American Romanticism
1800–1860

The Pattern of the Journey

The journey—there is probably no pattern so common in all of narrative literature, from the Bible, to the Greek epic the Odyssey, to modern films like The Wizard of Oz. Very early in his Autobiography, Benjamin Franklin describes in great detail an important American journey: a personal quest in which the young Ben leaves his home in Boston and travels to Philadelphia. Franklin’s journey is a declaration of independence, a move away from the constraints of his family and toward a city where he might prosper. We can see in this an expression of both his personal goals and the goals of eighteenth-century America: a reaching out for independence, prosperity, commerce, and urbane civilization—in other words, a quest for opportunity.

Franklin wrote about his journey to Philadelphia in 1771. In 1799, the American writer Charles Brockden Brown described a very different journey to Philadelphia in his Romantic novel Arthur Mervyn. In this tale a young farmboy hero leaves his home in the country for Philadelphia. Instead of finding a place of promise where he can make his dreams come true, however, the boy is plunged into a plague-ridden urban world of decay, corruption, and evil. The Philadelphia of this novel is no city of promise; it is an industrial hell that devours all hope and ambition.

The journeys described in Franklin’s Autobiography and Brown’s Arthur Mervyn make clear the differences between the views of the rationalists and those of the Romantics. To Franklin and other rationalists, the city was a place to find success and self-realization. To the Romantic writers who came after Franklin, though, the city, far from being the seat of civilization, was often a place of moral ambiguity and, worse, of corruption and death.

The characteristic Romantic journey is to the countryside, which Romantics associated with independence, moral clarity, and healthful living. Sometimes, though, as in the works of Gothic-influenced writers like Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), the Romantic journey was a voyage to the country of the imagination. But whatever the destination of the Romantic journey, it was a flight both from something and to something. In fact, America’s first truly popular professional writer, Washington Irving (1783–1859), is today known principally for an immortal story about an escape from civilization and responsibility—“Rip Van Winkle.”
American Romanticism can best be described as a journey away from the corruption of civilization and the limits of rational thought and toward the integrity of nature and the freedom of the imagination.

The Romantic Sensibility: Celebrating the Imagination

In general, Romanticism is the name given to those schools of thought that value feeling and intuition over reason. The first rumblings of Romanticism were felt in Germany in the second half of the eighteenth century. Romanticism had a strong influence on literature, music, and painting in Europe and England well into the nineteenth century. But Romanticism came relatively late to America, and it took different forms.

Romanticism, especially in Europe, developed in part as a reaction against rationalism. In the sooty wake of the Industrial Revolution, with its squalid cities and wretched working conditions, people had come to realize the limits of reason. The Romantics came to believe that the imagination was able to apprehend truths that the rational mind could not reach. These truths were usually accompanied by powerful emotion and associated with natural, unspoiled beauty. To the Romantic sensibility, the imagination, spontaneity, individual feelings, and wild nature were of greater value than reason, logic, planning, and civilization.

To the Romantic mind, poetry was the highest and most sublime embodiment of the imagination. Romantic artists often contrasted poetry with science, which they saw as destroying the very truth it claimed to seek. Edgar Allan Poe, for example, called science a “vulture” with wings of “dull realities,” preying on the hearts of poets.

Romanticism, originally a European movement, emphasized feeling and intuition over reason, sought wisdom in natural beauty, and valued poetry above all other works of the imagination.

Romantic Escapism: From Dull Realities to Higher Realms

The Romantics wanted to rise above “dull realities” to a realm of higher truth. They did this in two principal ways. First, the Romantics searched for exotic settings in the more “natural” past or in a world far removed from the grimy and noisy industrial age. Sometimes they found this world in the supernatural realm, or in old legends and folklore. Second, the Romantics tried to contemplate the natural world until dull reality fell away to reveal underlying beauty and truth.

We can most easily see the first Romantic approach in the development, in Britain, of Gothic novels like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and
Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, with their wild, haunted landscapes, supernatural events, and mysterious medieval castles. The Gothic, with its roots in French, German, and English literature, seemed an unlikely transplant to the new nation of America, where there were seemingly no places old enough to have accumulated ghosts or to reek of decay. But even writers in America, notably Edgar Allan Poe, were attracted to the exotic, otherworldly trappings of the Gothic. In America, particularly in the works of Poe, the Gothic took a turn toward the psychological exploration of the human mind.

The second Romantic approach, the contemplation of the natural world, is evident in many lyric poems, such as “Thanatopsis” by William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878). In a typical Romantic poem, a flower found by a stream or a waterfowl flying overhead brings the speaker to some important, deeply felt insight, which is then recorded in the poem. This contemplative process is similar to the way the Puritans drew moral lessons from nature. The difference is one of emphasis and goal. The Puritans’ lessons were defined by their religion. In nature they found the God they knew from the Bible. The Romantics, on the other hand, found in nature a more generalized spiritual awakening.

*American Romanticism took two roads on the journey to understanding higher truths. One road led to the exploration of the past and of exotic, even supernatural, realms; the other road led to the contemplation of the natural world.*

**Characteristics of American Romanticism**

- Values feeling and intuition over reason
- Places faith in inner experience and the power of the imagination
- Shuns the artificiality of civilization and seeks unspoiled nature
- Prefers youthful innocence to educated sophistication
- Champions individual freedom and the worth of the individual
- Contemplates nature’s beauty as a path to spiritual and moral development
- Looks backward to the wisdom of the past and distrusts progress
- Finds beauty and truth in exotic locales, the supernatural realm, and the inner world of the imagination
- Sees poetry as the highest expression of the imagination
- Finds inspiration in myth, legend, and folk culture

**The American Novel and the Wilderness Experience**

During the Romantic period, the big question about American literature was: Would American writers continue to imitate the English and European models, or would they finally develop a distinctive literature of
their own? America provided a sense of limitless frontiers that Europe, so long settled, simply did not possess. Thus, the development of the American novel coincided with westward expansion, with the growth of a nationalist spirit, and with the rapid spread of cities. All these factors tended to reinforce the idealization of frontier life—as they still do today.

Most Europeans had an image of the American as unsophisticated and uncivilized. But James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851) and other Romantic novelists who followed him turned the insult on its head. Virtue, they implied, was in American innocence, not in European sophistication. Eternal truths were waiting to be discovered not in dusty libraries or crowded cities or glittering court life, but in the American wilderness that was unknown and unavailable to Europeans.

We can see how the novel developed in America by looking at Cooper’s career. After writing two early novels based on British models, in his third novel Cooper finally broke free of European constraints. In this novel, *The Pioneers* (1823), Cooper explored uniquely American settings and characters: frontier communities, American Indians, backwoodsmen, and the wilderness of western New York and Pennsylvania. Most of all, he created the first American heroic figure: Natty Bumppo (also known variously as Hawkeye, Deerslayer, and Leatherstocking), virtuous, skillful frontiersman whose simple morality and almost superhuman resourcefulness mark him as a true Romantic hero.

**A New Kind of Hero**

Natty Bumppo was quite different from the hero of the Age of Reason. The rationalist hero—exemplified by a real-life figure such as Ben Franklin—was worldly, educated, sophisticated, and bent on making a place for himself in civilization. The typical hero of American Romantic fiction, on the other hand, was youthful, innocent, intuitive, and close to nature.

Today, Americans still create Romantic heroes; the twentieth-century descendants of Natty Bumppo are all around us. They can be found in the guise of dozens of pop-culture heroes: the Lone Ranger, Superman, Luke Skywalker, Indiana Jones, and any number of Western, detective, and fantasy heroes.

*American novelists looked to westward expansion and the development of the frontier for inspiration, creating subject matter that broke with European tradition. They created the American Romantic hero, whose qualities of youthfulness, innocence, intuitiveness, and closeness to the natural world set him solidly apart from the hero of the Age of Reason.*
Characteristics of the American Romantic Hero

- Is young, or possesses youthful qualities
- Is innocent and pure of purpose
- Has a sense of honor based not on society’s rules but on some higher principle
- Has a knowledge of people and of life based on deep, intuitive understanding, not on formal learning
- Loves nature and avoids town life
- Quests for some higher truth in the natural world

American Romantic Poetry: Read at Every Fireside

The American Romantic novelists looked for new subject matter and innovative themes, but the opposite tendency appears in the works of the Romantic poets. Like Franklin, they wanted to prove that Americans were not unsophisticated hicks, and they attempted to prove this by working solidly within literary traditions rather than by crafting a different and unique American voice. Even when they constructed poems with American settings and subject matter, the American Romantic poets used typically English themes, meter, and imagery. In a sense, they wrote in a style that a cultivated person from England who had recently immigrated to America might be expected to use.

The Fireside Poets were, in their own time and for many decades afterward, the most popular poets America had ever produced. In the era before mass media changed American family life, the Boston writers Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882), John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–1892), Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809–1894), and James Russell Lowell (1819–1891) were known as the Fireside Poets because their poems were so often read aloud at the fireside as family entertainment.

The Fireside Poets’ attempts to create a new American literature relied heavily on the literature of the past. Certainly, they were not great innovators, and their choice of subject matter—love, patriotism, nature, family, God, and religion—was, for the most part, comforting rather than challenging to their audience (though Whittier, for one, also wrote powerful antislavery poems). Still, the Fireside Poets furthered the evolution of American poetry by introducing uniquely American subject matter in their choices of topics: American folk themes, descriptions of the American landscape, American Indian culture, and celebrations of American people, places, and events.

Limited by their essential literary conservatism, the Fireside Poets were unable to recognize the poetry of the future, which was being written right under their noses. Whittier’s response in 1855 to reading
the first volume of a certain poet’s work was to throw the book into the fire. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s response was much more farsighted. “I greet you,” Emerson wrote to this maverick new poet, Walt Whitman, “at the beginning of a great career.”

The Fireside Poets, immensely popular in their time, created some poems of lasting merit, but their essential literary conservatism prevented them from being truly innovative. The first uniquely American poetry was yet to be created.