Romanticism as a broad term is associated with the empowerment of the individual over and above forms of law and restriction. As a historical movement it emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a reaction to the more rational traditions of religion and philosophy. An important historical characteristic of American Romanticism is the lateness of its development, explained in part by the internal concerns of a newly defined nation in the fields of politics, economics, and religion. Not until 1836, with the publication of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Nature*, was native expression given to the innovative ideas current in Europe at the turn of the century.

Historically, the realization of the freedom and independence of the individual, and the increasing valuation placed on it within Western society, goes hand in hand with the West’s economic embrace of capitalist ethics from the early modern period. It is this factor which accounts for the contradictory sweep of its appeal, providing both secular and divine justification for economic expansionism as much as for ethical humanitarianism. American emancipation from British colonial rule marked a first stage in its openness to the influences of revolutionary Romanticism apparent in Europe. Yet the most clearly defined American response was against the perceived stagnation and corruption of a burgeoning Romantic spirit.

The ideals and enthusiasms of transcendentalism sought metaphysical justification for the social ideals embodied in the Declaration of Independence, and assimilated influences derived from French utopianism and German mysticism to bolster its assertion of the inalienable worth of man. The pivotal expression of this reaction arrived with the publication of Emerson’s *Nature*, and the impetus for the subsequent movement which became associated with him, was its critique of America’s institutionalized failure to aspire to the revolutionary values that its independence had embodied. Instead, as Margaret Fuller observed, mid-nineteenth-century America had become "spoiled by prosperity, stupid with the lust of gain, soiled by crime in its perpetuation of slavery, shamed by an unjust war, noble sentiments much forgotten even by individuals, the aims of politicians selfish or petty, the literature frivolous and venal."

The Romantic spirit had been used to embrace conflicting ideological ideals, on the one hand justifying the acquisitiveness of Jacksonian democracy, and on the other inspiring the transcendentalists’ enthusiasm for the utopian ideals of Brook Farm.

The openness at the core of American Unitarianism, as it became institutionalized within Harvard University at the turn of the century, allowed for the belated reception and assimilation of continental ideals. As a form of liberal Christianity, Unitarianism had triumphed over the orthodoxies of puritan Calvinism, but had itself become an institution blighted by a conservative rationalism. The appeal of the philosophical and literary works of the German and English Romantic movements, and Emerson’s assimilation of their influence, helped to revive America’s own religious radicalism. A wide range of ethical, religious, and social interests were embodied by the transcendentalism of such figures as Bronson Allcott, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau. Notably, they paved the way for a range of writers as diverse as Emily Dickinson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, and Walt Whitman, to take the lead in the creative realization and exploration of the self which transcendentalism revitalized.

The subsequent modernist debunkings of Emerson up to and beyond the 1920s, by T. S. Eliot, George Santayana, Yvor Winters and others, obscured the fact that even these most resolute twentieth-century adversaries of Romanticism derived from the Romantic mainstream. For many American modernists and critics of the period, Whitman provided a more usable example than Emerson, the traditional figurehead of American Romanticism, for their reaction against Emerson was fueled by the cult of personality which had grown up around him subsequent to his canonization in the late Victorian period. The post–1945 revival of Emerson’s critical reputation revealed the continual underlying importance of American Romanticism to a range of public and intellectual discourses and twentieth-century ideologies and theories; this continued up to the 1970s and 1980s, hinging on the recognition that Romantic discourses provided a deepened textual polyvalence and interrogation of the nature of textualization and rhetoricism. In the work of Harold Bloom, Stanley Cavell, Barbara Packer, Richard Poirier, and others, Emerson is a figure grappling with the central tensions which Romanticism underlines, including a profound skepticism about the capacity of language to embody truth. His reputation as a seer and seeker of unity is displaced by a recognition of his skepticism revealed in the ambiguities and contradictions of his rhetoric. This more disturbing underside of Romanticism is a vital part and subject of the deconstruction movement in America which, in the work of Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller, foregrounds the profound uncertainty and skepticism of Romantic writing.

The Romantic inheritance can be seen to be vast and varied due to its provision of a basis for questioning which, in the 1960s, sees it informing the literature of the Beat poets, infusing the culture of youth rebellion and alternate lifestyles with Ro-

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**AMERICAN ROMANTICISM: APPROACHES AND INTERPRETATIONS**


Romantic materials. Romanticism persists as an appropriate idiom for confronting the implications of modernity, providing a means for interrogating and interpreting a world characterized by increasingly rapid change and dislocation.

IAN D. COPESTAKE

Bibliography


**AMERICAN ROMANTICISM: ITS LITERARY LEGACY**

Romanticism is one of the strongest intellectual currents in American literature, starting with the burst of cultural activity in mid-nineteenth-century New England and continuing through to the more diffuse, yet still readily discernible, themes of late-twentieth-century writing. Numerous lines of influence can be traced in fiction and poetry, across different genres and from different regional perspectives. This can be demonstrated by first, the Romantic emphasis on imaginative expression connects the regional modernism of Thomas Wolfe’s *Look Homeward Angel* (1929) with the poetry of Walt Whitman; Hart Crane’s *The Bridge* (1930) and the urban modernism of Langston Hughes’s poetry; and onto Allen Ginsberg’s and Jack Kerouac’s Beat writings of the 1950s. Second, the celebration of nature in Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden; Or Life in the Woods* (1854) and Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855) has found numerous outlets, from the twentieth-century poetry of Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and Robert Bly to Native American writers attempting to preserve tribal customs and the sanctity of nature in an increasingly mercantile environment (for example, Louise Erdrich and N. Scott Momaday). Third, the Gothic writing of Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe has mutated into the “grotesque” stories of the modernist Sherwood Anderson in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919); and the mid-twentieth-century southern Gothic of Carson McCullers and Flannery O’Connor through to popular horror writers such as Stephen King.

A fourth intellectual strain derives from the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson, which provided the philosophical cornerstone for American Romanticism in the 1840s. Emerson himself was influenced by the British Romantic poets and German Romantic philosophy, but his essays (“First Series”, 1841; and “Second Series”, 1844) offer a peculiar blend of New England spirituality and Kantian idealism, mixed with an assertion that American culture should no longer rely on European artistic models for direction. One aspect of Emerson’s thought that has been particularly influential is his recognition of selfhood. In his essay “Circles” (1841) he shifts emphasis away from the “knowing” individual and the epistemological certainty of Enlightenment thought, to the “experiencing” individual and the “energizing spirit” that comes only by nurturing sensitivity to environment. This reformation of the self can be seen as a direct influence on the work of the philosophers William James and George Santayana as they strove to question received notions of subjectivity in the late nineteenth century, through to the cultural thinkers Stanley Cavell and Cornel West trying to revive the prophetic spirit of the early movement for the late twentieth century. Although versions of Emersonian Romanticism can still be detected in contemporary writing, such as Don DeLillo’s interest in the technological sublime in *White Noise* (1984) and Paul Auster’s explorations of postmodern identity in *New York Trilogy* (1989), it is in debates about the future of American literature in the late nineteenth-century that the pervasive nature of Romantic thought began to emerge.

In his canonical study *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957), Richard Chase identifies two primary modes of American writing that emerged in the nineteenth century: the romance form, as a version of what Nathaniel Hawthorne called the “twice-told tale,” existing at one remove from the everyday in an imaginative realm of fiction, and naturalistic writing characterized by the accurate study of social conditions. This polar view of American literature largely derives from the novelist William Dean Howells’s argument in the 1880s that “the romance and the novel are as distinct as the poem and the novel.” Howells separates the serious study of social values undertaken by realist and naturalist writers after the Civil War, from the earlier Romantic investigations of Hawthorne and Herman Melville into the inner life of characters troubled by, but partly transcending, their environment. While romance writers usually focused on the natural world and the morality of individuals at odds with their peers, naturalists tended to concentrate on the constraints that prevent moral action within the social and legal systems of urban America.

While Howells’s distinction is true to a degree, another perspective on the realism of Henry James and the naturalism of Stephen Crane and Frank Norris suggests that American fiction around the turn of the century was more tightly interwoven than Howells acknowledges. Over a thirty-year period (from *Roderick Hudson* [1876] to *The Golden Bowl* [1904]) James worked with different strains of social realism, drawing as much from romance as from cool empirical observation. Similarly, although the naturalists were more direct than James in their depiction of urban conditions and class conflict, their exploration of the tensions between individuals and environment contain strong Romantic impulses. For example, Norris argued that it was the moral responsibility of the writer to rejuvenate refined and genteel literary forms (such as those of Howells and James)


The Octopus

The strains of naturalism in Norris’s major novels *McTeague* (1899), *The Octopus* (1901), and *The Pit* (1903) address the “realistic” issues of poverty and the effects of technology and business on the material conditions of life, but in each novel he delves “down deep into the red, living heart of things” rather than depicting only “clothes and tissues and wrappings of flesh.” For Norris, the true writer takes realism away from the coziness of the middle class drawing room into the street, where it fuses with a dynamic Romantic spirit that is heedless of moral limits and literary propriety.

The modernist critics T. S. Eliot, in “‘Romantic’ and ‘Classic’” (1934), and Philip Rahv, in “Redskin and Paleface” (1939), reinforced this notion of two competing traditions in American writing. For Eliot, the effusiveness of Romantic thought was inferior to the balance and poise of classical poetry, whereas Rahv compares “redskins” such as Whitman and Mark Twain and their celebration of nature and open spaces with the “paleface” writers Henry James and T. S. Eliot, who are more cerebral and often drawn to European literary traditions. While Rahv’s distinction holds for certain writers, his bipartite scheme lacks nuance, and does not take into account modernists such as Ezra Pound and Henry Miller, whose work reviles Romanticism (Pound expresses his dislike of Whitman in “A Pact” [1916] and Miller parodies Romantic expression at the beginning of *Tropic of Cancer* [1934]) but also displays sympathies with its spirit of nonconformism (Pound’s poem ends by agreeing there should be “commerce between” Whitman and himself). Divisions in recent American writing can still be discerned in accordance with Howells’ distinction, but critics such as Jonathan Levin have argued that the resistance to “definitive formulations” in Romantic thought is often expressed as “stylistic restlessness” and “unsettled possibility” that cannot be reduced to list of generic characteristics. As such, the legacy of Romanticism forms a complex series of influences, revealing the tensions between nativist and international impulses while reinforcing the essential hybridity of American literary production.

**Martin Halliwell**

**Bibliography**


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**ANDERSEN, HANS CHRISTIAN 1805‒1875**

Danish novelist, playwright, poet, and writer of fairy tales

Hans Christian Andersen was the first truly professional Danish writer in the sense that he earned a living from his writing and never had another occupation. Although his fame today rests on his fairy tales, his works cover every literary genre and many of them received great popular acclaim in his own time, both in Denmark and abroad.

There are few writers whose life and works are more inextricably entangled than those of Hans Christian Andersen. He grew up in great poverty in Odense, then the second largest city in Denmark, and was only eleven when his father Hans Andersen, a cobbler, died. His mother had to take odd jobs, and ended up an alcoholic. Some of his closest relatives had experienced imprisonment and madness, and the existence of an elder, illegitimate, half sister haunted him for much of his life. It is significant that the theme of a young man who has to overcome poverty before his innate talents are recognised—often with the help of benefactors—runs through Andersen’s works. A loner, he always felt an outsider in the bourgeois and upper-class society to which he desperately tried to adapt. One of his own self-images was that of a “swamp plant” reaching for the light. From early childhood he did, however, believe strongly in his own artistic talents, and at the age of fourteen obtained his mother’s reluctant permission to travel to Copenhagen to seek his fortune, without any contacts there and equipped only with a letter of recommendation to the leading ballerina at the Royal Theater.

From childhood on the theater was always Andersen’s grand, if largely unrequited, passion, and his early visits to the Odense Theater left an indelible mark. In his first difficult years in Copenhagen, he managed to get minor parts at the Royal Theater and to have lessons in singing and ballet, but to no avail. Rejection as a performer only fueled his desire to become a playwright, but early derivative attempts were very crude and revealed an appalling lack of elementary education. Nevertheless, although the Royal Theater rejected them, it was at this point that some influential people there saw a few glimpses of potential in Andersen and offered him a free secondary education. Jonas Collin, the Royal Theater’s director, oversaw this scheme, and in him and his family Andersen found the surrogate father and the bourgeois home that he yearned for, and subsequently referred to as the “home of homes.” The actual school years were the most miserable of his life and haunted him long afterward, but