Romanticism and Transcendentalism
Where We’ve Been

➢ First American Literature (2000 B.C. – A.D. 1620)
  ● Native American Literature
  ● Historical Narratives

➢ Becoming a Country (1620-1800)
  ● Puritanism
  ● Revolutionary Writing (persuasive rhetoric)
Individualism (1800-1855)

➢ Romanticism and Transcendentalism
  - Longfellow, Irving, Emerson, Fuller, Thoreau, Whitman

➢ American Gothic
  - Poe and Hawthorne
Definitions

➢ Romanticism sprang up in both Europe and America as a reaction to everything that had come before it: the rationalism of the 18th century Age of Reason and, especially, Puritanism.

➢ Romantic artists, philosophers, and writers saw the limitations of reason and celebrated instead the glories of the individual spirit, the emotions, and the imagination as basic elements of human nature.
Transcendentalism was based on a fundamental belief in the unity of the world and God.

The soul of each individual was thought to be identical with the world.

Emerson said that every individual is capable of discovering higher truth (and identification with God) on his or her own, through intuition.

Transcendentalists sought to have individuals “transcend” to a higher spiritual level.

To achieve this goal, the individual had to seek spiritual, not material, greatness and the essential truths of life through intuition.
## Characteristics of Romanticism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classicism</th>
<th>Romanticism</th>
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<tr>
<td>Normality</td>
<td>Abnormality</td>
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<tr>
<td>The group, the masses</td>
<td>The individual</td>
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<td>Balance, order</td>
<td>The grotesque</td>
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<td>Control, constraint</td>
<td>Spontaneity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reality</td>
<td>Mystery, imagination</td>
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<td>Order</td>
<td>Reverence for nature</td>
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<td>Facts and reason</td>
<td>Intuition and feeling</td>
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<td>Tradition</td>
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<td>Urban</td>
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<td>Crowds</td>
<td>Solitude</td>
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<td>Even temperament</td>
<td>Melancholy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Balance</td>
<td>Disorder</td>
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<td>Formal language</td>
<td>Vernacular language</td>
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<td>Practicality</td>
<td>Whimsy</td>
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<tr>
<td>The present</td>
<td>Distant in time or place</td>
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Romanticism Idealizes . . .

- Natural scenery
- Natural man
- Rustic and primitive life
- The past, especially the medieval period
Romanticism Emotionalizes

- Indulges the emotions
- Appeals to the senses, imagination, emotion
- Encourages awareness of the supernatural
Romanticism Individualizes

➢ Values the eccentric
➢ Celebrates the abnormal
➢ Revels in differences and uniqueness
Romanticism Escapes

➢ In time (past or future)
➢ In distant, rural places
➢ Into the emotions
➢ Into the subconscious
➢ Into the abnormal
➢ Into the imagination, the supernatural
➢ Into the senses
Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

- Possessed a religious sense of mission
- Emerson was the philosopher and teacher
- Left the Unitarian church because he felt that “to be a good minister, it was necessary to leave the church.”
- He avoided building a logical intellectual system.
- Called for the birth of American individualism inspired by nature
- Most famous essay is “Nature”
- Major Ideas:
  - Need for new national vision
  - Use of personal experience
  - Notion of the cosmic Over-Soul
Emerson Quotes

➢ “Trust thyself, every heart vibrates to that iron string.”
➢ “Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.”
➢ “Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist.”
➢ “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.”
➢ “To be great is to be misunderstood.”
Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

➢ From a poor family, like Emerson
➢ Thoreau was the student and the practitioner.
➢ Worked his way through Harvard
➢ Reduced his needs to the simplest level and lived on very little money
➢ A nonconformist, he attempted to live his life at all times according to his rigorous principles
➢ *Walden*: the result of two years, two months, and two days he spent living in a cabin he built at Walden Pond
Thoreau, continued

➢ He also wrote “Civil Disobedience,” which contains his theory of passive resistance based on the moral necessity for the just individual to disobey unjust laws (inspired Gandhi and MLK, Jr.)

➢ Main Ideas:
  ● Ecological consciousness
  ● Do-it-yourself independence
  ● Ethical commitment to abolitionism
  ● Political theory of civil disobedience and peaceful resistance
Questions to Consider

- In small groups (four or less), discuss the following questions. These will help you fully understand transcendentalism. One person per group should take notes.
  - How are you affected by nature? Do you find comfort in it? Do you reflect the moods of nature?
  - What is the role of nature in your life?
  - What is meant by an individual’s spiritual side? How do you define it?
  - Is there a connection between the individual’s spirit and nature? If so, what is that connection?
  - What does it mean to know something intuitively? For example, has a parent or a sibling ever known something was wrong with you without having talked with or seen you? What do we mean when we say “I just know it”?
  - How do you demonstrate that you are an individual? Do you think independently or others or do you follow the crowd?