

# 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)



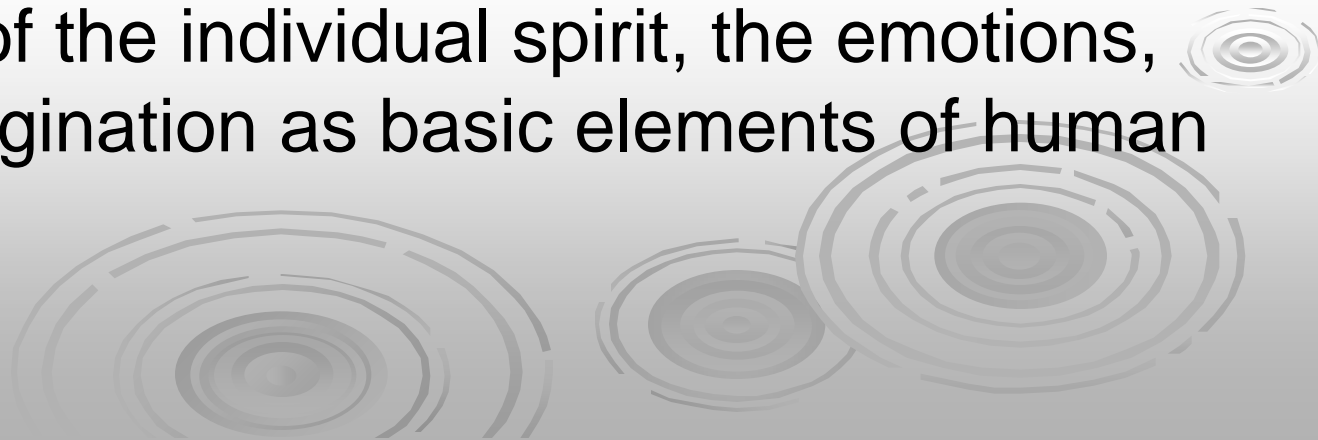
# Individualism (1800-1855)

- Romanticism and Transcendentalism
  - Longfellow, Irving, Emerson, Fuller, Thoreau, Whitman
- American Gothic
  - Poe and Hawthorne

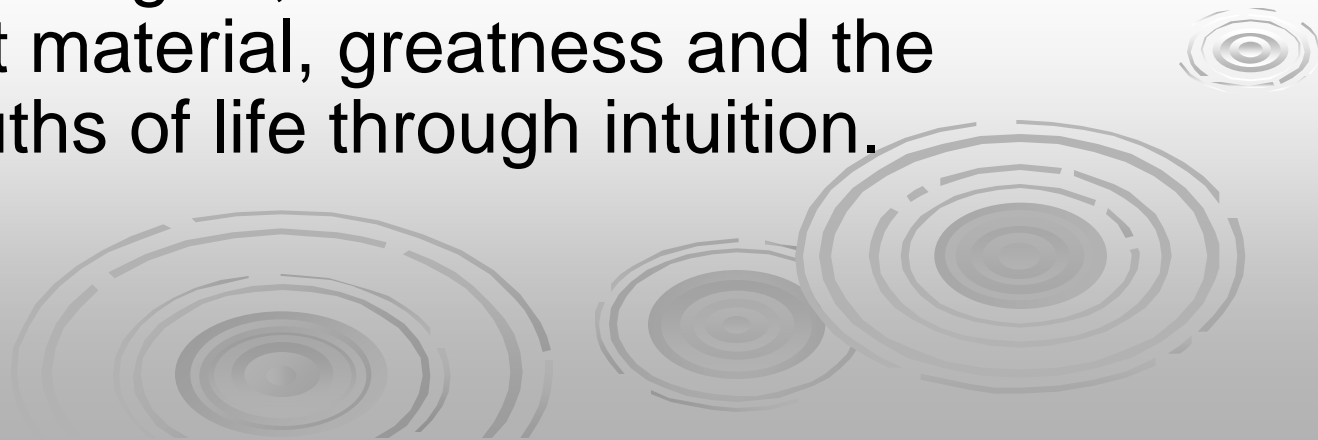


# Definitions

- Romanticism sprang up in both Europe and America as a reaction to everything that had come before it: the rationalism of the 18<sup>th</sup> 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

## Classicism

- Normality
- The group, the masses
- Balance, order
- Control, constraint
- Reality
- Order
- Facts and reason
- Tradition
- Urban
- Crowds
- Even temperament
- Balance
- Formal language
- Practicality
- The present

## Romanticism

- Abnormality
- The individual
- The grotesque
- Spontaneity
- Mystery, imagination
- Reverence for nature
- Intuition and feeling
- New ideas
- Rustic
- Solitude
- Melancholy
- Disorder
- Vernacular language
- Whimsy
- Distant in time or place

# 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



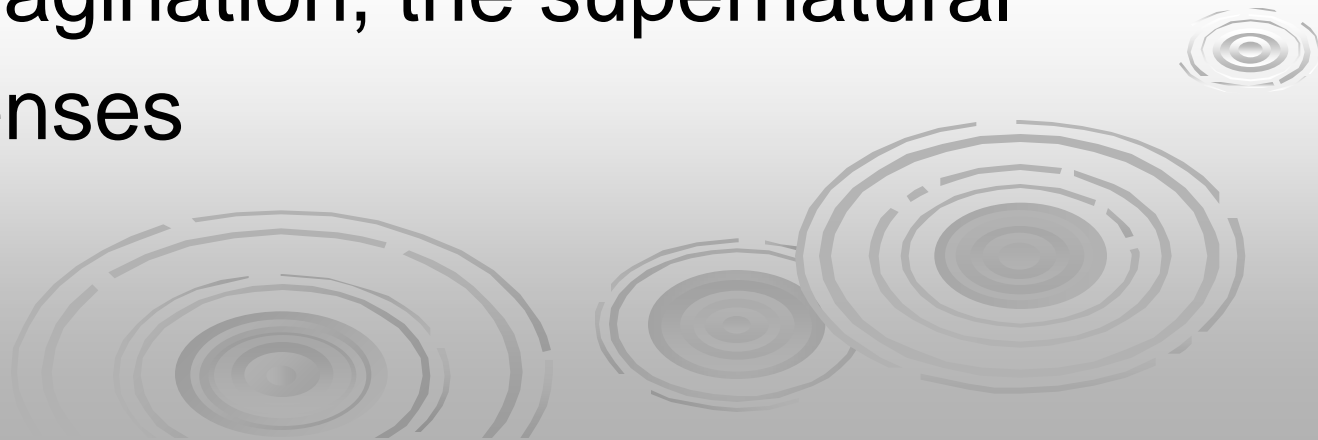
# Romanticism Individualizes

- 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



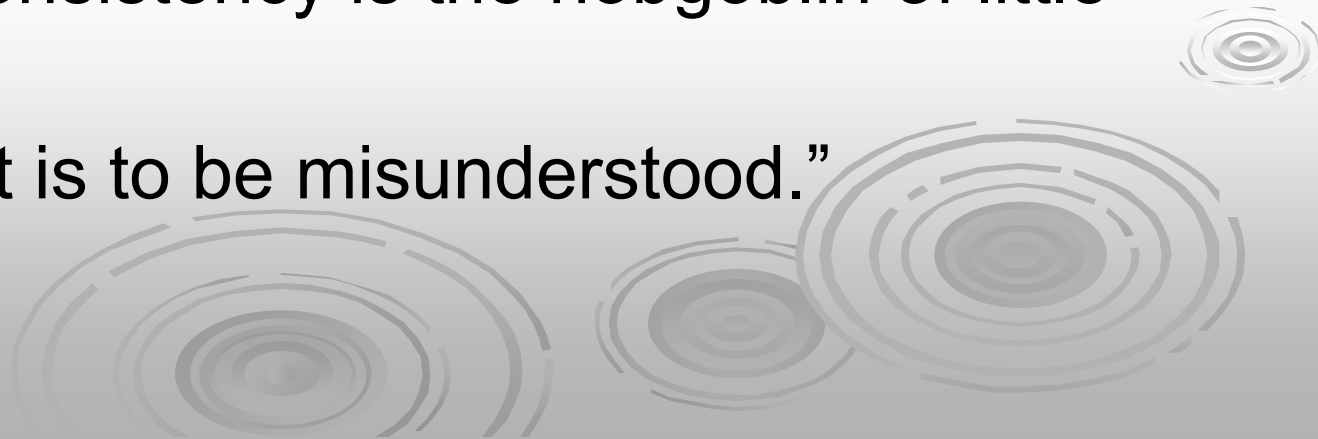
# Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

- 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

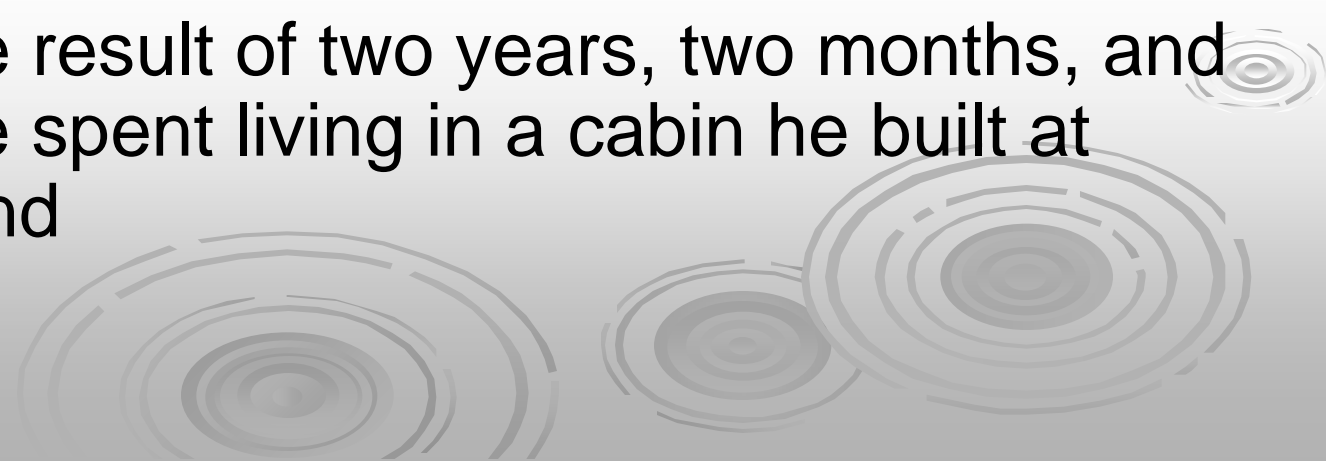


# Emerson Quotes

- “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
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# 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?