

Celebrations of the Self

Romanticism and Transcendentalism

“Good men must not obey the laws too well,” Ralph Waldo Emerson said. His aphorism illustrates a vital key to the American character—after all, if the original colonists *had* obeyed the laws, the American Revolution would never have occurred, and the country might never have existed. This rebelliousness—so much a part of our heritage—reflects an essential aspect of Emerson’s philosophy of transcendentalism, a distinctively American offshoot of the romantic movement.

Around the beginning of the 19th century, the movement known as romanticism sprang up in both Europe and America as a reaction to everything that had come before it: the rationalism of the 18th-century



Ralph Waldo Emerson



American authors of the 19th century. Seated from left: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, William Cullen Bryant, Washington Irving (at the end of the table), and Margaret Fuller (slightly behind Irving). Seated in right foreground: Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Standing from left: Edgar Allan Poe (in profile facing left) and Nathaniel Hawthorne (in profile facing right). Standing from right: James Russell Lowell (with beard facing front) and Ralph Waldo Emerson. The Bettmann Archive.

Age of Reason and, especially in America, the strict doctrines of 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. The splendors of nature inspired the romantics more than the fear of God, and some of them felt a fascination with the supernatural.

In the first half of the century, as the U.S. population exploded and the country's borders spread westward, the romantic spirit guided American writers in their efforts to capture the energy and character of the new country. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Washington Irving were by far the most popular American writers of the time. Their works exhibit a typical romantic preoccupation with atmosphere, sentiment, and optimism.



Henry Wadsworth
Longfellow



Washington
Irving

Although Washington Irving was the first American writer to achieve international fame, the first really distinctive American literature came from the transcendentalists. The philosophy of transcendentalism, derived in part from German romanticism, was based on a belief that “transcendent forms” of truth exist beyond reason and experience. However, Ralph Waldo Emerson gave this philosophy a peculiarly American spin: he said that every individual is capable of discovering this higher truth on his or her own, through intuition.

The groves were God's first temples.
Ere man learned
To hew the shaft, and lay the architrave,
And spread the roof above them—ere
he framed
The lofty vault, to gather and roll back
The sound of anthems; in the darkling
wood,
Amid the cool and silence, he knelt down,
And offered to the Mightiest solemn thanks
And supplication.

William Cullen Bryant
from “A Forest Hymn”

By the shores of Gitche Gumee,
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,
Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis.
Dark behind it rose the forest,
Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees,
Rose the firs with cones upon them;
Bright before it beat the water,
Beat the clear and sunny water,
Beat the shining Big-Sea-Water.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
from *The Song of Hiawatha*

I know I am august,
I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate
itself or be understood,
I see that the elementary laws never
apologize,
(I reckon I behave no prouder than
the level I plant my house by,
after all.)

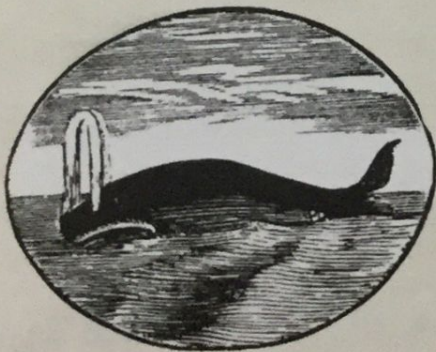
Walt Whitman
from “Song of Myself”

It was a high counsel that I once heard given to a young person, "Always do what you are afraid to do."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos [hypochondria] get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.

Herman Melville
from *Moby-Dick*



Henry David Thoreau, Emerson's young friend and colleague, proved a prickly but brilliant embodiment of transcendentalist ideals as, militantly turning his back on material rewards, he devoted his life to the study of nature and his own individual spirit. His *Walden*, an account of the two years he lived alone in a one-room shack in the country (although dining regularly at Emerson's Boston house), remains a genuine American masterwork.

Walt Whitman was championed at the beginning of his career by Emerson for the ideas and style that Emerson believed the new American poetry required. Still, influential as Whitman has been in the 20th century, he waited a long time for his contribution to be recognized by the larger public in his own time. In 1855 he had to print the first collection of his poems, *Leaves of Grass*, himself. Able to sell only a few copies of the book, he gave virtually all of the 795 copies away. Meanwhile, in that same year, Longfellow published *The Song of Hiawatha*, which like his earlier books of poetry, sold thousands and became a bestseller.

Traditions Across Time: Whitman's Heirs Express the Self

The celebration of individualism that began with romanticism and flourished with transcendentalism has remained at the core of American literature to the present day. During the first half of the 20th century, the poetry of William Carlos Williams and E. E. Cummings, among others, emphasized the spirit and power of solitary individuals. Contemporary writers, however, tend to temper their celebrations of the individual with more ambiguity. Rosario and Aurora Morales, for instance, try to find a new unity in their separate voices as mother and daughter, and the poet Luis J. Rodriguez makes readers view his eccentric aunt with a mixture of admiration and shock. The down-home voice of Garrison Keillor is shaped by the humorous ironies that are a trademark of our time.