

American romanticism –



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American Romanticism originates from the Germany of the 1770s and from that time on it has captured the rest of Europe and from about the 1820s America, as well (Hampson, par. 1). In America, there had not been a long literary tradition as was the case in Europe, and therefore their Romantic period also helped with the build of the foundations of a national literary tradition. The Declaration of Independence had only been signed on 4 July 1776 (Ushistory.org, par 4). This means the country was not yet a century old during the start of the Romantic period in the United States.

American Romanticism became both an imitation of European, especially British romanticism, but it was also innovative. There are many elements used to describe American Romanticism, but here some of the more important ones will be discussed with the use of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown*, Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* and poem 260 *I'm Nobody! Who are you?* by Emily Dickinson. The first element of great importance to American Romanticism is individualism. The individual is important with his or her personal feelings and ideas, which results in a subjective view of the world.

During the Romantic Period, both writers and poets wanted to be a true individual. They did not want to be part of the great mass, even if this meant they would not fit in. Poem 260 *I'm Nobody! Who are you?* from Emily Dickinson expresses this idealisation of individualism: " I'm Nobody! Who are you? Are you - Nobody - too? Then there's a pair of us Don't tell! they'd advertise - you know! How dreary - to be - Somebody! How public - like a Frog - To tell one's name - the livelong June - To an admiring Bog! "

(Dickinson, 1204) There was negative side to being an individual that is different from the rest of society.

Edgar Allan Poe for instance lived a tragic life, filled with almost as much darkness as his stories (Levine, 671-674). Emily Dickison was lonely, although she had created her own isolation. Her poetry “ reflects her loneliness and the speakers of her poems generally live in a state of want” (Poets. org, par. 3). Nathaniel Hawthorne also preferred to live in privacy, he was “ a deeply private man”(Levine, 589). Now we that we have come to Hawthorne, it is time to discuss our the second, crucial element of American Romanticism, namely the use of symbolism.

As discussed in the second Introduction to American Studies lecture from period two, one should even look for symbolism when reading Hawthorne, because that will help with interpreting his work. Here is an example of symbolism from Young Goodman Brown: “ He had taken a dreary road, darkened by all the gloomiest trees of the forest, which barely stood aside to let the narrow path creep through, and closed immediately behind” (Hawthorne, 606). Hawthorne uses symbolism to create a dark atmosphere here.

Symbolism is used frequently in prose and poetry, but the vast amount of it and the associations concerned with it (for instance nature or gloomy places), is typical for Romanticism. Poe also uses a variety of symbolism in The Raven. It is noticeable that there is soundssymbolism in The Raven, which we did not find in Hawthorne’s prose: “ Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary, Over many a quaint and curious volume

of forgotten lore, While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping, As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door –

Only this and nothing more. ” (Poe, 675) The last element of American Romanticism that will be discussed here is escapism and finding Truth. This results in literature that focuses on places the writer/poet has escaped to, such as the past, exotic places, nature and the abnormal. This can possibly be an effect of the harshness the writer/poet had to face in his/her everyday life. Individualism is closely related to this element, for it is because of their individual ideas, feelings and imagination that they may find their ordinary lives hard to bear.

All the three authors discussed escaped in their writings. Emily Dickinson escaped from her isolation in her poetry and Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe escaped in the abnormal, where they found a different world. Works Cited Dickinson, Emily. “ I’m Nobody! Who are you? ” The Norton Antology Of American Literature. Shorter seventh edition. Ed. Baym, Nina and Levine, Robert S. W. W. Norton & Company, 2004. 1204. “ Emily Dickinson. ” Poets. org. Web. 2 January 2011. Hampson, Thomas. “ Romanticism. ” I Hear America Singing(IHAS). Web. 2 January 2011.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. “ Young Goodman Brown. ” The Norton Antology Of American Literature. Shorter seventh edition. Ed. Baym, Nina and Levine, Robert S. W. W. Norton & Company, 2004. 605-614. Levine, Robert S. “ Nathaniel Hawthorne. ” The Norton Antology Of American Literature. Shorter seventh edition. Ed. Baym, Nina. W. W. Norton & Company, 2004. 589-592. Levine, Robert S. “ Edgar Allan Poe. ” The Norton Antology Of American

Literature. Shorter seventh edition. Ed. Baym, Nina. W. W. Norton & Company, 2004. 671-674. Levine, Robert S. "Emily Dickinson. The Norton Antology Of American Literature. Shorter seventh edition. Ed. Baym, Nina. W. W. Norton & Company, 2004. 1197-1200. Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Raven." The Norton Antology Of American Literature. Shorter seventh edition. Ed. Baym, Nina and Levine, Robert S. W. W. Norton & Company, 2004. 674-678. "The Declaration of Independence." US History. org. Web. 2 January 2011. Nature and American nationhood Nature has a special role in American society. It is used by American artists to emphasize the uniqueness of the United States and its society.

The following texts will be discussed to illustrate this: Frederick J. Turner's The Significance of the Frontier in American History and Washington Irving's Rip Van Winkle. Albert Bierstadt's painting The Oregon Trail is the third and last material that will be used. The Significance of the Frontier in American History fits within the American frontier theory and explains why natural boundaries were so important in the creation of the American nation: "The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization.

The wilderness masters the colonist" (Turner, 1854). Or in other words: the colonists from Europe changed when they moved away from civilization and encountered the wilderness. This resulted in "a new product that is American"(Turner, 1855). This would mean the American people were created by the specific natural circumstances in the New World. It was an unknown world, a wilderness they needed to handle and to which they adapted until they became Americans. Turner is not the only one that

consider nature of great importance on the development of the American nation.

In Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle*, nature also has a special role to play. One of the most important features in this story, are the Catskill mountains. Especially noticeable is the way in which Irving combines nature with the history of the creation of the American nation. After Rip's night in the mountains with the Dutch colonists, he comes back down and sees how time has elapsed years in what for him seems only a night. The story lends a surreal, almost magical quality to the mountains (and nature in general): Surely this was his native village, which he had left but the day before. There stood the Kaatskill mountains – there ran the silver Hudson at a distance – there was every hill and dale precisely as it had always been – Rip was sorely perplexed – 'That flagon last night,' thought he, 'has addled my poor head sadly!'" (Irving, 462.) While everything has changed, all the natural features of the landscape have remained the same, as if nature is more powerful than time. This fits with Turner's idea of nature as a strong factor that can change people and will forever continue to exist.

Lastly, there is Albert Bierstadt's painting *The Oregon Trail*. The painting displays an expedition to the west. Nature is displayed here quite detailed and has a specific meaning. On the right we can still see the mountains that probably symbolise the Appalachians, the first great natural obstacle when the colonists wanted to move the frontier more westwards. The sky above the mountains is rather dark, but on the westside it is bright. Bierstadt must have done this with a purpose, namely to make clear that he thought nature was important in the creation of the United States.

The east stands for the old, to Europe and to suppression, while the west is displayed as a light, good place to go. One can see here, as well, that it seems the colonists changed from Europeans into Americans, because of nature. That is something the painting has in common with the texts by Turner and Irving, for they all express nature has had a unique significance in the development of the United States and the American people. Nature has been the great factor in the creation of America, according to these sources by Turner, Irving and Bierstadt.

If we draw a conclusion out of this, this would mean that anyone can become an American, as long as he/she experiences the same natural circumstances as the colonists did who became the first Americans. This is an interesting thought when you look at America as a nation built out of immigrants. Works Cited Bierstadt, Albert. *The Oregon Trail*. 1869. Kennedy Galleries. New York. Christies. Web. 10 January 2012. Irving, Washington. "Rip Van Winkle." *The Norton Antology Of American Literature*. Shorter seventh edition. Ed. Baym, Nina and Levine, Robert S. W. W. Norton & Company, 2004. 453-466.

Turner, Frederick J. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." *The Norton Antology Of American Literature*. Shorter seventh edition. Ed. Baym, Nina and Campbell Reeseman, Jeanne. W. W. Norton & Company, 2004. 1852-1857. Representations of Racism and Slavery Racism has always been a black spot on the idealised view of America and it still is to a certain degree. Behaviour towards people of a different colour has improved, but it is there nevertheless. However, racism in America has known much worse days, for instance during the time that slavery was allowed.

The following materials describe certain aspects of slavery and racism towards black people in the past: On Being Brought from Africa to America by Phyllis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth's Ain't I a Woman? and last, but not least Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn. Each of the materials mentioned above will be discussed. First, On Being Brought from Africa to America, a poem written by Phyllis Wheatley. She was born in Africa, but then she was brought to America as a slave: " 'Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land, Taught my benighted soul to understand

That there's a God, that there's a Savior too: Once I redemption neither sought nor knew. Some view our sable race with scornful eye. ' Their color is a diabolic dye. ' Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain, May be refined, and join the angelic train. " (Wheatley, 420-21.) Wheatley describes how she, like other black people from Africa, did not know Christianity. But she found it when she was brought to America, she understood " that there's a God, that there's a Savior too. Which means that God can forgive you your previous sins (here not being Christian), as long as you become a good Christian. She argues that if God can forgive, the American Christian should do so as well. In Wheatley's opinion, slavery should be abolished, because a Christian is a Christian and they are all equal in God's eyes. Their colour does not matter. Something that one should notice, is that the second material is also from a black woman, namely Sojourner Truth. She has a different statement to make, than Wheatley.

Where Wheatley is against slavery in general, an opinion she shares with Truth. In Truth's speech the evil of slavery is not the only topic, though. Women, both black and white, were discriminated for a long time. They did

not have the same rights as men. She thought this did not make sense at all: “ Then that little man in black there, he says women can’t have as much rights as men, ‘ cause Christ wasn’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him. ” (Truth, par. 4. Truth made a point with this speech, and she got recognition from people like Harriet Beecher Stowe. Two women and their opinions on racism and slavery have been discussed until now. It is about time to do research on the opinion of a man, namely Mark Twain. His novel *The Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn*, is not exactly feminist, for he only gives small, not too important parts to them in his story, but slavery is an important topic in his story. He discusses the moral difficulties for white people, such as his main character Huck, who helps Jim, a slave, with regaining his freedom.

Huck has been taught that black people are the property of other white people and therefore he should return Jim to his rightful owner. On the other hand Jim has become a friend of his, and therefore he does not tell on him when he gets the chance: “ I didn’t answer up prompt. I tried to, but the words wouldn’t come. I tried, for a second or two, to brace up and out with it, but I warn’t man enough – hadn’t the spunk of a rabbit. I see I was weakening; so I just give up trying, and up and says – ‘ He’s white. ’ ” (Twain, 1339.)

The fact that Huck does not betray Jim, despite his inner conflict, proves that Jim has become a friend of him. In this way Twain’s novel is a statement against slavery, because one can only be friends with his equals. Works Cited Campbell Reeseman, Jeanne. “ Mark Twain. ” *The Norton Antology Of* <https://assignbuster.com/american-romanticism-2/>

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