**Characteristics of the Romantic Era (Romanticism)**

- 1800-1855

**Genres and Style:**

* Short stories, poetry, book (mostly fiction), some non-fiction essays

**Topics:**

* Interest in the **mysterious** and **supernatural**
* Interest in the long ago and the far away **(freedom of imagination)**
* Love of **nature**
* Interest in the **unique and the individual**
* Interest in **intuition and feelings**

**Historical context:**

* **Growth of democracy in the U.S. -** Americans started to take more control of their government, especially with Andrew Jackson’s election (“The People’s President”).
* In a new a democratic country, where the political climate increasingly emphasized the **common citizen**, the Romantic movement had an obvious appeal.
* **America was moving in new directions, literally and figuratively**- American literature was also moving into its first truly creative period.
  + Because of the country’s establishment, talented writers, who earlier would have written about politics and religion, were now writing creative stories and poems.
* Romanticism was a rejection of everything that the Age of Reason stood for. Romanticism stressed the **emotional** instead of the **rational** response to things.
* Influenced by European ideologies, the Romantics sought new ways to express themselves in literature, music, painting, and sculpture.

**Transcendentalism:**

* A slightly later (1830s) group of the American Romantics was comprised of the Transcendentalist writers (Emerson and Thoreau are examples).
* Transcendentalism shared the general characteristics of Romanticism while exhibiting a few specialized traits.
* The name “Transcendentalism” came from Immanuel Kant (German philosopher) who spoke of “transcendent forms” or **kinds of knowledge that exist above and beyond reason and experience.**
* The Transcendentalists placed great faith in **intuition (inner feelings and insight)**, and they urged people to have confidence in their **own inner lights.**
* The Transcendentalists took creativity to different level by allowing their **intuition and inner lights** to affect their writing.
* They expressed disgust for conformity and praised individuality, which sparked **creativity**.
* The Transcendentalists stressed the belief that there was a **connection between people and nature**, which individuals could feel if they removed themselves from the routine concerns of day-to-day life.

**Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) - *Walden***

* Thoreau attended Harvard, and after college, Thoreau taught off and on and ran his own academy in Concord, Massachusetts with his brother.
* Thoreau was very close friend and supporter of Ralph Waldo Emerson (who we will study later), and when Thoreau’s career as a teacher ended, he went to live in the Emerson household where he continued to learn from Ralph Waldo Emerson; at this point Emerson was already an influential literary figure (14 years older than Thoreau).
* Influenced by Emerson’s “romantic” ideals, Thoreau built a cabin in the woods by Walden Pond (Massachusetts) and lived there for two years (1845-1847); he wanted to simplify his life to the point where he could learn what the true essentials of life were.
* Thoreau spent these two years writing and learning about nature.
* Thoreau did not want to spend his valuable time working for unnecessary material goods, preferring instead to simplify his needs and concentrate on mental and spiritual activity; in this respect, Thoreau was a true **Transcendentalist.**
* While at Walden Pond, Thoreau spent hours closely observing the details of his environment: the plants, the animals, and the pond in each season of the year.
* Thoreau wrote *Walden* after he left the pond; the book was not published until 1854.
* *Walden* is the record of Thoreau’s life at the pond. For artistic purposes, Thoreau compressed his two years at the pond into one year, using the four seasons to structure his book.

“Civil Disobedience”- Thoreau

* In 1846 Thoreau spent a night in jail for refusing to pay a Massachusetts poll tax (a flat tax that everyone had to pay just for existing- “poll” meaning head from the Middle Ages).
* Thoreau’s refusal to pay was his protest against the use of tax money to support slavery and the Mexican-American War.
* Thoreau wrote “Civil Disobedience” (essay) while in jail; the essay conveys his strong transcendentalist views and urges every citizen to protest any governmental policy that requires him or her to be “the agent of injustice to another.”
* “Civil Disobedience” has influenced political leaders throughout the world, such as Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.

**Washington Irving (1783-1859)-“The Devil and Tom Walker”**

* Irving grew up in a prosperous New York family, and had the opportunity to travel to Europe as a young man.
* From 1807- 1809, Irving published numerous essays and a book about New York society.
* He then traveled back to Europe to help save a branch of his family business (hardware importing), and during this trip, he realized his distaste for a career in business. He decided to stay in Europe and pursue a literary career. Irving returned to the United States after seventeen years abroad.
* The idea of the **short story with imaginative topics** thrived during the Romantic Era, and Irving is often considered to be the United States’ **first successful short story writer.**
* In 1819, Irving published *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon* (Geoffrey Crayon is the pen name Irving often used)*.* This book was a compilation of essays and short stories; two of the short stories included in this famous book are “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.”
* “The Devil and Tom Walker” is one of Irving’s later short stories, and it appeared in his collection published in 1824 titled *Tales of a Traveler.*
* To create his tales, Irving took a number of European literary themes and gave them American settings. A person making a bargain with the devil was a common theme in European folklore and literature.
* “The Devil and Tom Walker” mirrors the German tale known as the **Faust legend**. The story describes how a man of great learning named Faust agrees to surrender his soul to the devil in exchange for wealth, power, and sensual pleasures. Irving gives the Faust legend an American twist in “The Devil and Tom Walker.”
* In the “Devil and Tom Walker,” the reader will see **the freedom of imagination** and the interest in the **mysterious and supernatural.** Also, Irving **creatively** makes a point about **the extent some people will go to for wealth and riches.**

**Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) - “Self-Reliance”**

* Emerson was a poet, essayist, and philosopher.
* At Harvard, which he entered when he was only fourteen, he studied philosophy. After graduating in 1821, Emerson taught for a few years; he then followed his father’s path and became a pastor for a short time.
* During the 1830s and 40s, Emerson and a small group of people gathered regularly to discuss ideas. This group started their own journal, *The Dial.* The philosophical system created by this group is known as **Transcendentalism.**
* Essential to this philosophy is Emerson’s view that **human spirituality is reflected in nature.**
* As we discussed earlier, the central idea of **Transcendentalism is that there is some knowledge of higher reality, or truth, that human beings grasp through intuitions and emotions (rather than through logic or the laws of science).**
* Emerson believed that a person should follow the tendency of his or her own ideas, even if those ideas differ from what society enforces.
* After her resigned from the ministry, Emerson traveled for a time in Europe, and then settled in Concord, Massachusetts.
* Emerson devoted himself to writing essays and poetry. One of his most famous essays is titled “Self-Reliance.”
* In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson argues that we must look to ourselves, not to society, in our search for truth and happiness.
* Emerson also gave lectures, which was a major source of income for him.
* Many writers (such as Thoreau) were influenced by Emerson, but other critics believed that he was **too optimistic.** One noted writer (Henry James) said that he “had no sense of wrong… no sense of the dark…”

**Journal #6:**

**“Self-Reliance” is full of ideas about what leads to human happiness. What do you think contributes to happiness?**

**Emerson also expresses his strong feelings about resisting conformity in this famous essay. Being a nonconformist sometimes means going against norms of one’s community or culture. How do you think people in your school or community react to nonconformists?**

**Nathaniel Hawthorne -“Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment”**

* (1804-1864)-Hawthorne is known as one of the great American novelists of the mid-nineteenth century. His novel *The Scarlet Letter*, published in 1850, is considered a masterpiece in **world** literature.
* Hawthorne was born in Salem, Massachusetts. One of his ancestors, John Hathorne, was a presiding judge at the Salem witch trials. Hawthorne felt guilt about his Puritan ancestors’ intolerance, and he wrote *The Scarlet Letter* in part to absolve his family’s guilt.
* It is believed by many that Hawthorne added a “w” to his last name to distance himself from his heritage.
* Hawthorne attended Bowdoin College (in Maine) and graduated in 1825. Two of his classmates were Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (poet) and Franklin Pierce (later President of the United States). He stayed close with both throughout his life.
* When Hawthorne left Bowdoin, he returned to Salem and began a twelve-year hibernation. He wanted to be a writer, and during this period, he learned his craft, spending hours each day at his desk.
* In 1837 Hawthorne published *Twice-Told Tales*, a collection of short stories; “Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment” is included in this collection.
* Hawthorne became increasingly gloomy in his later years, **worrying about things such as money and his writing abilities.**
* Hawthorne is considered a **creative, imaginative Romantic** writer, but he is one whose perception of **the dark side of human life overpowers the usual optimism of the Romantics. Many of his works reflect the awareness that humans are capable of evil.** He is admired as a careful craftsman and as a writer of **haunting power.** Because of this “dark” characteristic, **Hawthorne is known as one of the “brooding” Romantics.**
* “Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment” is about the quest for youth, specifically a Fountain of Youth. As early as the 1500s explorers (specifically Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de Leon) searched for the Fountain of Youth, the waters of which were said to keep a person from aging. “Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment” explores what might happen if such a Fountain of Youth really existed.

**Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) - “The Pit and the Pendulum”**

* Poe’s life was for the most part difficult and unstable. His parents were traveling actors, and by the time Poe was two, his father had deserted the family, and his mother had died in poverty in Richmond, Virginia.
* Mrs. John Allan, a friend of Poe’s mother, decided to take care of Edgar. Mrs. Allan and her husband, a Richmond businessman, raised Poe as their son and gave him the middle name of Allan.
* At one point the Allans spent five years in England, where Poe attended very distinguished schools. His love for literature stemmed from this part of his life, and it was at this time that he began to write poetry.
* Poe attended the University of Virginia for one year; he had to withdraw because of money issues.
* Poe ended up serving for two years in the military (at West Point), and when Mrs. Allan died, his relationship with Mr. Allan fell apart. Poe was scarred by this fallout and later wrote, “The want of parental affection has been the heaviest of my trials.”
* At this time he started to whole-heartedly focus on writing. He published several small volumes of poetry and he wanted to write stories.
* Though Poe is often only esteemed for his poetry, Poe is credited with developing the **short story form (elements of a short story, the organization, complex ideas, etc.).**
* Most of his stories explore the **mysterious, frightening depths of human consciousness.**
* As has been the case with so many artistic geniuses, Poe was not adequately appreciated in his own time. Many of his contemporaries criticized him as morbid and excessive.
* Poe’s **“brooding” Romanticism** and his probing of the **dark forces** in humans appealed to later writers.
* Many twentieth-century critics agree that Poe was very effective in breaking down the psychological barriers in literature and exploring the human psyche.
* “The Pit and the Pendulum”- During the second half of the 1400s, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella ruled over much of what we now call Spain. Determined to create a strong, unified country, Ferdinand and Isabella established the **Spanish Inquisition**, a special court that imprisoned or killed people suspected of not following Roman Catholic teachings. Prisoners of the Inquisition were often tortured brutally and thrown into dungeons. In “The Pit and the Pendulum,” Poe describes the final hours of a man imprisoned during the Spanish Inquisition.