

**American Literature & Culture**  
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**Mod 05 Lecture Number 27**  
**Romanticism (Lecture 21)**

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Good morning friends, so I thought before I start talking about the American poet Edgar Allan Poe, let me give you a brief overview of American Romanticism and how to situate it in the broad area of Romanticism as literary theory and as a feature, important feature of literary criticism. So you should know that there was an English Romanticism and there was an American Romanticism. So the key names associated with Romanticism are Wordsworth, Coleridge, Emerson in America and of course Edgar Allan Poe. They also talked about something called the poetic diction and then you have Coleridge giving us the idea of fancy and imagination.

You should also know what is the lyrical ballads, that is the seminal publication by Wordsworth and Coleridge in England and then Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* which was published in 1817 when he talks about the constructs of, the concepts of fancy and imagination. And other important names of this period are William Hazlitt who wrote on poetry in general. So Hazlitt is important and of course after that we had great Romantic poets like Shelley and Keats, and then I would also refer you to Harold Bloom's edited version or edited volume called *Romanticism and Consciousness*. It is a 1970 publication and it's an anthology of literary criticism and other works.

Now you should know that the Romantic Period in England, now we are talking, I am taking you gradually to American Romanticism but I am just trying to contextualize the beginning of Romanticism in English or in England. So, an English literature, so most commonly the Romantic Period in English Literature is regarded as the period between 1789 to 1830. The key year rather is 1789 which is the outbreak of the French Revolution and then another important year is 1798, the publication of lyrical ballads and also 1832, it was from 1739 to 1832, the culmination of Romantic Period and 1832, the end of this particular period is marked by the death or the year of Sir Walter Scott's death in 1832.

So the idea of Neoclassicism such as decorum and order were displaced by the English Romanticism where the emphasis was on individual experience. So this is important for English Romanticism to understand the period, the emphasis is on individual experience. In France Jacques Rousseau famously said, man is born free but everywhere he is in chains. So there was an emphasis on originality and genius and this replace the idea of imitation of classical authors. The writers of this age were influenced by thinkers such as Locke, Hume and Edmund Burke.

William Wordsworth, the greatest of all English Romanticists, he lived from 1770 to 1850 and the impact of the French Revolution and its ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity were most keenly felt by his works, or in his works. He was disillusioned later on with the turn that the French Revolution had taken when it became gory and bloody and in 1795, it was epoch marking age, Wordsworth met Coleridge, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Those two came together. They salvaged, at least they tried to salvage the ideals of Romanticism from the anarchy that followed the French Revolution and then, they collaborated on their lyrical ballads.

That's the supreme effort of the Romanticists in 1798. It's a collection of 23 intimate poems about rustic life told in simple language; that is important, simple language and a pure expression of romantic ideals. So the key highlight or the key features of the lyrical ballads is to redefine literary taste towards a new language. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge repudiate the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers and aimed for austere purity of language.

The emphasis on simplicity of poetic language is based on the idea that humble and rustic life leads to more permanent and a far more philosophic language than that which is frequently substituted by poets. Wordsworth also deemed that, neither it is nor can be any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition. This assertion reinforces or marks a shift towards natural word order, grammar and sentences structure in poetry as distinct from the conventional poetic style of earlier poets.

Wordsworth defines a poet as a man speaking to men, you know, speaking to other men in the heart-felt language. This signifies that focus is not just on the poet, poet and by poet I mean, the one with a superior intellect but also on the reader who is understood by the poet as informed and imaginative. This was a literary world where the ordinary people and the outcast had a voice. The common people had a significant role to play and where women and children have a place.

Remember all the great poems in the Lyrical Ballads. Ok so women and children had a place. So The Solitary Reaper, Lucy poems so these hitherto marginal characters also were foregrounded. So this was the poetry of individual conscience and the idea was no less democratic than the principles behind the French Revolution. Wordsworth and Coleridge therefore gave politics a human face.

Now coming to another great British or English Romanticist Samuel Taylor Coleridge who lived between 1772 to 1834 and according to him, the distinction between fancy and imagination are major theory or is the major theory of poetry. And this is something that Coleridge also abided by in his general theory of mental processes. In *Biographia Literaria*, he says the imagination then I consider as primary or secondary.

*Biographia Literaria* published in 1817 and he said no man was ever yet a great poet without being at the same time a profound philosopher. And with these words he challenges the beliefs that poetry and philosophy are natural antagonists. No, according to Coleridge, they go hand-in-hand. His famous ideas on fancy and imagination, where he says fancy has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The fancy is indeed is no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space.

For Coleridge, fancy is a mechanical process which receives the elementary images which he calls, the fixities and definites. However it is the imagination that produces a much higher kind of poetry and dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate. Coleridge fancies merely mechanical but imagination is vital. Wordsworth attaches more significance to fancy than Coleridge and called it a creative faculty. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge differs from Wordsworth on this and states that what Wordsworth thinks is fancy alone is really fancy and imagination blended and that poetic genius is shaped by the depth of imagination.

Coleridge's imagination is extolled as the ultimate synthesizing faculty enabling humans to reconcile differences and opposites in the world of appearance. The imagination thus generates and produces a form of its own while its rules are the very powers of its growth and production. Coleridge also talks about synthetic power where he says that imagination reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities of sameness with difference, of the general with the concrete, of the idea with the image.

The faculty of imagination assimilates and synthesizes the most disparate elements into an organic whole. The reconciliation of opposites is the central idea or ideal for the romantic imagination. It is inextricably bound with the other two major concepts for it is presumed to be the faculty which enables us to read nature as a system of symbols, to Coleridge the archetype of all geniuses was Shakespeare and Coleridge says he became all things yet for ever remaining himself.

For Coleridge the imagination goes beyond. It transcends the experience and creates and realism did not matter as much as imagination; cases in point, *Kubla Khan* or *A Vision in a Dream*. In *Kubla Khan*, 1797, he wrote the poem famously under the influence of opium for he fell asleep and he had a dream. He dreamt that he was writing a poem and when he woke up a few hours later, he sat down and penned a few lines. While writing, he was called by someone and when he came back, he realized he had forgotten the rest. Still you get an example of Coleridge's experiences that is a dream, Ok, that is his dream, and that he had a dream and he created a poem out of that dream. So you know the famous lines from *Kubla Khan*.

That sunny dome! those caves of ice!

And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!

This is nothing but poetic frenzy. This is what Coleridge means when he talks of the power of imagination. So Wordsworth and Coleridge's literary criticism as expressed in Preface to Lyrical Ballads and Biographia Literaria continued to be of central importance in the history of criticism in theory. Apart from that, William Hazlitt is another important literary writer. He was a poet, painter, historian and critic and was mentored by Coleridge. He published An Essay on the Principles of Human Action.

Other essays include The Spirit of the Age, The Life of Napoleon, all these we are talking about early nineteenth century. Hazlitt associated romantic poetry with the French Revolution. Like Coleridge, Hazlitt had great respect for the imagination which he knew could change the way we see every day things. In his essay Genius and Common Sense he says you decide from feeling and not from reason. This is quite an anti-thesis to what later on dramatists like Brecht would say that you have to cry tears from your brain, so logic and reasoning are more important than feelings but we are talking of two different schools of thoughts here.

So along the lines of impressionistic critics has laid emphasis on the felt qualities of work. He says imagination is the faculty which represents objects, not as they are in themselves but they are molded, as they are molded by other thoughts and feelings into an infinite variety of shapes and combinations of power. And he says in On Poetry in General, poetry is imitation of nature but the imagination and the passions are a part of man's nature. Two key ideas in Hazlitt's criticism are the issue of style and the idea of sincerity. He stressed upon the courage to say as an author what he felt as man and from here I move on to American Romanticism which flourished somewhere later than in Europe.

The designated Romantic Period in America is between 1825 and 1865. The period is also called American Renaissance and the age of Transcendentalism and the key players of this movement are Emerson, Thoreau and Walt Whitman. Then at the same time, we have the Dark Romantics. So we have the Transcendentalists and we have the Dark Romantics, that


include Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville whose *Moby Dick*, rather excerpts of *Moby Dick* we have already been through and Nathaniel Hawthorne. So these are the dark Romantics. Now Emerson and Whitman referred to America as a poem which needed to be written. Whitman called the expression of individual identity akin to national identity, Ok and they also staged a revolt against the age of reason and rational and scientific spirit of the age.

Now reason played an important role in the American Revolution. America was a British colony before it won its independence in 1776 and The Declaration of Independence, so Thomas Paine, another American intellectual, his pamphlet, *Common Sense* was published in 1776, a work that challenged the authority of the British Government and the Royal Monarchy.

You have to know what are the key highlights of the Age of Reason. That is reason and control and conformity and order and rationality. It is mechanical. Romanticist or the features of Romanticism are clearly the opposite; imagination, spontaneity, individualism and expression of emotions. Now Romanticism, the literature was highly subjective, saturated with emotional intensity. The idea was that the common man could be the hero of a text and nature was the place of refuge. The Romantics valued nature as opposed to social order. The American Romantics valued Spiritual Intuition and self-reliant individualism.

And the key literary device of this literary movement is the pathetic fallacy where nature is not a passive observer but is sympathetic to people. The Romantics proposed certain realistic techniques such as the use of local color, for example through down-to-earth characters like Wordsworth's rustics or Walt Whitman's use of language, colloquial language. Walt Whitman who lived between 1817 and 1892, his masterpiece is *Leaves of Grass* which was published in 1855 and he also wrote *Song of Myself*. In *Leaves of Grass*, he declared a poet's manifesto that a New American poet would create new forms and subject matter for poetry, rejecting the conventional language and rhyme. Please look at this poem,

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## Leaves of Grass

- A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;
- How could I answer the child? . . . I do not know what it is any more than he.
- I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.
- Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord, A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropped,
- Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say Whose?

this poem, Leaves of Grass and read it.

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How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

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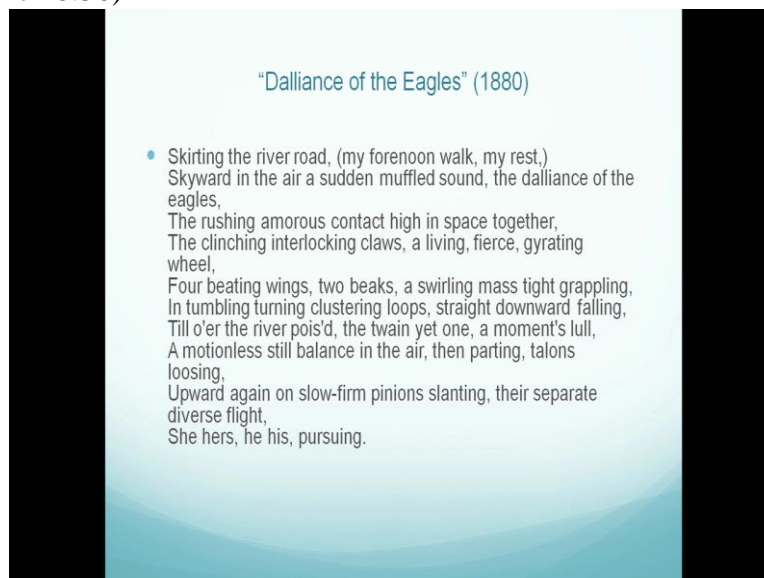
So look at the emphasis on nature

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divinity, child, Ok so inquisition, innocence so this is what Romanticists stand or Romanticism stand for

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Look at his another poem, Dalliance of the Eagles which was published in 1888. Please look at the poem.

Skirting the river road, (my forenoon walk, my rest,)

Skyward in air a sudden muffled sound, the dalliance of the eagles,

The rushing amorous contact high in space together

The clinching interlocking claws, a living, fierce, gyrating wheel,

Four beating wings, two beaks, a swirling mass tight grappling,



In tumbling turning clustering loops, straight downward falling,  
Till o'er the river pois'd, the twain yet one, a moment's lull,  
A motionless still balance in the air, then parting, talons loosing,  
Upward again on slow-firm pinions slanting, their separate diverse flight,  
She hers, he his, pursuing.  
So, nature at its amorous best!

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We also had in this same period Wallace Stevens who is considered one of the foremost modernist writers and then other writers of all genres included people like William Cullen Bryant, Washington Irving, H. W. Longfellow, Margaret Fuller, James Cooper, one who gave us the definitive noble savage in his Natty Bumppo novels, *The Last of the Mohicans* most famous among them all and then Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Coming to Ralph Waldo Emerson who lived from 1803 to 1882, Emerson ushered in American Romanticism. He was a leading exponent of Transcendentalism. His works influenced people such as Thoreau, Whitman and Emily Dickinson and also later on George Eliot and Nietzsche in Europe. His essay, *Nature*, there is an essay called *Nature* bears testimony to his Romantic world view and expresses several of his ideas on individualism. He believed that nature is perceptible only to the eye and heart of the child and someone who has retained the spirit of infancy.

Nature is part of God. And according to Emerson, the whole of nature is the metaphor of the human mind. This relation between the mind and matter is not fancied by some poets but stands in the Will of God and so is free to be known by all men. Emerson wrote his famous essay, *The American Scholar*, which was actually a lecture delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society in 1837. He called for distinctively American writing free from European influence.

It was a call for in this essay or in this lecture, became a call for Americans to trust their individuality and act as noble representatives to the whole or to the world. The major influence on the scholar included not only nature but also the mind of the past. So we have to associate it with the traditions the American literary and philosophical tradition and also the great European traditions. So mind has to be influenced by the, but then yet mind has to retain its individuality, that is what he says.

You can always compare Emerson's thoughts to T. S. Eliot's as he put forward in his essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent* where Eliot suggested that the individual writer should subordinate himself to the mind of Europe, to tradition. For Emerson, the mind of the past being restrictive is what contemporary writers must transcend and express the reality of their own period. His most fundamental premise is there is one man. The final influence on the scholar is action. Without it, he is not yet man. Without it, thought can never ripen into truth. His another important essay is *Self-Reliance* where he says who so would be a man would be a non-conformist. Those are, and these philosophies, these ideas are the core of the American intellectual thought process; to be an individual, to be a non-conformist, to be an original.

Coming to Henry David Thoreau who lived between 1817 and 1862, he was an essayist, poet, philosopher and a mystic and a keen observer of nature. He was also a lover of solitude and an exponent of the simple life. He famously said, government or that government is best which governs not at all or which governs least. This was put forward in his book, *Civil Disobedience* which was published in 1849. Thoreau's *Walden* remains a seminal text, a template for an authentic life that can be lived if one leads a simple life free of materialism. Published in 1854, it has now become a model for everyone who wants to experiment with life full of urbanization, industrialization and materialism, free of all forces of consumerism. So, according to Thoreau, the writer while writing should become one with nature and also

with the ecological and the spiritual. Ok, so these are, the writing should take the writer forward and help him unite the principles of ecology and spiritualism.

Now next important writer of American Romanticism is Nathaniel Hawthorne who lived between 1804 and 1864. He drew upon Emerson's theories of enlightenment and also Coleridge's view on imagination. Along with Herman Melville he derided the twin issues of mechanism and commercialism in American society. He was obsessed with the principles of sin and guilt and he was the first great writers, the great writer in the American tradition of psychological and subjective fiction, a case in point being *The Scarlet Letter*.

And from there, we move on to Edgar Allan Poe who lived between 1809 to 1849. He was a poet, short story writer and occasional critic also. Major works include *The Fall of the House of Usher* published in 1839, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, 1841, *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Raven* which was published in 1845. Along with Melville and Hawthorne we have already seen, he is known as the dark Romantic and followed the Gothic tradition. And you will find plenty of creepy symbols, horrific themes that people living life in death or death in life and psychological effect that is most important, the psychological effects of guilt and sin.

Poe followed the close analysis of work and his essay, *The Philosophy of Composition* in 1846 he explains the progress of writing *The Raven*, his most famous poem. He explains that instead of working in a fine frenzy of ecstatic intuition, a poet chooses a consistent emotional atmosphere that takes primacy over incident, character and versification. In his *The Poetic Principle* in 1850, he asserts that aesthetic appreciation rather than didactic purpose was of chief literary value. There are two schools of thought, aesthetics and also didactic.

Didactic is more about how instructive, a text can be and aesthetics can be more about how beautiful text could be. So Poe reinforced or supported the aesthetic appreciation in construction of a poem or a text. He states that the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetical topic in the world.

Other things about Poe, his reviews of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Tales* offer his most celebrated views of the genre of prose fiction. Like many romantic authors, Poe objected to allegories. And here is an excerpt from his *Raven*. Let's read a couple of lines from *Raven* and enjoy the aesthetics of the poem. So

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 someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.  
“’Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door—  
Only this and nothing more.”

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December;  
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.  
Eagerly I wished the morrow;—vainly I had sought to borrow  
From my books surcease of sorrow—sorrow for the lost Lenore—  
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore—  
Nameless here for evermore.

And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain  
Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;  
So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating  
“’Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door—  
Some late visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door;—  
This it is and nothing more.”

And Annabel Lee is yet another great poem by Poe that we will be looking at soon in our next class. Let me now take you to tell you about his tale writing which were, with you know, Nathaniel Hawthorne, not with, exactly with Nathaniel Hawthorne but where he talks about Nathaniel Hawthorne and he says In tale writing, Nathaniel Hawthorne, that is the title of the essay. Poe points out Hawthorne's lack of originality, and his dependence on allegory. And remember Poe was not a great supporter of using allegory in poetry.

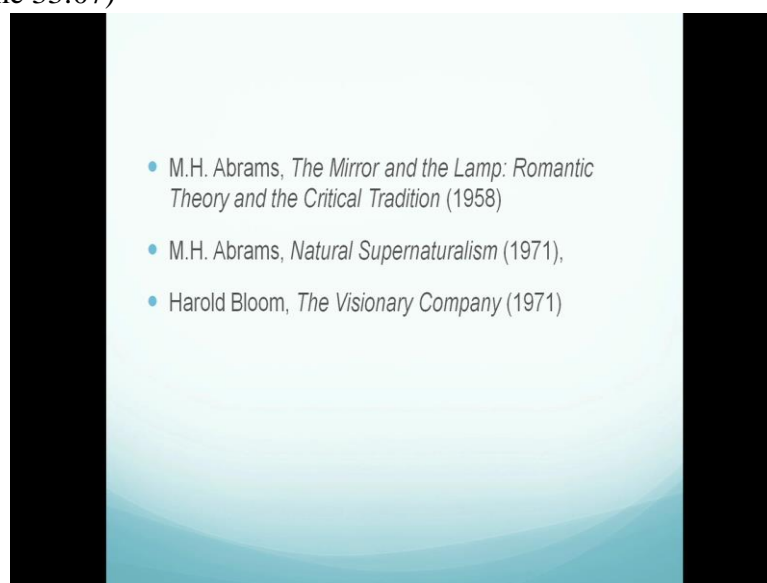
So coming back to American Romanticism, what were the key features? So key feature was of course the celebration of individualism, and also celebration of emotions. Nature, they worshipped nature, they revered nature and also the American Romanticists asserted the importance of the unique, the non-conformist, even the eccentric. Consequently they opposed the character typology of Neo Classical literature, especially drama. In another way of course, Romanticism created its own literary types, most predominantly American individualist and a non-conformist.

But one has to remember that individualism may lead to isolation and Emerson worries in *The American Scholar* about imitation and parroting. He looks inward to find divine essence which he claims we all share in common. You should know that Thoreau isolates and purifies himself at Walden Pond. *Walden* is a great book by Thoreau. Poe habitually portrays aristocratic and hypersensitive madman in Gothic enclosures and Melville's Captain Ahab from *Moby Dick*, Captain of fishing boat with Homer like or Shakespearean grandeur.

So you know all these characters and one has to remember that in American Romanticism, the thrust is belief in natural goodness of man, and that man in a state of nature would behave well but is hindered by civilization. The figure of the noble savage is the outgrowth of this idea. Sincerity, spontaneity and faith in emotion are markers of truth is at the core of American Romanticism.

Also the belief that what is special in the man is to valued over what is representative or also they have to delight in self-analysis. So self analysis and self examination is also important. They also believed in the affirmation of the values of democracy. This is important, and the freedom of the individual. This is what I wanted to tell you about American Romanticism and we do, when we do our Edgar Alan Poe in our next class, I would like you to remember or recall all these features. Now please take a look at the reading list or the references.

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And these are the books that I recommend.

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Thank you very much.