

Unit 2: American Romanticism

Semester 4 - Week 3

Section 2: American Literature

Unit 2: American Romanticism

Time allotted: 4 to 5 sessions

Weekly Workload : 1 hour 30 mn

Description:

This unit studies the earliest forms of fiction in America written during the nineteenth century. The study covers an overview of American romanticism and its historical background, then a study of two short stories: Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher".

Objectives:

1. Study of the short Story genre and its relationship to life in America
2. Exploration of the type of imagination prevalent during the earliest years of American independence then the civil war
3. Exploration of the real beginning of American fiction (compared to the earliest texts tackled in class which were non-fictional)

Pre-requisites: A reading of the two short stories "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" is necessary in this unit. The students must also be familiar with the main events that happened in the earliest part of American history (the independence, the expansion, the civil war)

Lesson Plan

- Overview of the Romantic movement and revision of its basic concepts
- Exploration of the historical situation in America during the nineteenth century
- Study of the important Romantic concepts in American Literature and the extent to which they are different from their definition in British Romanticism
- Study of the short story as a distinct genre
- Study and analysis of the main ideas and themes of the short story "Rip Van Winkle"
- Analysis of an excerpt from "Rip Van Winkle"
- Study of an excerpt from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher"
- Overview of American gothic literature

Lecture 1 : American Romanticism and Transcendentalism

The characteristics of Romantic Literature common to Europe and America

- Enthusiasm as a result of Industrial Revolution and material welfare.

- Faith in the values of individualism and a quest for self-hood.
- Intuitive perception was considered as real truth (W. Wordsworth called it “the intimation of immortality”).
- A feeling that the natural world is a source of goodness and man-made society a source of corruption (“Rip Van Winkle”).
- The exaltation of imagination above rationalism and the limiting facts; this means a faith in the boundless life of the human spirit and a belief in the ideality of elevation as a reality truer than the evidence of the material world.
- A sense of wonder (the belief in the miraculous, emphasis on surprise, discovery).
- The cultivation of naiveté and innocence (uncorrupted).
- A view of nature in which beauty is central; nature was seen as a refuge and escape from society and its problems.
- A delight in melancholy and the pleasures of despair, pessimism (gave birth to Byronic hero, Hamlet figure: so sensitive that everything strikes him).
- Romantics reveled in the feeling of strangeness and mystery which resulted in the fantastic visions of Coleridge and Poe. Gothic literature is also part of the Romantic Movement (horror literature, a mixture of fantastic and horrid elements in tales (ghosts, castles), Mary Shelley Frankenstein).
- A feeling of rebellion.

The Characteristics of American Romanticism

The expansion westwards and the discovery of new territories encouraged a feeling of optimism and hope for a better life. For Irving and Cooper the frontier was an invitation for adventure (it even continued with Mark Twain).

The rise of the self-made man (the American dream)

Emphasis on humanitarianism, noble savage, return to primitive nature for Transcendentalists like R.W Emerson and H. Thoreau.(transcendentalism has been defined philosophically as “the recognition in man of the capacity of knowing truth intuitively, or attaining knowledge transcending the reach of senses”). Delight in the big and the mighty (large scale) deriving from the mystery of nature in the unexplored

continent. As a result, novels, short stories and poems replaced sermons and pamphlets as America's principal literary forms.

The Short Story Genre

It is a brief imaginative narrative, unfolding a single predominating incident and a single chief character; it contains a plot, the details of which are so compressed, and the whole treatment so organized as to produce a single impression.

The short story is the best suited literary form to the American life and character.

AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM

- **Nature is Equal to God:**

Nature is symbolic. Understanding the language of nature can bring us closer to God.

God is everything → **God is omnipresent**

- **God is Omnipresent**

God is **everywhere** and in **everything**. There is no need for specific religions or churches. Transcendentalists wanted a **direct** relationship with God, not through a priest or a pastor

- **Man is Divine**

Nature is divine, which makes man divine, therefore we have a direct relationship with God, we are **particles** of God

- **Intuition**

Every person is able to understand right and wrong out of intuition . Humans do not need to learn morality from holy books but from the inner self.

- **Self-Reliance**

Intuition and **natural instincts** guide us to do the right things. In nature we are **uncorrupted**. Only when living in society that we become corrupted.

- **Society is a source of Corruption**

Society demands conformity and conformity kills **individuality**

- **Idealism** : Human beings are **naturally good** at their core, society corrupts them.
- **Materialism is bad**

Striving for material goods is worthless. It causes us to place **artificial** and **false value** on objects and people.

- **Technology is bad**

Advances in technology caused more problems for society. Before going fast with technology human beings need to **get in touch with themselves**. Technology **runs** man.

- **Emphasis on the Here and Now**

The past is **unimportant**. Knowledge comes from **experience** . One cannot learn anything truly valuable from the past or from the people who lived before us. Knowledge was built on experience.

Famous Romantic and Transcendentalist Figures

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

- Published *Nature* in 1836 (Philosophy, religion, and literature), his most famous essay “Self-Reliance” exposts a religious sense of mission.
- He was unwelcomed in Harvard for 30 years for his attack to Harvard University.
- He called for the birth of American individualism inspired by nature.
- His major ideas were:
 - The use of **personal experience**
 - The notion of the cosmic **oversoul** (inner light – divine)
 - The doctrine of **compensation** (self-reliance)

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1867)

- Looked for ultimate truth in nature, he says one of his memories was of staying awake at night: "looking through the stars to see if I could see God behind them."

- Non-conformist.
- His masterpiece *Walden* is an experience of two years and two months and two days spent in a cabin in Emerson's property from 1845 to 1847
- He urged his readers to rethink their own lives creatively
- Always asking questions
- Looking to nature for meaning of life

Similarities

- Both were born as a reaction to strict traditions, laws and religious rules of the time.
- Both philosophies opposed Calvinism, which states that human outcomes are predetermined.
- Both placed a huge emphasis on the individual as well as inspiration from nature.
- Both encouraged the individual to discover their own truth rather than obey the constructs of the time.

Differences:

- Transcendentalists believed that God was omnipresent, and could be experienced through the intuition.
- Their goal was to "transcend" ordinary life to **experience the symbolic and spiritual** world around them
- Romanticists thought that religion was something that had to be worked out on a personal level, and one should not subscribe to preconceived religious structures
- Romanticism had a high dependence on feelings, emotions and observations
- Transcendentalists depend on intuition and the guidance of the inner light.
- In romanticism: The natural world was good, while humans were corruptible. The closer human beings could get to their natural state the more pure they would be.
- In transcendentalism: there is an inner goodness in all human beings. The more an individual could tap into their inner light, the closer to God they would become.

In writing, the romanticists often wrote about moral issues, promoting individualism, emotion, freedom and creativity while rejecting reason and tradition. Writers were grouped together based on the similar content of their writing rather than their style. Those within the transcendentalist movement also frequently disagreed with each other over main points of philosophy.

References

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