Week Two Lecture
American Literature in the Nineteenth Century
1800 - 1865
Essays

Historical Perspective

A chronology of some significant events of the period:

- 1840 – Transcendentalist journal, *The Dial*, is published for the first time; Catherine Brewer becomes first U. S. female college graduate
- 1841 – Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

Literary Trends and Movements

Romanticism

The Romantic literary movement had been going on in England since the end of the French Revolution in 1789, and Americans were influenced by Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and other writers from across the Atlantic. More than that, however, they were finding a new sense of imagination in the aftermath
of the war for independence and their desire for a national literature, a body of works that was distinctly "American." Scholars date the movement as starting sometime around 1820 with the publication of poems by William Cullen Bryant, stories by Washington Irving, and the novels published by James Fenimore Cooper. Artists, particularly those of the Hudson River School, were influenced by Romanticism, especially in their renderings of nature's grandeur, as can be seen in Asher Durand's painting, "Kindred Spirits."

What characterizes Romantic literature? The Romantics had a sense of wonder and the belief that people are essentially good and can achieve their potential if given the right circumstances. The Romantics tend to have emotional intensity, and they favor imagination over the more science-minded Enlightenment writers. Ralph Waldo Emerson epitomizes the Romantic sensibility in his essay, "Self-Reliance," where he stresses individuality above conformity. The Romantics stressed freedom in life and literature, rather than formalism, and they revered the present and future above the past, not looking to traditions to shape the future but to new ideas and concepts. Some works by authors of this movement are adventuresome and mysterious, such as Poe's ventures into the world of nightmares, or Hawthorne's fascination with the darker psychological aspects of the psyche. Others, such as Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, are openly personal and subjective, and much of their work exalts the glories of nature.
Transcendentalism, a central facet of American Romanticism, is an early nineteenth-century movement that involves eclectic philosophies and spiritual concepts. Emerging out of Unitarianism, which espouses God as a Unity and not a Trinity, transcendentalism goes beyond it to blend Christian mysticism, Greek philosophy, Hindu wisdom, and ideas from the English Romantics. Not easily broken down, transcendentalism is based on the idea that the human soul is born with “transcendental” knowledge. Resisting the conformity of the prevailing Christian doctrines, the transcendentalists saw the world as animated by God and humans as reflections of God, especially in their potential. They valued individual understanding and intuition, since the human soul is a part of the universal spirit or “Oversoul,” and should be thus be respected and valued. Nature also embodies the divinity of the Oversoul, and the daily occurrences within the natural world are considered extraordinary, on an equal plane with Biblical miracles.

The independence of the new nation and the desire for a national literature gave rise to what has been called the “American Renaissance,” a time during mid-century when many writers seemed to be at the peak of their creative powers and published works of distinction. In addition to the work of Emerson and Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter*, Herman Melville published *Moby Dick*, and Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. 
The Transcendental Club, made up of Emerson and his friends, created *The Dial Magazine*, which continued publication from 1840-44.

The ideals of the New Republic were undermined by the existence of slavery and the ongoing tensions with native peoples. The Suffrage and Abolitionist movements as well as other reform movements during the century were all signs of the limits as well as the potential of a vital democracy. Women, indigenous peoples, and slaves – all found themselves playing a role in the rapidly changing society. By the end of the Civil War, the situation changed yet again, as the Africans who had been forced into chattel slavery for more than two centuries, found themselves legally free.

**Romantic Writers and Transcendentalists**

**Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)**

Ralph Waldo Emerson is the literary giant of the early nineteenth century. Known for his great essays such as “Self-Reliance,” “The American Scholar,” and “The Poet,” he also wrote poems and kept extensive journals. A catalyst for the developing writers of the era, he assisted both Thoreau and Hawthorne and influenced Walt Whitman and Herman Melville. He has also come to represent the transcendentalist movement, popularized in the journal, *The Dial*, which he founded along with Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and other transcendentalists of the time.
Born in Boston in 1803, Ralph Waldo Emerson was one of eight children, but the only one to live until adulthood. His father, a Unitarian minister, died when the boy was eight years old, and his mother took in boarders, the family's finances having shrunk considerably. The family sometimes lived in Concord with relatives, and Emerson's education was spotty, consisting of private tutors, family tutors, and occasional time at Boston Latin School. He graduated from Harvard University and afterwards did some teaching, but he followed in the path of his father and the long line of family ministers that preceded them accepting a position at his father's old Unitarian church in Boston. His short marriage to Ellen Tucker, who died less than two years later from tuberculosis, which he contracted as well, left him with lifelong grief, although after a trip to Europe, he returned and in 1835 married Lydian Jackson with whom he had four children. The next in a series of losses -- Emerson had lost his father, brothers, and his first wife -- was his firstborn son when the boy was only five.

He published *Nature* in 1836, his series of lectures, *Essays*, in 1841, *Essays: Second Series* in 1844, and in 1847, his book, *Poems*. Having found the church to be stifling, he eschewed dogmatic interpretations of the scriptures and the general lifelessness he felt in their portrayal of divine truths. Leaving the ministry, he turned to writing and lecturing, during which time he became so well-known that his portrait was hung in schools and libraries throughout New England. In the course of his life, he met most of the English Romantic poets, many of the major writers across the eastern seaboard, the explorer, John Muir, and Abraham Lincoln. Symptoms of tuberculosis stayed with him for many years, though he lived to be nearly seventy-nine.
Emerson died from pneumonia in 1882, and he is buried in Concord near his friends, Henry David Thoreau and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

"Self-Reliance" (1841)

"There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion." This pronouncement is emblematic of Emerson's aphoristic style, and the essay contains many such comments. Emerson's extensive, elaborate journals became the starting place for his lecture and essay ideas, and "Self-Reliance" began as a journal entry. We feel as if we have entered a conversation. Emerson's essays can be difficult, but if read in parts a little at a time, or all at once with concentration, we can apprehend the spirit of the works.

The essay's title reveals its theme, though there are several ideas that flow in and out like small currents: the importance of the individual, the idea of genius, the concepts of conformity and nonconformity, thoughts about travel, and ideas about divinity. It is easy to pull out a few quotes to ponder but more difficult to state a concise premise that is held throughout the essay. Many passages are beautiful: "When a man lives with God, his voice shall be as sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn." One might say, though, that an Emerson essay both repels and draws readers. His style is simple and
ornate, critical and positive, roaming through thoughts as if he is trekking across a varied landscape describing it as he goes along. Many people can probably agree with his suggestion that “For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure,” and not many, particularly students trying to finish school, would agree with the idea that “With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do.”