



American Literature and Art



Explore These Questions

- What themes did American novelists and poets explore?
- What ideas did Emerson and Thoreau express?
- How did American painters create their own styles?

Define

- transcendentalism

Identify

- Washington Irving
- James Fenimore Cooper
- Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Henry David Thoreau
- Walt Whitman
- Emily Dickinson
- Hudson River School

SETTING the Scene

In 1820, a Scottish minister named Sydney Smith blasted what he saw as a lack of culture in the United States:

“In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? Or goes to an American play? Or looks at an American picture or statue? What does the world yet owe to Americans?”

Even as Smith wrote these words, American writers and artists were breaking free of European traditions. These men and women created a voice and a vision that were truly American.

American Storytellers

Until the early 1800s, most American writers depended on Europe for their ideas and inspiration. In the 1820s, however, a new crop of writers began to write stories with American themes.

Two early writers

One of the most popular American writers was **Washington Irving**, a New Yorker. Irving first became known for *The Sketch Book*, a collection of tales published in 1820. Two of the best-loved tales are “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” (See page 318.)

Irving’s stories gave Americans a sense of the richness of their past. His appeal went

beyond the United States, however. Irving was the first American writer to also enjoy fame in Europe.

James Fenimore Cooper also published novels set in the past. In *The Deerslayer* and *The Last of the Mohicans*, Cooper created the character Natty Bumppo, a heroic model of a strong, silent, solitary frontiersman. The novels also gave an idealized view of relations between whites and Native Americans on the frontier. The stories were so exciting, however, that few readers cared if they were true to life.

Later writers

Nathaniel Hawthorne drew on the history of Puritan New England to create his novels and short stories. Hawthorne was fascinated by Puritan notions of sin and guilt. His best-known novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, was published in 1850.

In 1851, Herman Melville published *Moby-Dick*. The novel tells the story of Ahab, the crazed captain of a whaling ship. Ahab vows revenge against the white whale that years earlier bit off his leg. *Moby-Dick* had only limited success when it was first published. Today, however, critics rank it among the finest American novels.

Edgar Allan Poe became famous for his many tales of horror. His short story “The Tell-Tale Heart” tells of a murderer, driven mad by guilt, who imagines he can hear his victim’s heartbeat. Poe is also called the “father of the detective story” for his mystery

stories, such as “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.”

William Wells Brown published *Clotel*, a novel about slave life, in 1853. Brown was the first African American to earn his living as a writer.

Women writers

Many best-selling novels of the period were written by women. Some novels told about young women who gained wealth and happiness through honesty and self-sacrifice. Others showed the hardships faced by widows and orphans.

Few of these novels are read today. However, writers like Catherine Sedgwick and Fanny Fern earned far more than Hawthorne or Melville. Hawthorne complained about the success of a “mob of scribbling women.”

The “Inner Light”

In New England, a small group of writers and thinkers, known as Transcendentalists,

emerged. **Transcendentalism** was the belief that the most important truths in life transcended, or went beyond, human reason. Transcendentalists stressed emotions over reason. They believed that each individual had control over his or her life. This belief influenced many transcendentalists to support social reform.

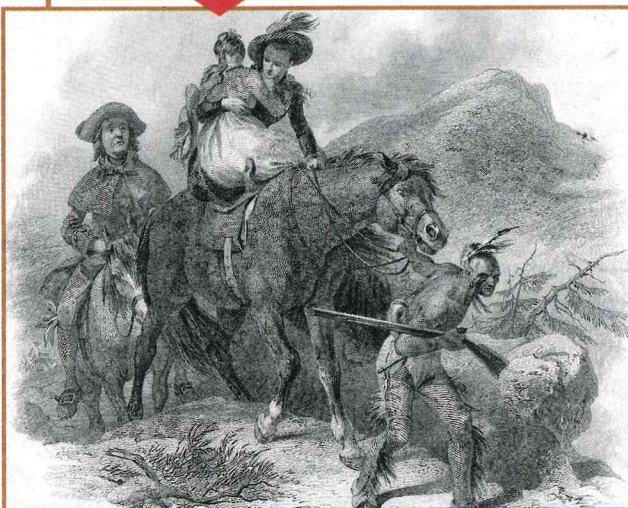
One Transcendentalist, Margaret Fuller, wrote *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. The book strongly influenced the movement for women’s rights.

Emerson

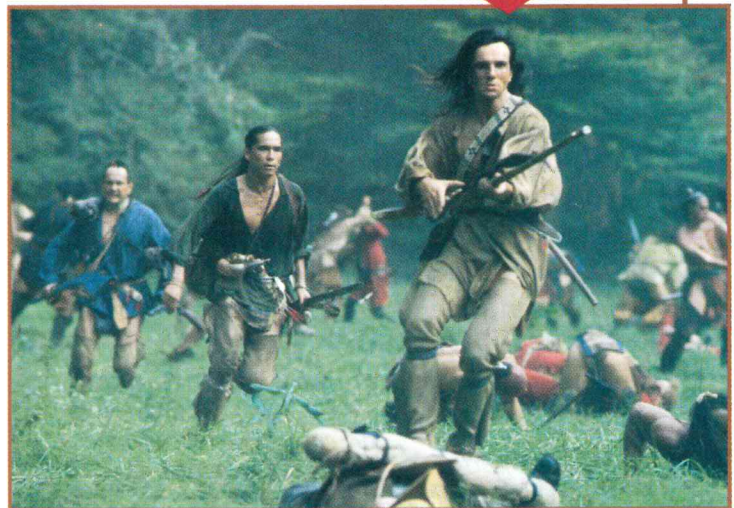
The leading Transcendentalist was **Ralph Waldo Emerson**. Emerson was the most popular essayist and lecturer of his day. Audiences flocked to hear him talk on subjects such as self-reliance and character. Emerson believed that the human spirit was reflected in nature. Civilization might provide material wealth, he said, but nature held higher values that came from God.

Linking Past and Present

Past



Present



An Enduring American Tale

In 1826, James Fenimore Cooper’s frontier tale *The Last of the Mohicans* (left) was a best-seller. In 1992, a film version of Cooper’s novel (right) was one of the year’s most popular movies. The works of other early American writers, such as Hawthorne and Melville, have also been turned into movies or television miniseries. ★ **Why do you think modern audiences would still enjoy a movie version of *The Last of the Mohicans*?**



Thomas Cole wrote that “it is of the greatest importance for a painter always to have his mind upon Nature.” In paintings like Kaaterskill Falls, left, Cole captured the beauty and power of New York’s Hudson River valley.

★ What kinds of emotion might a painting like this stir?

Thoreau’s “different drummer” told him that slavery was wrong. He was a fierce abolitionist and served as a conductor on the underground railroad.

Poetic Voices

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was the favorite poet of Americans in the mid-1800s. Longfellow based many poems on events from the past. “Paul Revere’s Ride” honored the Revolutionary War hero. “The Song of Hiawatha” idealized Native American life.

Other poets spoke out on social issues. John Greenleaf Whittier, a Quaker from Massachusetts, and Frances Watkins Harper, an African American woman from Maryland, used their pens to make readers aware of the evils of slavery.

Walt Whitman published only one book of poems, *Leaves of Grass*. However, he added to it over a period of 27 years. Whitman had great faith in the common people. His poetry celebrated democracy and the diverse people who made the nation great. He wrote proudly of being part of a “Nation of many nations”:

In his essays and lectures, Emerson stressed the importance of the individual. Each person, Emerson said, has an “inner light.” He urged people to use this inner light to guide their lives and improve society.

Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau (thuh ROW), Emerson’s friend and neighbor, believed that the growth of industry and the rise of cities were ruining the nation. He urged people to live as simply as possible. In *Walden*, his best-known work, Thoreau describes spending a year alone in a cabin on Walden Pond in Massachusetts.

Like Emerson, Thoreau believed that each individual must decide what is right or wrong. He wrote:

“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears.”



Connections With Civics

In his essay *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau argued that people had a right to disobey unjust laws if their consciences demanded it. He once went to jail for refusing to pay taxes to support the Mexican War, which he felt promoted slavery. Thoreau’s ideas on nonviolent protest later influenced Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

“ A Southerner soon as a
 Northerner . . .
 At home on the hills of Vermont or
 in the woods of Maine, or the
 Texan ranch,
 Comrade of Californians, comrade of
 free North-Westerners . . .
 Of every hue and caste am I, of
 every rank and religion,
 A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentle-
 man, sailor, quaker,
 Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer,
 physician, priest. ”

Today, critics consider **Emily Dickinson** one of the nation’s greatest poets. Yet, only seven of her more than 1,700 poems were published in her lifetime. A shy woman who rarely left her home, Dickinson called her poetry “my letter to the world / That never wrote to me.”

American Painters

Before the 1800s, most American painters studied in Europe. In 1772, Benjamin West of Philadelphia was appointed historical painter

to King George III. Many American painters journeyed to London to study with West, including Charles Willson Peale and Gilbert Stuart. Both Peale and Stuart painted famous portraits of George Washington.

By the mid-1800s, American artists began to develop their own style. The first group to do so became known as the **Hudson River School** because they painted landscapes of New York’s Hudson River region. Two of the best-known painters of the Hudson River School were Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand. African American artist Robert S. Duncanson also reflected the style of the Hudson River School.

Other American artists painted scenes of hardworking country people. George Caleb Bingham was inspired by his native Missouri. His paintings show frontier life along the rivers that feed the great Mississippi.

Several painters tried to capture the culture of Native Americans on canvas. George Catlin and Alfred Jacob Miller traveled to the Far West. Their paintings record the daily life of Indians on the Great Plains and in the Rockies.

★ Section 4 Review ★

Recall

- Identify** (a) Washington Irving, (b) James Fenimore Cooper, (c) Ralph Waldo Emerson, (d) Henry David Thoreau, (e) Walt Whitman, (f) Emily Dickinson, (g) Hudson River School.
- Define** Transcendentalism.

Comprehension

- Describe the subjects explored by each of the following writers: (a) Nathaniel Hawthorne, (b) Edgar Allan Poe, (c) William Wells Brown, (d) Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
- What did Emerson and Thoreau think about the importance of the individual?

- (a) Where did early American painters get their inspiration? (b) How did this situation change in the mid-1800s?

Critical Thinking and Writing

- Drawing Conclusions** Why do you think writers and artists did not develop a unique American style until the mid-1800s?
- Linking Past and Present** (a) What do you think Walt Whitman meant when he called the United States a “Nation of many nations”? (b) Do you think these words can still be used to describe the nation today? Explain.



Activity Creating a Chart Henry David Thoreau is returning to look at today’s society. He will spend a week in your community. Make a two-column chart. In the left column, list things, places, and activities he will probably criticize. On the right, list things, places, and activities he will appreciate.