TIMELINE OF AMERICAN LITERARY HISTORY

Romanticism
1830-1865
Romanticism

a movement that flourished in literature, philosophy, music, and art in Western culture during most of the nineteenth century, beginning as a revolt against classicism
Shift from CLASSICISM to ROMANTICISM

CLASSICISM
Emphasized...
...reason over the imagination
...the social over the personal
...the common over the individual

Valued...
...clarity
...order/balance
...tradition

Perceptions of Nature
~ governed by fixed, unchanging laws
~ “a self-contained machine, like a watch, whose laws of operation could be rationally understood”

ROMANTICISM
Emphasized...
...the importance of emotions
...the importance of imagination
...the individual over the common

Valued...
...social progress
...spiritual growth
...change

Perceptions of Nature
~ beautiful, strange, mysterious
~ “saw nature not as a machine but as an organic process, constant development, and change.”
Influences

• Frontier promised opportunity for expansion, growth, freedom; Europe lacked this element.
• Spirit of optimism invoked by the promise of an uncharted frontier.
• Immigration brought new cultures and perspectives.
• Growth of industry in the north that further polarized the north and the agrarian south.
• Search for new spiritual roots.
Literary Themes

• Highly imaginative and subjective
• Emotional intensity
• Escapism
• Common man as hero
• Nature as refuge, source of knowledge and/or spirituality
Characteristics

• Characters and setting set apart from society; characters were not of our own conscious kind
• Characterization—work proves the characters are what the narrator has stated or shown
• Universe is mysterious; irrational; incomprehensible
• Formal language
• Good receive justice; nature can also punish or reward
• Supernatural foreshadowing (dreams, visions)
• Description provides a "feeling" of the scene
Yet romanticism does have a fairly definite meaning. The term designates a literary and philosophical theory that tends to see the individual at the center of all life, and it places the individual, therefore, at the center of art, making literature valuable as an expression of unique feelings and particular attitudes (the expressive theory of criticism) and valuing its fidelity in portraying experiences, however fragmentary and incomplete, more than it values adherence to completeness, unity, or the demands of genre. Although romanticism tends at times to regard nature as alien, it more often sees in nature a revelation of Truth, the “living garment of God,” and a more suitable subject for art than those aspects of the world sullied by artifice. Romanticism seeks to find the Absolute, the Ideal, by transcending the actual, whereas realism finds its values in the actual and naturalism in the scientific laws that undergird the actual.
SOURCES
ADVENTURES IN AMERICAN LITERATURE. HARCOURT BRACE JOVANOVICH
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