University of Mohamed Boudief

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Level/ Second year G 1, 2, and 3

Module: American Literature

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LESSON THREE:

The Romantic Period

1820-1865

Patriotic and individualistic, urban and untamed, wealthy and enslaved—Americans in the first half of the 19th century embodied a host of contradictions. Struggling to make sense of their complex, inconsistent society, writers of the period turned inward for a sense of truth. Their movement, known as romanticism, explored the glories of the individual spirit, the beauty of nature, and the possibilities of the imagination.

Historical Context

Historical forces clearly shaped the literature of the American romantic period. Writers responded—positively and negatively—to the country's astonishing growth and to the booming Industrial Revolution.

The Spirit of Exploration

Westward expansion: Writers of the romantic period were witness to a period of great growth and opportunity for the young American nation. With that growth, however, came a price. In 1803, the Louisiana Purchase doubled the country's size. In the years that followed, explorers and settlers pushed farther and farther west. Settlers moved for largely practical reasons: to make money and to gain land. But each bit of land settled by white Americans was taken from Native American populations who had lived there for generations. The Indian Removal Act of 1830, for example, required Native Americans to relocate west. As whites invaded their homelands, many Native Americans saw no choice but to comply. And those who did not were simply—and often brutally—forced to leave.

Toward the middle of the century, Americans embraced the notion of "manifest destiny"—the idea that it was the destiny of the United States to expand to the Pacific Ocean and into Mexican territory. Mexicans disagreed, of course. When Texas was annexed from Mexico by the United States in 1845, it set off the Mexican-American War. Many Americans, including writer Henry David Thoreau, found the war to be immoral— a war fought mainly to expand slavery. "Can there not be a government," he wrote, "in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?" In the end, the United States defeated Mexico and, through treaties and subsequent land purchases from the Mexican government, established the current borders of the 48 contiguous United States.

Growth of Industry

The stories and essays of the romantic period reflect an enormous shift in the attitudes and working habits of many Americans. When the War of 1812 interrupted trade with the British, Americans were suddenly forced to produce many of the goods they had previously imported. The Industrial Revolution began, changing the country from a largely agrarian economy to an industrial powerhouse. The factory system changed the way of life for many Americans, but not always for the better. People left their farms for the cities, working long hours for low wages in harsh conditions. In addition, Northeastern textile mills' demand for cotton played a role in the expansion of slavery in the South. Writers of this period reacted to the negative effects of industrialization—the commercialism, hectic pace, and lack of conscience—by turning to nature and to the self for simplicity, truth, and beauty.

Cultural Influences

Many romantic writers were outspoken in their support for human rights. Their works created awareness of the injustice of slavery and called for reform in many other areas as well.

The Tragedy of Slavery

From 1793 to 1860, cotton production rose greatly, due to the invention of the cotton gin and other farming machinery. So did the number of enslaved workers. Plantation owners were the wealthiest and most powerful people in the South, yet they were relatively few in number. Most Southern farmers held few or no slaves, but they aspired to. They felt that slavery had become necessary for increasing profits. For slaves, life was brutal. Field workers—men, women, and children—rose before dawn and worked in the fields until bedtime. Many were beaten or otherwise abused. And worst of all, family members were sold away from one another. Often family members attempted to escape to be with one another again. Unfortunately, escapes were rarely successful. Tension over slavery increased between the North and the South. Many in the North saw slavery as immoral and worked to have it abolished. Others worried as the balance of power between free and slave states shifted with each new state entering the Union. Romantic poets James Russell Lowell and John Greenleaf Whittier wrote abolitionist journalism and poetry, and even Henry Wadsworth Longfellow published a volume of antislavery poems. Perhaps the greatest social achievement of the romantics was to create awareness of slavery's cruelty.

Call for Social Reform

By the mid-19th century, many Americans had joined together to fight slavery and the other social ills of the time. Many leading writers of the Romantic Movement were outspoken in their support for human rights. William Cullen Bryant and James Russell Lowell, for example, were prominent abolitionists who also supported workers' and women's rights. The abolition movement began by advocating resettlement of blacks in Africa. But most enslaved African Americans had been born and raised in the United States and resented the idea of being forced to leave. Instead, white and black abolitionists (including women) began to join together to work for emancipation. They

formed societies, spoke at conventions, published newspapers, and swamped Congress with petitions to end slavery.

In the 1830s and 1840s, workers began to agitate as well, protesting low wages and deteriorating working conditions. Many struck, but few were successful—a large pool of immigrants was always ready to take their places. Still, workers began forming unions, and slowly conditions improved.

Women in the early 19th century found much to protest. They could neither vote nor sit on juries. Their education rarely extended beyond elementary school. When they married, their property and money became their husband's. Many even lacked guardianship rights over their children. Throughout this period, women worked for change, gathering in 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York, to continue their long fight for women's rights.

Ideas of the Age

Reflecting the optimism of their growing country, American romantic writers forged a national literature for the very first time. Yet sectionalism threatened to tear the nation apart.

Nationalism vs. Sectionalism

In the early 1800s, many Supreme Court decisions strengthened the federal government's power over the states. At the same time, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams established a foreign policy guided by nationalism—the belief that national interests should be placed ahead of regional concerns or the interests of other countries. Reflecting the national pride and optimism of the American people, writers of this age forged a literature entirely the nation's own. For the first time, writers were not imitating their European counterparts, but were listening to their own voices and writing with a distinctly American accent.

However, this new spirit of nationalism was challenged by the question of slavery. Up until 1818, the United States had consisted of ten free and ten slave states. As new territories tried to enter the Union, the North and South wrangled over the balance of power between free and slave states. Economic interests also challenged nationalism. Tariffs on manufactured goods from Britain forced Southerners to buy more expensive, Northern-manufactured goods. From the South's point of view, the North was getting rich at the South's expense. Sectionalism, or the placing of the interests of one's own region ahead of the nation as a whole, began to take hold.

Romantic Literature

Themes of individualism and nature unified the writing of the American Romantic Movement, despite dramatic differences in the writers' focus and style.

The Early Romantics

The early American romantic writers may have been influenced more by the literature of another continent than by that of their own. Romanticism had first emerged in Europe in the late 18th century, in reaction to the neoclassicism of the period that had preceded it. Where neoclassical writers admired and imitated classical forms, the romantics looked to nature for inspiration. Where neo-classicists valued reason, the romantics celebrated emotions and the imagination. The first American romantic writers grew out of this European tradition, shaping and moulding it to fit their unique American identity. They too were reacting to what had come before—the rationality of the Age of Reason and the strict doctrines of Puritanism. Indeed, much had changed since the Puritan era in America, and the writers of the early romantic period reflected the more modern sensibilities of their day. As the U.S. population exploded and the country's borders moved westward, American writers aimed to capture the energy and character of their growing country. They saw the limits of reason and instead celebrated the glories of the individual spirit, the emotions, and the imagination as basic elements of human nature. The splendours of nature inspired the romantics more than the fear of God, and some of them felt a fascination with the supernatural.

William Cullen Bryant's 1817 poem "Thanatopsis" went a long way toward establishing romanticism as the major force in the literature of mid-19th century America. Bryant followed the trend of the English romantics by celebrating nature in his work. Romanticism was not only a movement in poetry, however. Washington Irving, the first American writer esteemed abroad, pioneered the short story as a literary form. He put America on the literary map and also influenced other writers, particularly Nathaniel Hawthorne. James Fenimore Cooper is remembered for writing the first truly original American novel. He celebrated the American spirit in all his frontier novels, known as The Leatherstocking Tales. The early romantic writers were the pioneers of America's national literature, setting the course for those who would follow.

The Fireside Poets

Other writers influential in forging an American literature were the Fireside Poets, a group of New England poets whose work was morally uplifting and romantically engaging. The group's name came from the family custom of reading poetry aloud beside a fire, a common form of entertainment in the 19th century. With the Fireside Poets, the poetry of American writers was, for the first time, on equal footing with that of their British counterparts.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the best-known member of the group, stressed individualism and an appreciation of nature in his work. His poems took for their subject matter the more colourful aspects of America's past. "Evangeline," for example, tells of lovers who are separated during the French and Indian War, while "The Song of Hiawatha" takes its themes from Native American folklore. Longfellow's fame was so great that after his death, he was honoured with a plaque in Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey in London—the only American poet ever to receive such an honour.

The other Fireside Poets, James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and John Greenleaf Whittier, were strongly committed to using poetry to bring about social reform. They were interested in such issues as abolition, women's rights, improvement of factory conditions, and temperance. They also championed the common person—perhaps as an outgrowth of the form of democracy that had been sweeping the land since President Jackson took office in 1829. Jackson had crusaded against control of the government by the wealthy and promised to look out for the interests of common people. One can see this regard for the common person in the work of Whittier, for example, who wrote of farmers, lumbermen, migrants, and the poor.

The Transcendentalists

By the mid-1800s, Americans were taking new pride in their emerging culture. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a New England writer, nurtured this pride. Emerson led a group practicing transcendentalism—a philosophical and literary movement that emphasized living a simple life and celebrating the truth found in nature and in personal emotion and imagination. Exalting the dignity of the individual, the transcendentalist stressed American ideas of optimism, freedom, and self-reliance.

The term transcendentalism came from Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher who wrote of "transcendent forms" of knowledge that exist beyond reason and experience. Emerson gave this philosophy a peculiarly American spin: he said that every individual is capable of discovering this higher truth on his or her own, through intuition. The transcendentalists believed that people are inherently good and should follow their own beliefs, however different these beliefs may be from the norm. Both Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" and Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" address this faith in the integrity of the individual.

Not surprisingly, a major target for the transcendentalists' criticism was their Puritan heritage, with its emphasis on material prosperity and rigid obedience to the laws of society. The transcendentalists disliked the commercial, financial side of American life and stressed instead spiritual well-being, achieved through intellectual activity and a close relationship to nature. Thoreau put his beliefs into practice by building a small cabin on Walden Pond and living there for two years, writing and studying nature. Transcendental ideas lived on in American culture in the works of later poets such as Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, and Wallace Stevens and through the civil rights movement of the 20th century. In the short term, however, transcendentalists' optimism began to fade when confronted with the persistence of slavery and the difficulty in abolishing it.

The transcendentalists

- emphasized living a simple life
- stressed a close relationship to nature
- celebrated emotions and the imagination

- stressed individualism and self-reliance
- believed intuition can lead to knowledge
- believed in the inherent goodness of people
- encouraged spiritual well-being over financial well-being

American Gothic: The "Brooding" Romantics

Not all American romantics were optimistic or had faith in the innate goodness of humankind, however. Three other giants from this period, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville are what have been called "brooding" romantics or "anti-transcendentalists." Theirs is a complex philosophy, filled with dark currents and a deep awareness of the human capacity for evil. While Irving had been satisfied if his work kept "mankind in good humour with one another," Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe were haunted by a darker vision of human existence. Their stories are characterized by a probing of the inner life of their characters, and examination of the complex and often mysterious forces that motivate human behaviour. They are romantic, however, in their emphasis on emotion, nature, the individual, and the unusual.

Exploring the darkness: Poe and Hawthorne, and to a lesser extent Melville, used gothic elements such as grotesque characters, bizarre situations, and violent events in their fiction. The gothic tradition had begun in Europe, perhaps inspired by the gothic architecture of the Middle Ages. European writers of the 19th century, such as Mary Shelley, author of Frankenstein, delighted readers with their deliciously creepy accounts of monsters, vampires, and humans with a large capacity for evil. The Romantic Movement itself also gave rise to gothic literature. Once the romantics freed the imagination from the restrictions of reason, they could follow it wherever it might go. For the dark romantics, the imagination led to the threshold of the unknown—that shadowy region where the fantastic, the demonic, and the insane reside.

Edgar Allan Poe, of course, was the master of the gothic form in the United States. He explored human psychology from the inside, using first-person narrators who were sometimes criminal or even insane. His plots involved extreme situations—not just murder, but live burials, physical and mental torture, and retribution from beyond the grave. Nathaniel Hawthorne agreed with the romantic emphasis on emotion and the individual. However, he did not see these as completely positive forces. His works, such as The Scarlet Letter and "The Minister's Black Veil," examine the darker facets of the human soul—for example, the psychological effects sin and guilt may have on human life.

Herman Melville's early works were mostly adventure stories set in the South Pacific. Moby Dick, however, departed from that pattern. By concentrating on a ship's captain's obsessive quest for the whale that took his leg, Melville explores such issues as madness and the conflict of good and evil. Later, in "Bartleby the Scrivener," Melville reveals the dark side of material prosperity by exploring how the struggle for material gain affects the individual. Perhaps the dark vision of Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe foreshadowed the tumult and tragedy that was soon to erupt in civil war in America. There is no question

that these three writers profoundly affected the development of the American literary voice throughout the remainder of the 19th century.

American gothic: the "brooding" romantics

• did not believe in the innate goodness of people

• explored the human capacity for evil

• probed the inner life of characters

• explored characters' motivations

• agreed with romantic emphasis on emotion, nature, and the individual • included elements of fantasy and the supernatural in works

American Gothic

The Raven

Poem by Edgar Allan Poe

Literary Analysis: Sound Devices

First published in 1845, "The Raven" became an instant hit. Part of the poem's popularity was due to Poe's clever use of sound devices, patterns of word sounds used to create musical effects.

• **Rhyme**, the repetition of similar sounds, is one of the easiest sound devices to spot. Poe adds variety by using internal rhyme, rhyming words that fall inside a line.

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December;

• **Repetition**, of rhymes and of words and phrases, helps give "The Raven" its distinctive rhythm.

As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.

• **Alliteration**, the repetition of initial consonant sounds, is used to create rhythm or to stress key words.

While I nodded, nearly napping . . .

• **Onomatopoeia** is the use of words that sound like their meaning, such as the word rustling in this example:

And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain

As you read, note how Poe combines these sound devices to form complex rhythmic patterns. Reading aloud will help you appreciate Poe's ingenious use of sound effects.

"The Raven" tells a story without directly stating all of the important details. You'll need to use clues in the poem to make inferences about the speaker's situation as the poem opens and about his state of mind during the events of the poem. As you read, use a chart like the one shown to record your inferences and the clues that helped you. By the end of the poem, you'll be able to draw conclusions about what the speaker experiences.

	Inferences about the speaker	Clues
State of mind		

Recent experiences		

The Raven

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 surcease1 of sorrow—sorrow for the lost Lenore—
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
Nameless here forevermore.

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;—
That it is and nothing more."

Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer,
"Sir," said I, "or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore;
But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping,
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,
That I scarce was sure I heard you"—here I opened wide the door;—
Darkness there and nothing more.

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;
But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token,
And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, "Lenore!"
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word "Lenore!"
Merely this and nothing more.

Back into the chamber turning, all my soul within me burning,
Soon again I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before.
"Surely," said I, "surely that is something at my window lattice;
Let me see, then, what thereat is, and this mystery explore—
Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery explore;—
'Tis the wind and nothing more!"

Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore.
Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;
But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door—
Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door—
Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,
By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,
"Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou," I said, "art sure no craven,
Ghastly grim and ancient Raven wandering from the Nightly shore—
Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's Plutonian7 shore!"
Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore."

Much I marveled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly,
Though its answer little meaning—little relevancy bore;
For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being
Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door—
Bird or beast upon the sculptured bust above his chamber door,
With such name as "Nevermore."

But the Raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only
That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.
Nothing farther then he uttered—not a feather then he fluttered—
Till I scarcely more than muttered "Other friends have flown before—
On the morrow he will leave me, as my hopes have flown before."
Then the bird said, "Nevermore."

Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken,
"Doubtless," said I, "what it utters is its only stock and store
Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster

Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden8 bore—
Till the dirges9 of his Hope that melancholy burden bore
Of ‘Never—nevermore.’”

But the Raven still beguiling all my fancy into smiling,
Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird, and bust and door;
Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking
Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore—
What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore
Meant in croaking, “Nevermore.
This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing
To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom’s core;
This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease reclining
On the cushion’s velvet lining that the lamp-light gloated o’er,
But whose velvet violet lining with the lamp-light gloating o’er,
She shall press, ah, nevermore!

Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer
Swung by Seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.
“Wretch,” I cried, “thy God hath lent thee—by these angels he hath sent thee
Respite—respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore;
Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!”
Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!—
Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,
Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted—
On this home by Horror haunted—tell me truly, I implore—
Is there—is there balm in Gilead?—tell me—tell me, I implore!”
Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore.”
Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

“Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!” I shrieked, upstarting—
“Get thee back into the tempest and the Night’s Plutonian shore!
Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!
Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust above my door!
Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!”
Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming,
And the lamp-light o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted—nevermore!

Comprehension

1. Recall Where and when do the events of the poem take place?
2. Recall What is the raven’s response to all of the speaker’s questions?
3. Clarify What is the speaker’s explanation of the raven’s one response?

Literary Analysis

4. Draw Conclusions: Review the inferences you made as you read. What conclusions did you draw about the speaker and his emotional state?

5. Examine Tone: For each of the following passages, describe the speaker’s tone, or attitude, toward the raven. What explains the speaker’s changing responses to his mysterious visitor?

- the raven’s first appearance (lines 43–44)
- the thoughts the raven inspires (lines 71–74)
- the purpose the speaker attributes to the raven (lines 81–84)
- the speaker’s command to the raven (lines 97–98)

6. Compare and Contrast Imagery: Poe uses imagery to create a stark contrast between Lenore and the raven. Using a chart like the one shown, list images used to describe each character. Based on these images, what main feeling or quality is each character used to communicate? Cite evidence.

7. Evaluate Sound Devices: Reread lines 79–84. Identify the sound devices used in this stanza, and give examples of each technique. Which of these devices do you find most compelling or effective? Explain your answer.

8. Make Judgments Consider the speaker’s changing responses to the raven and the conclusions you drew about his state of mind. What does the speaker’s conflict with the raven suggest about the behaviour of people who are struggling with grief? Support your answer with details.

Literary Criticism

9. Author's Style In an essay about "The Raven," Poe claimed that he started with the word nevermore (he liked its vowel sounds), then added the death of a beautiful woman ("the most poetical topic in the world"). Only later did he invent the story and characters that readers have found so moving and memorable. Poe seems to have been more interested in form than content. Which do you find more important in this poem? Cite details in your answer