

Romantic Period

The first „national“ American literature that appeared at the beginning of the 19th century (only after several decades after the War of Independence) was romantic in character, like the European literature of the time. This was not caused by imitation, but due to the abounding strangeness of this new continent, and the different experience of a way of life.

Main features of Romanticism:

- it stressed emotion, intuition and passion over reason
- an increasing interest in nature, in the natural, primitive and uncivilized way of life
- growing interest in scenery
- emphasis on the subjective feeling and subjective approach to the world
- the need for spontaneity in thought and action
- increasing importance attached to natural genius and the power of imagination
- celebrating the individual and his needs
- freedom of thought and expression
- the cult of the Noble Savage
- the trend toward the irrational and supernatural
- rediscovery of a body of older literature – folktales, ancient ballads and epics

Washington Irving (1783-1859)

the first American author to achieve international renown. His works are frequently humorous, he wrote always for pleasure and to produce pleasure

The Sketch Book (1820) – a collection of essays and of Americanized versions of European folk tales. In this book Irving showed his romantic interest in landscape, folklore and the past. Two of the stories, „Rip Van Winkle“ and „The Legend of Sleepy Hollow“, set in days when New York was a Dutch colony, are classics in American literature. With these two narratives Irving is usually seen as having created the short story as a new genre, distinct from the tales or gothic mysteries.

James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851)

the first great American novelist. He was famed for his plots full of action and his vivid, somewhat idealized, portrayal of American life in the forest and at sea. Altogether Cooper published 32 novels, writing approximately one book a year. He wrote fiction, history, biography, political reflections and travel writing. He developed and popularized several literary forms such as „frontier novel“, „sea novel“, and „dynasty novel“. Cooper used American setting for his novels, and also some of distinctively American forms, like the earlier captivity narratives. Because of this Americans were very proud of his books.

Leather-Stocking Tales – a series of 5 novels, (*The Pioneers, The Last of the Mohicans, The Prairie, The Pathfinder, The Deerslayer*) depicting life on the early American frontier. Here Cooper celebrated the beauty of the American wilderness and the simple frontier life. He wanted to give picture of vanishing values and ideas, a sense of the loss of innocence, loss of harmony between the whites and Indians as the civilization develops. Natty Bumppo, the main character of the novels, was a symbol of all that had been destroyed and lost in America.

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49)

poet, short story writer, literary critic

poetry: his poems are remarkable for their flawless literary construction, for their haunting themes, for extraordinary manipulation of rhythm and sound.

literary criticism: Poe produced a great number of book reviews; his literary essays were famous for their sarkasm; his theories on the nature of fiction have had a lasting influence on American and European writers

horror stories: „The Fall of the House of Usher“, „The Pit and the Pendulum“, „The Black Cat“

detective stories: „The Murders in the Rue Morgue“ and „The Purloined Letter“ are regarded as predecessors of the modern detective story. Poe invented the character of the detective who solves the crime through rational methods, through understanding the psychology of the criminals.

Poe influenced many writers and poets. His poetry affected the development of French symbolist poetry. His fiction influenced surrealist painters. His character of the detective influenced Conan Doyle's portrayal of Sherlock Holmes, and his story „The Gold Bug“ (about a search for buried treasure) inspired Robert Louis Stevenson when writing *Treasure Island*.