

## Prose Romance

Late 1840s and early 1850s were the era when a series of new American literary masterpieces appeared. Henry Thoreau wrote „Civil Disobedience“ and *Walden*, Herman Melville wrote *Moby Dick*, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, Walt Whitman wrote *Leaves of Grass*. This area is sometimes referred to as American Renaissance.

Prose writing during American Renaissance consisted mainly of romances (that were a counterpart to English novels). While English novel was a description of a certain social class and milieu, American novels were quite different. Social milieu did not exist in America, so American authors focused more on complexities of emotions in the characters. Prose romance is half-way between novel and myth, and is highly subjective. Characters represent emotions and psychological states. Action in these romances is not realistically convincing, but is symbolic. Not only novel-length romances, but also short stories written by American authors during this period were often allegorical, full of symbols and metaphors.

### Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)

born in Salem in Massachusetts, a descendant of Puritan immigrants. Hawthorne was closely tied to his birthplace and his ancestry, and at the same time he was aware of his aversion to both. He knew about the negative role his family had in the past. (One of his ancestor arrived in the American colonies in 1630, worked as a judge, and condemned one Quaker woman to be whipped because she was of a different religious belief than the Puritans. Another of his ancestors was a judge in the Salem witchcraft trials). The sins of his Puritan ancestors, their intolerance, cruelty and pride, influenced Hawthorne's writing.

Hawthorne's stories and romances are allegorical, he was a master of symbols. He carefully described the psychology of his characters, was absorbed by the enigmas of evil and moral responsibility. He was especially interested in the dark sides of human souls, which made him create tales similar to those of the British Gothic novelists. He looked for inspiration in the past in order to get beyond the surface of society. His work has a dream-like character and resist simple interpretation. Themes of his works are veiled and have usually several layers.

Hawthorne's famous tales/short stories: *The Birthmark*; *Rappaccini's Daughter* (both are about men who are ruined when they want to discover the mystery of life); *Young Goodman Brown*; *The Minister's Black Veil*

*The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Hawthorne's masterpiece, it is the study of the effects of the adultery of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, a Puritan minister. The novel/romance asks the question whether the act of Hester and her lover was really sinful.

*The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), this romance deals with the problem of hereditary guilt

### Herman Melville (1819-1891)

At age 20 he became a sailor. Mostly he sailed aboard whale-ships. Melville's life as a sailor provided the material for his six books and also trained his imagination. As a sailor he was exposed to very hard working conditions, together with men of all races, and he learned to identify with slaves and to draw analogies between different forms of oppression. After what he saw during his voyages, Melville came to view the white civilized man as the fiercest animal on the earth.

After 5 years on the sea, Melville came back to the USA and started to write about his adventures. In his books Melville dealt with contradictions that cannot be solved (good and evil, freedom and fate, knowledge and unknowledgeable). His works are puzzling, disturbing, full of enigmas.

*Typee* (1846), partly autobiographical novel contrasting civilization with primitive life; the hero lives for some time among a tribe of cannibals, the Typee. However, he finds them happy, morally pure and better than so called civilized men.

*Moby-Dick* (1851), considered by some critics the greatest novel of American literature; in this novel Melville developed a new technique of fusing fact and symbol. *Moby-Dick*, the great white whale, represents God or fate. Captain Ahab, the central character, wants to kill the whale, for him, *Moby-Dick* is part of a universal mystery which he hates because he cannot understand it. When Ahab find the whale and attacks it, his ship is destroyed. Language: poetic, full of metaphors and poetic imagery, allusions to Shakespeare)

*The Piazza Tales* (1856), a collection of short stories

*Billy Budd*, Melville's last novel, not published during his life

Melville died completely forgotten and was rediscovered only in the 1920s.

Another literary genre that was very popular in America around the middle of the 19th century was „domestic novel“. These novels were written by women authors, were more realistic than writing of Hawthorne and Melville, were generally composed in a plain, conversational style, were concerned with love, jealousy, property, careers and other everyday matters. (Harriet Beecher Stowe, today known especially as the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but wrote also domestic novels; Louisa May Alcott: *Little Women*)