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Department of English

Level: Second Year

Module: Literary Texts

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American Romanticism

Historical Context

American Romanticism emerged in the early 19th century as the young nation stretched westward, fueled by the Louisiana Purchase (1803) and the promise of Manifest Destiny. Industrialization churned in the East, but the frontier beckoned—a vast, untamed canvas. The War of 1812 cemented independence, sparking a cultural push to define "**American-ness**" **beyond British roots**. Romanticism, borrowed from Europe's Rousseau and Wordsworth, took hold—but here, it married rugged landscapes and democratic fervor to a belief in human potential. It's less about castles and kings, more about forests and free souls.

Characteristics of American Romanticism

- **Nature as Divine:** Wilderness isn't just scenery—it's a sacred force, a teacher of truth.
- **Emotion Over Reason:** Feelings trump logic; intuition guides the heart.
- **The Individual:** The self is heroic, unbound by society's chains.
- **Imagination and the Sublime:** Beauty and terror intertwine, stirring awe.
- **American Identity:** Folklore, frontier, and optimism shape a national myth.

Now, let's see these in action through excerpts from five giants of the movement.

Excerpts and Explanations

1. Washington Irving – "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820)

- Excerpt:

"The chief part of the stories, however, turned upon the favorite spectre of Sleepy Hollow, the Headless Horseman, who had been heard several times of late, patrolling the country... It was, as I have said, a fine autumnal day; the sky was clear and serene, and nature wore that rich and golden livery which we always associate with the idea of abundance." (From The Sketch Book)

- Explanation: Irving, a Romantic pioneer, blends folklore with nature's splendor. The Headless Horseman—a local legend—embodies imagination's power, a spectral figure haunting the Hudson Valley. The "golden livery" of autumn paints nature as abundant and sublime, not just a backdrop but a living presence tied to American soil. Ichabod Crane's quirky individualism (a lanky dreamer) nods to the Romantic hero—flawed, yet chasing something grander than practicality.

2. James Fenimore Cooper – "The Last of the Mohicans" (1826)

- Excerpt:

"The vast canopy of woods spread itself to the margin of the river... The water seemed piled against the sky... The whole landscape, which, seen by a favoring light, and in a genial temperature, had been found so lovely, appeared now like some pictured allegory of life, in which objects were arrayed in their harshest but truest colors." (Chapter 5)

- Explanation: Cooper's frontier epic exalts nature's majesty—the "vast canopy" and river evoke the sublime, a beauty so immense it borders on terror. This isn't tame European countryside; it's America's wild heart. The "pictured allegory" reflects Romanticism's love of symbolism—nature mirrors human struggle, raw and real. Hawkeye, the rugged individualist, embodies freedom beyond civilization, a distinctly American Romantic ideal.

3. Ralph Waldo Emerson – "Nature" (1836)

- Excerpt:

"In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes." (Chapter 1)

- Explanation: Emerson, a Transcendentalist Romantic, sees nature as divine healer and teacher. The woods strip away "mean egotism"—society's petty concerns—restoring the soul's purity. This is emotion over reason: feeling nature's "blithe air" trumps intellectual doubt. The individual's uplift "into infinite space" celebrates self-reliance, a cornerstone of American Romanticism, tied to the nation's promise of limitless possibility.

4. Henry David Thoreau – "Walden" (1854)

- Excerpt:

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that

I had not lived... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life." (Chapter 2, "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For")

- Explanation: Thoreau takes Emerson's ideas to the woods, living them at Walden Pond. "Live deliberately" is peak Romantic individualism—choosing a raw, authentic existence over society's script. Nature teaches "essential facts," a sacred wisdom beyond books. "Suck out all the marrow" is visceral emotion—an urge to feel life's depth, not just think it. This American twist: practicality meets wild yearning.

5. Walt Whitman – "Song of Myself" (Leaves of Grass, 1855)

- Excerpt:

"I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you... / I loafe and invite my soul, / I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass." (Section 1)

- Explanation: Whitman's free verse explodes with Romantic joy. "Celebrate myself" is the individual unbound—heroic, democratic, sharing "every atom" with all. Nature's "spear of summer grass" is divine simplicity, sparking awe and contemplation. Imagination flows—unstructured lines mirror the soul's sprawl. This is American Romanticism at its boldest: a poet of the people, rooted in the land's open promise.

Why American Romanticism Stands Out

Unlike European Romanticism's brooding castles or ancient ruins, America's version thrives on newness—virgin forests, boundless plains, a nation still shaping itself. It's optimistic yet shadowed: Cooper's noble savages fade, Hawthorne (later in the Renaissance) probes guilt.

Transcendentalism adds a spiritual twist—nature as America’s cathedral. These writers don’t just dream; they claim a cultural identity amid frontier dust and democratic hope.

Legacy

American Romanticism fades by the 1860s, eclipsed by Realism’s grit post-Civil War. But its echoes linger—Thoreau inspires environmentalists, Whitman frees poets, Irving’s tales haunt Halloween. It’s the root of America’s literary soul—wild, heartfelt, fiercely itself.