

Romanticism and Reform: U.S. Literature from the Jacksonian Era to the Civil War

Study Questions for Session 1: American Romanticism in the Antebellum Era

I. Questions of canonization

1. Define the term *American renaissance*, considering its historical and geographical boundaries!
2. Discuss the importance of Concord, Massachusetts!
3. Discuss the significance of F.O. Matthiessen for the canonization of nineteenth-century American literature! In how far is the publication date of his book important?
4. Who were the "Fireside Poets"?

II. Historical Background

1. Characterize the antebellum era, paying particular attention to the importance of Andrew Jackson's presidency!
2. Explain the relationship between territorial expansion and the national debate on slavery!
3. The antebellum era as an era of reform.
4. The antebellum era as an era of technological progress.
5. Describe the emergence of a national public sphere in the antebellum era!

III. Romanticism as a new discourse in Western intellectual history

1. Characterize Romanticism as a reaction against enlightened empiricism!
2. What is Edmund Burke's critique of the Lockean view of nature?
3. Discuss the influence of the French revolution on the emergence of Romantic discourse!
4. Define the meaning and function of the term *sublime* in the nineteenth century! (You may want to consult Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*.)
5. Explain the meaning and function of the term *Aufhebung* in nineteenth-century intellectual history!

IV. Romanticism as a literary phenomenon

1. Discuss romanticism as a reaction against neoclassicism!
2. Distinguish the different conceptions of *art* in neoclassicism and romanticism!
3. Characterize Romantic language and Romantic subject matter! (You may want to consult Wordsworth and Coleridge's preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*.)
4. What are the prevalent traits of the Romantic *genius*? Identify different versions of this figure!

V. Romanticism as a continuation of the enlightenment

1. What is the relationship between subject and object in Romantic thought? (You may want to consult Fichtes *Grundlagen der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*.)
2. Explain the meaning of *transcendence* in Romantic thought!
3. Discuss nationalism and Romantic love as two forms of transcendence!

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Study Questions for Sessions 2: Ralph Waldo Emerson

Required Reading: "The American Scholar"; from *Nature*: "Introduction," chapters 1, 4, 6.

Suggested Further Reading: "Divinity School Address," "Self-Reliance."

I. Situate Emerson's thought in American intellectual history!

1. Define the term *transcendentalism*, considering its historical and geographical contexts!
2. Transcendentalism and North American Christianity: The influence of Unitarianism. (Consult Emerson's "Divinity School Address.")
3. Transcendentalism and the Enlightenment: The influence of John Locke's empiricism.
4. Transcendentalism and the Enlightenment: The influence of deism.

II. "The American Scholar"

1. Characterize Emerson's style! In how far are style and philosophy related?
2. Describe the essay's structure!
3. The different roles of literature and experience in Emerson's "American Scholar."
4. What are the "duties" of the scholar? (Consider Emerson's understanding of the terms *self-trust* and *genius*!)
5. Discuss the Americanness of the American scholar! What does Emerson mean when he speaks of "the courtly muses of Europe"?
6. Explicate Emerson's sentence "The near explains the far."

III. *Nature*

1. "To what end is nature", according to Emerson? What is Emerson's definition of the term?
2. The relationship between subject and object in Emerson's *Nature*.
3. The sublime in Emerson's *Nature*.
4. Interpret the famous "transparent eyeball"-passage!
5. The problem of idealism and its solution in Emerson's *Nature*.

IV. Key Concepts

1. What does Emerson mean by "self-reliance"?
2. What does Emerson mean by "representative men"?

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Study Questions for Sessions 3 & 4: Henry David Thoreau

Required Reading: *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, especially chapters 1, 2, 18.

Strongly Suggested Further Reading: "Slavery in Massachusetts," "A Plea for Captain John Brown."

I. Discuss the importance of Thoreau's oeuvre for American literature!

II. The meaning of Thoreau's stay at Walden Pond

1. The stay at Walden Pond as a gesture and as an "experiment."
2. Characterize the narrator's view of nature!
3. What are the "necessaries of life"? Discuss their importance to the narrator!
4. Discuss the narrator's concepts of property and worth/value!
5. Characterize the narrator's attitude toward technological progress!

III. Language and irony

1. Characterize the use of economic language in the first chapter of *Walden*!
2. Define the narrator's concept of "economy"!
3. In how far is the narrator of *Walden* a critic of language?
4. The function of inversions in *Walden*.
5. Analogies and their function in *Walden*.

IV. The self and the community / Solitude and society

1. Define the narrator's concept of selfhood (identity)!
2. Explicate the sentence "I have travelled a good deal in Concord"!
3. Describe the relation between narrator and implied reader in *Walden*!
4. The themes of education and philanthropy.
5. The function of writing.

V. Later Writings

1. The political and eco-critical aspects of Thoreau's later writings.
2. Summarize the argument of "Slavery in Massachusetts"!
3. Politics and Romantic selfhood in "A Plea for Captain John Brown."

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Study Questions for Sessions 4 & 5: Edgar Allan Poe

Required Reading: "The Sphinx," "Morning on the Wissahiccon," "The Domain of Arnheim," "The Masque of the Red Death," "The Tell-Tale Heart."

Strongly Suggested Further Reading: "Ligeia," "The Purloined Letter," "The Imp of the Perverse."

Suggested Further Reading: "Landor's Cottage," "The Fall of the House of Usher."

I. "The Sphinx" and "Morning on the Wissahiccon"

1. Poe's concept of nature in comparison to Emerson's concept of nature.
2. The relationship between the narrator and his relative in "The Sphinx."
3. Narrator and implied author in "The Sphinx."
4. The sphinx as *nemesis*: Where does the monster come from? (cf. IV.5 below)
5. "The Sphinx" and the (Emersonian) problem of idealism.
6. "Morning on the Wissahiccon": Describe the structure of the narrative! Why is the text structured in this way?
7. "Morning on the Wissahiccon" as a satire.

II. "The Domain of Arnheim"

(you may want to study "Landor's Cottage, a Pendant to 'The Domain of Arnheim'" as well)

1. Describe the structure of the story!
2. Characterize the narrator!
3. Ellison's character and behavior as examples of Romantic *hubris*. (cf. IV.5 below)
4. The meaning of landscape gardening to Ellison. Analyze Ellison's theory of nature!
5. The meaning and significance of the term "earth-angel."
6. Define the terms *sublime*, *beautiful* and *picturesque* in their 18th to 19th-centuries meaning and show their significance for "The Domain of Arnheim"!
7. The grotesque in "The Domain of Arnheim."
8. Interpret the narrator's description of Ellison's landscape garden!

III. "The Masque of the Red Death"

1. Romantic *hubris* in "The Masque of the Red Death." (cf. IV.5 below)
2. The grotesque in "The Masque of the Red Death."
3. The function of colors and sounds in "The Masque of the Red Death."
4. Where does the masque of the Red Death come from?
5. Analyze the relationship between Prince Prospero and the masque of the Red Death!

IV. "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Imp of the Perverse"

1. The narrative structure of "The Tell-Tale Heart": Distinguish character, narrator, implied author, and different figures of the reader!
2. Find examples in the text's structure (sentences and passages) illustrating the narrator's unreliability in "The Tell-Tale Heart"!
3. Why did the narrator kill the old man in "The Tell-Tale Heart"?
4. The development of point-of-view in the narrative of "The Tell-Tale Heart."

5. Poe's concept of the *nemesis* and of the *doppelgänger*, as exemplified in "The Tell-Tale Heart" (for these terms, you may want to consult F. Kelleter, *Die Moderne und der Tod*).
6. Interpret the concept of the Evil Eye in "The Tell-Tale Heart"!
7. Poe's concept of *hubris* in "The Tell-Tale Heart": Interpret the ending! (cf. IV.5)
8. Relate Poe's concept of *perversity* in "The Imp of the Perverse" to "The Tell-Tale Heart"!

V. "Ligeia"

1. "Ligeia" as a subversion of the romantic love story.
2. Characterize the narrator of the tale!
3. Characterize the lady Ligeia and compare her to other Poe-characters!
4. Interpret the narrator's taste in furniture!
5. Who killed Rowena?
6. Interpret the ending of the tale, distinguishing between *supernatural gothic* and *explained gothic*!

VI. "The Purloined Letter"

1. Characterize the literary figure of the private detective!
2. The function of prefect G—.
3. Characterize Minister D—! Compare him to other Poe-characters!
4. Dupin's "analytical" method of finding the letter.
5. The themes of mathematics and poetry in "The Purloined Letter."
6. The relationship between detective and criminal.
7. Relate "The Purloined Letter" to Poe's landscape, murder and love tales!

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Study Questions for Sessions 6 & 7: Nathaniel Hawthorne

Required Reading: *The Scarlet Letter*, including "The Custom House."

Strongly Suggested Further Reading: "Young Goodman Brown."

Suggested Further Reading: "Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*."

I. The Function of "The Custom House"

1. The narrator and his narrative in "The Custom House."
2. Hawthorne's distinction between *romance* and *novel*. (Also consult "Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*"!)
3. The relationship of the actual and the imaginary according to (and in) "The Custom House."
4. The relationship between the past and the present in Hawthorne's literary theory.

II. The Main Structural Elements of *The Scarlet Letter*

1. Identify major plot elements!
2. Analyze the relationship of narrated time and time of narrative! Draw a chart of the novel's time structure!
3. How does the narrator provide unity and cohesion to his plot?
4. Characterize the narrator's attitude to his characters!

III. Character Constellation and Plot

1. Sin and atonement: Compare the main characters!
2. Interpret the novel's ending!
3. The function of the forest scene.
4. The function of Pearl.

IV. The Letter "A"

1. The relationship between symbol and meaning.
2. The multiple readings of the letter A.
3. Allegory and symbolism in the novel. (For the romantic understanding of these terms, you may want to consult Feidelson, *Symbolism in American Literature*.)
4. Hawthorne and the (Emersonian) problem of idealism. Consult "Young Goodman Brown"!

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Study Questions for Sessions 8 & 9: Herman Melville

Required Reading: *Moby-Dick or, The Whale*, esp. chapters "Etymology", "Extracts", 1-4, 10, 16, 26-28, 32, 35-36, 41-42, 46, 50, 89, 93-94, 96, 99, 106, 110-11, 124, 127, 132-35, "Epilogue."

Strongly Suggested Further Reading: "Bartleby, the Scrivener."

I. In how far does Melville's biography shed light on the institution of authorship in the 19th century?

1. Interpret Ishmael's sentence "A whaleship was my Yale College and my Harvard."
2. The importance of *Typee*.
3. Melville's theory of literary production and reception. (Consult "Hawthorne and His Mosses"!)
4. How do you account for the Melville Revival of the 1920s?

II. *Moby-Dick*: Structure and Narrative Perspective

1. The novel as a forerunner of modernism.
2. The novel as a hybrid.
3. The meaning of the peritexts. (For the term peritext, check Gerard Genette.)
4. Point-of-view in the novel: Ishmael as narrator.

III. Character Constellation

1. Interpret the opening of Ishmael's tale!
2. Ishmael as character.
3. Ahab as character.
4. The function of minor characters. (Consult chapters 26 and 27!)

IV. Epistemology as a Theme

1. What does the whale mean to Ahab? Interpret chapters 36 and 41!
2. Ishmael's epistemology: Interpret chapters 35, 96, 32!
3. How does Ishmael know the whale? Interpret chapter 42!
4. The (Emersonian) problem of idealism in *Moby-Dick*: Interpret chapters 93 and 99!

V. "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street"

1. Relate setting and action of "Bartleby the Scrivener"!
2. Interpret Bartleby's sentence "I would prefer not to"!
3. The function and character of the narrator.
4. Bartleby's life prior to his employment on Wall Street – a possible explanation of his fate?

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Study Questions for Sessions 10 & 11: Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson

Required Readings: Walt Whitman, "Preface to *Leaves of Grass*" (1855), "Song of Myself" (version of 1881), "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking."

Emily Dickinson, poems # 130, 214, 258, 280, 303, 341, 441, 449, 465, 510, 585, 657, 712, 1068, 1129.

I. The importance of Walt Whitman's oeuvre for American literature

1. Situate Whitman's oeuvre in the literature of the American Renaissance!
2. Whitman as an urban poet.
3. Crisis points in Whitman's life.
4. Describe the genesis of *Leaves of Grass*!

II. "Preface to *Leaves of Grass*" (1855)

1. The Americanness of American poetry, according to Walt Whitman.
2. Discuss Whitman's concept of (analogous) form!
3. What are the contents and themes of democratic poetry?
4. Is there a democratic language, according to Whitman?

III. *Leaves of Grass*: "Song of Myself" (version of 1881)

1. Name the prevalent literary techniques employed by Whitman, find examples for them and interpret their poetic function!
2. Identify the point-of-view in "Song of Myself," paying particular attention to sections 1, 2, 5, 13, 16, 24, 33, 34, 41, 44, 47, 51, 52!
3. Characterize the speaker of the poem in his role as poet. What is his relation to the reader?
4. Compare Whitman to the transcendentalists, especially to Emerson and Thoreau! (Pay attention to section 34!)

IV. "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"

1. Analyze the first stanza, paying particular attention to rhythm and syntax!
2. Thematic contrasts in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking."
3. The process of poetic expression in the text's narrative: "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" as a metapoetic poem.
4. The relationship of death and poetry in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking."

V. The importance and uniqueness of Emily Dickinson's poetry in American literature

1. Acquaint yourself with Dickinson's life as a poet!
2. Identify similarities and differences between Whitman and Dickinson! Find examples for them in Dickinson's poems and analyze their significance! (Pay particular attention to poems no. 130, 214, 303, 441, 1068!)
3. Name the prevalent literary techniques employed by Dickinson, find examples for them and interpret their poetic function!
4. Juxtaposition as a poetic device in Dickinson's poems: Analyze poems no. 258, 341, 465!

5. Define Dickinson's concept of death, comparing it to Whitman's! (Pay attention to poems no. 712, 280!).
6. Analyze Dickinson's strategy of indirection and circumference, especially in poem no. 1129!
7. Compare Dickinson to the transcendentalists!

VI. Poetic form and content in the poetry of Emily Dickinson

1. The use of rhymes in Dickinson's poetry.
2. The function of dashes in Dickinson's poetry.
3. Syntax and argument in Dickinson's poetry.
4. The theme of auditory perception in Dickinson's poetry.
5. The significance of the moment in Dickinson's poetry.
6. The function and use of pauses in Dickinson's poetry.
7. The endings of Dickinson's poems.
8. Metaphor and metonymy in Dickinson's poetry. (Compare to Whitman!)

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Study Questions for Session 12: Harriet Beecher Stowe

Required Reading: from Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly*: "Preface", chapters 1, 3, 7, 9, 14, 20, 26, 30, 31, 34, 40, 45

I. The cultural work of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

1. Stowe's novel as a reaction to the Compromise of 1850.
2. Discuss the publication history of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*!
3. Discuss the reception of Stowe's novel! What were some of the more immediate reactions?
4. Is Harriet Beecher Stowe "that little lady who started this big war"?
5. Why does the novel have a double plot?

II. Harriet Beecher Stowe and the discourse of evangelical piety

1. Stowe's Presbyterian background as a key to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
2. Characterize the discourse of evangelical piety!
3. In how far is the abolitionist movement related to evangelicalism? Discuss the case of William Lloyd Garrison!
4. Anti-intellectualism and antinomianism in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
5. "Common sense," "natural" sense, and "the sense of the heart" in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

III. Harriet Beecher Stowe and the discourse of sentimentality

1. Characterize the discourse of sentimentality!
2. What does Stowe mean when she writes that she wants to "exhibit [slavery] in a *living dramatic reality*"?
3. Characterize the relationship between narrator and reader in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*!
4. The domestic sphere and the public sphere in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

IV. The cultural politics of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

1. How are African Americans portrayed in Stowe's novel? Identify different types!
2. Racialism in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
3. Why has "Uncle Tom" become a pejorative term in African American slang?
4. How does Stowe represent Southern society?

V. Female sentimentalism in the antebellum era

1. Discuss the re-evaluation of sentimentalism in current feminist theory! (You may want to consult Jane Tompkins' *Sensational Designs*.)
2. Female sentimentalism and the Republican tradition.

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Study Questions for Session 13: John Augustus Stone

Required Reading: *Metamora, or The Last of the Wampanoags*

Suggested Further Reading: Thomas Jefferson, from *Notes on the State of Virginia*: Query VI (excerpts)

- in preparation -

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Study Questions for Session 15: Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs

Required Reading: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (complete); Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (selections in Norton)

Suggested Further Reading: Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?"

I. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*

1. Discuss the significance of the publication date of Douglass's *Narrative*!
2. Interpret the title of the narrative, paying particular attention to the phrase "written by himself"!
3. Autobiography and slave narrative as literary genres (pay particular attention to focus, voice, structure, plot).
4. Are there differences between Douglass's *Narrative* and traditional autobiographies?
5. How is slavery portrayed and criticized by Douglass?
6. Characterize and explain the presentation of the North in Douglass's *Narrative*!
7. Interpret the preface(s) of the *Narrative*!
8. Forms of rebellion in Douglass's *Narrative*.
9. What is the narrator's attitude towards Christianity?
10. Interpret the root episode!
11. The narrator's voice as an American voice.
12. The concept of selfhood in Douglass's *Narrative*.

II. Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

1. The trickster figure in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*: Compare!
2. Forms of rebellion in Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.
3. The relationship of emancipation and shame in Jacobs's text.
4. The sentimental plot as model for *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.
5. Inversions of sentimentality in Jacobs's text.
6. Domesticity and motherhood in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.
7. Describe Jacobs's (personal / professional) relation to Harriet Beecher Stowe and Lydia Maria Child!
8. Discuss the question of the authenticity of Jacobs's text!

III. Theoretical Frame

1. What does Gayatri Spivak mean when she asks, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"
2. Can the subaltern speak, in Spivak's sense, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*?