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See also: Blake, William; Philosophy of Nature; Romanticism in European History; Romanticism – American; Western Esotericism.

Romanticism – American

American Romanticism is the general term used to encompass the intersections among several philosophical, theological, political, and artistic movements that occurred in the United States during the middle of the nineteenth century, a period characterized by American territorial expansion and industrialization on the one hand, and sweeping religious and social reforms on the other.

Like its earlier European counterparts, American Romanticism represented a reaction to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment values of order, rationality, scientific method and urbanity. While not fully rejecting the gains of the Enlightenment – which included a critique of orthodox Christianity and religious “superstition” that many Romantics shared – Romanticism sought to reinvigorate those aspects of human knowledge and experience that the Enlightenment had pushed aside. These included: attention to mysticism and psychological supernaturalism and a thematic emphasis on the value of the imagination, sentimentalism, natural spiritualism, and pastoralism.

A prominent theme in this intellectual and artistic movement was a renewed attention to nature, not simply as a system of laws to be interpreted (an Enlightenment trope) but as a source of spiritual and psychological renewal. Like the British Romantics (such as Wordsworth and Coleridge), the American Romantics saw experience in nature as a means to return to a childlike state of innocence, unsullied by civilization. Regained innocence, in turn, could lead to a higher level of insight into the nature of the good, the true, and the beautiful (and for some, also, the nature of God). The responsibility of the Romantic artist was not only to advocate for such a return to nature, innocence, and moral purity but also to convey it to others through poetry, essays, paintings, and related arts. Because the American landscape was already steeped in symbolic associations (America as “the new Eden” or “New Canaan”), it is not surprising that the American Romantics would emphasize the uniqueness of American nature in particular. Such emphasis built on the already established symbolic importance of American nature, while also contributing to the Romantic agenda of shaping a new national identity.

American Romanticism is traditionally thought to have begun in the late 1820s and to have ended by the 1860s, the period of the Civil War (1861–1865). Several important historical events and trends were associated with these middle decades of the nineteenth century. Perhaps most importantly, the Romantic era saw a movement away from – and calls for a return to – the Jeffersonian values of agrarian republicanism that had dominated during the preceding Federalist period. Thomas Jefferson had argued that the moral, spiritual, and national integrity of American culture rested upon the citizenry’s relationship to the natural landscape and its gentle cultivation, and he had imagined a nation of small farmers. By the 1830s and 1840s, however, industrialization had begun to spread across the American landscape in the form of railroads, steamboats, and agricultural machinery. According to historian Leo Marx, this led to a consciousness of what has been called the “machine in the garden” – the recognition that the utopian and rural values of early American identity were being challenged by industrialism, expansion, and urbanization.

The middle of the nineteenth century also marked a change in American self-perceptions in two important ways. Perhaps most importantly, the question of slavery and abolition became increasingly urgent as the economic and social climates of the urban North and the agricultural South diverged radically and as the opening of the western frontier shifted the balance of political power. At the same time, the territorial expansion of the United States westward also changed the way Americans came to understand and to construct their identity. During this period, characterized by the philosophical imperatives of expansion known as “Manifest Destiny” and shaped by the war with Mexico from 1846–1848, the settlement of the American west was advancing rapidly, so that by 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner could claim that the frontier was closed and that it had irrevocably shaped what it meant to be an American. In the “Frontier thesis,” Turner had completed the idealization of the west that had begun during the presidency of Andrew Jackson (1828–1836), and the settlement of the west brought with it new mythologies, stereotypes, and images of progress. American Romanticism may be understood as an alternatively nostalgic and progressive response to these shifting values and as an effort to negotiate the tension between different models of the American relationship to the landscape.

These changing attitudes toward the American landscape and its relationship to national identity are reflected in the art of the Romantic period, particularly in the works of a group of painters known as the Hudson River School. Established during the 1820s and working until about the 1850s in the United States, these painters represented in their images the tensions surrounding American attitudes toward nature and the unsettled wilderness. While earlier paintings of the American landscape had emphasized the

aesthetic tradition known as the picturesque, in which the harmonious balance of natural and human elements was central, the Hudson River painters introduced the more complex dynamics associated with the sublime. The sublime had been a central theme of European Romanticism since the 1780s and was used to explore the mind's encounter with objects that overwhelmed the understanding. According to its most important theorist, the English writer Edmund Burke (1729–1797), the sublime was an experience characterized by feelings of fear and anxiety in the face of something awesome – particularly wild and rugged landscapes such as the Swiss Alps, Niagara Falls, or, later, the American west.

While elements of the sublime are present in the work of many painters associated with the Hudson River School, including the works of Asher B. Durand (1796–1886), paintings such as Thomas Cole's (1801–1848) *The Orxow, the Connecticut River near Northampton* (1836) are considered representative examples of the movement. In this image, Cole captures the contrast between a calm and cultivated pastoral valley and the threat posed by the encroachment of the wilderness, and the painting has been read as symbolizing the Romantic tension between nature and human endeavor. "Luminists" such as John Kensett (1816–1872) continued this tradition of Romantic landscape painting from the 1840s–1880s, focusing on subjects associated with maritime scenery. Most importantly, as the nineteenth century progressed, painters began to create images of the American west that drew upon the visual language of the sublime. Artists such as Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902) and Thomas Moran (1837–1926) helped to mythologize and, therefore, ultimately to preserve areas of the Rockies and the west by helping to create support for the conservationist movement (1850–1920) and for emergence of the National Parks in the 1870s; yet, by representing western America as "virgin" territories, they also reflected the very conditions of "Manifest Destiny" that placed these landscapes in jeopardy of development.

This tension between civilization and wilderness can be seen in the literature of American Romanticism as well, but in these works the dynamic is often internalized. In other words, the contrasting aspects of the landscape often come to symbolize a conflict within the national psyche, which imagined American identity as simultaneously a product of the frontier and of emerging industrial capitalism. Romanticism emphasized the individual encounter with the natural, moral, and spiritual world, and one of its central concerns was the process of self-knowledge. Writers often described this encounter with the self in very different ways, however. Some Romantic writers, such as Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864), or Herman Melville (1819–1891), focused on the wild or "savage" drives to power, domination, and cruelty within human nature, and their works often engaged themes of supernaturalism, psychological dis-

turbance, or the Gothic. The classic example of American Romanticism in this vein is Melville's novel *Moby Dick* (1851), which focuses on Ahab's encounter with a natural world that takes on the characteristics of his own mind and its pathologies.

While authors such as Melville emphasized the sublime or Gothic mode of Romanticism, other authors represented the American psyche and the progress toward cultivation of the landscape more positively. Writers such as James Fennimore Cooper (1789–1851), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882), and David "Davy" Crockett (1786–1836) offered images of Anglo settlers and frontiersmen transforming and taming the American wilderness, and these works connected American national identity with the characteristics of the "noble savage." The term "noble savage" was first popularized in the eighteenth century by European philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1788), and it was used as part of the language of colonial encounter to describe indigenous peoples such as the American Indians in ways that idealized them as simple, uncivilized, and close to nature and to natural religion. During the nineteenth century, Anglo writers hoping to create a new literary tradition and to define their own national voice came to assimilate these same "savage" values into an image of American political identity as grounded in a reverence for and personal connection to the landscape, even as individuals participated in its conquest and appropriation. Davy Crockett's *Autobiography* (1834) and the mythology that surrounds him, for example, reveal the powerful legacy of Romanticism on American culture during this formative century.

Finally, the American Romantic period was also associated with a group of writers and philosophers known as the Transcendentalists. This group included writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), and the movement later influenced or involved important nineteenth-century nature writers such as Margaret Fuller (1810–1850), Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809–1894), or George Perkins Marsh (1801–1882), founder of the conservationist movement. A central theme of Transcendentalism was the idea that complete human experience could only be achieved through harmony with nature and through participation in the universal consciousness ascribed to the living universe. In formulating its ideas, the Transcendentalist movement drew upon several theological and philosophical traditions, including pantheism, Unitarianism, Platonism, and the increasingly available translations of Eastern religious traditions. The literary texts most closely associated with Transcendentalism include Emerson's *Nature* (1836) and Thoreau's *Walden* (1854).

American Romanticism, then, describes a formative period in American cultural history, during which the landscape and its wildness again came to represent a particular source of spiritual, moral, and national vitality. If

the previous and first generations of Americans had viewed the wilderness as an obstacle to be overcome in the cultivation of democracy and as a space to be conquered and tamed as one of the conditions of stable nationhood and national identity, the Romantics came to see the matter differently. For the American Romantics, the wilderness came to symbolize an empty space, the very vacancy of which allowed for the projection onto it of an idealized and powerful vision of national identity. Preserving the wild and the mythologies that characterized the wilderness as “empty” allowed the American landscape to become the scene in which the moral, spiritual, and political conflicts of Romanticism were forged and resolved.

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Further Reading

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- See also: Art; American Indians as “First Ecologists”; Emerson, Ralph Waldo; Nature Religion in the United States; Noble Savage; Romanticism and Indigenous Peoples; Romanticism in European History; Rousseau, Jean-Jacques; Savages; Thoreau, Henry David; Transcendentalism.

Romanticism – Western toward Asian Religions

Although some of the pioneers of the environmental movement, notably Henry David Thoreau, were interested in and sympathetic to Asian religious ideas, it was not until the 1960s that the idea that South and East Asian religions are more likely to promote beneficent behavior toward nature became widespread amongst scholars, adherents of those religions, and the public. The idea became popular at a time when environmentalists began to argue that the severity of the environmental crisis demanded a deep and radical change in attitudes rather than scientific or technological fixes.

The perception that scientific and technological intervention in natural processes was a part of the problem, rather than a solution to environmental degradation, was reinforced by the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962. Carson’s belief that “whenever we substitute something man-made and artificial for a natural feature of the earth, we have retarded some part of man’s spiritual growth” (Carson 1998: 160) found ready acceptance in the counterculture of the period. In 1967, Lynn White argued in an influential article that the roots of the ecological crisis were to be found in Judeo-Christian conceptions of divinely legitimated human mastery of nature. Moreover, White argued that “Marxism, like Islam, is a Judeo-Christian heresy” (White 1996: 189) and that therefore, both shared Christian axioms. Alternative values or an alternative spirituality that could promote a less damaging relationship with the environment had therefore to be sought outside the Western religious tradition in, amongst others, the religions of South and East Asia.

Although each of the major South and East Asian religions has found advocates for the environmentally positive values of the tradition, by far the most significant have been the claims made for Buddhism. White already identified Buddhism as offering the best chance to rethink humanity’s relationship to nature, although he remained doubtful of its viability in the West. As Buddhism has attracted more Western converts, the claims made for its environmental credentials have grown. Martine Bachelor and Kerry Brown write, “at its very essence, Buddhism can be described as an ecological religion or a religious ecology” (Bachelor and Brown 1992: viii) and Alan Sponberg makes the claim that “Buddhism is an environmental ethic” (Sponberg 1997). Other prominent Buddhist environmental thinkers and activists, such as Gary Snyder and Joanna Macy, have made comparable claims. Rather more sober estimates have been offered by Ian Harris and Lambert Schmithausen. It is, however, the strength of some of the claims made for Buddhism’s environmental credentials, and their similarity to some other Western claims about Buddhism (for example, Rita Gross’s claim that “Buddhism is feminism” [Gross 1993: 130]), that may indicate that they owe more to Western interests than to anything that is the case about Buddhism. To demonstrate this, it is worth conceptualizing these claims within the longer history of Western perceptions of Asian religions, and of Buddhism in particular.

Although as early as 1710 the Jesuit writer J.F. Pons had connected the Chinese who revered the Buddha, the monks of Japan and the Lamas of Tibet with the Buddhists reviled as atheists in India, it was not until the 1840s that speculations about the possible African or central Asian origins of Buddhism were finally replaced by a consensus among European scholars that India was the birthplace of Buddhism. Once the question of the relative priority of Buddhism and Brahmanism had been settled in favor