American Literature and Art

Inspired by nature and democratic ideals, writers and artists produced some of America’s greatest works.

**ONE AMERICAN’S STORY**

Washington Irving wrote some of the first stories to describe America. For example, “Rip Van Winkle” tells of a man in New York State. Rip wakes up after a 20-year nap to find many changes. He goes to the inn, which once had a picture of King George on its sign.

*Washington Irving, “Rip Van Winkle”*

**A VOICE FROM THE PAST**

The red coat was changed for one of blue and buff, a sword was held in the hand instead of a sceptre [staff of authority], the head was decorated with a cocked hat, and underneath was painted in large characters, GENERAL WASHINGTON.

While Rip slept, the Americans had fought and won their revolution! Irving’s work helped to win European respect for American writing for the first time. This section discusses other individuals of the 1800s who created uniquely American literature and art.

**WRITING ABOUT AMERICA**

Irving and other writers were influenced by a style of European art called romanticism. It stressed the individual, imagination, creativity, and emotion. It drew inspiration from nature. American writers turned their interest in nature into a celebration of the American wilderness.

Many books featured the wilderness. James Fenimore Cooper wrote five novels about the dramatic adventures of wilderness scout Natty Bumppo. One that remains popular is *The Last of the Mohicans*. Francis Parkman wrote a travel book, *The Oregon Trail*, about the frontier trail.

**TERMS & NAMES**

- romanticism
- Hudson River school
- transcendentalism
- civil disobedience

**WHY IT MATTERS NOW**

Nineteenth-century writers such as Hawthorne and Thoreau laid the foundation for American literature.

**MAIN IDEA**

**CALIFORNIA STANDARDS**

- 8.4.4 Discuss daily life, including traditions in art, music, and literature, of early national America (e.g., through writings by Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper).
- 8.6.6 Examine the women’s suffrage movement (e.g., biographies, writings, and speeches of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Margaret Fuller, Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony).
- 8.6.7 Identify common themes in American art as well as transcendentalism and individualism (e.g., writings about and by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Louisa May Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow).
- REP4 Students assess the credibility of primary and secondary sources and draw sound conclusions from them.

**TAking Notes**

Use your chart to take notes about the influence of writers.
In addition, writers began to use a more American style. A teacher and lawyer named Noah Webster gave guidelines to that style in his *American Dictionary of the English Language*. Webster first published his dictionary in 1828. He later revised it in 1840. The dictionary gave American, not British, spellings and included American slang.

Other writers besides Irving celebrated America’s past. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote many poems that retold stories from history. For example, “Paul Revere’s Ride” depicted the Revolutionary hero’s ride to warn of a British attack. Generations of students memorized lines from the poem, such as, “One if by land, and two if by sea; / And I on the opposite shore will be.”

**Creating American Art**

European styles continued to influence American artists, but some took these styles in new directions. One group of painters influenced by romanticism worked near the Hudson River in New York State. The **Hudson River school** artists painted lush natural landscapes. Several members of this school went west for a change of scenery. For example, Albert Bierstadt took several trips to America’s mountainous West. He produced huge paintings that convey the majesty of the American landscape. (See page 310.)

Other artists also went west. John James Audubon came to the United States from France at age 18. Traveling across the continent, Audubon sketched the birds and animals of his adopted country.

Enslaved African Americans also contributed to American art. They made beautiful baskets, quilts, and pottery. Most of these slaves

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**HISTORY through ART**

Asher Durand was a founder of the Hudson River school of painting. His best-known work, *Kindred Spirits*, was painted in 1849. This romantic work shows two artists inspired by a beautiful landscape. The figures in the painting are Durand’s friends, the poet William Cullen Bryant and the painter Thomas Cole.

**Compare this painting to the one on page 180. Is the style different? If so, how?**
remained anonymous, but one did not. David Drake worked in a South Carolina pottery factory and signed the pottery he created. He was the only factory worker to do so.

Following One’s Conscience

By the 1840s, Americans took new pride in their emerging culture. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a New England writer, encouraged this pride. He urged Americans to cast off European influence and develop their own beliefs. His advice was to learn about life from self-examination and from nature as well as books.

Emerson’s student, Henry David Thoreau, followed that advice. In 1845, Thoreau moved to a simple cabin he had built by Walden Pond near the town of Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau furnished it with only a bed, a table, a desk, and three chairs. He wrote about his life in the woods in *Walden*. Thoreau said that people should live by their own individual standards.

Emerson and Thoreau belonged to a group of thinkers with a new philosophy called *transcendentalism*. It taught that the spiritual world is more important than the physical world. It also taught that people can find the truth within themselves—through feeling and intuition.

Because Thoreau believed in the importance of individual conscience, he urged people not to obey laws they considered unjust. Instead of protesting with violence, they should peacefully refuse to obey those laws. This form of protest is called *civil disobedience*. For example, Thoreau did not want to support the U.S. government, which allowed slavery and fought the War with Mexico. Instead of paying taxes that helped to finance the war, Thoreau went to jail.

Louisa May Alcott began her writing career as a transcendentalist poet in the 1850s, but achieved her greatest fame in 1868 with her book *Little Women*, which became popular with children as well as adults. Alcott was active in abolition and suffrage movements. Another New England transcendentalist, Margaret Fuller, also called for change. In her magazine, *The Dial*, and in her book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Fuller argued for women’s rights.
Exploring the Human Heart

Like Thoreau, other writers broke with tradition. In 1855, poet Walt Whitman published *Leaves of Grass*, a book that changed American poetry. His bold, unrhymed poems praised ordinary people. Emily Dickinson lived in her family’s home almost her entire life. She wrote poems on small pieces of paper that she sewed into booklets. Her subjects include God, nature, love, and death. Most of her 1,775 poems were published only after her death. Both Whitman and Dickinson shaped modern poetry by experimenting with language.

Fiction writers of the 1800s also shaped American literature. Edgar Allan Poe wrote terrifying tales that influence today’s horror story writers. He also wrote the first detective story, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.”

Nathaniel Hawthorne depicted love, guilt, and revenge during Puritan times in *The Scarlet Letter*. The novel shows that harsh judgment without mercy can lead to tragedy. Hawthorne may have learned that lesson from his family history. One of his ancestors condemned people at the Salem witchcraft trials.

Herman Melville won fame by writing thrilling novels about his experiences as a sailor. In 1851, Melville published his masterpiece, *Moby Dick*. This novel tells about a man’s destructive desire to kill a white whale. Although the novel was not popular when it was published, it is widely read now. Several movie versions exist.

These fiction writers portrayed the harmful effects of cruel actions. Other people thought that individuals could alter society for good. Section 3 describes those reformers.

Section 2 Assessment

1. Terms & Names
   Explain the significance of:
   - romanticism
   - Hudson River school
   - transcendentalism
   - civil disobedience

2. Using Graphics
   Use a chart like the one below to list important individual writers and artists. For each one, name or describe one of his or her works.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writer or artist</th>
<th>His or her work</th>
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   Which one would you like to learn more about? Why? (8.6.7)

3. Main Ideas
   a. What was romanticism and how did Americans adapt it? (8.6.7)
   b. What is civil disobedience and what did Thoreau do that is an example of it? (8.6.7)
   c. How did the writers of the mid-1800s shape modern literature? (8.6.7)

4. Critical Thinking
   Evaluating
   Why do you think the literature and art of the mid-1800s are still valued? (CST3)
   THINK ABOUT
   - the way they feature U.S. history and culture
   - their universal themes—themes that relate to all people in all time periods
   - the way they reflect changes happening at that time

Activity Options

**ART**
Choose an American painting, sketch it, and make it into a *jigsaw puzzle*; or make an *audio recording* of a museum guide’s description of it. (8.6.7)