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ENG 3701-021: American Romanticism

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American Romanticism  English 3701  Summer 98

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Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not a history of theirs? Enshrouded for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines today also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.

Emerson, the opening paragraph of Nature (1836)

"American Romanticism" is a course in the literature and culture of the first half of the nineteenth century, roughly 1800 through 1865. This is the time when American artists worked to create a literature that was identifiable American, one that gave voice and image to the unfolding American experience as something new and preferable to European culture, and that addressed itself to the particular political, cultural, and spiritual demands of the new nation. These demands were great, and in all respects, this is one of the most intense periods of American history, full of great confusions and tensions, most of all with respect to the issue of slavery, which culminated in the inevitable tragedy of the Civil War.

Perhaps because the period was so turbulent and uncertain, the literature from this time remains some of America's greatest, and its authors stand as America's foremost literary contribution to world culture. Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Dickinson, Fuller, Douglass, Stowe, Melville, Poe, Irving, and Hawthorne, the authors we will chiefly be reading, are still, in my opinion, voices to attend to, and like all great artists, have crucial things to say, both about their own time and about ours. My hope for this class is that through reading and discussing their work, we can explore this period of American history for itself and also for what it can tell us about today.

Along with the reading, the work for the class will consist of the following:

--two historical summaries, two or so single spaced pages, duplicated for the class, due as assigned.

--a take home final, around eight pages, due at the end of the term.

The final grade for the course will be based on the written work and on class participation. Regular attendance and regular involvement in class discussion are mandatory, especially if you want an A.
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6/8 Introduction
6/9 Whitman, Song of Myself, "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads"
6/11 Emerson, Nature, chapters VI-VIII; Whitman, "Live Oak, with Moss"
6/17 Hawthorne, Preface to The House of the Seven Gables; Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition"; Melville, "Hawthorne and his Mosses"; Emerson, "The Poet; Whitman, "Democratic Vistas"
6/18 historical summary #1 due; assignment to be given
6/22 Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," "Self-Reliance"
6/23 Emerson, "Experience"; Thoreau, "Walking"
6/24 Thoreau, Walden, chapters 1 and 2
6/25 Thoreau, Walden, chapters 3-6, 11, 16-18
6/29 Douglass, Narrative; Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl
6/30 Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin; Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts"; Emerson, "Last of the Anti-Slavery Lectures (March 7, 1854); Melville, "Benito Cereno"
7/1 Whitman, "The Wound-Dresser," "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"
7/2 historical summary #2 due

7/6 Dickinson, selected poems
7/7 Twain, Huckleberry Finn
7/8 Twain, Huckleberry Finn
7/9 Twain, Huckleberry Finn

7/13 conclusion; take home final due