

# American Romantic Period

## 1800-1860

*the First Great Creative Period of American Literature*

### ▶ History:

- 1830: Indian Removal Act
- 1830's: First Tenements Built
- 1850's: Underground Railroad
- 1850–55: American Renaissance Period
- 1848: First Women's Rights Convention in US  
(Seneca Falls, NY)
- 1851 (Boston): Fugitive Slave Law
- 1859: John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry
- 1861–5: Civil War

# American Romantic Period

## Characteristics:

- ▶ Predominate philosophies of *Romanticism* and *Transcendentalism*
- ▶ American authors formed literary clubs
- ▶ The first truly American novels emerge (not following British models)
- ▶ No copyright laws to protect authors (English works could be printed cheaper than American works)
- ▶ Controversies: Expansion (growing cities), Individualism, Abolition vs. Slavery, Inventions/Technology, Immigration & Xenophobia, Politics & Civil War (widening between the North & the South)

*Where do people look for TRUTH?*



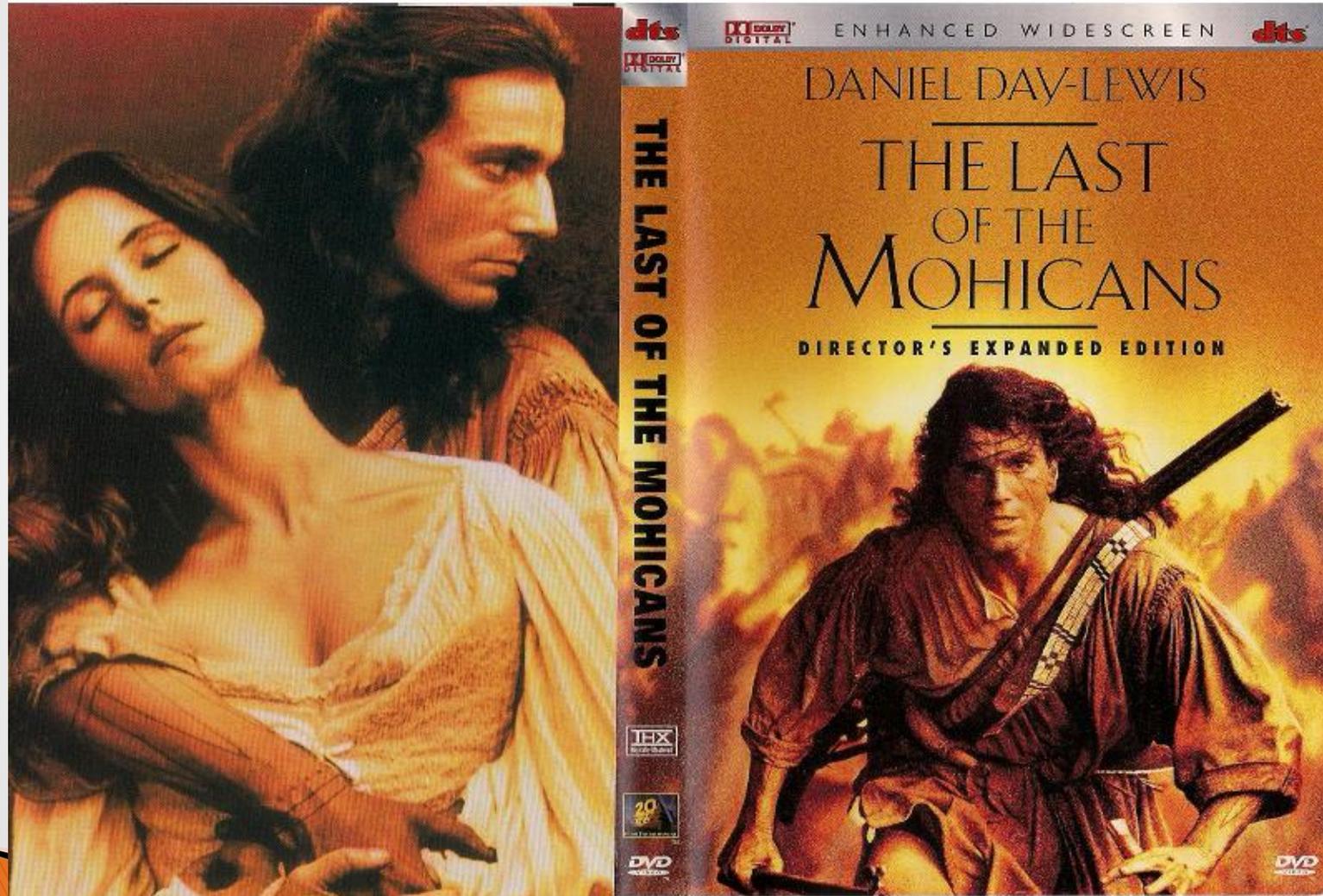
# *Characteristics of American Romanticism*

- ▶ Values *feeling & intuition* over reason
- ▶ Places faith in *inner experience* & the power of the *imagination*
- ▶ Shuns the artificiality of civilization & seeks unspoiled *nature*
- ▶ Prefers youthful *innocence* to educated sophistication
- ▶ Champions *individual freedom* & the worth of the *individual*
- ▶ Reflects on *nature's* beauty as a path to spiritual & moral development
- ▶ Stresses the inherent *goodness* of humankind
- ▶ Looks backward to the *wisdom* of the *past* & distrusts progress
- ▶ Finds *beauty & truth* in exotic locales, the *supernatural* realm, and the *inner world* of the *imagination*
- ▶ Sees *poetry* as the highest expression of the *imagination*
- ▶ Finds *inspiration* in *myth, legend, & folklore*

# *Six I's of Romanticism*

- ▶ *Individualism*
- ▶ *Intuition*
- ▶ *Imagination,*
- ▶ *Innocence*
- ▶ *Inspiration from Nature*
- ▶ *Inner Experience*

# The American Romantic Hero



# *Characteristics of the Hero:*

- ▶ Is *young* or possesses *youthful qualities*
- ▶ Is *innocent* and *pure of purpose*
- ▶ Has a *sense of honor* based on some *higher principle*—not society's rules
- ▶ Has a *knowledge of people and life* based on *deep, intuitive understanding*—not on formal learning
- ▶ Loves *nature* and avoids town life
- ▶ *Uneasy* around women (*who represent civilization, domestication, & worldliness*)
- ▶ Quests for some *higher truth* in the *natural world*
- ▶ **Worldly** (*world traveler*)
- ▶ **Educated** (*formal “book” education*)
- ▶ **Sophisticated** (*fits easily into any high society “black tie” event*)
- ▶ **Bent on making a place for himself in the world** (*hungers for success*)

*American Romantic Hero*

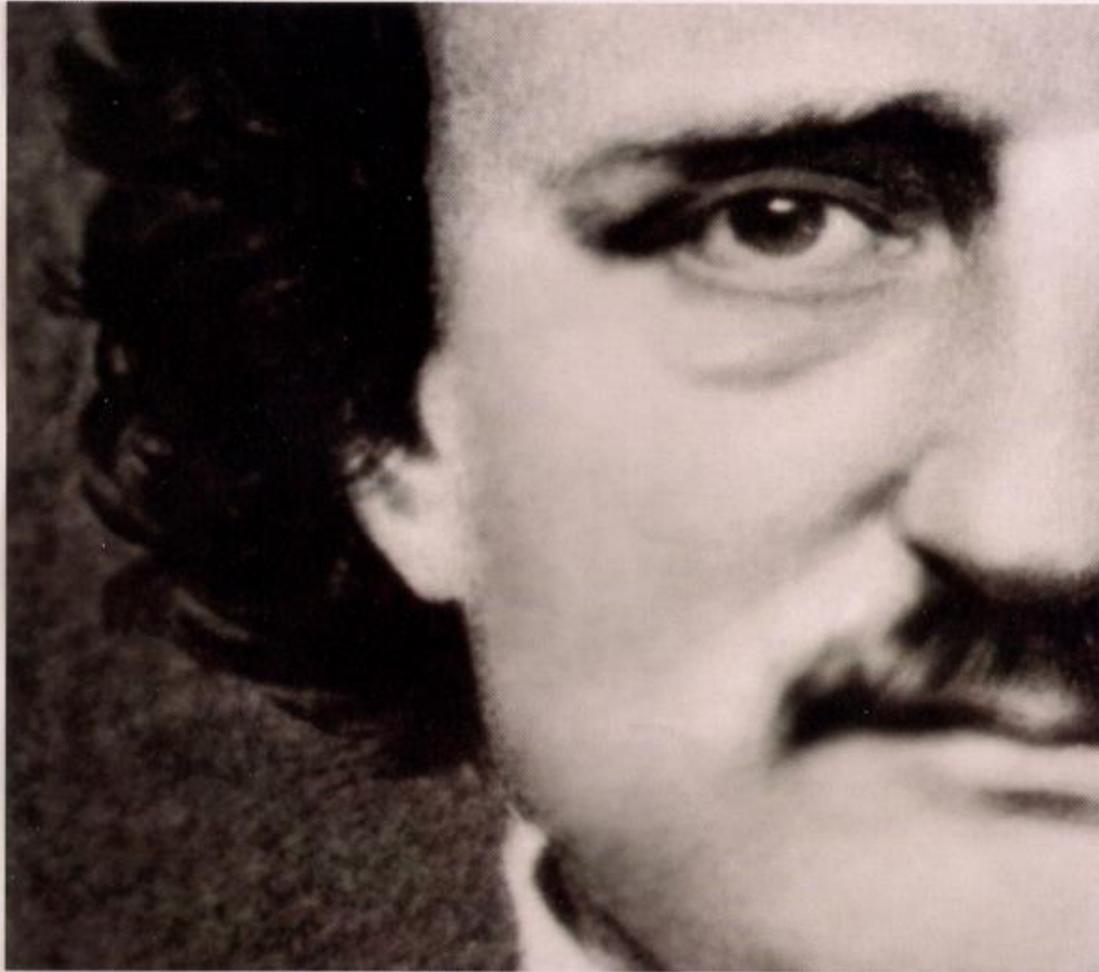
## **Rationalist Hero**

(Exemplified by Benjamin Franklin—the “ideal male type” in the Revolutionary Period)

# Gothic Literature Characteristics

- ▶ Dark, gloomy atmosphere
- ▶ Setting: ruins, caves, glens, or glades
- ▶ Elements of sin and guilt
- ▶ Hints of ancient glory
- ▶ *Fantastic literature* elements:
  - Supernatural aspects
  - Contrast between an ordinary character and the situation he/she is caught in
  - Seemable “unexplainable” events that are explained in the end—but it is *still* dark & scary – *OoOo!*

*Does everyone have a “DARK SIDE?”*



# *The Dark Romantics*

- ▶ **Authors:** Nathaniel Hawthorne, Hermann Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe
- ▶ Had much in common with other American *Romantics* and *Transcendentalists*--valued intuition over logic and reason; saw signs and symbols in physical events (spiritual facts behind appearances)
- ▶ **Disagreed** with Romantics and Transcendentalists for ignoring humanity's **DARK SIDE**
- ▶ **Works Explored:** the conflict between good and evil; psychological effects of sin and guilt; madness and derangement of the human psyche; & the destructive underside of appearances

# *Transcendentalism*

- ▶ The idea that in determining the ultimate reality of God, the universe, the self, and other important matters, one must *transcend*, or go beyond, every day human experience in the physical world.
- ▶ Ralph Waldo Emerson (Father of Transcendentalism) searched for God within himself.
- ▶ Henry David Thoreau (Emerson's protégé) searched for ecstatic experiences in the outer world of nature.

# *Transcendentalism*

- ▶ *Transcendentalists* sought to create a new religious consciousness that would embody the freedom & democracy of the new nation:
  - They opposed conventional religion.
  - They distrusted science.
  - They felt that the way to God was through the *Self* – the contemplation of one’s own thoughts would lead to a perception of the *Infinite*.

# Transcendentalist's View of the World:

- ▶ Everything in the world, including humans, is a reflection of the *Divine Soul*.
- ▶ The physical facts of the natural world are a doorway to the spiritual or *Ideal* world.
- ▶ People can use their *Intuition* to behold God's spirit revealed in nature or in their own souls.
- ▶ *Self-Reliance* and *Individualism* must outweigh external authority and blind conformity to custom and tradition.
- ▶ *Spontaneous feelings* and *Intuition* are superior to deliberate intellectualism and rationality.

# Four Historical Influences contributing to *Transcendentalism*:

- ▶ ***Idealism*** (Greek philosophy of Plato, 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) which said that “true reality involved ideas rather than the world as perceived by the senses.” Idealists sought the permanent reality that underlay physical appearances & believed that the “*universal good*” was reached through intellectual contemplation.  
(Plato’s philosophy evolved out of his interest in the way general concepts relate to specific objects. For example, he wondered what enables human beings to refer to thousands of different objects—say trees—by using a single word, *tree*. Plato concluded that all trees share something in common, and that this thing is the *form* or *idea* of a tree.)
- ▶ ***Hinduism*** and its idea of “*atman*,” which means that each individual soul is made of the same stuff as the *Atman*, the universal *World-Soul*.
- ▶ ***Romanticism*** which glorifies the “*self*” & the *emotions* as opposed to society and reason.
- ▶ ***Puritanism*** which shaped *Transcendentalists* into *ethical idealists* deeply concerned with questions of good & evil.