CHAPTER 11

An American Culture

ANTICIPATION/REACTION

Directions: Before you begin reading this chapter, place a check mark beside any of the following seven statements with which you now agree. Use the column entitled “Anticipation.” When you have completed your study of this chapter, come back to this section and place a check mark beside any of the statements with which you then agree. Use the column entitled “Reaction.” Note any variation in the placement of check marks from anticipation to reaction and explain why you changed your mind.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anticipation</th>
<th>Reaction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. _____ As the nineteenth century began, New England was the literary capital of the United States.</td>
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<td>2. _____ Writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were intensively individualistic and suspicious of “society.”</td>
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<td>3. _____ Writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne were not widely read or appreciated in their own day.</td>
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<td>4. _____ Early-nineteenth-century Southern literature was more Romantic than that of New England.</td>
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<td>5. _____ By 1850, all the states provided free elementary schools for their residents’ children.</td>
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<td>6. _____ The most compelling argument for free tax-supported schools which all children were expected to attend was that they would instill the values of hard work, punctuality, and submission to authority in the children of working-class families.</td>
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<td>7. _____ Of the nation’s first six presidents, only George Washington did not graduate from college</td>
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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading Chapter 11 you should be able to:

1. Define literary Romanticism and Transcendentalism.
2. Identify the major themes in the works of leading early-nineteenth-century American Romantics.
3. State what purposes the common school was intended to serve in early-nineteenth-century America.
4. Identify major themes in America’s civic or popular culture in the early nineteenth century.
5. Describe the major accomplishments of American scientists in the early nineteenth century.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In Search of Native Grounds

As the United States grew larger, richer, and more centralized in the early nineteenth century, a distinctively American culture emerged. Eastern literary groups encouraged the development of a distinctly American literature, but before 1830, only novelist James Fenimore Cooper made successful use of the national heritage and introduced nineteenth-century Romanticism to American readers—increasingly middle-class women. Romanticism stressed subjective emotional values, the beauty of nature, and the freedom of the individual. New York City was the nation’s literary capital before 1830, but it was soon to be overtaken by a renaissance in New England.

Before 1830 most of America’s best painters received their training in Europe. They did a flourishing business painting the portraits of wealthy merchants, planters, and Revolutionary War heroes. Self-trained primitive artists catered to the tastes of rural and middle-class patrons.

The Romantic View of Life

Romanticism was a revolt against the cold logic and intellectual orderliness of the Age of Reason. Romantics believed that change and growth were the essence of life. They valued intuition, individualism, optimism, and ingenuity. New England Transcendentalism was the fullest expression of American Romanticism. Transcendentalists subordinated intellect to feeling, stressed the uniqueness and innate goodness of each individual, and glorified nature, human aspiration, and self-confidence. They were complete individualists. What mattered to them was that each person aspire to stretch beyond his or her known capabilities.
**Emerson and Thoreau**

The leading Transcendentalist was the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. In “The American Scholar” he urged Americans to seek inspiration in America’s own natural surroundings. Although he was confident that change would bring progress, he was too much the individualist and idealist to accept the cooperation and compromises required of an active social reformer. His faith in self-reliance made him an opponent of powerful government, but he did admire strong leadership.

Rampant materialism disgusted Henry David Thoreau. Like Emerson, he was a stubborn individualist and objected to social restrictions and strong government. In a hermitlike experiment he tried to demonstrate that an individual need not depend on society for a satisfying existence. His book, *Walden*, is an indictment of social conformity. In “Civil Disobedience” he justified the right of a citizen to disobey an unjust or immoral law; yet, like Emerson, he refused to participate in organized reform movements.

**Edgar Allan Poe**

Throughout his relatively short life, alcoholism, melancholia, and an obsession with death haunted Romantic poet Edgar Allan Poe. Yet he was an excellent editor, critic, and poet, and a fine short story writer. His highly imaginative works reveal his fascination with mystery, fright, and the occult. He perfected the detective story, dealt with science fiction themes, and was a master of the horror story. Although he rejected most middle-class values, his well-crafted works were widely read. His poem “The Raven” was instantly popular.

**Nathaniel Hawthorne**

Novelist and short story writer Nathaniel Hawthorne disliked the egoism and bland optimism of the Transcendentalists. He made excellent use of New England history and culture as background, but his works were chiefly concerned with the individual’s struggle with sin, guilt, and pride. His *The Scarlet Letter* perfectly reflected these themes. He was widely read and appreciated in his own day, and he was active in Jacksonian politics.

**Herman Melville**

Like his friend, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville could not accept the pervasive optimism of his day, but he did admire Emerson and, like Emerson, he protested the subordination of human beings to machines. Melville dealt with the dark side of human nature in *Moby Dick*, a subtle and symbolic treatment of good and evil, faith and pride. It is one of the world’s finest novels, but, unlike Poe and Hawthorne, Melville’s more profound work was little appreciated by his contemporaries.
Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman was the most Romantic and authentically American writer of his age. Like Hawthorne, he was politically active, but he greatly admired Emerson and the Transcendentalists, especially their view that inspiration and aspiration, not intellect, were at the heart of all human achievement. His free verse poetry in *Leaves of Grass* reflects his uncritical and undisciplined reliance on natural inclinations.

The Wider Literary Renaissance

Although less profound and original than his famous New England contemporaries, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s many poems were enormously popular, and he captured the spirit of his times better than any of them. New Englanders such as George Bancroft and Francis Parkman also dominated the writing of history. These avidly-read histories were written for a popular audience and incorporated Romantic themes. Southern literature was even more Romantic than that of New England. South Carolina’s William Gilmore Simms was the most versatile, influential, and prolific of southern writers.

Domestic Tastes

Charles Bulfinch developed a Federalist style of architecture that gave Boston a unique dignity and charm. The elaborately decorated Gothic style was more suitable to the prevailing Romanticism and more widely popular. Americans of the period were growing increasingly attracted to native American art. The Romantic Hudson River school specialized in grandiose pictures of wild landscapes. Art unions formed to encourage native art. They were a boon to many artists and helped introduce competent artwork into middle-class homes. Crude but charming lithographs by Currier and Ives were even more widely popular.

Education for Democracy

The early-nineteenth-century common school movement was based on the Jeffersonian belief that the success of a democratic government depended on an educated citizenry. Common schools were free tax-supported schools that were administered statewide and employed professionally-trained teachers. New England’s Horace Mann, whose faith was in the improbability of the human race through education, became the chief advocate of these public schools. By the 1850s every state outside the South provided free elementary schools and supported teachers’ colleges.
Common schools were successful for a variety of reasons: Employers needed trained and well-disciplined workers, non-English and non-Protestant immigrants needed to be “Americanized,” and working-class children needed to be instilled with middle-class values. Most assuredly, common schools were a mutually beneficial melting pot of America’s increasingly economically differentiated and ethnically diverse population.

**Reading and the Dissemination of Culture**

The growth of an urban middle class increased interest in cultural refinement. Improved printing technology reduced the price of books, magazines, and newspapers, making them more accessible to the public. Moralistic and sentimental “domestic” novels and nondenominational evangelical Christian literature were best-sellers. Self-improvement and “how-to” books were also very popular.

Philanthropists’ support made many educational activities available to all. Mutual improvement societies called lyceums illustrate the new popularity of knowledge and culture. Lyceums established libraries, lobbied for better schools, and sponsored lecture series featuring leading scholars of the day.

**The State of the Colleges**

Early-nineteenth-century America had too many colleges for too few students. These private and expensive institutions generally geared their curriculum toward the training of clergymen. In the 1840s some colleges began to introduce more courses in science, economics, and mathematics. Western and southern colleges offered mechanical and agricultural subjects, and some colleges began to enroll women.

**Civic Cultures**

Boston, Philadelphia, and New York vied for primacy as the cultural center of the United States. In the West, Cincinnati emerged as the center of trans-Allegheny culture. Nevertheless, many cities had literary and natural history societies and were regular stops on the lyceum circuit.

**American Humor**

Humorists often exploited the contrast between American ideals and the reality of American life in the early nineteenth century. The anti-intellectual Jacksonians were the favorite butt of New England’s intellectual satirists. Juxtaposing the genteel and vulgar in American life was also popular in the South and West, as were themes of violence and shady characters.
PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THINGS

*Define the following:*

Romanticism

Transcendentalism

common school

lyceum

*Describe the following:*

*The Last of the Mohicans*

*Walden*

“Civil Disobedience”

“The Raven”

*The Scarlet Letter*
Moby Dick ____________________________

Leaves of Grass ________________________________

Identify the following:

James Fenimore Cooper _______________________________

Washington Irving ________________________________

Benjamin West ________________________________

John Singleton Copley ______________________________

Charles William Peale ______________________________

Gilbert Stuart ________________________________

Ralph Waldo Emerson ______________________________

Henry David Thoreau ______________________________

Edgar Allan Poe ________________________________
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Author/Artist</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nathaniel Hawthorne</td>
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<tr>
<td>Herman Melville</td>
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<tr>
<td>Walt Whitman</td>
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<tr>
<td>Henry Wadsworth Longfellow</td>
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<tr>
<td>William Gilmore Simms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hudson River school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Currier and Ives</td>
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<td>Horace Mann</td>
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<td>William Beaumont</td>
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SELF-TEST

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. The center of American literary Romanticism in the 1830s and 1840s was
   A. New York City.
   B. New England.
   C. the South.
   D. the West.

2. Transcendentalists believed the key to truth was
   A. reason.
   B. intuition.
   C. the Bible.
   D. formal education.

3. Most Transcendentalists believed that the good would prevail if each individual
   A. simply obeyed the law.
   B. did what seemed most logical and reasonable.
   C. followed the dictates of his or her own conscience.
   D. became active in social reform movements.

4. America’s leading Transcendentalist was
   A. Nathaniel Hawthorne.
   B. Herman Melville.
   C. Ralph Waldo Emerson.
   D. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

5. Although most literary romantics admired Emerson, they often disagreed with his views on
   A. individualism.
   B. powerful government.
   C. materialism.
   D. social activism.

6. Henry David Thoreau’s Walden was an indictment of
   A. civil disobedience.
   B. individualism.
   C. conformity.
   D. idealism.
7. Edgar Allan Poe’s works dealt with all the following themes EXCEPT
   A. mystery.
   B. horror.
   C. science fiction.
   D. self-help.

8. The New England writer who was most fascinated by the themes of sin, guilt, and pride in America’s Puritan heritage was
   A. Nathaniel Hawthorne.
   B. Herman Melville.
   C. Henry David Thoreau.
   D. Edgar Allan Poe.

9. Pessimism and the darker side of human nature were favorite themes in the works of all of the following EXCEPT
   A. Nathaniel Hawthorne.
   B. Ralph Waldo Emerson.
   C. Edgar Allan Poe.
   D. Herman Melville.

10. Walt Whitman’s poetry is probably best described as
    A. highly intellectual.
    B. strongly critical.
    C. undisciplined.
    D. uninspired.

11. The highly talented and popular New England poet who wrote of Paul Revere’s famous ride was
    A. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
    B. James Russell Lowell.
    C. William Gilmore Simms.
    D. Edgar Allan Poe.

12. The Hudson River school of artists specialized in
    A. Gothic architecture.
    B. Classical themes.
    C. portraits.
    D. grandiose landscapes.

13. Educational reforms in the early nineteenth century did NOT
    A. establish publicly financed elementary schools.
    B. restore colleges to the honored place they had enjoyed in the Revolutionary era.
    C. create state-administered public school systems.
    D. found normal schools to train teachers.
14. One of the United States’ chief advocates of public schools in the early nineteenth century was
   A. William Beaumont.
   B. Horace Mann.
   C. Hosea Biglow.
   D. Charles Bulfinch.

15. Proponents of common schools did NOT argue that these schools would
   A. save taxpayers money.
   B. train and discipline workers.
   C. Americanize immigrants.
   D. spread middle-class values.

16. Most early-nineteenth-century popular literature dealt with all the following themes EXCEPT
   A. sentimentality.
   B. self-improvement.
   C. science.
   D. religion.

17. Most early-nineteenth-century American colleges
   A. maintained strict discipline of their student body.
   B. were relatively inexpensive to attend.
   C. were overcrowded.
   D. were privately endowed.

18. Beyond elementary school, most early-nineteenth-century Americans’ higher education relied on attendance at
   A. college.
   B. high school.
   C. lyceum lectures.
   D. scientific demonstrations.

19. The cultural center of the trans-Allegheny West in early-nineteenth-century America was
   A. St. Louis.
   B. Pittsburgh.
   C. Louisville.
   D. Cincinnati.
20. A favorite theme of early-nineteenth-century American satirists was the contrast between
   A. Romanticism and Transcendentalism.
   B. ideals and reality.
   C. democracy and equality.
   D. individualism and freedom.

Essay Questions

1. State the values of literary Romanticism. Do you agree or disagree with these values? Why or why not?

2. Which of the major Romantic authors seems most interesting to you? Why?

3. What arguments were used in support of the establishment of free tax-supported schools in early-nineteenth-century America? Which argument sounds most plausible to you? Why?

4. Why do you think American science was unremarkable in the early nineteenth century? What, of scientific value, was accomplished?

5. Compare and contrast the major themes in literary Romanticism and the civic or popular culture of early-nineteenth-century America.

CRITICAL THINKING EXERCISE

Classification

In previous chapters you worked with classification matrices to help you gain control of the narrative information presented in the textbook. In those cases, much of the classification matrix was already prepared for you to complete. In the following exercise, you are to prepare your own classification matrix that will identify six major early-nineteenth-century authors (Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman) with their views and the major themes of their writing. The six authors will be listed along one side of the classification matrix. You must decide what themes and views to list along the other side of the matrix, then indicate at proper intersections whether the author’s view or treatment of that theme was positive or negative, or whether he treated that theme at all. Carefully read the relevant early sections of Chapter 11 to find useful information.

Your matrix, then, must show each author’s views and themes (insofar as the text provides that information). For example, your matrix should show at a glance that Emerson’s and Thoreau’s views were optimistic (a theme in their writings), but the views and themes of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville were more pessimistic. There is no direct reference in the text on optimism as a theme in Whitman’s work (though one can infer from the text that he was optimistic). Thus, a
portion of your chart might look something like this (using “+” as a positive view by the author toward the theme, “-” as a negative view, and “na” as an absence of information.

*Hint: Some of the themes you might include (try to find about a dozen) are attitudes toward individualism, materialism, human nature, and so on.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Views and Themes of Early-nineteenth-century American Authors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
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<tr>
<td>optimism</td>
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<td>individualism</td>
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