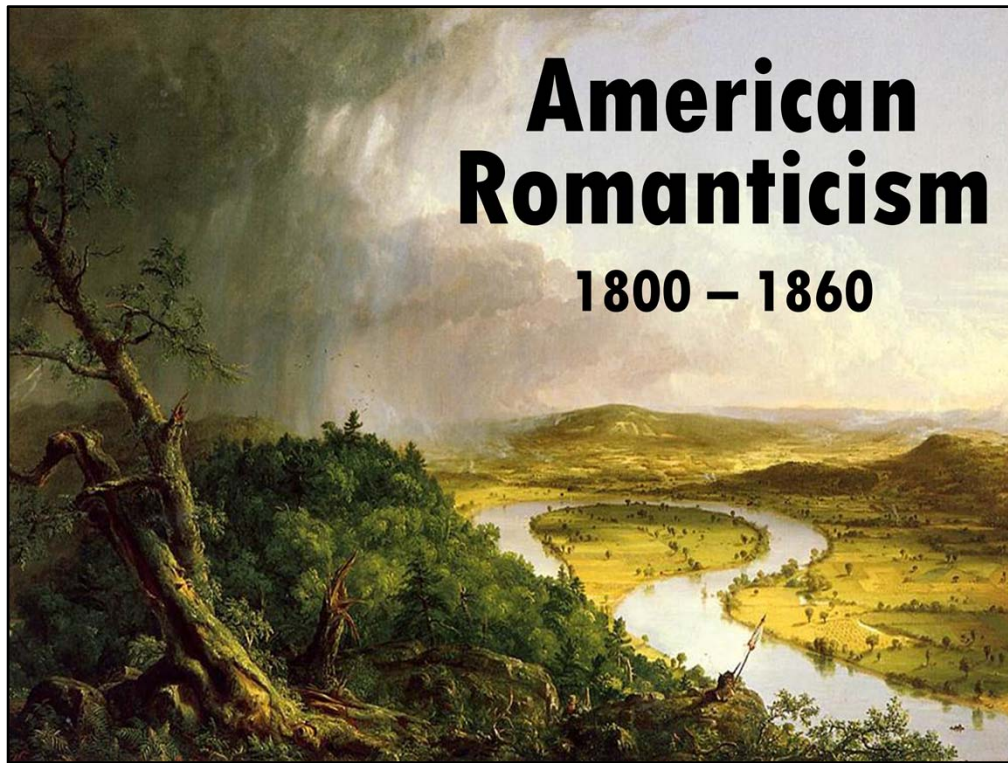


**Module 6: The Power of the Mind in the Romantic Era**  
**Topic 1 Content: American Romanticism**



American Romanticism

## Module 6: The Power of the Mind in the Romantic Era

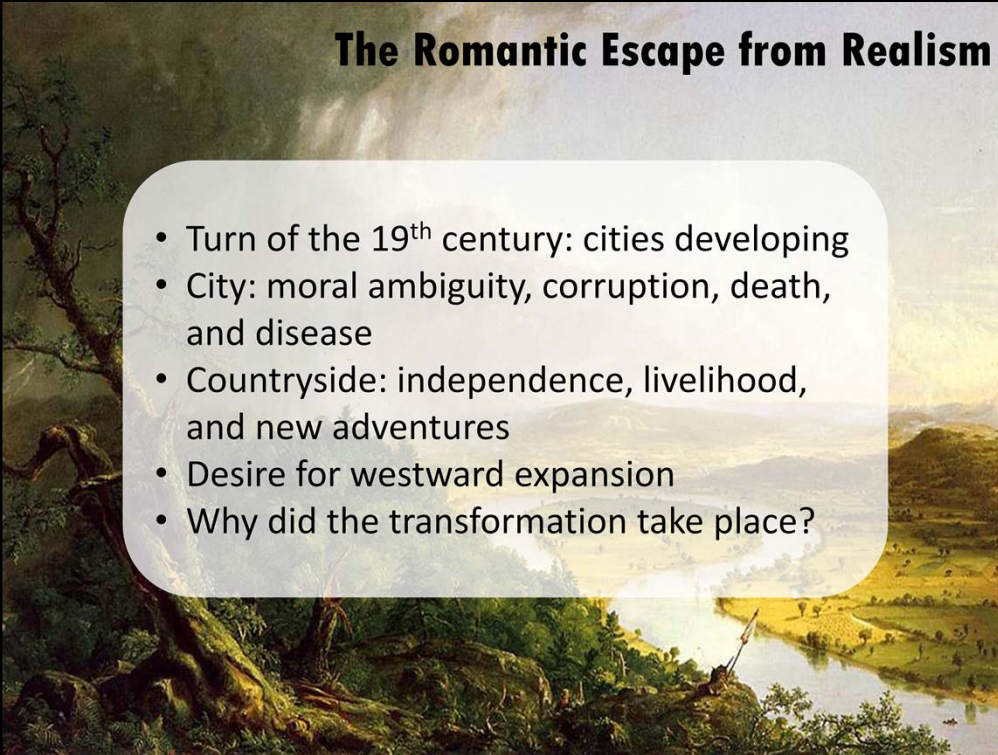
### Topic 1 Content: American Romanticism



Following closely behind the Romantic movement in Europe, America had her own transformation between 1800 and 1860. This was a time of dramatic growth and change in America both economically and culturally. Authors during the Romantic era were free to explore new genres and ideas which not only affected the literary landscape in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but also laid the groundwork for future generations.

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### Topic 1 Content: American Romanticism



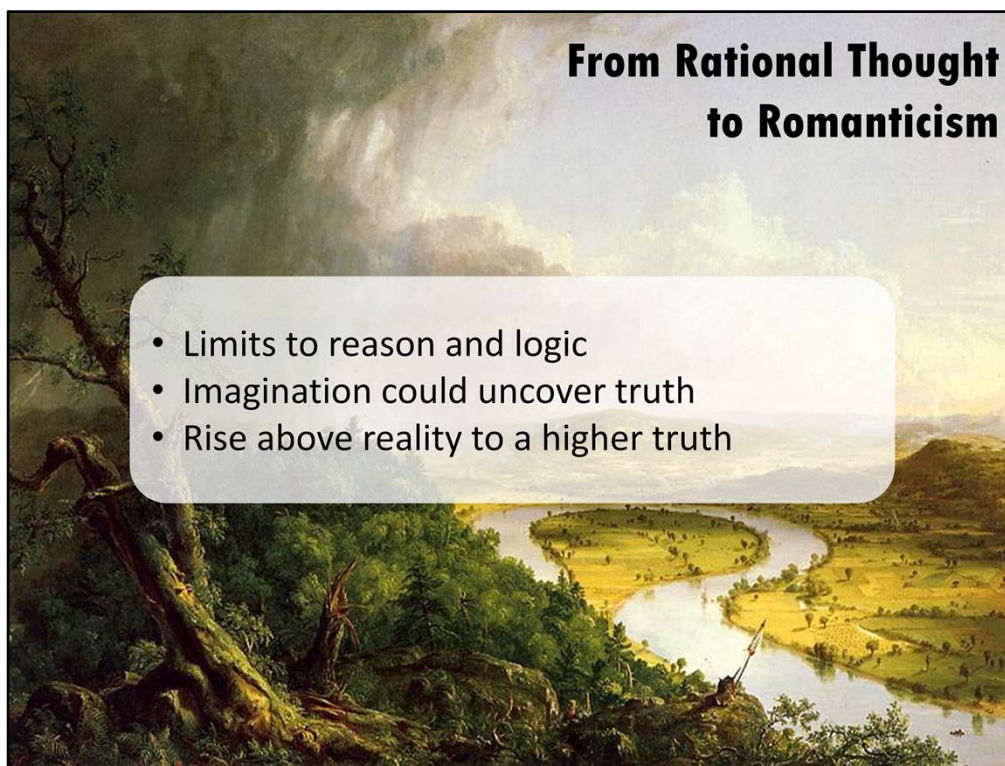
### The Romantic Escape from Realism

- Turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: cities developing
- City: moral ambiguity, corruption, death, and disease
- Countryside: independence, livelihood, and new adventures
- Desire for westward expansion
- Why did the transformation take place?

During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the frontiers to the west of the colonies were seen as mysterious, dangerous, and evil. But at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, cities were developing to a grand scale and grew increasingly polluted both physically and metaphorically. The city became associated with moral ambiguity, corruption, death, and disease. In contrast, the countryside was now seen as unexplored territory offering independence, livelihood, new adventures, and other limitless possibilities. The nation was young, and the desire for westward expansion infected a nation. But why did the transformation take place?

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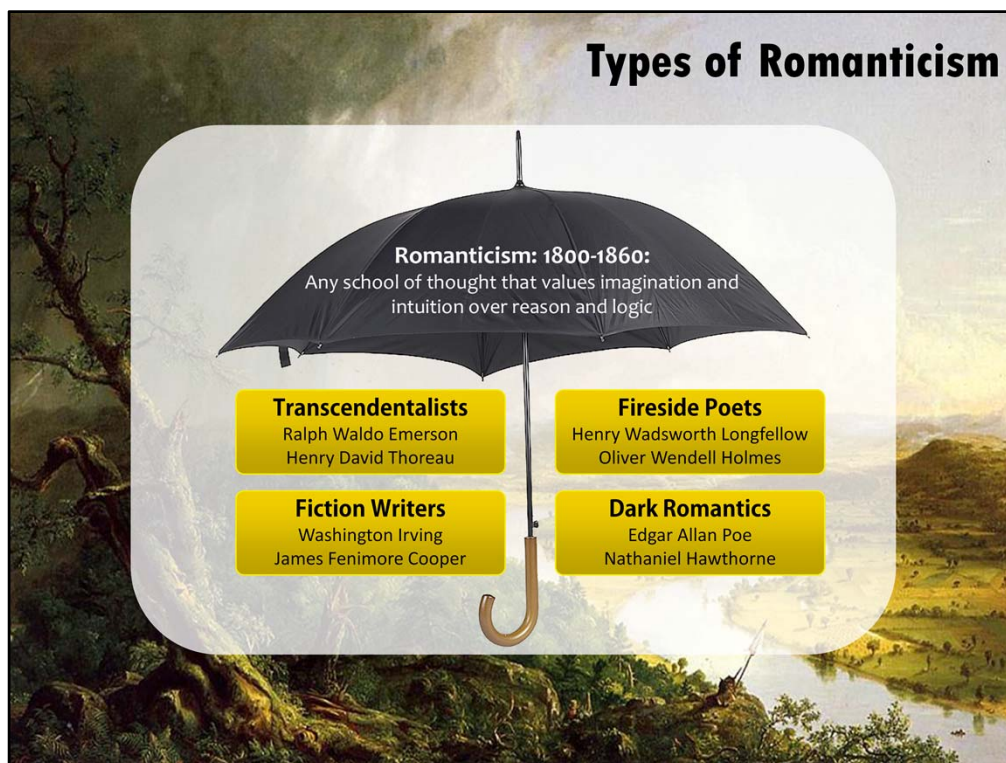
### Topic 1 Content: American Romanticism



This transformation took place because society began to see the limits to reason and logic. Not everything could be explained in a rational matter. As a result, the Romantic sensibility began to take form. Romantics believed imagination could uncover truths that reason could not reach. For example, think about apparitions or ghosts, UFO sightings, or other unexplained ideas. According to Romanticism, there are other methods beyond simple reason and logic for finding answers to the big questions. To do this, people have to rise above dull reality to a realm of higher truth.

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Romanticism can be tricky to understand, so it may be helpful to keep the overarching definition in mind. Romanticism encompasses any school of thought that values imagination and intuition over reason and logic. The key words in this definition are *imagination* and *intuition*. As a result, many groups of writers fall under the metaphorical umbrella of Romanticism. Even though they have stark differences, they all have imagination and intuition in common.

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Remember that what was most important to the Romantic writers was abandoning reason and logic in favor of imagination, spontaneity, individual feelings, and nature. In order to cast aside reason and logic, Romantics examined two avenues of thought. The first involved exploring culture, society, the past, and exotic or supernatural elements in life. Remember the example about ghosts? With little scientific proof, one must use imagination to explain their existence. The second avenue of thought involved contemplating the natural world until the mundane side of reality falls away to reveal underlying beauty and truth. The Romantic writers found inspiration in nature, and you can see this characteristic in the writings of Romantic authors.

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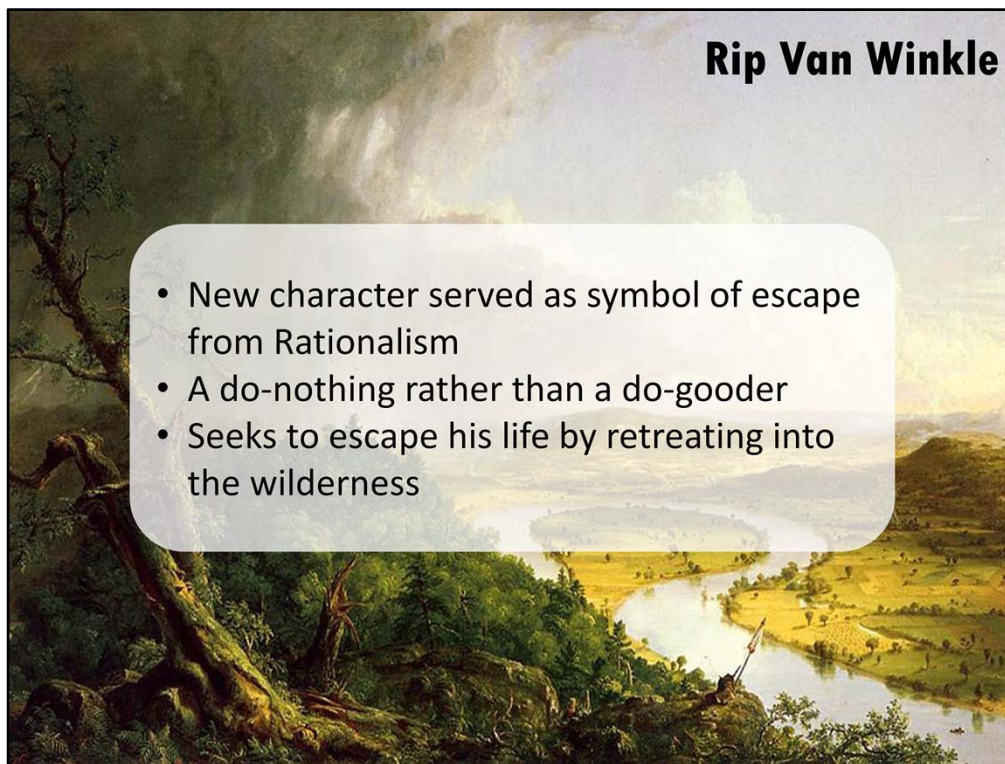
### Topic 1 Content: American Romanticism



Many new literary genres were established by American authors during this time period. The first American novels were being composed, and with them came the new American hero. Poetry also became popular in addition to the entertaining short stories from the likes of Edgar Allan Poe. Finally, nonfiction essays were written by authors fighting for social justice and a better America.

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American Romanticism explored new characters, one of whom is Rip Van Winkle. Serving as the symbol of escape from Rationalism, he is a do-nothing rather than a do-gooder. Whereas Benjamin Franklin during the 18<sup>th</sup> century sought in his writing to improve himself with his thirteen moral virtues, the character of Washington Irving's story seeks to escape his life by retreating into the wilderness. The story of Rip Van Winkle is iconic and humorous, and it is still a favorite story today.



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One special group of writers during this time period was the Fireside Poets. Though the poetry of these writers was wildly popular as a form of entertainment, it was not very original in its rhyme, meter, themes, and imagery. For the most part, the Fireside Poets tended to imitate British poets. However, the Fireside Poets were widely appreciated as American families gathered around the fireplace at night to read their poetry.

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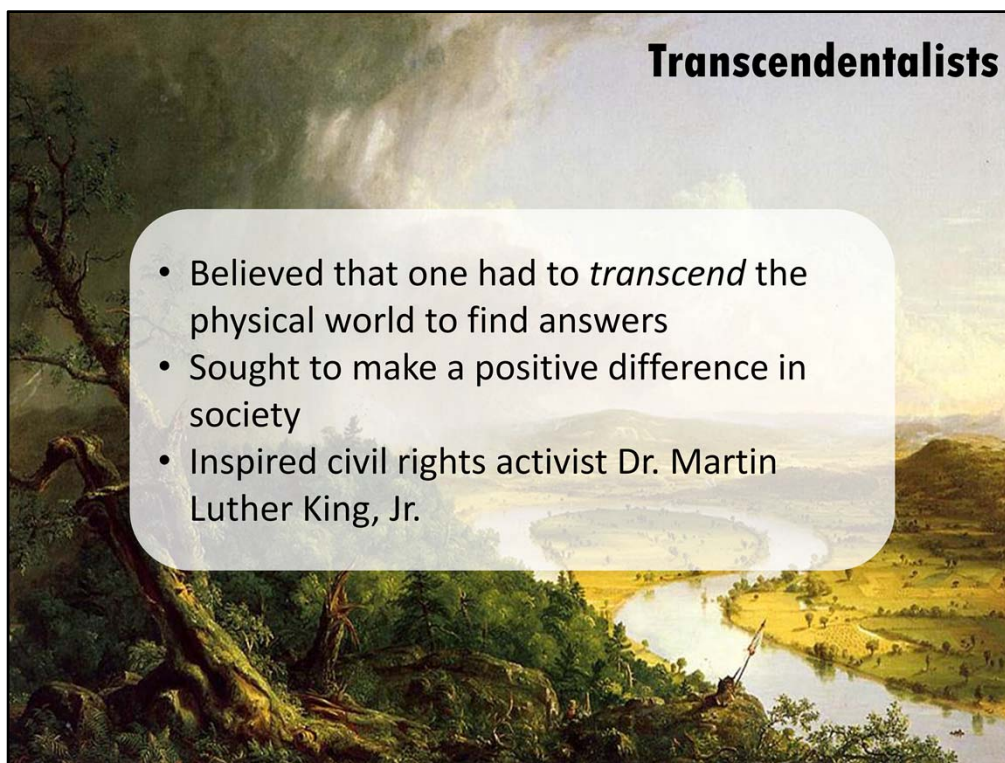
### Topic 1 Content: American Romanticism



In the Romantic novel, a new kind of hero developed. He is youthful, has an innocent quality, thrives in nature, does not like city life, and is awkward with ladies. The Romantic hero of several novels by James Fenimore Cooper was Natty Bumppo, sometimes referred to as Hawkeye. If one day you should see the film *The Last of the Mohicans*, you will recognize Daniel Day-Lewis's character as the classic Romantic hero of Cooper's novels. Natty Bumppo's contemporary counterpart might be a character like Indiana Jones.

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#### Transcendentalists

- Believed that one had to *transcend* the physical world to find answers
- Sought to make a positive difference in society
- Inspired civil rights activist Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Transcendentalists were a group of intellectuals who developed their own philosophies about life. They believed that one had to *transcend*, or go beyond, the physical world to find the answers to life's deepest questions. To their credit, they were optimistic idealists who sought to make a positive difference in society. In fact, the famous civil rights activist Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was inspired by the theories on civil disobedience by one such Transcendentalist named Henry David Thoreau.

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Finally, the Dark Romantics are a group of writers who are sometimes referred to as the Anti-Transcendentalists. Among the most famous Dark Romantic writers is Edgar Allan Poe, who explored the dark and complicated human psyche. His thoughtful and probing stories are still enjoyed by people of all ages today.