Dark Romanticism

**Directions:** Highlight characteristics of Dark Romanticism, so you will be able to identify them in Dark Romantic literature.

Dark Romanticism's birth was a mid-nineteenth-century reaction to the American Transcendental movement. Transcendentalism is an idealistic philosophical and social movement that developed in New England around 1836 in reaction to rationalism. Influenced by romanticism, Platonism, and Kantian philosophy, it taught that divinity pervades all nature and humanity, and its members held progressive views on feminism and communal living. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were central figures. Dark Romantic works are notably less optimistic than Transcendental texts about mankind, nature, and divinity. Dark Romantics view the natural world as dark, decaying, and mysterious; when it does reveal truth to man, its revelations are evil and hellish.

Dark Romanticism is often defined as a historical, literary phenomenon. In the late 18th century, authors reacted against the Age of Enlightenment and its blind-materialism and faith in reason. The artists reacted against classicism and preached—in contrast to the Age of Enlightenment—feeling and, imagination. Authors reacted against both classicism and the Gothic novels, which tended to focus on horror and the grotesque. Instead, they wrote about the tragic dimension of human life. As a result, the genre of Dark Romanticism was born.

The main theory of Dark romanticism is that the self is the only thing that can be known or verified. There are several characteristics of Dark Romanticism: the focus on the tragic; a belief in sin and evil; attention to the mysteries of life, including the spiritual realm; and a reverence for human nature, and all its struggles. The Dark Romantics adapted images of anthropomorphized evil in the form of Satan, devils, ghosts, vampires, and ghouls. Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human traits, emotions, and intentions to non-human entities and is considered to be an innate tendency of human psychology.

Dark Romantic works differ from Transcendental texts in that they are are notably less optimistic about mankind, nature, and divinity, and they are much less confident about the notion that perfection is an innate quality of mankind. They present their characters as prone to sin and self-destruction, not as inherently possessing divinity and wisdom. While both Transcendentalism and Dark Romanticism see nature is a deeply spiritual force, Dark Romanticism views it in a much more sinister light than does Transcendentalism, which sees nature as a divine and universal organic mediator. Neither are cynical about the existence of the divine or spiritual forces. Whereas Transcendentalists advocate social reform when appropriate, works of Dark Romanticism frequently show individuals failing in their attempts to make changes for the better.

Some of the authors considered most representative of Dark Romanticism are Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, and the poet Emily Dickinson.