

American Romantic Poetry: Read at Every Fireside

The American Romantic novelists looked for new subject matter and new themes, but the opposite tendency appears in the works of the Romantic poets. Like Franklin, these Romantic poets wanted to prove that Americans were not unsophisticated hicks. They attempted to prove this by working solidly within European literary traditions rather than by crafting a unique American voice. Even when they constructed poems with American settings and subject matter, the American Romantic poets used typically English themes, meter, and imagery. In a sense they wrote in a style that a cultivated person from England who had recently immigrated to America might be expected to use.

In fact, the Fireside Poets—as the Boston group of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (page 170), John Greenleaf Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and James Russell Lowell was called—were, in their own time and for many decades afterward, the most popular poets America had ever produced. They were called Fireside Poets because their poems were read aloud at the fireside as family entertainment. They were also sometimes called Schoolroom Poets, because their poems were for many years memorized in every American classroom.

Limited by their literary conservatism, the Fireside Poets were unable to recognize the poetry of the future, which was being written right under their noses. Whittier's response in 1855 to the first volume of a certain poet's work was to throw the book into the fire. Ralph Waldo Emerson's response was much more farsighted. "I greet you," Emerson wrote to this maverick new poet Walt Whitman, "at the beginning of a great career."

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