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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Historical Romance in American Literature

Historical romance became one of the most important forms of early nineteenth-century American fiction. It enabled writers to transform the past into imaginative literature and to create national myths for a young country still searching for a distinct cultural identity. American historical romance drew upon the Revolution, Puritan New England, the frontier, the wilderness, Native American life, westward movement, and the conflict between freedom and civilization. Its principal practitioners—Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and Nathaniel Hawthorne—used history not merely to reconstruct past events but to explore questions of identity, memory, morality, national destiny, and social change.

2.1 Definition of Historical Romance

Historical romance is a form of prose fiction that combines a historical background with imaginative plots, fictional characters, adventure, love, mystery, conflict, and symbolic meaning. Although it draws upon an identifiable historical period, it does not aim to provide a strictly factual or documentary account of the past. Rather, it reshapes the past creatively. The writer selects historical events, places, customs, conflicts, and social conditions and combines them with invented characters, romantic incidents, suspense, heroic action, and emotional narratives.

The term “romance” is important because it suggests a departure from ordinary realism. A romance may present events in a heightened, legendary, idealized, symbolic, or mysterious manner. It often creates an atmosphere of adventure and wonder. Its characters may become larger than life, and its settings may acquire mythic significance. For example, in historical romance, the wilderness is not simply a geographical area; it becomes a symbol of freedom, danger, innocence, conflict, or moral testing. Similarly, the Puritan past may become a means of examining guilt, repression, sin, individual liberty, and social judgment.

Historical romance usually contains several important elements. It is set in a recognizable historical period, but its plot is largely imaginative. It may include

adventure, love stories, political conflict, war, espionage, religious struggle, family secrets, or cultural encounters. It often dramatizes conflict between different groups, such as colonists and Native Americans, Patriots and Loyalists, Puritans and dissenters, settlers and frontiersmen, or individuals and society. It also tends to treat the past with nostalgia, mystery, reverence, or imaginative distance.

The purpose of historical romance is not simply to entertain readers with stories about earlier times. It uses the past to explore the present. Through historical settings, writers can examine national origins, cultural memory, inherited guilt, social injustice, personal freedom, and historical change. The historical romance thus makes history emotionally and imaginatively meaningful. It allows readers to see that the past survives in the customs, fears, ideals, and conflicts of the present.

2.2 Historical Romance in America

American writers faced a special challenge in creating historical romance. European writers had access to a long history of kings, queens, castles, aristocratic families, medieval battles, ancient traditions, and legendary heroes. The United States, by contrast, was a young republic with no medieval past and no hereditary aristocracy. American writers therefore had to discover literary material in their own history, landscape, and social experience.

They found this material in the New World. Colonial settlements, Puritan New England, the American Revolution, the frontier, Native American life, the wilderness, the Hudson River Valley, westward expansion, and the conflict between civilization and nature all became important subjects for American romance. The historical romance enabled writers to turn these experiences into myths of national origin. It offered a way of imagining what America had been, what it had become, and what it might become in the future.

The American past was particularly suited to romance because it was full of rapid transformation and conflict. The Revolution had created a new political order. The frontier was moving westward, changing the relationship between settled communities and wilderness. Native American peoples were being displaced through settlement, war, removal, and expansion. Industrial and commercial development threatened older rural ways of life. American historical romance often expresses both excitement about progress and anxiety about its destructive consequences.

The genre also helped writers create a national mythology. It presented the wilderness as a central American symbolic space. It represented the frontier hero as independent, physically capable, morally direct, and free from the corruption of urban or commercial society. It transformed Puritan New England into a landscape of ancestral guilt, religious severity, sin, secrecy, and historical memory. It made the Revolution a source of patriotism, courage, divided loyalties, and national birth. In this way, historical romance gave imaginative form to the American past and helped establish a distinct national literature.

2.3 Washington Irving and Historical Imagination

Washington Irving was one of the earliest American writers to gain international recognition. He was important because he showed that American places, legends, customs, and history could become subjects for imaginative literature. His work was influenced by European literary traditions, especially English essayists, German folklore, and the historical romances of Sir Walter Scott. Yet he transformed these influences by locating his stories in American settings and by giving them a distinctly American historical and regional character.

Irving's major works include *A History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty* (1809), *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819–20), "Rip Van Winkle," and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." In *A History of New York*, published under the name Diedrich Knickerbocker, Irving uses comic satire to describe the Dutch period in New York. The work parodies serious historical writing, mocks pedantry, and satirizes political life. It is often regarded as one of the earliest important works of American comic literature. Irving's use of the Dutch past also contributed to the creation of the "Knickerbocker" tradition associated with New York writing.

Irving's greatest achievement lies in *The Sketch Book*, particularly in "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." These tales were influenced by German folklore and by the historical-romance tradition of Sir Walter Scott, but they use specifically American settings and historical materials. The attached text emphasizes that both stories create American myths while exploring social and cultural change in a manner that is at once playful, humorous, and serious.

"Rip Van Winkle" is set in the Hudson Valley, near the Catskill Mountains of New York. Its central character, Rip Van Winkle, is a gentle but lazy and unhappy man who escapes from his domestic troubles by wandering into the

mountains. There he encounters strange little men dressed in old Dutch clothing and drinking a mysterious beverage. After drinking with them, Rip falls asleep for twenty years. When he wakes and returns to his village, he discovers that the American Revolution has taken place. He is no longer a subject of King George III but a citizen of the United States.

The story humorously presents the transformation from colonial America to republican America. When Rip returns to his village, he finds that familiar people are dead, his home has changed, and the political world around him is entirely different. He becomes confused about his own identity and says, “I’m not myself—I’m somebody else.” This comic confusion represents a deeper historical truth. Rip’s personal disorientation mirrors the larger disorientation experienced by a nation that had passed suddenly from colonial dependence to political independence. The attached text describes Rip’s experience as a “gently comic response to traumatic change” and as a reflection in miniature of the rapid changes affecting the nation as a whole.

“Rip Van Winkle” is therefore more than a pleasant fantasy. It combines folklore, history, fantasy, regional atmosphere, and social satire. It shows that historical change affects ordinary people as well as political leaders. The Revolution may be a grand political event, but Irving presents it through the bewildered experience of a simple villager. The story also reflects nostalgia for an older, slower, and more stable society. Rip’s return reveals a new America in which politics, change, ambition, and social movement have replaced the quieter rhythms of the old Dutch village.

“The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” is another major example of Irving’s historical imagination. The story is set in a secluded Dutch-American community in the Hudson Valley. Its protagonist, Ichabod Crane, is a superstitious schoolteacher who is interested in winning the wealthy Katrina Van Tassel. His rival is Brom Bones, a confident, energetic local man. Ichabod’s terrifying encounter with the Headless Horseman, who appears to throw a pumpkin at him, leads to his disappearance from Sleepy Hollow.

The tale combines local legend, Gothic atmosphere, comic characterization, folklore, and regional history. It parodies several narrative forms, including ghost stories, tall tales, and epic adventure. The Headless Horseman may be a supernatural figure, but the story strongly suggests that Brom

Bones has used Ichabod's superstition to frighten him away. This ambiguity gives the tale both comic and Gothic power.

Like "Rip Van Winkle," "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" is concerned with historical change. Irving presents Sleepy Hollow as a retired and old-fashioned Dutch valley where customs, manners, and traditions appear to remain stable while the "torrent of migration and improvement" changes the rest of the country. The story creates an image of a "vanishing America," a rural and traditional world threatened by modernization, migration, and economic development. Irving therefore turns local folklore into a national myth. He makes the Hudson Valley a symbolic landscape in which the old and new Americas confront each other.

Irving's lasting importance lies in his ability to convert American history and local legend into imaginative fiction. He gave American literature memorable places, figures, and myths. His stories helped establish the American short-story tradition and proved that American writers could use regional materials to create works of universal appeal. The attached text identifies "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" as stories that initiated the great tradition of the American short story.

2.4 James Fenimore Cooper

James Fenimore Cooper was the most important early American writer of historical romance. If Irving created myths of the Hudson Valley and early national life, Cooper created the great myth of the American frontier. He was the founding father of the American historical novel and one of the earliest major creators of the literary West. He adapted the historical romance model associated with Sir Walter Scott to American places, conflicts, landscapes, and social problems.

Cooper did not merely write adventure stories. His fiction examines major tensions in American history: freedom and law, wilderness and settlement, individualism and community, nature and civilization, Native American life and white expansion, democratic ideals and social hierarchy. The attached text describes him as a writer who explored "the contradictions of American society in a time of profound change."

Cooper's first novel, *Precaution* (1820), was a conventional novel of manners set in English society. However, his second novel, *The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground* (1821), established his reputation. The novel is set in New York during the American Revolution, particularly in the politically divided area of

Westchester County. Its hero, Harvey Birch, appears to be a Loyalist spy, but he is secretly working for General George Washington and the revolutionary cause.

The Spy is important because it dramatizes divided loyalties during the Revolution. Harvey Birch is devoted to American independence, yet he also has emotional and social connections with Loyalists. He becomes a character who stands between opposing groups. The attached text calls him a “neutral ground” because his personal position allows conflicting social forces to meet in one human figure. Through Birch, Cooper explores patriotism, espionage, loyalty, betrayal, social division, and the painful complexity of national struggle. The novel was an immediate success and established Cooper as a distinguished American novelist.

Cooper’s best-known achievement is the Leatherstocking series. The five novels are *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1841). These novels are connected by their central hero, Natty Bumppo, and by their exploration of the changing relationship between wilderness and civilization. Although the novels were written in one order, their events cover different stages of Natty Bumppo’s life, from youth to old age.

The Pioneers is set in 1793 in a recently settled area of New York State. It introduces Natty as an ageing frontiersman known as Leatherstocking. The novel presents a community in the process of settlement and social organization. Natty becomes increasingly marginal to this settled society because his natural code of conduct conflicts with the laws and institutions of the new community. In one memorable incident, he is arrested for shooting a deer out of season. This episode reveals the conflict between natural freedom and civil law.

The Last of the Mohicans is set in 1757 during the French and Indian War. Natty, here called Hawkeye, is shown in maturity. The novel contains adventure, pursuit, battle, captivity, rescue, and cultural conflict. It made Natty Bumppo one of the best-known heroes in American fiction and introduced the memorable Native American characters Chingachgook and Uncas. The novel is both a thrilling historical adventure and a meditation on the destruction of Indigenous cultures during colonial conflict and white expansion.

The Prairie follows Natty into the far West, where he is known simply as the trapper. He is now in his eighties and lives on the great plains. The novel is concerned with westward movement, the vastness of the prairie, conflict between

different social groups, destruction of wilderness, and the uncertain future of the American republic. At the end of the novel, Natty dies while looking toward the western horizon and the colours of an American sunset. The attached text suggests that this death may symbolize the passing of the democratic and natural possibilities represented by Natty himself.

The Pathfinder returns to the period shortly after *The Last of the Mohicans*. In this novel, Natty faces the possibility of marriage but finally recognizes that domestic life is not suited to his nature. He accepts that it is not according to his “gifts” to love and marry. Like later Western heroes, Natty remains a solitary figure, committed to wilderness, action, and freedom rather than marriage, property, or settled community.

The Deerslayer, although written last, is the earliest novel in the internal chronology of the series. It presents Natty as a young man and shows his initiation into adulthood. He begins as Deerslayer and receives the name Hawkeye after a decisive conflict. The novel takes place in a setting described as remote, obscure, and close to the “mists of time.” In this final-written volume, Cooper moves furthest away from social realism and closest to romance and myth. Natty becomes almost legendary, a heroic embodiment of natural wisdom and moral innocence.

2.5 The Leatherstocking Tales

The central figure of the Leatherstocking Tales is Natty Bumppo. He is known by several names in the different novels: Leatherstocking, Hawkeye, Pathfinder, Deerslayer, and the trapper. These names correspond to different stages of his life and different aspects of his character. Natty is not merely an individual character; he becomes a mythic figure who represents the possibilities and contradictions of American individualism.

Natty Bumppo lives between two worlds. On one side is the world of white settlers, property owners, towns, laws, courts, commerce, and expanding civilization. On the other side is the world of Native Americans, wilderness, hunting, natural law, movement, and frontier life. Natty belongs fully to neither world. He is white, but he often feels closer to the wilderness and to Native American companions such as Chingachgook than to the society of settlers. His position between cultures enables Cooper to dramatize the conflicts that shaped early American history.

Natty represents natural honesty, practical skill, courage, independence, and knowledge of the wilderness. He possesses what Cooper presents as natural morality. He relies less on formal education, institutions, or social convention than on experience, instinct, and close observation of nature. The attached text describes him as a figure who becomes increasingly close to the “American Adam,” a character marked by innocence, virginity, male companionship, natural wisdom, and freedom from the corrupting influences of conventional society.

Natty’s relationship with the wilderness is central to his identity. He understands the habits of animals, the signs of the forest, the movement of enemies, and the moral value of restraint. He is also presented as an early conservationist figure. He criticizes the destructive tendencies of settlers who cut down forests, kill animals excessively, and treat nature only as property. He laments the desire to “strip th’arth of its trees” and rob animals of their natural food. In this sense, Natty represents a moral opposition to waste, greed, and uncontrolled expansion.

At the same time, Natty’s individualism is not simple or entirely positive. He dislikes the intrusive control of society and law, but he also recognizes that law is necessary for people who do not possess his strength and natural wisdom. In *The Prairie*, he says that law can be troublesome, but he also admits that it may be worse to be entirely without it. This ambivalence is important because it reflects a central American question: should the nation value individual freedom above all, or does democracy require law, social responsibility, and community?

2.6 Major Themes in Cooper

The frontier and wilderness are central themes in Cooper’s historical romances. The wilderness is not merely a physical setting; it is a symbolic space. It is beautiful, free, dangerous, mysterious, and morally challenging. It offers escape from the constraints of society, but it is also threatened by settlement, exploitation, commercial development, and westward expansion. In Cooper’s fiction, the movement of civilization often means the destruction of natural landscapes and traditional ways of life.

The opposition between civilization and nature is particularly important. Cooper often contrasts the integrity and simplicity associated with Natty Bumppo and the wilderness with the greed, materialism, legalism, and disorder associated with advancing settlement. Yet he does not present civilization as wholly evil or nature as wholly innocent. His fiction recognizes that wilderness can be dangerous and

that society requires law and cooperation. The tension between these alternatives gives his novels intellectual depth.

Westward expansion is another major theme. Cooper recognizes the excitement and possibility associated with national growth, but he also sees that expansion has destructive consequences. It means the clearing of forests, the arrival of settlers, the growth of property and commerce, the disappearance of wilderness, and the displacement of Native peoples. *The Prairie* has an especially autumnal and melancholy mood because it repeatedly refers to immigration, cultivation, the destruction of wilderness, and the scattering of Indigenous communities. Cooper's work can therefore be read both as a celebration of expansion and as a warning against its violence and waste.

Native American representation is both important and problematic in Cooper's fiction. His Native American characters, especially Chingachgook and Uncas, are among the most memorable in early American literature. Cooper gives them courage, dignity, loyalty, physical beauty, and moral seriousness. However, his representation is shaped by the stereotype of the "noble savage" and by the myth of the "vanishing Indian." He often presents Indigenous peoples as heroic figures destined to disappear before the advance of white civilization. This romantic myth can conceal the actual historical violence of land seizure, forced removal, warfare, and cultural destruction.

The attached text shows that Cooper's representation of Native Americans is deeply ambivalent. In *The Prairie*, the Pawnee are represented as noble, dignified, and courageous, while the Sioux are depicted in a harshly negative manner as treacherous and savage. Such contrasts simplify diverse Indigenous communities and reproduce racial stereotypes. Modern readers must therefore appreciate Cooper's imaginative power while critically examining the ideological limitations of his portrayal of Native peoples.

National identity is another major concern. Cooper used the frontier and the wilderness to create a specifically American imaginative world. European romance had used castles, aristocrats, and medieval battles; Cooper created romance from forests, lakes, plains, trappers, scouts, settlers, Native Americans, and Revolution-era conflict. His fiction gave America national heroes, national landscapes, and national myths. The wilderness became one of the central symbolic spaces of American literature, later influencing writers as different as

Melville, Twain, Cather, Faulkner, Hemingway, and many Western novelists and filmmakers.

Individualism is also central to Cooper's work. Natty Bumppo remains independent from property, marriage, formal education, institutions, and settled society. He is a solitary hero whose value lies in his natural wisdom and moral self-reliance. Yet Cooper also recognizes the danger of individualism when it becomes selfishness. In *The Prairie*, Natty's opponent Ishmael Bush represents a destructive form of social isolation. Ishmael lives at the edge of society, pursuing private advantage without respect for either natural law or civil law. Through this contrast, Cooper distinguishes Natty's ethical independence from Ishmael's predatory selfishness.

2.7 Nathaniel Hawthorne and Historical Romance

Nathaniel Hawthorne is another major practitioner of historical romance, although his method differs sharply from Cooper's. Cooper usually turns to the frontier, the Revolution, and the wilderness; Hawthorne turns to Puritan New England, ancestral guilt, moral ambiguity, sin, secrecy, and the burden of the past. Hawthorne preferred to call his longer works "romances" rather than novels because he believed that romance gave the writer greater imaginative freedom.

In the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne explains that a romance permits the writer to depart somewhat from the ordinary illusion of reality and to "cloak" the subject in a "legendary mist." This does not mean that Hawthorne's romances are unrealistic in a superficial sense. Rather, his imaginative distance enables him to explore moral and psychological truths more deeply. The historical setting becomes a symbolic field in which the hidden conflicts of the human heart can be revealed.

For Hawthorne, romance was a means of investigating the relationship between past and present. He was fascinated by the Puritan history of New England and by the possibility that the sins of earlier generations could continue to affect later descendants. His own family history contributed to this interest. One of his ancestors, John Hathorne, had been a judge during the Salem witch trials. Hawthorne felt both connected to and troubled by this ancestral legacy. The attached text notes that the burden of the past and the problem of inherited guilt became central themes in his fiction.

The Scarlet Letter (1850) is Hawthorne's greatest historical romance. It is set in seventeenth-century Puritan Boston and tells the story of Hester Prynne, who is publicly punished for adultery. She is forced to wear the scarlet letter "A" on her dress and to endure the judgment of the community. The novel examines adultery, sin, guilt, punishment, secrecy, revenge, individual freedom, social conformity, religious authority, and the moral rigidity of Puritan society.

Hester Prynne becomes one of the central heroines of American literature because she resists complete social destruction. Although she is publicly shamed, isolated, and punished, she preserves her dignity, independence, strength, and capacity for love. Her relationship with the Puritan community is complex. She is a rebel against its moral code, yet she cannot entirely separate herself from society. The novel explores the conflict between the individual's private truth and the community's public law.

The symbolic structure of *The Scarlet Letter* is central to its power. The letter "A" initially signifies adultery, but its meaning changes as the novel develops. It may suggest "Able," "Admirable," or "Angel." The attached text emphasizes that Hawthorne transforms simple allegory into complex symbolism by allowing the letter to acquire multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings. The novel therefore resists easy moral judgment. It does not simply condemn Hester or Puritan society; instead, it explores the human complexity of guilt, love, law, freedom, and forgiveness.

The contrast between the settlement and the forest is also important in *The Scarlet Letter*. The Puritan settlement represents law, order, security, surveillance, and social judgment. However, it is also a place of repression and moral rigidity, marked by the prison and scaffold. The forest represents freedom, secrecy, nature, desire, and escape from social convention. Yet it is also morally uncertain, associated in Puritan imagination with darkness, temptation, and the devil. The attached text observes that Hawthorne presents both the settlement and the forest in an ambivalent way; neither is purely good nor purely evil.

The House of the Seven Gables (1851) continues Hawthorne's interest in the burden of history. The novel explores inherited guilt, family decline, ancestral wrongdoing, greed, revenge, and the relation between past and present. The Pyncheon family lives under the shadow of a curse linked to an earlier act of injustice. The old house itself becomes a symbol of decayed aristocracy, inherited sin, memory, and historical confinement. Hawthorne suggests that the past cannot

simply be forgotten. It survives in family structures, social privilege, guilt, and patterns of behaviour.

The Blithedale Romance (1852) is based partly on Hawthorne's experience at Brook Farm, a nineteenth-century experiment in communal living. The novel examines reform, idealism, social experimentation, egoism, sexual tension, and the difficulty of transforming human nature. Hawthorne does not simply reject reform, but he is suspicious of any movement that claims to have solved the deepest problems of human life. His fiction repeatedly suggests that individuals remain morally complex and that no social system can entirely remove pride, selfishness, secrecy, or desire.

Hawthorne's historical romances are important because they use the past as a way of examining the present. Puritan New England becomes a symbolic landscape in which modern readers can confront questions of guilt, social judgment, individual liberty, gender, sexuality, religious authority, and inherited responsibility. His romance form gives him freedom to make historical events, places, objects, and characters more mysterious, symbolic, and psychologically intense.

2.8 Importance of Historical Romance

Historical romance made the American past artistically meaningful. It enabled American writers to create national myths at a time when the country was still young and searching for cultural independence. Through historical romance, writers turned the Revolution, Puritan New England, the frontier, the wilderness, Native American life, and westward movement into imaginative material.

The genre created major American myths. Irving's stories created myths of the Hudson Valley, Dutch-American memory, the Revolution, and a vanishing rural past. Cooper's novels created the frontier hero, the wilderness myth, the solitary scout, and the drama of expansion. Hawthorne's romances created a powerful myth of Puritan New England as a place haunted by guilt, secrecy, sin, repression, and ancestral memory. These myths continued to shape later American literature.

Historical romance also allowed writers to criticize the present indirectly through the past. Irving's tales reveal anxiety about modernization, migration, and social change. Cooper's frontier novels expose tensions between freedom and law, wilderness and settlement, natural morality and social corruption.

Hawthorne's romances show that the past is never entirely dead; inherited guilt and historical injustice continue to influence later generations.

The importance of the genre lies in its ability to connect history with imagination. It does not simply reproduce facts; it transforms them into symbolic narratives that ask larger questions. What does a nation remember? What does it forget? What is lost when societies expand and modernize? What responsibilities do individuals inherit from the past? What is the relation between freedom and law? How can a democratic society preserve both individuality and community?

Historical romance therefore occupies a central place in early American literature. It gave writers a way to invent the national past, criticize national myths, explore the moral consequences of historical change, and establish an imaginative language for understanding America itself.

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