Chapter 12: Antebellum Culture and Reform:
Objectives:

- We will study the contributions of the Hudson River School, antebellum writers, and the transcendentalists in fashioning an American culture grounded in nationalism and romanticism.
- We will study the development of utopian communities and new religions as an expression of the American reform impulse.
- We will study the growth of both religious revivalism and new theories of health, science, and education during the antebellum decades.
Rom_14:17  For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.
America was rapidly changing in the mid-nineteenth century.
There were challenges to traditional values and a feeling of uncertainty with change.
One result of these conflicting attitudes was the emergence of a broad array of movements intended to “reform” the nation.

These reform efforts generally reflected one of two basic impulses.

The first was an optimistic faith in human nature, a belief that within every individual resided a spirit that was basically good and that society should attempt to unleash.
A second impulse was a desire for order and control.

With their traditional values and institutions under assault and eroding, many Americans yearned above all for stability and discipline for the nation.
THE ROMANTIC IMPULSE:

- Europeans held American artistic and intellectual life in the middle nineteenth century with contempt.
- Europe looked down on this aspect of America.
THE ROMANTIC IMPULSE:

- Ironically, the Nation’s cultural leaders were striving for another kind of liberation that over-shadow their nationalism.
- That impulse largely came from Europe was the spirit of romanticism.
- In literature, in philosophy, in art even in politics and economics, American intellectuals were committing themselves to the liberation of the human spirit.
Nationalism and Romanticism in American Painting:

○ The most important and popular American paintings of the first half of the nineteenth century set out to evoke the wonder of the nation’s landscape.

○ Unlike their European counterparts, American painters did not favor gentle scenes of carefully cultivated country-sides.
Nationalism and Romanticism in American Painting:

- They sought to capture the undiluted power of nature by portraying some of the nation’s wildest and most spectacular areas.
- The felling of awe and wonderment and even fear of the grandeur of nature.
Nationalism and Romanticism in American Painting:

- The first great school of American painters emerged in New York.
- Frederic Church, Thomas Cole, Thomas Doughty, and Asher Durand who were along with others known as the Hudson River School painted the spectacular vistas of the rugged and still largely unsettled Hudson Valley.
Nationalism and Romanticism in American Painting:

- They conveyed a “wild nature” that existed in America, therefore was a greater nation of promise than the played out lands of the Old World.

- Yet there was also a sense of nostalgia in many of the Hudson River paintings, an effort to preserve and cherish a kind of nature that many Americans feared was fast disappearing.
Nationalism and Romanticism in American Painting:

- In later years, some of the Hudson Rivers painters traveled farther west, in search for more profound spiritual experiences.
- They painted the natural wonders, like Yosemite, Yellowstone, and the Rockies that touched a passionate chord among the American public.
- Some of the most famous paintings were from Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran.
Literature and the Quest for Liberation:

- Americans in the first decade of the nineteenth century were relatively indifferent to their own writers.
- The most popular writer at that time was Sir Walter Scott of Britain.
- The most popular domestic books were sentimental novels written mostly by and for women.
Literature and the Quest for Liberation:

- However, Washington Irving and others had advanced in the first decades of the century, made considerable progress with the emergence of the first great American novelist: James Fenimore Cooper.
- He wrote 30 novels in the space of three decades and wrote about the American wilderness.
- His most important novels were known as the “Leather Stock Tales.”
Literature and the Quest for Liberation:

- They explored the American frontiersman’s experience with Indians, pioneers, violence, and the law.
- Cooper’s novels were a continuation of the early nineteenth century efforts to produce a truly American literature.
- But they also served as a link to the concerns of later intellectuals.
Literature and the Quest for Liberation:

- For in the *Leather Stocking Tales*, was both a celebration of the American Spirit and landscape and also an evocation through the central character of Natty Bumppo of the ideal of the independent individual with a natural inner goodness.

- There was also evidence of another impulse that would motivate American reform: the fear of disorder.
Many of Cooper’s less savory characters illustrated the vicious, gasping nature of some of the nation’s western settlers and suggested a need for social discipline even in the wilderness.

Other important American writers emerged on the heels of Cooper.

They displayed even more clearly the grip of romanticism on the nation’s intellectual life.
Literature and the Quest for Liberation:

- Walt Whitman, the self-proclaimed poet of American democracy wrote poems of an unrestrained celebration of democracy.
- Of the liberation of the individual and of the pleasures of the flesh as well as of the spirit.
- They also expressed Whitman’s personal yearnings for emotional and physical release and personal fulfillment.
- A yearning perhaps rooted in part in his own experience as a homosexual living in a society conservative society.
Literature and the Quest for Liberation:

- In his large body of poems, Whitman not only helped liberate verse from traditional convention;
- He also helped express the soaring spirit of individualism that characterized his age.
Literature and the Quest for Liberation:

- Herman Melville who ran away to the sea in his youth and spent many years sailing the world became the greatest American novelist of his era.
- The most important of his novels was *Moby Dick*, published in 1851.
- The novel revolved around Ahab, a captain of the whaling vessel who was obsessed with killing a whale that maimed him ultimately leading to his demise.
- This reflected the conviction that the human spirit was a troubled, often self-destructive force.
Literature and the Quest for Liberation:

- More bleak were the works of one of the few southern writers of the time to embrace and search for the essence of the human spirit, Edgar Allan Poe.
- In his short and unhappy life (died at the age of forty) Poe produced stories and poems that were primarily sad and macabre.
Literature and the Quest for Liberation:

- His most famous poem *The Raven*, established him as a major, if controversial literary figure.
- Poe evoked images of individuals rising above the narrow confines of intellect and exploring the deeper world of the spirit and the emotions.
- Where the spirit contained much pain and horror.
- American writers looked down upon Poe and his work and his message, but he was ultimately to have a profound effect on European poets.
Literature in the Antebellum South:

- Like the North, the South experienced a literary flowering in the mid-nineteenth century, and produced writers and artists who were concerned with defining the nature of American society and of the American nation.
- But White southerners tended to produce very different image of what that society was and should be.
Literature in the Antebellum South:

- Southern novelists of the 1830s (among them Beverly Tucker, William Alexander Crauthers, and John Pendleton Kennedy).

- Some were writers of great talent and many of them residents of Richmond, produced historical romances or romantic eulogies of the plantation system of the upper South.
In the 1840s, the Southern literary capital moved to Charleston, home of the most distinguished of the region’s men of letters: William Gilmore Simms.

For a time, his work expressed a broad nationalism that transcended his regional background.

But by the 1840s he too had become a strong defender of southern institutions especially slavery against the encroachments of the North.

He believed a unique quality to southern life that it was the duty of intellectuals to defend.
Literature in the Antebellum South:

- One group of southern writers, however, produced works that were more broadly American.
- And less committed to a glorification of the peculiarities of Southern life.
Literature in the Antebellum South:

- There were writers from the fringes of plantations society who depicted the world of the backwoods rural areas.
- Augustus B. Longstreet, Joseph G. Baldwin, Johnson J. Hooper and others focused not on aristocratic cavaliers but on ordinary people and poor whites.
Literature in the Antebellum South:

- Instead of romanticizing their subjects they were deliberately and sometimes painfully realistic.
- They seasoned their sketches with a robust, vulgar humor that was new to American literature.
- These new southern realists established a tradition of American regional humor that was ultimately to find its most powerful voice in Mark Twain.
The Transcendentalists:

- One of the outstanding expressions of the romantic impulse in America came from a group of New England writers and philosophers known as the transcendentalists.

- They borrowed heavily from German philosophers and English writers and distinguished between reason and understanding.
The Transcendentalists:

- Reason as they defined it, had little to do with rationality.
- It was rather the individuals innate capacity to grasp beauty and truth through giving full expression to the instincts and emotions, and as such, it was the highest human faculty.
The Transcendentalists:

- Understanding, the transcendentalists argued, was the use of intellect in the narrow artificial ways imposed by society;
- It involved the repression of instinct and the victory of externally imposed learning.
- Every person’s goal therefore should be liberation from the confines of “understanding” and the cultivation of “reason.”
- Each individual should strive to “transcend” the limits of the intellect and allow the emotions the “soul” to create an original relation to the universe.
The Transcendentalists:

- The philosophy first emerged first among a small group of intellectuals centered in Concord, Massachusetts.
- Their leader and most eloquent voice was Ralph Waldo Emerson.
- A Unitarian Minister in his youth.
- Emerson left the church in 1832 to devote himself to writing and teaching transcendentalist thought.
The Transcendentalists:

- Emerson believed that the quest for self-fulfillment, individuals should work “for a communion with the natural world: in the woods, we return to reason and faith.... I am part and particle of God.”

- He believed that each person had an innate capacity to become through his or her private efforts, a part of this essence in capturing the classic romantic belief in the “divinity” of the individual.

- Emerson was also a committed nationalist who believed that American artistic and literary greatness can be achieved.
The Transcendentalists:

- Almost as influential as Emerson was another leading Concord transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau.
- Thoreau went further than his friend Emerson in repudiating the repressive forces of society which produced quiet desperation.
- Individuals should work for self-realization by resisting pressures to conform to society’s expectations and responding instead to their own instincts.
The Transcendentalists:

- Thoreau’s rejection of what he considered the artificial constraints of society extended as well to his relationship with government.
- In 1846, he went to jail briefly rather than agree to pay a poll tax.
- He would not, he insisted, give financial support to a government that permitted the existence of slavery.
The Transcendentalists:

- In his 1849 essay “Resistance to Civil Government,” he explained his refusal by claiming that the individual’s personal morality had the first claim on his or her actions.
- That a government which required violation of the morality had no legitimate authority.
- The proper response was “civil disobedience” or “passive resistance” a public refusal to obey unjust laws.
The Defense of Nature:

○ The transcendentalists and others feared the impact of the new capitalist enthusiasms on the integrity of the natural world.

○ Nature was not just a setting for economic activity as many farmers, ministers, and others believed; and it was not simply a body of data to be catalogued and studied, as many scientists thought.

○ It was the source of human inspiration—the vehicle through which individuals could best realize the truth within their own souls.
The Defense of Nature:

- Genuine spirituality came not from formal religion but through communion with the natural world.
- Thoreau believed that humans separated from nature would lose a substantial part of their humanity.
- In making such claims, the transcendentalists were among the first Americans to anticipate the environmental movement.
- They believed in and articulate an essential unity between humanity and nature, a spiritual unity, they believed without which civilization would be impoverished.
Visions of Utopia:

- Although transcendentalism was an individualistic philosophy, it helped spawn the most famous of all nineteenth century experiments in communal living:

- Brook Farm, which Boston transcendentalist George Ripley established as an experimental community in West Roxbury Massachusetts, in 1841.
Visions of Utopia:

- There, individuals would gather to create a new form of social organization.
- All residents would share equally in the labor of the community so that all could share too in the leisure because leisure was the first necessary cultivation of self.
- Participation in manual labor served another purpose as well; it helped individuals bridge the gap between the world of intellect and learning, and the world of instinct and nature.
Visions of Utopia:

- The obvious tension between the ideal of individual freedom and the demands of a communal society took its toll on Brook Farm.
- Many residents grew dissatisfied and left.
- Fire destroyed the central building of the community in 1847, the experiment dissolved.
- Among the original residents of Brook Farm was the writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, who expressed his disillusionment with the experiment and, to some extent, with the transcendentalism in a series of notable novels.
Visions of Utopia:

- But Brook Farm inspired other attempts for utopia.
- French philosopher Charles Fourier whose ideas of socialist communities organized as cooperative “phalanxes” received wide attention in America.
Visions of Utopia:

- Others drew from the ideas of the Scottish industrialist and philanthropist Robert Owen.
- Owen himself founded an experimental community in Indiana which he called New Harmony. It was to be a “village of cooperation” in which every resident worked and lived in total equality.
- The community was an economic failure but the vision it had inspired continued to enchant Americans.
• But in vain are men's dreams of progress, in vain all efforts for the uplifting of humanity, if they neglect the one Source of hope and help for the fallen race. "Every good gift and every perfect gift" (James 1:17) is from God. There is no true excellence of character apart from Him. And the only way to God is Christ. He says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me." John 14:6. {SC 21.1}
Redefining Gender Roles:

- One of the principle concerns of many of the new utopian communities was the relationship between men and women.

- Transcendentalists and other movements of this period fostered expressions of kind of feminism that would not gain a secure foothold in American society until the late twentieth century.
Redefining Gender Roles:

- One of those who raised the issue of gender was Margaret Fuller.
- A leading transcendentalist and a close associate of Emerson, she suggested that important relationship between the discovery of the “self” that was so central to antebellum reform and the questioning of gender roles.
Redefining Gender Roles:

- “Many women are considering within themselves what they need and what they have not.

- I would have Woman lay aside all thought such as she habitually cherishes, of being taught and led by men.” Margret Fuller
Redefining Gender Roles:

- A redefinition of gender roles was crucial to one of the most enduring of the utopian colonies of the nineteenth century: the Oneida Community, established in 1848 in upstate New York by John Humphrey Noyes.
- The Oneida “Perfectionists,” as residents of the community called themselves, rejected traditional notions of family and marriage.
- All residents, Noyes declared, were “married” to all other residents; there were to be no permanent conjugal ties.
Redefining Gender Roles:

- It was a place where the community carefully monitored sexual behavior, where women were to be protected from unwanted childbearing; in which children were raised communally, often seeing little of their own parents.

- The Oneidans took special pride in what they considered the liberation of their women from the demands of male “lust” and from the traditional bonds of family.
Redefining Gender Roles:

- The Shakers, even more than Oneidans, made a redefinition of traditional sexuality and gender roles central to their society.
- Founded by “Mother” Ann Lee in the 1770s, the society of the Shakers survived throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.
Redefining Gender Roles:

- They had a large following in the antebellum period and established more than twenty communities throughout the Northeast and Northwest in the 1840s.
- They derived their name from a unique religious ritual, a sort of ecstatic dance, in which members of a congregation would “shake” themselves free of sin while performing a loud chant.
Redefining Gender Roles:

- The distinctive feature of Shakerism however was its commitment to complete celibacy which meant of course that no one could be born to Shakerism;
- All Shakers had to choose the faith voluntarily.
Redefining Gender Roles:

- In the 1840s there were more women than men; and members lived in conditions in which contact between men and women was very limited.
- Shakers openly endorsed the idea of sexual equality; they even embraced the idea of a God who was not clearly male or female.
- Within the Shaker society as a whole, it was women who exercised the most power.
- Mother Ann Lee was succeeded as leader of the movement by Mother Lucy Wright.
Redefining Gender Roles:

- The Shakers were not, however motivated only by a desire to escape the burdens of traditional gender roles.
- They were trying as well to create a society separated and protected from the chaos and disorder that they believed had come to characterize American life as a whole.
The Mormons:

- Among the most important efforts to create a new and more ordered society within the old was that of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints—the Mormons.
- Mormonism began in upstate New York as the result of efforts of Joseph Smith.
- A young energetic but economically unsuccessful man, who had spent most of his twenty-four years through the Northeast.
The Mormons:

- In 1830 published *The Book of Mormon* was published that Smith asserted was a translation of a set of golden tablets he had found in the hills of New York, revealed to him by an angel of God.

- A book that claimed that one of the lost tribes of the Children of Israel settled in North America and that Jesus came to America after His resurrection to minister to them.
The Mormons:

- Smith sought to establish a righteous community or a “New Jerusalem and with a small group of believers began searching for more than twenty years.

- They were met with hostility and persecution because of their radical religious doctrines included polygamy, a rigid form of social organization, and an image of intense secrecy.
The Mormons:

- Mormonism reflected a belief in human perfectibility.
- God had once been a man, the church taught and thus every man or woman would aspire to become as Joseph Smith had become, a saint.
- But unlike other new communities such as the Onedians, the Mormons did not embrace the doctrine of individual liberty.
- Instead they created a highly organized, centrally directed, almost militarized social structure a refuge against the disorder and uncertainty of the secular world.
The Mormons:

- They placed particular emphasis on the structure of the family.
- Mormon religious rituals included baptism ceremonies of deceased ancestors as a result, they believed they would be reunited with those ancestors in heaven.
- Thus beginning their intense interest in genealogy.
The Mormons:

- The original Mormons were, for the most part, men and women who felt displaced in their rapidly changing society, people left behind or troubled by the material growth and social progress of their era.
- In the new religion, they found genuine faith.
- In the society Mormonism created, they found security and order.