

Fireside Poets—American Romantic Poetry

(From *Elements of Literature*)

If the Romantic novelists looked for new subject matter and innovative themes, virtually the opposite tendency appears in the Romantic poets. Like Franklin, they wanted to prove that Americans were not unsophisticated hicks, but were as knowledgeable and polished as Europeans.

When an editor was shown the manuscript of Bryant's poem "Thanatopsis" he found it difficult to believe that such accomplished poetry could be the work of an American. Bryant had borrowed typically English themes, meter and imagery to construct a poem with an American setting. In a sense, his poem was what a cultivated Englishman who had emigrated to America might be expected to write.

Each of the American poets in this unit, also, looked backward—over his shoulder, as it were—at the established European literary models. Their poetry was limited by this tendency, and by their own facility with traditional meter and diction (leading to poems with "dum-de-dum" rhythms). But these poets used their talents fruitfully. Each wrote a few great poems, and each wrote many many other poems that for generations were the staple of home and school readings.

In fact, the Fireside Poets, as the Boston group of Longfellow, Holmes, Lowell and Whittier was called, were the last great **popular** poets in America. They were called Fireside Poets because their poems were so often read aloud at the family fireside as family entertainment. The works of the Fireside Poets appealed to the ordinary, literate man and woman, and their subjects—love, patriotism, nature, family, God and religion—secured for these poets a well-loved place in almost every American home.

Nevertheless, their attempts to create a new American literature relied too reverently on the literature of the past. 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 reading the first volume of a certain new poet's work was to throw the book in the fire. Ralph Waldo Emerson's response was more farsighted. He wrote to the new poet, Walt Whitman: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career."