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“We Must Get Rid of Slavery, or We Must Get Rid of Freedom.” Self, Other, and Emancipation in Antebellum America

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Abstract: Antebellum American literature, like the country itself, was a heterogeneity of Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and political prose culminating in the national narrative. Authors during this time struggled with the issue of slavery and their works reflected varying degrees of disdain for it and its treatment of slaves that were the direct representation of the Other. Prominent writers, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman used their prose and poetry to speak out about a nation cleaved in two. These two sides could not agree on how to move forward and this struggle was in fact a mirror image of the binary idea of the Self and the Other. If the Self was the white male, the Other was the slave or Native American who was outside of the antebellum norm. Emerson encouraged an equality and self-reliance that would reverse the power structure of the time. Hawthorne used veiled allegories to suggest that the nation’s slavery problem would rectify itself in time. Melville preached about capitalism and Christian hypocrisy while Whitman used his poetry to aesthetically envision a truly inclusive democratic antebellum America. These authors were pioneers in the humanism of literature that was meant to inspire the nation to achieve its potential and ensure that every voice would be heard. However, antebellum human rights were not fully realized and slavery dehumanized the Other leading to a nation divided and eventually civil war.