

Romantic realism in Walt Whitman

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Abstract

Romanticism was a reaction against convention. As a political movement, this reaction was reflected in the new democratic ideals that opposed monarchy and feudalism. In art, it meant a turning away from Neoclassicism and the ancient models of Greek perfection and classical correctness. Romanticism asserted the power of the individual. Romanticism marked an era characterized in the idealization of the individual. Walt Whitman had a strong belief that nature was the root of all beautiful things, whether it was the smell of a flower, or the light of the moon anything that was natural had internal beauty and thereby had the possibility to make humanity beautiful. Walt Whitman's writing were all in themselves different styles of Romanticism though they all used common themes of nature, and solitude. Whitman's goal in his writing was to get the people of the world to change in their belief.

Keywords: Romanticism, neoclassicism, philosopher, Revolution, idealistic, hermit

Introduction

Walt Whitman was a great Romantic poet. From the late eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, in both Europe and the United States, an artistic and intellectual movement called Romanticism became a dominant force in politics, religion and the arts. Although the term 'Romanticism' means different things to the poets, minister, philosopher, political theorist, or artist yet some basic principles apply to them all.

Romanticism was a reaction against convention. As a political movement, this reaction was reflected in the new democratic ideals that opposed monarchy and feudalism. In art, it meant a turning away from Neoclassicism and the ancient models of Greek perfection and classical correctness. Philosophically, romanticism would contend with rationalism – the belief that truth could be discerned by logic and reason. Romanticism asserted the power of the individual. Romanticism marked an era characterized in the idealization of the individual. Politically the movement influenced democratic ideas and the revolutionary principles of social equality. Philosophically, it meant that the idea of objective reality would give way to subjective experience; thus all truth became a matter of human perception. In the art world Romanticism marked a fascination with the individual genius, and elevated the artist, philosopher, poet and scholar above all other people.

Romanticism reflected a deep appreciation of the beauties of nature. For the romantics, nature was how the spirit was revealed to human kind. The romantic philosophers believed in the metaphysical or spiritual nature of reality. They thought that a higher reality existed behind the appearance of things in the physical world. Nature appeared to people as a material reality; however, because it evoked such strong feelings in human kind, it revealed itself as containing a higher, spiritual truth. Romantic artists attempted to capture in their art the same feelings nature inspired in them.

Romanticism emphasized the importance of the subjective experience. The romantics believed that emotions and the senses could lead to higher truths than either the reason or the

intellect could. Romantics supposed that feelings, such as awe, fear, delight, joy and wonder were keys that could unlock the mysteries of the world. The result was a literature that continually explored the inward experiences of the self. The imagination became one of the highest faculties of human perception, for it was through the imagination that the individuals could experience transcendent or spiritual truths.

Finally, Romanticism was idealistic. On one hand, Romanticism was philosophically rooted in idealism. Reality existed primarily in the ideal world – that is, in the mind – while the material world merely reflected that universe. In other words, the ideal world was 'more real' than the real world. On the other hand, Romanticism was literally idealistic; it tended to be optimistic in its outlook on life. Political and social Romantics asserted that human beings could live according to higher principles, such as the beliefs in social and human equality, freedom and human rights.

When studying the influence of these principles of romantic thought on the United States from 1800 to 1860, it is important to look also at some of the historical, philosophical and artistic movements in Europe. European thought constantly made its way into American thought and vice-versa. In fact, there seemed to be an ongoing dialogue between the Old World and the New over the character and nature of Romanticism. The New World was intent on applying romantic principles to the uniqueness of the American experience. For its part, the Old World saw romanticism as a continuation of its long history and deep traditions.

French Revolution and its impact on romanticism

The French Revolution of 1789 created a torrent of romantic ideals across Europe. Unlike the American Revolution and the struggle for independence from an outside, imperial power, the French Revolution marked an internal struggle within one of Europe's great nations. The conflict was over social class and competing political ideologies, ideas that were indeed threatening and revolutionary. Because of the French Revolution, all the principles of Romanticism

suddenly became a basis of government. The cry of the French Revolutionaries for fraternity, equality and liberty shook the foundations of European monarchies. Common people had come to believe in the rights of man. The European world tried to understand the causes of the French Revolution and what its greater implications for the human kind.

The French Revolution inspired many romantic writers to think of history as an evolution to a higher state. The French Revolution seemed to herald a rebirth of human possibility. In the old way of thinking, history was a static pyramid. It was a hierarchy, a great chain of being, that flowed from God, down to kings, to common people and then to the natural world. It was viewed as a purposeful, moral voyage. It told the story not of kings and heroes, but of democracies, the will of the people, and the triumph of the individual.

One of the great thinkers of social romanticism was Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881). In his best selling book, *The History of the French Revolution* (1837), Carlyle provides the definitive romantic view of the Revolution. In highly romantic language, Carlyle dramatizes the plight of the French aristocracy but show that they are ultimately the victims of history. Carlyle makes real the characters of Louis and Marie Antoinette, giving the reader a strong identification with their sorry plights. Nevertheless, he pits these 'characters' against the tide of history. For Thomas Carlyle history is a living thing; indeed, he constantly refers to it as if it is one of the characters in the drama. Even history is surprised by the outcome of the revolution:

But what if history were to admit, for once, that all the Names and Theorems yet known to her fall short? That this grand Product of Nature was even grand, and new, in that it came to range itself under old-recorded laws of Nature at all; but to disclose new ones?

French Revolution was singularly important, because, in this new page in history, human kind is presented with a radically different notion of himself. Carlyle remarks:

It is a change such as History must beg her readers to imagine, undescribed. An instantaneous change of the whole body politic; the soul-politic all changed; such a change as few bodies, politic or other, can experience in the world ^[2].

For Carlyle history tells the story of the Divine soul acting on human affairs. In this chapter of human history, the spirit of Romanticism descended on the earth in the form of revolution. Carlyle thought that humankind had been divinely ordained to think of itself in terms of its higher spiritual nature, under the new principles of fraternity, equality and liberty.

Carlyle's works became highly influential in America, especially in the thought of the Transcendentalists in general and Walt Whitman in particular. For the Americans, American history seemed to be unfolding exactly in the way that Carlyle describes the French Revolution. America, too, appeared to be acting out its own drama of divine history.

One cannot understand the complexities of American Romanticism and Transcendentalism without at least a general understanding of eighteenth century philosophers Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

Romantic writers in the early nineteenth century agreed with Rousseau, claiming that those intense experiences or natural scenes and dramas (such as streams and mountains) would

reawaken the intuitive powers, particularly imagination. They agreed too with Kant's proposition that individuals contained within themselves an inborn spiritual knowledge. Romanticism celebrated the divinity of the individual. It assumed that individuals might have an immediate relationship to God insofar as they placed themselves within Nature. The romantics believed that human nature was made 'in likeness of God.' They felt that communion with Nature would reveal the divinity of human beings as a higher, intuitive truth.

The romantic viewpoint, a particular way of looking at the relations among God, man and Nature, manifested itself in European literature, music, painting and sculpture. In the visual arts, the English artists such as J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851) and John Constable (1776-1837) established the visual romantic genre through their landscapes of sea and countryside. Using rich, almost impressionistic colours and tones, they painted with a deep appreciation of the beauties of Nature. Turner, for example, explores the interplay between sea and sky with great romantic feeling. Both reflected the contemporary literary and romantic movements in Europe. Their art conveyed the romantic ideal; that is, they supported the romantic belief that reflections of the beauties of Nature could initiate the heightened personal awareness of the senses, and thus approach the spirit of the divine.

In literature, the Romantic Movement was dominated by English poets William Wordsworth and Coleridge. In 1798 they published *Lyrical Ballads* and in so doing launched the English

Romanticism had a great effect on the imagination and sensibilities of thinking men in America. While Western Europe had always celebrated America as the new world, nineteenth century Americans began to realize the potential their newness held for achieving a great society.

Walt Whitman had a strong belief that nature was the root of all beautiful things, whether it was the smell of a flower, or the light of the moon anything that was natural had internal beauty and thereby had the possibility to make humanity beautiful. In many of his poems Whitman depicts that nature is what depicts the true soul of a man and has the power to both display it and control it. These aspects of nature were large parts of the American Romantic movement, which shows Whitman's relationship to the American Romantics.

O powerful, western, fallen star!
O shades of night! O moody, tearful night!
O great star disappear'd! O the black murk that hides the star!
O cruel hands that hold me powerless! O helpless soul of me!
O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul!^[13]

This illustrates the power that Whitman believed the natural world had over him and the rest of humanity. It also shows the dark and sinister thought that he had as a Romantic writer. The sun falls in the west, and the darkness of the night takes over. It is because of the blackness of nature that comes with night which holds the soul of a human. Aspects of solitude are also common in Whitman's writings. Very often do they go hand in hand with dark aspects showing the relation between the darkness where they provoke the exploration of self and the ability to find one's true soul? Having studied the mocking-bird's tones and the flight of the mountain-hawk,

And heard at dawn the unrivall'd one, the hermit thrush from
the swamp-cedars,
Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for a New World.
Victory, union, faith, identity, time,
The indissoluble compacts, riches, mystery,
Eternal progress, the kosmos, and the modern reports.
This then is life ^[14].

This makes it abundantly clear that some man, presumably Walt Whitman himself, has spent some amount of time in a dark and somber swamp, a place in which people do not usually live, the gloomy and dark aspects are expressed by the sheer fact that it is a swamp. During his time there he studies nature, plants and animals helped him unravel himself. With this new sense self he immerses to head for the real world. Under his belt the knowledge of victory, union, faith, time, and most importantly, identity, since identity is the soul of a human and everything about it.

Common in not only to Whitman's writing but to writings forms of this time was the belief in the natural goodness of man, that man left by himself would be good, moral, and fair. The aspects of civilization and the influence of one human on another is what changes this for each individual.

Behold, the body includes and is the meaning, the main concern and includes and is the soul;

Whoever you are, how superb and how divine is your body, or any part of it! ^[15]

The body is everything that involves a human, including the soul. Since the body is something which is naturally good, and incorporates soul, then the soul is good as well. If the soul is what represents human nature, or a human's way of being then by nature the soul is good. It is not until the corruption of civilization that changes the good nature of the mind.

As stated before there are other elements of Romanticism, used by Whitman: the use of nature solitude, and darkness the most however he did sometimes use the aspect of art as a part of humanity and life. Art represents creation of man, nature is what man is trying to create, and so without one another they are all nothing.

The straying thence, the separation long, but now the wandering done,

The journey done, the journeyman come home,

And man and art with Nature fused again ^[16].

As someone discovers oneself by separating themselves from everything, they learn to understand themselves as they return to a normal life man, nature and art are all assembled again. These three key elements of life are all assembled together again and make up the nature of life and humanity. A display of darkness in American Romanticism comes from Whitman writing about the death of President Abraham Lincoln. Whitman states that the action of a person are more important that the word or art of a person. That Lincoln's death or the death of any man in the action of what he or she believed speaks more than any of the works of literature or art that person created.

I repeat it—the grand deaths of the race—the dramatic deaths of every nationality—are its most important inheritance-value—in some respects beyond its literature and art—(as the hero is beyond his finest portrait, and the battle itself beyond its choicest song or epic.) ^[17]

As somber this is following the somber writing style of much or romanticism, this also displays what Whitman wanted

people to do. He wanted people to do the right things even if death came because of it, as happened to Lincoln.

Not only was Walt Whitman an incredible writer, and poet, but he was one of the most influential writers of the time. He changed many people's ways of looking at life and changed the views of the American people. He gave many what they were looking for by through his works and his creation of a new style of poetry helping create America's first writing style. His writing were all in themselves different styles of Romanticism though they all used common themes of nature, and solitude. Whitman's goal in his writing was to get the people of the world to change in their belief. He did this through more than just his political essays but his poetry and prose as well. The revolution which he began changed the world of poetry forever due to this man.

Alt Whitman's poetry of the 'self' also makes him a great romantic poet. Throughout his long and eventful life and literary career, Walt Whitman promoted himself as the poet of American democracy and of the common man. That is why the personal element is extremely prominent in the poetry of Walt Whitman. One of the most persistent themes in the poetry of Walt Whitman is the glorification of the 'self'. In a sense Whitman wrote 'confessional poetry' when this term was unheard of. Private experiences with and feelings about death, trauma, depression and relationships were addressed in this type of poetry, often in an autobiographical manner and this is what we see Whitman also doing. Walt Whitman can be greeted as a powerful exponent of the human self. 'Self' enjoys a unique status in Walt Whitman's poetry and it constitutes the central motivating force it. Walt Whitman's poetry came at a time in America when imported European literature and poetry was becoming inadequate and irrelevant to the American experience ^[18]. The new urban population of America needed a new representative, a role that Walt Whitman aimed to fill. Walt Whitman was the first advertiser of his own product, like many of the manufacturers of his day ^[19]. While working in the newspaper business, he learned several ways of promoting his product However, unlike advertising, Whitman addressed his readers as citizens rather than customers, and tried to promote himself as a restorative commodity for America.²⁰ He wrote a "poetics of hype"—a poetry that tries to sell its value to an audience it already claims to represent ^[21]. Whitman promoted himself in his poetry through the language of popularity, thereby creating the notion that his work was already representative of the American populace ^[22]. He asks his readers to help him in creating a collective American self, thereby giving them part ownership ^[23]. But the important thing to note about the self is that Whitman makes it conscious of its own identity. It can identify itself with others, without loss or destruction of its own identity. The self always escapes from the impinging identities. The identity of self and Death is not everlasting or permanent, because Death always sends back the self to earth. In a way, Death contributes in the self's recreation or rebirth. The identity of the self and God also cannot lead to total absorption or loss of it. In fact, it is God. Self, for Whitman, retains its own identity and individuality under all conditions.

Conclusion

For Walt Whitman, the complete 'self' is both physical and spiritual. The self is man's individual identity, his distinct

quality and being, which is different from the selves of other men, although it can identify with them. The self is a portion of the one Divine Soul. Whitman's critics have sometimes confused the concept of self with egotism, but this is not valid. Whitman is constantly talking about 'I,' but the 'I' is universal, a part of the Divine, and therefore not egotistic.

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