

# Impact of Romanticism on R.W.Emerson, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson

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## Abstract:

*Romanticism, the special term in literature has been used to refer to certain artists, poets, writers, musicians, as well as political, philosophical, and social thinkers of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early to mid 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It has equally been used to refer to various artistic, intellectual, and social trend of the era. Despite of this common usage of the term, a precise characterization and specific definition of Romanticism has been the subject of debate in the fields of intellectual history and literary history throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, without any great measure of consensus emerging.*

*The romantic impulse played a major role in the mid-nineteenth century blossoming of American literature and art that has been called the American Renaissance. Romanticism in English literature had little connection with nationalism, the related term, Transcendentalism, intellectualism etc. The major figures in the movement of Transcendentalism were Ralph Waldo Emerson and romantic realism of Walt Whitman. The poetry of Emily Dickinson— can be taken as epitomes of American Romantic literature. By the 1880s, however, psychological and social realism was competing with romanticism in the novels too.*

*Through this paper we can innovate many new ideas and philosophies of the age of Romanticism. The books and journals of English literature are enriched by plenty of papers on Romanticism which give us enough opportunities to review and research on this topic.*

## Introduction:

Basically the term “Romanticism” has been used to refer to certain artists , poets, writers ,musicians , as well as political ,philosophical, and social thinkers of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early to mid 19<sup>th</sup> centuries . It has equally been used to refer to various artistic, intellectual, and social trend of the era. Despite of this common usage of the term, a precise characterization and specific definition of Romanticism has been the subject of debate in the fields of

intellectual history and literary history throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, without any great measure of consensus emerging. It was a movement originated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe and strengthened in reaction to the Industrial Revolution. Partially it was a revolt against aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment and a reaction against the scientific rationalization of nature. It was embodied most strongly in the visual arts, music, and literature, but had a major impact on historiography<sup>[1]</sup>, education<sup>[2]</sup> and natural history.<sup>[3]</sup>

The movement validated strong emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic experience, placing new emphasis on such emotions as trepidation, horror and terror, and awe—especially that which is experienced in confronting the sublimity of untamed nature and its picturesque qualities, both new aesthetic categories. It elevated folk art and ancient custom to something noble, made spontaneity a desirable characteristic, and argued for a "natural" epistemology of human activities as conditioned by nature in the form of language and customary usage. It focuses on Nature: a place free from society's judgment and restrictions. Romanticism blossomed after the age of Rationalism, a time that focus on scientific reasoning's. In literature, Romanticism found recurrent themes in the evocation or criticism of the past, the cult of "sensibility" with its emphasis on women and children, the heroic isolation of the artist or narrator, and respect for a new, wilder, untrammelled and "pure" nature.

Actually Romantic literature displayed a number of recurrent motifs: the theme of the individual in rebellion; the symbolic interpretation of the historic past; subjects from myth and folklore; the glorification of nature; faraway settings; sentimentalism; the nobility of the uncivilized man (the Native American, for example); admiration for the simple life; the elevation of the common man; a fascination with Gothic themes, with the supernatural and mysterious, with introspection, melancholy, and horror; and a humanitarian political and social outlook.

The romantic impulse played a major role in the mid-nineteenth century blossoming of American literature and art that has been called the American Renaissance. (Cliff notes) In English literature, the group of poets now considered the key figures of the Romantic movement includes William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Percy B. Shelley, and the much older William Blake, followed later by the isolated figure of John Clare. The publication in 1798 of Lyrical Ballads, with many of the finest poems by

Wordsworth and Coleridge, is often held to mark the start of the movement. However in the period when they were writing they were widely regarded as a marginal group of radicals, though they were supported by the critic and writer William Hazlitt and others.

Romanticism in English literature had little connection with nationalism, and the Romantics were often regarded with suspicion for the sympathy many felt for the ideals of the French Revolution, whose collapse and replacement with the dictatorship of Napoleon was, as elsewhere in Europe, a shock to the movement. François-René de Chateaubriand is often called the "Father of French Romanticism". In France, the movement is associated with the 19th century, the plays, poems and novels of Victor Hugo, Spanish Romanticism also influenced regional literatures. A very strong aspect of Polish Romanticism was its relation to and inspiration from Polish history. Brazilian Romanticism is characterized and divided in three different periods. The first one is basically focused in the creation of a sense of national identity, using the ideal of the heroic India.

The related term, Transcendentalism is a philosophical movement that developed in the 1830s and 1840s in the New England region of the United States as a protest to the general state of culture and society, and in particular, the state of intellectualism at Harvard University and the doctrine of the Unitarian church taught at Harvard Divinity School. Among the transcendentalists' core beliefs was the inherent goodness of both man and nature. Transcendentalists believed that society and its institutions - particularly organized religion and political parties - ultimately corrupted the purity of the individual. They had faith that man is at his best when truly "self-reliant" and independent. It is only from such real individuals that true community could be formed.

The major figures in the movement were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Amos Bronson Alcott. Other prominent transcendentalists included Charles Timothy Brooks, Orestes Brownson, William Ellery Channing, William Henry Channing, James Freeman Clarke, Christopher Pearse Cranch, Walt Whitman, John Sullivan Dwight, Convers Francis, William Henry Furness, Frederic Henry Hedge, Sylvester Judd, Theodore Parker, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, George Ripley, Thomas Treadwell Stone, and Jones Very.<sup>[1]</sup> Later Transcendentalist writers such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson still show elements of its influence and imagination, as does the romantic realism of Walt Whitman. The poetry of Emily Dickinson— can be taken as epitomes of

American Romantic literature. By the 1880s, however, psychological and social realism was competing with romanticism in the novel.

Objectives:

- a) To review and recritique of literature, especially Romanticism
- b) To make aware of the readers a number of recurrent motifs through romantic literature
- c) To help in the emergence of new ideas and in the process led to the emergence of positive voices that were beneficial for the marginalized
- d) Sections of the society.
- e) To give an unprecedented importance to folk literature, non-classical mythology and children's literature,
- f) To search different literature we can know more about that particular literature.

Methodology:

- a) Study of the available literary texts and relevant criticism of the author,
- b) Collection of materials from libraries and internet-websites and suggestions of eminent specialists,
- c) Critical study and analysis of the collected materials,
- d) Data collection from the statements or writings of the author or author's circles.

Discussion:

European Romanticism on American writers

European Romantic movement reached America in the early 19th century. American Romanticism was just as multifaceted and individualistic as it was in Europe. Like the Europeans, the American Romantics demonstrated a high level of moral enthusiasm, commitment to individualism and the unfolding of the self, an emphasis on intuitive perception, and the assumption that the natural world was inherently good, while human society was filled with corruption.<sup>[4]</sup>

Romanticism became popular in American politics, philosophy and art. The movement appealed to the revolutionary spirit of America as well as to those longing to break free of the strict religious traditions of early settlement. The Romantics rejected rationalism and

religious intellect. It appealed to those in opposition of Calvinism, which includes the belief that the destiny of each individual is preordained. The Romantic movements gave rise to New England Transcendentalism which portrayed a less restrictive relationship between God and Universe. The new religion presented the individual with a more personal relationship with God. Transcendentalism and Romanticism appealed to Americans in a similar fashion, for both privileged feeling over reason, individual freedom of expression over the restraints of tradition and custom. It often involved a rapturous response to nature. It encouraged the rejection of harsh, rigid Calvinism, and promised a new blossoming of American culture.<sup>[5][6]</sup>

American Romanticism embraced the individual and rebelled against the confinement of neoclassicism and religious tradition. The Romantic movements in America created a new literary genre that continues to influence American writers. Novels, short stories, and poems replaced the sermons and manifestos of long ago. Romantic literature was personal, intense, and portrayed more emotion than ever seen in neoclassical literature. America's preoccupation with freedom became a great source of motivation for Romantic writers as many were delighted in free expression and emotion without so much fear of ridicule and controversy. They also put more effort into the psychological development of their characters, and the main characters typically displayed extremes of sensitivity and excitement.<sup>[7]</sup>

Ralph Waldo Emerson is one of the greatest thinkers and writers of America. He has been called the, "Father of American Transcendentalism", the Sage of Concord", his *Nature* is referred to as, "*The Bible of Transcendentalism*". Matthew Arnold considered him to be as great a writer of prose as Wordsworth was that of poetry. To him "Transcendent" means 'beyond' and 'above', hence a transcendentalist is one who believes in the existence of a divine world, beyond and above the world of the senses. The divine is referred to as 'the over-soul' by Emerson and it was referred to as the "Soul of all the worlds" by Wordsworth. Thus the teaching of the transcendentalists harmonized with the rise of democracy, the rise of romanticism and the revolt against the Puritan Orthodoxy, and carried by the transcendentalists to its natural conclusion.

To Emerson, beauty and truth are one and same things. When he says "our live is embodied in beauty" he means by the over-soul, within which every man's particular being contained.

Emerson's *Nature* - "*the Bible of Transcendentalism*" – states his basic concepts of Man, Nature and God. In *Nature*, Emerson has tried to locate man in relation to nature, on the one hand, and God, on the other.

Essentially speaking his view of transcendentalism includes all the diverse elements of ideals, mysticism, intuition, and spiritualism.

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.

Walt Whitman's *Leaves of grass* is considered as, "the expression of a beast" , "*the Bible of Democracy*" and he himself is considered as the poet of Democracy and the representative of America . His *Song of Myself* is a long hymn to his own nature, and one of the gems of romantic poetry. Probably, the Song outlines the basic feelings of romantic poetry better than any other single piece.

Another feature of Romantic poetry, besides a typical sort of atheistic transcendentalism, is the use of vivid imagery and personification. The very title "I Hear America Singing" is a brilliant and beautiful Romantic image.

The last aspect of Romanticism in him is a certain non-duality, a merging of the Self with nature or God or humanity. The Romantic does not see himself as something small and separate, but as something large and all-encompassing, which pervades everyone and everything in the world. It is a rebirth of the old mystic doctrine that "All things are one," and Whitman describes the feeling perfectly in the third section.

American Romanticism, also called the American Renaissance, marked the first maturation of American letters. New writers and artists influenced the individuality and uniqueness of America through their work. This new, creative fire ignited a separate, growing culture that, over time, gave birth to the America known today. Although another great writer would be Emily Dickenson who was also a great romantic poet that wrote about love, death, and the human relationship with God and nature she helps show how romanticism can tie in with philosophy and religion. Emily Dickinson, without intending to

do so, greatly impacted American Romanticism. With her imagery, wisdom, and questioning of life's meanings, she forever left her mark on American literature. Throughout her life, she published very few poems, but after Emily's death, her sister, Lavinia, found her old collections of work.

The subjects of Emily Dickinson's poetry varied from nature to religion; many of her late poems involved the difficulty and necessity of faith. One of her first poems, a comic valentine, displays Dickinson's wit that "would later be so prominent a feature of her mature verse." In her poetry, she used the most unconventional, "nonliterary" form available, though she used traditional variations in other works.

Her poem, *because I could not stop for Death*, in which, the ideas of Romanticism are quite evident. The first stanza reads, "Because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me; the carriage held but just ourselves and immortality." The subject of human mortality is present in Dickinson's poem, and the question of what lies beyond death is discussed. This relates directly to the subjects of romanticism; it is clear that in her poem, Dickinson has a desire for knowledge and wisdom, especially for what the future – and eternity – holds.

#### Conclusion:

To conclude, Romanticism became popular in American politics, philosophy and art. American Romanticism embraced the individual and rebelled against the confinement of neoclassicism and religious tradition. The Romantic movements in America created a new literary genre that continues to influence American writers. Novels, short stories, and poems replaced the sermons and manifestos of former times. Romantic literature was personal, intense, and portrayed more emotion than ever seen in neoclassical literature. It is very difficult to analyze the special qualities of these three American Romantic poets, and the limited usefulness of the term Romanticism we have nevertheless to agree that the term has some justification in the light of poetic theory and practice to realize that there was a significant shift in taste and attitude taking place throughout Europe and America in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century literature.

Through this paper we can innovate many new ideas and philosophies of the age of Romanticism. The books and journals of English literature are enriched by plenty of papers on Romanticism which give us enough opportunities to review and research on this topic.

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