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Tenets of Romanticism in 19th Century Literature: An Analysis

During the 19th century, America was coming into its own as a new country and slowly forming its own unique culture. Although still relying heavily on European influence, there was a yearning from Americans to progress in academics and affluence to further prove America's worth and independence from Europe. It seemed at the time to be impossible or at least improbable for the rough and rugged United States to demonstrate its own admirable works of literature, art, and other forms of intellectual thought. However 19th century writers, along with other Americans in different disciplines, would prove this assumption wrong. It was during the Romanticism period, a time western culture focused on the self, individual perception and reasoning, nature, imagination, and experience, that America created some of the best works of literature in modern history. From the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson in "Self-Reliance" and Henry David Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government" to supernatural and spooky tales of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" and Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" to the enlightening and terrifying biography of Fredrick Douglass in *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass*, the United States reveled in its new influence to the literary world through demonstrating the tenets of Romanticism, perhaps a perfect time and movement for America to do so. Through examining the main ideas of Romanticism including: self-reliance, supernatural forces, and freedom and the freedom of the self; American writers have reflected the tenets of the Romantic ideals while showing the world that the United States had officially created a unique character for the world to marvel.

Several American writers have demonstrated the Romantic tenet of self-reliance in a definitive and unique perspective through new philosophy and reflection of current events. This can be seen in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, especially in his piece “Self-Reliance” and Henry David Thoreau’s “Resistance to Civil Government.” In Emerson’s “Self-Reliance,” Emerson discusses the importance of the individual and relying on the self in order to truly become who one is meant to be. He also insists on nonconformity, condemning conformity as a form of restricting the individual from their full potential. He mentions this idea in his argument, “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist...Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world” (Emerson 551). According to Emerson, by self-reliance one can become a man and that by thinking for one’s self one can relieve them from suffering the problems of the world. Although some of Emerson’s ideas may not have been realistic, his works provoked readers to look inward and change themselves by thinking on their own. In Donald E. Pease’s “‘Experience,’ Antislavery and the Crisis of Emersonianism,” Pease argues “Emerson set this structure of aversion to the work of disassociating him from the moral imperatives of two of the most powerful institutions of social reform—philanthropy and abolition—of his day,” (72). Emerson hoped that through his work in promoting the tenet of self-reliance, Americans of his day would progress towards social change for the better and ending prejudice and poor practices.

Self-reliance can also be seen in Henry David Thoreau’s “Resistance to Civil Government.” In “Resistance to Civil Government,” Thoreau shares similar ideas with Emerson that the individual can overcome suffering by thinking for one’s self. He differs from Emerson however through his comparisons of his philosophy to current events such as the Mexican War and slavery. This can be seen in his idea of abolition and the ability of man to rid the country of

the practice, “A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance, nor wish it to prevail through the power of the majority. There is but little virtue in the action of masses of men. When the majority shall at length vote for the abolition of slavery, it will be because they are indifferent to slavery, or because there is but little slavery left to be abolished by their vote” (Thoreau 846-47). Thoreau believes that in the abolition of slavery, a man who is self-reliant and independent would take immediate action in ending slavery, not idling standing by with the masses waiting for slavery to diminish to the point that the majority can easily agree with no dispute or disturbance. According to Robert A. Gross in “Quiet War With The State: Henry David Thoreau And Civil Disobedience”, “in Mexico he has been heralded as a key source for the nonviolent challenge of native peoples to federal and state laws on indigenous rights and culture” (2). This is the main problem Thoreau discusses, advocating to Americans that self-reliance should become the forefront of qualities a man should possess, a quality that would help in change public thought while relieving one’s self from the burdens of conforming society.

Romantic writers have also focused on the tenet of the supernatural, particularly in its role on expressing the issues of the individual and society. The work of Edgar Allan Poe in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” have demonstrated examples of characters experiencing supernatural activity that impact of the character’s experience in society and its reflection on realistic social problems. In Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Poe dramatically describes the final scene of his short story with the narrator’s supernatural experience with the house of Usher, “As if in the superhuman energy of his utterance there had been found the potency of a spell—the huge antique panels to which the speaker pointed, threw slowly back, upon the instant, their ponderous and ebony jaws. It was the work of the rushing gust—but then without those doors there did stand the lofty and enshrouded

figure of lady Madeline of Usher” (Poe 714). The use of spells, hauntings and the revival of supposed dead characters are typical Gothic Romantic supernatural tales which were popular during the 19th century which Poe masterfully uses in order to show the reader the psychological behavior of the individual. According to John H. Timmerman in “House of Mirrors: Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’”, “the reader is also placed inside the mind of this leading character-narrator who is only a step away from insanity. In “Usher” we also have a creeping horror and the mental disintegration of the principal persona, but the story is in fact narrated by an outside visitor,” (228). Poe does this in order, “for the reader [to be] far more deductive than the narrator but [and] has to wait for him to reach the extreme limit of safety before fleeing. However dull the narrator’s mental processing, it is altogether better than being trapped in insanity,” (228). Poe uses the Romantic idea of the supernatural through the narrator’s experience in order to show the reader the horrors of the individual going insane and the isolation that accompanies mental decline. This causes the reader to step into the narrator’s mentality and feel for themselves the emotion and fear the character experiences, which Poe demonstrates in hopes to express the societal and individual issue regarding mental illness.

In Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle,” supernatural can also be experienced through the main character Rip Van Winkle who has a life changing experience by supernatural forces. Van Winkle’s experiences are verified by the town historian Peter Vanderdonk who depicts the long established supernatural activity around the area: “He assured the company that it was a fact, handed down from his ancestor the historian, that the Kaatskill mountains had always been haunted by strange beings. That it was affirmed that the great Hendrick Hudson, the first discoverer of the river and country, kept a kind of vigil there every twenty years, with his crew of the Half-moon, being permitted in this way to revisit the scenes of his enterprise, and keep a

guardian eye upon the river, and the great city called by his name” (Irving 481). Irving uses the supernatural experiences in “Rip Van Winkle” in order to demonstrate the urge to escape reality and return to the past or future to demonstrate current and past political and personal issues. In “Rip Van Winkle,” Irving specifically is referencing the Revolutionary War and the formation of the United States as a new nation. In the article “Washington Irving’s Rip Van Winkle: A Dangerous Critique of a New Nation,” Sarah Wyman discusses the supernatural activity as, “The trope of looking at but not knowing what one sees becomes a central theme of the tale as well as a key to the way the text exploits the tension between appearance and reality... Rip’s narrative becomes an instrument of self-knowledge and social cohesion for a nation abruptly split from its past history and identity” (217). Irving uses the supernatural to discuss the problems facing the new United States and its relations to Europe while also demonstrating the new American male persona. By showing the difference between the past and present Irving satirically shows the before and after of the United States through an incompetent character who craves to escape his current life. This can be related to the present issues of the nation as Americans attempted to differentiate between the old and new.

Finally writers of the Romantic period depicted the freedom of the self and freedom of man, a Romantic tenet that reflected the dark underbelly of American society in the practice of slavery. No writer of the time could express the passion for freedom better than the famed Fredrick Douglass in his biography *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass* and Henry David Thoreau’s “Resistance to Civil Government.” In *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass*, Douglass writes about his horrifying experience in slavery and his journey to freedom. Throughout the biography Douglass tells readers his conflict with desiring freedom and adjusting to the norms of slavery. Resolved to find freedom, Douglass describes his longing for freedom:

“Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in everything. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition. I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm” (Douglass 963). In his descriptions and argument throughout his biography, Douglass discusses to readers the importance of freedom and the injustice and cruelty of slavery against innocent people. This can be seen in Peter Coclanis and Stanley Engerman’s article “Would Slavery Have Survived the War?” where the main analysis of slavery was, “broadly speaking, [it] was profitable to slaveholders and that the behavior and values of slaveholders, by and large, were either animated by—or at least consistent with and explicable via—market logic, considerations relating to the so-called cash nexus, and bare-faced, even blunt, profit and loss concerns” (70). Slavery was a strict business whose slaveholders were, as Douglass argued throughout his piece, inhumane and cruel. He provides evidence for the case of abolition, a main concern during the Romantic period in America. Along with other Romantic writers, Douglass uses an appeal of his desire for freedom to demonstrate the evil aspects of slavery while also showing the inhumane conditions African Americans were forced to suffer under the practice.

Henry David Thoreau’s “Resistance to Civil Government” also illustrates the Romantic tenet of freedom through his ideas regarding abolition and social change. His ideals would force him to disobey the government in protest against unjustified practices and as a consequence, a jail sentence. He shares his thoughts while in jail, “Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison. The proper place to-day, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less desponding spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by

their principles. It is there that the fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, the Indian come to plead the wrongs of his race, should find them; on that separate, but more free and honorable ground, where the State places those who are not with her but against her,--the only house in a slave-state in which a free man can abide with honor” (Thoreau 850). Thoreau uses the power of writing and philosophy to discuss the struggle of Romantic writers and minorities to reform society in bringing abolition and equality among the different ethnicities. Although it would not immediately happen, Thoreau’s piece along with Douglass would provide strong arguments for freedom that would motivate others. This can be seen as detailed in Gross’s piece, “He [Thoreau] did so without fanfare, withdrawing his support for a state he considered hostile to individual freedom. This action expressed a militant spirit of anarchism stirring among radical abolitionists in the Boston area, who denied the right of any institution – church, state, or family – to coerce the individual” (Gross 3). Thoreau’s use of the tenet of freedom is essential in his argument due to its impact on the literary appeals which Thoreau and other Romantic writers hoped would inspire readers and promote change in 19th century America.

Romanticism during the 19th century was an essential time in American literary history as numerous writers began writing some of the most famous works of American literature, proving that America can create greats just like Europe. Romanticism was also an important time because it was a departure from the Enlightenment period in emphasizing the individual, self-reliance, freedom and the power of the supernatural. These tenets of Romanticism can be demonstrated in several American works during this time: self-reliance and the power of the individual in Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” and Thoreau’s “Resistance in Civil Government”; freedom and the freedom of the self in Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass*; and the experiences of the supernatural in Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” and Irving’s

“Rip Van Winkle”. By demonstrating the tenets of Romanticism, American writers illustrated the power of the self and that as a culture that America’s rustic individualism could stand equal to its Europe counterparts.

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