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New Subjects of Admiration: Romanticism in 19th Century Literature

While the Enlightenment ushered in an Age of Reason whereby people were freed from some of the traditions of the past, others were disillusioned by the unfeeling influence of science and logic in their lives. The new era of Romanticism arose in the early 1800s in part as a response to the more calculating, unemotional ways of the Enlightenment. Romanticism instead placed more emphasis on the individual and their relationship with the natural world. Ralph Waldo Emerson perfectly illustrates the great importance placed on the self and inner-being in his essay entitled “Self-Reliance.” The movement began spreading through arts, even going so far as to affect civil society through politics as discussed in “Resistance to Civil Government” by Henry David Thoreau. The foundation of the self and social change was the common man, a figure newly considered a worthy subject of great literature. Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” both feature such a common man. The former work also fed into the emotionalism of the Romanticism era by including the otherworldly and mystical. “The House of Usher” by Edgar Allan Poe also relies on such occult components to develop the story. Overall, literature during this period reflected several new philosophies, including the importance of the self, the reverence of the common man, and the presence of the supernatural.

One of the key tenets of the romantic period is the significance placed on the self and self-reliance. Gone with the days of stifling the individual in favor of improving mankind at the

will of the majority; instead, in with improving and exalting the inner being to achieve a new kind of enlightenment in which truth comes from within. A tremendous contributor to this new veneration of the self is Ralph Waldo Emerson, particularly in his essay "Self-Reliance." In his work, Emerson outlines the enemies of self-reliance and the relation between self-reliance, the individual, and society so as to guide the audience into a new way of thinking. Defining self-reliance can be summed up in Emerson's famous two words: "trust thyself" (550). A prominent adversary of self-reliance is the corruptive influence of society that perpetuates conformity and consistency. Charles Bakewell elaborates on Emerson's distaste for consistency in his article "The Philosophy of Emerson," saying that "his life was a continual protest against all efforts to make the living soul feed on its dead past" (528). Because the "inmost becomes the outmost," Emerson encourages the audience to hold true to one's own intuition and not allow exterior factors like society to alter what comes from within (549). Bakewell summarizes Emerson's advice: "All that is necessary is that man stand forth boldly for himself; do what his own peculiar capacities best fit him for doing; honest, frankly, and steadfastly be himself" (532). For those that accept the schism between society and self, Emerson offers strong words of what can be achieved: "Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have suffrage of the world" (551). Fittingly, with "greater self-reliance" comes a "new respect for the divinity in man" which "must work a revolution if all the offices and relations of men" (Emerson 561). Thus, self-reliance goes beyond self-fulfillment and, in dramatic terms, can lead to power and social upheaval.

Given that the shift from others to the self has such dramatic consequences, it comes as no surprise that other great thinkers have used this reasoning to call for change during the Romanticism period. One such writer is Henry David Thoreau in his essay entitled "Resistance to Civil Government." While Thoreau does not focus on praising the individual like Emerson, he

relies on the importance of the self in contributing to a better society. Thoreau demonstrates his belief in the power of the individual when he writes, “if one HONEST man...ceasing to hold slaves, were actually to withdraw from this co-partnership...it would be the abolition of slavery in America” (850). Rather than speaking in abstract terms about what can be achieved with self-reliance like Emerson, Thoreau pinpoints a massive social issue that he claims to be within the control of the individual. After all, Thoreau calls for the government to view “the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived” (857). Under Thoreau’s line of thinking, the self is unspeakably important in impacting his or her own community, even the seemingly omnipotence of the government. Also commenting on Thoreau’s reverence of the individual is Leigh Kathryn Jenco in her article “Thoreau’s Critique of Democracy.” Even as the article surveys many of Thoreau’s political considerations, the individual remains the central figure. Jenco elaborates:

Thoreau establishes the individual as the only source of moral authority. This reduces all potentially political obligations to moral ones, an identity that informs his perception of political authority as an extension of the moral authority of persons, not rules, laws, institutions, or traditions. (360)

In this way, the man who ceases to hold slaves would do so out of both a moral obligation because he, via his inner self, has the true source of power and authority. Viewing the self as formidable and influential figure also justifies its veneration during the era of romanticism.

The glorification of the common man is another feature of romanticism with the ideal being placed on the simplicity in which the common man lives his life. Rather than being bogged down by characteristics of the upper class like the exaltation of pretentious, highbrow culture, the common man values the practical and the natural. The common man’s departure from high

society is thus through his return to the basics as exemplified by trades like farming.

Romanticism further praises the common man for his almost child-like innocence in which he stands uncorrupted by the civilizing influence of society and does not desire great acclaim.

Washington Irving features such a famed common man in his short story “Rip Van Winkle.” The protagonist, Rip Van Winkle, is “a simple good natured fellow” who is also a “kind neighbor” and “an obedient, henpecked husband” (Irving 472). Even though Rip is unable to “[keep] his farm in order” as might be expected of a common man, he manages to “assist a neighbor in the roughest toil” (Irving 473). His helpfulness to others is one of Rip’s main redeeming qualities and earns him the praise of his community. Rip represents the ideal common man because he lives his life simply and desires nothing more. While certainly not as industrious as Crèvecoeur’s ideal, Rip is still a farmer and spends much time in natural settings. As the story comes to a close, Rip takes his place on the porch with the other old men to serve as a “chronicle of the old times,” an appropriate ending for a man who is content and happy to remain as himself, however insignificant (481).

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s take on the common man in his story “Young Goodman Brown” varies from the almost placid nature of Rip. Instead, Young Goodman Brown, Hawthorne’s protagonist, desires more out of life and intentionally leaves home to go on a journey in the woods. Describing his own family as a “race of honest men and good Christians,” Brown grapples with retaining his faith and goodness when confronted with characters like his wife, Faith, that value his common man characteristics while others, like the devil, wish to change him (Hawthorne 621). Despite his later struggles and corruptibility, Brown represents the common man through his escape to nature, a simple place freed from the bastardizing influence of civilization. Even his name, Goodman, suggests that he is but a humble, honest man. Fitting into

this image is his young, affectionate wife, Faith, who was “aptly named” based on her role in Brown’s life (Hawthorne 619). Richard Adams in “Hawthorne’s Provincial Tales” discusses another part of Brown’s personality that matches with the common man persona. Even after facing evil, Brown “[fails] to grow up” and “develops only a great fear of moral maturity and of the knowledge and responsibility that maturity brings” (Adams 444). This fits in line with the child-like innocence of the common man and manifests itself in Brown’s aversion for dealing with morality. Of course, Brown is ultimately forced to confront the issue of good and evil because of his concern for his wife’s involvement in Satan’s ritual.

Another element of romanticism is the presence of the supernatural, a feature that appears in stark contrast to the reason and logic valued during the Enlightenment. The supernatural represents a broad category for all that cannot be explained away by science. The inclusion of the supernatural in literature is a fitting component of the romanticism era because it plays into the imagination and emotion of the audience. Such fantastical forces transcend the limits of the natural world and shatter the sense of control rationality gives to man. A terrific example of the otherworldly at play in literature is in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher.” The story follows an unnamed narrator visiting his old childhood friend, Roderick Usher. During his stay, the narrator begins to express his increasing unease from being around Roderick by commenting, “I was obliged to resolve all into the mere inexplicable vagaries of madness...It was no wonder his condition terrified—that it infected me. I felt creeping upon me...the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions” (Poe 711). Despite Roderick’s mania and connection to the inexplicable, the narrator continuously tries to maintain a level of rationality throughout the story. Even so, such superstitions evolve into several supernatural events like the timing of real-life sounds to a medieval story the narrator was reading aloud to the

dramatic collapse of the House of Usher into the tarn after both Roderick and his twin sister die. John Gruesser also reflects on the “occult events” in his article “Madmen and Moonbeams: The Narrator in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’” which speaks on competing themes of “rationalism versus supernaturalism and reliability versus unreliability” within the story (80). While discussing the supernatural events, Gruesser asserts, “Roderick and Madeline die together because one cannot exist without the other, and the house falls because it is preternaturally connected to the family” (81). In this way, not only is collapse of the house defying the laws of the natural world, but it also suggests a mystical relationship between the house and the Usher family. The narrator backs Gruesser’s claims by referencing the incestuous Usher family and its tie to the House of Usher as demonstrated through the name that was “an appellation which seemed to include...both the family and the family mansion” (Poe 703). Furthermore, the narrator writes about how Roderick felt “enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted” based on the “influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion” had “obtained over his spirit” (Poe 705). Thus, a definitive tie can be seen between the house and the Ushers, ultimately leading to their mutual demise.

Another example of the supernatural at work is in Washington Irving's story "Rip Van Winkle." Attempting to find some respite from his nagging wife, Rip takes to the woods and finds peace in a ledge overlooking the river. As Rip unwinds in his natural setting, subtle supernatural events begin to occur. Firstly, a far off voice disrupts his solace by shouting out his name, causing his dog to growl and Rip himself to feel "a vague apprehension stealing over him" (Irving 475). Rip soon discovers the voice belongs to a "strange figure" wearing a "cloth jerkin" in the "antique Dutch fashion" (Irving 475). Philip Young argues in his article entitled "The

Mythic Rip Van Winkle" that the men Rip encounter are "'Hendrik Hudson' and his crew," members of the Barbarossa legend (559). Adding to this characterization is the men's unusual appearance, their long beards, their meeting place in the mountains, and the presence of the ravens (Young 560). Beyond being members of a legend, Young takes the supernatural element a step further by identifying the men as gods based on their chosen game of bowling that "makes the sound of thunder," alluding to "Frederick Red Beard...the god of thunder" (560). Regardless of their exact identity, the men are otherworldly figures, particularly given the odd liquor they drink that puts Rip to sleep for twenty years. The mystical people and drinks thus play an important role in developing the story.

Even as seemingly unrelated tenets, the strong sense of self, the idolization of the common man, and the manifestation of magical components all intertwine to contribute to the Romanticism era's departure from Enlightenment thinking. While the "Fall of the House of Usher and Elegiac Romance" by Craig Howes does focus on Edgar Allan Poe's short story, his article does illuminate a truth held by many of the authors aforementioned. Howes observes the "struggle of the individual" is "to remain self-determining in the face of combined forces," be it government, society, supernatural influences, or any multitude of factors decried by Thoreau, Emerson, Irving, Hawthorne, or Poe (77). In this sense, each work is a vital contribution to romanticism literature, representing the awakening and newfound freedom of the individual.

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