



## A GREAT ROMANTIC POET - WALT WHITMAN

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### ABSTRACT

Romanticism was a reaction against convention. This reaction of romanticism, as a political movement, 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. He also felt that internal beauty is present in all natural things and thereby had the possibility to make humanity beautiful. All the Walt Whitman's writings used common themes of nature and solitude and hence had in themselves different styles of Romanticism. 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

### 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 a poet, minister, philosopher, political theorist or artist, yet some basic principles apply to them all. Romanticism was a reaction against convention. From a political point of view, romanticism 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.

Talking philosophically, rationalism is belief that truth could be discerned by logic and reason, with which the reaction of romanticism would contend with. However, the power of an individual is asserted with romanticism. 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.

The beauty of nature is deeply appreciated in romanticism. 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 evoked such strong feelings in human kind and it revealed itself as containing a higher, spiritual truth; therefore appeared to people as a material reality. 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. Feelings such as awe, fear, delight, joy and wonder were supposed by romantics as keys that could unlock the mysteries of the world. The result was a literature that continually explored the inward experiences of the self. Through imagination individuals could experience transcendent or spiritual truths and hence imagination became one of the highest faculties of human perception. Finally, romanticism was idealistic, as it 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. Romanticism tended to be optimistic in its outlook on life and hence was literally idealistic on the other hand.

As asserted by the political and social romantics, human beings could live according to higher principles, such as the beliefs in social 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 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 bestselling 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.

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).

### **Romanticism and Nature**

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. From the romantic viewpoint, a particular way of looking at the relationship among god, man and nature manifested itself in European literature, music, painting and sculpture. English artists like 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 beauty 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.

### **Walt Whitman in American Romanticism**

In literature, the Romantic Movement was dominated by English poets like William

Wordsworth and Coleridge. In 1798 they published *Lyrical Ballads* and in so doing launched the English Romanticism which 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 expresses his belief that nature is what depicts the true soul of a man and has the power to both display it and control it. American Romantic movement comprises largely these aspects of nature, which shows Whitman's relationship to the American Romantics.

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

This illustrates the power that Whitman believed the natural world had over him and the rest of humanity. 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. It also shows the dark and sinister thoughts that he had as a Romantic writer. 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. In Whitman's writings, aspects of solitude are also common. 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 ones true soul.

It can also be felt clearly that some person, presumably Walt Whitman himself, has spent some time in a dark and somber swamp, a place where people do not usually live, the sheer fact that it is a swamp are expressed by the gloomy and dark aspects of the same. He studies nature, plants and animals during his time there, which helped him unravel himself. He emerges to head for the real world with this new sense of self. The knowledge of victory, union, faith, time, and most importantly identity are common not only in Whitman's writings but in all the writing forms of this time. There 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 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!

The body involves a human as well as his soul. The soul is presumed to be good because it is incorporated in the body which is naturally good. 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. The other elements of Romanticism used mostly by Whitman are: the use of nature solitude and darkness. However the aspects of art as a part of humanity and life are also being used by him. Man is trying to create nature and art represents creation of man, and so they are nothing without one another. By separating themselves from everything, someone discovers oneself and thus learn to understand themselves as they return to a normal life, where 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. In American Romanticism a display of darkness comes from Whitman writing about the death of President Abraham Lincoln. Whitman states that the actions of a person are more important than the word or art of a person. The death of Lincoln or that of any man in the action of what he or she believed speaks more than the art created by that person or that of any of the works of literature.

In some respects, the grand deaths of the race and/or the dramatic deaths of the nationality are its most important inheritance value beyond its literature and art (as here the hero is beyond his finest portrait, and the battle itself beyond its choicest song or epic.) As somber this is following the somber writing style of much of 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. Walt Whitman was not only an incredible writer and poet, but he was also one of the most influential writers of the time. He changed the views of the American people and also changed the many ways of people looking at life. Through his works, he gave many what they were looking for by and also helped to create America's first writing style by creation of a new style of poetry. All his writings used common themes of nature and solitude but were all in themselves represent different styles of romanticism. Whitman's goal in his writing was to get the people of the world to change in their belief. His political essays as well as his poetry and prose played a major role in aiming at this change. The revolution which he began changed the world of poetry forever..

Walt 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. Whitman too, we can see addressing private experiences with and feelings about death, trauma, depression and relationships in this type of poetry, often in an autobiographical manner. In Walt Whitman's poetry, 'Self' enjoys a unique status and it constitutes the central motivating force. Walt Whitman can be greeted as a powerful exponent of the human self. In America Walt Whitman's poetry came at a time when imported European literature and poetry was becoming inadequate and irrelevant to the American experience.

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. 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. He wrote a "poetics of hype" a poetry that tries to sell its value to an audience it already claims to represent. 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. He asks his readers to help him in creating a collective American self, thereby giving them part ownership.

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 one's 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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