

Romanticism



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Romanticism PART ONE Romanticism has many complex aspects, but one of its most impressive elements is how it uses nature as a source of inspiration. The sublimity of the natural world inspires the imagination of artists to soar high above ordinary daily goings-on. By stepping outside of human life, a sort of poetic communion can take place between the artist or poet and the natural world. The poet can then bring this experience back to his reader. I will briefly look at how both Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson accomplish this effect.

Whitman's poem "Song of Myself" is quite remarkable for the way in which the speaker steps out of himself and seems to go careening around the world. He becomes more of a life force than a person and can see and experience almost anything. These are some of the most powerful lines:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey work of the stars,
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg
of the wren,

And the tree-toad is a chef-doeuvre for the highest,

And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,

And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery,

And the cow crunching with depressd head surpasses any statue,

And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.

Here Whitman shows that even the smallest things around us—a grain of sand, a pismire, a cow—contain an enormous history and an enormous power. A leaf of grass can stand in for all of creation. A tree-toad is a masterpiece. A mouse is capable of inspiring the awe of an entire religion.

Most significantly, he writes that "the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery." This is a celebration of all that has gone into creating

the world and how deeply it can inspire us—like the best romantic poetry.

Emily Dickinson can also be seen to affirm some of these same themes in the poem LXVI, about a bee:

Contending with the grass,
Near kinsman to herself,
For privilege of sod and sun,
Sweet litigants for life.

.....

Her public is the noon,
Her providence the sun,
Her progress by the bee proclaimed
In sovereign, swerveless tune.

Once again nature is an enormous canvas which is all interlinked and inspires great beauty. The bee is “kinsman” to the grass, and all the things of the world are “sweet litigants for life.” And on top of these sentiments, the bee is “sovereign,” not unlike the other small creatures of great inspirational power in Whitman’s poem.

PART TWO

Two important elements of romanticism are the individual versus society and a reliance on human emotion over cold rationality. Both of these principles can be seen in effect in Rousseau’s *Confessions* and in Wordsworth’s poem “Tintern Abbey.”

Rousseau’s long autobiography *Confessions* constantly points out how different and apart he is from other people. “I am not made like any of those I have seen; I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence. If I am not better, at least I am different.” This is a central

theme of romanticism. The person who lives truly, understanding himself and nature, in tune with his emotions, is a person apart. The romantic is often portrayed as alone and sensitive—either ostracized by others because of his uniqueness or choosing like a hermit to be free of the conformist and corrupting world of society. This book also celebrates the power and centrality to life of emotion. He writes that, “ If I had ever, a single time in my life, tasted all the delights of love in their fullness, I do not believe that my frail existence could have endured it; I should have died on the spot.” This too is a vital aspect of romanticism.

In William Wordsworth’s poem “ Tintern Abbey” these elements are echoed. The Hermit is a romantic figure who has chosen to leave society so as to live a more authentic life in tune with nature away from “ the dreary intercourse of daily life.” The natural beauty of the place fills the poet with tranquility and a sense of love and pleasure. This communion with nature allows him to reflect peacefully on his own life and to embrace his emotional reaction. He thinks that even if life from this point on goes awry, the memory of this abbey’s beauty will restore him:

If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,
Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,
And these my exhortations!

This poem is emblematic of many of romanticism’s themes.