

Features of romanticism in ivanhoe essay sample



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Romanticism, a movement that swept across late 18th century Europe, rapidly gained popularity with many British authors, transforming approaches to literature in the process. The tenets the movement embraced: medievalism, nationalism, the individual, folklore, nature, Gothic romance, exoticism, emotion, and religion, provided a clear departure from the earlier movements of the Enlightenment and Classicism, freeing authors for other directions.

During this time the Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott read James McPherson's *Ossian* cycle of poems. Greatly influenced by the romantic elements in the work, he also began writing in that style; thus becoming one of the most famous practitioners of the historical novel; and reflecting Romanticism's yearning for simpler periods not encumbered with the burden of Classicism.

One of his best known novels, *Ivanhoe*, incorporates many of the themes embraced by the Romantics. A romance set in 12th century England, medievalism permeates the structure of *Ivanhoe*: portraying the Crusades, knights, jousting tournaments and the realm of chivalry and its resulting attitudes; Rebecca tells Ivanhoe that she despises such a concept, while he, in turn, defends it. Honor and valor are important attributes and are frequently invoked to right injustices; including the struggle to free Rebecca from her captors when she is wrongly condemned, and the effort to restore Richard to the throne.

Nationalism and politics also play large roles in the novel. The situation is abrasive and tensions ignite between the Saxons and the Normans. As a disinherited Saxon, Ivanhoe is loyal to a Norman king, Richard the

Lionhearted. Additionally, he is to marry the Saxon Rowena. He provides a model for this divided populace, showing through his actions what Romantics such as Herder believed: that nationality is defined by geography.

Through his knightly role Ivanhoe does not bow to the prevailing mode of thought, but thinks for himself. He is a true hero who is unafraid to do what he believes is right; hence his loyalty to the Norman king Richard, an unpopular position which demonstrates his strength in acting as an individual.

Folklore and nature also figure into the story with Locksley's, or Robin Hood's, efforts to free the Saxons who have been kidnapped from Torquilstone. Later they save the king himself. Robin Hood and his merry men are men of nature who dwell in the forest; their story of robbing from the rich to give to the poor centuries old. Yet this legend becomes an even greater part of British folklore as Scott recounts their exploits.

Exoticism surfaces in the figures of Rebecca and her father Isaac, both Jews who are treated as "other" throughout the tale; disdained, spurned, not allowed to sit with more prominent citizens. Imprisoned unjustly for sorcery, the condemned Rebecca's life recalls gothic elements; distraught and in peril until Ivanhoe saves her. Unrequited in her love for him, she decides to leave for Granada, a land that was certainly exotic during that era. The Holy Land, the object of the Crusaders' quest, also invokes exoticism.

Passion and extreme emotion are embodied in the person of Bois Guilbert, a man who hates Ivanhoe, yet pines for Rebecca, so fervently is he in love

with her. He faces a quandary: if he wins the combat with Ivanhoe, Rebecca dies; yet it remains his duty to

fight. Guilbert falls down dead during the combat, expiring from his own feuding emotions of hate/love and life/death; a valid testament to the Romantic belief regarding the power of emotion.

Religion and religious imagery are shown throughout the novel: the Crusades, Ivanhoe disguised as a Palmer, the Knights Templar, and Christianity versus Judaism. The supposed adherents of the faith are not always depicted in the most favorable light, but religion nevertheless composes an important part of the story since Romanticism freed writers to use biblical allusions without much reverence.

The ending of *Ivanhoe*, in which Ivanhoe loses the fight but triumphs when the villain dies, does not follow the framework of most medieval tales and the Romantic era made this unusual scenario possible. In fact, *Ivanhoe* is more a result of the Romantic period during which it was written (1819) than the Medieval period during which it was set (1194) because it epitomizes the essential elements of Romanticism.

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