

An Analysis of the Characteristics of American Romanticism---Take Irving and Emerson as Examples

Jing Guo

School of Foreign Studies, Liaoning University Shenyang, Liaoning Province 110136

Abstract: Combined with the general appreciation of the romantic works, this paper intends to illustrate them in detail to excavate its connotation and the deep reference significance for us today.

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Known as the renaissance of American literature, American romanticism has played a significant role in influencing people's world outlook and life value. For a long period, it's regarded as the invaluable heritage of that time. I am more inclined to combine the literary trend with the current society, which undoubtedly provides us with the guidance and instructions to cope with the problems today and regulate our psychological state. In general, there are several characteristics of romanticism as follows. Firstly, romanticism rebelled against the objectivity of rationalism, which is the fundamental distinction from realism. Secondly, romantic writers advocate the uniqueness and significance of individuals. Different from collectivism, individualism doesn't always remain negative because it offers a completely angel to identify themselves. Moreover, it's advocated that humans are born with the goodness, which should be preserved by receiving the right education. Thirdly, romanticism stressed man should maintain a friendly relationship with nature and strike a balance between economic development and environmental protection, which serve as lessons for the current economic development model. Fourthly, they affirmed the spiritual life, which encourages individuals to focus on spiritual perfection and moral cultivation. Finally, romantic writers prefer to describe the exotic and alien to revive their enthusiasm towards renaissance. Next, I will analyze the works of several major romantic writers by concluding the literary characteristics of romanticism.

1. The legend of Sleepy Hollow by Washington Irving

The legend of Sleepy Hollow, as one of Irving's representative works, is filled with mystery and legend. I was deeply impressed by the extraordinary description and underlying theme the author conveyed. Whether from its description of peculiarly quiet nature in the wilderness, or its profound theme, we can recognize the American romantic characteristics.

1.1 Idyllic environment description

What attracts me most is the idyllic description of the scenery at the beginning of the passage. Irving tends to combine the narration with the subtle description of the specific environment so that the readers can form an emotional link to what is going on, for one thing, such setting can foreshadow the development and the story while setting up the suspense and arousing readers' interest. For another, it's beneficial to highlight the psychological activities of the characters, Irving is adept at showing one's personality and psychological development by presenting a vivid and live environment. Therefore, it's not difficult to comprehend the central idea. At the beginning of *The legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Irving presents us with such a picture.

I recollect that, when a stripling, my first exploit in squirrel-shooting was in a grove of tall walnut-trees that shades one side of the valley. I had wandered into it at noon-time, when all nature is peculiarly quiet, and was startled by the roar of my own gun, as it broke the Sabbath stillness around, and was prolonged and reverberated by the angry echoes(Washington Irving, *The legend of Sleepy Hollow*, 1).

It's the vivid description of the peaceful village that form a sharp contrast against the mystery and uniqueness compared with the roaring world. Actually, this reveals Irving's doubt for the development and independence brought about by the industrial revolution. For one thing, this shows Irving's desire to return the nature and immerse himself to the ocean of peace. This is an evidence of his intense passion for the nature It is linked with his strong desire to fulfill their spiritual freedom as it's his firm belief that human and nature is closely interconnected and humans should maintain a harmonious relationship with nature, by which mankind can maintain their sobriety among the reckless and random development in the head-spinning world.

1.2 Profound theme

The Sleepy Hollow ultimately returned to tranquility. It also shows Irving's desire to escape from the real world. He is eager to stop the growth of the outer world from breaking the tranquility of sleepy hollow. Crane is a living example of the outside world who invaded the sleepy hollow, but he doesn't belong to this small village so he can only adapt himself to the society by returning to the real world. In the end, Crane became a politician, campaigned for office, wrote newspaper articles and finally became a judge on the

ten-pound court. Therefore, it's easy to see Irving's subtle satire on the changing and head-spinning American society.

Actually, Irving's attitude towards the social development of his era was contradictory. He did not fail to realize the progress of the society, but he intuitively thought the individual spirit wasn't able to develop freely in essence. In fact, the village in this novel is a symbol of America at that time and he was eager to point out the limitations and drawbacks of the society at that time. Judging from it, Irving is a relatively conservative person, so the emotion revealed in the novel is more about his yearning for the harmonious living state of nature and uncomfortable feelings towards the so-called development.

2. Nature by Emerson

Emerson takes transcendentalism as the core through his analysis thinking and research. First of all, transcendentalism emphasizes the significance of spirit rather than material. Secondly, they emphasize the importance of the individual. While attaching great importance to the moral perfection by immersing themselves into the nature, they look down upon the endless and greedy plunder of natural resources, which will mislead people into the wrong way. Thirdly, the transcendentalists are convinced that there is a close connection between nature and god because god integrates himself in the nature. Therefore, we can have soul communications with god by being close to nature.

2.1 The Unity of Man and Nature

In *Nature*, Emerson believes there are two indispensable elements in the universe. One is the mankind, which has been creating the civilization and establishing various institutions and regulations to found a harmonious society. The other is nature, which has been responsible for storing life and regulating the overall balance. For a long period, people are engaged in pursuing their material success regardless of sacrificing the vital ecosystem, thus damaging the fragile balance. Transcendentalism, to some extent, points out the shared benefits between us and nature, which has a certain progressive significance. Once the nature is trapped in a desperate situation, humans will be on the verge of breakdown and become the victim of their own evil deeds.

In his view, influenced by various factors, modern people lack a full and objective outlook at themselves in the world, thus lacking enough understanding of this world. In this roaring world, they are still confused and perplexed. Due to lack of communication with nature, many people have been intoxicated by the kaleidoscopic world, trapped in selfishness and egoism. Consequently, the majority of people are lacking in consideration for others including nature. What's worse, they are ignorant of the severe consequences of plundering the resources and habitation because greed and vice has overwhelmed them. Based on this, Emerson advocates we should be close to nature and understand it, breaking the limitations of vision and comprehending the real wisdom. It is the truth of nature that every creature is related to each other, and that they abide by the same rules. We have to admit the truth that we are only the participants in diversifying the whole ecological system. Therefore, by no means should we disrupting the workings of nature because God treats everything equal and we don't have the right to endanger the nature for our selfish benefit.

2.2 Material and spirit

Nature informs us of the idea that spirit is more important than matter and that only the development of spiritual world can guarantee satisfaction and happiness. Emerson believed that nature serves as a bridge between the universal spirit and man, allowing the two to communicate harmoniously. Moreover, it's Emerson's firm belief that retiring from the society and settling down to solitude is essential to get the hang of the truth. Therefore, he argues that loneliness doesn't accompany him while he is occupied in spiritual cultivation. Admittedly, desolateness does exist sometimes. At that time, communicating with the nature is the best way to ease the solitude. For example, he advocates people should look at the stars to admire the brilliance of truth and God. The so-called nature is a tiny microcosm of the universe world, which reflects people's new understanding of the spiritual world. In modern society, the principle that money is almighty is overwhelming, which underestimates the irreplaceability of spirit. Even though we are capable of gaining the wealth and fame by conforming to the principle, we will be desolate spiritually. Trapped in hustle and bustle, we fail to maintain sobriety and remain true to the original aspiration. Therefore, only by having a clear identity can we keep calm and tranquil, thus we are able to truly achieve our spiritual goal.

3. Individualism

Emerson felt that people needed to make sense of the natural world based on their own minds. In his opinion, the existing information and experience will greatly limit people's thinking while broadening their horizon. With the explosion of information and overwhelming power of the mass media, it has become increasingly difficult for people to distinguish the right from the wrong as we are trapped in the complicated nets of capital and the instinct of parroting, which means people tend to accept what the majority of people advocate regardless of the correctness. Nowadays, the exchange and collision of ideas are becoming increasingly intense, making it more difficult for people to stick to their own thinking. Transcendentalism, proposed by Emerson, believes in the power of independent thinking and advocates the necessity of individualistic value, which serves as an enlightenment for us today to better show the individualistic elegant demeanour.

To sum up, stressing individualism, advocating the harmony between humans and nature and spirit are the main literary features of romanticism. Even though American romanticism has been regarded as the ideology put forward by many transcendentalists, its connotation, in my opinion, serves as invaluable experience that guides us to cope with the problems we encounter.

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