
ROMANTICISM: THE LITERATURE OF NATURALISM AND REALISM

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ABSTRACT: The Romantic era, spanning the late 18th to the mid-19th century, is often characterized by its emphasis on emotion, individualism, and the sublime beauty of nature. However, a deeper exploration reveals that Romanticism also laid the groundwork for the subsequent literary movements of naturalism and realism. This article delves into how Romanticism, while distinct in its ideals and stylistic approaches, paved the way for the more grounded and empirically focused genres of naturalism and realism. By examining key works and authors, we aim to uncover the intrinsic connections and evolutionary trajectory from Romanticism to these later movements.

KEYWORDS: Romanticism, Naturalism, Realism, Literature, Emotion, Imagination, Nature, Sublime.

INTRODUCTION

Romanticism emerged as a reaction against the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and the Industrial Revolution's mechanistic view of the world. It celebrated the individual's experience, the power of imagination, and the beauty of untamed nature. Notably, Romanticism also fostered a profound appreciation for the complexities of the human condition and the natural world, setting the stage for the more detailed and observational approaches of naturalism and realism. This article explores how Romanticism's thematic and philosophical underpinnings contributed to the development of naturalism and realism.

Romantic literature is marked by several defining characteristics:

1. Emphasis on Emotion and Imagination: Romantic writers prioritized personal emotion and imagination over rationalism. Works by poets like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge epitomize this focus on individual feeling and the power of the creative mind.
2. Nature and the Sublime: Nature, in its raw and sublime form, was a central theme. Romantic writers saw nature as a source of inspiration and spiritual renewal, often contrasting its beauty with the corruption of industrial society.
3. Individualism and the Heroic: Romanticism celebrated the individual, often featuring protagonists who were introspective, solitary, and in conflict with societal norms.
4. The Supernatural and the Gothic: Elements of the supernatural and the mysterious were prevalent, reflecting a fascination with the unknown and the metaphysical.

Naturalism and realism, while distinct, share common features that differentiate them from Romanticism:

1. Naturalism: A literary movement that emerged in the late 19th century, naturalism focuses on the influence of environment, heredity, and social conditions on human behavior. It often portrays life with a detached, scientific accuracy.
2. Realism: Emerging in the mid-19th century, realism seeks to depict everyday life and society with fidelity and truthfulness. It focuses on ordinary characters and events, avoiding the idealization and romanticization typical of earlier literature.

Romanticism's deep engagement with nature and the human psyche created a fertile ground for the more empirical and observational approaches of naturalism and realism:

Detail and Description: Romantic literature's rich descriptions of nature and emotion can be seen as a precursor to the detailed observations of realist and naturalist writers. For example, Wordsworth's vivid landscapes prefigure the meticulous settings of realist novels.

Human Complexity: The Romantic focus on individual experience and psychological depth influenced realist writers like Gustave Flaubert and Henry James, who sought to portray characters with nuanced inner lives.

Social Commentary: While Romanticism often critiqued industrial society indirectly through idealized nature, realism and naturalism addressed social issues more directly, depicting the harsh realities of urban life and the struggles of the lower classes. Charles Dickens, for example, transitioned from Romantic influences to a more realist portrayal of Victorian England's social problems.

Key Works and Authors

Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein": Shelley's novel combines Romantic elements with a proto-naturalist approach, exploring the consequences of scientific hubris and the darker aspects of human nature.

Emile Zola's "Germinal": As a naturalist, Zola's detailed depiction of the harsh conditions in a coal mining community reflects the Romantic concern for the individual's suffering within an oppressive society.

Gustave Flaubert's "Madame Bovary": Flaubert's realist masterpiece examines the mundane realities and internal struggles of its protagonist, building on the Romantic exploration of personal dissatisfaction and societal constraints.

CONCLUSION

While Romanticism, naturalism, and realism are distinct literary movements, they are interconnected through their shared concern with human experience and the natural world. Romanticism's emphasis on emotion, nature, and individualism provided a foundation for the more detailed and empirical approaches of naturalism and realism. By understanding these connections, we can appreciate the evolutionary trajectory of literature and the enduring influence of Romantic ideals on subsequent literary developments.

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