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American Literature I

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A New Genre Emerges: The Creation and Impact of Dark Romanticism

Readers around the world pick up on the nuances of literature. We see the differences between genres, sometimes subtle and sometimes not so subtle. We can see how authors often insert their own experiences, beliefs, and personalities into their works. This makes each book unique and pleasurable while remaining similar to thousands of others. Many who study American literature know that different styles and literary movements influence authors. It is easy to see the impact of Puritan thinking in the seventeenth century or of Transcendentalism in the first few decades of the nineteenth century. Authors usually do not combine genres. However, three authors—Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville—each combine two styles, Romanticism and the Gothic, that at first glance appear radically opposite.

Romanticism gained momentum in America in the first half of 19th century, branching off from general Transcendentalist ideas such as individualism, connection with Nature, and the search for truth. Romantics aimed to explore beauty in its various forms, recognizing how “everything is alive, related, and meaningful” (*The Romantic Movement* 3). Like the Transcendentalists looked for truth in everything, Romantics looked for connections to other forms of life. The movement placed great value on nature, making man’s association with nature an important aspect. Idealism also distinguished it, along with a desire to explain “the *why* rather than the *how* of reality” (Eigner 3). Again demonstrating the quest for connections, followers of Romanticism valued knowing the reason for an action rather than the actual steps of carrying it

out. Authors attempt to make the real and common just as vivid as the foreign and unknown. It involves everything fresh, hopeful, and beautiful.

Gothic literature has its beginnings in Romanticism, which had grown so large that it started producing subgenres. Some of these included metaphysical, naturalist, and realist, with gothic developing into the largest and most well-known subgenre. It presents “the darker side of awareness... guilt, fear and madness... the uncomfortable sense of being in a fantasy world which is about to reveal secrets of the human personality” (Howells 5). Plots involved illness, secrecy, and terror. Readers and characters alike discovered horror in everyday occurrences, in the smallest details. In this type of novel, “the quiet hearthside was often established as a positive pole against the diabolic attractions of the superhuman quest” (Eigner 121). It glorifies the familiar even as it transports readers to a terrifying new world where evil is much more apparent. Authors almost always set these novels in distant places or times. Distancing the reader is deliberate and important because “the viewer could not see the details so well” (Eigner 142). This creates a sense of comfort as the reader returns to real life from this type of alternate reality. It is not so different from pure Romanticism, however. Both focus on nature, subtle connections, emotion, and characters’ motivations.

Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne are all Romantic authors as well as Gothic authors. These three authors have elements of each movement in their writings. They include a great number of Romantic tenets-- various types and instances of beauty, attempts at explaining human nature, and connections between characters and ideas that surprise the reader while offering insight into the way people think. However, all three men “doubted the cheerful American doctrine of inevitable progress” (*The Romantic Movement* 12). They viewed the world darkly. Although some stories do contain elements of hope, in general their works tend to be pessimistic, and deal

particularly with death. Morality, the question of evil, and the human psyche all play a role in the canon of all three men- issues that both the Romantics and the Gothics explore. What sets Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne apart is how they are the first to combine these genres in eloquent and powerful ways. In doing so, they created an entirely new genre which I will call Dark Romanticism.

Poe is one of the first to combine Romanticism and the Gothic in a new way. Readers do not usually group Poe, long considered a master of horror fiction, into the Romantic genre. However, Poe's fiction contains several elements of Romanticism. Rather than longing for the beauty of nature, he longs for beauty of the spirit. The link between beauty and death fascinated him, and this "is Poe's dominant theme" (*The Romantic Movement* 12). Several poems and short stories contain this idea, such as "Annabel Lee", "Eleonora", and "The Oval Portrait". He "distinguished sharply between truth and art" but is still "an idealist and a Romantic" (*The Romantic Movement* 10). He simply writes using a different type of Romanticism, one that combines the well-known aspects of traditional Romanticism with the darker themes of Gothic fiction. He had

That expansive idealism and that sense of inexhaustible potentiality and interest in life which are the marks of the Romantic. But in him appears another strain of Romanticism, a strain that is almost inevitably involved in its exaltations- that is, the conflict between the imagined perfect and the limitations and frustrations of actual, everyday existence.
(*The Romantic Movement* 10)

His conflicting ideas in his personal life appear in his writing as he attempts to clarify his thoughts. The frustrations that he experienced himself make an appearance in most of his short

stories and poems. This meets the criteria of Dark Romanticism. He focuses on connections as the Romantics do, and on the darkness of life as the Gothics do.

Of course, Poe's stories and poems quite obviously contain Gothic elements as well. His writing has "a dark impulse beyond understanding which wreaks havoc, operating in complete contradiction to the normative assumption of the early United States policy, that individuals will always seek to act in their own best interests" (Lloyd-Smit, 114-15). In other words, he rejects the idea that humans are basically good and does not believe people would help their fellow men. This contrasts the idealism of the Romantics.

Poe's short story "The Oval Portrait" exemplifies the combination of the Romantic and the Gothic, as well as Poe's fondness for the link between beauty and death. Even the description of the house in which the story takes place combines the two genres- "one of those piles of commingled gloom and grandeur" ("The Oval Portrait"). It is also set in Italy, a traditional setting for Gothic writers, a mysterious country full of passion, intrigue, and scandal. It is "a den of secrets" rather than a vacation spot as it is in the modern world ("A Dark and Stormy Night"). Poe's choice in setting "The Oval Portrait" there combines this element of the Gothic with the Romantic notion of the beauty of nature. Furthermore, the painting around which this story centers also contains elements of Dark Romanticism. There are Gothic aspects- illness, loneliness, suggestion of madness, and lingering death- as well as Romantic aspects like love that transcends death. The woman's beauty passes into the portrait at her death. The story's narrator does not reveal whether this is the case, but Poe deliberately blurs the lines between life and death by creating an ambiguous ending.

Like Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne also combines Romanticism with the Gothic. In his personal life, he had been a Transcendentalist as a younger man. Transcendentalism is closely

related to Romanticism, with a few differences mostly regarding beliefs about God and the nature of man. Hawthorne believed “evil existed and was inherent in human nature”, while the Transcendentalists and even many Romantics believed man was inherently good (*The Romantic Movement* 13). This sets him apart from his transcendental neighbors. He rejects their ideas about the necessity of church and their lack of dependence on emotion. Despite this, his stories contain instances of beauty and nature- he just gives these elements a darker twist. His stories are more true to life than Poe’s, but can be just as frightening for this very reason.

Hawthorne’s works contain a great amount of satire and dark elements. He is “an outwardly conventional author who smuggles into his stories dark, unpopular truths” (Gilmore 59). Even the apparently light, humorous story “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” satirizes the way society works and contains elements of the Gothic. One of the most memorable scenes takes place in an old, decaying church. Unearthly noises surround narrator Robin, who does not know whether he is dreaming or not. The entire story revolves around the mystery of his kinsman. Many of Hawthorne’s other short stories deal with Gothic themes and ideas such as death, physical and spiritual sickness, suspense, and isolation. Self-isolation is in fact a dominant theme of Hawthorne’s, expressed in works such as “Young Goodman Brown”, “The Minister’s Black Veil”, and “Rappaccini’s Daughter”. Ultimately, “Hawthorne’s use of light and darkness is central to his art and thought” (*Hawthorne’s Imagery* viii). He combines them, as Poe did, and in doing so creates a blend of two genres.

His short story “Rappaccini’s Daughter” demonstrates this most vividly. The story contains the Romantic elements of the beauty of nature and the optimism of young lovers. The window of the main character, Giovanni, overlooks a gorgeous garden. Beatrice possesses remarkable beauty, and she and Giovanni fall in love at first sight. However, there are heavy

Gothic themes as well that take the story down a different path than the expected outcome of a Romantic story. For example, “the profuse plants seem sinister as well as beautiful” (Gilmore 63). They are all unknown species, large and mysterious. Also, Beatrice is completely isolated from the outside world, furthering the mystery. The story continues exploring the unknown in how Giovanni spends a great amount of time with Beatrice but still feels isolated from her, mostly because they are never physical. This mystery is not explained until it is too late. Evil, in Hawthorne’s eyes, “was the mark of human and mortal existence, and to ignore it was to be conquered by it” (*The Romantic Movement* 13). This story clearly demonstrates this belief. Giovanni briefly connects with Beatrice, as both were poisonous, but his hopes are destroyed with her death. She can only escape the evil around her by dying.

The last of the original Dark Romantics is Herman Melville. Like Hawthorne, Melville started out more on the Romantic side. Well-known in his time, he wrote several novels on his adventures sailing around the world. He focused his stories more on the sea, celebrating its majesty. His first publications became best-sellers, popular in America as well as Britain. The overwhelming success of these novels caused him to have high hopes for the future.

However, the failure of his novels Moby Dick and Pierre caused him to turn to darker themes. Melville “fully shared in the American dream of greatness, but it turned into a nightmare for him” (*The Romantic Movement* 14). Embittered by the public’s rejection of his novels, and by his own financial instability, he began adding darker aspects to his writing, culminating in his becoming known as a Gothic writer for it. As he grew bleaker, “he became a prophet of America’s danger and possible disaster from pride and thoughtless optimism” (*The Romantic Movement* 15). In other words, he was no longer enamored of the American public who used to love him. Though less blatant than Poe, or even Hawthorne, Melville’s stories have deeper

meanings alongside Gothic characteristics like suspense and unknowability. They exemplify how “along with the utopian inspiration came profoundly pessimistic insight into the dangers of trusting a society to the undisciplined rule of the majority, fear of faction in democratic government, the rule of the mob an the danger of a collapse of the whole grand experiment” (Lloyd-Smith 110-111). He felt like a target. The stress of angry critics caused him to see the world as filled with angry, corrupt people whom he could not trust.

Melville’s fear of fools running the country is translated into his writing, one instance occurring in “Benito Cereno”. The story is “formally Gothic in its indeterminacy, its epistemological quest for the truth, and the constant windings, false clues, and reversals” (Lloyd-Smith 118). The Gothic is less stereotypical- no decrepit mansions, ghostly figures, or mad family members. His stories do deal with mystery, psychology, and death, but he humanizes it. For example, this particular story takes place on a mysterious ship run by a mysterious crew. This makes Melville’s stories as suspenseful and frightening as the horror stories of Poe; his stories reveal the injustice of society, suddenness of death, and endless capabilities of the human mind in a very subtle way.

The best example of the Romantic and the Gothic in Melville’s writing occurs in “Bartleby, the Scrivener”. This short story, appearing at first glance as a humorous mystery, combines the lightness and optimism that characterizes Romanticism with darker themes of the Gothic. Readers laugh at the narrator’s frustrations with Bartleby as he tries to befriend a man who rejects every attempt at friendliness. People expect Bartleby to give in and accept the offer of friendship, and ultimately improve his life. This is the unfailing idealism of the Romantics. However, Melville twists the events so that the ending looks more Gothic- the dirty prison, the conflicting emotions as the story progresses, the sudden death of Bartleby. Everything about the

story involves mystery, particularly Bartleby, who “remains a mystery” from start to finish (Gilmore 138). Melville reveals nothing about Bartleby, not even his full name. Instead of engaging with other characters, he always “silently retire[s] into his hermitage” (Melville 1501). Here, “hermitage” means his tiny corner of the office, but it can just as easily be seen as his metaphorical shell around his person. As Melville mixes these aspects with Romanticism, as well as his own writing style and experiences, a new type of creation emerges, similar to Poe and Hawthorne and yet unique in its subtlety and profound observations.

Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville each left an impact on American literature. They mixed Romanticism and the Gothic, each popular literary movements in their day, and created the brand-new genre of Dark Romanticism in doing so. Mixing hope and beauty with pessimism and death, along with styles and themes unique to each man, their stories take two different styles and combine them in a profound and important way. Though each story differs, one thing continues to remain the same: these authors played an extremely significant role in the world of literature with the creation of Dark Romanticism.

So many modern books take the liberty of combining genres. We have fantasy and mystery, horror and romance, and so on. Though most books do not fall under the category of Dark Romantic, the influence of its creation is still felt. Had it not been created, modern authors may not have felt as free to explore new genres. The world of literature would be such a dull place.

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