

The Romantic Aspects of Modernism and Imagism

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American literature can be categorized in a multitude of ways. There are many ways literature can be grouped, and they all require different criteria. Often, literature is categorized by time or artistic periods. The time periods often heavily rely on dates when pieces were written, whereas artistic periods rely on different elements or characteristics of the literature for classification. Despite the definitiveness that dates can provide, many of these artistic time periods can reflect one another. Some of the elements from specific time periods are also present in later ones. This means that certain literary works could be classified by these elements and placed in an artistic time period that does not match the numerical one. The artistic period of Romanticism has specific elements that are also found in many other periods. Walt Whitman's poetry exemplifies different elements of Romanticism. The elements of Romanticism that are present within his works can also be seen in poetry from later artistic movements. Some pieces that are categorized as Modernist or Imagist pieces also contain these Romantic ideals. Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" expresses elements of Romanticism that can be seen in Robert Frost's "Desert Places" as well as Carl Sandburg's "Grass."

The Romantic period lasted from about 1820 until around 1865. This period falls between the Colonial period and the period of Realism. According to the "Characteristics of American Romanticism" handout (refer to Appendix A), Romantic works include elements of valuing feelings and intuition over reason; placing faith in the inner experience and power of imagination; shunning the artificiality of civilization and seeking unspoiled nature; preferring rebellion to conventionality; experimenting with poetic form; valuing the individual freedom and worth of the individual; believing that Nature's beauty leads to spiritual and moral development; finding inspiration in folklore; and supporting the development and reading of the novel as a new genre. Walt Whitman is a famous American Romantic author: "Whitman was the father of all the new schools of verse in early twentieth-century America... he was one of the most powerful influences during this time of revolt, that in a very real sense he became its symbol" (Brown 1). His works are usually centered around themes involving nature and they often have an individualized, or first-person, point of view. The selection "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" exemplifies three defining qualities of Romantic literature: emotionality, individuality, and nature.

This selection by Walt Whitman places an emphasis on emotions and feelings. While the piece manages to evoke a variety of emotions from its audience, the selection also deliberately discusses them:

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,
And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,
I saw the debris and debris of al the slain soldiers of the war,
But I saw they were not as I thought,
They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not,



The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd,
And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer'd,
And the armies that remain'd suffer'd. (Whitman, l. 177-84)

The lines evoke emotions from the audience while also directly discussing them. The vivid descriptions of the battlefields provide strong imagery of corpses that evoke dark emotions from the audience. Whitman then discusses the feelings of those who survived the death of the individuals. This focus on the survivors evokes the emotions of pain and suffering that come with losing a loved one. There is an evident focus on emotion throughout the different sections of the piece. Often, this emotionality is tied to the Romantic element that focuses on the individual.

Whitman's selection has an apparent focus on the individual. The first-person point of view is used throughout the entirety of the selection. This focus on the individual and the individual's perspective is a primary characteristic of the Romantic time period: "As the night advanced, and I saw on the rim of the west how full you were of woe, / As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze in the cool transparent night, / As I watch'd where you pass'd and was lost in the netherward black of the night" (Whitman l. 61-3). Placing an emphasis on the individual is an integral part of the Romantic period. Whitman's selections often focus on the individual's perspective further enhancing the Romantic elements of his works. By using the individual as a focus, Romantic works can easily incorporate other elements. The focus on the individual makes it easier to incorporate a focus on emotion as well. This also allows for works to use vivid descriptions and imagery to depict the Romantic focus on nature.

The focus on nature in Whitman's piece is evident from the title alone. He mentions lilacs blooming in the title of the selection and the naturalistic elements of the piece are carried throughout. Each of the sections in the literary work mentions an aspect of nature at some point: "Sing on, sing on you gray-brown bird, / Sing from the swamps, the recesses, pour your chant from the bushes, / Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines" (Whitman l. 99-101). The focus on nature continues to be apparent and direct throughout the entirety of the selection. Some of the sections are more descriptive than others, but the presence and importance of nature is still prevalent in each. Due to the focus Whitman places on emotions, the individual, and nature, his works can be classified as Romantic pieces. These elements displayed in his work are also present in later works that are not categorized as Romantic pieces.

The period of Modernism lasted from about 1910 until roughly 1945. This period began after the Realism period. According to the "Characteristics of American Modernism" handout (refer to Appendix B), literature in this period has elements of tones of loss and disillusionment; nihilism; a loss of faith in political, social, and religious structures; no connection with history or institutions; a belief that the world is created in the act of perceiving it; no absolute truth; a celebration of inner strength; life being unordered; and a concern with the subconscious. Robert Frost was a Modernist writer and "one important result of this in the context of modernism may well be a new understanding of modernism itself, of the different ways in which it was possible to be a modern poet" (Kern 1). Many of his poems include these elements of Modernism;

however, they also contain elements of Romanticism. While Frost was writing in the time period that corresponds with Modernism, his poem “Desert Places” reflects the three main elements of Romanticism that Whitman focuses on in his selection.

Frost’s poem “Desert Places” puts an emphasis on emotions. While the focus on emotion is not direct like in Whitman’s work, it is still present. The emotions that Frost places a focus on are feelings of loss or loneliness: “And lonely as it is that loneliness / Will be more lonely ere it will be less - / A blanker whiteness of benighted snow / With no expression, nothing to express” (Frost l. 9-12). Frost explores the emotions of loneliness, loss, and despair in this selection. All the emotions are not directly stated in the text, but they can be interpreted from the wording of the lines. These emotions play a major role within the poem because they reflect thematic elements of the work. The emphasis that Frost places on emotion reflects the Romantic period while the darker nature of the emotions reflect the period of Modernism. The focus Frost places on emotion is paired with a focus on the individual as well.

Frost, like Whitman, also utilizes the first-person point of view. This emphasizes the importance of the individual in the work. The period of Modernism has a focus on the championship of the individual but not the individual alone. A focus solely on the individual is an element that is apparent in Romantic literature. “Desert Places” does focus on the celebration of inner strength, but also on the individual as a whole: “They cannot scare me with their empty spaces / Between stars - on stars where no human race is. / I have it in me so much nearer home / To scare myself with my own desert places” (Frost l. 13-6). The consistent use of the first-person point of view emphasizes the importance of the individual in Frost’s work. Frost does touch on the inner strength of the individual; however, this idea is not entirely consistent throughout the work. In contrast, the focus on an individual, or the speaker of the poem, is consistent throughout the piece when he continues to use the first-person point of view. This reflects the classifying elements of Romanticism rather than the distinctive elements of Modernism. Along with a focus on emotion and the individual, Frost also places an emphasis on nature.

Like Whitman, Frost uses nature imagery within his work. While characteristics of Modernism focus on perception of the world, it does not specifically place an emphasis on nature. The Romantic period, however, does place a heavy emphasis on the role of nature: “Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast / In a field I looked into going past, / And the ground almost covered smooth in snow, / But a few weeds and stubble showing last. / The woods around it have it - it is theirs. / All animals are smothered in their lairs” (Frost l. 1-6). Frost uses vivid nature imagery to help depict the major themes in his works. While this could be considered the perception of the speaker’s surroundings, it is presented in a way that is more observational of the beauty of nature. The themes of the poem correlate to elements of Modernism but the subject matter and the way this selection is written reflects elements of Romanticism. Frost’s “Desert Places” focuses on the same three major Romantic elements that Whitman did in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” despite being a Modernist writer.

The period of Modernism had another artistic period contained within it; the period of Imagism lasted from around 1909 till about 1917. This period was very similar to Modernism but

also had some apparent differences. The period of Imagism included characteristics of concise, direct expression of clear images; the use of vernacular style; absolute freedom in choice of subject matter; the use of free verse; a poet's response to a visual impression as concisely and precisely as possible; and embraces haikus and concentrated poetic forms. Carl Sandburg is an American poet who wrote during the Imagist period. Literary critic David Maas states, "Many of Carl Sandburg's reflective poems provide concrete visual details that vividly illustrate the general semantics extensional devices. Conversely, the general semantics extensional devices provide insights into Sandburg's poetry. Getting extensional seemed a perennial theme for this populist activist poet" (Maas 1). His poetry contains many of the defining elements of Imagism. Sandburg's poem "Grass" expresses elements of Imagism but also expresses characteristics of Romanticism that are also present in Whitman's and Frost's works.

Similarly to Whitman, Sandburg places an emphasis on emotions in his poem "Grass." They both explore emotions that are consistent with loss and grief; however, like Frost, the emotions in Sandburg's work are not directly stated: "Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo. / Shovel them under and let me work— / I am the grass; I cover all. / And pile them high at Gettysburg / And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun" (Sandburg l. 1-5). Sandburg is referencing fallen soldiers from different battles. Whitman does the same in his selection. In both works, the imagery of the deceased soldiers is meant to evoke emotions related to grief and death. This focus on and connection to emotion emphasizes the Romantic aspects of Sandburg's work. Imagism does not place any emphasis on emotion. There is a value placed on direct expression and freedom of subject matter, but it is often for physical objects rather than emotions. In an attempt to portray these emotions vividly, Sandburg, like Frost and Whitman, uses the first-person point of view.

Sandburg uses the first-person point of view in his selection. He makes the speaker take on the persona of the grass in a battlefield. While the grass is not a human individual, it is portrayed as if it were an individual: "Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo. / Shovel them under and let me work— / I am the grass; I cover all" (Sandburg l. 1-3) There is an obvious focus on the individual in this selection. The individual is not a human, but the grass is personified as if it were. The focus on the individual is not a characteristic or element of Imagism. The Imagism period does not place any emphasis on the individual in any capacity. The regard for the individual is an important element of Romanticism. Sandburg emphasizes the individual by using the first-person point of view and placing the audience into this perspective the same way Frost and Whitman do in their selections. When Sandburg personifies the grass, he then places an emphasis on nature.

A focus on nature is also not a typical characteristic of Imagism. While, again, there is a freedom of subject choice, nature is not directly stated as being a prominent element of the defining features of the period. Placing an emphasis on nature, however, is a defining feature of Romantic literature: "Shovel them under and let me work. / Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor: / What place is this? / Where are we now? / I am the grass. / Let me work" (Sandburg l. 6-11). Sandburg personifies the grass and makes it the speaker of the poem. This

ultimately make grass, or nature, a main focus of the piece. While his focus on nature is not as descriptive and vivid as Frost or Whitman, the focus on nature, as a whole, is still present. This element does not reinforce the period of Imagism but, rather, the period of Romanticism. Sandburg's work shows fundamental elements of the Romantic period that are also present in both Frost's and Whitman's literary selections as well.

Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg are American authors who were active in the literary community many years after the Romantic time period. Despite this, their works still explore and express important, defining elements of the Romantic period as expressed by the Romantic writer Walt Whitman. These three authors all wrote very different pieces of literature that expressed a variety of ideas; however, all the selections could be categorized, by literary characteristics, as Romantic pieces. While culture changes over time and new literary and artistic periods emerge, many elements of older periods will continue to carry on into the future of American literature.

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Appendix A

CHARACTERISTICS OF AMERICAN ROMANTICISM (1820-1865)

- Values feeling and intuition over reason
- Places faith in inner experience and power of the imagination
- Shuns the artificiality of civilization and seeks unspoiled nature
- Prefers rebellion to conventionality
- Experiments with poetic form
- Values individual freedom and the worth of the individual
- Believes that Nature's beauty leads to spiritual and moral development
- Finds inspiration in myth, legend, folklore
- Supports the development and reading of the novel as a new genre

Appendix B

CHARACTERISTICS OF AMERICAN MODERNISM (1910-1945)

Modernism is a deliberate rejection of the styles of the past, emphasizing instead innovation and experimentation in forms, materials and techniques.

- Tone of disillusionment, loss, nihilism (Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, Steinbeck, Eliot, Frost, Sandburg), absurdity
- Marked by a strong and intentional break with tradition and loss of faith in structures. This break includes a strong reaction against established religious, political, and social views.
- No connection with history or institutions. Their experience is that of alienation, loss, and despair.

- Belief that the world is created in the act of perceiving it, i.e., the world is what we say it is.
- No such thing as absolute truth. All things are relative.
- Championship of the individual and celebration of inner strength.
- Life is unordered.
- Concerned with the sub-conscious
- “The Lost Generation” (Hemingway)

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