
Romanticism In Herman Melville's Moby Dick And Jane Austen's Pride And Prejudice

The Romantic period stipulated emotional sensitivity and individual subjectivity as a revolt against aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment. Romanticism saw the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth) through intuition rather than deduction. Both Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* explore and subvert the aspects of Romanticism. Romantics stressed the awe of nature in language and the experience of sublimity through a connection with nature. They believed nature was the epitome of sublime since it paralyses the individual with its vastness and mystery. The language in the two texts are proved to be Romantic but they do not conform with the attitudes of Romanticism.

Melville's *Moby Dick* explores the attributes of natural forces and suggests that there is evil in the surrounding or the environment. He develops the theme of the individual versus Nature. In the character of Captain Ahab, Melville represents morphs into darker characteristics like obsession and madness. Ahab is fixated on his quest for vengeance: to find the great white whale, Moby Dick, who bit off his leg in the previous encounter. Through Melville's soliloquy, Ahab admits "I'm demoniac, I am madness maddened!!". It is revealed nothing will swerve Ahab from his "fixed purpose" and "iron way" of revenge. Ahab's insistence on free-will is the driving force for his need for revenge. In a way, he rebels against Nature, fate, or God. Melville's characterisation of Moby Dick is in stark contrast to Ahab. Where Ahab stands for mankind, Moby Dick is a representative of Nature. The whale is emblematic of the philosophical 'natural order' that Ahab resists and challenges, which places God and Nature above mankind, able to dictate a man's fate. Moby-Dick symbolises evil, power and omnipotence, revealed Ahab's opinion towards Moby Dick. He had 'piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race'. Moby Dick's head symbolises the unsympathetic and irresistible forces of nature. The quest to understand a hero's soul is a common plot in Romanticism, but in the Dark Romanticism of *Moby Dick*, Ahab's search is dark and evil, and in defiance of nature. Through Dark Romanticism, Melville subverts the attributes of Romanticism in *Moby Dick*.

The idea of sense and sensibility in Romanticism was challenged by the dependence of women on marriage to secure social standing and economic security. Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* challenged the attitudes formed in the Romanticism movement and upheld the supremacy of the rational faculty. *Pride and Prejudice* portray the Bennet family's desperation to marry off five daughters and the tragic truth that Mr Bennet must leave his property to an unpopular cousin because he has no sons. Through the characterisation of Austen's characters, it is deemed "a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." Elizabeth Bennet faces the tough truth that Mr Darcy's family does not see her as his equal in terms of social status. Austen depicts the sometimes harsh realities of love and marriage in the Edwardian Age. She communicates the hardships women faced, who did not inherit money, could not work and where their only chance in life depended on the man they married. She reveals not only the difficulties women faced in her day but also what was expected of men and of the careers they had to follow. Through the characterisation of Mr Bingley, Austen communicates the message that for men to be respected in society, the man

must have status and money. *Pride and Prejudice* focus is on reality and contains no supernatural or fantastical elements, unlike Romantic literature. In essence, Austen challenges the characteristics of the Romantic movement.

Romanticism supported optimism as a philosophical movement and individuals. It emphasised the importance of self-awareness in an individual rather than conformity to societal norms. Austen supported traditional values and established norms which conveyed in *Pride and Prejudice*, hence, challenging the attributes of the Romantic period. Melville's *Moby Dick* subverted the attitudes of the literary movement from optimism to pessimism through its characterisation of individuals. In essence, the two texts do not confirm but subvert and challenge the ideas associated with Romanticism.