

## ROMANTICISM IN THE NORTH AMERICAN SHORT STORY

## EL ROMANTICISMO EN LA NARRATIVA BREVE NORTEAMERICANA

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**Resumen:** En este artículo, se muestra cómo el Romanticismo influyó, en concreto, en la narrativa breve norteamericana analizando cinco obras: “Rip Van Winkle,” de Washington Irving; “The Minister’s Black Veil,” de Nathaniel Hawthorne; “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” de Herman Melville; y “The Minister’s Black Veil” y “The Tell-Tale Heart,” de Edgar Allan Poe. Los resultados que se han obtenido de este análisis han demostrado que estas cinco historias breves se pueden considerar trabajos románticos porque reflejan múltiples características del Romanticismo. De hecho, estos autores retratan las peculiaridades de los dos sub-campos más importantes del Romanticismo Americano conocidos como “Romanticismo Claro” y “Romanticismo Oscuro.”

**Palabras clave:** Romanticismo; Narrativa breve norteamericana; Emoción; Horror; Naturaleza; Psicología.

**Abstract:** In this paper, it is shown how the Romantic Movement influenced, more specifically, the North American short story by analysing five works: Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle,” Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Minister’s Black Veil,” Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” and Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” and “The Tell-Tale Heart.” The results which have been obtained from this analysis have demonstrated that these five short stories can be considered as Romantic works because they reflect multiple characteristics of the Romantic Movement. In fact, these writers portray the peculiarities of the most important subfields of American Romanticism, which are known as “Light Romanticism” and “Dark Romanticism.”

**Key words:** Romanticism; North American short story; Emotion; Horror; Nature; Psychology.



## INTRODUCTION

Throughout this paper, five short stories will be analysed: Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (1819), Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" (1832), Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853), and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842) and "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843). What these stories have in common is that, despite being written in different times, they portray several features of Romanticism. Consequently, the hypothesis which will guide this paper is that "Rip Van Winkle," "The Minister's Black Veil," "Bartleby, the Scrivener," "The Masque of the Red Death," and "The Tell-Tale Heart" can be regarded as Romantic literary works. This paper is quite relevant because, even though there is some research on how these short stories portray separate features of Romanticism such as the depiction of human psychology and the rejection of urbanization, scholars have not analysed yet how these texts are related to the whole literary movement. Thus, this paper will shed light on how Romanticism is reflected through the five short stories.

In order to achieve the above-mentioned aim, different steps will be followed. Firstly, a brief background on Romanticism will be provided, and it will include a description of its most relevant characteristics. Hence, literary Romanticism will be the main theoretical framework of the analysis so as to better understand how this movement is related to the stories by Irving, Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe. Afterwards, each short story will be analysed in-depth, showing how these works reflect multiple Romantic features in a comparative way. And, finally, I will reflect on such analysis and reach a conclusion at the end, stating how the initial hypothesis is proved.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT

Romanticism is an artistic, intellectual, political, cultural, and literary movement which emerged in Europe at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a revolutionary reaction against the objectivity and rationalism which characterized the Age of the Enlightenment and Neoclassicism. The movement originated in Germany and, then, it spread to England and France. From then on, writers all over the world were influenced by the literary style of British Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, William Blake, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and the views of German philosophers such as Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling and Friedrich Schleiermacher.

Romanticism flourished in Europe from the end of the eighteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century; however, not until the 1820s did the Romantic Movement reach America, when American editions of works by Wordsworth and Coleridge and German philosophy spread over the country (Charvat, 1937). In

such a way, American authors began to adopt the European Romantics' literary style and, in turn, were influenced by Emerson's transcendental philosophy. Indeed, American Romanticism is often divided into three main subgenres: (i) transcendentalism; (ii) Light Romanticism, which emphasizes an optimistic and creative view of life and the longing for an idealized past; (iii) and Dark Romanticism, which focuses on the darkest sides of human behaviour through mentally ill and sinful characters who have frightening experiences (Dinçer, 2010). American Romantic writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe became so relevant that they constitute the canon of nineteenth-century American literature (Jackson, 2016).

Regarding the main features of literary Romanticism, these works are characterized by: the exploration of horror, the supernatural and the macabre, the depiction of mental pathologies, the portrait of imagination and strong emotions over reason, the sublime power of nature, the nostalgia for a perfect past, the return to the life and thought of the Middle Ages, the rejection of modernity and industrialization, the interest in nationalism and political independence, exoticism, French symbolism, transcendentalism, individualism, and the concept of the Romantic writer as a creative genius.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle"

In "Rip Van Winkle," Washington Irving tells readers the fascinating and curious story of Rip, an idle but loved neighbour of a village among the Kaatskill mountains, in New York. In this text, considered as the first American short story, Irving reflects some of the Romantic features explained above. For instance, Romantic writers love exoticism and, therefore, they are interested in ancient ages and cultures such as the medieval times and Greek traditions. Thus, the settings for their works are often remote and mysterious locations where characters have peculiar experiences. Likewise, "Rip Van Winkle" is set in a remote old village which was founded by the Dutch. It is an area which is lost between mountains and a river, the Hudson. Irving has opted for a very rural setting far from the city life. Furthermore, one of the most characteristic features of Romanticism is the return to nature. In their works, Romantic authors usually describe landscapes, mountains, forests, and other natural spots of great beauty as they praise the Earth. Indeed, the Romantics are in great awe of the sublime power of nature because, to them, it is beautifully wild and dangerous. In "Rip Van Winkle," the narrator praises the breath-taking views which the main character contemplates among the mountains, and he describes nature as being unruly and wild too; for example, when Rip is wandering around the highest parts of the Kaatskill mountains:

On the other side he looked down into a deep mountain glen, wild, lonely, and shagged, the bottom filled with fragments from the impending cliffs, and scarce-

ly lighted by the reflected rays of the setting sun. For some time Rip lay musing on this scene. (Irving, 1921: p. 29)

As stated before, Romanticism emerged as a reaction against rationalism, and, therefore, another remarkable characteristic of this movement is an emphasis on imagination and strong emotions over reality and reason. In Irving's story, Rip meets some magic creatures who play ninepins among the Kaatskill mountains and, from that moment on, he starts to experience very strange situations which do not reflect a real or objective universe at all. After meeting these beings, Rip falls asleep and he awakes 20 years later in a completely different world. Apart from Rip's fantastic adventure, Irving's word choice also shows that he encourages readers to let their imagination run wild when using adjectives such as "fairy" and "magical" (Martin, 1959). Furthermore, Rip portrays extreme emotions like awe, horror, and confusion, and the narrator explains how he is even unconscious, incapable of being rational, when he is with Henry Hudson and his crew of the Half-moon:

By degrees Rip's awe and apprehension subsided. He even ventured, when no eye was fixed upon him, to taste the beverage [...] and he reiterated his visits to the flagon so often that at length his senses were overpowered, his eyes swam in his head, his head gradually declined, and he fell into a deep sleep. (Irving, 1921: 39-40)

Romanticism emerged at a time of political upheaval, characterized by revolutions and wars of independence taking place both in Europe and America. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Romantic writers are concerned with nationalism and movements of political independence. In this case, "Rip Van Winkle" can also be regarded as a Romantic literary work because not only does Washington Irving depict the American Revolution but he also questions its value when the country itself is still coming to terms with the new situation (Wyman, 2010). When Rip heads to the mountains, the United States is a dependent country ruled by Great Britain. However, when he returns from his vigil, he finds an independent nation. An illustration of this change is, for instance, the picture of George Washington in the tavern where he used to meet with his friends. Moreover, in this story, such interest in nationalism is linked to the Romantics' longing for an idealized past. When Rip returns to the village, he is desperate because he knows nobody, he hardly recognizes the town, and he does not know what to do to find his wife and his dog. The narrator tells readers that he is desolate when he discovers what has happened:

Rip's heart died away at hearing of these sad changes in his home and friends, and finding himself thus alone in the world. Every answer puzzled him too, by treating of such enormous lapses of time, and of matters which he could not understand [...]. He had no courage to ask after any more friends, but cried out in despair, 'Does nobody here know Rip Van Winkle?' (Irving, 1921.: 65)

Lost in a new world as he wanders between the past and the present, Rip wants to go back to the past and recover his life. In such a way, Washington Irving shows through the main character of the story that, as opposed to the past, the future America is stressful, unforeseeable, and chaotic (Wyman, 2010).

### **Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil"**

"The Minister's Black Veil" is a short story about Mr. Hooper, a clergyman who shocks his parishioners for wearing a mysterious black veil which covers his face until his death. Nathaniel Hawthorne's work can also be regarded as a Romantic text, but it shows some different features of the literary movement from those portrayed in "Rip Van Winkle." In fact, "The Minister's Black veil" reflects several characteristics of, specifically, Dark Romanticism such as the exploration of horror and darkness. As Dark Romantic authors, Hawthorne also achieves to create a frightening and mysterious mood already from the beginning of his story, when Mr. Hooper shows his black veil. The narrator describes how Mr. Hooper's parishioners are terrified when they see the veiled Reverend because they think that such veil is concealing the parson's darkest sin. Indeed, Mr. Hooper's veil scares him as much as it frightens his parishioners, and he is horrified every time he sees a glimpse of his covered face. Moreover, Hawthorne includes another Romantic element which emphasizes the dark and dreadful atmosphere of the story: the supernatural. The Reverend attends the funeral of a young woman wearing his black veil, and his darkened presence is so horrific that the dead lady's corpse shudders and shivers when the parson's face is unveiled while bidding her farewell.

In line with the depiction of terror, darkness, and the supernatural, the Romantics are interested in death too. Death has such a powerful impact on people's emotions that Romantic writers often reflect it in their works. Likewise, Hawthorne deals with death in "The Minister's Black Veil." An illustration of this is the moment when the narrator describes Mr. Hooper's demise very thoroughly at the end of the story. In fact, instead of reflecting death as something to be feared, Hawthorne focuses on death as the beginning of a sinless eternal life. When talking to Elizabeth, Mr. Hooper claims: "Be mine, and hereafter there shall be no veil over my face, no darkness between our souls! It is but a mortal veil – it is not for eternity!" (Hawthorne, 1987).

Nevertheless, the most remarkable Romantic characteristic portrayed in "The Minister's Black Veil" is symbolism. Romantic authors were influenced by

French symbolism and, therefore, they make use of tangible things in order to represent transcendental and abstract ideas or feelings. Mr. Hooper's black veil is clearly a symbol, and its meaning has been quite controversial among scholars. It has been interpreted as sinfulness, Puritanism, self-sacrifice, sexual fearfulness, heresy, blasphemy, and the antichrist's influence (Bysshe, 1955; Carnochan, 1968; Saunders, 2012). Mr. Hooper's last words shed some light on the meaning of the black veil

When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin; then deem me a monster, for the symbol beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and, lo! On every visage a Black Veil! (Hawthorne, 1987)

The parson tries to make his parishioners aware of the fact that everybody wears a veil because they hide something, either a secret or a deep feeling, even to their closest relatives and friends. In fact, the meaning of the veil is revealed by the narrator:

The subject had reference to secret sin, and those sad mysteries which we hide from our nearest and dearest, and would fain conceal from our own consciousness, even forgetting that the Omniscient can detect them. (Hawthorne, 1987)

Hence, as a Dark Romantic, Hawthorne portrays one of the darkest sides of humanity through the black veil: hypocrisy and deceit.

### **Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-street"**

In "Bartleby, the Scrivener," readers are introduced to a Wall-Street lawyer, who is, in turn, the narrator of the story, and his employees. As the two texts which have been examined above, Melville's short story also reflects several features of the Romantic literary movement; for example, the depiction of intense emotions over reason. After working efficiently for a few days, Bartleby becomes a completely unhelpful employee since he refuses to do everything. Besides, he stays in the office even at night and refuses to leave when he is asked to do so. Consequently, the lawyer is angry and overwhelmed because he does not know what to do with Bartleby. However, he also feels pity for his employee and wants to help him as he discovers that Bartleby is completely alone. Thus, Melville shows how the lawyer goes through a mixture of emotions. Feelings are so meaningful in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" that, like in "Rip Van Winkle," they replace reason. An illustration of this is Bartleby's refusal to be reasonable when the lawyer asks him to leave his work. In fact, Bartleby is regarded as an inhuman creature by the narrator since he does not reflect any emotion:

Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been any thing ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises. (Melville, 1986)

Romantic writers are so fascinated by the individual's inner world and what happens in our minds that they are also interested in mental disorders. In their works, they depict not only strong feelings but also their characters' varied mental pathologies. This Romantic characteristic is portrayed in Melville's short story through Bartleby. He acts very strangely because he is always isolated in his corner, looking at a wall, and he is hardly able to communicate with his work-mates. His speech is simple and repetitive, it sounds obsessive as he repeats the sentence "I would prefer not to" continuously. The narrator highlights Bartleby's mental pathology after realizing that he has been living at the office and analysing his behaviour:

What I saw that morning persuaded me that the scrivener was the victim of innate and incurable disorder. I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach. (Melville, 1986)

Moreover, the lawyer reaffirms his employee's mental disorder when he describes Bartleby as "demented" and "deranged."

Added to the depiction of intense emotions and mental illnesses, another Romantic characteristic which can be found in Herman Melville's work is individualism. The Romantics focus on individual freedom and subjectivity as a reaction against the objectivity of the Age of the Enlightenment. They think that individuals must listen to their deepest self and be true to them. Accordingly, their literary works often revolve around one major character's experience and deepest world. Furthermore, such individualism is often emphasized by the characters' solitude. In Melville's short story, readers are told that Bartleby is completely alone because he does not have any friends or relatives. Besides, he lives alone at work, in an empty building, and he is always isolated from people while he gazes at a wall until his lonely death. The narrator gives an account of Bartleby's complete solitude as follows: "What miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible!" (Melville, 1986). Moreover, Melville emphasizes individualism and solitude through his word choice because he labels Bartleby's corner "hermitage," a quiet and peaceful place devoted to prayer.

Like Mr. Hooper's black veil, Bartleby becomes a symbol in Herman Melville's short story. He refuses to work and isolates himself from society because he becomes aware of his awful working conditions. Bartleby's work as a scrivener is exhausting and harmful but, instead of taking care of his employees, the

lawyer only cares about production. Therefore, Bartleby represents “the alienated worker who, realizing that his work is meaningless and without a future, can only protest his humanity by a negative assertion” (Barnett, 1974). In such a way, Bartleby becomes a symbol for the dehumanized society created by capitalism. Indeed, Bartleby’s symbolic meaning becomes explicit at the end of the story, when the lawyer finds his corpse and exclaims: “Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!” (Melville, 1986). In this short story, symbolism is linked to another relevant characteristic of Romanticism: the rejection of modernity and industrialization. Melville criticizes a modern as well as an industrial system (capitalism) through the character of Bartleby because he shows how a capitalist society leads citizens to dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and isolation.

### **Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death”**

Edgar Allan Poe is one of the most iconic figures of American Romanticism and, therefore, both “The Masque of the Red Death” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” display multiple features of the Romantic literary movement. Like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe is considered a Gothic and Dark Romantic writer. In “The Masque of the Red Death,” Poe provides readers with a terrifying story in which he depicts the macabre as well as the supernatural, two remarkable aspects of Dark Romanticism. Prince Prospero, the main character, has moved to a remote place with his closest subjects in order to escape from the “Red Death,” a devastating and ghostly creature which has slaughtered most citizens. For the whole text, Poe creates a mysterious mood which attracts the readers’ attention through the shocking story of the Red Death. Indeed, the poet uses words related to terror continuously, for example, “horror,” “disgust,” and “blood.” Such mood is emphasized at the end, when the Red Death appears in Prospero’s abbey and kills everyone. Besides, the Red Death’s appearance triggers very intense emotions not only on readers but also on the revellers, who tremble in fear when they recognize the masked figure.

Another Romantic element reflected in Poe’s text is the Gothic setting for the story. Prince Prospero moves to a secluded and castellated abbey in order to hide from death. It is described as an enormous and “magnificent” building with strong walls and structures to protect its inhabitants. Moreover, the seventh apartment is also decorated in a Gothic style. It is a dark room with no light and Gothic furniture such as “black velvet tapestries” and “blood-tinted panes.” In fact, this Gothic setting has been created by Prince Prospero himself, which shows another key feature of the Romantic literary movement: the poet as a creative genius. Like the other Romantics, Poe regarded writers as superior human beings because, instead of imitating, they are able to let their imagination run wild and create tasteful art, which brings them closer to God and nature (Vanderbilt, 1968). In “The Masque of the Red Death,” Prince Prospero has created and decorated his Gothic abbey, and, therefore, he is portrayed as a genius who has taken the role of divine Creator (Vanderbilt, 1968). Indeed, Prospero’s

taste is highlighted several times from the beginning of the story, for instance, when the narrator states: "This [the abbey] was an extensive and magnificent structure, the creation of the prince's own eccentric yet august taste" (Poe, 2007).

As Herman Melville does in "Bartleby, the Scrivener," Edgar Allan Poe also depicts mental illness in "The Masque of the Red Death." The main character of the short story is described as a mentally ill person by the narrator owing to his peculiar tastes and eccentric behaviour: "The tastes of the duke were peculiar. [...] There are some who would have thought him mad. His followers felt he was not. It was necessary to hear and see and touch him to be sure that he was not" (Poe, 2007). Apart from the Prince's mental disorder, Poe's own inner obsessions are reflected in the story too. Time is so important in "The Masque of the Red Death" that, every time the clock chimes, the world stops, and revellers get confused, distraught, and silent. Besides, it is because of the clock that they become aware of the Red Death's presence. In addition, as opposed to Hawthorne's depiction of death as a new life in "The Minister's Black Veil," in Poe's work, death is portrayed as an unavoidable and frightening end. The narrator relates how, despite Prospero's effort to escape from the Red Death, it reaches everyone, no matter how far and how well protected they are. Therefore, Poe's short story has been analysed by critics as an allegory for the inevitability of death because it shows that nobody can escape from it (Almahameed, 2018). In such a way, the remarkable importance of time together with Prince Prospero's desperate attempt to avoid death reflect Poe's own obsession with time and mortality.

### **Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart"**

In "The Tell-Tale Heart," Edgar Allan Poe explores horror and the macabre again as he shows an unhinged and obsessive narrator who commits a terrible crime. The narrator kills his own father in cold blood and, if that were not enough, he explains every step he follows in detail. He coldly narrates how he murders his father with his bed and how he gets rid of the body by dismembering it. In fact, instead of repenting, he describes his father's killing as something which makes him feel happy and relieved: "I then [after murdering his father] smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done" (Poe, 2007).

Added to such horrific account, Poe reflects mental illness in this short story too through the narrator's mental disorders. He is obsessed with his father's eye because seeing it makes him become enraged. He even confesses that the eye was the main reason for killing his father: "[...] but I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye" (Poe, 2007). Moreover, the narrator has auditory hallucinations when he is talking to the policemen because he thinks that he is listening to his father's heart, but it is impossible since he is already dead. As Zimmerman argues in his paper, the narrator might be a schizophrenic person be-

cause most mentally ill people who suffer from schizophrenia have auditory hallucinations (1992). Furthermore, the narrator is quite arrogant and grandiose because he describes his crime as having been wisely committed continuously; for example, at the beginning of the story: "You should have seen how wisely I proceeded – with what caution – with what foresight – with what dissimulation I went to work!" (Poe, 2007). According to Zimmerman, exaggerated grandiosity and self-importance are common symptoms of schizophrenia as well (1992). The narrator himself tries to convince readers that he is not mentally ill for the whole story. Besides the murderer's behaviour and attitude, Poe reflects the narrator's madness through his writing style. As the narrator gets more and more hysterical and obsessive, Poe's prose becomes, in turn, more fragmented, with many short sentences, exclamation marks, and much punctuation. An illustrative example of this is found at the end of the story, when the killer is about to confess his crime: "Almighty God! –no, no! They heard! –they suspected! –they knew! –they were making a mockery of my horror!" (Poe, 2007).

It is evident, then, that the narrator has several mental disorders; however, there is some controversy over the causes of his mental illness. Some critics, as Zimmerman, regard Poe's character as a schizophrenic patient whereas others believe that he suffers from a post-traumatic stress disorder. In fact, Kachur claims that the narrator suffers from a post-traumatic stress disorder because he is an incest survivor (2008). Gothic literature often explores sexuality and shocking experiences, including incest, and, therefore, Poe's portrayal of incest is another feature which makes "The Tell-Tale Heart" a Romantic literary text. According to Kachur, the narrator is an incest victim because he tells how he makes his father suffer what he suffered, and he is shown as a victimized child with psychotic symptoms of trauma (2008). Thus, taking Kachur's view into consideration, this short story, like Hawthorne's and Melville's texts, includes several symbols, and the most remarkable one is the murder weapon. The narrator uses a bed, where sexual acts commonly take place, in order to kill his father. In this manner, Poe masks a traumatic experience through the use of an apparently meaningless object.

## CONCLUSION

In short, the hypothesis which guides this paper has been proved because, through the five analyses above, it has been demonstrated that Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil," Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street," and Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" can be regarded as Romantic works as they reflect multiple remarkable features of literary Romanticism. "Rip Van Winkle" depicts key Romantic characteristics such as the sublime power of nature, exoticism, imagination and emotions over reason, nationalism, and the longing for an idealized past, which is a typical aspect of Light Romanticism. Similarly, Herman Melville shows other features of the Romantic movement in "Bartleby, the Scrive-

ner” like the portrait of mental pathologies, individualism, symbolism, and the rejection of a modern and industrial society. As for Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, they reflect several characteristics of, specifically, Gothic and Dark Romanticism since they focus on horror, darkness, the supernatural, death, and the darkest sides of human psychology in “The Minister’s Black Veil,” “The Masque of the Red Death,” and “The Tell-Tale Heart.”

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