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A Critical Study of the Romantic Poets and Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This article decisively presents a critical overview of Romantic poetry, detailing its origins, influential poets, and the defining characteristics of romantic poetry. The romantic era emerged in the late eighteenth century and continued into the early 19th century, effectively replacing the neoclassical period that had been dominated by poets like Alexander Pope. With a strong emphasis on imagination, emotion, and nature, romantic poetry reshaped literary expression.

The focus here is on the great monumental poets— William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, John Keats, and P.B. Shelley. Wordsworth, alongside Coleridge, was instrumental in pioneering this movement. Through his work, Wordsworth masterfully captured the beauty of nature and resonated deeply with the emotions of common people. Coleridge, influenced by political currents and the works of others, provided profound insights into human nature that remain relatable. John Keats celebrated beauty and introduced the influential concept of "negative capability." In contrast, P.B. Shelley infused logic into his poetry while emphasising morality and depicting melancholy with remarkable elegance. This article serves as a definitive guide to comprehending the richness of the romantic era.

Keywords: Nature, Emotions, Imagination, Beauty, Love and Negative capability

INTRODUCTION

The Romantic period significantly reshaped English literature during the nineteenth century, commencing with the publication of 'Lyrical Ballads 'by Samuel Coleridge and William Wordsworth in 1798. This movement marked a departure from the classical literary style, which predominantly served the upper echelons of society, and introduced a novel literary approach that resonated more broadly with the general populace.

Romantic poets emphasized the relationship between humanity and nature, perceiving nature as a source of beauty and inspiration, a principle largely overlooked by their classical predecessors. Individualism became a hallmark of this period, with poetry reflecting personal experiences and emotions rather than adhering to general themes.

Consequently, the Romantic era showcased a variety of poetic forms, such as ballads and sonnets, in contrast to the heroic couplets favoured in earlier works.

Prominent figures of this era included Wordsworth, Coleridge, P.B. Shelley, John Keats, and Lord Byron. Wordsworth, in particular, championed the use of simple, accessible language to engage a wider audience. The Romantic poets drew considerable inspiration from contemporary foreign political movements, notably the French Revolution, which instilled themes of liberty and equality into their works.

The influence of German poets, including Friedrich Schiller, introduced concepts such as individualism and spiritualism, which became foundational to Romantic poetry. Wordsworth and Coleridge are regarded as the first-generation Romantic poets, whose works influenced a subsequent generation of poets, including Shelley and Keats. Their decision to publish 'Lyrical Ballads 'anonymously was motivated by concerns regarding the potential negative reception of their deviation from traditional norms. This collection utilised the authentic language of everyday individuals, thereby conveying vivid emotions and experiences that encapsulated the essence of the Romantic Movement.

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF ROMANTIC POETRY

****The Sublimity of Thought****

A pivotal concept within Romantic poetry is the Sublime, which evokes extraordinary thoughts and emotions—frequently characterized by both grandeur and the grotesque. This idea gained prominence in the 18th century through Edmund Burke's treatise of 1757 and was further explored by philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth.

****Reaction Against Neoclassical School of Poets****

Romantic poetry emerged in the early 19th century as a heartfelt reaction to the rational confines of Neoclassical poetry. This movement embodies powerful emotional expression that challenges the restrictive conventions of its predecessor. William J. Long emphasizes this intrinsic protest against the constraints imposed by established rules across various domains, including literature.

****Free play of Imagination****

The significance of imagination as a vital force for morality and truth in literature was heavily emphasized by Romantic poets, including John Keats, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. This perspective distinguishes them from their Neoclassical counterparts. Figures such as Keats and Blake asserted that imagination enriches the human experience and enhances the world. Blake notably articulated this concept in his poem "Auguries of Innocence":

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

****Vernacular and Nature Poetry****

An appreciation for nature as an essential source of inspiration is a hallmark of Romantic poetry, characterized by a varied relationship with the natural world and a belief in pantheism. This thematic exploration is particularly evident in Wordsworth's epic poem, *The Prelude*. In "The Tables Turned," Wordsworth writes:

"One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can."

Shelley regarded nature as a living entity intimately connected with humanity, while Wordsworth adopted a philosophical stance. In contrast, Keats approached nature with a unique perspective, and Coleridge argued that joy arises not from nature itself, but from individual emotional responses.

****The note of Melancholy****

The theme of melancholy plays a significant role in Romantic poetry, serving as a crucial source of inspiration for poets. This is illustrated in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," where he contemplates death and the allure of oblivion:

"For many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain."

****Love of Medieval Themes****

Romantic poetry, notably in the works of John Keats and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, often reflects a fascination with nostalgia and medievalism. This is evident in Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and the early Romantic contributions of Richard Rolle, such as "The Fire of Love."

****Use of Supernaturalism in Romantic Literature****

Many Romantic poets incorporated supernatural elements into their works, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge being a significant figure in this trend, particularly exemplified in "Kubla Khan."

****Strong Emphasis on Subjectivity****

Romantic poetry places a strong emphasis on sentiments, emotions, and imagination, creating a distinct departure from the Neoclassical emphasis on objectivity, which largely eschewed personal emotional expression.

THE ROMANTIC POETS

William Wordsworth: (7 April 1770 – 23 April 1850)

“In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs, in spite of things silently gone out of mind and things violently destroyed, the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time. The objects of the Poet’s thoughts are everywhere; though the eyes and senses of man are, it is true, his favorite guides, yet he will follow wheresoever he can find an atmosphere of sensation in which to move his wings. Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge—it is as immortal as the heart of man”.

—William Wordsworth, “Preface to Lyrical Ballads”

William Wordsworth delineates the evolution of poetic styles and themes in his ‘Preface to Lyrical Ballads. ’He posits that poetry should reflect the essence of common life, capturing authentic experiences through accessible language. By incorporating imagination, poets can evoke profound emotions, fostering a personal connection with readers. Wordsworth critiques previous poets for their detachment from the masses, resulting in works that lack engagement and vitality.

He famously asserts that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," emphasizing that our present emotions are intrinsically linked to past experiences. This connection enhances the relatability of poetic subjects. Wordsworth's deep attachment to his childhood—illustrated in his poem ‘To the Cuckoo’—serves as a poignant reminder of youthful joy.

Romantic poetry is characterized by natural language and poetic diction, effectively juxtaposing elite language with that of the general populace. Wordsworth adeptly portrays human nature, believing that poets, endowed with lively sensibility and enthusiasm, aim primarily to provide pleasure to their readers. His admiration for nature is evident, as he perceives it as a wellspring of inspiration.

In 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud, 'Wordsworth seamlessly intertwines nature with imagination. He employs a simile, comparing himself to a cloud, thereby positioning himself as an observer of the surrounding beauty. The vivid imagery of dancing daffodils creates a heartwarming visualization of nature, demonstrating his creative brilliance in portraying the ordinary through a captivating lens.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (21 October 1772 – 25 July 1834)

Samuel Coleridge and William Wordsworth cultivated a significant friendship that profoundly influenced their literary pursuits. Coleridge's interest in imagination and visionary philosophy emerged during his academic years, notably shaped by the revolutionary ideas of the French Revolution, which sparked his deep curiosity about human nature.

In 1796, Coleridge published a collection of juvenile poems that, while ambitious, faced criticism for their ornate diction and imagery. Despite these critiques, he aspired to develop a simpler, more engaging style. His formative education under James Bowyer emphasized the importance of truth, logic, and reason in poetry, with Bowyer asserting that "Poetry had a logic of its own." This perspective significantly impacted Coleridge's literary philosophy.

Moreover, Coleridge found inspiration in the sonnets of William Lisle Bowles, whose contemporary style resonated with him and encouraged a shift toward more accessible language. Coleridge admired Bowles' use of everyday language, referring to it as the "properties of flesh and blood." This newfound appreciation for simplicity marked a pivotal transformation in Coleridge's poetic approach.

Poets like Alexander Pope and William Crowe used artificial observations and epigrammatic couplets, neglecting natural behaviour and language. This style, while dominant in the eighteenth century, was criticized for its structure. Pope was highly regarded, but the next century brought the rise of the Romantic era, with William Bowles' sonnets playing a key role.

Coleridge noted important literary insights, emphasizing that poems should have rereading qualities, logical wording, and an element of surprise to maintain reader engagement. He contrasted metaphysical poets, who employed natural language and extraordinary ideas, with neoclassical poets like Pope, who utilized simple themes with complex language. Coleridge admired Bowles for successfully combining simple thoughts and language, which influenced his own romantic poetry.

Despite struggles with uneven quality and unfinished works, Coleridge produced notable romantic poems such as "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Christabel," and "Kubla Khan." His creativity was fueled by opium, initially for physical healing, but later as a means to explore his mind, leading to addiction.

Kubla Khan emerged from an opium-induced dream. In the fall of 1797, Coleridge battled dysentery and resorted to opium for relief. During a countryside walk, he unexpectedly fell asleep and awoke after two to three hours with a complete poem about Kubla Khan vividly in his mind. He later described this creative process as images rising before him effortlessly, devoid of any conscious struggle. He remembered a fully formed poem consisting of two to three hundred lines, yet he could only write down fifty-four lines before an unwelcome visitor interrupted him. This disruption caused him to forget the remaining lines, leaving the poem unfinished. Consequently, he continued to seek opium for creative inspiration in the future.

What could be more romantic than a poem born from the vision of a dream? Coleridge masterfully employed supernatural characters and elements in his work, showcasing a unique ability to intertwine the otherworldly with the real. His romantic poems embody all the hallmarks of the genre, including expressionistic imagination, clever incorporation of supernatural themes, and a deep respect for nature. No other poet could blend the natural and supernatural realms with the same grace as Coleridge. His vivid imagination was a potent asset, and his opium use proved to be a catalyst for his creativity.

Coleridge urged poets to prioritize imagination over reason, arguing that the real world is fraught with limitations. In the seventeenth century, the concepts of imagination and fancy were often conflated. Coleridge dispelled this myth in his "Biographia Literaria," where he delineated the differences. He defined fancy as the process of perceiving static images shaped by one's creative mindset, whereas imagination allows individuals to control and direct these images actively. He further categorized imagination into two distinct types.

While Coleridge may not have produced an extensive body of work during his lifetime, his influence on subsequent poets was profound. He inspired a generation of young poets, including John Keats, P.B. Shelley, and Lord Byron, who embraced his style and contributed to the Romantic movement. Here are some lines from his poem 'Kubla Khan':

"Then all the charm

Is broken--all that phantom-world so fair

Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread,

And each mis-shape the other."

In these lines, the poet showcases the natural beauty of Kubla Khan's property, highlighting fertile grounds, bright gardens, and ancient forests. Coleridge's vivid imagery is soothing, and his mention of incense appeals to the sense of smell, reflecting his love for nature.

He uses powerful comparisons, likening the river's sound to the earth's heavy breathing and comparing crashing waves to falling hail and threshed grain. This highlights Coleridge's imaginative range. Additionally, the supernatural element emerges when Kubla hears ancestral voices prophesying war, revealing Coleridge's affinity for inhuman entities. Overall, these elements embody the romantic attributes that enrich his poetry.

John Keats (31 October 1795 – 23 February 1821)

John Keats, a second-generation poet of the Romantic period, drew inspiration from first-generation poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge. He is known for his imaginative poetry and emotional depth, often emphasizing the theme of beauty. Keats believed that beauty was the ultimate truth, famously stating, "Beauty is truth, truth is beauty" in his poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

In a letter to his friend Benjamin Bailey, he linked human passions to the creation of beauty, arguing that imagination offers deeper insight into reality than rational thought. "[I]f Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all," proposed John Keats in an 1818 letter at the age of 22.

He likened imagination to Adam's dream of Eve, suggesting that truth is accessible through the imagination, blending elements of religion and emotion in human experience. John Keats, a second-generation poet of the Romantic period, drew inspiration from first-generation poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge. He is known for his imaginative poetry and emotional depth, often emphasising the theme of beauty. Keats believed that beauty was the ultimate truth, famously stating, "Beauty is truth, truth is beauty" in his poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn." In a letter to his friend Benjamin Bailey, he linked human passions to the creation of beauty, arguing that imagination offers deeper insight into reality than rational thought. He likened imagination to Adam's dream of Eve, suggesting that truth is accessible through the imagination, blending elements of religion and emotion in human experience.

Imagination is closely linked to spirituality, and John Keats considered it paramount, as reflected in his concept of 'Negative Capability. 'He defined it as the ability to endure uncertainties and doubts without the urge to resolve them with reason. Keats believed this state allowed poets to discover truth and beauty in all situations, much like Shakespeare, who balanced light and darkness in his works. In contrast, he noted that Coleridge struggled with uncertainty, seeking answers through reasoning.

Keats viewed the poet as someone without a fixed identity, able to engage with various subjects. He also communicated with contemporary P.B. Shelley, expressing concerns about his health and the materialistic approach to poetry of their time. Keats advised Shelley to refine his artistic approach, encouraging him to focus more on craft.

John Keats believed that poetry should have a meaningful purpose and that materialism should not motivate poets. His letters reveal his insights on poetry and its creation. Keats endured a challenging life, losing his father at six and his mother to tuberculosis six years later. This tragedy drove him to focus intensely on his studies, where he developed a close relationship with his headmaster and his son, Cowden Clarke, who nurtured his love for reading.

Though he became an intern for a surgeon, Keats quickly lost interest and shifted his focus to literature. His discussions with Clarke and his admiration for Edmund Spenser's "Faerie Queene" inspired him to embrace his poetic talent. This book ignited his passion for nature and beauty, leading him to write his first poem, "In Imitation of Spenser," in 1814, which reflected Spenser's dreamlike imagery. Throughout his life, Keats was also influenced by other poets such as Browne, Drayton, Milton, Wordsworth, and Shakespeare, producing numerous works.

John Keats wrote extensively about the desires and sufferings of the human heart, particularly influenced by the deaths in his family. Death became a prominent theme in his poetry, reflecting the melancholic aspects of life. He uniquely viewed melancholy as intertwined with joyful moments rather than just sadness. As a pure romantic poet, Keats aimed to provide sensory pleasure through his lyrical verses, avoiding any intentions of social critique. Nature featured prominently in his work, encompassing both real and imagined elements, allowing him to explore his own existence. Keats's romanticism resonated deeply with readers, particularly in poems like "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

“Thou still unravished bride of quietness,

Thou foster child of silence and slow time,

Sylvian historian, who canst thus express

A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme”

In this poem, the poet imagines the urn as a "bride of quietness" and a "foster child of silence," symbolizing its stillness and endurance over time. Keats also describes the urn as a "Sylvain historian," unable to tell its "flowery tale," brilliantly using natural imagery as the urn’s patterns reflect flowers and leaves.

He writes,

“Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard

Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave

Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;”

Keats contrasts heard and unheard melodies, finding beauty in the unknown. The boy beneath the trees symbolizes the eternal spring of the urn, showcasing vibrant nature. This evokes rich imagery, highlighting Keats' romantic elements. The intensity of emotions can be seen in another ode ‘Ode to Nightingale’, where the poet is fed up with the mundane world and wants to travel to the happy world of the Nightingale on the wings of poesy:

“Away! Away! for I will fly to thee,

Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,

But on the viewless wings of Poesy,

Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:

Already with thee! tender is the night,

And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,

Cluster’d around by all her starry Fays;

But here there is no light,

Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown

Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.”

P.B Shelley (4 August 1792 – 8 July 1822)

Percy Bysshe Shelley, a second-generation Romantic poet, emphasized the importance of imagination alongside reason in poetry. In his essay "A Defence of Poetry," he defined poetry as "the expression of the imagination." Imagination allows connections between ideas, producing harmonious works, while reason provides a logical framework. Shelley believed poets should convey moral lessons, not just focus on reader delight. He encouraged them to explore natural objects from various perspectives, creating diversity and influencing society.

P.B. Shelley connects religious themes with poetry, portraying poets as both societal influencers and prophets. In his essay "A Defence of Poetry," he asserts that poetry uses language, which, unlike the temporary elements of visual arts, is everlasting and unclassifiable. This makes poets superior to painters and sculptors. Shelley distinguishes between stories and poems, stating that stories are tied to specific times and places, while poems embody universal human experiences, making them more memorable. Despite facing bullying for his atheism, particularly at Syon House Academy and Eton College, Shelley found support in his friend Thomas Hogg, with whom he explored philosophy and literature, enriching his poetic vision.

Shelley’s poetry is rich in romantic elements, showcasing his deep love for nature, which he portrays as a superior force. He described nature authentically, often attributing human qualities to it and emphasizing its healing power. His depiction of nature varied from dancing waves to dark storms. Shelley also valued imagination as a vital part of poetry, exploring the unknown and expressing melancholy to highlight the darker aspects of human life. Additionally, like many romantic poets, he employed supernatural elements, using ghosts and spirits creatively. For example, in “Ode to the West Wind,” he envisions the wind as the essence of autumn, comparing fallen leaves to ghosts fleeing an enchanter. The vivid imagery enhances the emotional impact of his work, as seen in lines that express both beauty and suffering as evident in the following lines:

“Oh! Lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud

I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed

One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.”

Shelley poignantly conveys his melancholy, revealing his vulnerability through the comparison of life's challenges to the thorns of a flower, which inflict pain upon him. Once powerful and fierce like the west wind, he now finds himself subdued by life's adversities. In a yearning plea, he calls upon the west wind to elevate him like the clouds and leaves. The fusion of melancholy with natural imagery renders this stanza a rich expression for aficionados of romantic poetry, highlighting Shelley's masterful incorporation of romantic elements.

FINDINGS

The discussion provides a comprehensive analysis of the mindset of romantic poets, focusing on their distinctive engagement with nature, imagination, melancholy, and beauty. Unlike the neoclassical poets, who often prioritized logic, the Romantic period placed a premium on emotion and reader satisfaction, crafting works that deeply resonated with a diverse audience. These poets successfully appealed to all social classes, moving away from the elitist styles of the previous era, and fostering a profound connection with nature. Ultimately, the simplicity and emotional richness of romantic poetry significantly influenced readers, leaving a lasting impact on literary culture.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Wordsworth and Coleridge initiated the Romantic poetry journey with fresh perspectives, while Keats and P.B. Shelley elevated it, pleasing readers. Their contributions made the Romantic period resonate with all classes, emphasizing emotions and sensations. This era smoothly replaced the neo-classical period as readers embraced more positive vibes.

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