



Thematic Analysis of Poetry of Romantic Age

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Abstract : Romantic Age was the most fertile era for the poetry in English literature , as it deals with the great range of subjects because poets of this age were writing whatever they could imagine and in their own style. Emotions were given the foremost importance for the birth of poetry , for which William Wordsworth, pioneer of romantics, says , “poetry is the over spontaneous flow of the powerful emotions”. This paper deals with the different themes which prevailed in the poetry of romantic poets and describes how romantists made themselves different from the previous age of wit and reasoning.

Keywords : Romantics , Nature, Supernatural, Imagination, Hellenism and Poetic diction.

English Romanticism started around the mid eighteenth century and reached its culmination during the beginning of nineteenth century like their European counterparts the English Romantics supported the cause of the French Revolution and believed their literary works were revolutionary. The beginning and ending of Romantic era have many different dates, the Romantic period in English literature is dated beginning in 1785(death of Dr.Samuel) or alternatively in 1789 (outbreak of French Revolution) or in 1798 (the publication of William Wordsworth’s and S. T. Coleridge’s Lyrical Ballad) and as ending either in 1830 or else in 1832, the year in which Sir Walter Scott died and passage of the Reform Bill signalled the political preoccupations of the Victorian era or to accession of Victoria in 1837 and many extended it to the year of Wordsworth death i.e. 1850.

The following table is meant to convey a rough idea of the drift of poetry towards Romanticism in the table, the lateral position of the Title of a work gives an approximate estimate of its approach to the Romantic ideal. Such an estimate, especially in the

Date	Classical	Transitional	Romantic
1730	The Dunciad	The season	
1740	Epistle to Arbuthnott London		
1750	Vanity of Human Wishes	Night Thoughts Collins’ Odes	The Castle of Indolence
1760		Gray’s Elegy	
1770		The Traveller	Ossian
1780		The Deserted village	Chatterton’s Poems
1790		The Village	The Task Burn’s Poems Blake’s Poem

case of the transitional poems, cannot be determined absolutely, and need not be taken as final. The table nevertheless, reveals not only the steady drift but also the manner in which the different stages overlap

The Romantics discredited wit as against real poetic inspiration. Poetry to them did not mean just a set of smart gnomes but something inner and spiritual enlightening. Earlier poets like Pope and Dryden gave much more important to wit, reasoning for the creation of poetry and whose worth is entirely dependent on effective expression, a Pope writes,

True wit is Nature to advantage dress'd
 what opt was thought but ne'er so well expressed
 - Essay On criticism

But romantic poets such as Wordsworth emphasised the importance of imagination in the process of poetic creation. "For him(William Wordsworth) imagination was the most important gift that a poet can have and his arrangement of his own poems shows what he meant by it" Observes C.M Bowra, imagination to him was a divine power and in this Coleridge, agreed with him , he calls it "the vision and faculty divine"

The essence of Romanticism was, it must be remembered that literature must reflect all that is spontaneous and unaffected is nature and in man and be free to follow its own fancy in its own way. Even the lavishness of the Elizabethans can't excel that of this age. The development of new ideas brings fresh inspiration for poetry, and the poetical sky is bright with luminaries of the first magnitude. Due to this freedom , poetry of Romantic era witnessed a great range of subject matter and style of its own. Following are some important and dominating themes and features of Romantic poetry

Return to Nature - In the work of Cowper, Crabbe and Gray , the treatment is principally the simple chronicle and sympathetic observation of natural features. In the new race of poets, the observation becomes more matured and intimate. Notably in the case of Wordsworth, the feeling of nature rises to a passionate veneration that is love and religion too. To Wordsworth, nature is not only a procession of seasons and seasonal fruition , it is the eye of all things, natural and supernatural into which the observation soul can peer and behold the spirit that inhabits all things. Nature is thus amplified and glorified, it is to be sought not only in the flower and the fields but also in

the light of setting Suns
 find the round ocean and the living air
 find the blue sky and in the mind of man

far away from the busy city life, romantic poets' theme mainly associated with the nature, natural things and the rustic life of the village. They regarded it (nature) as a living and liberating force, as opposed to the utilitarian rationalist view nature. It was through nature they tried to establish communion with the entire world. Also, Keats protest against interference of scientific studies in the sensuous wealth of nature . He writes

There was a awful rainbow once in heaven
 We know her woof and texture; she is given
 In the dull catalogue of common things.

Also, Blake found man in "Chains" as for instance in London

In every cry of every man
 In every infants cry of fear
 In every voice, in every ban
 The mind- forg'd manacles I hear.

" Return to Nature" thus signified a return to natural liberty by snapping these "mind-forged manacle" Or "man made chains" William Wordsworth hailed the French Revolution as it was for him a step forward towards nature. Later however, when he realised that the revolution was not nature made but man made, he turned against it to seek comfort in the lap of real nature.

Imagination- According to Keats " The imagination may be likened to Adam's dream; he awoke and found it true" Imagination is a key term of Romanticism. This was a change from the mimetic theory (art as an imitation of the classical models) of art to

expressive theory (art as an creative expression) The Romantic thought of imagination as a dynamic, active and unifying faculty.

According to Horford, Romanticism was primarily “an extraordinary development of imaginative sensibility.” This imaginative sensibility opened up new vistas which were to be the wonder of both the poet and the reader alike. Blake who seems to have lived almost continuously in this visionary ecstasy affirmed that the ‘vegetable universe’ of phenomena is but a shadow of real world which is a imagination. Romantics backed imagination strongly against the earlier concept of mimetic theory. For then imagination is more primary than reasoning for the creation of poetry. “The poet”, says William Wordsworth, “is a man who do not only feels strongly but also thought long and deeply”. He is able to treat abstract things as if they were present i.e. he can imaginatively visualised objects which are not present before his eyes in their concrete form.

During the seventeenth century, the term ' imagination and fancy' had often been used in a vaguely synonymous manner to refer to the realm of fairy tales or make believe as Wimsatt and Brooks remark but in Biographia Literaria 1817 , Coleridge convincingly argued that fancy is different from imagination because it is more common. Coleridge calls fancy is mechanical process which receives the elementary images- ‘the fixities and definities’ which come to it ready made from senses where as imagination is able to “create” rather than merely reassemble by dissolving the fixities and definities. While explain the creative role of imagination he distinguished between primary and secondary imagination and termed secondary imagination to be poetic imagination.

Thus, where the neo-classicists projected only the cold light of reason on every object, the romantics looked at everything with the eyes of the imagination. Consequently the classicists were more realistic than the romantics in the ordinary sense. But the Romantic poets lived in the world of

“Forms more real than living man
nurslings of immortality”

Myths and Supernaturalism - Lyrical Ballads has been taken generally to mark the true beginning of the Romantic Movement, and in so far as it contained Coleridge's “Ancient Mariner ” it is indeed important in marking a significant development of the use of the supernaturalism in poetry. Coleridge's Supernaturalism however is neither shocking nor disgusting. It excited his wonder and he conveyed the feeling of wonder to his reader. This treatment of Supernaturalism is suggestive, delicate, refined, elegant, and eminently psychological. Even when Coleridge is describing something ordinary, he makes it suggestive or the supernatural. Lines like following represent Coleridge at his best and are perhaps unrivalled for their suggestiveness in the whole range of English poetry

A savage place, as holy and enchanted
As ever beneath a warning moon was haunted
By woman waiting for her demon lover.

Myths and ancient beliefs were the most attractive subject for the Romantic poets. In visions of the Daughter of Albion, America, Europe , Urizen, The Book of Ahania and the Song and Book of Los, The four Zoas , Milton and Jerusalem, Blake presented his fully developed mythology in order to give his view of man and his destiny. Full appreciation of Blake's prophetic Books is possible only to those who have worked out in detail his intricate system of myths and symbols. Blake was completely at odds with all official doctrines of his time, theological moral, political and esthetic.

Similarly, P.B.Shelley also chose such subject for his visionary, and prophetic work - Alaster or the Spirit of Solitude, The Revolt of Islam, Prometheus Unbounded and similar poems, we see the Shelleyan hero, a rebel against tyranny and a leader in the struggle which is to bring about ultimate happiness of humanity.

Medievalism and Hellenism- particularly in the poetry of second generation Romantic poets namely Byron, P. B. Shelley and John Keats, Medievalism and Hellenism is the most important theme. Romantic poets sought an escape into regions and state of being as far removed in time and space as possible. It is this love of the remote, the strange and the mysterious which introduced in them the interest in Middle Ages. Among these poets John Keats was the most fascinated with the middle ages and the Ancient Greece. He had no knowledge of Greek and little of Greece but none of his contemporaries was moved by the spirit of Greece, and none so skilfully captured the charm of its seaboard as did Keats in the passage

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
 To what the green altar, o mysterious priest,
 Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies
 And all the silken flaks with Garland drest?
 What little town by river or sea- shore,
 Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
 Is emptied to this folk, the pious morn ?
 And, little town, they streets for every more
 Will silent be, and not a soul to tell
 Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

-On a Grecian Urn.

Many of other poetry of Keats for example, Endymion, Ode to Psyche, Lamia and Hyperion etc. are highly influenced by Greek culture. Keats was the last great English poet to whom Greek mythology was a perpetual and living source not only of pleasure but of height and awareness of the natural world.

Poetic diction and metrical art - Apart from the philosophical difference the Romantics broke away from the traditional rules of literary style and subject matter. Their style was characterised by a preference for boldness over restraint, suggestiveness over clarity and freedom from the rules of composition genre and decorum. Wordsworth's views on poetical style are the most revolutionary of all ideas in his Preface to Lyrical Ballad. Discarding the "gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers". He insists that his poems contains little poetic diction and are written in "a selection of real language of man in a state of vivid sensation." William Wordsworth set himself to the speaking language of simple truth and of portraying man and nature as they are; and in this good work we are apt to miss the beauty of the passion, the intensity, that hide themselves under his simplest lines. The Romantic movement was a revolt not only against the concept of poetry held by the neo-classicists, it was also a revolt against traditional poetic measures. It sounded the death-knell of the Heroic Couplets which had reigned supreme upwards of a century. In his rejection of the Heroic Couplet also Coleridge represents the body of the romantic poets all of whom reverted to verse measures before Dryden and also invented some of their own. 'The Ancient Mariner' is couched in Ballad stanzas, in 'Christabel' he felt he had used an entirely "new principle" of prosody. Similarly Keats' style was even more distinctively his own and it has had a great effect on the later English poets, most notably on Tennyson and Pre-Raphaelites. Among the Romantic poets, Lord Byron's style was quite distinct from that of any other romantic poet. Always an admirer of Pope, though he lacked his finish and artistry, he never completely freed himself from poetic diction, personification and conventional epithets of previous age.

The theme and subject matter of romantic poetry was basically a reaction against the earlier periods. The Romantics strongly criticised the neo-classical vision of human life. The neo-classicists vision based on rational understanding of human life and universally applicable characteristics of human behaviour. The Romantic on the other hand favoured sentimental and individual description of human life. Below given a chart in which one can form an idea, at a glance, about the difference between classics and Romantics –

<i>Romantics</i>	<i>classics</i>
1. Emotional appeal	1. Appeal to reason
2. Subjective view point	2. Objective view point
3. Individual Approach	3. Typical Approach
4. Experimentation in expression	4. Clear and order expression and form. Belief in following precision
5. Dissatisfaction with the known	5. Suspicion of the unconventional and unknown
6. Quest for the unknown and	6. Adherence to the known and determined

Commented [1]:

the mysterious

Thus , the Romantic poets in their poetry seek an escape from the harsh realities , this “escape from actuality” was attempted by different romantic poets in different ways. Each invented an interesting and wondrous world of his own. Coleridge escaped to the world of the supernatural which was to him curiously exciting as well as satisfying. Keats was lost in the world of ancient Hellenic beauty . Byron twitched his nose at the whole world and lived in the make-believe world of his own egocentric creation. Of all the important romantic poets , it was Wordsworth who kept his feet firmly planted on the real world but even he looked at this world through the spectacles of romance , with the result that it excited his wonder in the same measure as the various imaginary worlds did that of the other romantic poets.

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