



A study on Romanticism in the works of Wordsworth and Coleridge

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ABSTRACT

Romanticism arrived in England towards the end of the French Revolution in the form of a strange, anonymously published volume of poetry called *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). This book ushered in an ambitious, new mode of poetic writing inspired by the same ideals, imbroglios, and follies of Enlightenment philosophy that spurred the architects of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.

Though it would take some time for the veil of anonymity surrounding *Lyrical Ballads* to dissolve, this co-authored book also announced the intense and not always harmonious intellectual collaboration of its creators, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge—both fervent adherents of the Revolution in their youth, both of whom, in different ways, would vociferously renounce that early passion after the bloodshed and hypocrisies of the Terror.

Grounded in a mixture of forbidding archaisms and vulgar vernaculars (rather than in the artful, high-flown language that had characterized much of eighteenth-century poetry), *Lyrical Ballads* was an explicitly experimental project—and an explicitly radical one—that engineered new and often irregular forms to suit its explorations of rural life, poverty, the natural, the “supernatural,” and modes of imagination, political and otherwise.

KEYWORDS:

Romantic, Nature, Poem



INTRODUCTION

Beginning with this landmark text and traveling through extracts of Wordsworth's Prelude, Coleridge's Biographia Litter aria, and occasional poems by both figures, this course will trace the complicated relationship between these poets—with special attention to the formal and political transformations that suffuse their work—and introduce students to crucial questions in the study of Romantic literature: In what ways does the radical imagination of Romanticism form and deform itself out of the upheavals of the French Revolution? What, moreover, does it mean to talk about the politics of Romantic poetry? What can reading Wordsworth and Coleridge in tandem teach us about Romanticism's philosophical constructions of solitude and sociality, nature and aesthetics? How and why did these poets resist or revise Enlightenment ideals of reason? And how should we understand the phenomenon we call Romanticism in all its contradictions?

In addition to poetry and prose by Wordsworth and Coleridge, the course will feature supplemental materials in the form of contemporary literary criticism and intellectual contexts from the period, including works by Berkeley, Burke, Kant, Rousseau, and Wollstonecraft.

When England began her mighty work of reform literature suddenly developed a new creative spirit as evident in the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats, and in the prose of Scott, Jane Austen, Lamb, and De Quincey. Even as the old institutions seemed crumbling with the Bastille, Coleridge and Southey dreamt of an ideal commonwealth, in which the principles of More's Utopia should be put in practice and Wordsworth wrote, —Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very heaven! (‘The French Revolution as It Appeared to Enthusiasts at Its Commencement’, 5-6).

Romanticism in English Literature can be said to have begun with the publication of lyrical Ballads by William Wordsworth and S.T Coleridge. In the ‘Preface’ to the second edition of lyrical Ballads Wordsworth described poetry as —the spontaneous overflow of



powerful feelings, a premise that can be read as the touchstone of romantic poetry. The Romantic movement was preceded by several related developments in the preceding century marked by the new appreciation of medieval romance from which the movement derived its name. The medieval romance was a tale or ballad boasting of chivalric adventure, individual heroism and exotic locales; it was also a contrast to the prevailing classical forms of literature with emphasis on contrived, formal elegance.

The first phase of the Romantic movement as seen in Germany was characterized by novelty in terms of content and style with emphasis on the mystical, the subconscious and the supernatural. The proponents of the phase included Holderlin, Goethe and Schelling. The second phase of the Romantic movement (1805-1830) was underscored by its attentiveness to national origins, imitation of native folklore, folk ballads and poetry, folk dance and music and the previously ignored medieval and Renaissance works as apparent in the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott. It was in this phase that English Romantic poetry is seen reaching its zenith with the works of Keats, Byron and Shelley. A byproduct of the interest in the exotic, the far and the remote is the _gothic, distinguished further by the supernatural as obvious in the works of Mary Shelley, C.R Maturin, Marquis de Sade, E.T.A Hoffman etc. By the 1820s the movement had spread throughout Europe represented by exploring the historical and cultural inheritance of individual nations and exceptional individuals, exemplified by the works of Thomas De Quincey, William Hazlitt and the Bronte sisters in England.

The essence of Romanticism was that literature must reflect all that is spontaneous and unaffected in nature and in man and reflect the same. Imagination, being elevated as the supreme faculty of mind, perceived as the ultimate creative power, helping to constitute reality, as much depended on perception. British literary critic Marilyn Butler (1981) cites M.H Abrams as echoing Schlegel's argument in his book *The Mirror and Lamp* (1953) when he argues about the difference between the Romantic writer and the eighteenth century writer.



Wordsworth completed *The Prelude* in 1805 but the record of his development as a poet that ran into fourteen books was published only in 1850 after his death as he thought it was unprecedented for a poet to dwell so much upon himself unless put in an appropriate context. *The Prelude* was thus intended to be a part of a broader philosophical work titled *The Recluse*, a work divided into three parts, which unfortunately could not be completed due to failing inspiration. *The Excursion* was another section of this work though it was published in 1814.

Romanticism in the works of Wordsworth and Coleridge

Wordsworth had five children with Mary Hutchinson. He underwent a phase of emotional upheaval with the death of his brother in 1805 and the estrangement from Coleridge in 1810 followed by the death of his children Catherine and Thomas in 1812. In the year 1828 Wordsworth and Coleridge reconciled and toured the Rhineland together. In 1838 Durham and Oxford University conferred upon him the honorary Doctor of Civil Law degree.

The family reached financial security with Wordsworth's securing a position as Distributor of Stamps in Westmorland. Though Wordsworth continued to write but in the period between 1820-1850 he published little except the volumes, *Yarrow Revisited* in 1831 and *The Borderers* in 1842. In 1850 he suffered an attack of pleurisy confining him to bed for a month. He died on April 13, 1850. *The Prelude* was published in the same year.

The Romantic Movement had for its political background the French Revolution and the developing Industrial Revolution in England that changed the physical appearance and the social structure of the country, with new notions of psychology and philosophy adding to the turmoil. The era of a complete break from the past had crept in silently and it was the Romantic poets who first took on the cudgels of change, refusing to adhere to the earlier eighteenth century view that it was the polite society that made men capable of civilized achievements. It was also a time when areas of imagination and sensibility also started getting explored.



Wordsworth can be read in the light of Ecocriticism. [Ecocriticism has been defined as —the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty 1996). According to Ursula K. Heise , Ecocriticism —analyzes the ways in which literature represents the human relation to nature at particular moments of history, what values are assigned to nature and why, and how perceptions of the natural shape literary tropes and genres. In turn, it examines how such literary figures contribute to shaping social and cultural attitudes toward the environment (Heise, 1999).]

Wordsworth not only explores the idea of nature and the non-human world as an integral part of the human world but also celebrates the harmonizing, rejuvenating and regenerating features of the natural world. His works become more relevant for ‘Green Reading’ as he also gives an insight into the background of the economical changes, effecting the topography of England, hinting about the shift in the religious sentiments during the time, and its effect on humans; taking them farther away from the —present embodied in Nature, into the realm of the —here after. Basil Willey (1960) observes that Wordsworth’s poetic ideas especially his leanings toward Nature can be traced to the deistic tradition of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The emotion of the ‘numinous’ formerly associated with super nature, had become attached to nature herself and by the end of the eighteenth century the divinity, the sacredness of nature was, to those affected by this tradition, almost a first datum of consciousness.

For Wordsworth nature becomes more of a living being than an inanimate object of admiration. Pulling it from the background to the very focus of relationship, Nature for Wordsworth acts more like a friend and companion. Wordsworth’s philosophy of Nature sees humans not severed from Nature but as her integral part. In his poem ‘Intimations of Immortality from Recollection of Early Childhood’ (1807) Wordsworth sees childhood as a phase in which humans are extremely sensitive to all natural influences, an epitome of gladness and beauty of the world.



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Beginning with this landmark text and traveling through extracts of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, Coleridge’s *Biographia Litteraria*, and occasional poems by both figures, this course will trace the complicated relationship between these poets—with special attention to the formal and political transformations that suffuse their work—and introduce students to crucial questions in the study of Romantic literature: In what ways does the radical imagination of Romanticism form and deform itself out of the upheavals of the French Revolution? What, moreover, does it mean to talk about the politics of Romantic poetry? What can reading Wordsworth and Coleridge in tandem teach us about Romanticism’s philosophical constructions of solitude and sociality, nature and aesthetics? How and why did these poets resist or revise Enlightenment ideals of reason? And how should we understand the phenomenon we call Romanticism in all its contradictions?



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Romanticism is a difficult term to define as it stands for several things together. For instance, it has been associated with the word ‘romance’ of the mediaeval period which had a certain feeling of remoteness and a faraway atmosphere particularly regarding the landscape, fields of tearing and bravery, chivalry; belief in supernatural, chance and magic; women worship etc. Hence, originally the word ‘romantic’ signified the qualities in these semi-historical cycles, such as, “far-fetched and opposed to fact.” In the late 17th and 18th centuries, the term connoted “wild, extravagant and improbable”. The diarists Evelyn and Pepys used it in the sense of Gothic, that is, “irregular, wild and fantastic”.

It is strange that the poets now known as ‘Romantic poets’, such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats did not call themselves ‘Romantic’. This term was attached to them later in the 19th century. Wordsworth had considered ‘romantic’ as something “extravagant, excessive, and even undesirable”.

Towards the end of the 18th century there was a new dawn. The teachings of Rousseau, Montesquieu and Voltaire along with the French Revolution heralded a new age. Once more, like the Renaissance, a new vista opened out before Imagination that discovered a new territory of human life. ‘Liberty Fraternity and Equality’, the watch-words of the Revolution, ushered in a golden age. Mother Earth was discovered anew. All this revived in literature that same hopefulness, humanism and curiosity that characterized the Elizabethan Age.

In the age of Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats, there was a revival of the passionate-ness and restlessness, the same sense of wonder and mystery that characterized the Elizabethans. The Romantics revived the spirit as well as the forms and subjects of Elizabethan literature—the sonnet, the lyric, the pastoral, the blank verse drama, the Spenserian stanza and



the ballad. The great Elizabethans' richness of language, fullness of imagination, lyricism, picturesqueness, and the vastness of conception became inspiration for Romanticism poetry.

Historically, the 'Romantic Revival of Poetry' was a revival of the Elizabethan traditions and a revolt against the new-classical traditions of the eighteenth century. The Classicism of Augustan literature was of a special type:

Europe's literary taste was fashioned by France. Malherbe and Boileau, the French critics, insisted upon cultivating simplicity, clarity, prosperity, decorum, moderation and, above all, good sense. They applied the precepts of Aristotle, as codified by Horace and Longinus, to modern conditions. For over a century, German and English literature remained under the influence of Moliere, Racine and Boileau. British authors like Cowley, Etherege and Waller came under their influence during Charles II's exile in France.

CONCLUSION

The Classical poets lived in the present. Whereas, the Romanticism poets looked before and after and pined for what was not. Passion and emotion was re-infused into Romantic poetry. The early 19th century poets revolted against the narrow-mindedness and narrow civic sense of the classical school. For classical authors like Alexander Pope, the proper study for mankind was man in London. The Romanticism poets' love of man embraced the whole human race. 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity' was their slogan. They were firm believers in cosmopolitanism both in theory as well as in practice. Byron died for a country to which he had no national attachment; Shelley was more at home in Italy and Keats 'was of no nation whatsoever'.

Therefore, Romantic poetry is also called the poetry of Romantic Revolt. All the characteristics of Romantic Poetry mentioned above predominate in the works of Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron and Keats. They were contemporaries for near contemporaries.



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