

# Romanticism – coleridge

Literature



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Social and historical contexts of any time are influential in the formation of paradigms, which are then reflective in the immediate texts of that time, but also present impressionable ways of thinking that effectively imprint upon the minds of modern audiences. Whether it be contemporary criticism or adulation, there remains a high esteem for texts that were born from certain social circumstances, which become contextually significant in their insightful character, illuminating audiences about changing ideologies that shaped an era's literature. Though contexts differ from the time of composition to the time of interpretation, parallels will still be drawn, becoming an avenue for understanding those paradigms that evolved human thought and sensibilities.

This perception is certainly applicable to the remarkable literature produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by extensive social changes, which influenced the emergence of the revolutionary movement of Romanticism. Redefining the fundamental ways in which people thought about themselves and their world, Romanticism saw the paradigm shift from the Enlightenment emphasis on rationalism and science, introducing a shift in ideals towards insight through subjective reflection and sentiment. The rebellious spirit of the French Revolution and the dominance of the manufacturing industry caused by the Industrial Revolution repulsed the Romantics and they channeled their opposition through written expression.

Romantic texts born in this context are studied because of their capacity to unveil the radical ways of thinking and contextual paradigms that influenced composers. Modern scholars still seek new values within intensely analysed texts. M. Scrivener asserts in his article, *Inside and Outside Romanticism* that

regardless of whether the goals of contemporary interpreters have changed, there is still an enthusiasm to read Romantic texts, to better understand the context and influences upon composers: ‘ We are still within Romanticism, despite the strenuous efforts to propel us out of its gravitational force... our world is still shaped by Romantic assumptions...’

An examination of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Romantic poems, *This Lime Tree Bower My Prison* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* portrays the enduring paradigms that were shaped and have shaped ideologies through composition and interpretation. Christina Rossetti’s poem, *Goblin Market*, similarly brings to the forefront Christian paradigms that were dominant in the nineteenth century. Another influential text, Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* satirically presents a Gothic romance, influenced by Charlotte Lennox’s novel, *The Female Quixote* that offered an informative commentary on Victorian gender roles, notions of which were evolving through the late eighteenth and nineteenth century.

Coleridge’s poetry rejected neo-classicism, detailing the central paradigms of Romanticism: individual experiences, nature, idealism, and imagination. Influenced by philosophies of Platonism, Kant, Locke, and new German idealism Coleridge’s poetry reflected Christian Pantheism and spirituality. Although Coleridge was outraged by the carnage of the French Revolution, he was experimental with poetic style, mirroring the revolutionary tide in Romanticism’s political paradigms, using language as ‘ a new source of freedom’.

The Romantic ideologies presented by Coleridge remain impressionable to this day due to the remarkable sentiments he captures in his conversational

poems, particularly the desire to return to an intangible, idealised state of autonomy through affliction. This is apparent in *This Lime Tree Bower My Prison*, where the persona physically confined and in despondency, 'here in captivity I must remain...I have lost all Beauties and feelings,' overcomes the confines of his captivity, learning to celebrate the beauty of nature through the imagination.

Coleridge experiences an epiphany: 'A delight comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad as I myself were there!' He promoted the concept that in instances when the physical body is confined, human imagination can prevail over the corporeal restrictions with its power. Influenced greatly by Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), Coleridge sought to represent the doctrine of Pantheism in his poem; examining the notion of humanity as inextricably intertwined with Nature and the divine, becoming what he referred to as 'One Life'. This concept is best shown in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

Epitomising Coleridge's complex philosophical shifts, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* features a voyage of discovery in the boundless world of the imagination. Coleridge rejected the rational ideas of classical writers to present a message about sin and retribution through love and penance for wrong. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is an explicit commentary regarding the significance of religion. The killing of the albatross is the embodiment of religious negligence and the Mariner suffers the consequences.

Coleridge argued that human weakness can be eradicated through discovering God in Nature. This Pantheistic doctrine fashioned Coleridge's poem, an express outcome of his worship for the universe as divine and the

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earth as sacred. He abandoned the orthodox Christian conviction of man as immoral, saved by God's mercy and God himself seen as greater than men, rather believing that there was unity in man, nature and God.

The importance of religion is confirmed by the detail that the Mariner's recounting takes place at a wedding. Weddings are religiously understood as sacred and heralding new beginnings and it seems fitting that the Mariner stops a Wedding-Guest and tells his tale at such a setting. The Mariner's moral lesson shapes the course of the poem with observations like "The ancient Mariner inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen", leading readers to acknowledge that the Mariner has committed a disgraceful act. As the "Albatross begins to be avenged", the Mariner endures the consequences, particularly the agony of thirst: 'Water, water, everywhere, Nor any drop to drink.' The Mariner spends his life working to atone for the sin - 'The man hath penance done, And penance more will do' and his closing comments stress the moral values which he reiterates throughout:

'He prayeth best, who loveth best All things both great and small; For the dear God who loveth us, He made and loveth all...'

The religious commentary offered by Coleridge is shaped by the historical context, specifically the atrocities of the French Revolution as well as the swing in attitude from the conservatism of the Church to belief in the omnipresence of God in Nature. The portrayal of these Romantic ideologies not only had an influence on texts of the Victorian Era, but ensured that 'genealogies of contemporary literary culture cannot skip over Romanticism'.

Religious paradigms also influenced Christina Rossetti's poem *Goblin Market* that like *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a profound allegory about temptation and salvation. Through the misadventures of two sisters' - Lizzie and Laura with goblins, Rossetti presented Christian ideologies through the 'forbidden fruit' motif, symbolising the Goblin fruit as a metaphor for sexual pleasures.

Rossetti presented an ideal illustration of the precariousness of indulgence. Laura yields to the temptation of the Goblin fruit - "you cannot think what figs, My teeth have met in" and later pines "in a passionate yearning." This circumstance is akin to the Mariner's in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* where he indulges in killing the albatross and faces agonising consequences, yearning for a drop of water like Laura who longs for more fruit after the initial indulgence. The effect of the intense longing is shown to be fatal, but Laura is saved by Lizzie, who is depicted as a Christ like figure.

When she seeks remedial Goblin fruit for Laura, the Goblins: "... Trod and hustled her, Elbowed and jostled her, ... Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking, Tore her gown and soiled her stocking,..."

Lizzie's emblematic Christ like status becomes obvious from the quote as Rossetti compares the Goblins' acts of degradation to the torture Christ endured before his crucifixion. The Christian theme of 'redemption' is unmistakable, with Laura portrayed as a 'fallen woman' - immoral. Stringent social ideologies of the nineteenth century deemed fallen women as social outcasts, unable to move beyond the stigma, however, Laura challenges this notion with her eventual redemption. Lizzie's sacrificial actions reflect ideologies presented by the emerging Feminist Movement and she is

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depicted to be fighting for the freedom of women within her society against the patriarchal system of ostracism. *Goblin Market* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* are similar in their portrayal of fall and redemption. The two texts also resemble each other in the sense that they are both anticlimactic allegories. Mrs. Charles E. Norton asserts that *Goblin Market* may: "vie with Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner', ... for the vivid power by which things unreal and mystic link themselves with the everyday images and events of common life".

This *Lime Tree Bower My Prison*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Goblin Market*, prove that religious ideologies played a significant role in shaping nineteenth century society and thus the texts that came out of it. Modern critics are still trying to understand the different meanings that the poems offer, such is the quality of the concepts and expression. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* has especially puzzled many, with scholars questioning the Neo-platonic beings and events in parts five and six, in which the Mariner loses consciousness and his ship returns home inexplicably.

Walter Jackson Bate comments: "while as a whole [the poem] is so open in what it suggests, much of what the classical critic would call its 'machinery' seems deceptively closed and specific, crying out for allegorical interpretation." Coleridge's poetry has withstood two centuries of analysis and scholars are still fascinated by the different values presented by modern readings, interpreting the poem as a Christian parable to a political allegory. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is also valuable to contemporary scholars due to its contextual significance, its exemplification of the shift in attitude

towards Christian conservatism to Pantheism, which became a shaping force in nineteenth century literature.

Similarly influenced by the social context of the Victorian Age, Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, remains one of the leading satirical works. Austen critically examines the popularity of gothic romances, while subtly satirising the values of the bourgeoisie and the social paradigms of the patriarchal society, looking closely at the oppressive practices against women. Women in the Victorian Era were not expected to develop informed opinions and decisions but rather to attract a wealthy husband and assume a passive role within marriage.

Austen's heroine, Catherine Morland represents those women who tragically achieve pitiable autonomy through self-knowledge and within marriage. Catherine acquires control of her wild imagination but Austen satirises the disparity in social standards for female and male misbehaviour, notable at the conclusion as Frederick and John retain their pride while Isabella is humiliated, losing both suitors. Therefore, Austen's belief of marriage is not one of complete cynicism or an approval of the status quo, rather that only those who have a sensible view of love, have their successful conclusions.

Gothic fiction, which was increasingly becoming popular, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was a key feature of the Romantic Movement. Austen was influenced by this facet and by the Gothic romance, Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which was the foundation of the Gothic genre at the time. Austen parodies the melodramatic elements and improbable occurrences in Gothic novels through Catherine, who becomes fascinated with the more absurd elements. Catherine imagines the worst



aspects of the Gothic novel regarding the Abbey – an atrocious murder, concealed compartments and the ubiquitous storm.

In contrast to the typical Gothic heroine, Austen portrays Catherine far more ordinarily. There is nothing exceptional about her, having no heroic qualities except reading: ‘...from fifteen to seventeen she was in training for a heroine; she read all such works as heroines must read to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable ...in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives’.

Austen asserts that Gothic novels are pure fiction and not about real people, places or true ‘human nature’. After Catherine understands this, she was resolved, ‘of always judging and acting in future with the greatest good sense’ Northanger Abbey encourages reader to compromise between the extremes of Romanticism and the privileging of reason in Classicism.

Austen diverged from the Romantics by taking a less emotive approach to her work, basing her philosophic approach on a more realistic foundation with characters having a deep-seated morality structured on Christian ethics and a traditionalist approach to life. This is evident in Henry’s statement to Catherine, ‘we are English, that we are Christians’. However, Austen does adopt Romanticism’s concern with suppression of women, advocating ‘the possibility of freedom and happiness’ through mutual respect instead of assuming ‘concealment, repression and accommodation’

Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* influenced Austen, a subtle eighteenth-century text, seeking to dismiss the romance convention as illusory; it is a commentary on Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. A critique

of Cervantes' idealism, the novel has also been read as a feminist interpretation on the consequences of women's estrangement from male society. Austen's Catherine is similar to Lennox's heroine, Arabella whose study of historical romances misleads her. The novel's primary concern is the negative consequences of romance novels on a woman's moral judgment. Lennox presents a didactic message that the values intrinsic in archetypal romances are only idealistic. She demonstrates this paradoxically, by portraying a heroine, deluded by romance. Many critics support this interpretation: Laurie Langbauer asserts, " Arabella's excesses of behavior reflect what is wrong with romance . . . The Female Quixote shows that romance is excessive fiction, so excessive that it is nonsensical..."

However, modern critics interpret this as not an attempt to oust romance, but to conserve it. Lennox's attention to this theme was directed by the rise of the Feminist Movement with the likes of Mary Wollstonecraft advocating ideologies of female individuality and equality. Lennox seeks to convey this through Arabella who challenges the Victorian ideals of women being powerless, displaying great authority however, without any awareness of doing so. Arabella asserts:

" 'Tis very certain, my Beauty has produced very deplorable Effects . . . but you must observe, that my Will has no Part in the Miseries, that unfortunate Beauty occasions . . . by a fatal Necessity, all these Things will happen whether I would or not"

Critics have noted an obvious correlation between *The Female Quixote* and *Northanger Abbey*, specifically in the fact that both texts rejected the romance tradition:

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“ Lennox and Austen sought to make a clean break with their romantic precursors... The Female Quixote became standard and when Northanger Abbey came along, critics applauded it as a similar rejection of the ‘ women’s’ romance of its author’s predecessors.’

The Female Quixote and Northanger Abbey are appreciated for their perceptive mockery of romance novels, elucidating audiences about the repressive conditions that women of the Victorian Age experienced. These texts have remained popular because readers are able to identify those paradigms that fashioned texts like The Female Quixote and Northanger Abbey.

Literature presents an opportunity to connect with those concepts of the past that have moulded contemporary ways of thinking, privileging precious insight about the social and cultural paradigms that progressed human thought. Composers constructed from their contexts, texts that enable readers to understand a time that is not their own. This is made obvious by Coleridge who promotes Pantheistic ideologies of Romanticism, emergent in the historical context of the French and Industrial Revolutions while Rossetti uses biblical allusions to portray Christian paradigms, signifying the importance of religious ideologies in the shaping of the texts composed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The Female Quixote and Northanger Abbey also emphasise the influence of social and historical contexts on literature, reflecting ideologies of Feminism and opposing the established beliefs of Victorian gender roles. Such iconic texts have emerged from an era, charged by turbulent change, which

shaped noteworthy paradigms, and thus unforgettable literature that contemporary audiences