

Self and imagination in romanticism

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The Romantic era is denoted by an extensive questioning and expression of challenging notions building on the convictions of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment challenged the Christian Orthodoxy which had dominated Europe for 1, 000 years. Romanticism proposed an exploration of self, emphasising the primacy of the individual and a vision of humankind animated by the imagination, endorsing a reverence and personal connection to nature. The set texts *Fancy* and *Ode to a Nightingale* explore a world created by imagination, emphasising the importance of reflection and sustaining a relationship with nature.

Northanger Abbey however, examines the interplay between reason and imagination. The related text *Thanatopsis* possesses tropes of Dark Romanticism, depicting humanity's curiosity of the supernatural whilst Beethoven's works analyse the expression of intense emotion and nature as a moral force. A propensity for self analysis and introspection is a feature of Romanticism. This notion gained impetus as a response to the Neo-Classicist belief that humans were created as social beings, designed to conform to the status quo and abide by tradition.

As well as a defiance against social duty and personal discipline, an emphasis on the individual came about as a result of anti-establishmentism. Closely connected to the Romantics' rejection of the artificial was a growing opposition to established institutions such as the monarchy and the Church. Paul Brians, an American Scholar stated " The idea that the best path to faith is through individual choice, the idea that the government exists to serve individuals who have created it... are products of the Romantic celebration of the individual at the expense of society and tradition. Social conventions and

acceptable barometers of behaviour are questioned through the responders' identification with protagonists who are marginalised or 'different'. This is seen through the characterisation of Emily Bronte's, Heathcliff and Mary Shelley's, *Monster*. Romantic ideologues, in contrast to Neo-Classicists, valued the solitary state and the unique qualities of an individual's mind rather than the outer social world. Romanticism encouraged the creative exploration of the inner self and praised unconventionality.

Such focus is shown through the continual use of first-person lyrical poems. This technique is prevalent in Keats' works, particularly in his poem *Ode to a Nightingale*. Keats questions "Do I wake or sleep?" - his proclivity toward direct voice accentuates the importance of self reflection and moulds reader response. Keats describes the archetypal outsider - an obsessive, egocentric man of extremes who is disenchanted with life. These periods of deep introspection highlight the importance placed on feelings and creative contemplation.

For the Romantics, objective outlook is inundated by a new focus on the individual and the subconscious. The Romantic emphasis on introspection and imaginative reflection is critiqued in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* through the characterisation of the protagonist, Catherine Morland. Catherine is described as an atypical Gothic heroine - "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her to be born an heroine" - and through her reflections and fanciful Gothic delusions, the composer highlights how imaginings hinder personal growth and objective outlook.

Through dramatic irony, Austen derides these fantasies and demonstrates how they conflict with everyday realities. The composer suggests that a love for Gothic literature, or the supernatural - found in the contemporary texts of her time as a Romantic concept - contributes to impaired judgment and unworldliness. Through the growth of the antagonists in her story, Austen describes social pretension and unlike the concerns of Gothic literature, tells of a natural evil rather than the bizarre, macabre story lines of Gothic texts.

Austen criticises the notion of the supernatural, but reinforces the Romantic ideal that personal freedom is of more importance than complying with social mores as depicted in the expulsion of Catherine from the Abbey. The scene of General Tilney's dismissal of Catherine uncovers a dark, secretive side of human psychology, parallel to the villainous figures in Gothic novels, particularly Radcliffian works. Through plot development, Austen reveals that Gothic texts are an imaginative delineation of a mundane evil found within everyday society and hence, contribute to an understanding of the Romantic ideal of individualism.

Romanticism fostered the idea that the ideal world that was conjured up by the imagination was more real than the material world and that the metaphysical or transcendental spiritual reality that was conjured by the senses and the imagination had more authenticity. Romantics believed that 'Fancy' was crucial to the expansion of the human mind and spirit. Keats frequently references the imagination as a source of elation and exhilaration, his poem *Fancy* focusing on how the creative power of the mind can enhance the human experience and impart immortality. She will bring, in spite of frost,/ Beauties that the earth hath lost;" Keats implies that Fancy is a way of

preserving feelings and periods, providing an escape from the bitterness of a Romantic ideologue's reality. The philosopher Emmanuel Kant acknowledged imagination as the source of order and Friedrich Von Schelling argued that imagination had " a divine quality that was triggered by the generating power of the universe. " The divine was quintessential to Romantic ideology, Romantics striving for perfectibility which they felt was only achieved through nature.

The height of imaginative experience is the concept of the sublime. Crucial to the full expression of imagination, the sublime was the cause of awe and terror. Nature's rugged beauty and power was seen as both a source of jealousy and inspiration evident in William Cullen Bryant's *Thanatopsis*. " The planets, all the infinite host of heaven,/Are shining on the sad abodes of death" describes nature as a transcendental force that surpasses the limitations of the superficial world. The importance of the sublime was stressed as a result of pantheism which saw nature as a powerful, untamed force to be worshipped.

Pantheism came about as a response to deism and its rational view of the world as being ordered, possessing mechanistic patterns and laws. Deism supported the idea that social order was hierarchal and that human existence was divinely ordered and sanctioned. Romantics however, shared the belief that reality was organic and without any set order. Romanticism brought forward the idea that with Nature lay an ideal state, free from the artificial aspects and constraints of civilisation. To be alone in wild, lonely places was for the Romantics to be near to heaven.

This is obvious in Beethoven's works, particularly Moonlight Sonata, which is known to be a musical delineation of the night sky. Nature was described by the Romantics as innocent and virtuous, an entity that could not be tainted by the wrongs of humanity. In this way, Beethoven depicts the morality of nature through his delicate harmonies and the employment of adagio, creating a tone of gentleness. The composer uses the musical techniques of dolce and legato to pacify his audience.

The Romantic idea that nature was a moral force and guideline was used by Beethoven to criticise the French Revolution. Beethoven's 5th piano concerto, known as The Emperor, was a political statement inspired by the ideas of justice and freedom as a result of his disillusionment with Napoleon. The idea of liberation and independence was central to Romantic ideals, a notion which came about as a response to middle and lower-class oppression and society's hindrance of self-expression.

Through their interpretations, whether they literary or musical, Romantics found within nature a means of expressing themselves. The universe was seen as mysterious, ruled by hidden, dark and supernatural forces. This is evident in the prevalence of references to the Exotic and Gothic in Romantic texts. Keats' *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* tells of a woman of supernatural beauty, describing her as "a faery's child" implying the seductress is other-worldly. This fascination with the Exotic was a response to the novelty of international exploration.

Romantics had an obsession with other cultures different either in time or distance: the old and the primitive (Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn* a perfect example of how the ancient influenced Romantic texts through his frequent

references to ancient Greece as he describes “ Tempe or the dales of Arcady? ”), Oriental, alien, vanished or Gothic. Following naturally from the Romantic interest with the old and exotic was an attraction to the supernatural and bizarre as seen in Gothicism. Gothicism was the preoccupation with the supernatural, influenced by a desire to defy the God-fearing Catholic Church.

Examples of its relevance in Romantic texts can be seen in Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* and Bryant’s *Thanatopsis*. Bronte writes of “ spectres” whilst Bryant writes of “ His favourite phantom” portraying the Romantic predilection to the paranormal. The complex concepts of self and imagination are analysed by the ideologues of the Romantic era through their subversion of the conventional measures of behaviour and their defiance against the traditional notions of the Enlightenment. These ideas formed the basis of the Romantic period and hence dominate Romantic texts.