

Poets of romantic era: history and literary works

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Romantic era was a literary, intellectual and artistic movement started as a reaction against neoclassicism and industrial revolution which rejected all the classical norms and traditions in literature. It started by the mid eighteenth century and remained till the mid nineteenth century. It all started with the French revolution. The motto of French Revolutionists based on the thoughts of two great French philosophers Jean Jacques Rousseau and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was liberty, equality and fraternity on political and social level. The first Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge went to France to witness the revolution from close quarters. They were greatly inspired by the ideas of French revolution and on their return to England brought those ideas in literature. In 1798, they jointly wrote a collection of poems “ lyrical ballads” which marked the beginning of romanticism in English literature.

About the same time, industrialization in England was at its full pace that of course brought with itself some serious drawbacks along with the benefits. The poor of the time were exploited to their full. Their worth was estimated through their efficiency level. The Romantics rebelled against the atrocities of Industrialization with their full might. They unleashed their pens to fight Industrialization. They were people with sensitive personalities and felt the wickedness of the mechanization. They stirred the dormant spirit of the people of that time with their poetry. They highlighted the darker aspects of Industrialization. These poets are divided into two generations. William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge come in the first generation while Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, and Lord Byron come in the second wave of Romantic poetry. Since the romantic poets were greatly

inspired by the freedom movement, their themes of poetry were also new at that time and for the fact of their liberal approach in every aspect, almost all the romantic poets have written on different themes.

Imagination is a common theme among all romantic poets. It served as the arch stone of Romanticism. Coleridge saw imagination as the supreme poetic quality, a divine power that made the poet a god like being. William Blake writes, “ One power alone makes a poet: Imagination, the divine vision”. Sincerity came from the core of heart of the poets. William Wordsworth writes, “ You feel strongly, trust to those feelings, and your poem will take its shape and proportion as a tree does from the vital principles that actuates it”. Besides imagination, other most themes of romantic poetry are peculiar to each writer.

Child labour was most common in England during industrialization. Children were forced to work in factories for long hours. They were ill fed and were paid much lower than the adults. William Blake although considered by many as a pre romantic poet for he was a bit earlier than Wordsworth and Coleridge was no doubt a true romantic in spirit. He protested against the abuses of child labour. He, with the gift of his poetry, highlighted the evils of mechanized society of his time. Blake severely criticised the abuse of children who worked in the chimneys. For this, he published a poem entitled as, “ The Chimney Sweeper”. In it Blake states:

“ When my mother died I was very young,

And my father sold me while yet my tongue

Could scarcely cry “ ‘ weep! ‘ weep! ‘ weep! weep!”

So your chimneys I sweep and in soot I sleep.”

The first version of this poem speaks from “ Songs of Innocence” and in this, the poet or the narrator, in the shape of a child, tells us how he was sold by his father when he was very young. He was sold to work in the factories. This poem emphasizes on the innocence of children by comparing them to lambs. They are finally rescued from the horrific place of factory by an angel and taken into green meadows. Along with the escape of the children, we get a hint of Blake’s love and praise for nature. The children can be assumed as people and the angel as nature. Thus, the people of Industrial Revolution could only be saved from its evil by the angelic nature thought William Blake.

William Wordsworth is one of the real founding fathers of romanticism in English poetry. Many consider the date of publication of “ Lyrical Ballads” that is 1798 as the birth of romanticism. In his “ Lyrical Ballads”, Wordsworth along with S. T Coleridge broke most of the rules for writing poetry that existed before romanticism. Conventional meter, rhyming scheme and outdated themes were neglected with full vigor and an attempt for new was made which was welcomed with high zeal.

His poetry was mainly concerned with the beauty and charm of nature. He treated nature as a god. For him, it was a source of inspiration. He used to seek guidance from it. In his prelude, he seeks muse from nature (unlike in the traditional epics in which poets seek muse from divine spirits). He also treated nature as his parent. In his Prelude, he says that nature teaches him

with the agents of fear and reward. According to him, the main cause of the sufferings of humanity was just because of their seclusion from nature. He warned the people of his age that they had become materialistic and were running after money just because of the curse of Industrialism. They were not human anymore as they worked like machines and their only aim was to accumulate as much wealth as they could. He asked the people to have a close communion with nature. Nature would solve their mental sufferings and in this way he treated nature as a healer also.

Wordsworth lived for most part of his life in the country sides of England. He is also known by the name of “ Lake Poet” as he was born in Lake District. He travelled to many parts of the European continent to experience the nature from close quarters. He not only enjoyed the tranquil nature but also the fierce form of nature. These included mountains, streams, waterfalls, wind, etc. About nature, he writes in one of his poems “ The Daffodils”:

“ I wandered lonely as a cloud

That floats on high o’er vales and hills,

When all at once I saw a crowd,

A host, of golden daffodils;

Beside the lake, beneath the trees,

Fluttering and dances in the breeze.....

.... Ten thousand saw I at a glance,

Tossing their heads in sprightly dance...

... A poet could not but be gay,

In such a jocund company.”

Thus, Wordsworth extracted serenity from the charming scenes of nature. It had a magical effect on him.

From this poem we can also get a hint of his view of poetry. Wordsworth defines poetry in the following words, “ Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions recollected in tranquility”. In this poem he describes how the remembrance of the scene of daffodils charms him and helps him compose poetry.

“ For oft on my couch I lie,

In vacant or in pensive mood,

They flash upon that inward eye

Which is the bliss of solitude”.

William Wordsworth like Blake abhorred Industrial environment and praised nature. In his poem “ Lines Written at a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey”, William Wordsworth writes about how he remembers the pleasure and joys he got from his time spent in nature. The city he lived in made him nostalgic and called up happier times. He was sorry for his time during his stay in city while sitting in the lonely rooms of artificial city, and missed a lot, the pure and sublime nature.

While William Wordsworth wrote about nature, his close friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote about supernatural. In “ Lyrical Ballads”, Coleridge wrote poems concerned with the supernatural. Coleridge produced “ Kubla Khan” in which he imagines a paradise like place. It is still a marvelous piece of supernatural poetry. He writes,

“ In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree

Where Alph the sacred river, ran

Through the caverns measureless to man...

...And here were forests ancient as hills,

Enfolding sunny spots of greenery”.

With Coleridge ends the first generation poets. The second generation starts with John Keats. “ Ode to a Nightingale, Ode to Autumn, and Ode to a Grecian Urn” are some of his renowned works. He mainly focused on death, nature and beauty. He was bored of life due to his poverty and expressed escapism in his poetry. In his poem, “ Ode to a Nightingale”, he says,

“ My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains

My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk...

... That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,

And with thee fade away into the forest brim”.

Most of his poems are concerned about beauty. He considers beauty as the most important thing in life. “ A thing of beauty is a joy forever” is his famous line. He once said “ I have loved the principle of beauty in all things.” In Ode to a Grecian Urn he says “ Beauty truth; Truth beauty”. By this line he means that beauty is immortal.

With beauty as an important thing among all other things, Keats gave his view about the function of poetry. He said that “ Poetry should be an incarnation of beauty, not a medium for the expression of religious or social philosophy. He said “ A poet is a creator and an artist, not a teacher or a prophet.”

He was a poet of great potentials. He died when he was only twenty five years old but despite his early death, he freed himself from the clutches of time by the gift of poetry and still lives in the heart of people.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, a contemporary of Keats, was another Romantic poet who had a rebellious spirit. He rebelled against the Industrialism. His rebellion was not limited only to worldly matters but rather he rebelled against the great authority of God. He printed a pamphlet with anonymous writer entitled, “ The Necessity of Atheism”, while he was still a student at the university. He suffered a lot and was expelled from university for this act of blasphemy when the writer was discovered.

Shelley has also written about the power of nature and man’s relation with it. In “ Ode to West wind”, Shelley symbolizes west wind to nature. Nature’s force of change is described in this poem. Nature’s contrasting force of

immortality is compared with man's mortality. In the end Shelley wish his spirit to be transformed with the west wind which promises rebirth with the revival of spring.

George Gordon Byron was the third and last of romantic poets. His poetry has three major themes; liberty, the power of nature and the folly of love. As Byron travelled to different parts of Europe, he saw that many people were subjected to suppression. This he criticized in many of his poems. " The Prison of Chillon" is one such poem in which he writes of a patriot who stood against oppression.

Byron also wrote about nature. He looked to nature from several angles. " The Prisoner of Chillon" connects nature to freedom while at the same time showing nature's potentially deadly ability to flood the whole dungeon.

Byron's many poems speak women and love. In Childe Harold Pilgrimage he seeks muse from several women. She walks in beauty is his another poem which speaks of virtues of a woman. For a great while he sought a perfect love but at a later stage he concluded that it is unattainable and this became the theme of many of his poems. In Don Juan, Byron mocks the ideal of love even when his protagonist falls in love with many women.

Concluding with what romantic poets gave to English literature is a very vast topic to write on but in short we can safely assume that if there was no romantic movement in English literature, the most beautiful part of English poetry would have been lost forever. Their unconventional writing style with diverse themes brought a revolution which even now people admire. The

names of Wordsworth and John Keats if not more than other great writers are indeed no less popular in our contemporary world. In fact the zeal of their spirits and the power of their poetry has an extraordinary appealing force to the minds of and souls of not only the people of their age but of our age too.