

Romantic period - william blake

Literature



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Nowadays when people talked about “romantic” or “romance”, usually indicated that of the opposite of ration and reason. Rousseau pointed out that romance is to go back to nature, However, Heine in the other way thought that romance is to go back to the life style of middle age, while Hugo considered romance as the combination of tragedy and quaintness. Romance to me, is the opposite of civilization, ration, and reality, just like the typical tension between passion and ration displayed in Madame Bovary, the protagonist Madame Bovary had life struggles between pursuing her dreams and passion and living an ordinary life with a dull husband.

It was also a struggle between love and bread. Actually, the word romance is hard to define. Rene Wellek conceded that there are three dimensions of romantic criterion, which are imagination, nature and symbol and myth, based on this three aspects of looking at romance, we can probably sum up all kinds of romance. There are a lot of definition of romance in dictionary, such as some of the definition mentioned in J. A. Cuddon’s A Dictionary of Literary Terms, which are interests on natural elements, and primal, natural, uncivilized world, inclination of focus on scenery, intertwining the human spirit to the natural world, and attention on imagination. And of course, praising the noble savages.

Romantic era had been literary fashion in the approximate age in first half of 19 century. It’s usually considered to be the counter-revolution to industrial revolution and intellectual behave of Enlightenment. Romanticism was originated from Europe and it was meant to participate in reaction of revolt against scientific “truth”, fact and rationality.

These elements were embodied intensely in literature as a lot of great writers had done in romantic period. Except for industrial revolution and era of enlightenment, the historical background of romantic period was within an age after capitalists expending their territories through ideology of imperialism, oppressing the weak all over the world. These historical background had huge influence on human mind in many aspects: the unbridled capitalism soon brought up the idea of civilization however made human's mind spoiled.

Thus, literature in romantic period emphasized on imagination could mean social care for the lower level labors, getting away from shackled human mind under the power of capitalism, getting rid of the dogma of neo-classism and pursued some kind of new source of poetic inspiration, and immersed into nature and enjoyed the philosophy that the nature brought to the poets. After so many explanations of the word "romance" and the historical background of romantic period, how do we define "romance" throughout observation from romantic period writers and poems?

I concede that the spirit of romance is to fight against the idea of unity, a commonplace, traditionally united concepts, and authority. Therefore, it seems that romantic writers have the common parts that they were talented in showing their originality, which were different from traditional elements and rules. I think the most important key words for romantic period is imagination, and it was what poets used to develop their own originality in literature world. They used imagination to create more interesting narrative lines, and to change the world.

Romantic poets don't like to describe the reality world with details, but to create the reality with their own imagination. While blossoms of imagination depend on how natural world inspired the poets, therefore, they could not stand writing about lives in palace, which were quite unchangeable, and stick to the old fashioned principles, on the other hand, they love to get closer to the nature. The natural world actually plays a role of eonian lyre in poets' minds. Furthermore, the poets in fact tend to write about stories of nobody, instead of somebody, to rebel the tradition of putting high class noble people as protagonists.

Among all of the romantic writers, William Blake was impressively skilled in using imagination, for him, " The imagination is not a state: it is the human existence itself. " said he. William Blake, born in 1757, was the most influential poets in romantic period, first published his printed collection called Poetical Sketches in 1783, and Songs of Innocence was then published in 1789, later on Songs of Experience was published as well. Blake's philosophical insights of human states was displayed in his two collections.

The contrary of his two collection, Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience, showed two kinds of spiritual states of human's mind. He paralleled the innocent, childish state of mind with grown-ups world of seasoned, experienced and adulthood of corrupted human minds. For example, his poem " The Lamb" was the representation of a tame purity, while the poem " The Tyger" showed the dark side of the world. Pairs of innocence and experience formed a sharp contrast in both of collections. I think Blake in these two collections with such contrast, were elivering the concept of " highest human state", which was not encouraging people to be

solely innocent and pure, either to be experienced. Blake didn't keep a distance from both of two states of minds and wished to find out a better state of mind which is even higher than being innocent or experienced. The real highest state of human nature is to be experienced but always keep a pure heart just like a child. The Songs of Innocence depicted the naive hopes that was imported into children's minds. Some of the poems were about children's innocent voices, and others were written to describe children from adult's perspective.

In the Songs of Innocence, speakers are always using childish minds to look at things, without knowing incidents that happened in this society, such as racial discrimination and children laboring were immoral. This kind of innocence is ridiculous, just like the theme in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, one of the episode was that one of the protagonists Taminais went to an island where full of children, Taminais played with those children closely, however after that she found that she couldn't bear absurdity of sensuality then sunk into the water. The innocence here becomes absurd and ridiculous.

And this had shown that innocence is actually on the other side, absurdity, because this is some kind of ignorance toward evil. In the Songs of Experience in contrast showed the destroyed faith in innocence after experiencing the corruption of adult lives. Blake displayed the dark, evil side of reality, which was something that the innocence do not confront. It's like growing up is the process of being through experiences out of reality, just as Adam and Eva had eaten forbidden fruits, their innocence was swept away, instead, they were forced to confront dirty, dark reality.

People could not be always innocence, tyger mentioned in Songs of Experience might come to reality some days. Here I would like to mention about another work by William Blake, The Book of Thel, which I consider representation of practical situation when two human status conflicting with each other. Thel, a shepherdess, who lives in “ the vales of Har”, reigns this idyllic world. Even though she is the sovereign of the vales of Har, she is still living in a peaceful and everlasting but without definite life goals. Therefore, she is finding answers.

Thel raises a lot of philosophic questions, such as asking why the flowers must die. Her life is like a rainbow, a parting cloud, reflections, dreams and smiles of infants, according to her own narration. The most important episode is that Thel wishes to die in comfort with God’s presence. A human form lily talks to Thel, saying that God cares about whole world, mercifully including a little flower. And that is the answer lily gives to Thel, which is indicating the happiness of a little flower exists, and the happiness will continue to keep them company after getting into heaven.

However, Thel is still confused about her life purposes. Thel then asks the cloud about the reason why it could simply accept the fact that life is limit. The cloud answers that life is cycling, when cloud dies, it benefits nature and humans every much, and will live in another forms. However, Thel doesn’t satisfy with this answer. She is still questioning whether the meaning of death is to be eaten up by worms. On the other hand, the cloud thinks that feeding worms is also a purpose of life, because once life goes to the end, it still could help other life forms.

In Blake's imagination, the cloud and the worm both have human forms. But the worm doesn't speak, it can only cry. The same situation occurs when Thel goes to find a clay to talk to her, she receives similar messages to others suggestion toward life and death. When Thel figures out that God put much efforts to nurture worms. She is stunned by this truth, and is pretty sure that this is the answer for mortality. Then, the clay asks Thel, " Are you willing to] enter my house? 'Tis given to thee to enter and to return. Fear nothing. " Thel accepts and comes into being.

But while Thel comes to her own grave, she hears a voice talking about organic sexual joys and they kind of bring human suffering. Thel after that runs back into her own kingdom. From Songs of Innocence, Songs of Experience and The Book of Thel, we can see that the idea Blake aims to convey is that human beings could not stay purely innocence, because that might be viewed as the ignorance of reality and the dark side of the world. Just like Thel, who stays in her own innocence and escapes from the possibilities of being experienced in the real world.

To my point of view, I think that human beings should not be encouraged to stay in totality, the innocent situation, conversely, we should always develop our minds and make ourselves more mature and at the same time keep ourselves a childish, pure spirit. Just as Geoffrey Keynes had said, " The Book of Thel is an allegory of the unborn spirit visiting the world of generation. Thel rejects the self-sacrificing aspects of experience and flies back to eternity. " The philosophical insights of Blake was accurately indicating that the development of human minds could be built in conflicting condition of two opposite sides.

That is, no conflict, no development, and this is like plate movement theory: plates constantly extrude each other to make the plates' altitude grow. Just like Blake in his poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* mentioned "Without Contraries is no progression." In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake opposed to traditional Christianity's version of the definition of good and evil, which preaches human being that body is sinful, desire is out of evilness, on the contrast, angels are the representation of spirit. Body and soul are fallen into binary, either good or evil.

Notwithstanding, Blake had a different point of view from traditional binary of good and evil, he thought that optimal goodness is engaged with two opposite elements, such as energy versus reason, active versus inactive, and the prolific versus the devouring, etc, or say, the mixture of both good from heaven and evil from hell. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, /Now the sneaking serpent walks/In mild humility. /And the just man rages in the wilds/Where lions roam. / Blake tried to break the traditional rules of good and evil borderline, and he was strongly emphasizing on the possibilities of combination of good and evil.

Blake was a brilliant philosophical poet belonged to category of romantic period for reasons. Just as what I had summed up the definition of romance in former paragraphs, the spirit of romance is to counteract the idea of unity, commonplace, traditional conservations, and authority. Here we can see Blake's philosophy was breaking the traditional rules and invent his own point of view in his poems, it was definitely "fighting against traditions and authority", which could be described as well-developed spirit of romantic period.