

Features of romanticism in coleridge's kubla khan and keat's ode to a nightingale...

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Due to its multi-faceted nature, the Romantic period revealed philosophical tensions, such as the conflicting conceptualizations of the role of the imagination and nature in facilitating greater individual understanding. Coleridge's 1816 poem 'Kubla Khan' and Keats's 1819 poem 'Ode to a Nightingale' demonstrates the conflict between Romantic writers on understanding the supremacy of the imagination in conjunction with reason to seek individual truth. Another Romantic tension arises from Coleridge's 1797 poem 'This Lime Tree Bower my Prison' and Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, where the composers adopt distinct approaches in representing the relationship between the natural world and the individual in facilitating greater understanding. As these composers and their texts depict different permutations of Romantic philosophy, they illustrate the differing approaches to the imagination, nature and the individual.

Although the Romantics focused on the supremacy of the imagination, there were conflicting views as to the extent to which it could facilitate individual truth. In 'Kubla Khan,' Coleridge conceptualises the imagination and reason as the ideal Romantic sources of individual truth. By titling the poem as a "vision in a dream," and using fragmented stanzas, Coleridge uses the poetic form to emphasize the imagination as the purest form of literary expression, as argued in *Biographia Literaria* as "the prime agent of all human perception." Nonetheless, when Coleridge reaches the idealized "caverns measureless to man... in a vision he once saw" he synthesizes reality and the extraordinary through his awe-stricken tone to highlight the superiority of truth and the imagination working in conjunction, rejecting the Enlightenment era's strict adherence to rational thought. Indeed, Coleridge

emphasizes how imagination and reason are interdependent in “ sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice!” Here, the paradox symbolises the prepossession to unity in the human experience to formulate the ideal truth, reflecting Blake’s belief that the “ imagination is the real and eternal world”. Ultimately, the anaphoric collective chant in “ all who heard... all should cry,” highlights the extent to which the imagination and reason could facilitate the sovereign truth of wider Romantic society. Coleridge challenges the Augustan value of how “ reason must be our last judge” and instead celebrates the Romantic “ attempt to reconcile the heart and the head.” Thus, ‘ Kubla Khan’ exemplifies Coleridge’s Romantic perspective on the harmonisation of imagination and reason as sources of the sovereign truth for both the individual and society.

On the other hand, although Keats emphasises the idealised nature of the imagination in ‘ Ode to a Nightingale,’ he diverges from Coleridge by exploring how Augustan reason instead undermines the power of the imagination in formulating truth. Keats highlights the role of the imagination in offering solace from harsh reality, through the juxtaposition of his “ heart aches” and “ thine happiness” after hearing the nightingale’s song. In doing so, Keats embraces Shelley’s symbolic perspective that “ A poet is a nightingale, who ...sings to cheer its own solitude.” The narrator’s poetic rejection of being “ charioted by Bacchus and his pards,” and rather choosing to embrace “ the viewless wings of Poesy” causes him to exclaim that the nightingale’s song is “ such an ecstasy!” In doing so, Keats reflects the Romantic value of imagination as the Wordsworthian “ spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” and the rejection of restrictiveness of

Augustan rationality, much like Coleridge in 'Kubla Khan' with his accumulative phallic imagery of the "mighty fountain...forced". However, Keats questions the reliability of the imagination in seeking greater understanding, exclaiming how reality harshly "tolls me back from thee to my sole self!", which reflects the Romantic tension arising from the conjunction of imagination and reason in gaining wholesome truth. By questioning whether the nightingale was "a vision real or waking dream?", Keats' rhetorical question exposes the escapism in Coleridge ideal of imagination, fragmenting its spontaneous power and thereby emphasising its limits in facilitating truth for the individual. This is further highlighted in the fricative motifs of "fading away" and "forlorn" juxtaposed throughout the poem, which emphasises the inherent contradiction between imagination and reality in formulating truth. Although this reflects Blake's belief that "this world's a fiction and is made up of contradiction," this reveals the tension in Romanticism, as Coleridge praises in 'Kubla Khan' the conjunction of imagination and reason in catalysing "such a deep delight" which "would win me." Ultimately, by personifying the limits to which the imagination could facilitate individual understanding in "it cannot cheat so well as she is fam'd to do, deceiving self," Keats rejects a unity between the imagination and reality in revealing truth. Thus, Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale' and Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' demonstrates the Romantic tension of the extent to which the imagination and reason are sources of the sovereign truth.

Another key tension in Romanticism was the conceptualisation of the relationship between nature and humanity, and its role in deepening

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individual understanding. One perspective was offered by Coleridge in 'This Lime Tree Bower my Prison' where he characterises the natural world as a spiritual vehicle for individual self-actualisation, thereby reflecting his view that the individual and nature are fundamentally akin. In utilising religious imagery to describe the natural world, Coleridge emphasises the importance of nature in the formation of individual knowledge as God "doth make all one whole." Coleridge adopts a pantheistic viewpoint in describing the "wide wide heaven... the many steeped tract magnificent," illustrating Burke's view of an explicit link between the nature and the Divine as "the grandeur of nature [is] read as the handiwork of a divine creator." Importantly, Coleridge condemns the lack of emotional spirit arising from the Industrial Revolution, asserting nature as a superior alternative being a spiritual vehicle for individual self-actualisation; demonstrated in the personification of the sun that has a "yellow light" which enables individuals to "contemplate with lively joys the joys we cannot share." This conceptualisation of nature, which reflects Blake's belief that "nature is the soul," is further shown as the narrator is "struck with deep joy" at "the Almighty Spirit" apparent in nature, which transforms his initial view of "this lime tree bower" as a "prison" to the antithetical "soothing" state which "may lift the soul." These religious allusions exemplify Coleridge's belief in communion with the natural world, and its religious elements, to facilitate individual self-actualisation. Hence, Coleridge depicts the relationship between the natural world and humanity as intimate, reflecting his adoption of the Wordsworthian belief to "let nature be your teacher," whilst rejecting the Augustan attempt to "methodize nature." Therefore, Coleridge's 'This

Lime Tree Bower my Prison' elevates the natural world as a spiritual vehicle for individual self-actualisation and celebrates the interdependent relationship between nature and humanity.

Contrastingly, Shelley adopts a dualist approach in Frankenstein to argue that the natural world and humanity are distinct, as the natural world can act as condemnatory force against the hubris of man. Much like Coleridge in 'This Lime Tree Bower my Prison', nature has the ability to fill Frankenstein "with a sublime ecstasy" when he "longed to console" after creating the Creature. The juxtaposition between his moods illustrates the natural world as instrumental for spiritual renewal, rejecting how the Enlightenment countered the spiritual right of man during the Industrial Revolution. Shelley thereby encapsulates the Romantic belief that nature can act as a conduit for individual self-actualisation. However, when Frankenstein creates the Creature, he is overshadowed by the "dim and yellow light of the moon" which parallels the "yellow skin" of the arising monster. Here, Shelley's lexical cohesion around "yellow" connotes a sense of human decay, emphasising how nature can morally react to Frankenstein's "fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature." This reflects Shelley's belief that nature and individuals can have distinct moral complexities when individuals act outside the bounds of human morality, which is at odds with Coleridge's conception of an unlimited relationship between humanity and the natural world. Soon after the creation, Frankenstein is "drenched by the rain which poured from a black and comfortless sky," where the metaphorical "comfortless" sky represents nature's moral warning against the overreaching hubris of man. In doing so, Shelley reflects Emersons' emanationist view that

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“ the moral law lies at the centre of nature,” contrasting strongly with Coleridge’s statement that nature is “ without morality” as shown in ‘ Kubla Khan’ where “ Nature be there” only to “ keep the heart awake to Love and Beauty!”. Therefore, Shelley’s Frankenstein depicts nature and the individual as distinct, using nature to reflect the Romantic condemnation of the hubris of man, which conflicts with Coleridge positioning of nature in ‘ This Lime Tree Bower my Prison’ and highlights the diversity of Romantic thought about the natural world.

By comparing Coleridge’s ‘ Kubla Khan’ and Keats’s ‘ Ode to a Nightingale’, alongside Coleridge’s ‘ This Lime Tree Bower my Prison’ and Shelley’s ‘ Frankenstein’ the writers of the Romantic period reveal the tensions in representing the imagination and nature to seek greater understanding. Although, these texts illustrated the disparate approaches to Romanticism, all composers acknowledged the supremacy of imagination and nature from which their derived individual perspectives are still universally relevant today.