

Preface To Lyrical Ballads: Manifesto Of Romanticism

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ABSTRACT: The Romantic poets transferred their experiences into their poetry with honesty and directness. The present paper provides a comprehensive understanding of Wordsworth and Coleridge's restoration in the field of poetry as they wrote a completely different kind of poetry as compared to their predecessors. The main aim of this paper is to examine the major characteristics of the Lyrical Ballads.

INDEX TERMS: Romanticism, Intellectualism, Classicism, Renaissance, Humanitarianism.

Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing: its object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony, which gives strength and divinity to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives the from the same tribunal. Poetry is the image of man and nature. (Preface to Lyrical Ballads 15)

The publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 by Wordsworth and Coleridge, proved to be a landmark in the history of English Literature, and marked the beginning of the Romantic age (1798-1900). The Romantic poets were inspired by the writings of the Elizabethan Age (1552-1604). The Elizabethan age is regarded as the first Romantic age in the history of English Literature. Thus with the revival of the characteristics of the Elizabethan literature the period between 1798-1900 was termed as "Romantic Revival". The major romantic poets are William Wordsworth, S.T. Coleridge, P.B. Shelley, John Keats and Lord Byron. The Romantic age was preceded by the Neo-Classical Age. The Romantic Age was a revolt against the Neo-Classical writings of Alexander Pope and Dr. Johnson. In the 18th Century the classical tendencies of correctness, adherence to rules and regulation, didacticism and Intellectualism were dominant in literature.

Dr. Johnson's poem, *London* is part of the eighteenth-century genre of imitation. It is based on Juvenal's Third Satire which pronounces Umbricius leaving Rome to live in Cumae in order to escape from the vices and dangers of the capital city. In Johnson's version, it is Thales who travels to Cambria (Wales) in order to escape from the problems of London. Johnson chose Juvenal as a model based on his own appreciation for Juvenal's works.

Though grief and fondness in my breast rebel,
When injured Thales bids the town farewell,
Yet still my calmer thoughts his choice commend,
I praise the hermit, but regret the friend,
Resolved at length, from vice and London far,
To breathe in distant fields a purer air,
And, fixed on Cambria's solitary shore,
Give to St David one true Briton more.
(Dr. Johnson (Web), London a Poem 1-8)

The Preface to Lyrical Ballads was published in the year 1800. William Wordsworth's views in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, on Dr. Johnson's poetry,

This is a bad kind of poetry, or This is not poetry; but This wants sense; it is neither interesting in itself, nor can lead to anything interesting; the images neither originate in the same state of feeling which arises out of thought, nor can excite thought or feeling in the Reader.
(Preface To Lyrical Ballads 23)

The terms “Classicism” and “Romanticism” indicates the attitudes and beliefs which are translated into the basic characteristics and features present in the literature of the age. Classicism is thus associated with discipline, adherence to rules of writing, emphasis on the intellect e.t.c. While Romanticism stands for freedom of expression, high flights of imagination, personal and emotional expression e.t.c. The main political and social event of the Romantic age was the French Revolution. The French Revolution – or at least the idea of French Revolution- Liberty, Fraternity and Equality, and the mystique associated with it- was for a brief period one of the great stimulating forces of the English literary imagination. William Wordsworth in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* says that he was identifying the war with the France as one of the crucial contexts of the Romantic period. Rousseau said “Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains”. Rousseau has also influenced the Romantic poets greatly. Gradually speaking Romanticism is the expression in terms of art of sharpened sensibilities and heightened imaginative feelings. Emotion and imagination are the bedrock of Romanticism. Further the Romantics take us to the far-off places in the middle Ages and introduce the readers to a world of strangers and beauty. It is the combination of strangers allied with beauty that we have the essence of the Romantic period. The Renaissance was considered as the first Romantic period in the English literature. The Romantic Revival in the beginning of the 19th Century completely throwing away the values that were held dear by the classicist headed by Alexander Pope. A new leaven was given to art and literature and poetry of this age witnessed a complete break away from the tradition and usages upheld by the pseudo-classicists of the former age (History Of English Literature 262).

Mirror and Lamp:

“The Mirror And the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition” is a book written by M.H. Abrams. The Mirror and the Lamp has summarized a long tradition of assumptions about Romanticism and adopted the tradition into the language of literary theory. Abrams has been a major exponent of what Jerone McGann has called “the Romantic ideology” which has advertised the Romantic consciousness as “a good and happy place”. Abrams came up with the phrase “Apocalypse of the imagination” to describe the particular achievement of Romantic writing. (The Cambridge Companion To British Romanticism 18) Abrams said that till the Romantic Age literature was like a “Mirror”. He uses the metaphor of the mirror as there was no originality and they imitated the classicist and strictly followed all the rules of writing. Abrams uses the metaphor of “Lamp” for the Romantic poets. He said that the soul of the Romantic poets was self illuminated like the lamp and so they also illuminated the people. In a powerful divergence, Abrams shows that up until the Romantics, literature was usually understood as a mirror, reflecting the real world, in some sort of mimesis, but for the Romantics, writing was more like a lamp; the light of the writer’s inner soul fallen out to brighten the world.

William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge Working In Partnership:

William Wordsworth (1750-1850) brought a completely new approach to the writing of the English poetry. His objections to an over stylized poetic diction, his attitudes to Nature, his choice of simple incidents and humble people as subjects of his poetry- these well-known characteristics of his are but minor aspects of his revolutionary achievement. The two friends William Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge agreed to divide the field of poetry. Wordsworth is poetic while Coleridge is visionary. Coleridge mainly wrote on subjects that were supernatural, or, at any rate, romantic, which he was to inform with a human interest and appearance of truth. Wordsworth’s part was to choose events of everyday life, and the selection of the humblest form; the characters and incidents of his poem “were to be such as will be found in every village and its vicinity where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them or to notice them when they present themselves”. (The Cambridge History of English Literature 101)

Romantic Manifesto

Following are the major characteristics that can be characterized as manifestation of romanticism:

Break From The Set Rules:

The romantic poetry was against the neo-classical poetry which strictly followed rules and regulations. The classicist stressed on reason and logic. The neo-classical school of poetry was mainly the creation of intelligence. It followed rigorously to the closet couplet. Romantics believed that work should make proper sense and should be understood by others. However the romantic poetry breaks away from the set rules. According to Wordsworth and Coleridge, “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion, recollected in tranquility”. The romantics made the couplet lose and flowing. They made no deliberate use of stereotyped and conventional diction of the Augustan Age.

Note of Subjectivity and Expression of Personal Feelings:

Poets of this age were in favour of giving subjective interpretation to the objective realities of life. The romantic poetry became individualistic in its outlook. Lucas said that it was an expression of “Id”. The poets during this age talked about their personal feelings, rather than the universal feelings. For Example Wordsworth in the poem “Upon the Westminster Bridge” talks about how he feels seeing such a beautiful sight.

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would be the soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty
This city now cloth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the Fields and to sky;

Interest in Country Life and Return to Nature:

Poetry of the 18th Century was concerned with clubs and coffee houses, social and political life in London. Nature had particularly no place in classical poetry. Wordsworth in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* says,

The principle object than proposed in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life and to relate or describe them throughout as far as possible in a selection of language really used by man and at the same time to throw over them a certain coloring of imagination, whereby the ordinary themes should be presented in the mind in an unusual manner.

In the poetry of Romantic Revival the interest of the poet was transferred from artificial decoration to natural beauty and conviviality of nature. These poets turned to elemental simplicities of life and lived in closer touch with the beauties and charm of nature. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge have spiritualized nature; they are not merely poets of nature but prophets of nature. William Wordsworth in his poem "Three Years She grew" writes,

Three years she grew in sun and shower,
Then Nature said, "A lovelier flower
On earth was never sown;
This child I to myself will take,
She shall be mine, and I will make
A Lady of my own. (Lyrical Ballads)

William Wordsworth considered nature as the best teacher. He was very much influenced by Rousseau's "Emile"- give a child to nature and she will take care of all that the child needs by way of education. Nature educates through joys which elevate the mind and spirit. Nature is a vital force- a living presence- both law and impulse. William Wordsworth in his poem "The Tables Turned", refers to nature as teacher,

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man;
Of moral evils and of good,
Than all the sages can. (Lyrical Ballads)

Binocular Was Turned from Reason to Emotion:

In the romantic poetry reason and intellect, was replaced by emotion, imagination and passion. There was a heightened emotional sensibility. The romantics wanted the readers to feel what they felt. Wordsworth's poetry takes its origin from emotions and is recollected in tranquility. The word "tranquility" makes the poetry a meditation. Emotion is recollected in tranquility and it is this emotion which makes the poetry a meditation. The poetic composition has to pass through four stages: recollection, contemplation, recrudescence and composition.

Presentation of Common Life:

Romantic poets especially Wordsworth started taking interest in the lives of common people, the shepherds and the cottages and left the gallant lords and fashions. A feeling of humanitarianism colored the poetry of Wordsworth, Shelly and Byron. The romantic poetry was marked by intense human sympathy and consequent understanding of human heart. It was quite natural for Wordsworth to deal with the simple life of ordinary villagers and rustics who lived in close proximity to nature, rather than talking about politicians and statesman who were intoxicated with glory and power. He treated the rustic characters with utmost sympathy and dignity. He made the rustic characters mouthpiece of humanity. Wordsworth in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* says, "Humble and rustic life was generally chosen because in that condition the essential questions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity."

Use of Simple Language:

Stress is laid on simplicity instead of inflated and artificial mode of expression adopted by the classical poets. In romantic poetry we have more natural diction and spontaneous way of expressing thoughts. Wordsworth in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* says,

There neither is nor can be any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition (poetry). They both (prose and poetry) speak by and to the same organs. The body in which both of them are clothed may be said to be the same substance. Poetry sheds no tears such as angels weep but natural and human tears. Poetry is the image of man and nature.

According to Wordsworth, poetry is not dependent upon rhetorical and devices but it is the true expression of the poets' own thought and feelings. Wordsworth believes that a poet is a man speaking to man. Poetry is the breath and the final spirit of all knowledge. Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge. It is as immortal as the heart of man.

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