

An Appreciation of Three Poets of the Younger Generation of Romanticism

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Abstract: As the main period in British literature, romanticism plays a very important role. The aims of romanticism are to protest against the bandages of rule and custom, to return to nature and to plain humanity, to emphasize the eternal ideals of youth and to appeal to the human heart. This period is an age of poetry, and in this essay, the author would like to talk about three famous poets Byron, Keats, and Shelley who are the representatives of The Younger Generation of Romanticism and their variety of forms, style will be appreciated also.

1. Introduction

1.1 Romanticism

Romanticism is a movement that flourished in literature, philosophy, music and art in Western culture during most of the nineteenth century, beginning as a revolt against classism. And it is generally said to have begun in 1798 with the publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* and to have ended in 1832 with Sir Walter Scott's death.

The movement expresses a more or less negative toward the existing social and political conditions that came with industrialization and the growing importance of the bourgeoisie. The romantics see man essentially as an individual in the solitary state, emphasizing the special of each individual's mind. Romanticism actually constitutes a change of direction from attention to the outer world of social civilization to the inner world of the human spirit. In essence it designates a literary and philosophical theory which tends to see the individual as the very center of all life and all experience.

There are some prominent and most noticeable characteristics of romanticism. The romantic movement is marked by a strong reaction and protest against the bondage of rule and customs; it returns to nature and to plain humanity for its material; it emphasizes the eternal ideals of youth, and appealed to the human heart; it is marked by intense human sympathy, and by a consequent understanding of the human heart; it is the expression of individual genius rather than of established rules; and it returns to Milton and the Elizabethan for literary models.

1.2 Features of Romantic Writing

The romantic period is an age of poetry. Wordsworth and Coleridge are the major representatives

of this movement. Wordsworth's theory of poetry is calling for simple themes drawn from humble life expressed in the language of ordinary people.

To Romantics, poetry should be free from all rules. They would turn to the humble people and the common everyday life for subjects. "They have also made bold experiments in poetic language, versification and design, and constructed a variety of forms on original principles of organization and style."^[1]

The Romanticists' own aspiration and ideals are in sharp contrast to the common sordid daily life under capitalism. Their writings are filled with strong-willed heroes or even titanic images, formidable events and tragic situations, powerful conflicting passions and exotic pictures. Sometimes they resorted to symbolic methods, with the active romanticists, symbolic pictures represent a vague ideal of some future society; while with the passive romanticists, these pictures often take on a mystic color.

The tone of Romanticism was shaped by the naked emotionalism of Rousseau's *Julie, ou la nouvelle Heloise* (1761), and the exotic legends and mythology found in Oriental and Homeric literatures and 17th century travel writers. The stylistic keynote of Romanticism is intensity, and its watchword is 'Imagination'. Remembered childhood, unrequited love, and the exiled hero were constant themes.

1.3 Main Themes in Romantic Writing

Imagination, defined by Coleridge, is the vital faculty that creates new wholes out of disparate elements. The natural world comes to the forefront of the poetic imagination. The romantics would turn to other times and places to escape from a world that had become excessively rational, as well as excessively materialistic and ugly.

"Nature" meant many things to the Romantics. As suggested above, it was often presented as itself a work of art, constructed by a divine imagination, in emblematic language. While particular perspectives with regard to nature varied considerably--nature as a healing power, nature as a source of subject and image, nature as a refuge from the artificial constructs of civilization, including artificial language--the prevailing views accorded nature the status of an organically unified whole.

Symbolism and myth were given great prominence in the Romantic conception of art. In the Romantic view, symbols were the human aesthetic correlatives of nature's emblematic language. They were valued too because they could simultaneously suggest many things, and were thus thought superior to the one-to-one communications of allegory. Partly, it may have been the desire to express the "inexpressible"—the infinite—through the available resources of language that led to symbol at one level and myth (as symbolic narrative) at another.

In Romantic theory, art was valuable not so much as a mirror of the external world, but as a source of illumination of the world within. Among other things, this led to a prominence for first-person lyric poetry never accorded it in any previous period.

The Romantics asserted the importance of the individual, the unique, even the eccentric. Consequently they opposed the character typology of neoclassical drama. In another way, of course, Romanticism created its own literary types.

2. The Younger Generation of Romanticism

"Literature cannot be cut neatly by ages. Although the Romantic Movement started in 1798, with the publication of Lyrical Ballads, romantic tendencies had appeared long before then, even when neoclassicism was still in its full flower."^[2]

2.1 George Gordon Byron (1788-1824)

2.1.1 A Brief Introduction to Byron

George Gordon Byron is one of the greatest Romantic poets in English literature. Together with Shelley and Keats, he belongs to the second generation of the Romantic Movement. He was an artist, but he held radical views on politics and morality; he had a great many sexual exploits, but like the heroes of his works seldom acted on his own initiative; he was born with clubfoot and was lame, but he died organizing an army and fighting for the freedom of Greece; he was notorious in England during his lifetime, but he had an immense reputation in Continental Europe.

Byron was educated at Harrow and Cambridge. While a student of nineteen, he published his first collection of poems entitled *Hours of Idleness*. It was severely criticized by the conservative *Edinburgh Review*. "After his graduation in 1809, he and his friend John Cam Hobhouse made a tour of Europe, traveling through Portugal, Spain, Malta, Albania, Greece and reaching as far as Asia Minor."^[3] This two-year travel provided him with material for the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and for his oriental verse tales *Giaour*(1813), *The Corsair*(1813) and *Lara*(1814), and his works also are *Hours of Idleness*(1807), *Manfred*(1817), *Cain*(1821).

These works established Byron as one of the most important poets of his day, almost overnight, and he enjoyed great fame and popularity. Compared with the other high Romantic poets who were eager to discover new poetic language and new imaginative freedom, Byron seems old-fashioned. Taking Pope as his example, he offers stories of travel and adventure which recall the eighteenth-century picaresque novel and satire. Byron's contribution to Romanticism consists not in technical innovations, but in creating a personality of great intellectual influence.

2.1.2 Some Literary Criticism to Byron

In Byron's works, the world-famous characteristic is the Byronic hero. "A typical Byronic hero is an arch-rebel, an outlaw, who loves transgressions; like Milton's Satan, he has determined aims and will defy all opposition in the pursuit of his ends; he is alienated from the society and is disdainful to humanity at large, but he has a strong sense of superiority; he is remorse-torn, but he is never repentant; he has a tendency to court his own destruction and bring destruction to those around him....Byronism, which is at the back of Nietzsche's concept of the Superman, provides an outlook and a mode of feeling for the nineteenth-century literature and philosophy."^[3]

"Of the important English poets of the romantic movement, the one with the greatest international reputation is George Noel Gordon Byron, and the comment by Hippolyte Taine, a famous French literary critic reflects this fact in his History of English Literature: 'the greatest and most English of these artists, Byron is so great and so English that from him alone we shall learn more truths of his country and of his age than from all the rest together.'"^[4]

"Byron's life and work is like a book which seems at first sight to be dominated by its highly colored plates."^[5] In his poems, Byron reveals his sympathy with the suffering people and raises his voice against the reaction that sets up in Europe after the defeat of Napoleon. He also glorified the French Revolution and grieved at its failure.

Byron's poetic style is loose, fluent, and vivid. Ease and raciness are always characteristic of him. "He is the master of cutting wit and biting repartee, and superior in imagery and diction...His cynicism and pessimism, his excessive individualism, and his continual posing as the hero in his own verse mar the true poetic qualities of many of his longer works."^[2]

2.1.3 Appreciation of Byron's Works

Byron left us a lot of great works after his death, among his works, the readers could get his great

mind, great spirit. In reading Byron, it is well to remember that Byron was a brave fighter against injustice and tyranny and for freedom both in his life and in his works. In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, besides charming, detailed descriptions of nature with its mountains, waterfalls, seas, lakes, storms, clouds, lightning and waves, Byron showed his consistent attitude of antagonism toward tyranny and his great enthusiasm for freedom through his sympathetic description of the depressed people.

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, consisting of four cantos, is based chiefly on Byron's own experience and obsessions and reflections during his extensive travels on the European Continent—in Portugal and Spain, Greece and Albania, and in Belgium, Germany, France, Switzerland and Italy. Though the poem is supposed to be a reward of what the hero Childe Harold saw and felt during his journey from one country to another, more often than not the author intrudes upon the scene and airs his own views and reveals his own sentiments. So in the poem "there is a conglomeration of everything—from colorful descriptions of national manners and customs and beautiful pictures of natural scenery, to the poet's reminiscences of past heroes of different European countries and his comments on contemporary political events and social changes. Here we may see the poet's enthusiastic support for heroic fighters of liberty in Spain, Albania, France and Italy as well as his pessimism and despondency arising from his individualism and his distrust of the masses."^[6]

Don Juan is generally considered to be the greatest of Byron's works and Byron called it "a satire on abuses of the present state of society."^[4] *Don Juan*, containing 16 cantos was nominally based on a traditional Spanish legend of Don Juan as a great lover and seducer of women, yet actually Byron invented an entirely different story and there is hardly any resemblance to the original except in the name and the Spanish origin of the hero.

2.2 Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

2.2.1 A Brief Introduction to Shelley

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born of an aristocratic family in a village of Horsham, Sussex. In 1810, Shelley entered Oxford University and plunged into the study of poetry, philosophy and the classics. As a lyric poet, Shelley is one of the supreme geniuses of English literature. He is certainly the most beloved of the Romantic poets. Byron was never tired of saying that Shelley "was without exception the best and least selfish man I never knew."^[2]

Shelley was one of the few of his generation who was not tempted to despair by the failure of the French Revolution. He believed that even though the revolution proved abortive the effort had not been wasted, for it had shown to the people an ideal of freedom which they would continue to seek, and eventually find. "Endowed with an enthusiastic revolutionary spirit, he was perpetually at war with the conventional world, a martyr and exile, simply because he could not accept the code of morals prescribed by established conventions."^[2]

As a great man, Shelley leaves us a lot of christed works. There are some of his works: *Queen Mab*(1813), *Revolt of Islam*(1818), *The Cenci*(1819), *The Masque of Anarchy*, *Hellas*(1821), *Prometheus Unbound*(1819), *Ode to the West Wind*(1819), *To a Skylark*(1820) and *The Cloud*. Besides a great poet, Shelley was also a great theorist of poetry. In *A Defense of Poetry*(1821), his chief work of literary criticism, Shelley advanced his complete and systematic theory of poetry.

2.2.2 Some Literary Criticism to Shelley

"It is said that the fundamental characteristic of Shelley's works is that throughout his life he wrote because he was convinced that as a writer, he could pave the way for a better society."^[2] Even

in his shorter pieces the social ideal is the central one. Shelley's poems shine with radiant beauty, marvelous symbolism and imagery, exalted exquisiteness of personification, and perfectness of artistry. They are the spontaneous flow from the poet's heart, full of youthful freshness and enthusiasm.

"The significance of Shelley is that he gave the highest creative expression to this new age. "[7]He saw farther and deeper than his contemporaries and was able to project his vision in soaring verse. Shelley's greatness lies not only in the nobility and dignity of his ideas. His superb artistry, his glowing imagination, and his incomparable feeling for the most exquisite and impalpable aspects of nature place him in the very front rank of English poets.

Shelley's poetry divides itself into two distinct moods. "In one he is the violent reformer, seeking the overthrow of conventional institutions and the establishment of universal happiness...In a different mood, which finds expression in his wonderful lyrics, Shelley is like a wanderer, following a vague, beautiful vision, forever sad and forever unsatisfied, always pursuing an ideal, hoping for something better that is to come." [2]

So in most of his works, "Shelley fights against tyranny and oppression, but he comes to hold the view that the world can be changed only after changes are introduced to man's moral nature." [3] Love and justice must take their sovereign reign within man's soul before there is hope for a better future.

2.2.3 Appreciation of Shelley's Works

Prometheus Unbound has generally been regarded as one of Shelley's most important works. The play is based on ancient Greek mythology and upon the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus, which dramatizes the sufferings of Prometheus, unrepentant heaven, was condemned by Zeus to be chained to Mount Causasus and to be tortured by a vulture feeding upon his liver. But Shelley altered the ending of the story by writing Prometheus as the hero remaining rebellions to the end against the all-powerful Zeus instead of submitting to Zeus in the play of Aeschylus.

In *Prometheus Unbound*, the attempt to spread this inactivating gloom by emphasizing the failure of the French Revolution is symbolized in ActI in the attack of the Furies; the Chorus of Spirits, in contrast, reveals the dawning spirit of hope. The next act depicts the beginnings of this change beneath the surface of society, the "Spring gathering up beneath" of the final song of the Spirits in ActI, the "Spring, child of many winds" of the opening speech of ActII.

2.3 John Keats

2.3.1 A Brief Introduction to Keats

The name of John Keats is usually associated with the names of Byron and Shelley. Like his great compeers, Keats was a marvelous poet of genius.

John Keats was born in London on October 29, 1795. Before Keats was fifteen, both his parents died. His guardian bound him as an apprentice to a surgeon. Later he made friends with Leigh Hunt and other radical writers in London, and published some poems in Hunt's magazine. His first collection of poems was published in 1817. His second book *Endynion* appeared in 1818. Then he gave up medicine for poetry.

"For a long time, Shelley, Byron, and Keats's other friends believed that the inhumanity of critics was responsible for the early death of the poet. Nevertheless, Keats had a stronger character than is generally known. In spite of the hostility showered upon him, Keats did not put down his pen; he worked even harder and produced a large number of magnificent poems, short and long, during the three years after 1818." [2]

His third and last volume of poetry *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and other Poems* appeared in 1820. And his works includes *On a Grecian Urn, To a Nightingale, Ode to Autumn, To Psyche, On First Looking in Chapman's Homer* and *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*.

2.3.2 Some Literary Criticism to Keats

"Keats seems to have studied words more carefully than did his contemporaries, and so his poetic expression, or the harmony of word and thought, is generally more perfect than theirs. More than any other he lived for poetry, as the noblest of arts. More than any other he emphasized beauty."^[2] To him, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever."^[2] He is an apostle of beauty. Some of his poems incline toward "Art for art's sake." He shows certain aloftness from the interest of worldly life and seems seeking refuge in an idealistic world of illusions and dreams, but this is due to his resentment of the bourgeois-aristocratic society.

We can get Keats's special view of life as a mixture of happiness and sorrow, pleasure and pain, love and disappointment. In *Ode to a Nightingale*, he described the ecstasy on hearing the bird's song as a heart-ache, a drowsy numbness and a half-conscious journey towards death—"being too happy in thine happiness". Keats's poetry is richly adorned with sensuous details which delight senses. *Ode to Autumn*, for example, makes a rich-colored oil painting with words.

"Keats seems to take delight in the concrete details which he records, and sometimes he seems to be identified with them as they form the slow-paced, gracious movement of his verse. The concreteness of his description and the felicity of his phrasing makes Keats, like Shakespeare, a most rewarding poet for readers who appreciate the quality of language and who are able to see, through imagination's eye, the variety of objects behind his words."^[3]

2.3.3 Appreciation of Keats's Works

Keats was a composer of poetry of wonderful genius. His poems reveal mastery of form and depth of feeling. In reading Keats, we are therefore reading the work of a man whose experience is mainly literary. "The growing insight that underlies the remarkably swift development of his talent was gained primarily from the act of writing."^[8]

The pattern of Keats's work is prospective rather than retrospective; it consists of hopeful preparations, anticipations of future power rather than meditative reflections on past moments of insight or harmony. His poems frequently climax in questions—"Was there a poet born?", "Did I wake or sleep?"

On First Looking in Chapman's Homer is one of Keats's best known sonnets. Here with great enthusiasm the poet expresses his admiration and wonder at the antique world of epic heroes after he has read Homer's *Iliad* in Chapman's translation. This also provides a good instance of the extremely rich and pictorial language employed by Keats.

"Different from the ethereal aspect of nature which gives Shelley's poetry so haunting a quality, the poetry of Keats shows the enthralling beauty of line, color, shape, order and taste. His poems are marked by the mastery of artistic form, depth of feeling, vivid imagery, perfect finish, and touching melody."^[2]

3. A Comparison between the Three Famous Poets

Their attitudes, resulted from frustrations of their efforts in revolting against the established code and the sordidness of the society, are different. Byron's poetry shows the poignancy of cutting wit and biting repartee. His tone is often satirical. Keats shows a certain indulgence in the appreciation of beauty and an inclination of "Art for art's sake", and sometimes is blamed as an escapist. The poetry of Shelley is always filled with imaginary beauty for the future, sweet though in sadness.

All of their poetry excels in imagery. In Byron's poems, the images are largely created through allusions; in Keats's poems, they are created chiefly through elaborate and decorative delineation of nature, showing the beauty of line, color, shape, odor and taste; in Shelley's the exquisiteness of figurative language and symbolism extolls the visionary scenes, while the spontaneous flow from the poet's heart is full of youthful freshness and enthusiasm.

Byron employs a manly and racy style; Shelley's poetry shows excellence of artistry and the unification of ideas and form; in many aspects, Keats is the best workman of them all.

4. Conclusion

Byron, Shelley and Keats, as the very important representatives, enjoyed the world-famous fame. Through the simple introduction to them, the author believes that it is easy to find their greatness, including their perfect language, musical effect, and deep feeling.

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