

UGBA Sem. – 5
2019- 20

English (Core) Paper No. - 306
Title - Essays - I

Essay on Romantic Poetry

The Romantic period being instinct with the spirit of revolt, it may be taken for granted that in poetic style there is great range of effort and experiment. The general tendency is toward simplicity of diction and away from the mannerisms of the eighteenth century.

The Romantic age was indeed the golden age of the lyric, which reflected the Romantic spirit of the time in liberal and varied measure. It comprised the exalted passion of Shelley, the meditative simplicity of Wordsworth, the sumptuous descriptions of Keats, and the golden notes of Coleridge.

With descriptive and narrative poems the age was richly endowed. One has only to recall Byron's early work, Keats's tales, Coleridge's supernatural stories, and Scott's martial and historical romances to perceive how rich the harvest was. The Spenserian stanza was a favourite model, but the ballad is nearly as popular. Satirical Poems were numerous; and their tone was fierce, for the success of the French Revolution led to the expression of new hopes and desires.

William Blake (1757-1827) had been dissatisfied since boyhood with the current state of poetry and what he considered the irreligious drudgery of contemporary thought. His early development of a protective shield of mocking humour with which to face a world in which science had become trifling and art irrelevant is visible in the satirical An Island in the Moon. He then took the bolder step of setting aside sophistication in the visionary Songs of Innocence (1789). His desire for renewal encouraged him to view the outbreak of the French Revolution as a momentous event. In works such as The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790–93) and Songs of Experience (1794), he attacked the hypocrisies of the age and the impersonal cruelties resulting from the dominance of analytic reason in contemporary thought. As it became clear that the ideals of the Revolution were not likely to be realized in his time, he renewed his efforts to revise his contemporaries' view of the universe and to construct a new mythology centred not in the God of the Bible but in Urizen, a repressive figure of reason and law whom he believed to be the deity actually worshipped by his contemporaries. The story of Urizen's rise was set out in The First Book of Urizen (1794) and then, more ambitiously, in the unfinished manuscript *Vala* (later redrafted as The Four Zoas), written from about 1796 to about 1807. Blake developed these ideas in the visionary narratives of Milton (1804–08) and Jerusalem (1804–20). Here, still using his own mythological characters, he portrayed the imaginative artist as the hero of society and suggested the possibility of redemption from the fallen condition.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was born at Cockermouth, outside the Lake District. In 1839, Oxford conferred upon him the degree of D. C. L. (Doctor of Civil Law) and on the death of Southey he became Poet Laureate. Throughout his life, however, he never wavered in his faith in himself and his immortality as a poet.

He records that his earliest verse was written at school. At the university he composed some poetry, which appeared as An Evening Walk (1793) and Descriptive Sketches (1793). In style these poems have little originality, but they already show the Wordsworthian eye for nature. The first fruits of his genius were seen in the Lyrical Ballads (1798), a joint production by Coleridge and himself, which was published at Bristol. Biographia Literaria is epoch-making, for it is the prelude to the Romantic movement proper. The concluding piece, Tintern Abbey, is one of the triumphs of his genius. During the years 1798-99 Wordsworth composed some of his finest poems, which appeared

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in 1800. Among the most noteworthy of the new works in this collection were "Michael", "The Old Cumberland Beggar", "She dwelt among the untrodden ways", "Strange fits of passion I've known", and "Nutting".

"The Prelude", which was completed in 1805 but not published until 1850, after Wordsworth's death, is the record of his development as a poet. He describes his experiences with a fullness, and laborious anxiety that are unique in our literature. The poem, which runs to fourteen books, is often dull and prosy, but at times, particularly, when he is describing the formative influence of nature, and his emotions when confronted by seemingly unreal natural objects, the blank verse is impassioned, and inspired by his exaltation, wonder and awe.

"The Prelude" was intended to form part of a vast philosophical work called "The Recluse" which was never completed.

Next to be published, in 1807, were two volumes of poems which represent the fine flower of his genius. Wordsworth is here seen at the height of his powers. Some of the finest lyrics are: "The Solitary Reaper", "The Green Linnet", "I wandered lonely as a cloud"; in the philosophical, "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality", "Ode to Duty"; and the Sonnets Dedicated to National Independence and Liberty - are of a quality which has led many critics to hail them as the finest sonnets in the language.

After the publication of "The Excursion" Wordsworth's poetical power was clearly on the decline, but his productivity was unimpaired. His later volumes include The White Doe of Rylstone (1815), The Waggoner (1819), Peter Bell (1819), Yarrow Revisited (1835).

Theory of Poetry. In the preface to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads (1800) Wordsworth set out his theory of poetry. It reveals a lofty conception of the dignity of that art which is "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge", Wordsworth rightly says,

"Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity."

Regarding subject, Wordsworth declares his preference for "incidents and situations from common life". He insists that his poems contain little poetic diction and are written in "a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation."

Features of his poetry.

(a) Its Inequality and its Limitations: "The Excursion" is long, meditative, and often prosaic poem and these tendencies become more marked as the years pass. Before the year 1808 he had produced poems as intensely and artistically beautiful as any in the language. He had little sense of humour, a scanty dramatic power, and only a meagre narrative gift, but he strove to exploit all that qualities in his work.

(b) Its Egoism: The best of his shorter poems deal with his own experiences; and his longest works "The Prelude" and "The Excursion" describe his spiritual development in the minutest detail.

(c) In spite of this self-obsession he is curiously deficient in the purely lyrical gift. He excels especially in the face of nature, in the expression of a reflective and analytic mood which is both personal and general. The following lyric illustrates this mood to perfection:

*"My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the man:"*

In his sonnets he his lyrical mood burns clear and strong, and as a result they rank among the best in English poetry, Wordsworth's use of the Petrarchan form was so striking that he re-established its supremacy over the Shakespearian sonnet.

(d) His treatment of Nature: His dealings with nature are his chief glory as a poet. His treatment is accurate and first-hand. His personal dealing with nature in all her moods produces a joy, a plenteousness of delight, that to most readers is Wordsworth's most appealing charm. In his treatment off nature, however, he is not content merely to rejoice: he tries to see more deeply and to find the secret springs of this joy and thanksgiving.

S. T. Coleridge (1772-1834) : The real blossoming of **S. T. Coleridge's** poetical genius was brief indeed, but the fruit of it was rich and wonderful. In collaboration with Wordsworth, he produced the Lyrical Ballads (1798). The most noteworthy is "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner".

In 1797, Coleridge also wrote the first part of "Christabel", but, though a second part was added in 1800, the poem remained unfinished, and lay unpublished till 1816. "Christabel" is the tale of a kind of witch, who, by taking the shape of a lovely lady, wins the confidence of the heroine Christabel. "Kubla Khan", written in 1798, was, like "Christabel", unfinished, and it also remained unpublished until 1816. It is the echo of a dream – the shadow of a shadow. In 1802, he wrote the great ode "Dejection".

The most conspicuous feature of the poems is their intense imaginative power. No poet has ever excelled Coleridge in magic of language. For example, a passage from "The Ancient Mariner":

*"And now 'twas like all instruments,
Now like a lonely flute;
And now it is an angel's song,
That makes the heavens be mute."*

Lord Byron(1788-1824)'s first volume Hours of Idleness(1807) was a juvenile effort. He composed a satire in the style of Pope, calling it English Bards and Scotch Reviewers (1809). Then followed the two years of travel, which had their fruit in the first cantos of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage (1812) which brought him fame. The hero of the poem is a romantic person, and is very clearly Byron himself. A famous quotation from the poem speaks to humanity on a deeply emotional level:

"The great object of life is sensation – to feel that we exist, even though in pain".

He also composed a large number of lyrics. He also wrote some satirical poems and the longest of all is "Don Juan". In range, in vigour, and in effectiveness "Don Juan" ranks as one of the greatest of satirical poems. In it Byron expresses the wrath that consumes him, and all the human race comes under the lash.

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) was born in Sussex. He was educated at Eton and Oxford.
His Poetry:

Shelley's earliest effort of any note is Queen Mab (1813). Alastor, or The Spirit of Solitude (1816) followed. It is a kind of spiritual autobiography. After this came Laon and Cythna (1817). Then Shelley left for Italy. The first fruits of his new life were apparent in Prometheus Unbound (1818-19, published in 1820). This wonderful production is a combination of the lyric and the drama. The story is that of Prometheus, who defied the gods and suffered for his presumption. There is a small proportion of narrative in blank verse, but the chief feature of the poem is the series of lyrics that both sustain and embellish the action.

Among the longer ones are Julian and Maddalo (1818) and The Masque of Anarchy (1819, published 1832). The latter, inspired by the news of the massacre of Peterloo, expresses Shelley's revolutionary political views, and is very severe on Lord Castlereagh.

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In The Witch of Atlas (1820, published 1824) and Epipsychidion (1821) Shelley rises further and further into the atmosphere of poetical imagination, until he becomes almost impossible of comprehension.

“Adonais” (1821) is a lament for the death of Keats modelled on the classical elegy. Though there is a loud note in the attack on the critics, whom Shelley held to be responsible for the poet's early death, the Spenserian stanza is here used with a splendid tone and a force which increases as the poem progresses. It glows with some of the most splendid of Shelley's conceptions.

With the longer poems he also wrote some shorter lyrical pieces. “To a Skylark” and “The Cloud” are among them; so are some exquisite songs, such as “The Indian Serenade”, “Music”, “When soft voices die”, “On a Faded Violet”, “To Night” and the longer occasional pieces—for example, “Lines written among the Euganean Hills”, and the “Letter to Maria Gisborne”. Of his many beautiful odes, the most remarkable is “Ode to the West Wind”. The last line of the poem gives the reader a sense of hope towards the future:

“If winter comes, can spring be far behind?”

Features of his Poetry:

(a) His lyrical power is equal to the highest to be found in any language. It is now recognized to be one of the supreme gifts in literature, like the dramatic genius of Shakespeare. This gift is shown at its best when it expresses the highest emotional ecstasy, as in the lyrics of “Prometheus Unbound”. He can also express a mood of blessed cheerfulness, a sane and enjoyable joy.

He can also express the keenest note of, depression and despair, as in the lyric “O World! O Life! O Time!”

(b) Shelley's choice of subject makes it convenient to divide his work into two broad groups, the one consisting of his visionary, prophetic works such as “Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude”, “The Revolt of Islam”, “Prometheus Unbound” and similar poems, and the other of his shorter lyrics. In almost all of the visionary poems we see the Shelleyan hero, a rebel against tyranny and a leader in the struggle which is to bring about the ultimate happiness of humanity.

He rejoices in nature, but nature of a spiritual kind. Frequently he is concerned with the thought of death or his own sense of despair or loneliness:

*“O world! O life! O time!
On whose last steps I climb,
Trembling at that where I had stood before;
When will return the glory of your prime?
No more- Oh, never more!”*

(c) His descriptive power at once strikes the imagination. The effect is instant. His fancy played among wild and elemental things, but it gave them form and substance, as well as a radiant loveliness.

(d) His style is perfectly attuned to his purpose. Like all the finest lyrical styles, it is simple, flexible, and passionate. It has a direct clarity and a purity of language which are peculiarly Shelley's own.

(e) Shelley's limitations are almost as plain as his great abilities. He lacks humour; and his political poetry is often violent and unreasonable.

(f) During his lifetime Shelley's opinions obscured his powers as a poet. No fluctuations in taste can ever remove him from his place among the great.

John Keats was born in London. In 1821, he died in Rome early, at the age of twenty-five.

His Poetry:

When Keats was about seventeen years old, he became acquainted with the works of Spenser, and this proved to be the turning-point in his life. His earliest attempt at verse is his “Imitation of Spenser” (1813), written when he was eighteen. This and some other short pieces were published together in his Poems (1817), his first volume of verse. This book contains little of any outstanding

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merit, except for some of its sonnets, which include the superb “On first looking into Chapman's Homer”.

Of a different quality was his next volume, called “Endymion” (1818). This remarkable poem professes to tell the story of the lovely youth who was kissed by the moon-goddess on the summit of Mount Latmos. Keats develops this simple myth into a complex and flowery and rather obscure allegory of over four thousand lines. The work is clearly immature and flawed with many weaknesses both of taste and of construction, but many of the passages are most beautiful. The first line is often quoted, and it contains the theory that Keats followed during the whole of his poetical career:

“A thing of beauty is a joy for ever.”

Keats's health was already failing, but the amount of poetry he wrote is marvellous both in magnitude and in quality. His third and last volume, published in 1820 just before he left England, contains a collection of poems of the first rank. “Isabella, or The Pot of Basil” (1818), is a version of a tale from Boccaccio, and deals with the murder of a lady's lover by her two wicked brothers. The poem, which is written in ottava rima, marks a decided advance in Keats's work.

In “Hyperion”, Keats took up the epic theme of the primeval struggle between the older race of gods, such as Saturn and Hyperion, and the younger divinities, such as Apollo. Both in style and structure the poem is modelled on Paradise Lost.

“The Eve of St Agnes” (1819), regarded by others as his finest narrative poem, is a tale of the elopement of two lovers. The story is slight but moves quickly; the background of family dispute is kept well in mind, and the love scenes are more controlled than those in “Isabella, or the Pot of Basil”. The poem is full of beauties of description, imagery, and colour.

Together with the longer poems are many shorter pieces of supreme beauty. The great odes – “To a Nightingale”, “On a Grecian Urn”, “To Psyche”, “On Melancholy”, “To Autumn” - were nearly all written in 1819, and in their approach to flawless perfection the best of them are unequalled in Keats. All the odes, with the exception of “To Autumn”, show a concern with the poet's desire for true beauty, and they thus have a close link with “Endymion”, “Hyperion”, “Lamia” and “The Fall of Hyperion”. The odes are experiments in verse form based on the sonnet. A quotation from “Ode on a Grecian Urn” beautifully shows the natural, human inclination to imagine things as better than they are:

“Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard, are sweeter”.

As a sonneteer Keats ranks with the greatest English poets. Of his sixty-one sonnets some ten, including “On first looking into Chapman's Homer”, “When I have fears that I may cease to be”, and “Bright Star, would I were stedfast as thou art”, are worthy to be ranked with those of Shakespeare.

Among the other shorter poems “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, a kind of lyrical ballad, is considered to be one of the choicest in the language.

Features of his Poetry.

(a) His choice of subject differs from that of most of the other major romantic poets. His love of nature is intense and is constantly to be seen in the imagery of his poems.

(b) His style is even more distinctively his own, and it has had a great effect on later English poets, most notably on Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites. His early verse was rich in melodic beauty and decorative effect full of colour and the images of the senses.

Summing Up:

Some minor poets during the period are Southey, Moore, Campbell, Rogers, Leigh Hunt. The Romantic period, with the spirit of revolt, has great range of effort and experiment in poetic style. The general tendency is toward simplicity of diction that is best seen in the works of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley. But Keats is too fond of golden diction to resist the temptation to be ornate. Over the ages these poets have influenced many poets across the globe with their style, diction, philosophy and artistic poetry.

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