

PREDOMINANCE OF NATURE IN ROMANTIC POETRY

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Recently the veteran writer Ruskin Bond was asked whether Coronavirus epidemic should make people across the globe rethink and contemplate about their relationship with Nature, he replied, "I think all this has been possibly caused by too much interference and overexploitation of Nature, fueled by our over-consumerism, materialism and soaring population. See what has happened with Amazon forests in Brazil. Lockdown has given people enough time to be in solitude and reflect on their lives and their relation with Nature" (Santoshi).

This statement throws light upon the journey we have made from the past to the present times, a journey that began in the 18 century or even a little before that, when man started the destruction of nature to achieve progress. The felling of trees, construction of factories and industries and huge skyscrapers has resulted in natural imbalance. We have destroyed the natural landscape and its rich resources. This perilous violation of nature has been unprecedented. Unfortunately, the natural imbalance has endangered the lives of all living organisms on the planet.

The desynchronisation of our relationship with nature and the growing desire for material success has left us with little peace and satisfaction. It has filled our lives with emptiness, boredom and monotony. The present paper aims to understand the relationship of man with nature through an exploration of romanticism in English literature. It tries to highlight the romantic urge that reminds man of his bond with nature and the great spiritual wealth it withholds.

The romantic poets paint the picture of the beautiful English countryside uncorrupted by materialism. But the melancholic tone which they adopt in their poetry was born out of the sense of emptiness, misery and poverty that became the part of lives of people of England in the eighteenth century.

The sight of the daffodil flowers or the song of a skylark never failed to bring delight to the ailing heart of the romanticists. The rich melody of the skylark or the company of nightingale

transported the poets to the world of eternal delight and tranquility which they could never discover in the filthy alleys and the by lanes of London or in blackened chimneys of the innumerable factories that doted the English cities.

Teach us, Sprite or Bird,
 What sweet thoughts are thine:
 I have never heard
 Praise of love or wine
 That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine
 (Shelley)

To Shelley, the skylark is not a bird, it is a spirit and its song is divine. It is capable of taking man to the soaring heights of ecstasy. The material world with its sorrows and anxieties can never mitigate sadness from the human heart. The experience of rapture and ecstasy that every heart desires according to Shelley, could only be found in the rich melody of the skylark.

Wordsworth was one of the most prominent poets in the group of romantic poets. He captured the readers with a wonderful depiction of the rich and marvelous English countryside and the culture of the people who dwelt in the beautiful Lake district and across its green countryside. The enchanting imagery and the subjects that he chooses make his poems all more interesting. His poetry highlights the evils of man's lust for materialism. He questions this tendency and points out the necessity of establishing harmony between man and nature. Peace and tranquility, Wordsworth suggested through his poems is found in the company of nature and not in the accumulation of wealth and material luxuries. Whether it is the solitary reaper, Lucy or daffodil flowers they all reflect the poet's love for the beauty of nature – which for him was a source of spiritual delight. The company of the daffodil flowers fills the poet with everlasting happiness.

The waves beside them danced; but they

Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
 A poet could not but be gay,
 In such a jocund company:
 I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
 What wealth the show to me had brought
 (Wordsworth, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud")

The depiction of the beautiful English countryside and its rustic life and culture in **The Solitary Reaper** is an attempt to remind us of the richness of nature. The girl is singing leisurely while reaping in the peaceful field surrounded by beautiful mountains and valleys. The calm village is free from the corruption and pollution that had engulfed England in its sway due to black soot and fumes of billowing smoke erupting from factories in England.

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;

(Wordsworth, "The Solitary Reaper")

The carefree life of the rustic folk is nothing like the life of the chimney sweepers living in the English cities. They are forced into child labour. A pathetic sketch by William Blake of small children forced to work due to poverty and sold to perform physical labour is worth mentioning here. It is from the poem **The Chimney Sweeper**, taken from his famous collection, **songs of innocence and experience**

When my mother died, I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry " 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!"
So, your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.
(Blake)

As Norton points out,

"The wretched figure of the child sweep is a key emblem in Blake's poems of social protest. Not only are the sweeps innocent victims of the cruelest exploitation but they are associated with the smoke of industrialisation thus uniting two central Romantic preoccupations: childhood; and the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the natural world. A report to parliamentary committee on the employment of child sweeps in 1817 noted that 'the climbing boys' as young as four were sold by their parents to master-sweeps, or recruited from workhouses"(Norton).

The 18th century English society was marching into poverty and gloom. Blake hints at the emergence of capitalism that reinforced poverty, brought a new work culture based on deplorable conditions of work and introduced child labour. The class system emerged and

marked a distinction between the rich and the poor. The pain and suffering of the common people became the focus of romantic concern. The poets sought an escape into nature and created an imaginary world with never ending peace and happiness in their poems as a way out of the misery and anxieties of the human world. They believed that nature held inexhaustible spiritual power, and also had the capacity to heal the wounds inflicted by a cruel and unjust social order. Hence their poetry was a protest, a protest against injustice, against industrialisation, against the destruction of nature. The poetry was revolutionary as the movement was greatly influenced by the French revolution. The thrust of the romantics was on the dignity of individual. Freedom from all social and literary constraints and the creation of an egalitarian society haunted their creative consciousness.

Romanticism was an intellectual movement that began in the mid eighteenth century in the wake of rapid industrialization of Europe. It rebelled against the social and literary conventions of the earlier era of enlightenment and neo classicism, which strongly focused on objectivity and rationality. The romantics emphasized the subjective and irrational, they inclined towards feeling and emotion rather than reason and logic.

The city of London that William Blake describes in the poem entitled **London** is a transformed place. The poem follows the same strain as we find in **The Chimney Sweeper** except that it goes a step further to describe the degeneration of the city.

The English cities with huge factories and rancor is flooded by people who restlessly walk down its dusty roads and pavements to work.

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe (Blake)

The beautiful natural landscape has disappeared. In every nook and corner of the city one finds hordes of people, weary with hard labour, all engaged in a ruthless drive to achieve material prosperity. The poem has allusions to child labour, poverty, inequality and prostitution that the new materialistic English society brought with the change that swept across the world.

How the Chimney-sweepers cry
 Every blackning Church appalls,
 And the hapless Soldiers sigh
 Runs in blood down Palace walls

(Blake)

The pain and misery reflected in the poems of Blake and Wordsworth are born out of a sense of the changing landscape of London. The threat of the growing urbanisation and the onslaught of technology inculcated a sense of nostalgia, a retreat to the ancient era of the medieval period, to the old Greek culture that symbolized the richness and glory of the classic civilization, untainted by material corruption and greed. In the insatiable lust for materialism, they foresaw monotony and emptiness.

The poems exemplify the objects of nature. A flower, a tree, the brook, the sky or the cry of a nightingale became for them an objective correlative- a spiritual quest that would relieve the pain and misery of the world. Nature for them was a reflection of divinity which manifested itself in its various elements- the river, the trees the mountains and valleys. The poets believed that nature is the true-life force that nurtures the spirit and bestows peace upon an ailing soul. A mechanical life disrupts this bond.

Wordsworth laments about the loss of man's spiritual connection with nature in the poem **The World is too much with us**. The poet addresses the modern man's tendency to exchange the real for the unreal and natural for artificial. His idea of peace and prosperity is nothing but a false dream. It is merely an illusion of his idea of happiness which he desperately desires.

“The world is too much with us; late and soon,
 Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; —
 Little we see in Nature that is ours;
 We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!”
 (Wordsworth, “The World Is Too Much With Us”)

These poets want to create a vision of the world, free from the anxieties and agonies of this ephemeral world, a world that holds the promise of eternal bliss, where beauty fills the mind with everlasting delight, where love is gratified and music feeds the soul. The pain, sorrow and misery of this materialistic world could only be mitigated through the construction of an imaginary ideal world where the piper plays his pipe incessantly and spring never departs.

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
Forever piping songs for ever new;

(Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn by John Keats")

In the poem **Ode to a Nightingale**, John Keats, yet another popular romantic poet describes the experience he had on listening to the Nightingale's song. He is transported to a heavenly world. He describes the effect of the bird's song on his senses which make him surpass the world. The song of the bird intoxicates him. His creative imagination which is the source of spiritual ecstasy carries him to the ancient Grecian world.

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One-minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk

(Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale by John Keats")

In this state of intoxication, the poet has lost touch with the world and its painful realities. He compares his state with the happy lot of those who drink water from the Lethe wards which in Greek mythology is a river which intoxicates and makes people forget the world when they drink it. The bird is further described as 'the light winged Dryad of the trees.' Dryad is a wood nymph in Greek mythology. They were the spirits of oak trees who could take the form of beautiful women. Through a retreat to the medieval world, the poet traverses the heaven. The song is enticing but the mood of the poet is melancholy.

The gloom that pervades before the poet listens to the song of the nightingale highlights the poet's disgust with the world, a world filled with cares, worries and anxieties. The depiction of the medieval world with its nymphs and streams with gushing water, and the thick forests echoing with the melody of the nightingale's song reflects the poet's obsession with nature. His heart rejoices in the ecstatic company of Nightingale and nature and he forgets the

sorrow of the human world. The nightingale becomes for him a spirit that is capable of providing eternal bliss. Death had never been undesirable, but Keats says it would be a pleasure to die listening to the soul delighting melody of the nightingale.

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!

(Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale by John Keats")

The Romantic Movement conveys an important message that nature should be preserved and nurtured. The disruption of the harmony between man and nature can be a disastrous portent for generations of mankind. If the message that was conveyed centuries ago had not fallen on deaf ears, perhaps we would not be facing the threat of our own extinction and of life on the planet.

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