

Analyzing the Romantic Era through the Works of John Keats and P. B. Shelley

Dr. Chandan Prasad

State Aided College Teacher, Department of English, Gazole Mahavidyalaya, Gazole, Malda, W.B.

Abstract: There was a radical change in English literature during the Romantic period, which was a reaction to the Enlightenment's rationalism and was marked by an emphasis on nature, the imagination, personal experience, and emotion. This study explores the Romantic movement through the chosen poetry of two major second-generation Romantic poets, John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Eats' poetry illustrates the tenets of Romanticism through the use of sensual imagery, aesthetic beauty, and the exploration of impermanence, suffering, and the search for truth, often expressed through the notion of "negative capability." Conversely, Shelley's poetry illustrates the idealistic and revolutionary tenets of Romanticism through their preoccupation with political freedom, social reform, intellectual idealism, and the transformative power of the imagination. By analyzing the poetic techniques, thematic preoccupations, and philosophical attitudes of the Romantics, this study aims to gain insight into the common and distinctive notions expressed in their poetry. Despite their profoundly different personalities and worldviews, this comparative analysis demonstrates how Shelley and Keats together contribute to a greater understanding of Romanticism as an aesthetic movement that seeks a common ground between subjective experience and objective truth. The study emphasizes the continued relevance of Romantic literature in capturing human dreams, imagination, and defiance of societal norms.

Keywords: Intellectual, imagination, collaborative, enlightenment, introspection

I. Introduction

English literature saw a dramatic change during the time of the Romantic movement, which started in the late 18th century and carried on into the early 19th century (approximately 1798-1837). This movement was a reaction to the emphasis on reason during the Enlightenment and the formalism of Neoclassicism. The romantic movement centred art on human emotions and creativity, emphasizing individualism, imagination, and a connection with nature.

The Romantic writers emphasized the importance of introspection, the value of one's own subjective experience, and the aesthetic value of nature. Nature was considered to be more than a landscape; it was a spiritual force that could heal and inspire people. The Romantic writers were able to break free from the constraints of industrial and urban culture through their interest in the past, mythology, the supernatural, and mediaeval traditions.

John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley, two prominent figures of the second Romantic era, aptly express the essence of the period through their poetry. Through their stress on the importance of feeling, creativity, and freedom, the two poets challenged the dominance of logic and society. Keats represents the sensual and aesthetic side of Romanticism, which glorifies the importance of nature, emotions, and aesthetic beauty. He stressed the Romantic belief in art as a source of truth and comfort in poems such as "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "Ode to a Nightingale," which are centred on the themes of death, suffering, and the quest for eternal beauty. On the other hand, Shelley represents the revolutionary and idealistic spirit of Romanticism. His passionate desire for social change, spiritual renewal, and political freedom is expressed in works such as "Ode to the West Wind" and "Prometheus Unbound." Nature, the agent of change and renewal, assumes a symbolic and dynamic form in Shelley's poetry. Taken together, the representations of Romanticism by Keats and Shelley, one rooted in idealism and transformation and the other in emotion and beauty, provide a complete analysis of the ideals and objectives of the Romantic era.

II. Objective of The Study

- To gain knowledge regarding the key characteristics of the Romantic era as reflected in the poetry of John Keats and P. B. Shelley.
- To study the nature in Keats's and Shelley's poetry as a central Romantic ideal.
- To investigate Keats's ideas regarding beauty, art, and transience in relation to Romantic aesthetics.
- To gather and observe Shelley's revolutionary idealism, political vision, and belief in social and moral transformation.

- To assess imagination, emotion, and individual experience are expressed in the selected works of both poets.

John Keats in “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

John Keats is known to be one of the greatest Romantic poets, famous for his philosophical thoughts on truth and beauty, as well as his sensual imagery and deep emotional insights. His most celebrated ode, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1819), is a perfect example of all that was romantic about him. Keats refers to the ancient Greek urn as the “still unravished bride of quietness” and the “foster-child of silence and slow time” in his ode to it. Time, beauty, and human experience are some of the themes that Keats explores in his romantic engagement with art.

The urn holds eternally the transient but potent feelings of lovers, musicians, and sacrificial offerings. Keats compares the transient nature of human life to the eternal nature of art, but also points out that love and joy are both transient. The picture on the urn of dead humans who are eternally joyful and young illustrates how art can hold beauty for the ages.

The famous saying, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," is a philosophical observation in the poem. This saying sums up Keats's views on the fact that aesthetic experience holds a truth that cannot be explained rationally. Another aspect of Keats's idea of negative capacity is evident in the poet's willingness to embrace the riddle and mystery without attempting to find rational answers. “Ode on a Grecian Urn” captures the essence of Romanticism in its entirety by celebrating originality, beauty, and emotional intelligence. It cements Keats's status as one of the most important Romantic poets by presenting art as an eternal form that provides solace and meaning despite the fleeting nature of human life.

The English poet John Keats wrote the influential poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in 1819. A speaker of unknown identity looks at a Grecian urn that is decorated with beautiful images of rural life in ancient Greece; the complex and mysterious design of the poem hides a very simple plot. These moments of life are fascinating, enchanting, and thrilling the speaker equally; they appear to have captured life in all its aspects. The urn is more a source of questions than answers, and the speaker's mood shifts accordingly. Different people have different opinions about how the poem should be concluded. It is as if the speaker is attempting to tell the listener and himself that beauty and truth are one and the same thing. Keats wrote this poem, like his other famous poems ("Ode to a Nightingale"), during a period of prolific creativity. Even so few people liked this poem when Keats wrote it, it is now regarded as one of the greatest poems in English literature.

John Keats in “Ode to a Nightingale”

Keats is celebrated as a great Romantic poet famous for his philosophical thoughts, imagery, and emotional sensitivity. Ode to a Nightingale (1819) is one of the best odes written by Keats, which portrays his deep concern for nature, creativity, and humanity. The themes of poetic transcendence, beauty, and immortality are all represented in the poem by the poet's response to the singing of the nightingale. Keeping in mind the sufferings, diseases, and deaths of human beings, Keats starts his poem with a sense of fatigue and pain. A world without misery, decay, and death is represented by the song of the nightingale, on the other hand. The nightingale's song is a symbol of the world of beauty and immortality, which Keats tries to attain as an escape from the drudgery of life. This temporary escape is achieved, not through drink or pleasure, but through the "viewless wings of Poesy," which highlight the Romantic belief in art and imagination.

The poem explores further the struggle between running away and being forced to confront reality. The poet is limited by the limitations of time and humanity, as opposed to the immortal nightingale, whose song has been heard through the ages. Keats again reaffirms his concept of negative capability, the willingness to accept ambiguity without the need for logical explanation, in the final lines by stating his confusion about whether his experience was a vision or a dream. Emotion, nature, imagination, and the paradox between reality and ideals are all characteristics of Romanticism, which is largely conveyed in "Ode to a Nightingale." The poem successfully conveys Keats's musings about pain, beauty, and the fleeting nature of human happiness, cementing his importance in the Romantic period.

Percy Bysshe Shelley his writings in Romantic Era

Poet Percy Bysshe Shelley is regarded as one of the greatest writers of the second generation of Romantic poets. Through his literary works, Shelley challenges tyranny in several ways, namely in religion, politics, and society, reflecting the fundamental ideals of Romanticism, which emphasize individual freedom. In order to criticize society and advocate for moral reform through his literary works, Shelley drew heavily on the ideals of the French Revolution. Through her poetry, Shelley's utopian ideals and imagination are evident. Unlike other poets who focused on their personal emotions, Shelley's works tended to concentrate on universal themes such as justice, liberty, and the potential for human perfection.

Nature is depicted in poems such as "Ode to the West Wind" and "Prometheus Unbound" as a deep force of individual and collective transformation. Shelley employs nature as a strong symbol of individual enterprise,

spiritual energy, and freedom, as opposed to a passive object. Another feature of Shelley's Romantic poetry is her belief in the capability of poetry and imagination. Shelley believed that poets were the "unacknowledged legislators of the world," having the power to direct the moral and intellectual development of mankind. His highly developed intellect set him apart from his contemporaries, but his expressive poetry, complex symbolism, and musical language were all characteristic of the Romantic school.

Percy Bysshe Shelley in “*Ode to the Westwind*”

Ode to the West Wind (1819) is one of the most lyrical poems Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote, and it is a classic representation of the ideals of Romanticism. Shelley portrays the West Wind in this poem as a strong symbol of the natural world that symbolizes both destruction and renewal. Shelley expresses the vital elements of his romantic vision, his belief in transformation, his revolutionary fervour, and his passionate idealism, through this symbolic representation. The five cantos that form the poem are a demonstration of Shelley's technical skill and lyrical power, and all of them are written in terza rima. The West Wind is referred to as the "Destroyer and Preserver" as it bears seeds of new life and also blows away dead leaves. This ambivalence represents Shelley's belief in the need for transformation to bring about progress in the world of nature and human civilization.

Shelley compares himself to the West Wind in his fight to overcome his own suffering and become a power for change in society. His greatest hope is that his words and thoughts will spread like "ashes and sparks" over the world, urging people to embrace freedom and change. Shelley shows in this poem that poetry can be a revolutionary force. As the poem ends with the question, "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" it sums up the hopeful spirit of the poem. The great Romantic tenet of regeneration after degradation is again asserted in this poem by Shelley's faith. The skill of Shelley in imagery and poetic structure is fully demonstrated in "*Ode to the West Wind*," which also expresses the Romantic faith in the power of nature, imagination, and individuals to transform society.

Percy Bysshe Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound*

Shelley's magnum poetic opus, "*Prometheus Unbound*" (published in 1820), is a typical example of his radical political views and his quintessential Romanticism. He resorts to the power of the Titan—a figure from Greek mythology known as Prometheus—representing his idea of resistance to injustice, tyranny, and oppression. On the contrary, he underlines his idea of freedom rooted in his heroic moral stand, love, and intellect.

Jupiter stands for tyrannical religious, social, and political authority, whereas Prometheus represents the human will to resist dictatorship. Patience, tolerance, and trust in the inevitable fall of tyranny are the means by which Shelley's Prometheus achieves his victory, rather than force. This exemplifies Shelley's humanitarian and Romantic ideals, which include a belief in the perfection of human nature and a nonviolent revolution. Ecology in the Prometheus A crucial symbolic function is played by Unbound. In celebrating freedom from oppression, it alludes to a future in which people and the environment might live in peace. The Romantic vision of man's oneness with nature is reaffirmed by Shelley's portrayal of nature as a living, breathing force that is in harmony with liberty and spiritual rebirth.

Additionally, Shelley's belief in the transformational powers of imagination and love is emphasized in the poem. In the end, it is love that brings people together and renews the world. Shelley expresses his aspiration for a future predicated on freedom, equality, and ethical advancement through vivid imagery, poetic language, and profound philosophical thought. A declaration of Shelley's Romantic ideals, *Prometheus Unbound* is a monumental work. It establishes him as one of the most pioneering Romantic poets by embodying his beliefs in liberty, human worth, and the transformative potential of love and creativity.

III. Conclusion

Both John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley, who were active during the Romantic era, wrote poems that reflect the spirit of that literary movement and its stress on personal agency, feeling, and the natural world. These poems were written during the time period of the Romantic period. Shelley, on the other hand, epitomizes the revolutionary and visionary spirit of the Romantic movement, advocating for social reform, freedom, and moral regeneration. Keats, on the other hand, focuses on art, beauty, and the impermanence of human life in his sensuous and introspective study of Romanticism. Despite the fact that their lyrical styles and temperaments couldn't be more dissimilar to one another, they both have a strong disagreement with the rigidity of logic and a deep appreciation for the power of imagination as a means of overcoming challenges and limitations. Through the writings that they have produced, they demonstrate that Romanticism was a dynamic literary movement that successfully matched individual feeling with community optimism. The timeless poetry of Keats and Shelley affirms the relevance of the Romantic era in articulating humanity's quest for beauty, truth, and freedom. This is true even if the Romantic era is defined by their poetry.

References

- [1]. A contemporary review of Keats- A link to John Gibson Lockhart's review of Keat's poetry in 1818
- [2]. Burns Anthony, John Danel. Sweet degradation – the persistence of the Gothic in Shelley's representations of love. Diss. U Leeds, 2004. PDF file.
- [3]. Chesterton GK. Robert Browning. Project Gutenberg of Australia. Prod. Roy Glashan, 2012. Ebooks. Web. 10. Nov 2017 <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks12/1204401h.html>.
- [4]. Chichester Bonca Teddi. Love, Sexuality, Gender: On Love, Discourse on Love, and The Banquet of Plato."
- [5]. Crook Nora. Shelley and Women. The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Ed. Michael Barcelona. Berlin: Mouton, 2000; 253-81. (17). PDF File.
- [6]. Day, A. (2011). Romanticism. Routledge.
- [7]. Deane, S. (2013). The French Revolution and Enlightenment in England, 1789–1832. In The French Revolution and Enlightenment in England, 1789–1832. Harvard University Press.
- [8]. Frijstein Anna. Track & Trace Authenticity. Diss: Gerrit Rietveld Academy. Amsterdam, 2015. PDF File.
- [9]. Garrett Martin. The Palgrave Literary Dictionary of Shelley. 1st Ed. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Print.
- [10]. Gaull Marilyn. Shelley's Sciences. The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Ed. Michael O'Neill, Anthony Howe and Madeleine Callaghan. 1st Ed. Oxford UP, 2013. Kindle.
- [11]. Gelpi Barbara, Charlesworth. Preface. Shelley's Goddess Maternity, Language, Subjectivity. New York: Oxford UP, 1992. PDF File.
- [12]. Hall, E. B. (1906). The friends of Voltaire. Smith Elder & Company
- [13]. Kant, I. (2013). An answer to the question: 'What is enlightenment?'. Penguin UK.
- [14]. Keats, J. (1909). The Poems of John Keats. London: JM Dent; New York: EP Dutton.
- [15]. Keats, J., & Clarke, G. (2004). Ode to a Nightingale
- [16]. More by Keats- A link to more poems by Keat, including his other odes.
- [17]. Outram, D. (2019). The enlightenment. Cambridge University Press.
- [18]. Portrait of John Keats by Joseph Severn- A painting done of Keats by his friend and contemporary, Joseph Severn.
- [19]. Starkweather A. J. & Wilson R.B. (1884). Socialism: Being a Brief Statement of the Doctrines and Philosophy of the Social Labor Movement, J.W. Lovell Company.
- [20]. The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Ed. Michael O'Neill, Anthony Howe and Madeleine Callaghan. 1st Ed. Oxford UP, 2013. Kindle.
- [21]. Wordsworth, W., & Creeley, R. (2004). I wandered lonely as a cloud. ProQuest LLC.