

ISSN:0976-8165



# The Criterion

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

**VOL. 15 ISSUE-2 APRIL 2024**

**15 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS**

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ISSN 2278-9529

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
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## **Romanticism: The Waves of Fleeting Emotions**

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11105667>

**Article History:** Submitted-31/03/2024, Revised-15/04/2024, Accepted-17/04/2024, Published-30/04/2024.

### **Abstract:**

The paper attempts to study the rise of Romanticism through a comparative study of the Romantic tendencies with that of its earlier age- the Neo- Classical age. The age of Romanticism focuses on spontaneity, purity rather than being logical and rational while writing poetry. The Romantic writers represented this spontaneous and pure form of Nature in their writings. These flawless waves of the romantic songs never fail to reflect its proximity to Nature. Thus Romantic poets like Wordsworth set up a democratic way of writing poetry wherein the poets emphasized on the importance of writing for the common man.

**Keywords: Romanticism, Neo Classicism, Enlightenment, Theory of Poetry.**

Any endeavour to explain the word Romanticism often takes our conscience into the arena of the natural world, far off from the real world. This assumption could not be ignored as the poetic sensibility of the Romantic age flows from the tranquility of human scruples and blows like the air of spontaneity, which is sudden and unforced. This natural crave for a painless world of imagination compels the reader to sink into the world of colouring thoughts while going through the flowing lines of Romantic poetry.

The flavours of colouring imagination, the propinquity to the natural world and the simplicity of human sensibility characterized the outlook of the poetic genius of the period.

The Romantic Age emphasized the vivacity of feelings, intuition and sensitivity rather than dealing with reason, intellect and head. The essence of eternity of art found a shape within the dimension of some rhythmic and ever flowing lines of poetry which put their ever lasting impression on human cognition. During the enlightened approach towards the work of art; the life was given less space and the sense of liberty became the only vehicle to transport the thoughts from its origin to the destination. However, the initiative was clearly visible to bring a new cult in the field of literature, to innovate rather than merely imitate the Classical norms as a part of tradition. The landmark came up in the form of a bunch of twenty three poems as a collaborated effort by William Wordsworth and Coleridge entitled as *The Lyrical Ballads* in the year 1798, which is considered conventionally as the beginning of Romantic period.

The *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1800) which establishes Wordsworth's theory of poetry and which were to be so influential not only on many of his contemporaries but the later generation too. The preface establishes the poetic manifesto that represents the spirit of the age. It deconstructed the well-constructed norms in the field of poetry. It is not just a critical piece of writing by William Wordsworth; it demolished the blind faith and acceptance of the classical norms which dominated the literature of England for almost two hundred years.

Ronald Carter and John Mcrae in *The Routledge History of Literature in English* quotes Wordsworth's Theory of Poetry thus,

'The principle object, then, which I proposed to myself in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way.' (201)

The principle aim was evidently defined that is to portray the everyday ordinary life with a colouring of imagination on it. The new theory established a reconstructed order of poetry, a fresh air with the fragrance of nature mingled in it. It was democratic in its tone; the sense of equality reflected for the very first time in literature. As Wordsworth stated once that he had aimed to show that men and women 'who do not wear fine clothes can feel deeply'. Therefore, the attitude towards greater liberty and democracy in political and social

affairs was paralleled by poetry which sought to turn over the existing system and establish a new; more autonomous poetic order. The value of art was given ample prominence along with the touch of 'commons' or those who could never be a part of the extraordinary life. The close affinity to the world of nature; the landscapes, valleys, rivers, lakes, mountains and the multicolored wings of nature were not only served as the integral part of the poetic body rather their relation to the ordinary life covered the space in the work of arts. The fresh approach with the touch of innovation broke a new ground; a sense of liberation in literature was felt in the atmosphere of creativity. It scattered the rough regulations or in other words the correctness in poetry. The set order of Neo-Classical poetry was targeted and harshly reacted against for being heavily 'artificial'.

The Romantic sensibility helped to shape the sense of artistic innovation and spontaneity; the ever green approach towards literature gave the value to the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' and to the 'emotions recollected in tranquility'. The proximity to nature compelled the consciousness of the poet to enjoy the liberation in literature and to let the fleeting emotions colour the words on the pages. The new companion of the poet came up in the form of nature to colour the imagination of his cognition.

As a movement, Romanticism is thus concerned with a reaction against the principle and authority and is a search for freedom in personal, political and artistic life. The Romantics reacted against the rational outlook of the Neo-Classical and the impersonality of growing industrialism. They carried out the strenuous effort to redefine the nation's history and bring a sense of liberation in the mind of people. The initial effect of the movement could be seen in the field of literature. In art, it came up as a response to the Neo Classical quest for correctness in Art, order and vitality of reason. The Romantic attitude towards art demolished the value for reason, intellect and head and they were overshadowed by emotion, feeling and heart.

The reactionary attitude of Romantic Age could easily define the prevailing tendencies of the time. A contrastive approach towards literature and life and human experience was very much visible in the sense of creativity of Neo-Classical and the Romantic men of letters. An in depth analysis of their treatment of art defines the sensibility of both the ages; in fact the comparative analysis of the two ages explores the meaning of Romanticism in the purest

sense of the word. The Romantic age is often contrasted with the Neo-Classical artistic sensibility.

Let's take up Neo-Classical poetic sensibility into consideration first; they emphasized the vitality of reason and order. The importance of imagination in poetry could not be ignored even in the Neo-Classical Age but the flights of imagination had to be confined within the certain dimension of norms and order. The value was given to enlightened outlook towards literature; the emphasis was on Reason and Order to establish all the essential norms of life. In the essay "*What Is Enlightenment?*" (1784) Immanuel Kant defined Enlightenment as "the liberation of mankind from his self-caused state of minority" and the attainment of a phase of maturity which is exemplified in his "determination and courage to use [his understanding] without the assistance of another." (Abrahams, M.H: 50). Thus the journey from minority to maturity was the key to the Neo-Classical Age. Thus man's belief in reason not only freed him from his reliance on authority and stereotypical conventions but simultaneously strengthened him to survive in the world in an ideal situation. The fascination towards aesthetic value of art was not the concern of the Neo-Classical authors rather; it was the apt equilibrium of Reason and Order which was given the priority in the work of art. The harmony of aesthetic power of literature and enlightened outlook towards life covered the ample of space in the literature of Neo Classical Age.

In contrast the poetic sensibility of the Romantic writers were far-flung from being captivated in the realms of Reason and Order proposed in the theory of Enlightenment. Instead of accepting the norm of the classical authors, the Romantic writers showed their natural thirst for the liberation of human soul from all the imposed Reason and Order of Enlightenment. Romantic writers looked into their own soul and the imaginative world unlike the classical authors who gave preference to something which is more logical and rational in its tone. The allure of the Romantic writers towards less rational, mystical and supernaturalism reflects the prevailing attitude favored by them. The rejection of the social norms in the poems of Neo-Classical writers confined the individual within the ordered way of life whereas the Romantic writers rejoiced the liberty of nature and individual human experience.

Apart from the differences between the rational and enlightened outlook of the Neo-Classical writers and the irrational and mystical tendencies of the writers of the age of Romanticism towards literature there was various other aspects existed at during the age of Romanticism which had reflected the difference in both the ages. The writers of Neo Classical age had given priority to the sense of traditionalism more than any other essential element of literature. These writers manifested a strong faith in traditionalism which was more often than not restricted them to fly away in the unreal world of fleeting emotions unlike the Romantic authors. Their sense of traditionalism was evidenced in their faith and enormous respect for classical authors (particularly Roman writers). The rules and decorum of writing established by the classical writers were supposed to provide the models which could be relied upon to reach the zenith of a creative endeavor.

On the other hand the radical innovations was given the prominence in the works of Romantic writers, the sense of resistance against the blind faith in traditionalism was quite easily visible, it allowed them the freedom to redefine nature within the framework of the aesthetic beauty of a work of art. The existing attitude privileged the sense of radical innovation rather than showing a staunch faith in the traditional models of writing. This attitude became the manifesto in the preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800). The preface came up with a revolutionary aim, to deconstruct the poetic diction of the preceding age and proposed to deal with materials from 'common life' in 'a selection of language really used by men.' The preface established a new poetry rather than a radical innovation in literature. The writers dealt with serious and lowly themes in less artificial language or rather in a common man's language to violate the basic tenets of language and literature of the Neo-Classical Age. The violation of the decorum of the Neo Classical writing was the key element of the poetic theory proposed by Wordsworth in the *Preface* (1800).

The age experimented and rejoiced the liberation in literature in a multifaceted ways; the sense of innovation in literature took different shapes to express it. The poets like Keats and Coleridge dealt with the conflict of supernatural world and the world of reality in their works. The sense of innovation eased their pen to experiment with the aspects of nature in a supernatural manner. The writers like Blake, Wordsworth and Shelley made the best use of the innovative mode of writing to express the visionary outlook to the greater extent in their works.

The use of symbolism especially in the works of Blake and Shelley gave an extension to the sense of innovation prevailed during the Romantic period. Blake was known for his extensive use of symbolism in his poetry. The innocence in Blake's poetry is symbolized through children, flowers, lambs or any seasons. Blake in order to show the oppression and rationalism uses the symbols such as urban, industrial landscapes, machines and social institutions. On the other hand for Shelley, symbols played a vital role in expressing the different aspects of life. His poem such as *Ode to Skylark* (1820) portrayed the symbol of eternity through the image of a Skylark. Shelley in his letters to Thomas Love Peacock said, "I always seek in what I see" and "the likeness of something beyond the present and tangible objects."

In the Neo-Classical Age the most vital concern was man and his being the essential part of the society; the nature for them was essentially the human nature. The prime material for the poetic creation was man; who was considered to be the primary source for any work of art. The idea of imitation was given prominence which proposed the thought that poetry is an imitation of life and it copied the human actions. The Neo Classical conception of poetry dealt with the slogan art for man's sake and not art for art's sake. As the following lines reflects the fact:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;

The proper study of mankind is man

Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,

A being darkly wise, and rudely great. (An Essay on Man)

Further, the Neo-Classical Age gave importance to the human nature; whereas, the Romantic writers emphasized the glory of nature in the purest sense of the word. The fascination for external nature could be seen in almost all the poems of the age. The treatment of nature took reader's conscience to an extraordinary level of external nature; the rivers, valleys, mountains, hills and landscapes together with its fauna and flora- became the thematic concerns for the poetic creation during this age.

Five years have passed; five summers, with the length

Of five long winters! And again I hear

These waters, rolling from their mountain- springs

With a soft inland murmur. (Tintern Abbey)

The most vital concern for the Romantic writers was the vision of nature and the impact of nature on the human mind. The poems were empirical in nature; that is, they captured the evidence of senses, going inward rather than outward.

The image of children played a significant role in the poetry of Neo-Classical and Romantic Age. The way in which children were represented in the poetic creations reflected a contrast in the attitudes. In the poems of Neo-Classical Age, the child is portrayed as an entity that is important merely because he/she will develop into an adult. They believed that the savage impulses of child must be controlled, making it enlightened and sophisticated. For the Romantic writers the child is holy and pure and its immediacy to God will only be besmirched by civilization. The child then is a source of innate and spontaneous feelings. As Wordsworth signifies the vitality of child and childhood experience in the following immortal lines:

The Child is father of the Man;

I could wish my days to be

Bound each to each by natural piety.

(My Heart Leaps Up)

The Neo-Classical writers emphasized the fact that literature was primarily an art and to achieve the perfection in an art form one was required to do the strenuous endeavor. The imitation of the ancient classical masters and their decorum were considered to the world view of art. The rules of poetry have been abstracted from ancient authors, whose long survival proved the fact that they were the art maker. The school of correctness during the Neo-Classical Age referred to the prevention of fervor; modest opinions moderately uttered, firm concern and precision in poetical technique; and humble replication of the style of the classical masters. As Pope said:



Those Rules of old discovered, not devised,

Are Nature still, but Nature methodized. (An Essay on Criticism )

While Neo-Classical writers were concerned about the decorum of classical, the Romantic writers focused on nature not methodized but naturalized. Wordsworth emphasized that the good poetry is nothing but the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” The statement elaborated the view that vitality of poetry does not lie in portraying the men in action rather its main concern is to reflect the poet’s emotions and at the same moment the poetic creation must come up as something that is sudden and unforced, the ‘spontaneous’ overflow. The word ‘spontaneous’ appeared to be the reactionary attitude of the Romantic poetry against the artificiality and artful manipulation of the Neo-Classical writings. In the process of creation the mind of the poet should not be confined within the dimension of certain rules and decorum of literature rather the feelings and emotions should be freed from all chains of rules.

The language and form of the literature of the two ages reflected the difference in viewing these essential proportions of a work of art. The Neo-Classical writers were concerned about correctness in literature and developed a strict and controlled way of writing characterized by a pertinent balance of the heroic couplet and by observance to the decorum of a special poetic diction. The Romantic writers on the other hand represented ways of writing which attempted to confine only the ebb and flow of individual experience in forms and language which established a proximity to ordinary speech and more open to the ordinary men.

Even though a comparative approach is helpful to understand the tendencies of the Neo-Classical and Romantic Ages but there are always exceptions to such general contrasts. Romanticism was much more than merely an age in the history of English Literature, which was not a sudden, drastic transformation, but which grew out of Neo-Classicism. The poetic sensibility of eighteenth-century writers such as Grey, Collins and Cowper showed a developing Romantic sensibility, and instances also reflected the fact that Romantic poets such as Byron was influenced by poetic models of Neo-Classical Age. To conclude the Romantic fleet of imagination one can say that their intuition were connected to a special insight or perception which was not visible to the ordinary intelligence. They awakened their insights and created their masterpieces by mixing insights with imagination.

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