



Recurrence of Romantic Aesthetics in Classicist Writings: A Survey of British Classical Poetry

Rabia Ashraf and Shazia Aziz

COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, Lahore, Pakistan.

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, classicism and romanticism are conceived as peculiar and mutually exclusive literary movements with distinct literary styles and stylistic characteristics. This paper aims to trace some prominent writing traits of the Romantic era like spontaneity, preoccupation with imagination and subjectivity and focus on highlighting emotions and feelings in poetry as evident in the works of poets writing before the Romantic era. A close examination and in-depth reading of selected works showed that romantic traits are not confined to the Romantic era only but also appear to be recurring in the writings of Chaucer, Spenser and other poets who were writing much before Wordsworth proposed the characteristics of romantic poetry in *The Prelude*. This study, therefore, traces romantic traits in the works that do not fall into romantic era chronologically.

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I. Introduction

Hamilton (1990) opines that romanticism is characterised by material rather than structural variety and there is stress on spontaneity and intensity of response to experience, on an apparently inherent pressure to accommodate plurality and discover radiant and central concepts. Wordsworth also considers spontaneity as one of the most prominent features of Romantic poetry and the writing process itself. According to Wordsworth (1800), good poetry is a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” produced after thinking “long and deeply” by a man who “possessed more than usual organic sensibility”. He also requests the reader to judge the poet’s style of composition, or expression by his own feelings instead of indulging in destructive criticism by being biased and influenced by others’ judgment, and marring his pleasure.

If compared in aesthetics and attitudes, romantic politics is characterized by change and classic by preservation; science in the Romantic period is characterised by generation and classicism by unification; religion in the Romantic period is expressive and in the Classical, immersive; romantic is characterized by doubt and classical by fear; romantic order is manipulative and classical is appreciative; mortality in romantics meant to transcend and to classicists, to deny. Classicism, inspired by the Greeks, is characterized by order, poise, and symmetry and views the world objectively. On the other hand, Romanticism, inspired by nature and imagination, is characteristic of wonder, ecstasy, and irregularity with self expression as supreme.

This paper attempts to examine whether the poetry of the Classical period can be strictly regarded classical as far as following all the norms and doctrines of style are concerned or there is some overlapping of qualities or whether the qualities to be termed romantic in essence later began to emerge slowly in the poetry of the Classical period, too. As Butler has it in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the term “Romantic” is

indispensable but at the same time has few misleading connotations too, as there was no self-styled “Romantic movement” at the moment when it started off and the writers like Blake and Byron did not label or called themselves as Romantics. It was with August Wilhelm von Schlegel’s Vienna lectures of 1808–09 that a clear distinction was made between the “plastic”, “organic,” qualities of Romantic art and the “mechanical” temperament of Classicism. This study hypothesizes that just as the early Romanticists were not consciously aware of the qualities they started to display through their art, classicists had also, knowingly or unknowingly, started to display the characteristic features of Romanticism in their poetry produced in the so called Classical period and tracing out this over lapping is the significance of the present study.

Many prominent writers of the Romantic period sensed and alluded to something new happening in world’s affairs. William Blake’s assertion in 1793 that “a new heaven is begun” corresponded a generation later with P. B. Shelley’s “The world’s great age begins anew.” Leigh Hunt and William Wordsworth were referred to by John Keats in the words: “These, these will give the world another heart, /And other pulses.” Fresh ideals began to emerge; particularly, the ideal of freedom, long cherished in England, was being extended to every range of human endeavor. As that ideal swept through Europe, it became natural to believe that the age of tyrants might soon end. So this vague feeling of some change going to take place and the poets’ sensibilities to refer to the upcoming changes through their poetry gradually even in classical times is understandable. As revolutions take time to materialize but the sparks start to kindle much earlier, these ashes of Romanticism had started flickering in the classical times in the poetry of that time.

Tele:

E-mail address: rabiaashraf@ciitlahore.edu.pk

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II. Theoretical Underpinnings

Classicism is used for 'the ideas and styles that are common in literature, art, and architecture of ancient Greece and Rome'. A literary definition of classicism regards classicism as "the principles or style embodied in the literature, art, or architecture of ancient Greece and Rome" marked by "adherence to traditional standards (as of simplicity, restraint, and proportion) that are universally and enduringly valid." Contrary to this, Romanticism is 'a style of art, literature, etc., during the late 18th and early 19th centuries that emphasized the imagination and emotions' and the literary definition defines romanticism as 'a literary, artistic, and philosophical movement originating in the 18th century, characterized chiefly by a reaction against neoclassicism and an emphasis on the imagination and emotions, and marked especially in English literature by sensibility and the use of autobiographical material, an exaltation of the primitive and the common man, an appreciation of external nature, an interest in the remote, a predilection for melancholy, and the use in poetry of older verse forms'.

The term "Romanticism", generally refers to the time period comprised of late 18th century in England. The writers of that epoch were classified as Romantic writers and their writings marked the impression of Romanticism on general mind sets. But probing more into the undertones of the term reveals that the term romanticism, coined in that era, was not something innovative and novel. When we go back into the Classical era and observe the works of the poets of that time period like Chaucer, Milton, Spenser and Pope, their poetry too is considered full of numerous important characteristics of Romanticism. Havens (1912) observes that "English Romanticism never began because it always was; it never had a new birth because it was never dead." In this sense, romanticism has been an all pervasive characteristic in English Literature. Beers (2005) contends that the terms Classic and Romantic do not describe specific periods in literary history or specific literature, as certain counterbalancing qualities are present in literatures of all times and countries. Romantic writings were produced among the Greeks and Romans; classical works were written in the middle Ages and there are classical romantic traits in the same author.

As far as the term Romanticism is concerned in British poetry, it was not a unique and innovative approach emerging in the late eighteenth century. It was persistent throughout in the history of English literature. Although there is a huge gap between the time periods of Romanticism and Classicism, they are interrelated in the sense that Classicist poets had romantic traits in their poetry, too, along with classicist traits. Likewise, romantic poets, too, had classicist essence in their poetic works along with a romantic inclination. Havens (1912) argues that the English people have always been romantically inclined and sentimental. He declares the terms 'the beginnings' or 'the Renaissance of English romanticism' as unfortunate misnomers. He admits that romanticism disappeared from English Literature, particularly from poetry, to a great extent, but he asserts that it does not mean that it ceased to exist.

III. Methodology

This study is a qualitative and in depth analysis of the literary movements of Romanticism and Classicism and in particular some classicists' selected poems as corpus have been studied and analysed as data to infer results of the study.

IV. Analysis

This study sets out to explore romantic traits in the writings of classical poets and writers. For the purpose of analysis, this study examined the romantic traits present in the works of some classical poets from both romantic and classical time periods viz. Geoffrey Chaucer, Edmund Spenser, Alexander Pope, John Milton, Thomas Gray and William Cowper.

Historically, in English literature, the writers have been categorized according to the time periods in which they were writing i.e., starting from Greek literature continuing till post-modern period. Usually, the writing style of different writers is judged in the light of the era to which they belong, neglecting the universality of their style. For instance, Classical writers are demarcated as the writers possessing traits of classical literary trends. Similarly, the writers of the Victorian, Romantic, Renaissance, Modern and Post-modern time periods are recognized according to the time periods to which they belonged. However, this categorisation is over simplified because the writers of every era display characteristics of other eras, too. So labelling them under exclusive terms is not justifiable since there are evidences of frequent overlapping of characteristics in the writings of different eras. For instance, the writers of classical time period possess many qualities of romantics in their writings and vice-versa. Nor is it justifiable to expect all the characteristics of a particular era in the writings of that particular time period. It is evident that even the writers of the Romantic time period lack many basic characteristics of Romanticism in their literary works. Same is the case with the writers of other time periods. Many writers lacked the basic qualities of their time periods in their writings and adopted the characteristics of other epochs. And various writers display a rich blend of the features of almost multiples of literary movements of literature in their writings. Hence, writers in the realm of English literature have display an amalgamation of different styles in their writings. No writer is bound to write in a specific way, nor is he bound to follow the writing trend of his age. A prolific and fruitful writer has innumerable choices before him to adopt for his piece of writing. He can choose any style of writing, can be influenced by any writer of any era, and is free to express and convey his ideas and views to his readers.

Chaucer is regarded as one of the earliest poets in the history of English literature. According to the era in which he was born, his poetry should have predominantly contained the elements of Classicism. However, the poetry of Chaucer comprises of an affluent flavour of Romanticism. In *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, one can observe the presence of various characteristics of Romanticism for example, the use of plain and simple language, a very obvious trait of Romanticism. The tales narrated by the voyagers in the *Prologue* are presented in a communicative and interactive manner. Common man can familiarize himself with the characters because of the simplicity, fluency and eloquence of the language they are made to articulate by the poet. Instead of choosing French or Latin for expression following the norms of his time period, Chaucer chose English language for his poetry because of its familiarity and association with the common man. Simple language in poetry is confined only to the period of Romanticism but it was always a trait of British poetry and hence not something novel in the Romantic era. Chaucer beautified English language to eradicate the aloofness and estrangement of the individual from literature, which was

there because of an alienated and difficult language used by his forerunners.

Alongside simple language, sensuousness is another significant characteristic of Romanticism found in Chaucer's poetry. Beautiful description with the use of powerful images and symbols involves our senses in the interpretation of his poetry. Chaucer, in his poetic works, uses sensuous images and symbols to make the images glare out as attractive and appealing. As a result, all senses are engaged in the interpretation of the text. Images used by Chaucer in his poetry contain deep sensuousness and sumptuousness which is eye-catching and appealing to the common sight and human mind. Images are presented in such a way that readers tend to feel each and every experience described by the poet through their senses. The strong descriptive power makes the reader imagine the physical statures of the pilgrims along with their inner thoughts and conflicts going on in their minds. Similarly, individuality i.e., focus on the significant position and place of man and highlighting the importance of his feelings, thoughts and emotions, is another trait of Romanticism evident in the poetry of Chaucer. Rather than universality, the main focus of attention is the individual himself. Chaucer, who is regarded as a pure classicist in this regard, focuses on individuality rather than universality. His poetry is based on the feelings, emotions, sentiments and viewpoints of the characters. The descriptions of characters illustrate their mindsets. For instance, the characters of the Wife of Bath, the Friar, the Monk, the Knight and the Priestess are presented in a beautifully evocative and graphic manner. Through their physical appearance and conversation, their inner desires, feelings, and cravings come to the surface with spontaneity of poetic expression thus enabling the reader to identify with the minds of the characters. There is flow and lucidity in the description of his poems. The images in *The Prologue* are beautiful and vibrant. The opening lines of the poem contain beautiful images portraying the spring season:

*Tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye...*

(The Prologue to *Canterbury Tales* 7-10)

Also, in the description of characters including the knight, the yeoman, the squire, the prioress, the monk and the friar, powerful and attractive images have been used to visualize appearances. Along with the images, symbols have also been used to highlight the insight of the characters in the poem. For instance, in the description of the Prioress, the symbol of "Madame Eglantine" (the name she chose for herself), the necklace she wears with the inscription of "Love Conquers all" is also symbolic of her real feelings. As a prioress, she is supposed not to think about worldly pleasures but she behaves in a way as to attract the attention of others. The words used by Chaucer in her description are symbolic in nature depicting the core feelings and thoughts of prioress. Same is the case with the description of other characters. The Friar in the company of pilgrims, too, has a dichotomy of appearance and reality. The Monk, too, is a hypocrite character. He pretends to be a pious man but possesses no religious values at all. The Knight in the company of pilgrims is dutiful, courageous and chivalrous as his profession requires, but he, too, is not satisfied with his duties. There is a conflict between duties and desires in the characters in *The Canterbury Tales*. The character of the Wife of Bath is also a true depiction of the romanticized approach. There is dissatisfaction in her

character. She is a sheer contrast with the woman of a classical time period. She speaks loudly, uninterruptedly and boldly about the incidents deemed inappropriate for a woman to speak about like failed marriages. These abundant presences of the qualities of individuality, emotions and feelings with striking symbols and images in Chaucer's characterization along with a dissatisfaction with reality, adventurousness, new experiences and picturesque quality give his poetry a romantic touch. So, the notion of novelty ascribed to the term Romanticism in the late 18th century is not justifiable. This term was introduced in 18th century, but its traits were born with the dawn of British poetry.

Edmund Spenser, considered and classified as a Classicist poet, also displays prolific Romantic attributes in his poetry along with Classicist traits. In *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser has merged epic with romantic traits so craftily as to make them appear as a unified whole. It is apt to call it a "Romantic epic" because of having qualities of both romanticism and an epic. The qualities of Romanticism including feelings, superiority to rationality, comforts of the outdoor, picturesqueness and detail in descriptions, heightened imagination, quest for intensity of emotions through external means, theme of the innocent victim, glorification of the objects of nature, dissatisfaction with the materialistic-mechanistic view of the world, subtle sense of mystery, simplicity of language with gravity of thought and spontaneity of expressions have been blended beautifully with the epic style of poetry. His epic poem, *The Faerie Queene* is replete with powerful images and symbols. In Canto-1, the symbols like "dwarf" symbolizing common sense, symbols of "fire", "snow", "forest" and "trees" are used beautifully to activate and engage the reader's imagination. Travelling as a quest for meanings, adventurousness, picturesque quality, cult of feelings and new experience, simplicity of language with gravity of thought, humanism and reality as having multiple aspects; all these characteristics of Romanticism are found in *The Faerie Queene*. These lines in Canto 1 are romantic in essence:

*Whose loftie trees yclad with the tempest to with stand
Did spread so broad, that heavens light did hide,
Not perceable with power of any starre:
And all within were pathes and alleies wide,
With footing worne, and leading inward farre,...*
(Canto 1, stanza 7)

Belief in ambiguity of reality and need for exploration, an important characteristic of Romanticism, is also prevalent in the poetry of Spenser. Dissatisfaction with the real world and fancy and feelings are depicted as superior to reason and rationality which is a major theme of Spenser's writing for example the Red Cross Knight in *Faerie Queene-1* is shown as a sensible and sagacious person. He sets off to a journey with Lady Una to posit the real world. He is dissatisfied with the world around him and is ready to fight with valour to eliminate evil from the world.

John Milton, another classicist poet, adopted many words from Greek literature in his poetry. He did not use all the characteristics of romanticism, because he was mainly inspired by the Greek. But in his pastoral elegy, *Lycidas*, a romantic predisposition is evident. There is dissatisfaction with the present world and a desire to posit it, which is a romantic trait. Milton, in *Lycidas*, focuses on ideas rather than form or meter, which is very romantic in essence. Unlike the structural quality which is typical of classicism, Milton's poetry has flow and drift of thoughts and ideas.

There is continuity in the lines of the poems making them readable in just one go. For instance:

*Where were ye Nymphs when the remorseless deep
Clos'd o're the head of your lov'd Lycidas?
For neither were ye playing on the steep,
Where your old Bards, the famous Druids ly,
Nor on the shaggy top of Mona high, ...*
(Lycidas 50-54)

At times the rhythm of Milton's poems becomes complex and is difficult to digest but the engaging theme and charming tone in his poetry grabs the attention of the readers who tend to continue reading the lines, ignoring the complexity of long stanzas. In *Lycidas*, Milton mourns the death of King Edward who is presented as Lycidas and he invoke muses to mourn for his death. Using harsh vocabulary, he depicts dissatisfaction with the world around. There is a need to postulate the world order, a typical romantic desire. Similarly, in *Paradise Lost*, Milton follows the Classicist tradition. He borrows many references from the Greek and that is a classicist trait in his poetry. But along with the classicist tone, there is romantic inclination, too.

Alexander Pope's poetry is more inclined towards Classicism. There is use of imagination in *The Rape of the Lock* only. The description of Belinda's character and the ambience surrounding her has been presented in a way that it stimulates the reader's imagination. The description is highly artificial in essence, yet it doesn't fail to captivate the audience. *Essay on Man* and *Essay on Criticism* both defy the essence of Romanticism. But the quality of spontaneity of expression is present in these two epistles which again link to romanticism. Pope's poems have fluidity, glibness and fluency. The ideas are affluent in nature. The ideas presented in *An Essay on Criticism* are highly philosophical in essence. There is seriousness in the description without having emotions and feelings. The poem seems dull and colourless, lacking the lyrical and pictorial quality but the slickness of ideas with spontaneity and freedom in expressions that is considered lend a romantic tone to the poem.

The age of Pope is known to be that of satirists. However, even in most of his satirical poems, there is a humanist tinge as well which is loaded with some romantic idea. Moreover, the notion of conceiving and introducing new concepts that never existed before, also considered a romantic trait, has a prominent presence in Pope's poetry. His poetry has freedom of expression and feelings. There is no restriction in the presentation and description of ideas. Though Pope seems to be inclined more towards Classicism, the presence of the above-mentioned qualities of Romanticism in his poems invests them with a romantic feel.

The poetry of Thomas Gray and William Cowper, two prominent pre-romantics, too, contains the characteristics of Romanticism along with a Classicist tone. Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* has a romantic

inclination at descriptive level though his abundant repetition in the description of the scene consuming lots of lines is a Classicist characteristic. Cowper's poem, *Lines Written during the Period of Insanity* is romantic in its essence with self-reflection as a prominent feature. The nostalgic tone of *To Mary* is yet again a Romantic trait. Cowper's poems are more romantically inclined in comparison to Gray's poetry.

Poets from the Anglo-Norman till the Pre-Romantic period somehow displayed romantic traits in their poetry. Chaucer was the earliest of the English poets, but his poetry is more romantic in essence among all the poets who come after him. So the qualities or characteristics of Romanticism in British poetry are persistent throughout. The terms defining them i.e. Romantics and classicists, are only demarcations coined to separate poets of one era from those of the other. Otherwise, the traits of Romanticism were always there in the history of English poetry in Britain. British poetry from its birth contains romantic characteristics in it and it was not a new development in the 18th century.

IV. Conclusion

The present study suggests that the classical and romantic poets and literary works cannot be considered as poles apart as far as characteristics are concerned. Both share the qualities of each other and the term romanticism just did not emerge out of nowhere or as a sharp contrast to classicism. Classicists already displayed some of the characteristics that were to be labelled romantic afterwards. There is frequent overlapping of characteristic traits in both the periods blurring the line in between so the works of both cannot be considered as extreme opposites.

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