



Optimism in Romantic Poets: Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats

Dr. Anupma Garg

Associate Professor in English, Department of English, S.S.D.P.C. Girls (P.G.) College
Roorkee, (Haridwar) peeyushkumar.garg@gmail.com

Abstract

The term optimism has come to assume in popular usage, has given rise to belief that the adherents of this doctrine must have been exuberantly cheerful persons, fatuously blind to the realities of human experience and of human nature, or insensible to all the pain and frustration and conflict which are manifest through the entire range of sentient life. Romantic poets mostly were neither exuberantly cheerful nor they were fatuously blind to the realities of human experience. Pessimism was the trait that was labelled to romantics. The reason may be their personal life, age or the criticism they received. Still presenting the darker aspects of nature they don't forget to present their optimistic attitude. This paper will deal to show Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley as optimistic poets.

Keywords: Optimism, Romantic, Pessimism and Beauty

Introduction

The industrial revolution was inaugurating what was to make greatest change in human life since history began, and it was founded on ideas and values altogether alien to these of the artist. The romantic poets saw developing around them a general worship of machinery and mammon, the imprisonment and corruption of the natural man. And while poets sympathized, for a time with the French Revolution, or at least cherished hopes of progress, the mass of their countrymen were brightened into reactionary suppression of liberty.

The age of materialism that arose due to French Revolution; where humanity was embedded with earning and spending and full of pessimism; at that time Wordsworth paved the way for optimism. Having visited France at the height of Revolution Wordsworth was inspired by the ideas of Republican Movement. Their emphasis of the value of the individual, imagination and liberty inspired him and filled him with a sense of optimism. He gave solace to mankind liberating them from this endless strife presenting nature in these words in 'The Tables Turned:'

She has a words of ready wealth

Our minds and heart to bless

Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health

Truth breathed by cheerfulness

X X X X

'The World is too Much With Us' conveys the same message:

*This sea that bares bosom to the moon
The winds that will be howling at all hours
And are up gathered now liked sleeping flowers
For this, for everything, we are out of
tune x x x x*

In the poem ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey’, written after the death of his sister Dorothy, the poet describes three stages in his developing response to nature and brings about the harmonious spirit of nature present everywhere. Finally, he utters a benediction for his sister and hopes that she may come to see nature in future as he sees it now. He expresses a vision that combines the poet with the present and the present with the future as he links himself with his sister and the worlds both around them. However Wordsworth turns to nature to feel:

*A presence that disturbs me with the joy
of elevated thought; a sense sublime
Whose dwelling in the light of setting sun
And the round ocean and the living air
And the blue sky and in the mind of man
A motion of spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thoughts
All rolls through all things
x x x x*

Another romantic poet, Shelley who was by temperament a zealous reformer, realized that he could not persuade man governed by personal motives to co-operate with him to improve the fate of mankind. Hence he decided to confine his imagery zeal to literary works. Shelley gave as through his songs a dream about the spiritual liberty of man, a quest of perfection which he sometimes named as freedom, sometimes beauty and sometimes love. It appears as if they have become synonymous for him.

In the lines “O world! O life! O time! on whose last steps I climb”, Shelley experienced the subtle and delicate secrets of the world that ignored him often being rough and indifferent. There were moments in his life where he trembled like a leaf and asks “oh lift me from the grass! I die! I faint! I fall!” but nothing could deter him from the dreams of soaring higher and higher like his skylark and the cloud. In ode to skylark the poet is keen to share “half of that gladness” which is powerfully creative and inspiring so that he will be able to fill the mankind with the similar ecstasy:

Teach me half the gladness

That thy brain must know

Such harmonious madness

From my lips would flow

The world should listen then as I am listening now⁹

X X X X

Otherwise how could the poet prophecy?

O wind!

If winter comes, can spring be far behind?

This depicts his unbounded optimism, hope, cheer and sunshine. As a thinker he gave too much value for Platonic rather than Christian ideals about religion, love, society and cosmos. In the stanza of Adonais he says:

The one remains, the many change and pass;

Heaven light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;

life, like a dome of many coloured glass,

Stains the white radiance of Eternity.¹⁰

X X X X

His optimism is seen through his belief in the regeneration that must follow the destruction and it permeates almost through all his poems such as "Queen Mab", "The Revolt of Islam", "Prometheus Unbound" or "Hellas" where he heralds the golden age:

The world's great age begins a new,

The golden years return

The earth does like a shake renew

Her winter weed outworn

Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam

like wrecks of a dissolving dream.¹¹

X X X X

The last two lines of the cloud reveals his faith in rebirth and immortality of soul.

I silently laugh at my own cenotaph

And out of the caverns of rain.

Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb

I arise and unbuild it again.

I change but I cannot die.

X X X X

For his optimistic views Clutton-Brook in his writing, 'Shelley: The Man and the Poet' remarked "We may think of him as of one bearing a flame of fire through a long journey of wind and rain and darkness. He does not seem to guard it and it is blown perilously from side to side."

Another romantic poet Keats, who left this mortal stage at 26, was a worshipper of beauty. Three reasons hastened his early death: untimely death of his brother Tom, poor response from his beloved Fanny Brawne and his own disease of tuberculosis. Yet he proclaimed "A thing of beauty in a joy forever". His melancholy lies not in the sad and ugly things of life, not in the death or the accompaniments of death, but in everything that is beautiful and joyful, in April showers and roses and in the eyes of the woman beloved:

But when the melancholy fit shall fall

Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud

That fosters the droop headed flowers all

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And hides the green hill in an April shroud

Then glut the sorrow on a morning rose.

or on the rainbow of the salt sand wave.

X X X X

This is the optimism of the poet that melancholy contrary to common beliefs is sweet to him, she has her own delights, but they can be experienced by a soul that has a palate fine. In ode to Autumn the poet finds its own music of this season:

Where are the songs of spring

Ay where are they

Think not of them

Thou hast thy music too.

X X X X

Our enjoyment of Autumn is tinged by no regret for the spring that is gone and touched by no prophetic thought of other springs to come. In such a pessimistic stage as described in 'Ode to Nightingale' where Keats is half in love with an easeful death and wants to cease upon the midnight with no pain he shows optimism by talking about the beauty and immortality of the bird's music.

Still wouldst thou sing and I have ears in vain

To thy high requiem become a sod

X X X X

In Ode on Grecian Urn the poet ends with the urn message that its beauty is of permanent value to man.

When old age shall this generation waste

Thou shall remain in midst of other woe

Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou sayst

Beauty is truth, Truth beauty

That is all

Ye know on earth and all ye

Need to know.

X X X X

Through this message the poet wants to emphasize that the stillness of the urn can't mar its beauty. He also believed that suffering, if viewed in a certain way, could be seen as something beautiful, as r tragedy of King Lear creates beauty of a horrific subject. This shows that there is something in the abstract nature of pain conducive to pleasure, that the sufferings are absolutely necessary to universal happiness. These sufferings and pain

became the source of outcome of optimism through which mankind can soar up higher and higher.

CONCLUSION

Nevertheless melancholy is almost a constant factor in English poetry of all ages. Before the advent of the great Romantics there was a literature of sensibility, acting as a hinge for the awing from Neo-Classism to Romanticism. Much of this literature is steeped in a melancholy, sometimes real, frequently affected so much so that terms such as “Graveyard School” have been given currency.

To sum up the pessimism in Romantic poets if any, was temperamental rather than personal disappointment, Wordsworth optimism is unshakable because he believed that nature is permanent source of happiness, whereas in case of Shelley, his pessimistic tone can be heard only when he writes about personal life but as soon as he thinks of the regeneration of mankind or reformation of human society his voice is optimistic enough. As far as Keats is concerned, he is very optimistic for the natural world otherwise how can he describe the nightingale as a figure for the beautiful and cyclonical nature of life?

As Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore says. “Pleasure is frail like dew drop; while it laughs it dies. But sorrow is strong and abiding. Let sorrowful love wake in you.

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