
Values of Romanticism: Wollstonecraft, Coleridge, and Shelley

The Romantic period was a time of exceptional change, emphasising the power of imagination as a window to transcendent experience and spiritual health. Lasting from the late 18th to early 19th century, the transitory period of Romanticism challenged engraved societal paradigms, moving from a time of strict hierarchy based on rationality to a focus on individualism and idealism. The voices of the romantic zeitgeists were expressed through the arts, where the human experience, the natural world and the yearning for unity and social cohesion flourished throughout their work in a tumultuous time of shifting religious, economic and scientific views. The individuals who gave the Romantic period meaning and importance were Mary Wollstonecraft through her treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1797-98) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1819), and finally John Constable, creator of the extravagant artwork *The Hay Wain* (1821). The transformative ideas communicated through these texts challenge ways of thinking, through a plethora of techniques.

The lack of substantive education available for women was thought to be for Wollstonecraft one of the primary reasons for women's subordination. Creative yearning for females was suppressed and the pursuit of knowledge arduous. Wollstonecraft argues in her treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, that to alter this philosophical view, they must first change the way women are thought of by men, such as her influential acquaintance Rousseau: "Once it is demonstrated that man and woman are not, and should not be constituted the same, it follows that they should not have the same education." Wollstonecraft alludes to this comment by Rousseau in a statement dripping with sarcasm, "The knowledge of both genders should be equal... women should not be treated as some kind of fanciful half being, one of Rousseau's wild chimeras." The paradox of moral rights is a contextual focus of the composer as she heavily advocates the need for an education reform and conveys the importance of women's pursuit of knowledge and purpose, thus reflecting the values of the Romantic period.

Wollstonecraft's arguments for the importance of co-education were one of her most widely accepted topics in her treatise; however she acknowledges the many challenges women will face in working towards this goal due to constricting gender stereotypes. The composers frustration caused by the unfulfilling societal expectations and conflicting pressures of her time are evident as she paradoxically states, 'it is strange that men aim to elevate the moral integrity of women by confining them to a childlike state'. This statement provokes the responder to consider the inequitable expectations placed upon women, as they were expected to display high morality, whilst remaining submissive and uneducated, deliberately oppressed by men. The

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tumultuous period of Romanticism did however bring about extensive societal change. Wollstonecraft seized this opportunity to compose her philosophical treatise, written in first person narration for the bulk of the text; alternating this with an omniscient voice to ensure detachment conveyed her arguments as being based purely on logic rather than emotion in some parts. She informs women of their value and that they must make an impact on the world through this omniscient voice, 'But in order to render their private virtue a public benefit, they must have a civil existence in the state'. The implementation of omniscience communicates Wollstonecraft's value for reason, and her overarching desire to portray women's ability to reason, a quality they were denied.

A deeper appreciation of the value of nature, the supremacy of imagination, individualism and idealism expressed through surreal and mysterious settings emerges explicitly in Coleridge's poems, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and 'This Lime-tree Bower My Prison'. 'The Rime' rapidly becomes a tale of loss and guilt at the hands of a break in the natural order and highlights the repercussions of breaking bonds between man and nature. The dramatic narrative climaxes after the mariner kills the albatross and thus violates the bond. The ramifications of this act are elucidated through a biblical allusion; "Instead of the cross, the albatross about my neck was hung." This has a significant emotional toll revealed through the use of assonance and repetition; "Alone, alone, all, all alone... And never a saint took pity on my soul in agony. The philosophical and religious paradigms that shaped romantic society dictated that nature was a powerful and sacred force, that when tampered with brought cataclysmic punishment to the guilty individual.

Conversely, the therapeutic attributes and haunting qualities of nature are explored by Coleridge in 'This Lime-tree Bower My Prison'. Powerful imagery is employed in this poem causing the responder to engage in a vivid psychological journey along with the composer as he follows the path of his friends through a shadowy forest; 'The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep, And only speckled by the mid-day sun'. The composer employs a simile, likening an ash tree to a bridge, to describe his friends crossing the stream in the final part of their journey; 'Where its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock flings arching like a bridge'. Coleridge's rich recollection of the forest transports him into the setting in a metaphysical sense, thus utilising the supremacy of his imagination. There are significant tonal shifts throughout 'This Lime-tree Bower My Prison' from a disheartening mood to a euphoric revelation in the last stanza, "I now am filled with joy, as if I was with them... nor in this bower." The composer's ability to harness the power of his imagination to shift himself from isolation to accompanying his friends omnisciently and consequently evoke an emotional response is reflective of the nature of the Romantic period in rejecting rationalism.

Romantics fostered a deeper appreciation of the beauty of nature and used the natural world as a medium for self-expression and fulfilment. This notion challenged the ideas and values of the

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rationalists and allowed individuals to embrace an alternate way of expressing their emotions. Alike Coleridge, Percy Shelley explored the supremacy of nature's ability to mirror the human condition through his poem 'Ode to West Wind'. Symbolism is prevalent throughout the poem as the wind is personified as a preserver and destroyer of life, "wild spirit, which art moving everywhere - Destroyer and preserver - hear, O hear!". This force of nature is an extended metaphor for the degeneration and regeneration of humankind and of the poet's own mind. The sombre emotional status of Shelley is reflected metaphorically, "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!"; his thoughts are then transformed into ecstatic rapture as he emphasises the healing power of nature in creating new life, "Drive my dead thoughts over the universe... to quicken a new birth". Both the form and the conflicting melancholy and euphoric tones of this lyrical poetry are reflective of the changing perspectives of humanity and the alteration of paradigms that shape society. According to Arthur Bradley, "The language is poetical through and through... it is not wrought and kneaded; it flows."

The Romantic period represented a movement towards the picturesque, with coherence between the individual, society and the natural world. This often was expressed through a nostalgic lens, where simplicity was valued in opposition to the rapid industrialisation taking place at the time. John Constable constructed an idyllic natural landscape in his 1821 oil painting *The Hay Wain*, which rejects the idea of change and instead expresses the continuity and calm of the English countryside. The artist painted nature as it was in reality with loose brushwork and natural tones; this avoided over stylising his work like many other Romantic artists at the time. The many tones are complimentary of each other as the blue of the water is mirrored in the sky and the reds of the brick house are emulated in the trees. The painting is brought to life through the use of white paint to create reflections of light upon the water, which cause the painting to appear to move as the water seems disturbed by the wheels of the hay wain as the light warps. These artistic techniques employed by Constable create an aura of calm and peace in a setting many Romantics would find comforting and valuable to escape from the fear of industrialisation in a period of unprecedented change.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge stated that "Imagination is the living power and prime agent of all human perception. This idea is central to the Romantic period as the power of imagination, individualism and idealism flourished and became the prevalent themes of the texts and sources critically analysed from this period: Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication Of the Rights of Woman*, the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Percy Shelley, and the artwork of John Constable. Although this time in history was fleeting, it was one of unparalleled change, as individuals strived for independence and coherence in their lives

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