

“Tendency of Escapism in the Poetry of Keats, Wordsworth, Shelley and Coleridge: A Critical Study”

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Abstract: This Research paper attempts to elaborate the element of Escapism in English Romantic Poetry. The aim of this paper is to justify a strong relation between English Romantic Poetry of 19th century and the tendency of Escapism.

Escapism shows a tendency to run away from reality, the responsibilities and routine of real life. Escapist does not feel at ease in the world around him. He tries to escape by unrealistic imaginative activity. A poet escapes in to a world of imagination. Poets generally live in a world of their own: they feel this world is not fit for them because of conditions and circumstances of life. Romantic poets dreamt a beautiful world of love, beauty, peace, freedom and pleasure and living amongst such harsh social conditions, political and economic conditions this was not possible. These romantic poets tried to fight against but when they find it difficult, romantic poets find rescue in escapism. So they escaped to their ideal world created by imagination. This imaginary beautiful world was full of pleasure, peace, beauty and happiness.. As we find in the poetry of great romantic poets Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. Like, Coleridge escaped into the supernaturalism. Wordsworth found that the world was too much with the people, so he escaped into the world of Nature and Shelley created a dream world of idealism. Keats created a world of Beauty and Truth around him.

Keywords: supernaturalism, escaped, rescue, imagination, unrealistic

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Escapism shows a tendency to run away from reality, the responsibilities and routine of real life. Escapist does not feel at ease in the world around him. He tries to escape by unrealistic imaginative activity. A poet escapes in to a world of imagination. Poets generally live in a world of their own: they feel this world is not fit for them because of conditions and circumstances of life. So they want to escape from the realities of this real world. As we find in the poetry of great romantic poets Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. Like, Coleridge escaped into the supernaturalism. Wordsworth found that the world was too much with the people, so he escaped into the world of Nature and Shelley created a dream world of idealism. Keats created a world of Beauty and Truth around him.

In 1798 the Lyrical Ballads were published. These poems were composed by Wordsworth and Coleridge. These poems were romantic in tone. They equalized rustic life. Romanticism was an artistic, literary, musical and intellectual movement that originated in Europe toward the end of 18th century. The Romantic Movement started with the publications of the lyrical ballads. These poems were characterized by imagination, emotion, subjectivity, love for nature, love and interest in the past, believe in the simplicity, freedom of expression and humanitarianism. In the early part of the 19th century romantic poetry was revived by Wordsworth, Coleridge and Robert Southey. This kind of poetry was a reaction against the neo-classical poetry. It was a revolt against the set rules of neo-classical poetry. Walter peter defines romanticism as an addition of strangeness to beauty. Romantic poetry brings out the humanitarian feelings. W.J. Long observes that “The romantic poetry of the first part of 19th century is a protest against the bondage of rules. Romantic poetry is the return to the Elizabethans.”

One of the most striking features of Romanticism is that Romantic poets were influenced by French Revolution and their revolutionary thoughts and ideas. French Revolution was a voice against tyranny, injustice and unequal laws and exhorted the poor and the underdog of society. Rousseau’s Primitivism individualism and romantic imagination impressed the romantic poet of England. Primitivism was a revolt against the artificial life of the sophisticated people. But after sometimes, the reign of terror and the emergence of Neapolian as an

undisputed tyrant, dashed the enthusiasm of romantic poets to pieces. The war between France and England shattered the faith of the Romantic poets. This was the time of Industrial Revolution too which created unrest among the people. These revolutions were not giving desired results. So this escapism tendency was natural to develop among the people and so forth in romantic poets.

Keats's poems reveal an element of escapism. In his poem 'on first Looking into Chapman's Homer', he discovered a new realm of wonder and beauty. He likes to live in such a realm of gold. He studied Greek myths and legends.

"Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold

And many goodly states and kingdoms seen" (on first Looking into Chapman's Homer)

These lines show his love for Greek art, culture and literature to such an extent that Shelley called him a Greek. His famous poem 'Endymion' is based on a Greek legend where the goddess Moon comes down to earth and falls in love with a mortal. Greek gods and goddesses were his frequent companions. He wandered through the middle ages in search of love and romance.

"A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:

Its loveliness increases; it will never

Pass into nothingness; but still will keep

A bower quiet for us, and a sleep

Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing." (Endymion)

Keats is known as an escapist. In his poem "Ode to a Nightingale" Keats describes the tendency of escapism. He poured this idea of escape very beautifully. He desired to go away from this real world in the world of Nightingale because this real world is full of strife, sadness and grief. After listening to the sweet song of Nightingale, the poet wants to escape from the miseries and sufferings of the world. He wants to go to the world of Nightingale as the bird knows no human sorrows and sufferings. The poet is not happy with this world as this world is a miserable place and he found sadness only in his life so he wants to go away from here.

"... Fade far away, dissolve and quite forget

... The weariness, the fever and the fret..." (Ode to a Nightingale)

Here Keats feels that earthly life is full of sorrows and sufferings. So he pines for a life of joy and happiness, like the life of Nightingale.

"Fade far away, and quite forget

What thou amongst the leaves hast never known, (Ode to a Nightingale)

Therefore the poet aspires for escape from realities of life, as he compares the fortune of man with that of the Nightingale.

The weariness, the fever, and the fret,

There, where men sit and hear each other groan;" (Ode to a Nightingale)

The poet wants to go to the happy world of the bird. He does not want to ride in the chariot of Bacchus, the Greek god of wine. The chariot of Bacchus is drawn by leopards and frenzied followers of Bacchus follow it. The poet does not seek the help of wine to go to the world of Nightingale. He would go there through his power of imagination.

"Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards

But on the viewless wings of Poesy." (Ode to a Nightingale)

Thus, if he sees beautiful images or scenery or hears melodious song, he feels exalted and forgets his pains and sufferings and this way he escapes. Like...

'A thing of beauty is a joy for ever' (Endymion).

Just as when he saw a beautiful Urn in British Museum, he forgets his conditions, even he elaborates the pictures depicted on the Urn.

Ah, happy, happy boughs that cannot shed

Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu. (Grecian Urn)

Keats longs to escape from the bitter realities. Therefore, we see that Keats is so disgusted with the real life that he always tries to escape from it.

Romantic poetry is known for the treatment of love, life and nature. Shelley’s poetry is the expression of the man himself. It springs from the heart rather than brain and so he occupies a distinct place among the poets of romantic revival. He was an extremely sensitive man and was always lost in clouds. He was a dreamer, an imaginary idealist. He hated material force, man made laws, intolerance and dogmatic rules which are the evil in the world. He sought to demolish them and create a new world of peace and plenty for all.

Mathew Arnold remarks that, “Shelley in his poetry, no less than in life, is a beautiful and ineffectual angel beating in the void his luminous wings in vain.”

Shelley wrote both personal and impersonal lyrics and the poet’s soul comes out in them. There is ardour of passion, wedded to personal sorrows. Shelley’s personal melancholy and cry of pain have become the cause of escapism.

In his poem ‘To a Skylark’ poet points out the main cause of human miseries. According to Shelley no man is happy in the world. Their hearts are full of numberless desires. When a desire is fulfilled a number of other desires take birth. So they are sad. Even when they smiles, it expresses a bit of grief also. It is the cause of mankind that its sweetest songs are not full of joy but saddest thought.

*We look before and after,
And pine for what is not:
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought* (To a Skylark)

When we look at other poems by Percy Shelley we see more of the despair with in his writing. It makes one wonder if the despair he writes about comes from his own life. In many of Shelley's other works we see him telling the reader that we cannot let other people take our work because then we might as well dig our own graves.

The tendency of escapism can be found in the poem “Ode to the West Wind,” where Shelley requests the west wind to allow him to share its strength and he imagines himself one of the infinite dried leaves blowing with the west wind of autumn. In the Autumn season leaves dries that fall to the ground, mixes with the frozen dormancy of winter, grow to new life in the spring. Poet wishes for his poetry to take part of the same natural cycle of death and life, life and revival.

*If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share* (Ode to the West Wind)

These lines of the poem reveals the escapism and revolutionary ideology of Shelley, when he identify west wind so strongly with himself that it will his thoughts and ideology all over the universe. Like west wind spreads leaves everywhere to initiate a new birth.

*Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,
Scatter, as from an unextinguishd hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!* (Ode to the West Wind)

Escapism can be seen in the bellow lines, when poet requests the west wind to allow him to share his strength. The sorrow and sufferings have crushed him. It is a matter of sorrow that his boyhood has disappeared. His personal life was unhappy. He was severely criticized by his friends and critics. He is without love, without mental peace. Therefore, he requests the west wind to help him in the difficult period of melancholy and lift him with it.

*Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!* (Ode to the West Wind)

Shelley wanted to escape from this world due to subjective melancholy and objective melancholy. We find Subjective melancholy in the poems of Shelley because he was without love, without mental peace and objective melancholy because there was the reign of tyranny, hatred, exploitation and monarchy.

In such a stressful state of mind, romantic poets wanted to run away from the cruel realities of the world to a new world where they can get peace, rest and happiness. Thus with the power of imagination they escape to the world full of perfection, love and beauty and find the pleasure and joy which they could not get in this cruel world.

All romantic poets have the tendency of escapism in their own ways but they have similar reasons to escape to the imaginative world. Coleridge wants to escape to a new world with the help of imagination which is full of unfamiliar and mysterious things. This mysterious imaginative world is supernatural. Coleridge attracted towards supernaturalism. Supernaturalism can be seen in his poems like ‘Kubla Khan’ and ‘Ancient Mariner’, and through supernaturalism he desires to escape from this real cruel world. Longing for death and sleep is a form of escapism which we can see in these lines:

*Oh sleep! it is a gentle thing,
Beloved from pole to pole!
To Mary Queen the praise be given!
She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven,
That slid into my soul.* (Ancient Mariner)

These lines also reveal the feeling of escapism when mariner is talking about death, repentance and resurrection. Mariner is preaching about penance and renunciation.

*Oh sweeter than the marriage feast,
'Tis sweeter far to me,
To walk together to the kirk
With a goodly company!* (Ancient Mariner)

Romantics talk about an ideal world which was not possible living amongst such harsh social and political conditions, so like all romantic poets Wordsworth also became an escapist. He moved towards Nature. In his poems he glorifies nature and urges people to move towards nature for peace and pleasure. He says nature is a mother, a nurse, a teacher and beloved too. According to Wordsworth nature is a foster mother.

Wordsworth wanted to escape from the mundane life, city life and modern commercial life. So he escapes to nature and also suggests going to nature for peace and satisfaction. In his famous poem Tintern Abbey, poet says that during the hours of tedium, in the midst of great noise of towns and cities, he has often recollected them lying in lonely rooms. They have been a source of delight to the poet because he has been recollecting for them for five years. The past emotions are recollecting in solitude. The weariness of mind of is relieved. It refreshed not only his bodily senses and feelings, but his intellectual powers were also made alert. The poet implies that the recollections of those beautiful objects of the wye valley have often thrilled him with sensational joy and have often thrilled him with sensational joy and have given him great mental peace.

*But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration:—feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure:*

*While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years.* (Tintern Abbey)

Poet wanted to escape from materialistic world that can be seen in his poem *The World is too Much With Us*. In this sonnet, the poet attacks the growing materialism of his age and the apathy of the commercial people towards the beauties of Nature. The poet condemns the mercenary pursuits of people of his times. The people of his times are engrossed in collecting of wealth without bending their heart to the beauties of Nature. The pursuit has become sordid. He exhorts the people of his time to give some time to the beauties of Nature.

*The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—*

*Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!* (The world is too much with us)

Wordsworth find peace and happiness in the simple and rustic people, they were pure and untouched by the pompous city life. In his poem Solitary Reaper poet throws light on the simple and hard life of a poor solitary reaper girl who reaped and sang. She was a pure soul because she lived in the lap of nature. Poet admires the melodious song of the poor reaper girl. He says that the song of the girl is sweeter than the songs of the nightingale singing to a group of tired travelers in the Arabian countries. It is also sweeter than the melodious songs of the cuckoo singing in the Hebrides.

*No Nightingale did ever chaunt
More welcome notes to weary bands
Of travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.* (Solitary Reaper)

Also, he escapes from his present life to childhood in his poem ‘Ode on Intimation and Immortality’ in this poem poet laments on the loss of glory, heavenly life which he had experienced in his childhood. During childhood the earth and every common sight was clothed in celestial light. Now the poet is grown up man so he feels that the celestial light had disappeared from his life. In childhood there was radiance, a spiritual life and a great enchantment but all three qualities have disappeared from his life.

*The child is the father of the man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.* (Ode on Intimation and Imortality)

Romantic poets dreamt a beautiful world of love, beauty, peace, freedom and pleasure and living amongst such harsh social conditions, political and economic conditions this was not possible. These romantic poets tried to fight against but when they find it difficult, romantic poets find rescue in escapism. So they escaped to their ideal world created by imagination. This imaginary beautiful world was full of pleasure, peace, beauty and happiness. In this world people were happy and free from all frets of life. Thus successfully they escaped from the harsh realities of the real world and miserable life.

All Romantic poets more or less are escapists. Romantic poetry presents not the world of reality, but the world of dreams. So escapism can be said as one of the main feature of all romantic writing of 19th century. The same tendency of escapism is found in the poems of all romantic poets but they dealt it in different prospective. Still the main reason for escapism remains same for all romantics. So the tendency of escapism dominates the poems of Keats, Shelley, Coleridge and Wordsworth.

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