Modernism and Romanticism: A Comparative Study of the Selected Poems of W.B. Yeats and John Keats

Introduction

Romantic poetry was especially concerned with the themes of country life which is also known as pastoral poetry; moreover it also employed mythological and fantastic settings. Romanticism focuses more on the individual than society. The Romantics were fascinated especially by the individual imagination and individual consciousness. “Melancholy” was quite the exhortation for the Romantic poets. A firm loosening of the persistent rules of artistic expression, during earlier times, was observed in the Romantic era.

In English literature, modernism has its roots in 19th and 20th century; the age was characterised by an unexpected and sudden release from conventional ways of viewing the world and interacting with it. Individualism and Experimentation, which were often heartily discouraged in the past, became the modern virtues. The modernist period in English literature was an intuitive response towards the prevailing aesthetics and culture of the Victorians culture of the 19th century. At the turn of the twentieth century, artists and intellectuals blamed the writers of earlier generation for misleading the society, thereby resulting in a dead end. They had the ability to predict hence they could foresee that world events were escalating into a mysterious territory.
EMOTION vs. REASON

John Keats is generally known as a poet of beauty. The principle of beauty for Keats had a spiritual existence. In language, Keats’ poetry is rich and sensuous; it is free flowing and sensually succulent in imagery and lavish in detail. Through all the five senses he saw and visualised beauty and celebrated it in his poetry. For him truth is beauty; his themes are love, beauty in art and nature and death. His poetry is sated with audio and visual representations. For his love for Greek culture and literature, Keats is also known as a Hellenist and through his poetry he tried to spread the culture of the Greeks.

Most of Keats’ poems are concerned with beauty as it was the only solace he found in a life which was full of sorrow and misapprehension; hence we see that beauty becomes the central idea in his poetry. The memory of something beautiful was treated by him him a source of joy. Beauty could be either physical (tangible) or spiritual (intangible). These two facets of beauty were strongly entwined, because physical beauty was basically the expression of the spiritual: also though the physical could be impermanent and mouldering, the spiritual is immortal and eternal. An artist may die after creating a piece of work, but his work remains.

Besides beauty, mystical female figures also occupy a major role in the poetry of Keats: from “Ode to Psyche”, to “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, to “Ode on Indolence” one sees a regular appearance of the female figures of ambition, love and poetry. Moreover they have characteristics which make them ‘otherworldly’. As far as his male figures are concerned, they are often chivalrous; however Keats himself often participates as a spectator-poet in relation to the women that are described.

Keats, being a true Romanticist, displays immense admiration for the natural world in his poetry. Many of his poems, involving “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” and “Ode to a Nightingale” present detailed descriptions of plants. Keats frequently connected love and pain
both in his life as well as his poetry. “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, is a fine specimen which shows the perfect intertwining of love with pain, and pleasure with death. Keats’ rich imagery, from sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste to weight, temperature, pressure, thirst, hunger, movement and sexuality, covers almost all the physical sensations.

In opposition to emotion of romantic poetry, the modern poets are concerned with reasoning. William Butler Yeats, one of the renowned modern poets, inspires his contemporaries as well as successors like Ezra Pound, W.H. Auden and T.S. Eliot. Though three common themes in Yeats’ poetry are mysticism, Irish Nationalism and love but modernism is the dominant theme in his writings. Yeats literary career began as a romantic poet and gradually he developed into a poet of modern age. As a mainstream modern poet, Yeats expresses remorse for pathetic condition of modern world which, after war, was left disordered and in turmoil and bewails for the glorious past. He, as a modern poet is sometimes anti-rationalist in his outlook which is communicated through his passion for mysticism or occultism. He famous for his sense of moral entirety of humanity and history.

Yeats, like Eliot, was also a representative modern poet who represents the spirit of the age in his poetry. He also uses symbolism, juxtaposition, myth, literary allusions and colloquial language as a device to convey the fretfulness of modern times. The World war-I totally shattered the people and brought suffering, boredom, frustration, anxiety and seclusion. In order to symbolise the psychological and spiritual states of modern man, Yeats has used different type of landscapes. “The Second Coming,” is noteworthy not only as a modernist piece of writing but also as a work that openly comments on the post-World War I social condition that incited the progression of modern poetry.

The poem was published in 1920, which is in the latter part of Yeats’ career - he died in 1939. World War I lasted from 1914-1918. It was notable for being surprisingly destructive and violent since old means of waging war were mixed with advanced technology.
which produced skirmishes that went nowhere and killed everyone thereby resulting in a loss of many lives.

**Romantic Idealism and Modern Realism**

Idealism about passion or love is one of the most important aspects of Romanticism as explored in Keats’ “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”. Keats depicts the experience of a wandering knight, meeting an enigmatic woman who calms him to sleep. On waking up he finds himself alone on a ‘cold hill’s side’ with no life force. Keats portrays the beauty of the lady by using sensual imagery. This depiction is indicative of idealism as the description of the woman flouts the customs of the time which hints at the romantic aspect.

Keats, in this ballad, seems to convey the harshness of world of reality. This had made many scholars speculate the beautiful, treacherous and seductive woman embodies his mother who has abandoned Keats in his early years. While others asserts that the woman is representative of Fanny Brawne, whom he used to consider as “belle dame”. As far as personal perspective is concerned, Keats attempts to investigate the oxymoron of life which is packed with a sequence of unavoidable inconsistencies and the paradoxical nature of world. This oxymoron life has been explained through the unexpected shift of situations in the ballad, wherein the knight falls asleep in an “elfin grot,” and on waking up finds himself “on the cold hill’s side.” (Keats) The juxta positioning of these situations similarly constructs dissonance between fantasy and world of reality, being indicative of the rebellious nature of the Romantic age and how it influenced the ideas of John Keats.

Keats uses strong imagery in order to strengthen the mesmerising aspect to his work. For example, he mentions “faery's child” and elfin grot” (Keats) so as to build a miraculous ambiance and add an aesthetic appeal to one’s imaginative sense, where the beautiful female symbolising imagination, takes him to an perfect world, and “lulled (him) to sleep” (Keats).
In reality, however, the knight's denial to forgo pleasures of imagination razes his life when he “woke and found me here, on the cold hill's side.” (Keats)

Keats’ poem revolves around a treacherous and seductive female who attracts men and abandons them; with their lives left in ruins and unfulfilled trances. Thematically, his poem thrives as a ballad because of being a miserable wailing over the impermanence of experience of life; in case of this poem it is beauty. It deals with love, the supernatural, women and femininity, death and abandonment. Death could be signified by the attractive lady who does not show any mercy as she betrays the knight by leaving him; while the knight could be Keats himself. The ballad is symbolic of Keats’ life which was full of conflicts. His love for his neighbor Fanny Brawne as well as his knowledge of approaching death acts as code into the dilemma of a dying medieval knight who is the prominent character of the poem.

More consideration of the knight’s story gives us more knowledge of parallels of Keats’ life with the poem. The knight’s dilemma in the poem appears to be Keats’ drama played out and transformed in an allegorical manner. Keats’ knight is deserted, lost, and already living a posthumous existence. The poem is sorrowful and somber in tone. In order to maintain this tone, Keats uses adjectives such as “woe-begone”, “sighed”, “gloam”, and “alone” (Keats).

Modern poetry questions the aesthetics of solid facts and norms demonstrating cynicism and generating murkiness in the work. It is frequently regarded as a drastic shift of standards permitting poets to renounce the constraints of overly glorified love and groundless hyperboles; letting them to support the physical and discover the world as it is, talking about the cruel realities. W.B. Yeats’ “The Second Coming” came soon after the end of World War I, which is at times also known as “The Great War” as it was the greatest war fought yet, and
because of its horrific nature it was also known as “The War to End All Wars”, people hoped it to be the last war.

The title of the poem proposes a different appearance of God to man. The Christian era comes to its end; with the completion of two thousand years. Man is unsure of the new shape of things. The “second coming” therefore is not of Christ but of a crueler and pitiless figure who would be the representative of the new age. Yeats believed that a civilisation lasts for two thousand years, every civilisation grows gradually like a gyre to reach its zenith and finally ends. He was tremendously aggrieved by the conditions of modern times which were caused a lot of bloodsheds. He believed that every new generation is born from the ashes of the previous generation therefore if people will continue to show their insensitivity and cruelty towards human kind then the generation which is yet to come will be crueler.

The modernist anxiety comes out most essentially from the happenings of early and mid 20th century. This can distinctly be seen in the initial lines of “The Second Coming,” where Yeats paints the modern world as gloomy and utterly perturbed. Among other things, he notes, how the modern world is a trend of viciousness. For instance, the image of the falcon is no more under the control of the master as it soars even higher, not being able to hear its master. This is indicative of a sturdy boost in brute hostility and violence. Also, the poet makes the reference of “the blood-dimmed tide” (Yeats), where “blood” signifying brutality that has “dimmed” humankind. The time in which this poem was written was a tumultuous time to live in, a time of “passionate intensity” (Yeats). The famous opening lines of “The Second Coming” display that the violence observed during the time gave was responsible for the anxious, troubled modernist attitude of the world. Thus the anxiety of the twentieth century arose from the inadequacy and failure of past structures, modes of thought and the order and disorder of contemporary life.
Conclusion

Just as other Romantic poets, Keats concentrated on exploring and understanding beauty. For him, everything owned potential beauty, moreover, as a poet it was his job to find and capture this beauty in his poetry. Apart from sensuousness, Keats’ aestheticism had an intellectual element. He was continually endeavouring to attain truth through beauty. The early poetry of W.B. Yeats also expresses a propensity towards aesthetic escape. He too was an escapist who believed in fleeing from troubles, forces and theories relevant to the modern world. Yeats, like all English poets of the late 18th century, initiated with a Romantic use of diction in his early poems.

While Romantic literature was spontaneous, emotional, introspective, concerned with beauty and passion; is sublime, irregular and picturesque in nature. Literature produced in Modern Age is rather strange, fragmented, innovative, disconnected, surreal and absurd. The romanticists saw world as beautiful, nature as moral and creative inspiring human mind; the world of modernist, however, is wasteland which is decaying because of the manipulation of man.

The Romantics deals with the subjects of humankind, Nature, soul, individuality, rustic life whereas Modernists talk about crude and harsh realities of life, their subjects include the human mind, violence, war, political change, confusion, death, loneliness, outcast. The language of the Romantics is quite different from than that of the Modernists. Romantics use embellished but colloquial language; on the other hand the Modernists employed experimental and self conscious language with no use of punctuation or capitalization. Experimentation of new techniques therefore becomes important in the Modern Age thereby shifting the focus from content to form.

References


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