

# Comparative Study of Romantic and Modern Poetry

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## Abstract

Romantic and Modern Ages are well known for the dominance of poetry. A comparative study with critical approach of the poetry composed during both the ages. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact start of the romantic movement, as its beginning can be traced to many events of the time: a surge of interest in folklore in the early to mid-nineteenth century with the work of the brothers Grimm, reactions against neoclassicism and the Augustan poets in England, and political events and uprisings that fostered nationalistic pride.

## 1. Romantic and Modern Poetry

Romantic poets cultivated individualism, reverence for the natural world, idealism, physical and emotional passion, and an interest in the mystic and supernatural. Romantics set themselves in opposition to the order and rationality of classical and neoclassical artistic precepts to embrace freedom and revolution in their art and politics. German romantic poets included Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and British poets such as Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, George Gordon, Lord Byron, and John Keats propelled the English romantic movement. Victor Hugo was a noted French romantic poet as well, and romanticism crossed the Atlantic through the work of American poets like Walt Whitman and Edgar Allan Poe. The romantic era produced many of the stereotypes of poets and poetry that exist to this day (i.e., the poet as a tortured and melancholy visionary). Romantic ideals never died out in poetry, but were largely absorbed into the precepts of many other movements. Traces of romanticism lived on in French symbolism and surrealism and in the work of prominent poets such as Charles Baudelaire and Rainer Maria Rilke.

Romanticism was arguably the largest artistic movement of the late 1700s. Its influence was felt across continents and through every artistic discipline into the mid-nineteenth century and many of its values and beliefs can still be seen in contemporary poetry.

"In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs, in spite of things silently gone out of mind and things violently destroyed, the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time. The objects of the Poet's thoughts are everywhere; though the eyes and senses of man are, it is true, his favorite guides, yet he will follow wheresoever he can find an atmosphere of sensation in which to move his wings. Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge—it is as immortal as the heart of man."—William Wordsworth, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads"

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Characteristics of Romantic literature emphasize passion, emotion, and nature. Romantic poetry was often written in common everyday language for all to relate, not just the upper class. Nature was a focus of many famous poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge. Wordsworth was known as the "father of English Romanticism." Any of his works can support the focus of nature. Robert Burns uses his Scottish dialect to support the "common everyday language" of the era. William Blake supports the emphasis of emotion in his Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience.

Literary critics consider 1798, the year when Wordsworth and Coleridge published their "Lyrical Ballads," to mark the beginning of the English Romantic Movement. However, its actual beginnings date back to the poetry of Gray, Collins, Blake and Burns who are regarded as 'Transition Poets' who lived and wrote at the end of the Neo-Classical Age. Critical opinion is divided as to when the Romantic Movement actually came to an end; in fact, some critics consider the Victorian age to be a continuation of the Romantic Age and that the English Romantic Age extended till the beginning of the Modern Age in the twentieth century. Cazamian defines Romanticism in A History of English Literature as, "The Romantic spirit can be defined as an accentuated predominance of emotional life, provoked or directed by the exercise of imaginative vision, and in its turn stimulating or directing such exercise." The characteristic features of English Romantic poetry are:

\*Love and worship of external Nature and dislike for the urban life.

\*Limited range of themes related to the medieval age, the supernatural and the mystical elements.

\*Poetry came to be regarded as the spontaneous expression of the poet's own feelings. In other words it is personal, romantic and mystical in attitudes and approaches to life.

\*Romantic poetry is emotive and highly imaginative with sentimental appeal.

\*Completely abandoned the 'Heroic Couplet' and substituted it with simpler verse forms like the ballads which belonged to the English rural Folk. In fact the

'Ballad Revival' is said to have sparked off the English Romantic Movement.

\*It adopts traditional versification & metrics to opt for the maintenance of sweetness of sensuous, mystic, melancholic, medieval and natural themes.

\*The language of the ordinary people became the language of Romantic poetry and the subjects of Romantic poetry were often ordinary people:

\*Subjectivity with the purpose of self satisfaction.

Romantic poetry carries unique features, which definitely distinguish it from other kinds of poetry. It is absolutely in contrast to neoclassical poetry. Neoclassical poetry is poetry of intellect and reason, while romantic poetry is the product of emotions, sentiments and the voice of the heart of the poet. Romantic poetry is what the heart of the poet says. It is a catharsis of the poet's emotions, thoughts, feelings and ideas bound in his heart. Romantic poetry is a reaction against the set standards, conventions, rules and traditional laws of poetry. That is the reason; romantic poetry is acknowledged as poetry of progressivism in contrast to neoclassical poetry. According to William J. Long "The Romantic Movement was marked, and is always marked, by a strong reaction and protest against the bondage of rule and custom which in science and theology as well as literature, generally tend to fetter the free human spirit."

Imagination is the hallmark of romantic poetry. It is a part and parcel of romantic poets like John Keats, Samuel Coleridge and P.B Shelley. Unlike neoclassical poets, who shunned imagination and didn't give any preference to imagination in their poetry, romantic poets laid extraordinary stress on imagination. They discredited the influence of reason and intellect in any form in their poetry. Samuel Coleridge considered an integral part of his poetry. In his *Biographia Literaria*, he has discussed two types of imagination-Primary and Secondary Imagination. He says, "The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and a repetition in the finite of the external act of creation of the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, coexisting with the conscious will, yet still identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode its operation."

On the other hand, the modernist poetry is characterized by the radical break with the traditions of literary subjects, forms, concepts and styles. In poetry, we can discuss the modernist elements in terms of four major subheadings: modern or new experiments in form and style, new themes and word-games, new modes of expression, and complex and open-ended nature of their themes and meanings. The most striking element of modernist poetry is the invention and experimentation of new modes of expression. Modernism includes the many '-isms' and therefore many different ways to express ideas and feelings. The different ways of expressing include the imagist way of presenting just concrete images for the readers to understand the idea and experience the feelings themselves; the symbolist way of presenting things in terms of deeply significant symbols of ideas and feelings for readers to interpret them intellectually; the realist way of truly reflecting the reality of the world; the naturalist way of going to the extreme of

realism by showing the private, psychological, fantastic and the neurotic; the impressionistic way of presenting unrefined first impression of everything by the observer; the expressionistic way of probing deep into one's own psyche and trying to express the hidden and deepest feelings, as in confessional poems; the surrealist way of imposing the mood of madness, intoxication and neurosis to excite the illogical 'language' of the unconscious; to name a few. Modernism includes all such experimentations in the technique of expression.

Another important element of modernist poetry is the use of new and wide range of subjects, themes and issues. Traditional poetry had to be limited to subjects of universal significance, general human appeal, and so on, even when the poems were romantically personal on their surface. But in modernist poetry, we read poems about just any topic and theme. We find poems about nature as well as eating plums, myth as well as satire of an old Christian woman, single characters as well as poor people, meaning of art as well as erotic memories of a woman, spiritual crisis as well as guilt of abortion, feminist movement as well as neurotic despise of a father, allegory of life-journey as well as the irony of death, and so on.

Besides being written on a large range of subjects and themes, modernist poems tend to be multiple in themes. It means that some single poems are about many things at the same time. For instance, Dylan Thomas's poem "This Bread I Break" is at the same time about nature, about spirituality, and also about art. The poem "Jellyfish" is also about the fish itself, the nature of human emotions and desires, the nature of women, as well as poetic expression. The poet never fully says, as in traditional poems, what the one and precise meaning of the poem is. That is why the reader has to work with many 'possible' themes and meanings in the same poem. The best one can expect is to try and find logical support for the theme or themes that he 'finds' in the poem. So, in modernist poetry, the meaning of a poem is the 'differing' interpretation of different readers. There can be no single and fixed meaning of any poem.

Also, modernist poets have violated all the known conventions and established rules of the past. In the form, style, stanza, rhythm and such other technical devices of poetry, old traditions have been demolished and new experiments are tested. Cummings' poems are good examples. There have been blank verse poems, pictorial poems, remixed rhythms, and so on. The old metrical systems, rhyme-schemes, and traditional symbols and metaphors are no longer dominating. Each poet makes his own rules. The multiplicity of styles is the characteristic of modernist poetry.

The single most common characteristic of modern poetry (in the European and American traditions, at least) is probably open form and free verse, which is quite different from the fixed forms and meters of traditional poetry. A reader of high-brow poetry today sometimes has to look around a bit to find modern sonnets or even ballads or other poems with regular line length, stanza length, meter, and end rhyme.

A second characteristic might be called fragmentation, juxtaposition, intertextuality (reference to other poems or other writings), and allusion. For an

example of all of the above, we can see T.S. Eliot's long poem *The Waste Land*. Not all recent poetry is "modern," of course. If this is an assignment, you may want to consider putting two poems from different centuries side by side -- two love poems, one by William Shakespeare and another by E.E. Cummings -- and seeing what sorts of differences emerge.

There are so many things to say on this subject. The following points are very essential:

\*Interest in human nature including all the behavior and tendencies of modern urban life.

\*Unlimited range of themes, subjects and issues of modern life.

\*It is impersonal, anti-romantic, innovative in attitudes and approaches to life; opposed to the Romanticist poetics of spontaneity and imagination;

\*Modern (better call it Modernist) poetry is more predominantly intellectual/cerebral in its appeal, rather than emotive and imaginative; Eliot and Pound would be the examples;

It is chiefly imagistic and involves symbolism, often private in nature; you can think of Eliot and Yeats; \*It is often full of allusions of sorts, and inter-textual references; again Eliot is a great master. It is often lexically, semantically and grammatically challenging for the uninitiated readership;

\*It rejects traditional versification and metrics to opt for free-verses and various experimental forms.

\*The language of highly intellectual people became the language of modern poetry which can't be understood easily.

\*Objectivity with the purpose of satire on the weaknesses of modern people.

## 2. Conclusions

But the chief tendencies may be divided into seven periods. They are (1) The decay of Victorianism and the growth of a purely decorative art, (2) The rise and decline of the Aesthetic Philosophy, (3) The muscular influence of Henley, (4) The Celtic revival in Ireland, (5) Rudyard Kipling and the ascendancy of mechanism in art, (6) John Masefield and the return of the rhymed narrative, (7) The war and the appearance of "The Georgians." It may be interesting to trace these developments in somewhat greater detail. Thus, paper focused the poetry of both the ages Romantic and Modern comparatively and critically.

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