

Comparing the Tenets of English and American Romanticism in Select Poems by Coleridge and Poe

Amit Kumar Rath, Research Scholar, PhD in English Literature. (The English and Foreign Languages University, Lucknow Campus)

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Abstract

Movements in Art often start with an unconventional thought in the mind of an artist in solitude. The thought finds expression in the artist's work and resonates with others until it gains the affirmation of a people and becomes a vibrant, anthropomorphic entity with a life force of its own. It neither remains stagnant nor indigenous and permeates through national, continental, and cultural boundaries to reach people in another society. It evolves to accommodate the needs of these new people. The geographical and socio-cultural nuances of the new arts find a place in this movement. After a few decades and a few hundred artists, the movement has evolved a distinction from its episteme. Now bifurcated into two, the entity has metamorphosed into forms called children of the parent.

The child and parent originating from the same body are separate beings with distinct identities, albeit there are commonalities. As the child grows, there is an increased demand and need for the severance of the umbilical cord to allow for independent development and existence. , While learning from the parent, the child becomes a self with a distinct identity. Romanticism in English literature inspires yet differs from Romanticism in the American literary canon. While they share the same roots and many themes, the differences are too significant to be ignored. The sharedness and differences in their evolution can be studied by comparing the poetry of their great romantics. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Edgar Allan Poe are a unique fit for such a comparison as the common theme of supernaturalism in their works allows for a fair comparison. This paper shall compare their selected poems to highlight Romanticism's similarities and differences in English and American literary canons.

Keywords: Romanticism, Coleridge, Poe, Dark-Romantics, Aestheticism

1. Cross-cultural communication and literature

The most straightforward definitions of 'communication' define it as the conveyance and inference of meaning between two parties. However, this exchange is not always limited to factual and fundamental statements of want, need, or solicitation. Beyond supporting the global daily business of living, communication imparts a more subtle and amorphous function that may not be noticeable in days,

months, or years but makes itself undeniably apparent, in retrospect, after decades and even centuries. These sentences, thoughts, and ideologies uttered in everyday life permeate the consciousness of a people to become their culture. In the words of Matthew Arnold, culture '... is a study of perfection' [1]. This culture of a society is created when the society as a whole, or in the majority, identifies customs, practices, and thoughts as the best of its creation and makes an effort for its conservation and preservation in its daily life. In essential historical moments, this society comes into close contact with another due to colonization, migration, and trade. This leads to interaction between the members of the two societies and the two cultures. Such an interaction inevitably leads to changes in the individual cultures as they evolve to understand and accommodate the new experiences that were previously unknown to them. It can be rationally argued that the culture of a society is best preserved and reflected by the Art it creates, consumes, and preserves. Therefore, turning to the Art of society can provide the most transparent answers about the creation and evolution of its culture. Evidence of such cross-cultural communication is present in all art forms, including literature. These instances of interaction and evolution of culture can be understood better by isolating a particular example for a comprehensive study. This paper aims to understand the discernible relation between the Romantic movements in English and American literature.

2. Romanticism in Literature

2.1.English Literary Romanticism

Movements in Art often start with an unconventional thought in the mind of an artist in solitude. The thought finds expression in the artist's work and resonates with others until it gains the affirmation of a people and becomes a vibrant, anthropomorphic entity with a life force of its own. However, with a movement as far-reaching and popular as Romanticism, it becomes difficult to trace the 'artist in solitude' whose work must have breathed life into such a unifying movement in the arts, but the image of this 'artist in solitude' remains ever-present in its very core. Romanticism originated in Europe at the end of the 18th century and is believed to have been most prominent between 1800 and 1850. It started as an artistic response to the crude machinations of the Industrial Revolution, rationalization, and utilitarianism with a harkening towards the medieval times. Romantic ideology emphasized the emotions of Man and the Artist and idolized Nature. Art forms displayed a renewed interest in man's raw, uninhibited emotions. They engaged in themes where feelings of awe and apprehension concurred in Man and Nature, disposing of rational composure. Aestheticism[2] in Art became a prime concern where Art was created for Art's sake. It encouraged the re-adoption of medieval descriptions of Nature, inspiring emotions in men. Folk art forms regained popularity and found implementation in new creations. The artist's feelings held prominence in the creation of Art, and it can be best described in the words of William Wordsworth[3], who defined *poetry* as a 'spontaneous overflow of emotions recollected in tranquillity.' It was essential for the artist's emotions to be portrayed untampered and unchecked by social conventions and mannerisms. 'Romantic

originality' dictated that these emotions had to be experienced for authentic portrayal and could not be borrowed.

Moreover, the place to best experience such emotions was found in the lap of Nature. From paintings to poetry, all art forms describe the importance and experience of man alone in teaching and mothering Nature. Nature was seen as the mother who created and cared and the teacher who chastised and taught. While the former inspired the emotion of awe and delight, the latter inspired apprehension and terror. William Wordsworth, William Blake, Lord Byron, and P.B. Shelley dealt with the theme of awe, whereas Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and Mary Shelley dealt with apprehension and terror. The latter themes were exhaustively employed in American romantic literature as it grew parallelly in the United States of America.

2.2 American Literary Romanticism

With the establishment of the first English colony in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, the first writings in English began to come up. There is little to no evidence of any Native American writings before this, as folklore and tales were orally passed down through the generations. Initially, literature from colonies of other European countries outnumbered literature in English. However, the case was soon reversed after the English occupation, the renaming of places, and changing the official language from Dutch to English. Spengemann, in his 1985 'American Writers and English Literature' states, 'The idea of an American literature was conceived, late in the eighteenth century, to deal with a single, inescapable problem: the literature in question, when it finally appeared, would be written in English.' (Spengemann 209) In the beginning, American literature documented the interaction of the settlers with the natives and extolled the benefits of colonies. A constant communication channel was maintained with England, and most of the literature written in America was published there. With the arrival of the Mayflower and the Pilgrims[4], the themes changed towards orthodox Christianity, sin, virtue, and religious persecution. In the 18th century, American writers turned towards rationality, scientific enlightenment, and political writings discussing the need for representation and equal rights for Americans instead of taxes. The political writings and pamphlets expressed the sentiments of the Revolutionary War and fueled it as well. This political need for a separate government and independent identity also led to literature being obligated to undergo a severance from the English cultural and literary heritage and created an independent canon of American literature. This independent literary identity was created in cohabitation with English literary trends and not in isolation.

Romanticism made its way to American literature in the early 19th century. The English ideals were carried into America intact, but many local additions were made to accommodate the American consciousness. The focus on the individual deepened, and the Self was studied in more profound isolation, which only became more fitting with the assumption that Nature was pure and human society was a corrupting influence. Poetry and prose found the protagonist alone, away from society, introspecting or conversing with Nature. It appealed to the adventurous spirit of America. The rejection of Rationalism and religion was inherent and manifested in the creation of Transcendentalism against the orthodox codes of Puritanism.

Transcendentalists believed in the inherent goodness of man that is later corrupted. They advocated the existence of a universal soul that permeates all living beings and allows their intuition to be the guiding, universal language. Despite all similarities in appearance and theme, American Romanticism differed from the English in the extent of its exploration of the theme of apprehension. The English focus was on 'awe,' and 'apprehension' received lesser attention, while the need for distancing made the Americans choose the opposite. While awe was present in the individual's adventures, it was outweighed by the apprehension of a sinister side of Nature and man. This theme was exhaustively used by dark Romanticists [5], such as Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe. In this exploration of supernaturalism in the poems of Coleridge and Poe, a common ground fit for a comparative study can be found. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Poe's *The Raven* are ideal candidates.

3. Romantic Poetry of Coleridge and Poe

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born in 1772 in Devon, England. His father was a church reverend and the headmaster at a grammar school, which could explain his use of religious themes and the concepts of virtue and sin in his poetry. A lonely childhood spent with books honed his imagination, and this is reflected in his conjuring of supernatural images. His supernatural experiences could also have been derived from his depression, laudanum treatment, and succeeding opium addiction. He wrote several poems, of which *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, first published in the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, is one of the most popular. He died in 1834 from a failed heart.

Edgar Allan Poe was born in 1809 in Boston, Massachusetts. He is famous for his macabre poetry and short stories. He is seen as one of the primary figures in Gothic literature and the inventor of the detective fiction genre in English. He was orphaned at an early age by his father's abandonment and the death of his mother. Although his foster mother was kind to him, he was always in quarrels with his foster father. His marital relationship also ended tragically with the death of his cousin and wife Virginia from tuberculosis. In 1845, two years before her, she had written *The Raven*. The poem is expected to have been inspired by the illness and impending death of his wife. His death was as mysterious as his narrative, and no known cause could be ascertained. The tragedies in the lives of these authors undoubtedly contributed to the macabre and mystery of their works. However, their works remained faithful to the tenets of Romanticism in various ways. A comparative reading of their best poems can illuminate the similarities and differences in their creativity and romance.

3.1 Comparing *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *The Raven*

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner begins with an argument which, superficially, appears to be a summary of the plot, but a reader revisiting the poem can easily make out the covert meaning between the lines discussing the moral and religious journey of the ship and the mariner from sin, punishment and repentance to redemption.

It is an ancient Mariner,

Moreover, he stopped one of three.

'By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me? (Coleridge 73)

The poem's first stanza features a third-person omniscient narrator who introduces the protagonist, the ancient mariner, as the first character. The mariner is described as 'ancient' instead of 'old,' which imparts an epistemological mystery to the character. The mystery is further asserted by the mariner's physical appearance, who has a long grey beard and glittering eyes. The poem also uses words that need to be revised in the poet's time to match the ancientness of the mariner's story. This stanza has alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter and ABCB rhyme scheme.

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly, there came a tapping,
As of someone gently rapping at my chamber door.
"Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door—
Only this and nothing more." (Poe 19)

The Raven begins like folklore with 'Once upon a...!', which imparts the characteristics of folklore and tales. The reader is reminded of the legends, mystery, and heritage associated with them. Poe sets the scene in a 'dreary midnight' where the narrator, in the first person, is tired and weak, reading old books on folklore. The narrator starts falling asleep as he is tired and suddenly hears a rap on the door. The change of the scene from the lull of sleep to violent rap catches the reader's attention. Poe keeps the description closely knit by using much alliteration. The narrator asserts false reassurance into a sense of normalcy. The self-reassurance by the narrator in 'Only This and Nothing More' indicates the first signs of the character's fear and apprehension. The first stanza opens with a trochaic octameter with ABCBBB rhyming scheme.

In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the mysterious use of undescribed powers to hold the attention of an unwilling listener cement the presence of supernatural elements in the poem. Like Poe, Coleridge also provides a false sense of normalcy to the reader by describing the sturdiness and speed of the ship. Immediately, the initial description of trouble follows with the image of unpassable ice and a sonorous description of its cracking. Poe also invokes sound in the silence disturbed by rapping on the door. Both the poets set their supernatural scenes in a backdrop of cold weather, appealing to the reader's experience of feeling cold in moments of a scare. Poe insinuates the idea of death by describing the dying embers that can be thought to denote the dying spark of Lenore's life. Lenore is described here as a maiden who does not or will not live with the narrator anymore without any direct reference to the context of absence in the initial passages. Poe's narrator continues with fits of care and reassurance. Coleridge introduces the albatross as a harbinger of good news and a 'Christian soul' who saved the sailors from the ice storm. The albatross, the bringer of good news and a sign of God is white and usually associated with angels and goodness.

In contrast, the Raven that brings lousy news is black, usually reserved for evil. Poe introduces the anthropomorphic[6] raven later than Coleridge. The Raven can 'talk' whereas the albatross is wordless.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner continues with the woes of the sailors as the scene alters between favorable and unfavorable weather. The sailors praise and curse the albatross as per their situation, attributing their fate to it. The suffering of hell on the ship is described as a scorching sun and lack of wind and water. It appears to be the punishment for the mariner's sin of shooting the albatross. Mysterious aquatic creatures are described as swimming on the surface of the ocean. The image of the albatross hung across the mariner's neck 'Instead of the cross...' invokes the idea of an upturned cross[7] on a sinner's neck.

Similarly, placing the Raven on the bust of Pallas, a Greek goddess of wisdom, signifies death or darkness upon the mind. The vocal Raven keeps repeating the word 'nevermore,' indicating the end of opportunities. Poe's narrator calls the raven 'ghastly grim,' bringing to mind the immediate idea of the grim reaper. Coleridge makes this very idea of personified death explicit as he talks about the mariner seeing Death and Life-in-Death gambling aboard a doomed ship. Death whereas claims the lives of the sailors; the mariner lives a life-in-death to repent for his sin.

Living alone on the ship, he, who could not appreciate a beautiful albatross, comes to appreciate the beauty of water snakes floating in the water. This marks his redemption as he can pray, and the albatross falls off his neck. The idea of melancholy in despair is explored by Poe as well. The Raven wonders whether the narrator of his poem will leave him, too, as people have left him in his life. This narrator tries to decipher the meaning of 'nevermore' as uttered by the bird and rationalizes its relevance by giving it various plausible reasons. Unable to find respite from the memories of 'lost Lenore,' he demands a drug to forget his pain and memories of his beloved. The idea of forgetfulness or state of sleep finds expression in many romantic literature dealing with death. The mariner finds respite in sleep. It rains, and his ship moves as he is asleep. The dead sailors are animated by spirits that make the ship move without water and waves to give the mariner another chance at repentance and Christian life. As the harbor and his country are near, the mariner is filled with joy and continues his prayers to ask God for either this to be true or for him to be dead. The desire and longing to be home with something or someone familiar and to be thereby loved are displayed by Poe's narrator as well when he asks the Raven, calling it a messenger of either God or the devil, if he could ever find respite and reunite with his beloved; the Raven replies 'nevermore.' This exhaustion of all hopes and the premonition of a darker future makes the narrator embrace his once despised melancholy. However, even there, he is left forlorn as the rebuked Raven refuses to remove itself from the narrator's company and remains perched on the bust of Pallas[8] – death upon his mind.

In contrast, Coleridge's mariner is rescued by familiar faces who marvel at his survival. He finds redemption from his curse of preaching to needy souls the message of loving all things created by God as equal. Although the poems share

similar motifs, images, and devices invoking horror, they end with different levels of hope for the future. Coleridge ends his poem with the lines 'A sadder and a wiser man, He rose the morrow morn' whereas Poe writes, 'And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor...Shall be lifted—nevermore!' (Poe 23) While the English romanticist sees optimism at the end of a ghastly tale, the American dark romanticist ends his lore with pessimistic forebodings of death and despair.

4. Conclusion

Romanticism, like any other movement in Art, permeates through national boundaries and cultural barriers as it moves from one person to another. The interaction of two cultures is bound to create something new that borrows from both yet offers something peculiar. English literary Romanticism created the European romantic movement in all art forms. It adapted its methods, motifs, and themes to American Romanticism to satiate its cultural needs. Originating from the same body, they bifurcate into two literary movements with their canons adequate for the culture and context they cater to. Writing for the romantic sentiment, Coleridge and Poe take slightly different approaches in their poetry that suited their finer sentiments. D.H. Unrue observes that 'There are, however, certain important differences between Poe's use of such seemingly romantic materials and themes and their use by incontrovertibly romantic or Gothic or Transcendental writers... Indifferent to Nature and primitivism, Poe is miserable in solitude and frustrated by the restrictions of subjective perspective. (Unrue 3) Poe is inspired by the dark elements of supernaturalism Coleridge has explored in his verse and masters the Art of invoking aesthetic terror through the macabre. William Freedman, a literary critic, notes in his 1981 *Poe's "Raven": The Word That Is an Answer "Nevermore"*:

Poe was influenced by the theories of Coleridge, from whom he derived his pivotal view of literature as a mode of expression whose immediate object is pleasure, not truth. He shared and may likewise have been influenced by Coleridge's insistence that "images, however beautiful, . . . become proofs of original genius only as far as a predominant passion modifies them; or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion; or when they have the effect of reducing multitude to unity" (Freedman 27)

The shared aesthetic object in their poetry and the similar approaches of achieving the confluence of several images into invoking one emotion in the reader are testaments to Coleridgean influence over Poe and the intercultural permeation between the literature of the two nations. What might appear to be the independent existence of two kinds of literature in their cultural contexts is a mirage created by the experience of these canons in isolation and separation from each other; the realization of the commonality of their origins and expression through shared history is only a curious glance away.

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