

SELECTED POEMS FOR ANALYSIS

ROMANTICISM IN LITERATURE

Romanticism in Literature: Importance, Characteristics and Impact

Romanticism (1789-1830) is the revolt of the senses or passions against the intellect and of the individual against the consensus. Its first stirrings may be seen in the work of William Blake (1757-1827), and in continental writers such as the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the German playwrights Johann Christoph Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The publication, in 1798, by the poets William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772- 1834) of a volume entitled **Lyrical Ballads** is a significant event in English literary history. The work of the later romanticists John Keats (1795-1821) and his friend Percy Bysshe Shelley and his wife Mary Shelley is marked by an attempt to make language beautiful, and by an interest in remote history and exotic places. George Gordon and Lord Byron use romantic themes, sometimes comically, to explain contemporary events. Wordsworth becomes a kind of national monument.

In America, this period developed into the **Transcendental Period** (Transcendentalism). Additionally, **Gothic writings** (Writings that invoke horror, suspense and fear inside the reader) overlap with the Romantic and Victorian periods. Romanticism is an intellectual and artistic movement that emerged in Europe by the end of the 18th century. Many features of the movement are shared with the previous or following movements but the essential characteristics of Romanticism are specific and crucial.

Romanticism can be seen as a rejection of the precepts of order, calm, harmony, balance, idealization, and rationality that typified Classicism in general and late 18th-century Neoclassicism in particular. It was also to some extent a reaction against the Enlightenment and against 18th-century rationalism and physical materialism in general. Romanticism emphasized the individual, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the personal, the spontaneous, the emotional, the visionary, and the transcendental. In England, the movement writers are divided into two generations:

First Generation Romanticist writers: William Blake, William Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge.

Second Generation Romanticist writers: Lord Byron, John Keats and Percy B. Shelley.

*Characteristics of the movement:

-Respect and love of nature considering it as a refuge, a source of inspiration, creativity and imagination. It is seen by Romanticist poets as a catalyst for thinking, deep reflection and harmony.

-Romanticism also believed in individuality as the absolute power that human beings need, it recreates a new wave of nationalist pride led by emotions in which reason and intellectual are totally neglected. Individualism is prioritized for the sake of unfolding of the Self, with the individual's freedom of expression and feelings

-Rejecting the rigid strict poetic language and style and considering imagination as a key to spontaneity and creativity.

-Focus on one's freedom of expressing deep feelings and emotions as sadness, joy, despair, hope, ... rejecting all types of domination and oppression (religious, political, social, ...). Romanticism emerged against the growing suspicion about the religious strict norms and the church hegemony over society and the arts

-Poetry is prioritized by English Romanticists rather than the other literary forms as W. Wordsworth states: "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings".

-Romanticist writers were known for using supernatural elements in their works as a result of the spreading gothic traditions and conventions of the genre. Elements of horror were combined with romance within gloomy settings and frightening atmospheres and mysterious characters and events.

A Poison Tree by William Blake (1794)

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe;
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I water'd it in fears,
Night & morning with my tears;
And I sunned it with my smiles
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,
Till it bore an apple bright;
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine,

And into my garden stole
When the night had veil'd the pole:
In the morning glad I see
My foe outstretch'd beneath the tree

“A Poison Tree” is one of Blake’s poems in “*Songs of Experience*”. It was written in **1794**. Based on the lines and appearance this poem is close structure and consists of four quatrains. This poem is about the dark side of human nature; anger and desire to triumph over the enemies. The speaker had a disagreement and felt anger toward his friend and his enemy, because his enemy stole his apple (poison apple) and ate it. Finally the speaker found his enemy dead under the tree. The speaker was glad and satisfied.

- Biography of the poet: Who is William Blake?

William Blake began writing at an early age; at age 10. He studied engraving and grew to love Gothic art, which he incorporated into his own unique works. He is a misunderstood poet, artist, engraver and visionary throughout much of his life. William Blake was born on November 28, 1757, in the Soho district of London, England. He only briefly attended school, being chiefly educated at home by his mother. Blake's artistic ability became evident in his youth, and by age 10, he was enrolled at Henry Pars' drawing school, where he sketched the human figure by copying from plaster casts of ancient statues. At age 14, he apprenticed with an engraver. Blake's master was the engraver to the London Society of Antiquaries, and Blake was sent to Westminster Abbey to make drawings of tombs and monuments, where his lifelong love of gothic art was seeded.

At age 21, Blake completed his seven-year apprenticeship and became a journeyman copy engraver, working on projects for book and print publishers. Also preparing himself for a career as a painter, that same year, he was admitted to the Royal Academy of Art's Schools of Design, where he began exhibiting his own works in 1780. Blake's artistic energies branched out at this point, and he privately published his *Poetical Sketches* (1783), a collection of poems that he had written over the previous 14 years. In August 1782, Blake married Catherine Sophia Boucher, who was illiterate. Blake taught her how to read, write, draw and color (his designs and prints). He also helped her to experience visions, as he did. One of the most traumatic events of Blake's life occurred in 1787, when his beloved brother, Robert, died from tuberculosis at age 24.

In 1804, Blake began to write and illustrate *Jerusalem* (1804-20), his most ambitious work to date. He also began showing more work at exhibitions, but these works were met with silence, and the one published review was absurdly negative; the reviewer called the exhibit a display of "nonsense, unintelligibility and egregious vanity," and referred to Blake as "an unfortunate lunatic." Blake was devastated by the review and lack of attention to his works, and, subsequently, he withdrew more and more from any attempt at success.

In the final years of his life, Blake suffered from recurring bouts of an undiagnosed disease that he called "that sickness to which there is no name." He died on August 12, 1827. Unappreciated in life, Blake has since become a giant in literary and artistic circles, and his visionary approach to art and writing has not only spawned countless, spellbound speculations about Blake, they have inspired a vast array of artists and writers.

-Structure and Form: the poem is a lyric; it is also a descriptive poem due to the provided descriptions and the words used for that description. It is composed of four quatrains and each two couplets rhyme together. Most of the lines are run-on lines and the punctuation used by the poet confirms the point.

-Content of the Poem (Theme): this poem tells about anger and desire to triumph over the enemies; the dark side of human nature. The poem discusses the catastrophic effects of unexpressed anger. The poet, very artistically, delves deep into the darker side of the human mind and captures the damage that anger does to the heart where it nourishes and becomes a poison. The speaker's anger is toward his friend and his enemy. He had a disagreement with his friend and he can solve it. He also had a disagreement with another person that is his enemy, but towards his enemy he did not express relief of his anger. The enemy grew his fury. Secondary themes also include hatred, revenge, self denial, alienation, grudge, wrath, and death.

-Language & Literary Devices: Blake has given great importance to the word diction and the tenses used to convey his ideas. There is a remarkable shift from the past tense to the present simple tense in the last stanza; that transition is highly significant.

- **Antithesis:** An antithesis is a figure of speech that refers to the juxtaposition of opposing or contrasting ideas. Blake has used this device in the first stanza. The opening line focuses on telling a friend about anger, and it vanishes. The next two lines show the opposite act about hiding his anger from the enemy, and it grows. This is a juxtaposition of two contrasting ideas.
- **Alliteration:** Alliteration is the repetition of the same consonant sounds in the same line such as in "my, my", "bore, bright", ...
- **Allusion:** Allusion is a belief and an indirect reference of a person, place, thing or idea of a historical, cultural, political or literary significance. In this poem, "Garden", "apple" and "tree" are the illusions of Adam, Eve and the Garden of Eden.
- **Personification:** the poet personifies emotions like wrath as a growing entity inside the human heart, eg: (I told my wrath: as if wrath is **listening** to the speaker).
- **Oxymoron:** with soft deceitful wiles, how can a deceitful wile be soft?
- **Metaphor:** It is a figure of speech in which an implied comparison is made between the objects different in nature. There is one extended metaphor used in this poem. It is used in the

second line of the third stanza “Till it bore an apple bright.” Here the apple is the metaphor of the fruit of his grudge. Another example of metaphor is in “I water’d it, I sunned it” the speaker compares wrath with the tree that needs water and sun to grow.

- **Symbolism:** Symbolism is using symbols to signify ideas and qualities, giving them symbolic meanings different from literal “Tree” symbolizes his wrath and anger whereas, “garden” is the symbol of the heart where the hatred is natured.
- **Imagery:** Imagery is used to make readers perceive things with their five senses. William Blake has used visual imagery throughout the poem to make his reader create a mental picture such as, “And it grew both day and night.” “Till it bore an apple bright”, “My foe outstretched beneath the tree.”

Blake has beautifully employed these devices to show the negative impacts of anger. The appropriate and careful use of these devices has made the poem captivating and thoughtful for the readers.

-The Poetic Voice: the poem is told from first person point of view

-The Rhyme Scheme and Scansion of the poem: The rhyme scheme followed in the poem is {AABB}. The rhythm of the poem is also straightforward and regular which makes it very easy to read, though not necessarily to understand. The straightforward and seemingly simple way in which Blake has written this poem contradicts with the very complex human emotions he is describing. The poem meter ranges between the Trochaic Tetrameter (line 1) and the Iambic Tetrameter (line 2).

I was | angry | with | my | friend |
1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

I told | my | wrath, | my | wrath | did | end |
1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

-Summary of the poem

The speaker tells that he was angry with his friend, and he openly expressed that he was angry. It ended there and then. However, when he grew angry with his enemy, he could not tell him why he was angry, and it continued growing. The poet wants to state that when you tell the reason for your anger to a friend, it ends but as you definitely do not tell the same to your enemy, it never ends. Rather, it continues growing.

The speaker again comes up with the same argument that he continued watering his fears every night and every morning and shed tears for it. He continued smiling thinking about how to remove this fear and thought about innocent wiles to harm his enemy. This means that if you have a fear of something or somebody, you continue raising stakes about your enmity and think about destroying your enemy.

The speaker continues telling that his fear grew day and night. The more he thought of it, the more it grew until it bore a fruit, an apple. He means that it is perhaps the same apple that our forefathers Adam and Eve ate. When his enemy looked at that apple, he knew that it was his and that the enemy’s likely plan was to get it by hook or by crook. The speaker means that fears or anger grows very quickly into such sweet plans.

The speaker states that his enemy planned to steal his apple and entered his garden with these intentions. In fact, this apple seemed to be a bait the speaker threw before his enemy to trap him. He was right that his enemy entered the garden at night and the night veiled the pole with which the apple was hanging. The enemy got caught and lay there prostrated. When the speaker saw him in the morning, he was glad that his enemy was trapped and lying there under the tree. This means that his plan worked, and he was successful in trapping his enemy. This also shows the power and results of negativity. This stanza completes the main idea of negative emotions and their power of destruction.

-Characteristics of Romanticism reflected in the selected poem: Explain why is William Blake’s “A Poison Tree” a Romanticist poem.