

Thomas Chatterton: The Patron Saint of the Romantic Movement

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Abstract

Thomas Chatterton, Bristol boy was one of the most precocious English poets the world had ever seen. He was the writer of mature verses and precursor of Romantic Movement. He had struggled both professionally and personally during his life time. When he was quite young, Chatterton was an estranged, alienated boy. Even at this time, the sign of precocity and egotism were quite apparent. Despite the struggle in personal life, he wrote with grace and poise and made a remarkable contribution to English poetry. He was gifted with natural poetical skill, keen sense of observation and delicate sensibilities. All his successors like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and D.G. Rossetti all showered praise on him. His poetry is fully romantic in its spirit, presentation of nature, autobiographical element, treatment of supernatural and his melancholic nature are the prominent features of romantic poetry of Chatterton.

Keywords: Romantic Movement, Neurosis, Egotism, Romantic Sensibility, Melancholy, Observation, Nature, Imagination

Thomas Chatterton, one of the precursors of romantic revival was endowed with a clever gift of imitation and touches of real romantic sensibility, sometimes expressed with delicate spontaneity and others in purely conventional language. The imaginative power displayed in the Rowley poems is aptly remarkable. His influence upon the poets of romantic revival was no doubt considerable. His poetry is fully romantic in its spirit although there are some features of the classical poetry in its way of expression. His treatment of middle-ages, love for nature, his melancholic predisposition, treatment of supernatural, personal neurosis and high imagination

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are prominent features of romantic school found in Chatterton's poetry.

The poetry of Chatterton presents a unique touch of romanticism. He made a great contribution to the revival of middle-ages. He is fascinated by medieval life and legends. It is evident from the fact that he had taken the theme of his poems from middle-ages and they have a moral.

“Among his early studies, we are told, antiquities and especially the surrounding of the medieval life were the favorite subjects. Heraldry seems especially to have had a fascination for him. He supplied himself with charcoal, black lead, ochre, and other colours; and with these it was his delight to delineate, in rough and quaint figures, churches, castles, tombs of warriors, heraldic emblazonments and others like belonging of the old world.”¹ ‘The Storie of William Conynge’ a poem addressed to the poet Thomas Rowley and William Conynge, both are medieval figures belonging to the fifteenth century. Rowley saw in his dream Aella a historical figure, “How on the bank there of brave Aella fought Aella descended from Morse kingly blood, Wardon of Bristol town and castle stead Who ever and anon made Denes to bleed”.²

The reference kingly blood, wardon of native town and study castle create the medieval atmosphere. Besides this, the poet Rowley has a cross in his pocket which is capable of removing anybody's sin. The crouches (cross) itself is a medieval property. More than that there is a sense of mystery and indefiniteness in the poem which is the high point of romantic art. Commenting on the medieval of Chatterton, Henry A. Beers remarks: “The image of medieval life which he succeeded in creating was, of course, a poor, faint – leisure, friends, long life- everything that was needed to give his work solidity. All that he had was a creative though undisciplined imagination, together with an astonishing industry, persistence and secretiveness. Yet with all his disadvantages, his work, with all its imperfections, is far more string than the imitative verse of the Wartons, or the thin, diffused medievalism of Walpole and Clara Reeve. It is the product of a more original mind and more intense conception.”²

The life in the middle-ages was highly romantic and so Chatterton has selected this special trait of the medieval life in his poetry. There are beautiful pictures of the fair sex in his poems. In the poem ‘To the beauteous miss hoyland’ the personality of Hoyland has been portrayed very beautifully:

Hoyland, more beauteous than the god of day,
Her name can quicken
and awake the lay;

I vain would phoebus, did not Hoyland, rise:

‘tis her bright eyes that gilds the eastern skies; ‘tis she alone deprives
us of the light;

And when she slumbers, then indeed ‘tis night. (CW, I, 152)

Chatterton also composed some of his poems in the disguise of a mythical priest of the fifteenth century Bristol, Thomas Rowley, a dramatically imagined person behind which he lost his own identity to give them the medieval coloring. The invention of a fifteenth century priest also

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shows Chatterton's love for the middle-ages. In this way, we see Chatterton has realized middle-ages in detail. His works dealing with the Middle Ages abounds in chivalry and adventure, medieval belief and custom.

The medieval fiction, which the boy invented, and by means of which he endeavored to palm off his fabrications upon the world as ancient originals, is in its own way as remarkable as the poems themselves.³

Nature is applied in his poetry as a background for human action and emotions. He was a great lover of nature. He believed that nature is beautiful because we are full of hopes but when we are sad, nature also appears sad to us. He often depicts nature "as a background or setting to human emotions and actions. This was a common way with those poets of the eighteenth century in whom the reviving love of nature was conspicuous but who still fixed their attention chiefly on man."⁴ His love for nature is described as –

The pleasing sweets of spring and summer past,
The falling leaf flies in the sultry blast
The fields resign their spangling orbs of gold,
The wrinkled grass its silvery joy unfold
Mantling the spreading moor in heavenly white,
Meeting from every hill the ravished sight. (CW 1,199)

His Heccar and Gaira breaths the very atmosphere of wonder there is the river Gaira with its surgy waived, thunder and lightening, the echoing caves, sharp rocks, the white currents of the river and the spreading green. The fruitful hills of Jarra with dark vaporous air distilling dew at nights and howling tempests are vividly realized. Moreover, there are many similes and metaphors taken from the object of nature to enhance the beauty of the poem. Heccar runs swifter than the haunted wolves and fly on the plumage of macaws; he pours the darts on them fast as the streaming rain, hurling a whirlwind through the trembling heart. For him, nature has no separate identity. If a man is sad, any season cannot make him happy. When he writes

Ah; what are beauties, the glories of spring?
The flowers will be faded, all happiness fly.
And clouds well the azure of every bright sky. (CW, 1, 59)

These lines have Keatsian sensuousness and the line Ah; what are beauties, the glories of spring? Reminds us Keats line where are the songs of spring ay, where are they? Nature is applied as a reflection of his gloomy mood, roams around the countryside and finds no relief for the suffering of men. Nature is merely a reflector of the onlooker's own moods and feelings –

Joyless I seek the solitary shade,
Where dusky contemplation veils the scene,
The dark retreat, of
leafless branches made,
Where sickening sorrow wets the yellowed green. (CW, 1, 183)

The poet also depicts the helplessness of human beings before nature. Nature does not make any distinction between the rich and the poor as the priest of Saint Godwin's church and the poor beggar both take shelter under the same elm tree to save themselves from the hailstones. Thus, nature becomes a great labeler. The poet besides using nature as a background for human

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emotions and actions there are a few poems in which he paints the beautiful scenes and sights of nature with an unerring hand.

Most of the precursors of romantic revival in the middle decades of eighteenth century were obsessed with melancholy so much that poets like Grey and Goldsmith are said to form the Graveyard school of poetry. Chatterton also belongs to this stream of poetry and his melancholy is closely related to his own bitter experiences in life and subsequent alienation from society. At times, Chatterton himself was subject to fits of abstraction, weeping and rage. He was very unlucky and has no true friend or supporter for his hard days. His all versatility and craftsmanship brought him nothing. In such circumstances it is natural that one's earlier melancholic disposition should develop and all his melancholic poems are the result of his inherent melancholic temperament. This temperament is reflected very faithfully in 'Elegy: Joyless I seek the solitary shade' and 'Horatius'. The poem 'Horatius' reflects transitory nature of love and beauty –

The wretch that loves thee now too soon shall weep
Thy faithless beauty and thy broken bow.
(CW,1,214)

The poet concludes like a born pessimist that the physical enjoyment finally leads to despair –

Unhappy youth, oh, shun the warm embrace,
Nor trust to much affection flattering smile
Dark poison lurks beneath that charming face
Those melting eyes but languish to beguile. (CW,1,214)

Keats, great admirer of Chatterton also depicts the fleeting nature of love and beauty. In 'Ode to a Nightingale' he writes –

Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes
Or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow.⁵

The poem 'Elegy Written At Stanton Drew' begins a strong feeling of melancholy. The death of 'Maria', the poet watching the tomb of Maria sadly:

Joyless I hail the solemn gloom,
Joyless I view the pillars vast and rude
Ah! What avails this awful sight?
Maria is no more. (CW, 1, 181)

Chatterton was melancholic poet in the sense; he suffered from frustration and disappointment. He had no social status in proportion to his ambitions. His autobiographical poems express his feeling of love, castigate his personal enemies and dwells on his economic and literary problems. In the poem – 'To Miss Bush of Bristol' poet expresses cruelty and ungratefulness of his beloved.

To you I urge the plaintive strain,
And though a lover sings in vain,
Yet you shall hear the song,

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Ungrateful lovely, cruel maid. (CW,1, 44)

In 'To Horace Walpole' expresses his anger –

Say, didst thou never practice such deceit?
Who wrote Otranto? But I will not chide,
Scorn I will repay with scorn and pride with pride,
Still Walpole still thy prosy chapters write,
And twiddling letters to some fair indite (CW,1,164)

Show his poor condition -

Had I the gift of wealth and luxury shared
Not poor and mean, Walpole! Thou had'st not dared
Thus to insult, but I shall live and stand

By Rowley's side, when thou art dead and damned. (CW,1,165)

George Catcott is criticized for doubting the authenticity of the Rowley poems as –

Thy friendship never could be dear to me,
Since all I am is opposite to thee. (CW,1,171)

The poem 'Last Verses' reveals his estrangement with life and mercenary attitude of the people of Bristol –

Farewell, Bristol's dingy piles of bricks, Lovers of
mammon, worshipper of bricks!
Ye spurned the boy who gave you antique lays,
And paid for learning with your empty praise. (CW,1,223)

Like most of the romantic poets Chatterton reveals himself in his poetry and the note of melancholy is to be heard at many places. The poet is unable to get any consolation from nature. His melancholy is at the peak in the 'Last Verses'. The poet committed suicide after writing this poem.

Chatterton, as a precursor of romantic revival shows great interest in supernatural and applied in many poems. He uses it with a great skill and evokes from the readers 'a willing suspension of disbelief'. He applies in 'The Church Warden and the Apparition' –

The night was cold and the wind was high,
And stars bespangled all the sky. (CW, 1, 204)

And

A ghastly phantom, lean and warn,
That instant rose, and thus began
Weak, wretch- to think to blind my eyes

Hypocrisy's a thin disguise. (CW, 1, 204)

Besides this in 'African Eclogues', 'The Death of Nicou', 'Hecar and Gaira' and 'Narva and Mored' Chatterton deals supernatural with masterly skill. 'Sly Dick', a poem deals with the theft of Sly Dick at the instigation of an infernal spirit. The opening lines

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of the poem creates an atmosphere of supernaturalism –

Sharp was the frost, the wind was high,

And sparkling stars bedecked the sky. (CW,1, 202)

His use of supernatural ideas prepares readers psychology to accept the doing of supernatural forces. How the spirit descended straight into his chambers before him stands and speeches. In ‘the parliament of spirits’ The poet glorifies the church of our lady of Redcliffe and the spirits of the departed ones. He takes the readers in confidence about supernatural reality through subtle suggestions and hints. The spirit of Nimrod, is of ancient origin referred in the Bible as the master builder. But even the spirit of master builder is amazed at the skill of the builder of the grand church of Canyng. Like the protecting spirit of Pope’s ‘The Rape of the lock’ ‘The spirit of Elle’ is a protecting spirit of Bristol, It bears more love for Bristol than girls have for their lovers. Elle’s longing for human form finds supernatural status as opposed to ordinary human feelings. The next ‘The spirit of Segowen’, a cheat and loose merry fellow, once at night was thinking how to deceive some person when suddenly. He heard a voice from the sky:

Thou sleepest; but lo! Satan is awake,

Some deed that’s holy do or He thy soul will take. (CW, II,165)

All the spirits in the poem are given a deft touch by the poet to keep the supernatural identity alive. The poem deepens faith in religion verifies the presence of supernatural beings. This unique blend of natural, supernatural and spiritual saves its supernaturalism from crudeness. Wylie Sypher writes – “some have credited Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’ with a magic lacking to almost every other poem in English. Though more finished in its artistry, Kubla Khan is however, know more magic than parts of Chatterton’s African Eclogues.”⁶

Thus, Chatterton displays romantic qualities like interest in middle-ages, love for nature imagery, supernatural element, strong emotion and melancholy. He uses a variety of metrical forms in his poetry, and his lyrical skill is seen in many of his poems. D.S. Taylor writes – “The extent to which he was a child of his century, of preceding poetic generations has been sufficiently understood. However, the persistent tendency of his forms and subject towards the less- ordered, the effective, the exotic, the dimly and powerfully primeval shows us that the romantics were right to see in him a precursor.”⁷

To sum up, it can be said that Romantic Movement which dominated the literary scene in the early part of nineteenth century had its beginning amidst the eighteenth century. “the thing that came to such a flourishing triumph in Blake, Coleridge, Shelly, and the rest romantics was indeed already potent in Walpole, Cowper, Gray and Collins and had a preliminary triumph in Chatterton and Mackpherson.” His influence upon romantic poets can be understood from the fact that almost all the romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelly, Keats and D. G. Rossetti showered praise on him. Shelley commemorated his genius in ‘Adonais’ (though main emphasis is on Keats) Wordsworth in ‘Resolution and Independence’, Coleridge in ‘Monody on the Death of Chatterton’, D.G. Rossetti in ‘Five English Poets’ and John Keats in sonnet ‘To

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