

The Evolution of British Literature

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From the Romantic Era through the Victorian age and even today the use of imagery in writing has long defined the works of authors. When it comes to imagery, the Romantic Poets focused heavily on natural images whereas the Victorian writers focused more on man-made imagery. However, through the ages the use of imagery to convey not only aspects and settings but also aspects of the mind and deeper emotions has not changed.

The Romantic poets relied heavily on natural imagery to lend a sense of beauty and hope to their work, even when the themes of the work overall were much darker. The Romantic poets witnessed the start of the industrial revolution and saw the world begin to shift. They wrote very often on the changes of the world and of very personal moments but always found a way to keep the natural world in all of their works despite the change in topics. The natural imagery in their work would lend a softer side, a light at the end of the tunnel, a more innocent aspect to their work. Dewey (2019) studied Romanticism and said “Romanticism is characterized by simple yet highly evocative language and a focus on individuals of the lower and middle class.” Perhaps this is because the changing world most often affected the working class and poets felt the need to get their messages out for those whose voices were quiet to the rich. What better way to stand up for those without a voice in society than to use your own voice when you have standing in high society?

For instance, William Blake, a Romantic Era poet, wrote quite often of religious views and when he had an audience he wrote about the suffering of the working class. His use of imagery is multi-faceted and layered, as is the case with most Romantic Era poets. Blake drew artwork to accompany his poetry and “to read a Blake poem without the pictures is to miss

something important” Lynch/Stillinger (2012). Blake uses natural imagery not only to add to the visual image he has created, but to convey his emotional presence in the work as well. In “The Lamb” Blake uses imagery to describe a lamb as both the physical animal and as a symbol of human innocence.

“Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
Gave thee life & bid thee feed.
By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice!”

“The Lamb” William Blake, stanza 1-8

At first glance this looks like such a simple poem about a little lamb in a meadow bleating and frolicking, but upon further inspection we can see that Blake is simply using the image of a lamb to convey give us the feeling of pure innocence. Even today lambs are a symbol of innocence and kindness.

Charlotte Smith was another well-known Romantic poet, though for a different reason than Blake, her poetry “had a sort of sadness, a melancholy”, Lynch/Stillinger (2012). Charlotte had a rough start to life, she was married young and ultimately divorced her husband, both because he was abusive and could not provide for her wellbeing, Erskine (2019), and eventually started writing for a living. Her emotions are easy to read in her work as even when describing

the natural scenery, the land and shore seem sad. She leaned heavily on her past to lend her work it's unique sense of melancholy and gave the readers a new view of the natural world.

“I love thee, mournful, sober-suited Night!

When the faint moon, yet lingering in her wane,

And veil'd in clouds, with pale uncertain light

Hangs o'er the waters of the restless main”

“To Night” Charlotte Smith stanza 1-4

Though this excerpt may be just a description of a moon above a waterway, the imagery and use of phrase here lend the work a sort of sadness and longing. Smith's use of imagery here makes it very easy to link the darkness of night and the beauty of the world to her own sadness and feelings of loneliness.

When the Romantic Era came to an end and the Victorians began writing there was a shift in imagery. Where before we saw natural images bringing life to emotion, we now see man-made things taking form. We begin to see the darker side of the world when we do look to nature as well, we begin to see the aftermath of a full-blown industrial revolution. Britain led the world during this revolution and “the era was a time of dramatic change and rapid development for Great Britain in almost all areas of industry, economy, and society, and the population increased drastically”, Miller (2019). The population increase made things even harder for the working class as did the industrialization of Britain. This change in society caused writers to start focusing on the darker side of reality as they were faced with children working in incredibly difficult situations. Elizabeth Browning wrote a very notable poem which highlights this issue in the Victorian Age which focused on the children who worked and died in the coal mines, unseen and un-thought of by those in high society.

“But the young, young children, O my brothers
Do you ask them why they stand
Weeping sore before the bosoms of their mothers,
in our happy Fatherland?”

“The Cry of the Children” Elizabeth Browning, stanza 21-24

In this poem Browning uses phrases like “your old earth” they say “is very dreary”, to highlight the way these children look at the world, the only world they see is the cold, dead land around the mine where they live and work and suffer. Using symbolism to show the world so drastically different than the Romantic poets, such stark contrast, shows the change the world went through, and the sadness felt by these poets when they looked around themselves.

Symbolism exerted a profound influence on twentieth-century literature, bridging the transition from Realism to Modernism, “Symbolism | Encyclopedia.com” (2020). Symbolism has remained just as important through the ages and has been widely used through both eras as a way to convey deeper messages and give works deeper meanings than what we see at first glance. When we look at how and why symbolism has changed over the years, we can see that writers are greatly influenced by what was happening around them and this is still the truth today. Modern writers and authors still use imagery, both natural and man-made, to make their point and give their work more depth. Symbolism may have begun as a Romantic notion and a way of finding beauty even in the worst circumstances, but it quickly became a common theme amongst writers from every period and a very popular tool in writing.

Symbolism is not just a tool, but a theme that started arguably one of the largest movements in literature and still holds true today. Though Symbolism has changed the common use of symbolism is very different than when it first became popular, it is still something that

influences writers very much today. When we compare writers through the Romantic, Victorian and 20th Century eras most often see the difference in their work, but there is always one common thread, symbolism. The use of Symbolism in writing has always been present and though different writers used it very differently, it is one thing we can use to see the similarities in the works of those these vastly different time periods.

References

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