

Sample Reflection Essay (ENG 3220)

Student Name

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The Individual and the Unexplainable in Romantic Literature

Romanticism is perhaps best understood through examining the ways it contrasted the Enlightenment. Enlightenment poets valued perfection of structure and logic whereas Romantic poets preferred to describe individual experience in the language of the common man.

Additionally, it was the unknowable, rather than that which could be scientifically proven, that was most fascinating for Romantics. The appeal to the common man, celebration of the individual, and fascination with the unexplainable are all represented in the works of Keats, Wordsworth, Burke, and Shelley.

In his poem "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" Keats exemplifies the Romantic sense of individualism. Despite the overshadowing of Chapman's Homer by Pope's translation, Keats found Chapman superior because of the way it made him feel. He "breathed its pure serene" reading it was like staring "Silent, upon a peak in Darien." Keats conjures images of nature to express his powerful emotional reaction. However, he also alludes to Herschel's discovery of Uranus, "felt I like some watcher of the skies When a new planet swims into his ken," thus paying tribute to the Enlightenment while simultaneously celebrating his individual experience.

Another poem by Keats, "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," is a musing on the ancient marble structures brought from Greece to England in 1806. To Keats they represent the inevitable fading of all things; both he and the marbles are "a shadow of a magnitude." The marbles are a shadow of the Classical Period, and Keats is a shadow of the renowned poet that he longed to be. Just as Keats's "dim conceived glories" give way to an inner feud, the rough

exterior of the marbles' mingled with their Grecian grandeur causes a dizzy pain. It is uncomfortable for people to consider them a remnant of the golden age of Greece because they want the Golden Age to be elegant and flawless. But rather than criticizing their imperfection, Keats examines the marbles and identifies himself with them.

Wordsworth's poem "Tables Turned" also celebrates the individual, but goes further than Keats. Written as a ballad, the poem harkens back to the Medieval Age, a time in which poetry was often written to be sung, making it easier to memorize and more widely enjoyed by the common person. The content of "Tables Turned" reflects this structural choice. It is a celebration of nature as a teacher as opposed to the drudgery of intellectual dissection. Wordsworth writes that our intellect meddles and misshapes beauty, "We murder to dissect." He exhorts his listener to bring "a heart That watches and receives." Through admonishing his listener to bring a receptive heart into the woods rather than a scrutinizing mind, Wordsworth hints at the aura of mystery in nature while also inviting the unlearned to enjoy its beauty to an equal, if not greater, extent as the learned.

Conversely, in his treatise, "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin Of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful" Edmund Burke seeks to reason his way into an understanding of human passions. Thus, Burke adheres to the Enlightenment-era practice of elucidating truth from observable behavior. However, he also rather defies logic by stating that "the influence of reason in producing our passions is nothing near so extensive as it is commonly believed," despite the fact that his purpose is to "pursue them [the passions] through all their variety of operations, and pierce into the inmost, and what might appear inaccessible parts of our nature." Reason cannot explain the passions, yet Burke is trying to use it to pursue them. He is trying to explain things that are beyond human comprehension, what Pope might deem quitting his sphere and rushing to

the skies. For this reason, Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* is quite Romantic. As he unravels the mystery of the sublime and the passions he is contemplating the unexplainable.

The unexplainable and the sublime are further illustrated in Shelley's "Mont Blanc. Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni." Shelley writes that Mont Blanc pierces "the infinite sky," it is awe-inspiring; it belongs in the realm of the unfathomable. It is also "rude, bare, and high, Ghastly, and scarred, and riven," these are frightful yet fascinating images; they draw the reader in to this desolate sight. But the mountain itself can barely be perceived, at its peak there are silent storms beheld by none. Shelley culminates the poem by asking what Mont Blanc, the earth, and stars and sea are if "to the human mind's imaginings Silence and solitude were vacancy." In his awe for the mountain he contemplates the nature of reality and his perception of it.

Through the works of Keats, Wordsworth, Burke, and Shelley one can see the intention in Romanticism. It was not simply a rejection of the Enlightenment but in many ways a continuation with a new destination. For the Romantics, to contemplate the unfathomable was itself a joy even if no conclusion was ever reached. Additionally, unlike Enlightenment poets, Romantics were concerned with individualism and poetry that appealed to the common person. Each of these elements combined to create a literary era which sought to contemplate the deepest of profundities of nature in a way which might appeal to all classes of people.

Works Cited

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