

## ENGLISH

**"As an international artistic and philosophical movement, Romanticism redefined the fundamental ways in which people in Western culture viewed themselves and the world."**

**Discuss this statement in relation to your understanding of the ways of thinking that marked the Romantic era.**

**In your essay, you must refer to TWO prescribed texts and texts of your own choosing.**

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The ambiguity and complexity surrounding the notion of the human experience is almost as multi-faceted as the definition of Romanticism which embodied this in art and philosophy. The movement shaped the ways of thinking of not only individual composers but through their work the entire world. The ideals of Romanticism transcend geographical borders as not only British texts explored the concepts of imagination, idealism and individualism, so did works in America and across Europe. All of these texts use their context to highlight the religious and philosophical paradigms of the time. Emily Bronte's 1847 novel *Wuthering Heights* and John Keats' 1819 poetry *Ode to a Nightingale* and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* explore the tenets of Romanticism and the human experience thus redefining the fundamental ways of thinking in Western culture. Similarly, an American Romantic text like Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter* and William Blake's 1795 painting *Good and Evil Angels Struggling Over the Possession of a Child* (hereafter *Good and Evil Angels*) also explore the ways of thinking of the Romantic movement.

Bronte's novel was heralded by Victorian readers as a work of imaginative potency and in the words of Lord David Cecil an exploration of the meaning of life. The Romantics treasured the imagination and admired its powers for an individual, explored through Bronte's effective use of characterisation. Catherine confesses to Nelly the nature of her dreams, highlighting religious paradigms within the novel's context;

I've dreamt in my life dreams that have stayed  
with me ever after and changed my ideas

Catherine's dreams become symbolic of her lack of conformity to social conventions, further reiterated in her burial away from Thrushcross Grange, *Wuthering Heights* and a kirkyard. Dreams are an extension of the imagination and act as an interface for a transcendental experience. Catherine's awakening to "heaven did not see my home" supports Marshall Brown's claim that the "moment of awakening in which the dream is preserved." The pagan nature of this quotations emphasises the displacement of Christian dogmas and thus the shift in religious paradigms to embrace a more personal experience with divinity through nature. In the novel, Bronte thoroughly dismantles the Victorian notion of the "Angel in the House" as Catherine refuses to remain indoors performing wifely duties, rather she longs to roam the moors, highlighting the Romantic's idealistic perspective of nature. Structurally, Bronte creates a contrast between the two volumes of the novel with the first exploring the anarchic relationship of Catherine and Heathcliff, and in the second - the restoration of harmony to the moors with the marriage of Cathy and Hareton. This is paralleled in the settings with the duality between the cold brutality of Thrushcross Grange symbolic of the preceding Enlightenment ideals, representing propriety in contrast to the warmth of *Wuthering Heights* emblematic of Romantic values. The duality represents the nature of the human condition encompassing all facets of emotion and embracing the human condition's diversity. However, Bronte not only manipulates structure to convey the tenets of Romanticism, the use of characterisation, particularly the Byronic hero of Heathcliff elucidates the concept of individualism within the novel. Heathcliff's dialogue in the second volume highlights his vengeance in:

I don't care how long I have to wait, if only I can do it at last.  
I hope he will not die before I do!

The exclamatory statement reiterates Heathcliff's impassioned state and contributes to the drama within the Dark Romantic novel. His revenge is set against the Lintons and Hindley, however the readers sympathise with him due to his torment as a foundling in the Earnshaw's home. Heathcliff is symbolic of individualism and epitomises the Byronic hero in Romantic literature. Bronte artfully uses her textual form to convey the ideals of the Romantic movement particularly the importance of imaginative experiences in illuminating the human experience and individualism. These values changed the ways of thinking during the 18th and 19th centuries not only for the composers but also their wider audience.

Keats also amplifies the concepts of the imagination and idealism through his poetry to convey to the world the importance of art and free forms of expression. Keats particularly emphasised the fleeting state of the human condition by examining the dichotomy between mortality and immortality, evidently in Ode to a Nightingale. Through poetry, Keats also reveals autobiographical details like the death of his young brother, Tom Keats, due to consumption, this is present in;

where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs  
where youth grow pale and spectre thin

The accumulation of monosyllables highlights the fleeting state of the human experience and its harsh nature with a direct reference to the illness he has witnessed as well as the grief, characterising the nature of the mortal realm. Keats rejects opium and alcohol to access the immortal realm, rather art and thus his imagination is the vehicle for his transcendental experience;

... on the viewless wings of Poesy  
Through the dull brain perplexes and retards

The personification of poetry, deifies art and its significance in heightening one's sense of self. Also, Keats portrays the intellect (symbolic of the rational and logical) as dysmorphic thus exerting the Romantic nature of the poem as it contrasts the concept of reason is limited to that of the lively imagination furthering the Keatsian notion of "Negative Capability". Keats idealises the immortal realm, in which the nightingale's song resides;

Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes

The personification of beauty deifies it as an attribute only held by those in the immortal realm, highlighting the Romantic tenet of aestheticism. The delineation between the mortal and immortal realm is evident as Keats idealises the nightingale's song as free of the disease of time which impedes upon the human experience, parallel to the urn in Ode on a Grecian Urn. The form of an ode lends itself well to exploring the Romantic tenets of the imagination and idealism and their role in impacting upon the human experience. However, the ballad form is also manipulated by Keats to convey these ideas in La Belle Dame Sans Merci. The form itself, idealises the medieval fairytale as it follows a knight's encounter with a seemingly ethereal woman without pity, defying the Christian concept of an ideal woman being chaste and unattainable until marriage, then subjected to the will of man (Eleanor Bance). Her freedom and wild nature is what entices the knight, evident through the use of repetition; "I shut her wild, wild eyes". The shift in dominance from the knight to the woman in the "elfin grot" is clear in:

And there she lulled me asleep  
I dreamed...the latest dream I ever dreamt

The repetition of "dream" highlights the ambiguity surrounding whether the woman is imaginative or real, a concept which permeates Ode to a Nightingale. Also the use of onomatopoeia in "lulled" creates an atmosphere of enchantment whilst highlighting the woman's dominance. The knight's encounter leaves him exhausted and lacklustre and is paralleled in the natural imagery;

The sedge had wither from the lake  
And no birds sing!

The approach of winter foreshadows the death of the knight as he remains withering on the "cold hill side". The migratory birds mimics the movement of the woman between men, and thus her unconventional ways. Keats utilises the abrupt cessation in the final lines of each stanza to echo the knight's experiences of loneliness as he awakes. Thus, Keats utilises poetic form to convey the tenets of Romanticism, specifically the imagination and idealism, which became a part of the paradigmatic shift which Western society experienced throughout the Romantic movement.

However, it was not only British Romantic texts which embodied such ideas, the American Romantic movement also heralded the power of the imagination, idealism of nature and individualism. Hawthorne's allegorical tale explores the experiences of Hester Prynne in Puritan Boston as well as that of Arthur Dimmesdale, The imaginative experience clearly transforms Dimmesdale:

Good heavens! For an instant he believed these words had passed his lips.  
But they were uttered only within his imagination.

The exclamation highlights the nature of Dimmesdale's sin and guilt transforming him into a paranoid and frantic man. His sin corrodes his soul and his health, parallel to the knight in La Bell Dame Sans Merci. Hawthorne criticises Puritan society by highlight Dimmesdale's hypocritical actions of committing adultery as a minister, demonstrating flaws in institutionalised religion which the Romantics considered oppressive. Hawthorne advocated a personal and direct relationship with divinity, the antithesis to Puritan traditions. It also reflects upon Hawthorne's negative perspective of his ancestry involved during the witch trials considered a historical injustice in contemporary time. The Transcendentalism movement was an American Romantic movement equivalent to pantheism in British Romanticism, permeating The Scarlet Letter:

...red eastern light upon his brow?

The symbolism of a red light being thrust upon Dimmesdale as a mark of shame is clearly emphasised by Hawthorne. Dimmesdale may escape the punishment of the laws of society, however the laws of nature in which God presides over are entirely inescapable. The symbolic "letter A" traced out in the sky by a meteor burns into his soul, as his internalised guilt slowly eats away at his very being. In contrast to Hester, who is punished by the laws of society and eventually begins to grow and become a more charitable woman. Hester is a unique individual in the novel and her independence is clearly exerted in her refusal to name the father of her child in:

'I will not speak!' said Hester, turning pale as death.

The use of simile is ironic since challenging the fundamental prerogative of the Puritan state - authoritarian power- gives her control of her life, rather than being drained of it. Hester defies the social conventions of Puritan society as paralleled by Catherine in Wuthering Heights, it also explores the growing importance and discussion of egalitarianism, particularly between men and women. First established in the preceding years of the Romantic movement by Mary Wollstonecraft in The Vindication of the Rights of a Woman, in a sense part of idealism within the movement. Hence, the international artistic and philosophical movement of Romanticism and its values are clearly conveyed in The Scarlet Letter particularly the tenets of imagination, idealism and individualism in relation to the human experience. It is a novel which not only enforced the Romantic ways of thinking in its own time, it also continues to engage readers in Western society today, asking them to challenge social conventions which are imposed upon them as well as their own identity.

Not only was prose fiction and poetry forms which the Romantics utilised to convey the ways of thinking of their time, the fine arts were also an imaginative outlet for the tenets and paradigms

examined in this period. Blake's painting *Good and Evil Angels* explores the dichotomy between innocence and experience through the contrasting light imagery, that is the use of chiaroscuro, in the image. The asymmetry of the frame with the dominating well-defined evil angel intruding on the innocence of the child held in the arms of the good angel is Blake's statement of the inevitable corruption of pure and innocent souls of children by the pressures of society and the need for their innocence to be protected and preserved. It also emphasises the inevitable nature of our souls being handed over to the forces of darkness whether it be the church or the state. The tether around the ankle of the evil angel is symbolic of the constraints of Enlightenment ideals or perhaps Blake's anti-slavery statement during a period of Industrialisation, where children and adults alike were slaves to factories and subjected to extreme working conditions, these concepts are also explored in Blake's poetry, particularly *London*. The tether elucidates Rousseau's philosophy, "Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains". With mechanisation stifling free forms of expression the quotation exemplifies the image Blake conveys and furthers his message that childhood innocence is a truly idealised state. Through the symbolic placement of a rising sun behind the child in the arms of the good angel. The rising sun represents rebirth and renewal and associates the idyllic state of childhood with divinity, as a child could achieve a higher sense of self and hence a closer proximity to God through their freedom to explore their imaginations. Blake witnessed the exploitation of children during Industrialisation, the poor working conditions led to high fatality rates for children. Idealism is also expressed in the painting through the nudity which exemplifies the liberation from social expectations, as well as androgyny. The ambiguity surrounding the angels' gender highlights the desire for equality between genders which became prevalent during the Romantic movement. Blake uses water colour to create transparency and blurred lines, highlighting the freedom achieved through exploring the imagination as well as defying the preceding eras conventions of definition. Joseph Turner was another artist who experimented with this medium to create emotionally evocative landscape images. Thus, art was also a platform for Romantics to express the values of the period particularly idealism in Blake's painting as a text continues to explore the dichotomy of the human experience between good and evil as conveyed through *Good and Evil Angels*.

Overall, the nature of Romanticism transcends both text type and geographical borders enlightening individuals and the world alike in the power of art, the imagination and its ability to both transform and illuminate the human experience. Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* all explore these notions elucidated through the Romantic tenets of idealism and individualism. Further, Hawthorne's American allegorical novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, explores the scope of the Romantic ways of thinking as an international movement and Blake's painting, *Good and Evil Angels* also reiterates the shifts in religious and philosophical paradigms during this period.