

# The Creative Launcher

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## The Co-Relation Between Chatterton and the Greater Poets of the Romantic Revival

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### **Abstract**

Thomas Chatterton, posthumous child of a school teacher, was one of the little-known English poets of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. He made a remarkable contribution in the field of English Romantic movement, also known as romantic revival and the romantic revolt. He was in fact its leader for he formulated its creed and gave to it a conscious direction and a purpose but he remained a victim of misfortune for a long time. This movement was later followed by William Wordsworth, S.T. Coleridge, P.B. Shelley, John Keats, Lord Byron, D.G. Rossetti and others. This research article aims at studying the co-relation between Chatterton and the greater poets of the Romantic Revival.

**Keywords:** Co-Relation, Romantic Revival, Inspiration, Nature Imagery, Medievalism, Supernaturalism, Melancholy, Subjectivity

In Chatterton's poetry, we have glimpses of sentiments and emotions which later on cultivated with great care and devotion by the romantic poets. As A .R. Weekes writes, "A revolt against conventional diction and stereotyped metre, against formality and shallowness and self-satisfaction, and a reawakening to the freshness and realism of phrase, to the subtle harmony of verse, to external nature, to human passion, to a sense of the wonder of the world, and to appreciation of all the glories of Greece and Rome and to our own older literature".<sup>1</sup> He pays attention towards a more picturesque, original, free and imaginative kind of literature. His works are marked by an excess of sentiments by over lavish decoration, a strong sense of colors, the sensuous apprehension of things and marked inclination for the fantastic. There is love for nature in Chatterton's poetry but at this stage there is nothing of that objective treatment of nature which we noticed in the classical poets. He takes delight in the presentation of sights and scenes of nature from a subjective vision and depicts nature as it

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appears to him. He depicts the beauty of setting sun in the west –

The sunset lowering in the western sky  
The swallowing spirit around the eye  
Upon my Cawna's bosom  
I reclined,  
Catching the breathing whispers of the wind. (C.W. I, 8) <sup>2</sup>

This is his close observation of natural surroundings. Chatterton's Poetry is full of nature imagery, the similes, the metaphors. 'Battle of Hastings' is quite remarkable for it. The whole poem is full of similes and metaphors. The depiction of sunrise and the disappearance of early morning along its rosy radiance is beautifully realized –

And now the grey-eyed the mourn with violets dressed  
Shaking the dew drops on the flowery meads,  
Fled with her rosy radiance to the west. (C.W. II, 122)

This treatment of nature of Chatterton's poetry is seen in full swing in the romantic poetry of Coleridge, Keats and Swinburne, though they were also dreamers. Nature seems to reflect the subconscious emotional experiences of the poets. In his preface to Seasons, Thomson admits this romantic tendency, fervor and love of nature-

I know of no subject more elevating, more amusing, more ready to awake the poetical enthusiasm, the philosophical reflection and the moral sentiment than the works of nature. Where can we meet with such variety, such beauty, such magnificence?<sup>3</sup>

The beauty of setting sun is well depicted in summer.

Low walks the sun and broadens by degrees,  
Just over the verge of day. (Th. CW. 177) <sup>4</sup>

For Thomson nature is a source of happiness. He finds joy and hope even in autumn which is a destructive season. He is thrilled with joy when he sees-

The pale descending year yet pleasing still,  
A gentler mood inspires, for now the leaf,  
Incessant rustles from the mournful groves;  
Of stronger fruits falls from the naked tree. (Th. CW. 245)

John Keats also presents the beautiful picture of autumn and the landscape in 'Ode to Autumn' -

Seasons of mists and mellow fruitfulness close  
bosom-friend of the maturing sun conspiring with  
him how to load and bless

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with fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run.<sup>5</sup>

Shelly in his 'ode to the west wind' earnestly appeals –

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe

Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth! <sup>6</sup>

William Cowper has a natural liking for nature scenery and remarkable sense of observation. His poems *The Task* and *the Winter Walk* reflects the profound charm of old haunted fields where he lived. He gives a serious detail of village life as he has seen –

God made the country, and man made the town,

What wonder than that health and virtue. (Cowp. PW. 185) <sup>7</sup>

In 'The Winter Evening', he depicts a beautiful picture of the winter season which is very suggestive –

Oh winter, ruler of the inverted year,

I love thee, all lovely as thou seem'st

And dreaded as thou art (Cowp. PW. 186)

William Wordsworth found the deepest thoughts and ideas in nature. He felt interested in the most ordinary objects of nature as in the lines –

To me the meanest flower that blows can give, Thoughts

that do often lie to deep for tears. <sup>8</sup>

Chatterton's poetry is an expression of his deep agony. He is always thirsting, always yearning, never pouring for the strains of a thankful satisfaction, but it is either the craving of an expectant or the aching of a baffled hope he is always chasing falling stars. In the poem 'The complaint' he expresses the indifference of his beloved and asks the dove-eyed goddess to ride him from despair –

Love, lawless tyrant of my breast,

When will my passion be at rest,

And in soft murmurs roll.

When will the dove-eyed goddess, peace

Bid black despair and torment cease,

And wake to joy my soul? (CW. I. 60)

The transitory nature of beauty and youth is also a source of melancholy to the poet. Because beauty disappears like a fairy painting of dreams as depicted in these lines –

Though soft the beams of thy delusive eyes

As the smooth surface of the untroubled stream;

Yet, ah, too soon the ecstatic vision flies.

Flies like the fairy's paintings of a dream. (CW. I. 214)

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The romantic poet Keats also depicts the same views of transitory nature of beauty and youth in his famous ‘Ode to Nightingale’ –

Where palsy shakes a few, sad, lost grey hairs,  
Where Youth grows pale and spectre-thin,  
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leading-eyed despair  
Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
Or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow. (John Keats’s SP. P.128)

Coleridge expresses his feelings of sorrow in ‘Dejection: An Ode’ –

A grief without a pang, void, dark and drear,  
A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,  
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,  
In word, or sigh, or tear

...

I see them all so excellently fair,  
I see not feel, how beautiful they are! <sup>9</sup>

Shelley in most of his poems is extremely melancholic. He describes his melancholy in the ‘Stanza Written in Dejection near Naples’ –

Alas! I have nor hope nor health,  
Nor piece within nor calm around,

...

Others I see whom these surround  
Smiling they live, and call life pleasure

To me that cup has been dealt in another measure. (Shelley’s SP. P.184)

Chatterton gave free vent to his feeling and self in his poetry. His emotionally surcharged lyrics are the desperate cries of an alienated soul suffering in a milieu that neither understood nor supported him. His poetry like romantic poets is an expression of the soul of the poet. He does not care for rules and regulations but gives free expression to his emotions. It is emancipation of the individual’s soul from the bondage of custom. Emphasis is laid on inspiration and intuition rather than on the observation of set rules. Almost all the romantic poets are obsessed with his self, his longings, frustrations and experiences. They revealed themselves in their writing. Chatterton’s subjective poetry reflects his neurotic personality to the full. He gives subjective interpretation to objective reality of life. Desire for self-revelation is the prime motive for the romantics. In the last stanza of the poem ‘To Miss Bush, of Bristol’ he is willing to sing her a plaintive note –

To you I urge the plaintive strain,

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And though a lover sings in vain,  
Yet you shall hear the song,  
Ungrateful, lovely cruel man. (CW. I. 54)

Chatterton's despair in love along with a helpless obsession with his beloved curiously presages Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' –

I saw pale kings and princes too,  
Pale warriors, death pale were they all;  
They cried – La Belle Dame Sans Merci  
Thee hath in thrall! (John Keats's SP)

Keats is extremely subjective in Odes. He expresses his desire to end his life in the joy of the bird's song in 'Ode to the Nightingale' –

Now more than ever seems it rich to die  
When thou art pouring forth  
Thy soul abroad in such an ecstasy. <sup>10</sup>

Shelley also expresses his inner self in his lyrics. He keeps his own problems in them. In stanzas Written in 'Dejection near Naples' the poet keeps the cry of his soul. He wants to lie down on the shore of the sea and forget the miseries of life. And in ought to the west wind he keeps the cry of his heart –

O lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud  
I fall upon the thorn of life, I bleed. (Shelley SP 148)

Robert Burns like other romantic poets expresses his feeling and emotions in his poems. His poems display a variety of moods and contains the honest expression of love. The praise of beauty of the beloved, the hope to see her after a period of separation and the dejected moods in her absence are all treated with equal beauty, delicacy and sincerity. In his poem 'A Red Red Rose' he says –

My love is like red red rose,  
That's newly sprung in June:  
My love is like the melody That is  
sweetly play'd in tune.  
As fair art thou, my  
So deep in love am I;<sup>11</sup>

Chatterton dissatisfaction with the present and the near transported him to the world of medieval ages. As such he has taken the theme of his poems from the middle-ages. He is fascinated with the chivalry, adventure, tales of love, superstitions, belief in magic and witch-craft, and spirits and fairies of the Middle-ages as is evident from the fact that he took great interest in reliques of that Age. Among his early studies, we are told antiquities and especially the surroundings of the medieval life were the favorite subjects; heraldry seems

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especially to have had a fascination for him. <sup>11</sup>Bristol, the birth place of Chatterton, also had medieval features. The Bristol into which Chatterton was born might have served as a fitting background for the Rowley poems. In the poems ‘The Unknown Knight or The Tournament’ the poet creates the medieval atmosphere by depicting the war like activities around the field of tournament. The participants of different lands are in great zeal to show their strength. –

The knights each one did point the lance,  
And to the combats did advance;

...

All strove to reach the place of fight.

The first to exercise their might. (CW. II. 175)

Chatterton depicts every detail of medieval life and makes the poems breathe the very atmosphere of middle-ages. Coleridge like Chatterton was also interested in medievalism. In “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, Mariner happened to kill an Albatross which caused suffering to him and to his fellow passengers who were boarding the ship. The poet describes the agony of the ancient mariner through the wedding guest. In ‘Kubla Khan’ the entire scene of action takes place into magical world of the middle-ages-

In Xandu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure dome decree;  
Where alph the sacred river ran  
In caverns measureless to man  
Down to sunless sea. <sup>13</sup>

Chatterton has a strong sense of imagination. With this imagination he adds the love of the supernatural. He shows keen interest in the supernatural and uses it in many of his poems. He made the super natural appear natural by the imaginative power. His supernatural refers to the distant past so that supernatural appears convincing. Wylie Sypher comments in this regard, “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, no more magic than parts of Chatterton’s African Eclogues”.<sup>13</sup> He gives even a religious dimension to his supernatural entities. He creates fear and horror with the help of supernatural. In the ‘Church Warden’ and ‘The Apparition’ –

A ghastly phantom, lean and wan,  
That instant rose, and thus began;  
Weak wretch- to think to blind my eyes,  
Hypocrisy’s a thing disguise. (CW. I. 204)

His treatment of the supernatural is very artistic and leaves an effect of ambiguity. Coleridge like Chatterton introduces supernatural very aptly in his poems. One of the greatest elements of Coleridge is the

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Willing Suspension of Disbelief in the treatment of the supernatural. In *Ancient Mariner* the action takes place in the remote region. The action in *Christabel* takes place in a magical world. We have the picture of remote castle, the haunted forests, a feuda barren, a lady praying at night for her lover and so many. It is the effect of the sin in the ancient marine that makes the ship unable to move. He further describes the calamity that fell upon the passengers after the Albatross was killed.

Thus, it is clear that Chatterton's treatment of nature, melancholic attitude, autobiographical element, his love for supernatural and his deep fascination for middle-ages are all the prominent features of romantic school which later on dominated the literary scenario of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry and found a full expression in the hands of romantic poets like Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Byron and the rest. It is not for nothing that Wordsworth refers to him as I thought of Chatterton the marvelous boy, the sleepless soul that perished in his pride. Coleridge in a *Monody* writes with wild unequal steps he passed along, of pouring on the winds a broken song. In *Adonis* Shelly pays tribute to him and Keats dedicated his long poem *Endymion* to him. Rossetti places him equal with Shakespeare in his sonnet *manhood at a boy's wild heart*. Thus, the fact that Chatterton was a genius romantic poet was acknowledged and accepted by almost all the romantic and pre-Raphaelite poets who enriched English romantic poetry after him.

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