

## **The Realistic Inquiry of Selected Romantic Poetry by Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats**

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### **ABSTRACT**

English romantic poetry has been traditionally conceived as a principal part of the idealism orthodoxy, an imitation of unrealistic ideal realms. This research aims to deconstruct this prevalent convention through isolating particular realistic aspects in English romantic poetry for examination. It argues that the real world has never been absent from the works of the English romantics. It tackles for this sake selected poems by William Blake, William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats, aiming to highlight their passionate concern with realistic aspects of man and the city and to examine their poetic interaction with significant real incidents and situations. The study investigates their presentation of England by comparing it with several non-poetic records produced by certain contemporary historians. It also tackles their treatment of human suffering which their writings give a voice to be objectively expressed. The concept of the romantic escape is treated as well where the romantics' imagination often carries them to ideal realms; the study argues

however that they never eternally reside there or enjoy escaping reality due to their existential needs that tie them to reality. The research concludes with the postulate that reality exerts a significant impact on the composition of English romantic poetry.

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## INTRODUCTION

The question of the ideal and the real has occupied the thoughts of poets and philosophers over ages. Ancient Greek literature expresses dissatisfaction with the aspects of the real world through creating fabulous worlds and deities. Although those fictitious aspects are manifestations of the poets' quest to access ideal fantastic realms, they have occasionally been employed to develop recognition of reality insofar as they are utilized to understand the phenomena of the tangible realm. The Greek philosopher Plato seeks perfection in the ideal world which he regards as unattainable and only exclusive for philosophers, and claims that the real world is more convenient for man.<sup>1</sup> Aristotle's *Poetics* credits poets for owning potential powers and great capabilities to create ideal worlds out of reality. Neither the ideal world, nor the real, has succeeded in eliminating the other. The perception, adoption and presentation of both have varied among the different literary ages. The literary movements afterwards have been often distinguished as either idealistic or realistic depending on the degree of emphasis the writers place on these trends; there is certainly however no literary age or movement that can be identified as purely idealistic or realistic.

Old English literature shows interest in the real aspects of the Anglo-Saxon world. War and the ideals of heroism are daily concerns of the old English

warrior. Anglo-Saxon literature nonetheless introduces warriors fighting supernatural creatures of the type of Grendel aiming to eliminate evil and make life ideally safe. Blending the supernatural and the real to help idealizing reality in *Beowulf* signifies a tension between realism and idealism in old English poetry. The Anglo-Saxon poet Caedmon represents a similar blend through expressing dissatisfaction with earthly thoughts of his real world, claiming that his hymns are heavenly inspired. English Middle Ages present romance characters as Sir Gawain who sets off on a quest to confirm his worthiness as an ideal knight, only to discover that he is tied to the real world of inescapable evil. Chaucer's heroes of *The book of the Duchess* and *The house of fame* hearken in their dreams back to the ideal past of the temple of Venus and the Trojan War respectively; different in-text and external evidence however demonstrate that Chaucer is basically concerned with tackling urgent themes of death and vanity. English Renaissance in a similar fashion has been occupied with heroes like Faustus who bears the tragic burden of the impossibility of escaping the real world to ideal realms. Some thoughts reflected in the writings of eighteenth-century poets and critics as Alexander Pope emphasize the imperfection of man's perception of reality opposed to the idealism of God's perfect creation. English literature consequently has often reflected amalgamated realistic and idealistic trends over time; the English Romantic Movement is no exception.

<sup>1</sup> His "Allegory of the Cave" in the Republic illustrates the convenience of the cave, paralleled to the real world of man, for the life of the average people.

English romantic poetry has been traditionally conceived as a principal part of the idealism orthodoxy, an imitation of unrealistic ideal realms. The English romantic poets are commonly treated as dreamy writers whose poetic activity aims to create romantic fanciful worlds detached from reality. Fairer (2014) associated the term romantic with “youthful love, daydreaming, mood-soaked landscapes (especially those inviting meditation or adventure), fabulous fictions, melancholy contemplation, imagined historic or exotic scenes, the trappings of chivalry and enchantment” (p. 102). Fairer’s interpretation limits the poetic activity of the romantics to the production of escapism writings sought to avoid reality and to wander in the realm of the ideal. His postulate could be tolerated as far as English romantic poetry did merely embody aspects of fantasy, adventure, exoticism and dreamlike scenes. Nevertheless, the real imperfect world has proven clear presence in major English romantic works.

## METHODS

The research placed emphasis on three major concerns that highlight the realistic aspects present in selected poetry by Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. It dealt first with the poets’ passionate concern with man and the city through comparing their presentation in certain poems with relevant historical accounts. It then reconsidered the poets’ temporal journeys to the ideal world where their existential needs were examined as a major power drawing them always back to reality; the poems depicting these

journeys relied on imagination as the main source of experience needed to compose poetry. The study finally investigated extra-poetic evidence, beside that given in poetry, of real personal experiences and situations that had exerted significant impact on the poets to create certain works.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **Versified Records of England and its Metropolis**

The English romantic poets’ presentation of England oftentimes provided a realistic account of the country. Their descriptions sounded more realistic than some non-poetic records by contemporary historians. The romantic rhymes that described the life of England or London particularly showed no inclination to the hypocritical discourse sought to satisfy the corrupted taste of the authorities as certain contemporary historic texts did. A demonstration of supposedly untrustworthy historical record of London can be illustrated in a letter written to King George IV in 1827 by the contemporary historian J. Elmes:

The splendid and useful improvements that have been effected in the Metropolis, under your Majesty’s auspices, and which it is the business of this work to describe, will render the name of George The Fourth, as illustrious in the British annals, as that of Augustus in those of Rome. (In Elmes & Shepherd, 1833, p. iv).

Elmes’s flattering words about London and King George IV were contrasted by other arguably reliable contemporary

historical accounts and romantic poetic works as well. These works demonstrated a more realistic treatment of the scenes and aspects of the London of the time. They corresponded to R. Williams' (2009) concept of "structures of feeling" which he viewed as:

A way of defining forms and conventions in art and literature as inalienable elements of a social process: not by derivation from other social forms and pre-forms, but as social formation of a specific kind which may in turn be seen as the articulation (often the only fully available articulation) of structures of feeling which as living processes are much more widely experienced. (p. 133).

Williams' view re-establishes literature as an authentic source of social reality. The major romantic poets whose work reflected adherence to the "articulation of structures of feeling" of England and its realistic aspects in this context are William Blake, William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley.

The exaggerated view of King George IV as a reformer comparable to Augustus of Rome was plainly disproved in P.B. Shelley's "England in 1819." Shelley presented King George III, father of George IV, in the opening line of the poem as "old, mad, blind, despised, and dying." Then he described his sons including his successor King George IV as:

Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow

Through public scorn, – mud from a muddy spring;

Rulers who neither see nor feel nor know,  
But leechlike to their fainting country cling  
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow. (In Greenblatt et al., 2006, p. 771).

George III was king of England till his death 1820 when his son George IV ascended the throne. Shelley in the poem attacked the king and his successors, presenting them as "mud from a muddy spring." He scorned their negligence of the interests of the citizens and the state. The later couple of lines presented them as parasites that "to their fainting country cling" till they brought destruction and demise.

Shelley's account of England during the reign of King George III and his sons sounded more realistic than Elmes's record. The language of Elmes is obviously panegyric maintained to please the court. The language of Shelley however expresses suffering that is presumably sincere expression of human feelings and experiences, thus inseparable from reality. Adorno (2002) regarded art as a world of unchangeable reality where suffering was only thoroughly and objectively expressed.

The abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting... Yet this suffering, what Hegel called consciousness of adversity, also demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it; it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it. (p. 188).

Art shows compassion to human suffering; romantic poetry is sympathetic with man and his pains. The aesthetic level of the poet's consciousness stores the purist reality insofar as the creation of poetry is centred on the revelation of aestheticism and purism that transcend appearances to essences.

William Wordsworth's "London, 1802" is comparable to Shelley's "England in 1819." It bears witness to the wretchedness and suffering of the English people, and to the deterioration of the metropolitan and social life. The poem reemphasizes the authentic recognition of social reality represented in romantic poetry. It foreshadows the gloomy perspective portrayed in Shelley's work. The poem's speaker described England as:

A fen  
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,  
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and  
bower,  
Have forfeited their ancient English dower  
Of inward happiness... (In Greenblatt et  
al., 2006, p. 319)

All aspects of the city were gone to decay. Religion, military, literature, domesticity and economy were urgent concerns that troubled the speaker, signified in the lines by the "altar," "sword," "pen," "fireside" and "the heroic wealth of hall and bower."

The contemporary historian Johnston (1851) provided extra non-poetic evidence that fostered Shelley's and Wordsworth's views of England. He confirmed the ill situations of the country at the time of the romantics. He depicted the troubling

financial conditions caused by imposing high taxation by the authorities between the years 1795-1815. He also highlighted the oppressiveness the English Government practiced over people during the reign of King William IV, the third son of George III; thus, verifying Shelley's record. Besides, Johnston (1851) quoted Sir Walter Scott's comment on the terrible situations of 1826 England:

Breakfasted at Manchester; pressed on,  
and by dint of exertion reached Kendal to  
sleep; thus getting out of the region of the  
stern, sullen, unwashed artificers, whom  
you see lounging sulkily along the streets  
in Lancashire. God's justice is requiting,  
and will yet farther requite, those who  
have blown up this country into a state of  
unsubstantial opulence, at the expense of  
the health and morals of the lower classes.  
(p. 90).

William Blake's "London," "The chimney sweeper," "Holy Thursday" and *Jerusalem* furnish additional evidence of the murky view of London provided by other romantic poets. His poem "London" is "a prophetic cry in which Blake turns upon Pitt's City of oppression"<sup>2</sup> (Bloom, 1965, p. 150). The poem describes the streets of London as "chartered," and the faces of its people as carrying "marks of weakness, [and] marks of woe." Its men and infants "cry," and its "hapless" soldiers "sigh." Its church is "blackening;" its streets are filled

<sup>2</sup> William Pitt the Younger (1759-1806). He became Prime Minister of England from 1783-1801 and from 1804-6. He raised the rate of taxation in Britain in the late eighteenth century.

with “blood;” the institution of marriage is blighted with “plagues.” This dark view of London is echoed in “The chimney sweeper” and “Holy Thursday” from *Songs of experience*, and in *Jerusalem* where illness plagues the whole country. In “The chimney sweeper” the “Priest and King... /make up a heaven of our [children’s] misery.” “Holy Thursday” eliminates all joy and introduces “babes reduced to misery,” and “so many children [who are] poor.” The dejection of England is particularly highlighted in *Jerusalem*:

The banks of the Thames are clouded! the  
ancient porches of Albion are  
Darken’d! they are drawn thro’ unbounded  
space, scatter’d upon  
The Void in incoherent despair! Cambridge  
& Oxford & London,  
Are driven among the starry Wheels, rent  
away and dissipated,  
In Chasms & Abysses of sorrow, enlarg’d  
without dimension, terrible.  
Albions mountains run with blood, the cries  
of war & of tumult  
Resound into the unbounded night, every  
Human perfection  
Of mountain & river & city, are small &  
wither’d & darken’d  
Cam is a little stream! Ely is almost  
swallowd up!  
Lincoln & Norwich stand trembling on the  
brink of Udan-Adan!  
Wales and Scotland shrink themselves to the  
west and to the north! (Blake, 2008, p. 147).

Michael (2006) assumed that Blake’s “London” was “hardly a realistic description, although it contained elements of the real

city: chimney sweeps, soldiers, blackening churches, and youthful harlots” (p. 26). The conflicting views of England and its metropolis trigger logical claims of ascertaining the credibility of representation of their reality in English romantic poetry. A consideration of Wordsworth’s definition of poetry would bring Michael’s argument into dispute. In the preface to his *Lyrical ballads*, Wordsworth placed emphasis on the selection of the subject of romantic poetry. He pointed out that the primary objective of poetry was “to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men” (In Greenblatt et al., 2006, p. 264). Wordsworth’s argument was based on his poetic composition that was arguably a representation of the English romantic poetic inclination.

Williams (2001) regarded art and literature as vessels of “structures of feeling” that enfold great sense of experienced social reality. He noted that “art reflects its society and works a social character through to its reality in experience” (p. 86). The scenes described in Blake’s “London,” Wordsworth’s “London, 1802” and Shelley’s “England in 1819” in this context, and in light of Wordsworth’s postulate of the subject of poetry, are enough poetic manifestations of the reality of England and London at that time. There are elements in Blake’s “London” however, like the “blackning Church” and bloodstained “Palace walls,” that are basically symbolic but point at reality. They form part of the

romantic praxis of utilizing imagination in poetry to enhance the effect of reality. They fall within Wordsworth's convention of adding to the common situations of life "a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way" (In Greenblatt et al., 2006, p. 264).

Damon (2013) supported this viewpoint in his interpretation of the poem pointing out

The blackening of the churches was literal: all visitors noticed it; but the real blot on the Church was its complacency at the misery of those most unfortunate children, the chimneysweeps. The bloodstain on the palace is only symbolic: the State was guilty of the slaughter of its soldiers. (p. 244).

The symbolic depiction of the blood stain that Damon (2013) highlighted was also part of the romantic reliance on imagination in portraying reality. The use of imagination in this regard is pursued to draw more attention to the representation of reality that results in intensifying the reader's appreciation of its aspects. The romantic poetic utilization of imagination is consequently "essential due to its representational powers that grant a special privilege to the work of art and render the ordinary incidents and situations of life more enticing and captivating of the reader's mind and appreciation" (Alsyouf, 2018, p. 190).

Blake's poetry does not intend to imitate reality as it is. Blake is rather involved in a process of creating new worlds out of the reality of his world. Stevens (2009) in this respect commented on the representation of reality in Blake's poetry arguing that

For Blake whether any artifact (poem or cosmology) represents the nature of things is a meaningless question since it was never intended to do so – it was intended to structure reality rather than represent its essence apart from human involvement. (p. viii).

Stevens (2009) also speculated about the relationship between imagination and reality in Blake's poetry stating that "the imagination is only content when it's imagination, engaged in the reshaping of reality" (p. 221). It is against this background that Blake's poetry, though rich with imagination, heavily draws on reality. He employed imagination in constructing his poems aiming to reflect the genius of his creation rather than to be separated from reality.

Reality can hardly be autonomous. In his commentary on John Dewey's thoughts Stevens (2009) stressed that "reality doesn't have independent existence" (p. 139). Treating reality to exist independently apart from thought is a fallacy; reality cannot exist away from being thought of or reconstructed by imagination. This postulate helps to give birth to ultimately beautiful constructions in which reality and imagination interplay aesthetically. The resultant poetic works would then appear highly imaginative, seemingly detached from reality, since "by approaching reality from the vantage point of creativity, truth is conceived as the imaginable" (Stevens, 2009, p. 20). As a consequence, the distinction between realism and idealism in romantic poetry is intricate; reality is therefore misleading

to realize though it is part of the romantic poetic construction.

The language Blake employed for poetry composition was highly figurative. Its recognition required particular knowledge of mythology, theology, astronomy and other disciplines. It often created complex fantastic constructions. This certainly was not intended to alienate the reader from the world of reality; on the contrary Blake evidently stimulated the reader's mind to perceive it. Lieshout (1994) argued that Blake's poetry "uses language as a tool to comprehend reality, to realize reality as a self-similar structure in a process that invigorates meaning" (p. 179). The reader of Blake's poems and of English romantic poetry generally should therefore avoid complete indulgence in the enticing realm of imagination which the poet creates. Although detachment from imagination's magical ideals is inconvenient, the appeal of imagination should not deny the reader the engagement in reality. Stevens (2009) emphasized this notion once again noting "Blake's poetry... isn't about coming to knowledge of truth, determining which figure is the truer representation of reality. What matters is that we learn through his poetry how to engage reality" (p. 203).

Wordsworth's poetry is uncommonly rooted in reality. The "colouring of imagination" which he added to poetry was a technique approached to avoid imprisonment in cages of lifeless language used by former poets who tended to employ "mechanical" words so as to present "feelings and ideas with which they had no natural connection

whatsoever" (Wordsworth in Mason, 2010, p. 44). In a fashion similar to Blake, Wordsworth's imagination was the result of a great sense of reality. Dowden supported this claim stating that his imagination had "rested on reality, brooded upon reality, coalesced with it, interpreted it" (in Marson, 2009, p. 89). The critical views featuring realistic tendencies in romantic poetry are inexhaustible. Symons (2009) placed emphasis on the influence reality exerts on Wordsworth's poetry declaring that "to Wordsworth nothing is what we call 'poetry,' that was, a fanciful thing, apart from reality" (p. 141).

Symons' argument demonstrated the integration of the ideal and the real in Wordsworth's work. The "fanciful" is reconciled with the realistic. The outcome is a combination of imagination and reality utilized to introduce the poetic subject.

Wordsworth's third fragment from his "Alfoxden notebook"<sup>3</sup> preceded all later critique in illustrating the combinatory relationship between idealism and realism in romantic poetry.

Of unknown modes of being which on  
earth,  
Or in the heavens, or in the heavens and  
earth  
Exist by mighty combinations, bound  
Together by a link, and with a soul

<sup>3</sup> The Alfoxden notebook "is bound in brown leather. It originally contained 36 leaves, many of which have been cut out, but has been restored and now has 49 leaves... It was used mainly in early 1798, but also in 1802." Retrieved January 2, 2019, from <http://collections.wordsworth.org.uk/wtweb/home.asp?page=linked%20item&objectidentity=DCMS%2014>



Which makes all one. (In Mortensen, 1998, p. 44)

Wordsworth's critique of poetry was articulated in this poem where he tracked the process of poetry creation initiated outside the work, in the world of real objects; the poem was born connected to an experience essentially related to the poet's interaction with reality. An external beautiful reality prompts an internal journey to the ideal realm of imagination. New images then relevant to the very experience emerge. Wordsworth wrote in expressing this activity:

To gaze  
On that green hill and on those scattered trees  
And feel a pleasant consciousness of life  
In the impression of that loveliness  
Until the sweet sensation called the mind  
Into itself, by image from without  
Unvisited, and all her reflex powers  
Wrapped in a still dream [of] forgetfulness.  
(In Mortensen, 1998, p. 47)

Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is a "philosophical poem, containing views of Man, Nature, and Society" (Wordsworth in Gill, 1991, p. 7). Wordsworth highlighted the impact of these important world aspects on him explicitly in the poem. It obviously revealed his attempts to emphasize:

The absolute presence of reality  
Expressing, as in mirror, sea and land,  
And what earth is, and what she hath to show.  
I do not here allude to subtlest craft,  
By means refined attaining purest ends,  
But imitations, fondly made in plain

Confession of man's weakness and his loves. (Wordsworth, 1871, p. 390).

*The Prelude* within this framework is a poetic treatment of reality. Although reality is available for all poets to behold, the romantics have developed a unique way to interact with it. Abercrombie (1962) credited the "inner life" of the poet as a featured power that could interact with reality outside. He argued that "only by concentrating belief inward can that reality be felt" (p. 67). Reality in romantic poetry is hence connected to the poet's imagination insofar as imagination is an internal power able to combine the elements of external reality. Reality thus becomes the poet's gate to idealism where an ideal reality evolves. The writings of Blake, Keats and Shelley also involve unique treatment of imagination and reality as Wordsworth's poetry does. Bowra (1950) stated that "the imagination creates reality" in Blake's poetry (p. 14), and that the "ultimate reality is to be found only in imagination" in the work of Keats (p. 15). Shelley's *Adonais* in a similar way "is capable of containing life itself... [though] it employs the myth of the [imaginary] classical god Adonis for the presentation of its subject" (Alsyouf, 2013, p. 16).

Shelley's *Adonais* relies intensively on the use of mythology. It is essentially an elegiac work in which Shelley laments the death of his late friend Keats who died young. In spite that the subject of the poem is highly realistic, the reader's first encounter with its lines would steer him away from the realm of reality for the imaginary qualities the

poem possesses. The poem is characterized by a utilization of the supernatural as a way to make the presentation of reality distinctive. Keats's death is presented through employing the myth of the death and resurrection of the fantastic classical deity Adonis, whose annual rebirth brings vegetation to the universe, seeking to grace Keats with the gift of spiritual immortality. Shelley's *Adonais* is accordingly a poetic treatment of the realistic occasion of the death of Keats whose fate is treated through recalling fantastic imagery and archetypes derived from the classical myth of Adonis. It furnishes another instance of a romantic poem based on imagination manipulated to deal with realistic aspects of the world.

### **Temporal Journeys to the Realm of the Ideal**

The romantics' concern with the real world has never deprived them from exciting journeys to the realm of the ideal, an activity created in imagination which occasionally functions as the major source of experience the romantic poets use for poetic composition. These journeys however have never produced a permanent escape from reality. The romantic poets' travels to the territories of the ideal world are round-trips always ending up with a return to the real one. These visits uplift their spirits and provide them with a clearer view of real life. Their detachment from reality serves in two ways; it allows them looking from a distance at their world, hence developing a more comprehensive perspective of it. Besides, it makes them

more sensitive to the predicaments and shortcomings of life because the experience of pleasure intensifies the individual's apprehension of painful conditions. Under these circumstances, the ideal worlds to which the romantic poets transcend have positive powers that help them to better understand real world occurrences, and to come to terms of solution with its imperfections.

Solving the problems of reality can only be conducted in its realm as far as romanticism is a movement greatly sympathetic with man and devoted to the betterment of his world. All the romantic poets' attempts to escape reality are therefore fleeting; their return is compulsory and urgent. They cannot stay for long away from man and earth. Blake in this respect "has the mystic's tormented sense of the doubleness of life between reality and the ideal. But he tries to resolve it on earth, in the living person of man" (Kazin, 1977, p. 10). Wordsworth's, Keats's and Shelley's poetry proves the same concerning their interaction with the ideal and the real. The imaginary ideal worlds they construct have never provided solutions for the crisis of existence they face. Their existential needs force them to search for worlds of ideal perfection to which they take temporary trips. They always however return to reality, to the realm that grants them a more solid ground that enables them to deal with their problems and concerns.

The ideal worlds of the "Nightingale" and "Grecian urn" Keats invents should not be interpreted as an escape from reality

though they show relevant inclinations. Quite contrary to that, they affirm the impossibility of escaping reality. Stillinger (2008) wrote commenting on “Ode to a nightingale”

We have the curious circumstance that in *Ode to a Nightingale*, the real world that the speaker wishes to escape in stanza 3—the world of weariness, fever, fret, and so on—has an entirely different set of references from the real world that, after he imaginatively succeeds in escaping, he longs to return to in stanza 5. (p. 12).

The primary motivator for the romantic attempts to escape reality is an inner conflict concerned with the search for perfection and artistic existence that grow inside the poet. Bush (1969) stated that “from first to last Keats’s important poems are related to, or grow directly out of, these inner conflicts...” (p. 82).

Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian urn” is an outstanding expression of the romantic poet’s inner conflict linked to a desire to unchain his imagination and thought and elevate them to the ideal realm of the “overwrought” urn. This notion is articulated in the following lines from the poem in which the speaker confesses his uncertainty about his powers of poetic creativity compared to those of the urn. He is even jealous of its artistic superiority over him and desires to travel to its ideal realms to disclose their mysteries.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! With brede  
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,  
With forest branches and the trodden weed;

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought

As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral! (In Greenblatt et al., 2006, p. 906).

The lines directly following the above close the poem with a defeat of the poet’s eagerness for eternal transcendence and snatch him back again to reality, to the world of “waste” and “woe” to which the existence of his mortal corporeal frame belongs.

When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,  
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”  
(In Greenblatt et al., 2006, p. 906).

Keats’s attempts to seek freedom from the transient imperfect world— either through the identification with the nightingale’s world of nature, the retire to the urn’s world of art, or in different instances by transferring into the fantastic world of dreams as in “Ode to psyche” and “Ode on melancholy” – always culminate in a return to reality at the very end of the poem. Baker (2007) meditated on Keats’s return from the ideal to the real writing

In a poet as sharply intelligent as Keats, the attempt to limit consciousness cannot succeed, even partially, for very long. ... The attempt to make a world out of fragments of fancy therefore quickly founders, and the dull brain, which deals with reality, soon reassumes command. (p. 47).

The invented ideal worlds with which the romantic poetic mind communicates whatsoever vanish very quickly, and the poet's preferable world of reality ultimately resumes dominating his poetic mind.

Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" similarly signifies the impossibility of the eternal escape from reality. The first three stanzas represent the ideal world of perfect natural views and enjoyable scenes to which the speaker seeks to escape.

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.  
Continuous as the stars that shine  
And twinkle on the milky way,  
They stretched in never-ending line  
Along the margin of a bay:  
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance. (In Greenblatt et al., 2006, p. 305-306).

The imaginary float in air the poet describes reveals the escape nature has permitted him to enjoy seeking to discover the ultimate natural beauty which the romantic eye can behold. The fourth and last stanza thereafter represents the return the poet needs to reality so as to enjoy a state of tranquillity he needs to compose a poem that communicates his experience. The below dance with the daffodils signifies the poet's joy of composing a poem describing the ideal realm he has experienced.

For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils. (In Greenblatt et al., 2006, p. 306).

In writing "Tintern Abbey" however Wordsworth escaped a particular reality to another truer version of reality. He escaped the harshness of the city's daily life to the pleasant reality of nature to which all his senses were adjusted.

These beauteous forms, [of nature]  
Through a long absence, have not been to me  
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:  
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din  
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,  
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,  
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;  
And passing even into my purer mind  
With tranquil restoration: (In Greenblatt et al., 2006, p. 259).

Foca (1998) commented on Wordsworth's experience of city and nature in "Tintern Abbey" stating:

By remembering places of exquisite beauty, or experiences which enlarged his sense of life and showed an interconnection unimaginable to an inhabitant of the fretfully stirring city, the poet is able to arrest his frantic spirit into an awed stillness. A refocusing of consciousness testifies to the fact that somewhere in the world there is a sense of order, though one is not currently

in its physical presence, that transcends even the constant mundanity forced on people by their own constructions: there exists a reality even more real, as it were, than the oppressive, inescapable city with its constant demands for activity. (p. 35).

Foca's argument was precursorly designed in line 50 of the poem where Wordsworth described the interaction between man and nature as a prompter of a harmony that enabled man to "see into the life of things." It is that moment when man becomes capable of recognizing the most important part of life – that is to see reality.

### **Extra and Intra-Poetic Evidence of Personal Experiences' Impact on Romantic Poets' Works**

The pathetic romantic hero of Wordsworth's pastoral lyric *Michael* is given several traits of the romantic poet. His rejection to escape reality, represented by nature in the poem, has a pleasant effect on the reader. In a fashion similar to "Tintern Abbey," *Michael* is an escape, not from reality to imagination but from reality to a truer reality. After his son abandons him to the city, Michael finds a console in the objects of the real world of nature – in the "storms," the "sun," the "cloud," "the wind" and "the land."

Up to the heights, and in among the storms,  
Will I without thee go again, and do  
All works which I was wont to do alone,  
Before I knew thy face.  
.....  
Among the rocks

He went, and still looked up to sun and cloud,  
And listened to the wind; and, as before,  
Performed all kinds of labour for his sheep,  
And for the land, his small inheritance. (In Greenblatt et al., 2006, p. 300-301).

Pirie (1982) introduced an appealing sentimental interpretation of the preceding lines where he argued that they asserted

The grandeur of Michael's surviving sense of reality. The sun, the clouds, the winds, the hills along with the 'dumb animals' they support, are felt presences to Michael. They are visible to his 'blind love', and in the strength of that unfaded vision he takes comfort. (p. 102).

Nature is the ultimate reality Michael has ever known. It is his hope of life and survival. He refuses to escape it to find new refuge though his body is chained with age. His experience with nature is reminiscent of Shelley's speaker of "Ode to the west wind" who challenges the harshness of his existential crisis associated with his mortality, toils to overcome the obstacles of life and finally finds a sweet resort in nature.

Different internal and external evidence emphasize the impact of reality on the composition of *Michael*. The poem reflects the collective experience of the society where Michael belongs. This experience contributes to the notions and motives that build up the poem. It essentially narrates an account of the story of Michael who sends his son Luke to work in the city, so that he can make money to pay off the debt

and save his father's land. After leaving the village, Luke prospers financially at first, but later his life critically changes; he becomes a criminal, and finally has to flee to some unknown place. Michael afterwards continues to mourn the loss of his son in the sheepfold where he spends most of his day recalling memories of him till he finally dies. Michael's story which the poem dramatizes is certainly realistic and well known by particular people as Wordsworth tells. He stated that "The story alluded to here is well known in the country. The chapel is called Ings Chapel; and is on the right-hand side of the road leading from Kendal to Ambleside" (Brett & Jones, 2005, p. 305). Wordsworth added more realistic details to his description in another note:

It may be proper to inform some readers, that a sheepfold in these mountains is an unroofed building of stone walls, with different divisions. It is generally placed by the side of a brook, for the convenience of washing the sheep; but it is also useful as a shelter for them, and as a place to drive them into, to enable the shepherds conveniently to single out one or more for any particular purpose. (In Brett & Jones, 2005, p. 305).

Reading *Michael* with knowledge of Wordsworth's notes on the poem should develop a distinguished sense of reality and sympathy towards the places and characters in the work, and particularly the figure of Michael.

Wordsworth's "To M. H."<sup>4</sup> is similarly based on a real walk with his wife two

<sup>4</sup> The M. H. letters refer to his wife Mary Hutchinson.

years before their marriage. Wordsworth provides external evidence where he tells that the pool mentioned in the poem "is in Rydal Upper Park" (Brett & Jones, 2005, p. 302). Identifying the place of the walk asserts Wordsworth's poetic concern with the realistic level of apprehension of the world. A similar incident of real walk also contributes to the composition of Shelley's *Julian and Maddalo*. It is Shelley this time walking with his wife by the Arno. Mrs. Shelley commented on this situation saying:

Once I went down with him [P. B. Shelley] to the mouth of the Arno, where the stream, then high and swift, met the tideless sea, and disturbed its sluggish waters. It was a waste and dreary scene; the desert sand stretched into a point surrounded by waves that broke idly though perpetually around; it was a scene very similar to Lido, of which he had said,—

"I love all waste  
And solitary places; where we taste  
The pleasure of believing what we see  
Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be:  
And such was this wide ocean, and this shore  
More barren than its billows." (In Rossetti, 1870, p. 279).

Particular names of real places associated with realistic incidents are used by both Wordsworth and Shelley to title some poems. The long title of Wordsworth's most memorable poem "Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798" employs a series of names and a date that belong to real experiences of place and

time. The title initiates an early identification between the reader and the poem's realistic representations. Shelley's "Lines written among the Euganean Hills, October 1818" produces a similar effect. His note on the poem places it among autobiographical poetry as it reveals influence of a real experience of the Euganean Hills on composing the poem; Shelley stated the poem "was written after a day's excursion among those lovely mountains which surround what was once the retreat..." (Wu, 2012, p. 1110). The dates and names of places in both poems, supported by the notes of the poets, create a high sense of credible reality.

The poet's experience of the place is also significant in other poems by Wordsworth. His poem *Michael* opens with persona's attempt to travel with the reader to "Greenhead Ghyll" and "Grasmere Vale" with their ideal past. Times and names of real places as well appear in the sub-titles of the various books of *The Prelude*, functioning essentially to structure the poem and introduce its parts. In a note by Wordsworth recalling his motive for composing "The thorn," he gives an account of a personal realistic experience:

Arose out of my observing, on the ridge of Quantock Hill, on a Stormy day, a thorn which I had often passed in calm and bright weather without noticing it. I said to myself, "Cannot I by some invention do as much to make this Thorn permanently an impressive object as the storm has made it to my eyes at this moment?" I began the

poem accordingly, and composed it with great rapidity. (Brett & Jones, 2005, p. 279).

It is true according to the note that Wordsworth's experience with the thorn is re-introduced in a way different from reality through employing poetical tools; the experience itself however begins in the real world of senses in the first place before the intervention of poeticity. The poem would have never existed apart from Wordsworth's real experience of the thorn.

## CONCLUSION

Realism has proven to exert a great impact on English romantic poetry. The connection between the English romantic poet and the realistic world where he exists has evidently been a major source of influence that determines the nature of the poetry he composes. Other poetical works beside the ones already investigated in this research can probably be examined to isolate their realistic features. This research has hopefully contributed to the scholarly efforts of identifying particular approaches the researchers can effectively adopt to tackle the concept of reality in a literary work. It is recommended thence that more romantic works be visited to examine their representation of reality. Readers and scholars may draw on the methods utilized in this research to prove the significance of reality in composing poetry.

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