

Impact of the Middle Ages on the Romantic Poetry

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Medievalism was one of the main tendencies of the English Romantic movement. Indeed, medievalism became associated with the Romantic Movement somewhat as Classicism with the Renaissance, because it provided writers with material and forms suitable to their mood. The Romantic poets were dissatisfied with the then existing modes of literature and the dreariness of life and therefore turned towards the Middle Ages for inspiration and novelty. The bygone ages had a particular charm, beauty and quaintness which attracted the romantic poets immensely. For them, the Middle Ages were full of beauty, love, wonder and adventure; and their dissatisfaction with the present conditions of life allured them towards the Middle Ages. As the Middle Ages were, from all points of view, essentially romantic ages, it was natural that the imagination of the romantic poets should turn back to them in search of inspiration and themes. Hence a very important phase of the romantic movement was the medieval or Gothic revival.

Medievalism was the significant feature of the romantic poetry but not an essential feature of all romantic poetry. Wordsworth, Shelley and Byron were the least influenced the Middle Ages. Instead of escaping to the past, Wordsworth found a constant spiritual anchor in Nature. He found in the healing power of Nature, a balm for all his pains and frustrations. As regards Shelley, he was a dreamer of the future. He found his spiritual home not in the bygone

ages but in the golden ages to come - " If winter comes can spring be far behind ? " was his guiding principle. As for Byron he was more interested in the world of his own make belief and the orient than the Middle Ages. Among the romantic poets Coleridge, Scott and Keats were the adorers of the Middle Ages.

Medieval note in the poetry of Coleridge :-

Coleridge was greatly influenced by medievalism and his *Christabel* and *The Ancient Mariner* are wrought with the colour and the glamour of the Middle Ages. In *Christabel* there is the usual medieval machinery like an old-fashioned castle, a feudal lord, mystery, superstition, magic, supernaturalism and terror. The medieval atmosphere gives the poem a colour of credibility. There are many references and suggestions of superstitious beliefs and the supernatural in the poem. Geraldine is a snake-like creature possessing the power of assuming any form she likes.

The *Ancient Mariner* is a ballad. At first in England ballads were written from the thirteenth to the early sixteenth century. In '*Ancient Mariner*' the language employed by the poet is simple and terse. The poem is written in a direct manner and many new elements and accents are introduced without any preliminary suggestion. Besides having a love of adventure and romance, the people of the middle Ages had a faith in religious ceremonials, rituals and superstitions.

The age was characterized by the dominance of the Catholic Church. The basic idea of The Ancient Mariner is medieval from this point of view. The crime and penance of the Mariner and his final expiation is a catholic idea which is the central point round which the story moves. The poet makes use of superstitious beliefs to heighten the old-world atmosphere of the poem. For example, it is a common superstition among sailors that something evil is about to happen when a star dogs the moon. Coleridge also uses this superstitious natural phenomenon before the death of the mariners.

One after ere, by the star dogged moon,
Too quick for good or ight,
Each turned his face with a ghastly fang,
And cursed me with his eye."

In this way The Ancient Mariner has been cast up in the medieval atmosphere.

Medieval note in the poetry of John Keats :-

Keats was the poet of legend and myth, of romance and chivalric tales. He was greatly attracted by the colour and curiosity relating to the life and doings of the people of the Middle Ages. In his poems like The Eve of St. Agnes, Isabella, La Belle Dame sans merci are dyed deep in the belief in magic and witchcraft, the tales of love, adventure and chivalry which were the part of the life of the Middle Ages. The Eve of St. Agnes gives us a vivid picture of medieval life, with its Castles knights and feudal lords, feuds, festivities, superstitions

love and romantic adventure. 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' is another superb ballad which revived the medieval life with its vogue of knight-errantry and chivalry. Not even the Pre-Raphaelites could capture the whole of the true medieval romantic spirit as Keats did in this poem. It is a poem of chivalry, love and romance along with the magic and mystery of medieval life.

Summing up the fascination of the Romantics for the middle Ages Samuel C. Chew in A Literary History of England says, "The Middle Ages were regarded with a fresh sympathy, though not, be it said, with accurate understanding. It is true that there were those who, like Shelley, seeking to reshape the present in accordance with desire, did not revert to the past but pursued their ideal into a utopia future. But to others the middle ages offered a spiritual home, remote and vague and mysterious. The typical romanticist does not "reconstruct" the past from the substantial evidence provided by research, but fashions it a new, not as it was but as it ought to have been. The more the writer insists upon the historical accuracy of his reconstruction the less romantic is he."

