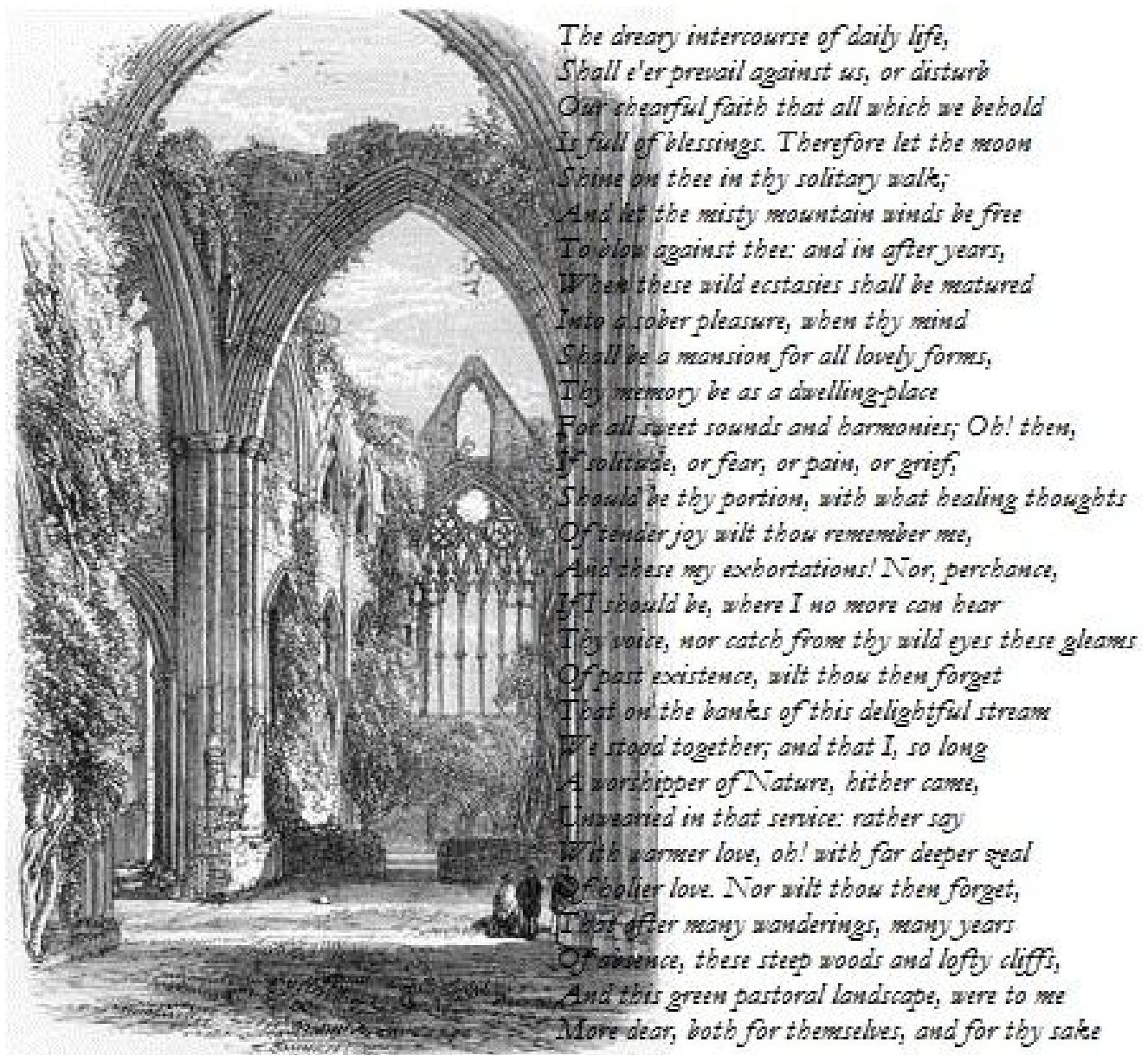


Poetry, Nature and Self: A Quest for Happiness and Acknowledgement during the Romantic Age



MA Thesis Cultural History

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Image: Unknown artist, in black (1869) Tintern Abbey, interior

Words: William Wordsworth, *Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey*, fragment

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	- 4 -
The ‘Spirit of the Age’	- 6 -
Romanticism: a concept	- 8 -
Preromanticism	- 10 -
Cultural interactions	- 12 -
A history of ‘Romanticism’	- 13 -
The case-studies	- 14 -
<i>Lyrical Ballads:</i>	- 16 -
<i>An experiment in feeling and education</i>	- 16 -
A new language for Wordsworth	- 18 -
The <i>Lyrical Ballads</i> : a short history	- 19 -
The Advertisement and Prefaces for justification and defence	- 21 -
Advertisement (1798)	- 23 -
Preface (1800)	- 23 -
Preface (1802)	- 25 -
The poems	- 27 -
Conclusion	- 29 -
<i>Self-development or the household?</i>	-
<i>Dilemmas and tradition in the life of a poet’s sister</i>	- 31 -
Romanticism and women	- 32 -
William and the other Wordsworth	- 34 -
The journals	- 35 -
Inspiration to William’s poetry	- 36 -
Dorothy’s poetry	- 39 -
Decay in later life	- 42 -
Dorothy and tradition	- 43 -
Conclusion	- 44 -
<i>John Keats:</i>	-
<i>The creation of a Romantic Hero</i>	- 46 -
The formation years	- 47 -
Self-education	- 48 -
Social interactions: friends and critics	- 49 -
The omnipresent Nature, senses and sensibility	- 51 -
Poetry from Imagination	- 51 -
The poet of senses and sensibility	- 52 -
The melancholy poet: Keats the Romantic Hero	- 55 -
Conclusion	- 59 -
Sensibility	- 59 -
The Romantic Hero	- 59 -
Self-education and –definition	- 60 -

<i>Conclusion</i>	_____	- 62 -
Nature and the natural	_____	- 62 -
Imagination	_____	- 63 -
Self-definition and public/social life	_____	- 64 -
Romantics	_____	- 65 -
<i>Bibliography</i>	_____	- 67 -

Introduction

“Dreaming and daydreaming in dark grottoes, amid vast wildernesses, or on high mountains”, this is how Marshall Brown described the ‘Romantic nature feeling’.¹ And he was not far off. Romanticism had everything to do with dreaming, the imagination and the overwhelming qualities of nature. The Romantic period was the time of head against the heart, the follow-up to the Enlightenment, during which all the sacred cows of religion were thrown over. Man was turned back into the autonomous being that he was by nature and God was no more. Reason ruled and all belief in magic and the supernatural had been terminated. The Romantic Movement started as a protest against this cold, new age of reason. Man could live with the fact that there was no God, but giving up on the magical, imaginative and supernatural was a different story altogether. Many were left disillusioned, because if there was nothing but reason, what room was there for emotions, imagination? People needed new ways to give meaning to their lives and a group of Romantic poets set out to do so. Their goal was, above anything else, to express feeling in their poetry: they wanted to make their readers feel again.

People needed magic and a retreat from real-life, especially in the second half of the eighteenth century. Industrialization was leaving its marks in the cities and in the country. The French Revolution and its ideals, but also its terrible consequences, reached England. Many hoped and believed that the Revolution would bring a cure for the problems with modern society and European civilization. When it did not come, they retreated to nature and Romanticism.² It became a sanctuary, where they could dream about a better world, revel in the past and imagine their time away. The outbreak of the French Revolution almost heralded the beginning of Romanticism. What they had in common was the striving for freedom: freedom from an oppressive regime and freedom from rationality.³ Romantic poetry wanted to satisfy this need: by discussing the natural world, filtered through an idealistic imagination, it took people away from their hardships, offering a refuge or perspective.

The refuge to nature and a more natural life started in people’s own gardens, which had until then been arranged with the logic and precision of the Enlightenment. Letting go of this rational gardening and letting nature run loose was the first step.⁴ Gardens should be wild; a place where fairies might live and where people could daydream. There they found a divine beauty, strength, a higher power. Nature, of all things, is closest to an archaic world, in which old values

¹ Brown, Marshall, ‘Romanticism and Enlightenment’, in: Curran, Stuart (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2010) [1993] p. 37

² Schenk, Hans Georg, *The Mind of the European Romantics* (Oxford, 1979) p. 11-12

³ Ibidem, p. 1

⁴ Ibidem, p. 241

and magic are still somewhere hidden. And most of all, nature has a tranquillity that the city lacked, especially during the Industrial Revolution. Nature was fighting a losing battle against the modernization, with all its artificialities.⁵ Because of the hardships of the time, poets wanted to offer their readers an escape: a turn away from the modernisation of society, the loss of rural life, the beginning of life in the city. David Duff wrote how these poets would “project their readers onto an imaginative plane, where the time and place are forgotten.”⁶ Return to nature and wild gardening had everything to do with the call for a more natural life. This call was answered in people’s own lives and a new reverence for natural scenes, but also in the language used for poetry. William Wordsworth was a revolutionist in that respect, wanting to do away with all the artificialities in his life as well as his poetry.

New genres emerged during Romanticism, but this thesis will focus on Romanticism in nature poetry and self-definition, in the works of William Wordsworth, Dorothy Wordsworth and John Keats.

⁵ Hans Georg Schenck, *The Mind of the European Romantics*, p. 175

⁶ Duff, David, ‘From Revolution to Romanticism: The Historical Context to 1800’ in: Wu, Duncan (ed.), *A Companion to Romanticism* (Oxford, 1998) p. 23

The ‘Spirit of the Age’

The Romantic period was an age of repression, censorship and legal threat.⁷ Women were repressed into their traditional role of matriarch: staying at home and taking care of the children. People from the lower classes and women in general had a hard time defending their rights, and their potential careers. Critics were inexorable on these writers, whether their critique was justified or not. These harsh critiques caused authors to feel the need to defend themselves. This was easiest achieved by their practice of self-definition, justifying both themselves and their poetry or prose. They did this through a preface or essay preceding a large work. Especially William Wordsworth, with his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, used this means as a defence.

Many other changes presented themselves, most importantly the Industrial Revolution. From a mainly agricultural society, England developed into an industrial and modernised nation.⁸ Instead of working on the land and living a rural life people now had to move into the city and work in factories. The ‘natural’ of everyday life was oppressed more and more. Nature was fenced in and no longer a place to roam freely. It is not hard to imagine how all these changes made people nostalgic for the days when they were still living their tranquil, unlimited lives. They needed nature as their haven once more. City life was harsh and a retreat into the countryside was limited by the fenced in agricultural fields. Nature poets jumped into the gap that was thus left by the industrialization. Romantic poetry had a hint of the nostalgic in it, as it romanticised a period that no longer was: the time before the industrialization, when nature was still free and vibrant. Nature poetry turned into an idealization of the nature scene as it had been before the urbanization:

As a site where the individual could find freedom from social laws, an idealization that was easier to sustain when nature was (...) represented not as cultivated fields but as uninhabitable wild wastes, unploughed uplands, caves and chasms.⁹

Poetry became an escape, mostly from the terrible reality of the war between England and France, which started in 1792 as the French Revolutionary Wars but continued into the Napoleonic Wars until 1815. Nature poetry could “create a mental sanctuary”. Especially John Keats was skilled in that respect, mostly because he created mental sanctuaries for himself.¹⁰ He fled into his imagination, which was usually filled with melancholy thoughts.

⁷ Curran, Stuart, ‘Romantic Poetry: why and wherefore?’, in: Curran, Stuart (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2010) [1993] p. 223

⁸ Lynch, D.S. & J. Stillinger, ‘The Romantic Period’ in: Greenblatt, S. (ed.) *Norton Anthology of English Literature vol. 2* (New York & London, 2006) [1962] p. 2

⁹ Ibidem, p. 15-16

¹⁰ Stuart Curran, ‘Romantic Poetry: why and wherefore?’, p. 211

The gloom of industrialization caused a new movement in literature, the Gothic novel, in which the most horrible subjects were treated. This fascination with immorality and coldness was felt as a disgrace by William Wordsworth. He was a Romantic poet and he believed that Romantic poetry could make people feel again, turn them back into sensible, loving beings that enjoyed beauty and not cruelty. Not only gothic writers were gloomy, however. A typical development of the Romantic period was the appearance of the Romantic Hero. This man, who seemingly had everything that could make him happy, would turn away from his happiness to revel in melancholy. The hero turns away from established norms and conventions and is in turn rejected by society, living a self-centred life. The focus is on the thoughts of the character, rather than on his actions. Books like *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* by Goethe and the poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* by Lord Byron have a Romantic Hero as the protagonist. That the Romantic Hero was not just a concept from fiction will become clear in relation to the young poet John Keats, who knew exactly how to evoke a melancholy atmosphere in his works and was, very much, rejected by society.

It was also the time of man against nature. The Romantic poet could ramble through the countryside for hours, experiencing its beauty and power. The Romantic period induced a trend of going out alone to face nature, seeing it in all its might and gaining knowledge and peace from it. Nature was a powerful source that man could try to overcome or retreat to. Romantic paintings, more than anything else, tried to grasp this aspect of man against nature. In Romantic poetry, there was a negotiation between the individual, nature and society.¹¹ The poetry came forth out of a desire of the individual to get away from society, and a desire to change that society for the better. The authors discussed in this thesis all had their own relation to nature and the natural. This determined how they dealt with or tried to influence society.

Rambling through nature became known as the Romantic *Wanderlust*. The poets, especially Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy, wandered through the countryside for hours.¹² William Wordsworth could cover as much as forty miles a day, no matter what the weather was. Just like many other poets, he used his walks to mediate and compose. It was nature that could give him inspiration, and fill the void of disillusionment that was left after the French Revolution and industrialization.¹³ The *Wanderlust* also caused an increase of tourism, a trend that all the poets discussed in this thesis followed and encouraged, sometimes unintentionally.

¹¹ Ferguson, Frances, *Solitude and the Sublime. Romanticism and the aesthetics of individuation* (New York, 1992) p. 125

¹² Hans Georg Schenk, *The Mind of the European Romantics*, p. 164

¹³ Ibidem, p. 165

Romanticism: a concept

But what exactly is this Romanticism? Already in 1924, Arthur O. Lovejoy stated that “[T]he word “romantic” has come to mean so many things that by itself, it means nothing.”¹⁴ That is why it is important to look at the concept in a context, to see what it means in relation to other things. The important things that were part of Romantic culture were conceptions of man and his relation to nature, the poetic style with a use of symbolism, imagination and myth, the workings of nature and poetic imagination.¹⁵ This thesis will look at Romanticism in that connection with nature and the imagination, but also from the perspective of the poet in their relation to society and practices of self-definition.

Lovejoy, in his article ‘On the Discrimination of Romanticisms’, offered a nice summary of what Romanticism meant for many: “A passion for moonlight, for red waistcoats, for Gothic churches, for futurist paintings, for talking exclusively about oneself, for hero-worship, for losing oneself in an ecstatic contemplation of nature.”¹⁶ Romanticism was all about the imagination, daydreaming and escaping into nature, which were effective means to reconnect with the feelings. After that, Lovejoy quoted a Professor Ker who named Romantic poetry the ‘fairy way of writing’¹⁷, indicating that it had much to do with imagination and supernatural things. John Keats is a great example of this ‘fairy way of writing’, as he often used folkloric tales about fairies in his poetry. The imagination played that big a part for him, that he lived more in it than in reality.

Professor Ker also stated that Romanticism implies reminiscence, and that it is dependent on the past. Romanticism romanticises the past, so that lovely memories will never die. Geoffrey Scott claimed that it is the cult of the extinct¹⁸, which adds to this idea. Memorizing the past, and the notion of Romanticism as a cult that reveres the past, has much to do with the idealization of nature by the Romantic poets. Hans Georg Schenk wrote how “[t]hose who feel apprehensive about the future will often cast a nostalgic glance back at the past and will at times even try to live in some bygone era. This is one of the most characteristic features of Romanticism.”¹⁹ The Romantics feared the things to come; they did not believe that progress would bring any good. Modern society would lead to the destruction of man and therefore, they revelled in the past, casting nostalgic glances back. This revelling in the past caused a glorification of ruins and even started a European-wide fashion of constructing artificial ruins.²⁰ This preoccupation with ruins

¹⁴ Arthur O. Lovejoy, ‘The Discrimination of Romanticisms’, p. 232

¹⁵ Wellek, René, ‘The Concept of “Romanticism” in Literary History II. The Unity of European Romanticism’ *Comparative Literature*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1949) p. 147

¹⁶ Arthur O. Lovejoy, ‘On the Discrimination of Romanticisms’, p. 232

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 231

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 231

¹⁹ Hans Georg Schenk, *The Mind of the European Romantics*, p. 33

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 44

was reinforced by some nature poets, especially Wordsworth. His poetry caused a surge of tourism, most notably to his favourite ruin, the Tintern Abbey. The poem ‘Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey’, the closing piece of *Lyrical Ballads*, played a big part in that.

Preromanticism

To get back in touch with their feelings and fantasies, poets developed unusual interests. This started a little time before the Romantic period. Poetry became a reflection of their curiosity for the uncommon. They started writing poetry about graveyards, gloomy forests, and nature as it was portrayed on landscape paintings: the wild and untameable kind of nature. The nature poetry movement actually had its roots in and co-existed with the Enlightenment, when a group of ‘Preromantics’ emerged.²¹ Although the “literature of untrammelled imagination had been forced underground” during the Enlightenment, it was not defeated.²² During this period, there was a renewed interest in sensibility, rather than rationality.²³ The result was sensuous poetry, describing an experience through the senses. Sensibility and the poetry of the senses were such great traits of Romanticism, that without it, much of the poetry that is so famous today could not have existed. Sensibility is essential to Romanticism.

The Graveyard school was an important forerunner of the Romantic poets. *Columbia Electronic Encyclopaedia* gives the following definition: “18th-century school of English poets who wrote primarily about human mortality. Often set in a graveyard, their poems mused on the vicissitudes of life, the solitude of death and the grave, and the anguish of bereavement. Their air of pensive gloom presaged the melancholy of the Romantic movement.” These Graveyard poets embraced sensibility and allowed themselves to feel and be touched by what they saw, whether it be a tomb or a sublime mountaintop.²⁴ They ignored the reason of the Enlightenment. These Graveyard poets paved the way for later works about the Romantic Hero.

Another important movement presaging the Romantics was pastoral poetry. These poets wrote about nature, the countryside and imagination. The great names of this period in terms of nature poetry are Cowper, Akenside and Thomson.²⁵ James Thomson wrote the first epic poem on nature, *The Seasons*. Akenside wrote a poem about *The Pleasures of Imagination*.²⁶ He obviously was part of the anti-Enlightenment movement and wanted to feel the delight of imagination, instead of using only rationality. These pastoral poets were a great inspiration for William Wordsworth, who filled entire volumes of poetry with pastorals in his most productive periods. Oftentimes, nature was described in tenderness, fused with a hint of melancholy.²⁷ The poet saw the natural scene and delighted in it, but also knew that it would pass, or already had passed. The

²¹ Brown, Marshall, ‘Romanticism and Enlightenment, in: Curran, Stuart (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2010) [1993] p. 38

²² D.S. Lynch & J. Stillinger, ‘The Romantic Period’, p. 13

²³ Tolley, Michael J., ‘Preromanticism’, in: Wu, Duncan (ed.) *A Companion to Romanticism* (Oxford, 1998) p. 14

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 14

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 16

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 16

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 18

passing of the seasons played a part in the mortality of natural scenes, but the industrialization also played a part in its destruction.

The melancholy hint is found in most Preromantic works. There was a fear of the future and nostalgia for the past. Progress only led to downfall and many feared and wrote about their deaths.²⁸ This hint of despair and gloom is also very present in the Romantic works. As this thesis will show, Keats could in that respect just as well have been a part of the Graveyard School. The nature poetry of the Romantics however, differed from that of the Preromantics. Whereas those had been objective texts about nature and landscapes, the Romantics discussed nature in a creative and imaginative way, which had been unthinkable before, because of the Enlightenment and the value it placed in facts and reason.²⁹ In Romanticism, there was room for imagination, and the ways in which the poet would have liked the world to be, or how he felt contemplating it. There was room for the poet himself in poetry now, and the ‘self’ was immersed in it. There is no objective, Romantic nature poetry; the scenes are always filtered through the senses, the imagination, and the poet himself.

Imagination was important to Romantic poetry, because it allowed the poet to see things that were not real; to envision a better world. In the Romantic period, this was of great value because it was such a bad time. The Romantic poets however believed that their power of imaginative vision could change the world.³⁰ This vision led to some of their best works. Fantasizing about this perfect world, imagining oneself in it and taking it along wherever you go occurred a lot for the poets, especially the Wordsworths. They found much solace in reliving their memories. In the end the real world is the place where happiness must be found, but nature never lost its appeal.³¹

²⁸ Michael J. Tolley, ‘Preromanticism’, p. 19

²⁹ Anonymous, ‘Tintern Abbey, Tourism and Romantic Landscape’

³⁰ Dawson, P.M.S., ‘Poetry in an Age of Revolution’, in: Stuart Curran (ed.) *Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2010) [1993] p. 78

³¹ Ibidem, p. 79

Cultural interactions

Most historical periods are named after they are already years past. The English Romantic period is no different. At the beginning of the Romantic period, which officially lasted from 1785 to 1830, poets were divided into schools rather than termed ‘Romantic’.³² For instance, there was the ‘Lake school’ to which Wordsworth and Coleridge belonged, named so because the poets were from the Lake District. And there was the Cockney school, which had a negative connotation, to which Keats belonged. As trivial a thing as a name may seem, this stamp was not easily shed. The Romantic period was a time when class, gender and education were very important and highly influential if one wanted to become successful.

Despite the limitations and oppressions of this period, however, poets became very aware of the powers they could exert through their poetry. Their will to be understood was strong and they were susceptible to public opinion. They wanted to shape society, but society also shaped them. Self-definition was an important means to connect to the public. Many poets and writers in the Romantic Age busied themselves with self-definition, or, trying to explain what their writings meant and were supposed to do. Wordsworth’s ‘Preface’ to the *Lyrical Ballads* and Shelley’s ‘Defence of Poetry’ are well-known examples of this. It seems as if the writers were on a mission, and they needed to make sure that the public would receive their message as they intended it. This way, they could influence society in the way that they saw fit. At the same time, public opinion could exert a big influence on them, as this period also saw the beginning of the writing of reviews that could either make or break a poet.³³ Through these reviews and the poetry an often strained and hostile interaction originated between public, critics and poets with an influence that worked both ways.

³² D.S. Lynch & J. Stillinger, ‘The Romantic Period’, p. 6

³³ Butler, Marilyn, ‘Culture’s Medium: the Role of the Review’, in: Stuart Curran (ed.) *Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2010) [1993] p. 128

A history of ‘Romanticism’

The first person to have described English poets of the early nineteenth century – especially the Lake poets – as belonging to a ‘Romantic School’ is considered to be Hippolyte Taine in 1863.³⁴ He derived the term from a group of German ‘Romantics’ who were self-named. The English and German could at the time not identify with each other, but since they were contemporary and overall shared much of the same themes in their works, they were ranked under the same denominator.³⁵ The importance of the ‘interior’ poet, or the archetype of a poet “living in the dreamily introverted remoteness of his own consciousness”, had already been established throughout the nineteenth century.³⁶ The biggest transformations in defining Romanticism were caused by shifts in the canon. The increasing or diminishing importance of certain poets in the canon changed the definition of Romanticism and the criteria for naming a poet Romantic or other. Blake, for instance, did not become prominent in the canon until the 1960s, but today he is seen as the exemplary Romantic.³⁷ The increasing importance of Wordsworth at the beginning of the twentieth century caused an emphasis on the ‘naturalism’ of Romantic poetry. The natural world became the prime Romantic subject, and it still is today.³⁸

The study of Romanticism transformed in the 1980s. The ‘cultural turn’ in history gave new importance to public history, putting more emphasis on people, society and sources such as ego-documents. That is why diaries and correspondences in letters are considered such valuable sources for defining Romanticism today. This thesis uses ego-documents to the extent that the personal view of the authors is very important. It helps to interpret their poetry, gives insight into their lives and influences. It is impossible to give a good analysis of a poet and his motivations without reading ego-documents. This thesis is written from the perspective of the poet and will argue that a poet’s background, diary or correspondence can shed much light on poetic development and choices made. Cultural development is also an important factor, as well as the interaction between the poet, his poetry, and the public. The Romantic age saw many changes. William Wordsworth, Dorothy Wordsworth and John Keats either suffered from these changes, or used them to their own advantage.

³⁴ Perry, Seamus, ‘Romanticism: The Brief History of a Concept’, in: Wu, Duncan (ed.) *A Companion to Romanticism* (Oxford, 1998) p. 5

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 6

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 7

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 8

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 7

The case-studies

This thesis will, as stated above, focus on nature poetry and the interaction it produced between authors and society. The fact that they were Romantics influenced how they experienced nature, used their imagination and how they dealt with society. Struggle, self-definition and education are important aspects, as well as nature, the imagination and defence. A great name in Romantic nature poetry is William Wordsworth. His *Lyrical Ballads* were radical, revolutionary, a sign of the times. That is why he and his work have to be present in this thesis. The subject that will be focused on is the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* and the message, even mission, that is conveyed through it. That William had a sister, Dorothy, is well-known, as well as the fact that she was a great inspiration and aide to his poetry. Her own works, however, have remained in obscurity for a long time and were not available to the public until 1874. Why did she not publish during her own lifetime? And then there was Keats, the 'Cockney'-born, young and very talented poet, who had to endure much during the short time that his career was given. Keats' poetry was one of the senses, with an omnipresent nature, suffused with melancholy.

William Wordsworth, Dorothy Wordsworth and John Keats: these are but three of the many authors who have left their traces in Romantic literature. The Romantic period, though not extensive in time, was very extensive in works produced. Examples are inexhaustible, but to illustrate the social interactions during this period and really define the Romantic period as a cultural phenomenon, I have decided to focus on these three case studies, chosen to give a clear view of three important matters that were very present in society at that time. Even though it may not seem so at first, these three writers actually had a lot in common. All had to struggle to be recognized by the public or their domestic circle, all had to deal with critique, but managed to follow their own desires anyway. Their main sources of inspiration and happiness were nature and the imagination. All three authors tried to establish their own role and place in life, struggling for appreciation and happiness.

The first case I will focus on is the *Lyrical Ballads* and the preface that was written for it. The practice of writing prefaces tells us much about the importance of self-definition, in a time when the literary review was just established. The chapter will look at Wordsworth's reasons, motivations and self-fashioning expressed in the prefaces and the *Lyrical Ballads* itself. Close-reading of the poetry and the prefaces can supply much information on the subjects and looking at the cultural situation of the time helps to shape the context. The main source of information here is the *Lyrical Ballads* itself and the different versions of the prefaces. Additional bibliographical research from secondary sources will give an idea of the society that *Lyrical Ballads* was published into and it illustrates how the book and additional essays were received. William

Wordsworth managed to establish a place in society for himself and the book, making *Lyrical Ballads* one of the most important books of the time. The importance and justification of the book was fashioned by Wordsworth himself. How did he do that, how was it received and how did it become such an essential Romantic work? Keywords here are self-definition, revolutionary and justification.

The next case-study researches Dorothy Wordsworth and the relation to her brother William. Until the 1980s Dorothy herself was not of any interest to scholars. Her journals were researched for information about her brother William, and signs of the influence he held over her.³⁹ William was always the poet, but not the only writer in the family. Dorothy wrote prolifically in her journals, but never independently published any of her work. Why did Dorothy never publish any of her works, even though she wrote so much? Main sources here are the journals that Dorothy kept during her life with William at Grasmere and Alfoxden, as well as some of her own and William's poetry. These sources will help define the relationship between the siblings and the reason that Dorothy wrote so much. It is also important to take into account the place that women had in society and the literary world: what was the milieu that Dorothy would have published in, had she published? Information on this is found by historical research, thus shaping the background against which she decided to either publish or not. Study of ego-documents, poetry and gender roles of the period will be the main methods here, as well as studying secondary information on Dorothy Wordsworth and her life. Keywords here are gender roles, tradition vs. freedom and inferiority.

The final case study will deal with John Keats and the fashioning of his personality through his poetry, letters and critique from the public. There was the talented poet that he fashioned himself, the 'Johnny Keats' that he was belittled into by the critics and the tragic poet, supposedly killed by his critics, that he became just after his death. That only the first image, created by himself, was an accurate one this thesis will show. Much of Keats' personality shows through in his poetry, as well as in the correspondences with his many friends. Comparative literary research shows how Keats related to other characters of the Romantic period. Fragments from critique he received in his own time will illustrate the pressure that Keats published under.

³⁹ Wolfson, Susan J., 'Romanticism and Gender' in: Duncan Wu (ed.), *A Companion to Romanticism*, (Oxford, 1998) p. 387

Lyrical Ballads: An experiment in feeling and education

A good illustration of the interaction between the public and the poet is *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of poems written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, first published in 1798. It is not the book that is most important here however, but the prefaces that Wordsworth wrote for it in the following editions of 1800 and 1802. The poems were an experiment for him, but also a poetical statement. Unfortunately, the public did not understand how to interpret the *Lyrical Ballads* and thus could not fully appreciate them.

The Romantic period saw an increase in literacy and the emergence of a new reading public.⁴⁰ This was mainly caused by the increasing availability of print materials, thus giving people more chances to read and educate themselves. After the 1790s, book production became more massive and cheap, thus making books more widely and easily available.⁴¹ Another important novelty was the appearance of the periodical. These were relatively cheap and thin booklets, filled with essays and letters to the editors. These created a conversational environment and shaped the reading public.⁴² At least until the 1780s this public was still homogeneous: well-educated, socially cultivated, with a sense of belonging to a cultural community and most importantly, well-to-do, as books were still very expensive then.⁴³ This public came to think that they actually had the power to make a difference and ‘make events’.⁴⁴

To avoid more critique of this increasingly literate and judicial reading public, Coleridge was hesitant to offer the book to the public without some sort of explanatory preface.⁴⁵ They could, however, not agree on the message and justification that it was meant to contain.⁴⁶ Coleridge aimed at an explanation and justification of the poetical language and subjects of the *Lyrical Ballads*, where Wordsworth wanted to make the public understand and enjoy it, more than the old traditional poetry. Wordsworth’s goal was to reach all the British readers with his poems and his message. He wanted to create a poetry that would appeal to and be readable for everyone. He decided to start an experiment with the use of ‘common’ and vulgar language in his poetry. He knew this would not be readily accepted and that he had to explain and justify his decision.

⁴⁰ D.S. Lynch & J. Stillinger, ‘The Romantic Period’, p. 17

⁴¹ Behrendt, Stephen C., ‘The Romantic Reader’, in: Wu, Duncan (ed.) *A Companion to Romanticism* (Oxford, 1998) p.92

⁴² Ibidem, p. 93

⁴³ Stephen C. Behrendt, ‘The Romantic Reader’, p. 91

⁴⁴ D.S. Lynch & J. Stillinger, ‘The Romantic Period’, p. 17

⁴⁵ Schultz, Max F., ‘Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the 1800 Preface to Lyrical Ballads’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* vol. 5, no. 4 (1965) p. 637

⁴⁶ Ibidem, pp. 619-620

During the Romantic period poetry had to “disturb the logic that dominated the social order”.⁴⁷ It started questioning this logic and the ideologies it controls: return to nature and natural rules would be the cure. Wordsworth was a nature poet and called for a more natural life. This is revealed in his style of poetry, which uses only ‘natural’ speech. His poetry became all about the expression of feelings and using language in the best possible way for that purpose. Wordsworth’s greatest mission was to express sentiments through his poems and let his readers feel the same.⁴⁸ To achieve this he needed to educate the public, so they would know how to interpret the poems. Coleridge did not believe in this goal to educate and influence his public by telling them how to read and interpret the *Lyrical Ballads*. The preface ended up Wordsworth’s alone.

By writing the Preface in the way that Wordsworth did, the importance of the *Lyrical Ballads* was fashioned and justified by William Wordsworth himself. How did he do this, and how did it become a cultural artefact? This chapter will look at the poems in *Lyrical Ballads* and three versions of preface – the Advertisement, Preface 1800 and Preface 1802 – discussing their arguments and influence.

⁴⁷ Hanley, Keith, ‘Wordsworth’s Revolution in Poetic Language’, *Romanticism on the Net* no. 9 (1998) <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ron/1998/v/n9/005790ar.html>

⁴⁸ Ibidem

A new language for Wordsworth

After the Renaissance and the French Revolution, the world was in the Enlightenment's grasp and it needed to get away from those ideas. Poets saw their poems as a medium to express their critique on the system and started using language in a new way for that purpose, especially Wordsworth. He made his own version of this Romantic ideology: to make the world feel again, and make them see what exactly was happening at the time, what all the developments were doing to society and to the human mind.⁴⁹ His main tool to do so was language. The *Lyrical Ballads*, to him, became an experiment. As was illustrated in the introduction, the Romantic period was one of hardships. Urbanization tore people away from their old rural lives, having to work in dirty factories instead of on the land. To be able to cope, people grew cold and distant. With his poetry, Wordsworth wanted to undo these harmful effects of urbanization.⁵⁰

But although Wordsworth claimed in the 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads' that he was attempting something new in poetry, he was actually greatly influenced by the three great nature poets of the eighteenth century: James Thomson (1700-1748), William Cowper (1731-1800) and Mark Akenside (1721-1770). In her book *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads*, Mary Jacobus discussed these three great poets from the eighteenth century that were an inspiration to him.⁵¹ The three main themes to be found in Wordsworth's poetry can be traced back to these three eighteenth century poets.

Thomson's *Seasons* from 1730 inspired the exploration of inner life and the feeling for nature. Cowper's *Task* from 1785 was an example for poetry from the vision of a natural universe animated by God. Akenside's *Pleasures of Imagination* from 1744 showed Wordsworth the relationship between nature and the perceiving mind. Not only the subjects but also the way he composed his poetry, in blank verse and in simple language, were derived from them.⁵² Wordsworth did however take it a step further than his predecessors and contemporaries; nature poetry for him became a way of writing about the human mind, and landscape poetry became a way of meditation.⁵³

⁴⁹ Keith Hanley, 'Wordsworth's Revolution in Poetic Language'

⁵⁰ D.S. Lynch & J. Stillinger, 'The Romantic Period', p. 11

⁵¹ Jacobus, Mary, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads* (1798) (Oxford, 1979) [1976], p. 38

⁵² Ibidem, p. 38

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 39

The *Lyrical Ballads*: a short history

The main goal for the creation of *Lyrical Ballads* was to make money. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth met in 1795, after which they soon became close friends. Both were poets, but poets in a very different way. Wordsworth was the wanderer, focussed on the senses and everything nature had to offer. Coleridge was more of a philosopher, but became more and more so as their friendship progressed. At some point they decided to make an extended trip to Germany, where William and his sister Dorothy were to become fluent in German and Coleridge would study at the University.⁵⁴ This trip required sufficient funding, so they decided to compose a poem together, a project that changed into a collection of poems when they discovered that they could not reconcile their difference in style. The idea initially was to jointly compose 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' but this was soon left to Coleridge alone as he wanted to use poetic diction in it, something that Wordsworth was intended to let go of.⁵⁵ Resulting in the *Lyrical Ballads*, the project was a joint effort to serve a common purpose: the raising of funds for their trip. Wordsworth however had more plans with the collection of poems. Not only did he want to make money, he also wanted to make a change. In the first place, he saw the ballads as an experiment in language. The *Lyrical Ballads* asked the reader to think: Wordsworth believed that he could "break down the barriers between literature and life, revitalise poetry itself."⁵⁶

The *Lyrical Ballads* were initially published anonymously in 1798. This was decided by Coleridge, who wrote to their publisher that "Wordsworth's name is nothing – to a large number of persons mine *stinks*."⁵⁷ He figured it would be best if their names remained unknown, trying to avoid any critique aimed at their origins or background. The justification of their work however required them to reveal their identities. Overall, the *Lyrical Ballads* got four editions in seven years, establishing Wordsworth's name as an important Romantic poet. The first edition appeared in October 1798, in an edition of five hundred copies. These were all sold by June 1800; so despite critiques on the book, people were reading and buying the *Lyrical Ballads*. The next edition was published in January 1801, with an additional volume containing new poems. Due to miscommunications between publisher and author, however, many different copies of the work circulated, making numbers unclear. Immediately after that, corrections and revisions were made, making a final, good version of the book. This third edition, published in June 1802, was again printed in five hundred copies. This time, however, they took almost three years to sell out, indicating that people had lost their interest in the *Lyrical Ballads*. In October 1805, the fourth and

⁵⁴ Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads*, p. 3-4

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 2

⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 9

⁵⁷ Butler, James A., 'Poetry 1798-1807: *Lyrical Ballads* and Poems, in Two Volumes' in: Stephen Gill (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 38

final edition finally appeared. This edition was least interesting considering revisions and additions, which were almost none, but most modern as it was printed by a new printer, using new standards of spelling, punctuation and a modern type. This was also the last edition that was published in collaboration with the authors.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Graver, Bruce and Ron Tetreault (ed.), *Lyrical Ballads: An Electronic Scholarly Edition* (Editors' Preface)
<http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/LB/>

The Advertisement and Prefaces for justification and defence

In the first edition of 1798, Wordsworth justified his poetry in the *Lyrical Ballads* through a short advertisement.⁵⁹ The argument was expanded in the second edition of 1800, which received an extensive Preface. Wordsworth wrote a supplementing essay in addition to his Preface, an appendix on poetic diction.⁶⁰ But still, Wordsworth was not satisfied. The final version appeared in the third edition of 1802, which was an extended version of the 1800 Preface. His main argument, from the Advertisement on, was his opposition to the poetic diction, a poetic tradition that called for an artificial use of language, making poetry elitist and unavailable.⁶¹ Wordsworth's main problem with this was the artificiality of the language. As a nature poet, he wanted to be close to nature. The artificialities had to be done away with; Wordsworth called for a more natural language, the same one that people used to communicate in everyday. The subject of poetry needed to be more natural as well. Eventually more critique was aimed at the preface than the poems themselves. Wordsworth claimed that whatever flaw was to be found in the poetry, this was done deliberately. Critics therefore found it hard to take the poems seriously.⁶² This is especially because quotes such as the following were published in the Preface of 1800: "To enjoy entirely the Poetry which I am recommending, it would be necessary to give up much of what is ordinarily enjoyed."

The MacMillan Dictionary gives 'lyrical' the following definition: "expressing beauty and strong emotions". These *Lyrical Ballads* then were by definition poems that were expressing intense feelings, as Wordsworth wanted them to. His poetry was a way for him to make the people feel. *Lyrical Ballads*, however, is an oxymoron, or contradiction in terms. 'Lyrical' comes from the Latin word 'lyre' which points out that something has the characteristics of song. It often referred to the epic poems, dealing with great subjects and many lines long. In relation to poetry, it means that it expresses the poet's own thoughts and sentiments. A ballad however, has connotations with popular folklore, meaning 'low culture', folk stories. Wordsworth was combining these two things into stories derived from rustic, common life, expressed in his own feelings and emotions. Thus, he combined low and high culture, which was actually quite impossible.⁶³ An epic poem cannot be a popular folk story. Wordsworth however believed that he could do it, as the common was just as suitable for poetry as was elitist diction. The fact that Wordsworth named his book *Lyrical Ballads* has everything to do with his practice of self-

⁵⁹ Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads*, p. 8

⁶⁰ Ibidem, p. 11

⁶¹ Ibidem, p. 8

⁶² Bialostosky, Don H., 'Colderidge's Interpretation of Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads', *PMLA* vol. 93, no. 5 (1978) p. 912

⁶³ Anonymous, 'Lecture 2: The *Lyrical Ballads*' <http://englishnew.ukzn.ac.za/two/rom2.html>

definition; if he gave the collection of poems such an unusual title, referring to two things that could actually not be united, people would know what to expect and see the collection in a different way than they usually would.

Robert Southey was critical of the *Lyrical Ballads*, when he wrote in *The Critical Review* XXIV that he thought that the experiment had failed, because Wordsworth had tried it on uninteresting subjects. He did think that Wordsworth had adapted the language of conversation for poetic pleasure in a right way. Another contemporary, Reverend Francis Wrangham, believed that Wordsworth's experiment had succeeded, emphasizing the uniqueness of his effort in a review of February 1801 in *The British Critic*. This Reverend praised Wordsworth for his originality and the fact that he distinguished himself from other poets. He also stated that Wordsworth made a just claim in wanting to transfer feelings to others.

Whatever may be thought of these poems, it is evident that they are not to be confounded with the flood of poetry which is poured forth in such profusion by the modern Bards of Science, or their Brethren, the Bards of Insipidity. The author has thought for himself; he has deeply studied human nature, in the book of human action; and he has adopted his language from the same source as his feelings. (...) It would be no mean, it would indeed be a very lofty praise, to assert of a writer, that he is able to pour into other bosoms powerful feelings of a particular class, or belonging to a particular order of men. To this praise, Mr. Wordsworth lays a well-supported claim.

A reviewer of Blackwood Magazine, John Wilson, wrote a letter to Wordsworth in May 1802, speaking of the *Lyrical Ballads* very fondly and positively.

To you, sir, mankind are indebted for a species of poetry, which will continue to afford pleasure while respect is paid to virtuous feelings, and while sensibility continues to pour forth tears of rapture. (...) The real feelings of human nature, expressed in simple and forcible language, will, on the contrary, please those only who are capable of entertaining them. (...) They represent the enjoyment resulting from the cultivation of the social affections of our nature; they inculcate a conscientious regard to the rights of our fellow-men; they show that every creature on the face of the earth is entitled to our kindness. They prove that in every mind, however depraved, there exist some qualities deserving our esteem. They point out the proper way to happiness. They show that such a thing as perfect misery does not exist. (...) Considered, therefore, in this view, the *Lyrical Ballads* is, to use your own words, the book which I value next to my Bible; and though I may, perhaps, never have the happiness of seeing you, yet I always consider you as a friend, who has, by his instructions, done me a service which it can never be in my power to repay. Your instructions have afforded me inexpressible pleasure; it will be my own fault if I do not reap from them much advantage.

Receiving this letter must have proven to Wordsworth that he had indeed succeeded in all that was his goal. To have someone appreciate his work as much as the Bible, to have it open his eyes for the goodness that is to be found in every man, was exactly what Wordsworth was aiming for. The effect of the *Lyrical Ballads*, then, for some was just as Wordsworth had envisioned.

Advertisement (1798)

The opening lines of this piece immediately begin the justification: “It is the honourable characteristic of Poetry that its materials are to be found in every subject that can interest the human mind. The evidence of this fact is to be sought, not in the writings of Critics, but in those of Poets themselves.” Here, Wordsworth says that it does not matter what the poet wants to write about, or how he does it. The critics have nothing to say about it, poetry is created by the poets. He continues to note how the poems are an experiment, to see “how far the language of the lower social classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure.” The aim was to prove that this ‘common language’ was just as suitable as the poetic diction for writing pretty poetry. He notes that the ‘Rime of the Ancyent Marinere’ was written in imitation of the style as well as of the spirits of the elder poets. Perhaps this was Wordsworth’s way of saying that he did not really agree with the style that Coleridge used in this poem. Originally, they wanted to write this poem together, but allegedly Wordsworth did not agree with Coleridge’s ideal of following the example of the elder poets. He ends with saying how, with some exceptions, “[T]he language adopted in it has been equally intelligible for these three last centuries.” The exceptions, very likely, are the poems written by Coleridge. This advertisement is more like an excuse, with the message that yes, this is poetry written on unusual subjects and in unusual language, but it is poetry nonetheless, and suitable to enjoy.

Preface (1800)

Instead of an addition to the Advertisement, Wordsworth wrote an entirely new essay discussing his new poetic language and imagery. The preface is a sort of manual to reading the *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth is making sure that everybody will read and interpret it as he intended it. He starts off by telling how he was at first unwilling to write a defence for his poems, because he thought that it would make his readers hate him for trying to force them into approval of the poems. He also feels that it would have been necessary first to determine the public taste, and whether it is healthy or depraved. Wordsworth had no estimate of the number of people that would be pleased with the poems, but the number of people that were was larger than he had expected. He also explains that the *Lyrical Ballads* was not his sole effort, but that “For the sake of variety and from consciousness of my own weakness I was induced to request the assistance of a Friend”.⁶⁴ Even though his name appeared on the title page, he did not want to take all the credit for himself, nor all the critique. He mentions how he knew for certain that their styles were similar enough to start this shared endeavour, and their opinions on the subject of poetry almost

⁶⁴ Wordsworth, William, *Lyrical Ballads, with other Poems – 1800 – vol. I* online source, <http://ebookbrowse.com/gdoc.php?id=229360915&url=cefdae4aa661a478a9ece2e37d37ac94> p. 2

entirely coincided. This seems unlikely compared to what he said in the advertisement, where he claimed that the author of the 'Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' used both the style and language of the old poets, which was the exact opposite of what the *Lyrical Ballads* was supposed to experiment with. This goal with the ballads he explains:

The principal object which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to make the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Low and rustic life was generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that situation our elementary feelings exist in a state of greater simplicity and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; (...) because in that situation the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.⁶⁵

This is a very important fragment of the preface, because here, Wordsworth really explains his plans with the 'rural' poetry. He states here that the language and subjects of this sort of life are more in touch with passions, feelings, emotions. In short, these people lived a more natural life, less artificial than life in the city. To be able to apprehend the beauty of nature and feel how it can make one feel, the poetry should be read that way. He still has no sympathy for the elder poets because they separate themselves from the common man and use 'capricious habits of expression in order to furnish food for fickle tastes and fickle appetites of their own creation'. This means that Wordsworth believed that his poetry was timeless, as it could appeal to any reader from any social milieu at any time. Further on, he notes how his meditations form his feelings and that the description of the objects excites those feelings, so that's why he brings them into his poetry – with a purpose. "All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings and comes from emotion gathered in tranquillity. It does not show itself until the tranquillity disappears and the emotion alone becomes visible. This is the good mood for composition. But the mind as a whole will be in a state of enjoyment." Feelings are always modified by thoughts, which are representatives of our past feelings, as Wordsworth writes. In time, the thoughts will be reconnected to the feelings. The result is a being, which is 'in some degree enlightened, his taste exalted and his affections ameliorated'.⁶⁶ In short, it will create a sensitive society, with people in touch with their feelings.

This new kind of poetry is very necessary, as "a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most

⁶⁵ Wordsworth, William *Lyrical Ballads, with other Poems – 1800 – vol. I*, p. 3-4

⁶⁶ Ibidem, p. 4-5

effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities". The beautiful works of poets such as Milton and Shakespeare have been driven into oblivion by such things as 'frantic novels' and 'sickly and stupid German Tragedies'. He hopes that it will be found that there is 'little falsehood of description' in his own poems, once again claiming that he is authentic, accurate and not using any poetic diction. He writes it as he sees it, no pretentiousness. The reason that he did not just write a book but composed poetry is that "The verse will be read a hundred times where the prose is read once". At the end Wordsworth stresses that it is not just his own cause that he is pleasing here, but that the understanding and acceptance of his vision is necessary for everyone, a subject of general interest. It is clear that he foresees the criticism that will be given to the poems as well as the preface, so he ends his preface with the following plea.

I have one request to make of my Reader, which is, that in judging these Poems he would decide by his own feelings genuinely, and not by reflection upon what will probably be the judgment of others. How common is it to hear a person say, "I myself do not object to this style of composition or this or that expression, but to such and such classes of people it will appear mean or ludicrous." This mode of criticism so destructive of all sound unadulterated judgment is almost universal: I have therefore to request that the Reader would abide independently by his own feelings, and that if he finds himself affected he would not suffer such conjectures to interfere with his pleasure.

Wordsworth does, however, leave it up to the reader to decide whether he has succeeded in his attempt, as he has just explained it.

Preface (1802)

This second Preface is centred on the subject of poetic diction and the role of the poet. Wordsworth explains again how he knows that the readers who were accustomed to the older writings will read his ballads and look for poetry, but not find it. For, not only is his poetry written in verse, it is not composed in poetic diction. He knows that what he wrote is of quality and importance. All the poems have a purpose: to illustrate how our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement. There is no personification of abstract ideas in these volumes, because it is not necessary to elevate the language used above that of prose. Wordsworth wanted to use the language of men, and man does not speak in metaphors and personifications.

The focus of this preface is on the Poet: what is a poet, to whom does he address himself? Who decides what language he is to use?

He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm, and tenderness, who has greater knowledge of human nature, and a more

comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them.

Wordsworth here not only praises himself, for he is a poet and he thus ascribes these qualities to himself. He also makes claims for his independence and artistic freedom. He is a man superior to other men in sensibility and is more in touch with nature than ‘normal’ people. He should not have to answer to petty rules about poetry, already centuries old and no longer suited to the times. Wordsworth writes as he wants to write and even though people may not understand, they should not immediately turn it down because it looks different from what they are used to.

Wordsworth’s argument grew fiercer with the years. Whereas the ‘Advertisement’ read more like an excuse, explaining that *Lyrical Ballads* is different from other poetry, but still suited to enjoy, the ‘Preface’ from 1800 was more of a justification. It convinced readers to see that the common really is a suitable subject for poetry and that his poetry could have ‘healing’ qualities for the public. His poetry will change people back into sensitive beings because his poetry will reconnect thoughts with feelings. He will make people be moved by what they see or hear; he will cure society from the industrialization. The final ‘Preface’ from 1802 is Wordsworth’s last stand; if he can’t convince them with this, then nothing will. In the last preface Wordsworth almost forces his readers to consider him as a superior being. He has his artistic freedom, he can write about whatever he wants and in the way he wants it. He has more knowledge and more sensibility than most people and so is capable of greater deeds. He portrays the poet almost as a superior, divine being who stands above common judgement. This last preface is no longer needed to make explanations or excuses, the readers finally need to understand what Wordsworth is all about and why his poetry is so good. Throughout these prefaces, Wordsworth has slowly fashioned himself into a superior poet-figure and his book indispensable to anyone. But the prefaces were not the only texts that were influential.

The poems

Only four of the poems in the first edition were by Coleridge, ‘The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere’, ‘The Foster-Mother’s Tale’, ‘The Nightingale’ and ‘The Dungeon’. All the rest was written by Wordsworth, as well as most of the additions that were made to the following editions. The poems deal, as Wordsworth claimed and wanted to do, with the common. They discuss the hardships, troubles and lives of the rural and the poor. Even though they did not live up to the poetical standards of the time, the poems are very moving, entertaining and always expressive. To the modern reader they are probably more intelligible than poetry in poetic diction. In that way, ‘The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere’ really stands out among the other poems, both in use of language and subject. A common denominator for all the other poems is hard to find either way, however. It is an unusual and strange collection of poems that do not have much in common and are quite different in style. Nearly all of them, at least from the first edition, do meet Wordsworth’s goals.

Many of the poems evoke a sense of pity, or sympathy, or sadness, some even being quite exciting. In the poem ‘We are Seven’ a young girl can not be convinced of the fact that, even though she used to have six siblings, now that two of them have died, they are with only five children. She keeps saying, “Nay, we are seven” because she visits their graves, and sits in the garden with them while she knits her stockings and plays. To her, it feels like she still has six siblings. Loss of children or siblings was very common in those days, meaning that many readers were very likely able to relate to it, feeling sadness but also sympathy for the little girl. Some of the poems, such as ‘The Thorn’ have tension and are truly like little stories. This poem narrates the history of a woman left by her fiancé. She often sits on a mountain ridge, exclaiming “Oh misery! Oh misery! Oh woe is me! Oh misery!” Nearby are a pond and a little heap of moss. More details are added to the story, until the plot of the story is revealed: the woman was pregnant, drowned her baby in the pond and buried it under the heap of moss. These poems have some of the melancholy in it that was often associated with Romanticism, dealing with death and loss, but in natural surroundings. They have tension, express feelings and are written from the poet’s perspective. Romantic poetry then was very suited for what Wordsworth was trying to achieve: it was suitable for the evocation of feelings, the discussion of sad subjects, the incorporation of the natural world and the expression of the poet’s thoughts.

The fact that *Lyrical Ballads* went through four editions in seven years means that, despite all the critique, people were actually buying and reading the book. Wordsworth and Coleridge became great names in British literature and their poems famous. The fact that they are still read today illustrates the quality of their work and that Wordsworth did succeed in his mission. Even

the prefaces are an important source of information. The effect on their contemporary public, was that the poems were read and appreciated and also had some unexpected results. The poem about Tintern Abbey caused a surge of tourism to the region. Wordsworth had described the ruins so beautifully, that people wanted to see it for themselves. The Tintern Abbey had become the centrepiece of the most frequently made British tour of the 1790s, which passed the Wye river valley and the historical border between England and Wales.⁶⁷ But not only the Tintern Abbey became a hotspot, the entire Lake District was overrun. All the poems about nature and the pastoral created a desire among the public to see these sites for themselves. At first, Wordsworth was pleased with this; people were listening and understanding that peace and tranquillity could be found in nature. He even wrote a *Guide to the Lakes* as a tour guide through the Lake District where he grew up. But it also was a manual, providing the reader with a guide to enjoy the scenery to its best. In this guide he described the beauty of this place and how it had best be discovered, but he also wrote about the changes time and tourism had brought about there. In his poems, he had wanted to share his passion for nature with his readers, but did not realize that the effects would cause his peaceful place to not be so peaceful anymore.

This increasing interest in the Tintern Abbey shows how much of an influence poetry could have on society, whereas the poetry came forth from developments taking place in society. Because of the poem, tourism increased; a sign of modernization. But because of the modernization of society, Romantic poetry originated. Wordsworth responded to a need he experienced in modern society: a poetry that was in touch with people's primal selves, closely connected to nature, the senses and feelings.

⁶⁷ Anonymous, 'Tintern Abbey, Tourism and Romantic Landscape', *The Norton Anthology of English literature*. Norton topics online http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/romantic/topic_1/welcome.htm

Conclusion

What stands out most in the both the Advertisement and the Prefaces is the fact that Wordsworth wanted to reach people. It was so important to him that the public would read his work and understand it. Ideally, it would touch them so much that they even changed their lives because of it, transforming into sensitive beings. By his choice of language and subjects he made sure that everyone who read the book would be able to understand the poetry and relate to it. Ideally, they would enjoy it even more than poetic diction. To give the readers a push in the right direction, the *Lyrical Ballads* was preceded by an Advertisement at first and later an extended Preface. Wordsworth did not fear that this lengthy essay at the beginning of the book would set people off. To him, all that mattered was that people would know what he did in his poems, and understand why he did it, and why it was a good thing. In this way, Wordsworth was defining his work as revolutionary; as the offset of a new type of poetry, marking the decline of the old one.

Most of what he wrote in the prefaces is true; Wordsworth did use the common, vulgar language, the subjects taken from the normal life, the lyrical poetry. He did express feelings in the poems, which succeeded in provoking feelings themselves. For Wordsworth, poetry was no longer an elitist matter; anyone who could read would understand his work. The poet did still stand out from the crowd in his opinion, Wordsworth fashioned the definition of a ‘poet’ after his own example. Thereby he also fashioned himself. That this poet was still an elitist creature seems unimportant. What matters most, was that yes, this poet is still superior to most human beings, but he is in touch with nature, sensibility and the common life. He is open and approachable for everyone, and so is the poetry. The poet was extraordinary, but the language he used no longer needed to be.

The book was read and discussed, Tintern Abbey became a frequently visited place; it was as if *Lyrical Ballads* belonged to that period. Without it, society would have been different. It came forth out of a need originating in the culture of the time, shaping that same culture simultaneously. *Lyrical Ballads* is an ultimate illustration of cultural interaction because it was begun out of a contemporary desire: travel and tourism, Coleridge and Wordsworth wanted to visit Germany. The experiment originated as a protest against developments such as the gothic novel, the melodrama, and the increasingly strict rules of poetic diction. The increasingly literate and critical public created a need for justification that grew stronger with every edition, resulting in the multiple prefaces. The addition of new poems, most of them pastoral, was caused by the increasing interest of Wordsworth with nature and the rural, following the increasing urbanization and fencing in of the countryside. The poems in their turn drove people to that

same countryside, increasing tourism. Every development, reason, effect and influence concerning the *Lyrical Ballads* had its origin in, or worked into, the culture of the time.

By explaining what harm industrialization, urbanization and the developments in literature had caused to the public, Wordsworth created a need and an importance for his own work. Wordsworth wanted to educate the people in every way. The *Advertisement* began as a short explanatory piece, justifying the unusual language and subjects of the poems. The first *Preface* became more serious, justifying the poems even more and teaching the public how they should be read. The final *Preface* was Wordsworth's final effort to teach the public anything. This essay became more of a manual, focussing on the education of the public and the role of the poet. The prefaces were a manual to reading the poems and the poems contained moralistic lessons; they served as a manual to reconnect with the emotions. Wordsworth, through self-definition, created a role for himself and his works in society. His poems would function as manuals for good behaviour, his prefaces as manuals for how to read and interpret the poems, and his travel guide as a manual to the enjoyment of nature.

Self-development or the household? Dilemmas and tradition in the life of a poet's sister

William was not the only Wordsworth discovering the scenery of his beloved Lake District, capturing the beauty of it in his poetry. He had his sister, Dorothy, living there with him, taking her along on hour-long walks through the countryside, discussing poetry and philosophy and sharing his experiences with her. Dorothy never became the poet he was, but she did write some prose and poetry of her own. These works are an invaluable source of information regarding their life together. Dorothy kept two sets of journals on their everyday lives, *The Alfoxden Journal* and *The Grasmere Journals*, named after the location of their house. Alfoxden in Somerset is the region where they first lived together from 1796 to 1799. The siblings were finally reunited after years of separation and lived only three miles away from good friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In 1799 they moved to the Dove Cottage in Grasmere where they stayed until 1808. In 1802 William married Mary Hutchinson, which meant that Dorothy now lived with her brother and his wife, and their beginning family. The years at Dove Cottage were the high point of William's career and Dorothy played a big part in his success. But even though she had a keen observing eye and wrote in a beautifully detailed way, she never chose the career of an author herself. How was Dorothy held back or stimulated by society and family choosing her path of life and career, being the sister of but never a great writer herself?

Romanticism and women

During the Romantic period women were allowed to receive only limited schooling, had to conform to rigid rules regarding their sexual behaviour and had no legal rights.⁶⁸ Besides accepting their position in the household as a mother and loving wife whose sole tasks were child rearing and housekeeping, they did not have many choices. Due to this, a great contradiction arose in the literary world. On the one hand, there was a great barrier for women to publish their work because it did not match with their traditional role of mother and housewife. On the other hand, women who chose their career and did not care about what society thought were writing prolifically. Some very famous poetesses were Anna Letitia Barbauld (1743-1825), Mary Robinson (1758-1800) and Charlotte Smith (1749-1806). These women were educated, liberal and did not care about how society judged them. Women, however, were often ridiculed by male writers, who were being surpassed by women in quality and quantity. Especially in prose, women began to compete with male authors in sales and reputation. The writings of thousands of women were published throughout the Romantic period.⁶⁹ These women had to keep in mind that they were not to set an example, as they might affect the British matrons negatively and turn them into studious women.⁷⁰ The traditional role for women in the household caused a setback in emancipation and while some women did not let that affect them at all, others were affected, feeling the need to publish anonymously, or as 'By a Lady'.⁷¹

During the period prior to Romanticism, especially in the 1750s and 1760s, women of the English elite gathered for the purpose of literary conversation. They became known as the Bluestockings and they distinguished themselves from the lower classes through their literacy and their ability to lead their lives in this fashion.⁷² In the years after that, the Bluestockings slowly disintegrated and the literary circle lost its elitist features. Women from every class came to know poetry, as well as increasing numbers of novels by women writers. Women readers and women writers equally grew in numbers as they were dependent on each other.⁷³ The 1790s saw the greatest burst of activity of women writers until then, as well as the beginning of feminism.⁷⁴ One of the reasons for this increase in women writing activity was that in real life, women were silenced more and more. The only way to reach people was through their writings, but they

⁶⁸ D.S. Lynch, & J. Stillinger, 'The Romantic Period', p. 5

⁶⁹ Curran, Stuart, 'Women Readers, Women Writers', in: Curran, Stuart (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2010) [1993] p. 170

⁷⁰ D.S. Lynch & J. Stillinger, 'The Romantic Period', p. 6

⁷¹ Susan J.Wolfson, 'Romanticism and Gender', p. 392

⁷² Stuart Curran, 'Women Readers, Women Writers', p. 171-172

⁷³ Ibidem, p. 172

⁷⁴ Ibidem, p. 175-176

lacked authority nonetheless.⁷⁵ Despite the stress that was increasingly laid on the traditional female role, many women kept writing, thus retaining their independency.⁷⁶

At the same time, a new patriarchy arose. The father took on a new position in the household, exerting more influence over the upbringing of his children and their education. This new care was often suffocating and limiting for girls, dominating their development.⁷⁷ The education and attention they received was of far lesser quality than that of their male siblings. Feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft felt that this new parental rule was the exact reason that women were seen as the weaker sex.⁷⁸ Girls had no access to the same knowledge and freedom that boys got, thus keeping them restricted and ignorant. To better the position of females, Wollstonecraft recommended education in medicine and business, politics and history. With this knowledge, women would be able to create autonomy for themselves and make their own money. This offered them an alternative to the often confining marriage.⁷⁹ In marriage, man was the ‘master and commander’; women simply had to obey.⁸⁰ A married woman was allowed no will of her own. As John Locke stated it, she was merely the housewife: someone who is related to her husband as a kind of contracted but unpaid worker in the home.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Stuart Curran, ‘Women Readers, Women Writers’, p. 179-180

⁷⁶ Ibidem, p. 180

⁷⁷ Caine, Barbara, ‘Women’, in: Ian McMalman (ed.), *The Romantic Age. British Culture 1776-1832* (Oxford, 1999) p. 44

⁷⁸ Ibidem, p. 44

⁷⁹ Ibidem, p. 46

⁸⁰ Ibidem, p. 48

⁸¹ Tuite, Clara, ‘Domesticity’, in: Ian McMalman (ed.), *The Romantic Age. British Culture 1776-1832* (Oxford, 1999) p. 130

William and the other Wordsworth

Even though William Wordsworth was not a great fan of women writers, he did encourage Dorothy to write some poetry of her own and recite it to the family. Surely, he was a follower of the ‘masculine tradition’, looking down on women poetry. At times, however, William would publish some of Dorothy’s poems in his own works, anonymously or with the caption ‘by my sister’. Even though William encouraged her writing, he also believed that the strain of authorship would be too much for her to handle.⁸² This may not have applied to her quality of writing, but maybe he took the reviewers in consideration, whom he had himself frequently been in contact with in a negative way. Because Dorothy already was quite insecure, public opinion could break her down.

Sadly enough, Dorothy’s insecurity was well-founded. While some of her poems showed great potential and quality, others were not half as good. This is why she is generally regarded as a prose-writer instead of a poetess.⁸³ In addition to that, men in her circle, most notably William, had no esteem whatsoever for female poets. William often regarded them with an ‘amused tolerance’, but he never truly appreciated them.⁸⁴ Therefore Dorothy did not dare to openly compose poetry of her own, because she knew it would be looked down upon by William and the other men close to her. She stayed with prose, because this was useful to them. All her journals she kept for William’s pleasure, subordinating her own talents to looking after her brother.⁸⁵ She often speaks extremely lovingly of her brother, for instance on 4 March 1802.

Now for my walk. I *will* be busy, I *will* look well & be well when he comes back to me. O the Darling! Here is one of his bitten apples! I can hardly find in my heart to throw it into the fire. (...) I walked round the two Lakes crossed the stepping stones at Rydale Foot. Sate down where we always sit. I was full of thoughts about my darling. Blessings on him.

Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere Journals*, 4 March 1802

This fragment seems to be coming from a woman in love. She can hardly throw away something he has touched, she thinks about him, sits at their favourite spot and refers to him as ‘darling’. That she loves William is obvious. This would explain why she gave up so much of her own life to please and serve him, setting aside her own talents. As can be read in *The Grasmere Journals*, however, she was no uneducated housewife. She listened to Wordsworth and Coleridge’s conversations, discussed poetry with them, read German books and wrote a lot. During their walks together she recited William’s poetry, which she also did to put him asleep: “After dinner we made a pillow of my shoulder – I read to him and my Beloved slept.”

⁸² Levin, Susan M., *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism* (Jefferson, 2009) p. 61

⁸³ Ibidem, p. 98

⁸⁴ Ibidem, p. 139

⁸⁵ D.S. Lynch, & J. Stillinger, ‘The Romantic Period’, p. 389

That Dorothy loved her brother, her life with him and the feeling that he needed her, is obvious. In the account of one of her walks, however, she recalls how she saw a beautiful patch of land that would be perfect to build a house on. She dreamed about it, thinking that if only she had three hundred pounds, she would settle there on her own.⁸⁶ This suggests that even though she had chosen the life with her brother, she often dreamed about having a place of her own. Despite the almost incestuous relationship that was going on between them, Dorothy could take her distance from William. She fantasized about leaving him and it was her who set up the marriage between her brother and her best friend, Mary. She wanted to be the most important person in William's life, but at the same time, she did not. She knew what was expected of a woman in their society and though sometimes she rebelled against it, most of the time she conformed to it.

The journals

Dorothy wrote very personally in her journals. She described the everyday life at the cottage in great detail, but she also entrusted her deepest emotions to the paper. The journals really were like a diary to her, a place where she could vent. Seen from this perspective, it is not strange that Dorothy never intended to publish these journals to the public, especially since much of it was concerned with the marriage of William and Mary, a subject that she was not always entirely happy about. Most of her prose, and a lot of her poetry, dealt with her loss of William as her sole companion.⁸⁷ The wedding took place on October 4th 1802, and this is what she wrote about it.

I kept myself as quiet as I could, but when I saw the two men running up the walk, coming to tell us it was over, I could stand it no longer, and threw myself on the bed, where I lay in stillness, neither hearing nor seeing anything till Sara came upstairs and said, 'They are coming'. This forced me from the bed where I lay, and I moved, I knew not how, straight forward, faster than my strength could carry me, till I met my beloved William, and fell upon his bosom.

If she had been happy about the marriage, she would not have isolated herself in silence. She obviously was experiencing feelings that she could not deal with, and as soon as she had the chance, she fell back in William's arms. Even though Mary was her closest friend, it seems she did not entirely realize what the marriage would mean for her.

Dorothy was, following the tourism trend, also a traveller. She went through Scotland twice and both times she kept a journal. These travel accounts she did mean to publish.⁸⁸ She loved roaming the countryside, no matter in what country, and kept close accounts of her

⁸⁶ Alexander, Meena, 'Dorothy Wordsworth: the grounds of writing', *Women's Studies*, vol.14 no.3 (1988) p. 204

⁸⁷ Susan M. Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*, p. 138

⁸⁸ Ibidem, p. 71

journeys. This freedom to roam about and enjoy the scenery was always more important to her than husband, household and children.⁸⁹ Settling down with a family of her own would have given her many more responsibilities, more than she had in the household of William. That may be why she chose to remain unmarried; that way she could be as free as she wanted to be and let her desire take her wherever she pleased.

A lot of the events described in the journals have to do with the household. She discussed her work in the garden and the harvest of their own fruits and vegetables, the food she made, even including recipes. She stayed up and talked with Coleridge, William and their brother John until deep in the night, always discussing poetry and talking about mountains. Even without William she stayed up and talked with Coleridge. William was always prominent in her daily updates; she noted where he was and what he did. She was much concerned with William's well-being; always commenting on how he felt, slept and looked. But however much she valued William and his opinion, she did not fail to stand up for herself. Maybe not in person, but she would in her journal. For instance on November 10th, 1801 Dorothy reported how she was very anxious for Coleridge. "I was melancholy, and could not talk, but at last I eased my heart by weeping – nervous blubbering, says William. It is not so." William did not allow her to be weak or sentimental, but she did not agree with him. She felt that she was in her right, crying.

Inspiration to William's poetry

In her writing, Dorothy used much of the same language as William and Coleridge did. Oftentimes a link can be made between a passage from her journals and a poem by either of them.⁹⁰ It is clear that they drew heavily from her writings in their own compositions. The fact that she could describe nature in detail caused William to draw gratefully from her work.⁹¹ She undertook many walks and travels with William alone or accompanied by Coleridge. The way Dorothy experienced these walks and the effect the surroundings had on her, was always an inspiration to Wordsworth. William wrote poems about Dorothy and drew from her journals for inspiration. Her journals are very detailed and give vivid images of the walks they took through nature very frequently. It is not unthinkable that he used these detailed and vivid images as an inspiration for his nature poetry. Or at least, a means to conjure up the image that he had seen with his own eyes a while before. Their beloved Lake District was the background for many of William poems.

⁸⁹ Susan M. Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*, p. 73

⁹⁰ Ibidem, p. 15

⁹¹ D.S. Lynch & J. Stillinger, "The Romantic Period", p. 390

An important note is found on April 25th, 1802 in *The Grasmere Journals*. Here Dorothy wrote: “Wm. was in the orchard. I went to him; he worked away at his poem though he was ill and tired. I happened to say that when I was a child I would not have pulled a strawberry blossom. (...) At dinner time he came in with the poem of *Children gathering Flowers*”. Here she makes a direct link between something she said and William’s creation of a new poem, which has the lines “Fill your lap and fill your bosom; Only spare the Strawberry-blossom!” She liked to think that she caused the epiphany that gave William his poem. The fact that she wrote this down, indicates that she felt proud to be of service to her brother, and that she was happy to please him in every possible way. Traces of Dorothy’s writing can be found in at least thirty-five of William’s poems.⁹²

One of the most well-known poems that William based on his sister’s prose is ‘I wandered lonely as a cloud.’ On April 15th, 1802, Dorothy wrote in the *Grasmere Journal*:

[W]e saw a few daffodils close to the water-side. We fancied that the lake had floated the seeds ashore, and that the little colony had so sprung up. But as we went along there were more and yet more; and at last, under the boughs of the trees, we saw that there was a long belt of them along the shore, about the breadth of a country turnpike road. I never saw daffodils so beautiful. They grew among the mossy stones as on a pillow for weariness; and the rest tossed and reeled and danced, and seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind, that blew upon them over the lake; they looked so gay, ever glancing, ever changing.

William turned this prose into the following poem.

I wandered lonely as a Cloud
That floats o’ high o’er Vales and Hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd
A host of dancing Daffodils;
Along the Lake, beneath the trees,
Ten thousand dancing in the breeze.

The waves beside them danced, but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee: -
A Poet could not but be gay
In such a Laughing company:
I gaz’d – and gaz’d – but little thought
What wealth that shew to me had brought:

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.

⁹² Susan M. Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*, p. 155

It is not hard to see what William did here. He used the image of the daffodils beneath the trees, the water of the lake moving alongside the strip of daffodils, but most of all seeing them dance. To Dorothy, the daffodils looked gay, but for Wordsworth, the daffodils would inspire joy in the memory of the poet for years to come. Dorothy used her imagination to make nature come to life right before her eyes; she saw things differently than William did. For him nature only came to life in his head, his own memories. Perhaps without the vivid descriptions of his sister, he might not have been able to write so many of his poems. The following comparison shows how they both described the same scene, but in a different fashion. On April 16th, 1802, they took a walk through the countryside, resting on a bridge, beholding the sights around them. William wrote the poem ‘The Cock is Crowing’, the following is a fragment.

The cock is crowing,
The stream is flowing,
The small birds twitter,
The lake doth glitter,
The green field sleeps in the sun;
The oldest and the youngest
Are at work with the strongest;
The cattle are grazing,
Their heads never raising;
They are forty feeding like one!

Dorothy saw the same things, but described them as such. “There was the gentle flowing of the stream, the glittering, lively lake, green fields without a living creature to be seen on them, behind us, a flat pasture with 42 cattle feeding; (...) The people were at work ploughing, harrowing and sowing; (...) cocks crowing, birds twittering.” It is clear from this fragment, as well as that of the daffodils, that even though she did not write much poetry, she did try to make rhymes and use poetic wording. Her prose was poetic, descriptive, sensitive and detailed. She does mention that William finished his poem along the way, indicating that he was uninfluenced by the later journal entry by Dorothy. However, their language is too similar to be coincidental. William drew from the journals, which Dorothy kept for the sole purpose of pleasing William. At the same time, William discouraged her to do something with it herself. It almost seems like he used her, took advantage of her and only brought her along all the time so that he could see how she responded to natural scenes and how she would describe them.

Dorothy's poetry

Dorothy was a true Romantic writer with the typical Romantic mind-set. The notion of man against nature, or woman against nature in her case, is very present in both her prose and her poetry, especially since she took such precise notes of her walks and travels through nature. Moreover, as could be read in the passage about the daffodils, Dorothy seemed to personify the daffodils, making them able to dance, laugh and be gay. This was common of the Romantic poets, who revived the ancient myths in which all of nature was alive and radiant with vitality.

While her style may have been Romantic, most of her subjects certainly weren't. Dorothy wrote about the domestic circle, her own hardships and experiences. Romanticism itself usually dealt with the larger dilemma's of life, and subjects such as nature and the sublime.⁹³ This type of poetry, about the 'larger things' was often reserved to male poets, women were expected to write about the household, the family and raising children.⁹⁴ In that respect, Dorothy did comply with what was culturally expected from her. Her way of life, however, did anything but that.

Family friends, the Beaumonts, very much liked to hear poems written by Dorothy read aloud. Dorothy was never fully satisfied with her work however, and denigrated it in her correspondences.⁹⁵ Whenever someone considered Dorothy a poet she felt uncomfortable and unworthy.⁹⁶ But was this modesty or did she actually believe that she was incompetent as a poetess, because she was a woman? She calls her own poetry mutterings and always reverts to the statement that she does not have proper a command of language; she could never use it for the expression of her feelings.⁹⁷ These insecurities were a big reason for her not to publish a collection of her own poetry. She may have been talked into her insecurity, but it also may have been well-founded, based on her own self-knowledge. Another consideration she made was the fact that her subjects were always drawn from real-life. She feared that she would negatively affect the people that she wrote about by making her work public.⁹⁸ Many of Dorothy's poems are about the house(hold), even Christmas, and addressed to or about children, especially her favourite niece Dora, whose name was actually Dorothy, named after her. She also wrote about nature but the rhyme is very simple and the quality does not come anywhere near the work of her brother, for instance the poem 'Loving and Liking'.

You may not love a roasted fowl
But you may love a screaming owl

⁹³ Susan M. Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*, p. 100

⁹⁴ Ibidem, p. 148

⁹⁵ Ibidem, p. 60

⁹⁶ Meena Alexander, 'Dorothy Wordsworth: the grounds of writing', p. 196

⁹⁷ Ibidem, p. 197

⁹⁸ Susan M. Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*, p. 62

Or even a spotted slimy toad
That crawls from his secure abode
His mossy nook in your garden wall,
When evening dews begin to fall
You may not love a dainty frog,
Scared by the Frenchmen from his bog
When in a fricassee or stew
He floats, or delicate ragout.
But you may love him in his pool
Where tho' he ne'er was put to school,
He swims by perfect law of Nature
A model for a human creature

This poem was obviously meant for children, suggesting that, even though she was an unmarried woman without child, she still put herself in the role of entertaining and educating children. Her modesty may have told her that this was all she was good for and that she could not write poems about more worldly subjects of good quality. Part of her may have wanted to make up for the fact that she was unladylike in some respects, or she just knew that she wasn't skilled enough for the more 'worldly' poetry.

She also wrote poems about her illness, whilst she was on her sickbed, and about the fact that she no longer could roam the country. She was an imaginary poet in that, even though she couldn't walk anymore to see the scenes for herself, she still had her memories. The following fragment of 'Thoughts on my sickbed' illustrates this.

When loving Friends an offering brought,
The first flowers of the year,
Culled from the precincts of our home,
From nooks to Memory dear.

With some sad thoughts the work was done,
Unprompted and unbidden,
But joy it brought to my *hidden* life,
To consciousness no longer hidden.

I felt a Power unfelt before,
Controlling weakness, languor, pain;
It bore me to the Terrace walk
I trod the Hills again; -

No prisoner in this lonely room,
I *saw* the green banks of the Wye,
Recalling the prophetic words,
Bard, brother, Friend from infancy!

No need of motion, or of strength,
Or even the breathing air:
- I thought of Nature's loveliest scenes;
And with Memory I was there.

Even though this poem was written on her sickbed, it shows quality and clearness of mind. The mere sight of fresh flowers, picked in the vicinity of her home, takes her back to a place in her memory. She no longer needs to be there bodily; her memory can take her back there just as easily, her being no longer a prisoner of her sickbed. She was a typical Romantic in that respect, writing about nature and the imagination, and those things being able to cause happiness.

Decay in later life

When later in life Dorothy was struck with mental illness, she turned into the complete opposite of what she had always been. Instead of the caring, hard-working woman she once used to be, she became a fat, lazy and unkind person who let others do everything for her.⁹⁹ She no longer cared for William and could not even walk anymore. In her moments of clarity she wrote about the sadness of her fate. Even before she became ill, she complained about constant head-aches in her journals, leading to the nervous breakdown she experienced later in life.¹⁰⁰ These head-aches could have been a sign of the frustration she felt because of the life she had chosen for herself. It seemed like the right thing at the beginning, but in the end she was just as oppressed as a married woman. She had all the duties of the household and above that, she was also always working for William, writing out his poetry, copying it and helping him compose. She loved to take care of William, but she was continually overworked.¹⁰¹ She never complained about it and wanted to please William more than anything, but she did place him above her own needs.

It must have been hard to be the sister of a great poet who always uses your material for his work, but never being able to step out of his shadow and publishing own work, being free from his judgements. Nearly all scholarly researches suggest that her deterioration at a later age came as a result of years and years of putting others' needs before her own. If this is true, then Dorothy did not want the life she lived with William after all. Important in this respect is also that passage in her journal where she dreamed about having a house of her own. Dorothy may have wanted to choose an independent life as a talented poetess, but felt frustrated because in her opinion, she was not good enough to be one. Had she felt more confident, she may have taken a risk and aspired to be a writer or a poet with an independent career. But she did not believe in herself, choosing the safety of her brother's household instead, where she would be financially secure but still had some of her freedom.

⁹⁹ Susan M. Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*, p. 63

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem, p. 155

¹⁰¹ D.S. Lynch, & J. Stillinger, 'The Romantic Period', p. 389

Dorothy and tradition

Dorothy herself was not a big fan of marriage. Even though she was the one who encouraged her brother to marry Mary, she was sad about the fact that Coleridge chose married life.¹⁰² This could explain why she did not want it for herself; maybe she liked the fact that she was still part of a household, without having to subject herself to the oppressions of being a married woman. Along her journeys, she often encountered women who had chosen the traditional female roles. She reported these encounters, but the women never appeared to express feelings of dissatisfaction about their lives. Here Dorothy could experience from a primary source that the burden of married life was not such a burden after all. Dorothy, however, always wrote condescendingly about these women, judging that they did not mind their lifestyles because they simply did not know any better.¹⁰³

In her letters she often wrote about her insecurities, it almost seems as if she had an inferiority complex. She talked down her own writing, as well as her person. She felt that all she was good for was taking care of the ones she loves and charity.¹⁰⁴ Perhaps this was the product of her broken childhood, missing a stable family and the company of her siblings. After the death of her parents, she lived with her aunt for ten years, without her brothers and the countryside she loved. This same aunt criticized her in correspondences, judging Dorothy for the fact that she loved to ramble through the countryside and behaving un-womanly. The conventional female roles did not suit Dorothy and she did not comply with them.¹⁰⁵ It is clear that this aunt limited her while she was growing up, having partially caused her insecurities.

Dorothy always enjoyed going on walks with her brothers and friends, surrounded by men doing un-womanly things. She felt that if she did not choose a traditional life for herself, she would not have to succumb to its rules either. One of the reasons she enjoyed these walks so much, was because she could undertake them, unburdened by husband or child.¹⁰⁶ She did not have to worry about what she left behind as she set out to roam through nature, giving her a great sense of freedom and carelessness, exactly what nature was meant to provoke.

¹⁰² Susan M. Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*, p. 23-24

¹⁰³ Ibidem, p. 75

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem, p. 55

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem, p. 55-56

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem, p. 76

Conclusion

In Romanticism, nature poetry was reserved to men, as prose was often connected with all the vulgarities that the women dared to write about.¹⁰⁷ Women did write a lot of nature poetry and especially before the Romantic period they ruled over men. With all the societal changes during Romanticism however, women were discouraged to write it anymore and considered to be incapable of writing good poetry. Therefore, it may have been that Dorothy did not feel herself to be worthy, or fit, to write nature poetry. Even though Dorothy chose her own path outside the expectations of society, the cultural tidings did influence her choices and the subjects she wrote on.¹⁰⁸ More importantly than seeking a husband of her own, creating a household and being a married woman, Dorothy chose to stay with her brother and be a part of his household. Instead of being the housewife, she was a mother to her cousins. While her choice to remain unmarried may seem like an independent one, she was in some ways worse off. Yes, she was independent in that she had no husband or children to consider or look after, but she did live the life of a housewife. She lived under William's roof, worked for him, cooked for him, sewed for him. She got all the duties of a household, without the pleasure of it being her own. No children of her own to love, or a husband to love and share with.

William was the most important person in her life and she cared for his approval and opinion very much. Since William was not a big fan of women writers, Dorothy very likely did not like to think of herself as one. She arranged her life so that she was of use to William and she could make him happy. In the role of the sister, soul-mate, fellow-wanderer, conversation partner, writer, housewife and all the other things she was for him, she could be of use to him and those things pleased him. If she were to become a female writer, William would see her as one of those other women who tried so hard to be like men, but are doomed to fail. She was so afraid to lose William's esteem that she avoided every move that could cause that. William may have taken up the patriarchal role for Dorothy, encouraging but limiting her at the same time. Dorothy was privileged as far as education was concerned: she was studying German, reading poetry and discussed philosophy with her brothers and friends.

Growing up without her siblings, she felt afraid to ever let go of them again. She would cling to them, so she would never have to miss them. In some ways, living with William offered her a freedom that she would not have experienced as a woman alone or a married woman, such as the rambles, walks and talks she had with her friends. She could perform a traditional female role in the household of her brother, without having the sole responsibility over it. If those were the things she wanted and loved most, she had made the right decision. But Dorothy was often

¹⁰⁷ Stuart Curran, 'Romantic Poetry, Why and Wherefore?', p. 213

¹⁰⁸ Susan M. Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*, p. 156

in conflict between her own desires and what was good for her family. Should she choose her own self-development or the responsibility of caring for others?¹⁰⁹ Her own needs often did not agree with those of William. Her decision to spend her life in the family of her brother eventually became a strain on her well-being which resulted in almost continuous head-aches, as can be read in her journals.

Apart from all the family-related problems, there are a few things which are even more important reasons for why Dorothy could never be a famous writer herself. She did not write fiction, she wrote journals and diaries. She did this solely for herself, and for the pleasure of William. Her journals were not supposed to be published; only her travel accounts were. People at that time were not interested in reading diaries and Dorothy most likely did not want people to read hers. The way Dorothy wrote them made them unsuitable for publication as she used many abbreviations, bad grammar and personal notes. Apart from her travel accounts, Dorothy really did not write much prose that she could have published. Moreover, Dorothy did not write a great many poems and the ones she did write were not very good. Had she published a collection of her own poetry, she might have been a public failure. After all, she was the sister of William Wordsworth, a great standard to live up to. Dorothy thought she knew her own limitations and never aspired to anything more, because she was convinced she could not do it. This realisation she drew from the literary milieu of the time, comments of those around her but mostly from her own insecurity.

The fact that she remained modest about her work despite others' compliments shows that she was either realistic or felt very inferior. William dissuading her to really become a professional writer might have had to do with the same thing. He was belittling her, but also protecting her from the harsh critique of the public and reviewers. Dorothy Wordsworth had a keen eye and wrote beautiful, detailed poetic prose. Had she decided to write novels, she would have had the possibility to show her talent in a more common literary form. If only she had lived in another place at another time and been more secure about herself, she could during her own lifetime have been the much appreciated author she is today.

¹⁰⁹ Susan M. Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*, p. 96

John Keats: The creation of a Romantic Hero

Not only women were having a hard time being acknowledged by the public and the critics, those of ‘low birth’ were judged equally harshly. The young, but very talented poet John Keats was ranked among them. His alleged ‘Cockney’ roots and style caused him to never fully be appreciated for his work. Not until the twentieth century was Keats truly ranked among the great poets of Romanticism. Nowadays his early death is seen as a great loss and he is in talent and language often compared to Shakespeare, who was one of his examples. Keats wrote fervently and today it is not only his poems that are admired, but also his letters. His prose-style shows his genius as much as his poems and his letters are some of the most beautiful in English history.¹¹⁰ While his period of development from a “blundering apprentice into a very finished craftsman” took only three years, at his age Keats was already much more talented than Milton and Shakespeare were at the same age.¹¹¹ In fact, his lack of education in poetry and literature allowed him to not be bothered with difficult terminology and diction.¹¹² Where Wordsworth needed an experiment and made an effort to use the language of the ‘common man’, Keats actually was a common man and composed like that naturally. This made his style lucid and intelligible. This chapter deals with the development of John Keats’ career and shows how origin and social milieu could place a stamp on a person, despite of his hard work and efforts to shake it off. It also shows how this same origin and background can shape a person, his interactions and poetry. In what ways was Keats a Romantic and how did he relate to nature and people because of it?

¹¹⁰ Colvin, Sidney (ed.), *Letters of John Keats to his Family and Friends* (Cambridge, 2011) [1891] Cambridge books online: <http://ebooks.cambridge.org/ebook.jsf?bid=CBO9781139060844> p. XI

¹¹¹ Ridley, M.R., *Keats’ Craftsmanship: a Study in Poetic Development* (Lincoln, 1933) p. 1

¹¹² Ibidem, p. 2

The formation years

Cockney is a term to describe a person who has been born within the radius of sound of the Bow Bells in the City of London. Its subculture lacked taste and education and was seen as vulgar, which presented itself most notably in language.¹¹³ A Cockney poet was thus easily recognized. In truth, Keats' poems contained only some elements of this language. He was born in the Cockney region, but was not of low birth. His interest in literature was encouraged by his tutor at school, Charles Cowden Clarke. Even though he was seven years Keats' senior, they became close friends and Keats' temper and studiousness changed for the better under his influence.¹¹⁴ It was also Clarke who introduced Keats to Chapman's translation of Homer and Shakespeare, big inspirations for many of his poems. Through Clarke, Keats had access to a large collection of books and knowledge, a privilege that he avidly used to his advantage.¹¹⁵ Perhaps most importantly, Clarke introduced Keats to Leigh Hunt, the editor of the radical journal *The Examiner*. The reason Keats was ever considered to be Cockney was because of this Leigh Hunt, who was generally seen as the leader of the 'Cockney School'.¹¹⁶

Keats' initial career path was that of medicine, a desire coming forth most likely from the death of his mother, whom he cared for in her illness until she died of tuberculosis when he was fourteen.¹¹⁷ Even though doctors back then were respectable, their profession was of low status. Surgery was even traditionally performed by barbers.¹¹⁸ An apothecary then was quite different from what it is now; it would come closest to what is now known as a general practitioner.¹¹⁹ Keats spent a big part of his inheritance on his education and enrolled for an apprenticeship, which indicates that he was very serious about becoming an apothecary. However, in the final stages of his education the pull of poetry became too strong, and Keats gave over to another vocation.¹²⁰ By that time, Keats had become an apothecary, physician and surgeon, much praised by his teachers.

The very reason that Keats did not actually become a doctor was not solely his desire to be a poet. His schoolbook, written by an 'Aesculapius' stated that a person could not experience too much sensibility if he were to operate and inflict pain on his patients. Keats was talented, but also very much in touch with his feelings, thus putting both himself and his patients in danger.¹²¹

¹¹³ Wu, Duncan, 'Keats and the Cockney School', in: Wolfson, Susan J. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Keats* (Cambridge, 2001) p. 37

¹¹⁴ White, R.S. *John Keats: A Literary Life*, p. 11

¹¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 11

¹¹⁶ Duncan Wu, 'Keats and the Cockney School', p. 47

¹¹⁷ R.S. White, *John Keats: A Literary Life*, p. 15

¹¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 16

¹¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 18

¹²⁰ Ibidem, p. 18

¹²¹ Ibidem, p. 38

Instead of alleviating human suffering physically, as a doctor, Keats now wanted to alleviate mental suffering through his poetry. He believed that poetry could heal, and offer consolation where medicines fail.¹²² He did finish his medical study, but despite the protests of those around him, he did what he loved best. He was eighteen when he wrote his first lines of verse, his first choices of topic were politics, poetry and women.¹²³

Self-education

As was stated in a previous chapter, the Romantic period saw an increase in literacy among the people. This affected not only the public, but also the authors. Books became more widely available and more and more were able to read them. Even though Keats lost his parents at a young age and was taken out of school before he got a decent education, he never stopped learning. Of all the Romantic poets Keats was the least educated, but he never resigned himself to that, remaining curious and studious for the rest of his life. He was for a large part self-educated and much of his knowledge came from books and encyclopaedia, which he bought himself and had access to through his friends. The fact that he could write poems about ancient mythology was thanks to his own curiosity and his great interest in that period. However, he gained his knowledge about the ancients and mythology from secondary sources such as Chapman's translation of Homer; something that was ridiculed by critics.

A great transformation in his poetry happened between *Endymion* and the *Odes*. Following his practice of self-education, he went from "the status of a gifted and charming minor talent to that of a major writer."¹²⁴ *Endymion* was the ultimate test for Keats; he wanted to know whether he could write the epic Miltonic poems which were so much a part of Romanticism. Whilst he was writing it, however, Keats soon grew weary and impatient with it. He felt that he had already proven to himself that he could do it, eager to make the next step in his poetic career.¹²⁵ The *Odes* were that next step, finally showing Keats' talent in all its glory. *Endymion* certainly fashioned and defined Keats as a poet.¹²⁶ For some, it can be seen as his rite of passage, his transformation from a boy with a dream into an established poet who writes quality poetry. It was the ultimate test for his powers of imagination and invention.¹²⁷ After *Endymion*, Keats could finally shed his Cockney-stamp.

¹²² R.S. White, *John Keats: A Literary Life*, p. 40

¹²³ Ibidem, p. 45

¹²⁴ Walsh, William, *Introduction to Keats* (London, 1981) p. 63

¹²⁵ M.R. Ridley, *Keats' Craftsmanship: a Study in Poetic Development*, p. 13

¹²⁶ Swann, Karen, 'Endymion's beautiful dreamers' in: Wolfson, Susan J. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Keats* (Cambridge, 2001) p. 20

¹²⁷ Ibidem, p. 21

Social interactions: friends and critics

Most reviewers thought Keats was a hopeless social climber, nothing more than a vulgar Cockney. Keats received the most brutal critiques from the *Blackwood* magazine. They thought that Leigh Hunt was a very bad influence on Keats, exerting Cockney influences over him and influencing his sensibility and poetical topics.¹²⁸ His worst enemy was the infamous ‘Z.’ from *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*.¹²⁹ This critic, later revealed to be John Gibson Lockhart, wrote in the August of 1818 the following critique on Keats, saying that there was a ‘frenzy’ for poetry at that time, everybody was caught with it and everyone wanted to write poetry, whether they were able to or not. Keats was destined for a medical career, even certified for it, but he too wasted his genius in the poetic madness.

From his prototype Hunt, John Keats has acquired a sort of vague idea, that the Greeks were a most tasteful people, and that no mythology can be so finely adapted for the purposes of poetry as theirs. It is amusing to see what a hand the two Cockneys made of this mythology; the one confesses that he never read the Greek Tragedians, and the other knows Homer only from Chapman; and both of them write about Apollo, Pan, Nymphs, Muses, and Mysteries, as might be expected from persons of their education.

In other words, Keats had no right to be composing poetry with classical subjects, because he was not properly educated in them and had no idea what he was talking about. He wrote about mythology as might be expected from him: badly. Furthermore, these ‘two Cockneys’ thought that mythology was suitable for poetry, when actually those stories were vulgar at the utmost, dealing with such things as murder, rape and all sorts of indecencies. This ‘Z.’ decided that Keats had better give up his poetic aspirations, as “it is a better and a wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet; so back to the shop Mr John.”¹³⁰

Unfortunately, Z. was not the only critic who wanted to give John Keats a hard time. He was often belittled by them into ‘Johnny Keats’, the boy from low birth who knew nothing. Some say the critique came forth out of jealousy, with a fateful result: the death of this young and talented poet.¹³¹ Some say all the critique is what caused the tuberculosis that killed him. Poets such as Percy Shelley and Lord Byron have claimed that it was the critics that killed Keats, that the stress over his continuously being downplayed ruptured the vessels in his lungs.¹³² This is unlikely considering his medical background; both his mother and his brother before him died of

¹²⁸ D.S. Lynch & J. Stillinger, ‘The Romantic Period’, p. 879

¹²⁹ O’Neill, Judith (ed.) *Critics on Keats* (London, 1967) p. 10

¹³⁰ Ibidem, p. 10

¹³¹ Aske, Martin, ‘Keats, the Critics, and the Politics of Envy’ in: Roe, Nicholas (ed.) *Keats and History* (Cambridge, 1995) p. 46

¹³² Stillinger, Jack, ‘The “Story” of Keats’ in: Wolfson, Susan J. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Keats* (Cambridge, 2001) p. 247

consumption. However, the image that Shelly set of Keats in his elegy ‘Adonais’ has been the prevalent one for a long time. But even though Keats had to deal with a lot of critique from reviewers and the public, he never let it deter or influence him.

Keats followed his own heart and he wrote poetry the way that he wanted it to. Most important for him, was the feedback from his family and friends, which he cared for a lot more than the public opinion. In the Romantic tradition of self-definition, Keats decided to write a preface to his ‘Endymion’, explaining himself and his reasons. He consulted with his friends about it, asking for their feedback. When they weren’t too positive about it, Keats wrote the following in a letter because to him, the reviews of the critics did not matter half as much as those of his family and friends.

Since you all agree that the thing is bad, it must be so—though I am not aware there is anything like Hunt in it (and if there is, it is my natural way, and I have something in common with Hunt). Look it over again, and examine into the motives, the seeds, from which any one sentence sprung—I have not the slightest feel of humility towards the public—or to anything in existence,—but the eternal Being, the Principle of Beauty, and the Memory of great Men. When I am writing for myself for the mere sake of the moment's enjoyment, perhaps nature has its course with me—but a Preface is written to the Public; a thing I cannot help looking upon as an Enemy, and which I cannot address without feelings of Hostility. If I write a Preface in a supple or subdued style, it will not be in character with me as a public speaker—I would be subdued before my friends, and thank them for subduing me—but among Multitudes of Men—I have no feel of stooping, I hate the idea of humility to them.

I never wrote one single Line of Poetry with the least Shadow of public thought. Forgive me for vexing you and making a Trojan horse of such a Trifle, both with respect to the matter in Question, and myself—but it eases me to tell you—I could not live without the love of my friends—I would jump down Etna for any great Public good—but I hate a Mawkish Popularity. I cannot be subdued before them—My glory would be to daunt and dazzle the thousand jabberers about Pictures and Books—I see swarms of Porcupines with their Quills erect "like lime-twigs set to catch my Winged Book," and I would fright them away with a torch. You will say my Preface is not much of a Torch. It would have been too insulting "to begin from Jove," and I could not set a golden head upon a thing of clay.

If there is any fault in the Preface it is not affectation, but an undersong of disrespect to the Public—if I write another Preface it must be done without a thought of those people—I will think about it.

John Keats, ‘Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds’, April 9th 1818

What is seen here is a poet who does not care about what the public thinks; to him, they are enemies. He can already see the reviewers with their pens held high, ready to bash his work. But he does not care. His relationship with the public was a hostile one and he wanted to do good with his poetry, not so much educate his public. The preface was written as a defence against them, a torch to chase them away. He fought the critics and the public but also ignored their opinion. He wrote for himself, not for them.

The omnipresent Nature, senses and sensibility

Nature poetry is the area where Romantic poetry is most famous; it has almost become synonymous with it.¹³³ Keats too, derived intense pleasure from nature.¹³⁴ Most striking about Keats' poetry is the incessant reference to nature. No matter what Keats describes in the poems, it is always compared to something from the natural world, whether it is an animal, a plant, or a stream or mountain. What is interesting about this though is that Keats was born in London. He was a city boy and not like Wordsworth, who hated the city and settled for a hermit's life in the Lake District. For Keats, the garden was far enough to find inspiration in nature: he never left the city for good. He did however feel a desperate need to travel, and did so in the summer of 1818 when he went to Scotland with his friend Charles Brown. Unfortunately, the weather was terrible and because of their lack of money they had to do much of their trip through Scotland on foot, sleeping in humble lodgings and eating poorly. They were supposed to stay away for four months, but had to return after three months because John had become too ill to carry on. He suffered from a severe cold and was very fatigued. It is commonly thought that this cold, contracted during the Scottish tour, is what triggered the tuberculosis that became his death.¹³⁵ Had Keats not felt the unstoppable urge to travel and see Europe's natural beauty, he may not have suffered his untimely death.

Poetry from Imagination

Keats often used an imaginary version of nature, his own sort of dream world. The Imagination played a big part in the composition of poetry for most of the Romantics and Keats as well relied on his imagination. He lived more in it than in the real world.¹³⁶ His imagination is where he got his poetic inspiration, not so much by going out and seeing things as they were. That Keats composed more from nature and his imagination than from rationality is illustrated by his insistence that poetic inspiration was not to be found in abstract reason, but in the ‘world of things’.¹³⁷

A sort of duality can be found in his poetry between reality and something that he imagined. On the one hand, Keats wrote about what he saw, or heard, such as with the nightingale discussed later on. On the other hand, Keats would read or see something, and it would come to life in his head. The poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, for example, is based on the

¹³³ Furst, Lilian R. *Romanticism in Perspective* (London, 1979) [1969] p. 83

¹³⁴ Ibidem, p. 85

¹³⁵ Bate, Walter Jackson, *John Keats* (Cambridge, 1978) [1963] p. 362

¹³⁶ M.R. Ridley, *Keats' Craftsmanship: a Study in Poetic Development*, p. 4

¹³⁷ Ibidem, p. 6

imaginative story that came to life in Keats' head after he had seen a Greek urn in a museum.¹³⁸ He constructed an imaginative story around something he had seen in reality. That is how most of Keats' poetry originated. He would experience with his senses, but compose with his imagination. His sensory experiences were elaborated into beautiful, fantastical and imaginative stories, based on what he had seen, heard and learned elsewhere.

That is another striking element in Keats' poetry: many of the poems have allusions to things he loved, such as Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, old folklore and ancient mythology, making them read almost like a fairy-tale. During the Romantic period nature grew out of its image of a passive object; it was now seen as an animate being because animals, trees and plants were seen as inhabitants of the earth, just like human beings.¹³⁹ Ancient Greek mythology as well began and ended in nature. It was suffused with nymphs, satyrs, gods and plants that had once been human. That sort of magical, fairy world feeling can be found in Keats' poetry as well; he brought nature to life in the shape of fairies, animated trees, plants, streams and creatures of the forest. Keats knew his mythology, all the knowledge coming forth from self-education. When Keats looked at nature, that mythological world is what he saw. He recreated the atmosphere of his daydreams in his poems.

The poet of senses and sensibility

The core of Keats' poetry lies with the senses. He described nature and life as he experienced it through his senses, very much in the Romantic tradition. Romanticism was the period of feelings, opposed to the rationality of the Enlightenment. Keats let go of rationality and followed his heart. Objectivity in nature poetry is rare, and often does the poet consider nature in relation to man, more specifically to himself.¹⁴⁰ In Keats' case, he described nature from his own perspective, filtered through his senses and his imagination. His poems were often written from the perspective of himself, or a main character. The following is a fragment from 'Ode to a Nightingale'.

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of the hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness,—
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot

¹³⁸ D.S. Lynch & J. Stillinger, 'The Romantic Period', p. 905

¹³⁹ Lilian R. Furst, *Romanticism in Perspective*, p. 84

¹⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 88

Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

Away! Away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

Keats here begins with a description of his senses; the song of the nightingale is so beautiful to him that it almost has the effect of numbing drug on him. Immediately there are allusions to mythology, nature, fairy tales and his own imagination. Lethe, the Dryad; his interest in mythology causes him to imagine the world in those terms. In the next stanza again there is mythology, but also fairy tales, all as he imagines it, experiences it through his senses. This Ode, which is actually much longer, has everything in it that Keats is known for: allusions to mythology and fairy tales, a description of the senses, nature filtered through his imagination, and a hint of melancholy and indolence.

The ‘cult’ of sensibility originated just before the Romantic period. The increasing inequalities in wealth and differences in class caused the middle class to distinguish itself from the lower class, by being able to have sensibility. The lower class knew too much suffering, poverty and hard physical work. Since the middle class had lighter worries, they could allow themselves to feel.¹⁴¹ Being able to use the senses, feelings, and emotions, became a luxury. Women were more capable of this sensibility, because their nerves were considered to differ from those of men: they were more ‘in touch’ with their emotions.¹⁴² Sensibility meant that a man had to be feminine. In poetry it had to do with feelings, the usage of the senses. But also sentimentalism, a belief in true love and the dangers of simply following one’s heart.¹⁴³ This cult claimed that reformation of a ‘fallen population’ could be achieved through conversion.¹⁴⁴ In other words, they knew that they could recreate a sensitive society now that the biggest hardships of the industrialization were over. This sounds very familiar to what Wordsworth wanted to achieve, but Keats also wanted to ‘heal’ the public with his poetry. Even though Keats did not really have a mission for the public

¹⁴¹ Barker-Benfield, G.J., ‘Sensibility’, in: McCalman, Iain (ed.), *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic age: British culture 1776-1832* (Oxford, 1999) p. 102

¹⁴² Ibidem, p. 102

¹⁴³ Ibidem, p. 110

¹⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 111

and did not much bother with self-definition, being able to write immortal poetry that could ‘make a change’ was very important to him.

Keats then was connected to the cult of sensibility. This is clear from the effect that natural images had on him, the way he shut himself out from the public and his critics and the fact that he gave up his medical career because he did not think he could handle it. He was sensitive in many ways and expressed this in all of his writings. He allowed himself to feel and be led by his desires, was aware of the dangers but did not let them deter him. He was trained to be an apothecary and surgeon, a job which secured him of a good and steady income. Instead, he decided to be a poet, even if that meant he would have to struggle and live in poverty.

Furthermore, there was his engagement to Fanny Brawne. Here, again, he decided to follow his heart against better judgement. He knew he would not be able to support her financially, he knew he was in bad health, yet he loved her too much to be able to let her go.¹⁴⁵ The fact that Keats could entertain sensibility and allow it to influence his life and choices indicates that Keats was not a low class boy who suffered, but someone who felt because he had the luxury to do so.

¹⁴⁵ William Walsh, *Introduction to Keats*, p. 105

The melancholy poet: Keats the Romantic Hero

Keats was, as a poet, obsessed with the tragedies of life, suffusing his work with melancholy and morbidity.¹⁴⁶ Throughout his life Keats encountered illness, death and loss. It was quite impossible for him to let go of that. Poetry could be a way to deal with those feelings, vent the melancholy in verse. A fascination with death was also very Romantic, set off by the Graveyard School during the Preromantic years. Keats was very much influenced by these Preromantics, as they introduced sensibility and emotive passion in poetry.¹⁴⁷ The words ‘gloom’, ‘melancholy’ and ‘feeling’ are omnipresent in his letters, showing that Keats occupied himself with these things to a great extent, and liked to share with his friends, or vent to them.

While for Wordsworth a poet was ‘a man speaking to men’, Keats saw himself as ‘a youth singled out by the gods’.¹⁴⁸ The fact that he saw himself in that way implies that he felt like he had a true calling, something he felt deep inside. His sensibility allowed him to feel this and follow his heart, leaving everything behind to follow his true destiny, bestowed on him by the gods. What Keats wanted the most, was a poetry that would still exist after he had died. The immortality of his poetry and his posthumous reputation were very important to him.¹⁴⁹ One of the poems he wrote at the end of life is ‘This Living Hand, Now Warm and Capable’. It might be an address to his posthumous readers, but also a fragment of a play. Either way, it does not fail to convey a message.

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood,
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm’d. See, here it is –
I hold it towards you.

The melancholy and gloom of all his works is much present here as well. It is almost as if Keats promises a haunting, that would make the readers wish that they could give up their lives, just so that Keats could live again.

The clearest proof of his gloomy nature is obviously his ‘Ode to Melancholy’. It was a trait of the ‘Romantic Hero’ to be melancholy, it was a sort of romanticized state in which the mind could feel and allow the feelings to overflow. The Romantic Hero refused “to see things as

¹⁴⁶ William Walsh, *Introduction to Keats*, p. 6

¹⁴⁷ Michael J. Tolley, ‘Preromanticism’, p. 14

¹⁴⁸ Karen Swann, ‘Endymion’s beautiful dreamers’, p. 21

¹⁴⁹ Milne, Drew, ‘Flaming robes: Keats, Shelley and the metrical Clothes of Class Struggle’, *Textual Practice*, vol. 15 no. 1 (2001) p. 101

they are, above all to see himself as he really is".¹⁵⁰ This often meant that he saw the world more negatively, revelling in sorrow. Moreover, the Romantic Hero loved to flee from reality, into the realm of his own imagination.¹⁵¹ When this feeling becomes too strong, however, suicide lurks, as the first stanzas of the Ode show.

No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist
Wolf's bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;
Make not your rosary of yew-berries,
Nor let the beetle, not the death-moth be
Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl
A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,
And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.

Striking here are the references to the natural world. It is clear that Keats knows his allusions well, to be found in mythology as well as nature. Lethe was the river of the underworld that causes forgetfulness, wolf's bane a poisonous herb. The beetle comes from Egyptian culture and the death-moth bears a skull on its back. All these things have to do with death and mourning, on the one hand showing that melancholy is expressed in many ways, and Keats knows his symbols of death well. This poem however is a call to not lose oneself in it. Did he write this for his own sake or that of the public? It is not unlikely that Keats sometimes needed to wake himself up as well.

He often revelled in this world, this feeling, just like the Graveyard School did before him. That he was of gloomy spirits is also obvious from the 'Ode on Indolence', not published until after his death. In this poem, he sees Love, Ambition and Poesy as three figures on a vase, fading and reappearing before his eyes. However, they 'cannot raise my head cool-bedded in the flowery grass'. He bids them adieu, to never more return, insinuating that he did not appreciate the presence of these three 'muses' in his life, nor is pained to be without them. Maybe he would even find pleasure in that feeling of loss, indolence, as is a part of melancholy.

Another recurring aspect of the Romantic Hero was the relationship to autumn. Both Goethe's Werther and Chateaubriand's René spoke of autumn in their stories. What appealed to them was the desolation in nature, trees stripped of their leaves and prevalent melancholy.¹⁵² Keats as well wrote a poem 'To Autumn', thus affirming his preoccupation with melancholy in nature. Keats however, manages to see the beauty of this season, underneath the bleakness.

¹⁵⁰ Lilian R. Furst, *Romanticism in Perspective*, p. 102

¹⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 107

¹⁵² Ibidem, p. 109

Season of mist and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun,
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the mossed cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells.

So there is mist and temperatures drop, but still, things grow, thanks to the sun that has warmed the cells of life during the entire summer, thus giving trees enough warmth to bear fruit in the fall. Fall is also “drowsed by the fume of poppies”. This was possibly because autumn was reaping time for poppies. They were used to create opium, a very popular drug during the Romantic period and certainly a remedy for the Romantic Hero’s *taedium vitae*, or tiredness of life.¹⁵³ The referral to this drug in combination to autumn does add to the claim that Keats was a Romantic Hero, even though he was not an opium addict himself. Keats here focuses on growth and life that is still present in the autumn. However, the poem also refers to the transience of nature and the seasons, for we all know that the warmth of summer will come to pass, and within a few months everything will have died.

Probably the most familiar Romantic Hero is Goethe’s Werther, who suffered from an unanswered love which eventually led to his suicide. Werther is an artistic, young and highly sensitive man, who falls deeply in love with the young girl Lotte. Unfortunately, she is already betrothed to another man. She cannot answer his love but Werther cannot just give up. He falls deeper and deeper in his own sorrow, until he decides that only death can ease his sufferings. The connection to Keats is striking. He as well was young, artistic, sensitive, passionate and very much in love with his Fanny Brawne. Their love was not impossible and Fanny and Keats could be together, but at the end of his life Keats suffered from increasing jealousy and obsession. He felt more and more as if his love was unanswered, because Fanny seemed careless or unresponsive to his love letters.¹⁵⁴ When he was away from her, doubts about the sincerity of her love played through his head, making him question himself and her, writing about it in his letters.

His last letters to her show less of the talented young poet and lover, they have made way for possessiveness and jealousy. Some of these letters were so severe, that editors often chose not

¹⁵³ Lilian R. Furst, *Romanticism in Perspective*, p. 100

¹⁵⁴ Sidney Colvin (ed.), *Letters of John Keats to his Family and Friends*, p. xvii

to publish them.¹⁵⁵ Keats made his love seem unanswered and hopeless, thus driving himself into despair. His insecurities would lead to his own unhappiness, pushing Fanny away from him in the process, Keats being further and further secluded in his own melancholy. Sadly, that was the fate of the Romantic Hero: seeing ghosts that are not really there, only to have everything contribute to his own sad fate. It was almost as if Keats actually was afraid of really being happy, always challenging himself and his fate, evoking melancholy.

A solitary, self-centred life was another trait of the traditional Romantic Hero. He would not care much for others, but lose himself in his own solitude and gloom.¹⁵⁶ Keats had many friends and did not like to be alone, but his poems did often come forth from a solitary experience. For example ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, which originated during an hour-long retreat to the garden, where Keats sat alone and listened to the song of the nightingale.¹⁵⁷ The poem ‘O Solitude! If I must with thee dwell’, sheds some light here.

O Solitude! If I must with thee dwell,
Let it not be among the jumbled heap
Of murky buildings; climb with me the steep –
Nature’s observatory – whence the dell,
It’s flowery slopes, it’s river’s crystal swell,
May seem a span; let me thy vigils keep
‘Mongst boughs pavilioned, where the deer’s swift leap
Startles the wild bee from the foxglove bell.
But though I’d gladly trace these scenes with thee,
Yet the sweet converse of an innocent mind,
Whose words are images of thoughts refined,
Is my soul’s pleasure; and it sure must be
Almost the highest bliss of human-kind,
When to thy haunts two kindred spirits flee.

This poem may seem contradictory, as Keats concludes that it is the greatest bliss to find another human of kindred spirit whom one can relate to. However, he states that it is his soul’s pleasure to flee with this kindred person to the haunts of solitude. Thus, by being ‘alone together’, escaping from the ‘jumbled heap of murky buildings’ and retreating to nature he would be happiest. So in one way, he claims that he would not mind to be in solitude as long as he could be so in nature. On the other hand, he says how he would love to have someone with him to converse with. He would not mind solitude if it but were in nature, but he would forever miss a person to converse with, as he requires that for his happiness. Being solitary in nature is a recurrent theme in Romantic poetry, another element that adds to Keats’ Romantic spirit.

¹⁵⁵ Sidney Colvin (ed.), *Letters of John Keats to his Family and Friends*, p. xvii-xviii

¹⁵⁶ Lilian R Furst, *Romanticism in Perspective*, p. 110

¹⁵⁷ D.S. Lynch & J. Stillinger, ‘The Romantic Period’, p. 903

Conclusion

Sensibility

Keats was a Romantic in the sense that he allowed himself to feel. It was his sensibility that made his medical career both impossible and unwanted. He longed for poetry, that medium to give a voice to his imagination. He had a world inside his head that he wanted to share with others, both through his poetry as well as the correspondences with his many friends. The sensibility played a big role throughout his life. Not only had the career-choice come forth from it, also his love-life. For a long time Keats had not liked to be around women, until he met his much younger neighbour Fanny Brawne. The love was unwanted and unpractical, but Keats could not fight his feelings of love any more than he could his calling to poetry.

Keats' sensibility also made him a caregiver and a loving friend. The fact that he nursed his mother and brother on their sickbed and wanted to become a doctor implies that he cared about the feelings of others, wanting to relieve their suffering. Just like the Greek tragedies offered a catharsis of the feelings, Keats wanted to alleviate mental suffering with his poetry. Reading about someone else's indolence, melancholy or impossible love might have helped people to put their own suffering into perspective. But more than that, his poetry may have helped him to put his own life into perspective. The 'Ode to Melancholy' discourages the reader to drink from the river of forgetfulness, to poison oneself, basically, to commit suicide. Why would a happy poet write something like that? Keats must have had these feelings of anguish himself, his poetry being a means to deal with them.

The Romantic Hero

John Keats, after his death, became the Romantic Hero of poetry: the melancholy man who was always in gloom and destroyed by the public. During his life, however, he was not so destroyed by the public at all. True, the critics did influence the reception of his poetry, but they did not harm Keats personally as much as was thought. Byron's famous quote that he was "snuffed out by an article" has since proven to be untrue. Keats *was* a Romantic Hero. It influenced his relationship with the public and the critics in that, maybe because he was so melancholy, he did not even feel it anymore. The critique from the public did not hurt him anymore but added to his Romantic feeling of melancholy, whereas the opinion of his friends and family really counted for him. That could be the reason why he sent transcripts of his poems with so many of his letters. In the end though, Keats did prove all the reviewers wrong; by the time that he published the Odes everybody was finally convinced of his talents.

Some of these odes had gloomy subjects, showing his true nature and adding to the myth that later surrounded him. Most important was the fact that even though Keats was a social person with many friends, he still retreated at times, seeking solitude and allowing his senses to fill him with beautiful images. At times like that, Keats lived in his own imagination, sometimes getting lost in his own feelings and world of gloom. Keats saw and sought melancholy, but always did so in respect to nature. Everything he wrote about was suffused with natural images. He almost created a new world out of his imagination, in which he lived almost more than in the real world. His poetry, suffused with allusions to myths, nature, his senses and fairy tales give us insights into his imaginary world, the dream world where his latest, and most beautiful, poetry came from. Everything he described was filtered through his imagination, giving hints of his melancholy and emotional state, thus providing an illustration of the development of this poet's mind, his increasing worries and thoughts of gloom as if he felt that his premature death was closing in on him.

Keats' imagination must have been what made his life bearable. After all his hardships, unhappy youth and all the people he had lost, his realm of imagination had become a refuge and a sanctuary. It is where all his experiences came to life and were transformed into beautiful poetry. Inspiration came from nature, and was filtered through his thoughts and knowledge. Nature was where he could imagine all the images he created in his head, it was the background for his daydreams.

Self-education and –definition

Keats liked to share his knowledge through his poetry. The many allusions he made to mythology, history and other poetical works shows how he wanted to use everything he learned to write beautiful verse. His later poems were more sophisticated than his earlier work, because he had simply learned more to allude to. Self-definition thus occurred mostly through the poetry itself rather than through prefaces or supplementary essays. Just by reading his poetry, one would get to know how Keats experienced the world, what he felt, how he thought about things. He is a presence in most of his poems, writing from his own perspective or placing himself in that of someone else, trying to feel as they would feel.

Poetry, however, is subject to interpretation. Objective, factual information is seldom found in poems. That is why Keats' correspondences are an invaluable source of information in this respect. Thanks to those letters, it is now clear that Keats did not suffer as much from critics as was commonly thought, that he sought for melancholy, not only in his own life and mind but also in nature. The odes to melancholy, indolence and the nightingale all show this, as well as

most of his life choices. He was a ‘dark’ Romantic, seeking for things that brought despair rather than happiness.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, these writers had more in common than at first might seem likely. They all found happiness in solitary retreat, either in nature or their own minds. They all followed the trend of the time and travelled. The desire to travel led to *Lyrical Ballads*. Had Wordsworth and Coleridge not wanted to go to Germany, they would not have felt the necessity to write this collection of poems. Dorothy wanted to travel through Scotland to keep a travel account that she wanted to publish. She knew she could write beautifully, but needed an interesting subject. Tourism was very popular so she had finally found something that she could show her talent in and that was publishable in that period. For Keats, it brought about the cold that damaged his health irreparably, the cold that is commonly thought to have killed him.

Tourism and a quest for beautiful natural images were a part of these poets' lives, just as much as nature and the imagination were. But this urge to travel was but one of their similarities, their motives and consequences but few of their differences. Their Romanticism shows in many ways, on which this thesis has hopefully shed some light.

Nature and the natural

This thesis has shown that throughout the Romantic period, a great rediscovery and appreciation for the natural occurred. In language, poetry, gardening, and in a way even the household it gained new significance. For, the natural role of the female was to give birth and nurse children. The unmarried woman, the female author with independence and a career, was actually a very contra-natural development. For Dorothy, being a Romantic meant that she chose the more natural life, retreating to the country, away from the cities and modern life. She ran a household with her brother William and lived a very natural life, taking daily walks and harvesting home-grown fruits and vegetables. Nature inspired feelings in her that she tried to convey in the journals, she made beautifully detailed descriptions of the natural world and did not let her womanhood deter her from taking strolls through nature. She both fought and complied to gender roles, following her own nature.

Wordsworth argued for a more natural life, natural poetry and a natural use of language. In the *Lyrical Ballads*, none of the poems he wrote dealt with supernatural things or used abnormal language. Wordsworth drew inspiration from real life, the real language of people. Poetry should come naturally, as he stated, "good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". For him, natural meant 'taken from real life'. Modernization and the social

developments related to it were not natural. The rural life was and Wordsworth honoured it in his *Lyrical Ballads*.

In the poetry of John Keats, nature is where the imagination meets the senses. He described nature as he imagined and experienced it. He did not know poetic diction and thus had a natural use of language of himself. Keats was not forced, he let his feelings guide him and his development occurred gradually.

For these three authors, nature was mingled everywhere through their lives, suffusing their writings, family bonds and everyday lives. They were in touch with their own natures, experiencing overwhelming emotions when confronted with natural beauty and life itself. Nature defined who they were, their love for it defining how they gave meaning to their lives.

Imagination

Nature and the imagination were inextricably linked. The imagination would serve as an inspiration, a refuge, a place for reliving moments of bliss. For Keats, it was the place where his poetry was born; inside his own mind, his own dream world. Everything he read, learned, saw and felt received a place there, living in his memory until it was expressed in his poetry. William and Dorothy used it to relive fond memories, a place to store beautiful images. Dorothy wrote them down in her journals, and William would later read her work and re-imagine parts of a walk or a journey. There was a difference between the Wordsworths and Keats in that Keats seemed to permanently live in his imagination, sensations entering it and becoming stories in his mind. The Wordsworths only used imagination to relive events, first experiencing them first-hand and later reviving the images in their heads.

The poet mediated between nature and the imagination. Even though they all wrote about nature and found inspiration in it, nature poetry was seldom an objective description. Both poetry and prose were filtered through the imagination of the author, influenced by things they had heard, seen, read or fantasized before. For all three authors discussed, nature was not just there; it would come to life inside their minds. Their perspective was a very important factor in their poetry; where did they place themselves in it? Keats became part of his fantasy, able to fly along with the fairies and go where no man could go. His imagination and natural images were fantastical. For the Wordsworths, the imagination was limited to seeing things that were actually possible, and real. Keats created his own nature, whereas the Wordsworths had to see it first before they could imagine it. Without memories, they could not create an image.

Self-definition and public/social life

Dorothy defined herself in the fact that she did not choose a household of her own, but stayed with her brother instead. It says a lot about her personality that she actually always placed the needs of other before her own. The journals as well show her personality, especially in relation to William. Keats defined himself through his poems, through the subjects that he chose and the perspective he wrote from. Through his attitude, his ways of seeing things and his view on the natural world, he actually defined himself as a Romantic Hero. Yes, those who wrote about him after his death played a part in that as well, but Keats did most of the defining himself, during his lifetime, through his poetry and correspondences. This was contrary to William Wordsworth, who did most of his self-defining through prefaces specifically designed for that purpose. Keats stated his claim in the poems, whether intended or not, and allowed people to interpret it for themselves. All he wanted was to write pretty poetry that would touch people and help them heal. Wordsworth had a more scientific approach to poetry and the preface. He wrote with a mission and it was mandatory that people would see him and his poetry as he wanted them to. He could not just let the public think what they would about him and his work. That is why he wrote the manuals to understanding both himself and the *Lyrical Ballads*, in the shape of prefaces.

Most information about these poets can be found in their own work. William Wordsworth made sure through his essays that people would get to know him and his ideals. Dorothy Wordsworth is most well-known through her journals, which were like a diary to her. She reads like an open book, thanks to her writings. Wanted or not, the whole world can now read about her personal thoughts and her everyday life. Keats' personality shines through in his poetry as well as his letters. These 'ego-documents' that have become valuable in historical research only thirty years ago have helped shed new light on these writers and their reasons. What is interesting is that Wordsworth fashioned himself intentionally. He wrote specifically for publication and even though much of the information we have about him today is derived from journals and letters, Wordsworth actively fashioned himself during his own lifetime and did so through publication. The self-definition of Dorothy and John was more of a natural development; they do not seem to actively have been shaping themselves publicly. Keats was mostly fashioned by the public, his critics and contemporary poets. As stated before, it was Shelley's view of Keats that has been the prevalent one for a very long time. Keats himself did write prefaces, but these he wrote for himself, for as he stated in the letter to John Hamilton quoted in chapter three, "[i]f there is any fault in the Preface it is not affectation, but an undersong of disrespect to the Public—if I write another Preface it must be done without a thought of those people—I will think about it." He hated the public so much that he could not

write a proper preface for them without being hostile and disrespectful, meaning that he did not consider himself to be able to influence the public to any degree.

What these three poets had in common was that their position in society was a marginal one, at least was at the start of their careers. Dorothy was a woman, and an unmarried one at that. Wordsworth was completely unknown when *Lyrical Ballads* was first published. His name was so insignificant that Coleridge and he even decided to publish their first edition anonymously. Keats came from a broken home, was reportedly from low birth and Cockney, his public image was far from the truth but it affected him nonetheless. Whereas Dorothy Wordsworth let society and those around her deter her, Keats was the entire opposite: he followed his passion, no matter how much critics turned him down or his family disliked his decisions.

Romantics

Dorothy was Romantic in this because she took on the traditional role, at the same time choosing the independence of a female writer without a family of her own to take care of. She combined trends of the time, into something that she felt comfortable with, following her own feelings. Keats used his sensibility to make decisions. This influenced his career, his love life and the way he treated the public. He did not care for them because they disliked him. He chose his personal life over his public life, thus making himself independent and autonomous. That he did not care about public thought shows through in everything written by him. His correspondences show that he only cared for the opinion of those close to him, but he would always follow his own heart, even if it disagreed with them. Keats' sensibility made him feminine and seemingly weak, but he was actually very strong. Despite the critics' attempts to destroy him he kept doing what he loved. I cannot state enough how Keats was a man of feelings, a man who felt and always followed his heart, even against better judgement.

Wordsworth was a Romantic in that he rebelled against the Enlightenment. He took on the challenge of educating and instructing the public, thus attempting to recreate the world in his own vision. If people were critical of his arguments or poetry, he tried to undo that with his prefaces. In his own mind, his poetry was most necessary for a properly functioning society, people needed to be influenced by him if they were to survive the period of industrialization. Wordsworth created his own necessity, quality and fame. Through the prefaces, he fashioned himself into the exalted poet, the one who has more sensibility than the common man, sees the world differently and has the power to make changes.

Wordsworth wanted to revolutionize poetry with the new, more natural use of language, but also change the canon of poetry. All the elder poets were about to be knocked off their pedestals. As stated in the earlier chapters, there were a great many female writers during this time. Wordsworth regarded them with ‘amused tolerance’, meaning that he actually did not appreciate their work. For him, women belonged in the household or writing indecent prose. This also showed in the relationship with his sister, Dorothy. She wrote prose, encouraged by William, but she wrote only little poetry, because in that she was discouraged by him.

There were different sides to the Romantic period and a ‘romantic’ attitude. The poets discussed here all struggled to find their place in this period that brought about so many new developments, but also reverted to the past. Some things changed for the better, others were returned to their former oppressiveness. Romantic literature served as an escape from all of these things. By doing what they loved and felt was right, they defined and established themselves. Had Keats not found the freedom to follow his heart and write the poetry that was born in his imagination, he would have remained an apothecary. Without the decline of the Enlightenment, there would not have been a place for Wordsworth’s ‘revolutionary’ poetry. This Romantic period reached out a hand to those that felt more in touch with emotions than rationality, it offered a platform and a place to share. Historical events are always a confluence of circumstances and influences work in more ways than one. It was lucky that these great authors were around when they were, so they could be influenced by the time, exert their influences and shape society when they did.

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