



Nature and Aesthetic Transcendence: Re-reading Romantic Consciousness in Shelley and Keats

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Abstract:

The paper examines the Romantic consciousness in a comparative analysis of nature and imagination in the poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats. Although Romanticism generally re-conceptualised nature as animate and spiritual, scholars have long recognised its diversity and plurality. This study examines how Shelley and Keats develop distinct yet complementary conceptions of nature and imagination. This research paper focuses on a close reading of Ode to the West Wind and To a Skylark, Ode to a Nightingale, and To Autumn, and examines how the two poets create opposing yet complementary poetic responses to nature. The methodology combines textual analysis with the important Romantic theories of imagination and aesthetic perception. The results show that Shelley imagines nature as dynamic and transformative, adopting a revolutionary imagination, while Keats imagines nature as a realm of aesthetic transcendence, in which sensuous experience makes it possible to contemplate mortality. The paper claims that Romantic consciousness is dialectical, rather than monolithic, and moves and stays still, aspires and accepts. The study also foregrounds this contrast, emphasizing the plurality of Romantic ideology and repositioning nature as both an external force and an internalized aesthetic principle in nineteenth-century poetry.

Keywords:

Romantic Consciousness;
Dynamic Nature;
Aesthetic Transcendence;
Imagination;
Shelley and Keats;
Comparative Romanticism

Introduction

The Romantic movement was a turning point in the history of English literature, favouring imagination, emotion, and nature over the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Romanticism, as a reaction to the mechanistic worldview and empirical dogmatism of Enlightenment thought, with its emphasis on reason, order, and objectivity, emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Romantic authors, in contrast, prefigured subjective experience, emotional richness, and the creative ability of the human mind, thus recalculating the role and extent of literary representation (Abrams 1971, 23; McGann 1983, 12). According to M. H. Abrams, Romantic poetry is no longer about the imitation of the external world; it is more about the inner world of the mind, in which imagination is the main source of meaning and the making of art (Abrams 1953, 58).

In this intellectual structure, the idea of nature is radically changed. Nature is no longer seen as a passive background or ornamental backdrop but as a living, dynamic being that actively participates in perceiving and shaping human experience. Nature is often seen as having a spiritual and symbolic meaning by the Romantic poets, and they also see it as a medium through which the external environment and inner consciousness

interact (Hartman 1971, 45; Wordsworth 1800). This re-conceptualisation locates nature as an objective reality and subjective construct that is constantly mediated through the creative powers of the poet.

Shelley and John Keats provide two very different but equally important expressions of Romantic sensibility among the second-generation Romantic poets. The paper is devoted to a careful analysis of *Ode to the West Wind* and *To a Skylark*, as well as *Ode to a Nightingale* and *To Autumn*. Although both of these poets are profoundly connected with the natural world and imagination, the orientations of their poetry differ significantly in terms of tone, philosophy, and emphasis on beauty. Shelley's poetry is marked by dynamism, visionary intensity, and devotion to change, frequently connecting the might of nature with the ideas of revolution and intellectual revitalization (Curran 1986, 89; O'Neill 1989, 67).

Such differences are indicative of larger differences in Romantic thought. Romanticism cannot be perceived as an integrated or homogenous movement, and it is possible to consider a variety of divergent ways of thinking about imagination, nature and human experience (Bloom 1971, 115). Shelley and Keats, therefore, may be read not as representatives of a single Romantic ideology but as embodying contrasting yet complementary modes of Romantic consciousness.

This study argues that nature, as a dynamic and transformative power created by Shelley to energize poetic imagination and induce revolutionary change, is seen as a space of aesthetic transcendence in which Keats perceives a contemplative response to mortality. Through the juxtaposition of these two poets, the paper aims to emphasize the internal heterogeneity of Romantic consciousness and to criticize simplistic approaches to interpreting Romanticism as a single-strand tradition.

By critically analysing the chosen poems with the help of the main Romantic theories of imagination and perception, this paper will prove that Romantic consciousness is a dialectical system, which swings between dynamism and immobility, ambition and fulfillment, activity and rest. It is not only that such a re-reading helps us to understand Shelley and Keats further, but it also re-replaces Romanticism as a multi-faceted and multi-vocal intellectual formation that has continued to influence literary and critical discourse.

Literature Review

The study of Romantic poetry has always anticipated the primacy of the imagination and the natural world, but the inward variety of Romantic consciousness has been a subject of critical debate. Among the most influential pioneering works is that of M. H. Abrams, whose *The Mirror and the Lamp* redefines Romanticism as a transformation of a mimetic to an expressive theory of art and argues that poetry is the reflection of the inner processes of the mind and not a simple imitation of the external world (Abrams 1953). It is this conceptualisation that is extended in *Natural Supernaturalism*, where Abrams places the Romantic thinking in the context of a wider intellectual tradition that redefines theological and philosophical concepts in terms of human imagination (Abrams 1971, 23). His concept of the internalization of nature continues to be central to understanding how Romantic poets create the natural world as a symbolic and psychological space.

Coleridge also expounds the theoretical importance of imagination in *Biographia Literaria*, where he differentiates the primary and secondary imagination. He describes imagination as a crucial and creative skill that constructs and recreates reality, turning it into an active and generative power, as opposed to a passive and reflective ability (Coleridge 1817, 202). The formulation has had a significant impact on later interpretations of Romantic poetry, especially regarding how the poet interacts with nature as a meaning-making and dynamic force.

The Visionary Company by Harold Bloom emphasizes the poetic self of Romantic authors and argues that a poet creates a specific bond with imagination and power (Bloom 1971, 115–132). Bloom's subsequent writing on Shelley further highlights how Shelley was myth-making and aspirational in his approach and places him within a culture of visionary and transformative imagination (Bloom 1993, 56). On the same note, Paul de Man (1984, 17) challenges the rhetorical aspects of Romanticism, revealing conflicts of language, meaning and representation, and Tilottama Rajan (1980, 34) examines the discursive ambiguity of Romantic texts, highlighting their interpretative instability.

The dynamic and transformative aspects of the poetry have been the subject of the critical discourse of Shelley. Stuart Curran (1986, 89) analyses the political and philosophical change in which Shelley is involved and pleads that the natural imagery in his work is often a metaphor of social and intellectual rebirth. Michael O'Neill (1989, 67) also points out the strain between desire and inability in Shelley's poetic imagination, whereas Earl

R. Wasserman (1971, 102) directs us to the symbolic and metaphysical aspects of his treatment of nature. These works all make Shelley a poet of motion, dynamism and imaginative change.

Conversely, the criticism of John Keats has mainly focused on aestheticism and sensuousness, and on the philosophy of beauty. Walter Jackson Bate (1963, 78) introduces Keats as a poet who became very interested in the problem of the conflict between the imagination and reality, especially the issues of mortality and transience. Helen Vendler (1983, 120) provides an in-depth study of the poet's odes, focusing on their structural and emotional richness, and Jack Stillinger (1998, 145) focuses on the mature vision of beauty and Keats's ability to balance beauty with impermanence. Further works by Levinson (1986) and Roe (1997) place Keats into a wider cultural and ideological context, which further illuminates the critical insight into his work.

In addition to the works of individual writers, Romanticism has been criticized by critics like Jerome J. McGann (1983, 28), who have revealed the ideological foundations of Romanticism and its internal contradictions. Geoffrey H. Hartman (1971, 45) and Paul H. Fry (1980, 63) add to this discussion through their studies of the interpretative and formal complications of Romantic poetry, specifically the ode form and the very process of reading.

This paper aims to fill this vital gap by providing a comparative re-reading of Shelley and Keats, and how each poet creates nature as a place of imaginative encounter. The investigation of the relations between dynamic energy and aesthetic transcendence will help to form a more complex view of Romantic consciousness as a plural, dialectic, and internally diverse phenomenon.

Theoretical Framework

Romantic consciousness can be conceived as an intensified and self-reflective way of perceiving, based on imagination, emotion, and a deep spiritual experience with nature. It is a decisive change in the sense of literature, when the outer world is not seen as an objective reality, unaffected by the viewer, but rather as a process of mediation by the internal resources of the human mind. Abrams believes that Romantic poetry internalises the world around and makes it a symbolic and psychological place (Abrams 1953, 67; Abrams 1971, 45). Here, the poet no longer remains passive in registering reality but becomes a participant in the process, molding experience by creative vision.

The key concept to this change is imagination. Coleridge formulated this idea most effectively in *Biographia Literaria*, where he differentiates between primary and secondary imagination. He refers to the primary imagination as the inherent power of human perception, and secondary imagination as the conscious creative power that breaks down and re-creates reality into artistic expression (Coleridge 1817, 202). This difference raises the imagination beyond a purely festooning or mimetic role to the status of a creative and transformative power. Nature is not merely described through imagination but is recreated and becomes symbolically resonant and emotional.

Moreover, Romantic consciousness implies profound emotional and spiritual sensitivity towards nature. Romantic poets often view nature as living, organic, and in harmony with human life. This sense aligns with the concept of the "sense sublime" in William Wordsworth, where the natural world shows a deeper unifying sense that goes beyond empirical reality (Wordsworth 1800). Nature, therefore, enables the poet to interact with philosophical and existential issues such as the nature of reality, the boundaries of knowledge, and how the self relates to the universe (Hartman 1971, 45).

However, Romantic consciousness is not a uniform or homogeneous concept. According to Harold Bloom, the Romantic poets vary greatly in how they treat imagination and how they approach nature, and represent various philosophical and aesthetic inclinations (Bloom 1971, 115). Some poets anticipate dynamism, flux, and change, as a place of energy and change, whereas others value stillness, contemplation, and the experience of the senses, and focus on the aesthetic and emotional aspects of the natural environment. Others, like McGann (1983, 28) and Rajan (1980, 34), also highlight internal contradictions and ideological ambiguities in Romanticism and claim that it can best be characterized as a discipline of opposing views rather than a doctrine.

This difference is most pronounced in the works of Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats. Shelley's poetry exemplifies an outward, kinetic, and visionary mode of Romantic consciousness. His imagination seeks to go beyond present reality and connect with forces of change, frequently associating natural occurrences with political and intellectual renewal (Curran 1986, 89; O'Neill 1989, 67). Conversely, Keats's poetic consciousness is introspective and philosophical, resting on sensuous perception and aesthetic experience. His interaction with

nature is not centered on change, but rather on exploring beauty, transience, and emotional substance (Bate 1963, 78; Vendler 1983, 120).

In this way, a theoretical vision of Romantic consciousness will have to explain its inner plurality and its ability to host a great variety of poetic views. Placing Shelley and Keats in the wider scope of theoretical discussion, one could admire the difference in their involvement of imagination and nature to build the complexity and longevity of Romantic thought.

Recent scholarship has revived interest in Romantic representations of nature through ecocritical, environmental, and new materialist perspectives. Scholars have increasingly challenged the traditional distinctions between humanity and nature, emphasising their interconnectedness and mutual influence (Morton 2010, 15–18). Similarly, new materialist approaches have brought to light the vitality and agency of the non-human world, offering fresh ways of understanding Romantic depictions of nature as an active and dynamic presence (Bennett 2010, 35–40). Recent studies have also underscored the continuing relevance of Romantic environmental thought in contemporary ecological debates (Rigby 2015, 22–24). Together, these perspectives have renewed critical interest in the relationship between nature, human consciousness, and imagination. Building on these contemporary discussions, the present study shows how Shelley and Keats develop contrasting yet complementary views of nature and imagination, revealing different dimensions of Romantic consciousness.

Dynamic Nature in Shelley

Ode to the West Wind

In *Ode to the West Wind*, Percy Bysshe Shelley introduces nature as an active, dynamic entity defined by movement. The West Wind is referred to as both the Destroyer and the Preserver, a paradox of change in which destruction becomes a precondition of renewal. This duality is indicative of a larger philosophical perspective of Shelley, whereby processes of decay and regeneration are reflected in the processes of nature. As Curran (1986, 89) notes, Shelley's natural imagery is often used as a metaphor for political and intellectual change; the flow of natural forces is associated with a potential for social renewal.

The symbolism of leaves of the dead drifting along like ghosts and winged seeds slumbering and awakening in spring represents an ongoing death-and-rebirth cycle. Nature is thus not fixed but in a state of continuous change. The call of Shelley, who says, "Drive my dead thoughts over the universe / Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth" (*Ode to the West Wind*, ll. 63–64), shows how much he wanted to associate poetic imagination with the driving force of nature (O'Neill 1989, 67). In this case, imagination is externalized and activist, as it tries to impact the world outside the self.

In this way, *Ode to the West Wind* can be seen as an example of how Shelley understands nature as a living force, one that is generative and spurs both poetry and revolution. Nature is not just a subject of contemplation but a source of change, with artistic creation fitting in with larger forces of regeneration.

To a Skylark

In *To a Skylark*, Shelley continues to build on his perception of dynamic nature; here, however, the focus is not on outward force but on idealised expression. The skylark is not only a bird, but it is a symbolic personification of simple, unmediated bliss and unthinking creativity. The skylark, as opposed to human beings, whose utterances are constrained by pain and restraint, dwells in a state of complete harmony, creating what Shelley refers to as unpremeditated art.

The poem compares human life with that of the skylark, which glorifies life with apparent ease. Shelley admits that human song is never anything but tinged with sadness, informed by the knowledge of death and pain. By contrast, the music of the skylark is not so restricted, but another level of existence. This opposition supports the notion that nature in the poetry of Shelley represents ideals which transcend human experience and give rise to imaginative ambition.

Meanwhile, the skylark serves as an inspiration of creativity. The many pleas Shelley makes, such as, for instance, when he asks, "Teach me half the gladness / That thy brain must know" (*To a Skylark*, ll. 101–102), show that he is seeking to learn through this natural symbol. Nature is the teacher, and it gives the understanding of a more pure form of expression which the poet wants to follow. According to O'Neill (1989,

67), this desire is indicative of a tension between transcendent aspiration and human limitation in the works of Shelley.

To a Skylark is a complementary piece to *Ode to the West Wind* as it reveals nature as a power of change as well as an ideal representation of beauty and expression. Whereas the West Wind is the outside revolutionary power, the skylark is the inside inspiration and imaginative surpassing. Collectively, these poems depict the vibrant and broad Romantic consciousness of Shelley, where nature is a source of transformation and the exemplar of artistic excellence.

Aesthetic Transcendence in Keats

Ode to a Nightingale

In *Ode to a Nightingale*, John Keats introduces nature as a means of aesthetic transcendence, a temporary break in the pain and constraints of human life. In contrast to the active interaction with nature as the power of transformation in Shelley's works, Keats views nature as the space of reflective experience, where imagination helps to have a moment of transcendence, though it is brief and profound.

The poet, in reaction to this song, says that he would love to fade away, dissolve, and forget the ills of the human world. This desire represents the Romantic desire to overcome the confines of material life by fantasy. This transcendence is, however, not an absolute one. As Bate (1963, 78) notes, Keats ends up realizing that such a creative escapism is so feeble since the poet is inexorably pulled back to the real world.

The poem works in a conflict between desire and constraint. Although imagination helps the poet to escape into a world of beauty and eternity temporarily, this is only momentary. The uncertainty and instability of the experience are emphasized in the last lines: "*Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music: Do I wake or sleep?*" (*Ode to a Nightingale*, ll. 79–80). This way of life makes it hard to draw a line between illusion and reality. This is where there is a sense of ambiguity that is what Keats himself described as negative capability, the ability to leave uncertainty unsolved (Keats 1970).

Therefore, *Ode to a Nightingale* is a good example of how Keats perceived nature as an aesthetic, transcendent space. Nature does not provide the transformation in the Shelleyan way, but a sort of transitory reprieve that increases consciousness of human smallness. The transcendent experience is short-lived, but it gives a significant interaction with beauty and mortality.

Ode to a Nightingale

In *To Autumn*, Keats gives a contrasting but complementary view of nature, one that focuses on harmony, maturity, and acceptance. In contrast to the tension and desire seen in *Ode to a Nightingale*, this poem is also characterized by a state of equilibrium and fulfillment, where nature is not perceived as a way to escape but as complete and peaceful.

Autumn, as a person, is highly in tune with nature, and it is linked with mellow fruitfulness and ripeness to the core. The symbolism of plenty, the fruity branches, the gourds, and the growing harvest are images that indicate that the world is at full flower. Instead of thinking about decline or decay, Keats underlines the abundance and fullness of the present moment. Stillinger (1998, 145) notes that the poem indicates that Keats is no longer in his youthful denial of the natural cycles, where nothing lasts long but is absorbed by a greater harmony.

Keats's language is very important in developing this air of calmness. Terms like mellow, soft, warm, and sweet create a sense of richness and calm in the senses. Keats's language is slow, mechanical, and engulfing in comparison with the more dynamic and urgent diction of Shelley's poetry, and he is more a thinker than an action-taker. According to Vendler (1983, 130), this is a controlled and harmonious style of poem-making, which displays the poet's ability to attain an emotional equilibrium in aesthetic perception.

Additionally, *To Autumn* also shows the unique way that Keats viewed transcendence. The transcendence here is not escapism but the fullness of being in reality. The poet has no aim of transcending the natural world but appreciating it more, seeing beauty in its rhythms. This is a shift from the longing for transcendence in *Ode to a Nightingale* to a state of reconciliation and acceptance.

In this way, *To Autumn* can be seen as the ultimate expression of Keats's aesthetic philosophy, where nature becomes a place of reflective fulfillment. It represents the Romantic mindset of appreciation of stillness,

harmony, and acceptance of transience. Unlike Shelley's dynamic and transforming vision, Keats's is inward, reflective, and reconciliatory.

Comparative Analysis: Movement and Repose

When we compare Shelley and John Keats, we find two different but complementary ways of Romantic imagination, which represent two different attitudes to nature, imagination, and human experience. Though both poets affirm the primacy of imagination and poetry's profound connection with the natural world, their poetic visions differ radically in movement, tone, and philosophical focus.

Shelley's poetry is dynamic, energetic, and visionary of change. In poems like *Ode to the West Wind* and *To a Skylark*, Nature is seen as a generative, active power that is in movement and flux. Symbolic features of the natural elements (wind and song) are used as symbols of revolutionary change, as Shelley believes that renewal is possible at both the personal and social levels. His mind is sweeping and prophetic, and aims to pass beyond the boundaries of the present and to adjust itself to forces of change. As Wasserman (1971, 102) and O'Neill (1989, 67) suggest, Shelley's poetic vision is aspirational, motivated by the desire to intertwine artistic creation with the larger processes of change and liberation.

Keats, in contrast, is more thoughtful, sensuous, and concerned with the immediacy of experience. Nature in *Ode to a Nightingale* and *To Autumn* is not a power of change but an environment of aesthetic bliss and contemplation. Keats's imagination is introspective; it is interested in the deepening of sensory perception and the question of the relations between beauty and decay. His poetic rhythm is cyclic instead of progressive, and there are points of transcendence and transition into reality. As Bate (1963, 78) and Vendler (1983, 120) note, Keats's work can be seen as an intensive work on mortality, where aesthetic experience is not an escape but a reconciliation.

This opposition can be interpreted as a larger opposition in Romanticism itself, between movement and stillness, aspiration and fulfillment, transcendence and immanence. Where Shelley is the Romantic impulse to energy, change, and idealism, Keats is the counter to this, the impulse to stillness, reflection, and acceptance. However, these differences are not an easy opposition. Instead, they bring out the inner diversity and dialectic of Romantic consciousness.

The two poets are of different inclinations, but both have a common belief in the power of imagination to transform. In the case of Shelley, imagination is a form of vision that projects itself, redefines reality, and imagines new possibilities. To Keats, imagination is an inward-looking process that intensifies the experience of reality and allows one to be more conscious of beauty and impermanence. Both instances have imagination as the mediator between the self and the natural world, in which perception is converted to meaning (Abrams 1953, 67).

Further, their different responses to nature indicate two complementary ways of approaching existence. The active character of Shelley underlines becoming- continuous change, rebirth, and striving towards an ideal future. The aesthetic nature of Keats focuses on being- presence, richness of sensations, and acceptance of life as it is. Such tensions, as proposed by McGann (1983, 28) and Rajan (1980, 34), are at the core of Romantic ideology, which opposes closure and multiplicity.

Comparative analysis of Shelley and Keats, therefore, shows that Romantic consciousness cannot be single-minded in its philosophical or aesthetic system. Rather, it is a product of an interrelated dynamic between opposing but interacting views. The movement and repose intertwine in Romantic poetry, highlighting the abundance of the tradition and its ability to embrace a variety of forms of expression.

Conclusion

Re-reading Shelley and John Keats illustrate that Romantic consciousness is dynamic and reposeful, aspirational, and accepting, and cannot be defined in a single or reductive way. In this context, nature is presented as a dynamic and diverse entity that can be perceived as a power of change or as aesthetic contemplation, movement or immobility, and as a foreign force of change or an interiorized place of reflection. This dualism highlights the complexity of Romantic thought in the sense that the outer world and inner consciousness are constantly being mediated by the force of imagination.

Shelley's poetry anticipates energy, change, and future possibilities. In *Ode to the West Wind* and *To a Skylark*, elements of nature are used to represent revolutionary transformation and revival of ideas. His

imagination is broad and turned outward, aiming to combine poetic work with social and philosophical development. Like nature itself, the poet emerges as an agent of change, re-establishing the purpose of poetry as an agent of change.

By contrast, Keats's poetry focuses on aesthetic experience, sensuous perception and philosophical depth. Poems such as *Ode to a Nightingale* and *To Autumn* describe nature as a place of reflection and emotional involvement, where beauty and change exist in symbiosis. His self-centered imagination heightens perception and acceptance of the impermanence of life. By so doing, Keats reinvents transcendence as not escapist but complete immersion in the beauty of the present moment of existence, a transient phenomenon.

Shelley and Keats unveil together the dialectical essence of Romantic consciousness. The drama of movement and stillness, aspiration and fulfillment, change and acceptance are not antithetical but constitutive, as is the pluralism and richness of Romanticism. The unifying principle is imagination that mediates the interaction of self and nature, inner and outer experience, perception and meaning.

Finally, the comparative analysis of the two poets reveals that Romanticism was a dynamic, internally heterogeneous, and philosophically subtle movement. It is not tied down to the historical temporality but still informs modern literary and intellectual discourse and poses perennial questions on the imagination, human experience, and how we interact with the natural world. The ability of poetry to explore, reconcile, and enrich the range of human consciousness is validated in the works of Shelley and Keats, in their opposing but complementary visions, which provide a permanent source of aesthetic and philosophical illumination. The ability of poetry to explore, reconcile, and enrich the range of human consciousness is affirmed in the works of Shelley and Keats, whose contrasting yet complementary visions continue to offer profound aesthetic and philosophical insights. The enduring relevance of their poetry is evident in contemporary critical discussions, which continue to revisit Romantic engagements with nature, imagination, and consciousness in the light of present-day environmental and intellectual concerns.

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