

## THE DECADENCE OF MORALITY THROUGH MODERNISATION: THE ANALYSIS OF REGRETS OF THREE ROMANTIC POETS

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**Abstract:** *The romantic era began when the fact that there were many poets and writers had published their works focusing on the enlightenment of knowledge. Most of them welcomed Romanticism as the dawn of modernisation; appraising knowledge in the areas of science, music, and literature (Cunningham & Jardine, 1990). Despite there were a number of poets in this era produced notable works in the literature which have directed their writing to celebrate modernisation, the very few pieces of works which appeared to defy the existence of modern world must also be addressed. Thus this paper delves into the concept of exploring the negativities of modernisation which in one way or another have affected the nature of humans and their humanity that has been foreseen and felt by three selected Romantic poets namely William Wordsworth, William Blake, and Robert Frost. This paper has therefore selected three poems written by these three respective poets to identify the exact areas which are believed to carry their mood of dejection about this era of industrialism and cultural transformation. The results of the analysis have shown that this era, despite the ease it had offered in enhancing people's lifestyles and economy, the poets chose to persevere with their stance by showing their reproach towards the modern world through their poems.*

**Keywords:** *Romanticism, Enlightenment, Modernisation, Romantic Literature, Cultural Transformation*

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### Introduction

#### **Background of the Study**

The Romantic Era was at its peak in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century where many movements in exploring knowledge of science, music and literature were carried out extensively. It was

notably considered as an era that had given birth to many philosophers in various fields and one of the prominent areas is literature. Many poets stood up for this moment of enlightenment which was believed to be the dawn of modernisation and self-identification by making ways to solidifying principles and ideas (Berlin, 2013).

This era had witnessed how one's imagination could be considered as an unlimited premise as many poets had produced massive writing about nature versus man. Most of them explored for answers in science to dismantle the concept of nature in theoretical methods that can be easily understood by man (De Man, 2000). Many writers were found to put so much effort into expressing their awe towards nature and how it can be translated into scientific analogies as one way for them to celebrate the advent of a modern world.

### ***Problem Statement***

The existence of poets and playwrights in the Romantic Period has contributed a massive work that explained about human experience (Hough, 2018). As the modern world crept in, many of them moved along with the new experience and started exploring about it as what they have portrayed in their writings. However, William Wordsworth is one of the renowned Romantic poets who travelled against the era of Romanticism by providing his criticisms (via his poems) towards world's modernisation and industrialisation, that prominently took place after The French Revolution (Woudstra, 2012). The stance was clearly posited in his poetry and one of the poems is entitled 'The World is Too Much with Us', that will be discussed in the later section of this paper. Because of this contradiction, this research would like to fill the gap by providing evidence about the negativities of the modern world as felt by the three selected poet even though there were many literary activists in this era welcomed modernisation with positive energy. Based on our observation, William Wordsworth apparently is not the only one who defies the era of modernisation in this era and thus, we have selected two more Romantic poets who have written poems signifying their disapproval of such civilisation.

### ***Research Objective***

The advent of Romantic Era coincided with Industrial Revolution that took place between the 1760s and the 1860s which had opened a considerable amount of job opportunities in some industries such as machine manufacturing and building construction that progressively paved ways to modernity and therefore, affected the social structure and economy (Teich & Porter, 1996). Thus, the objective of this paper is clear; to investigate what are the fields or/and objects that come along with modernisation that have brought regrets to the three selected Romantic poets by looking at the poems written by them.

### ***Research Questions***

This research has posed two research questions and they are:

- a. What are the areas related to modernity that have caused disappointment among these three Romantic poets?
- b. What are the reasons that have made these poets reject modernity despite the advantages it could offer in terms of social and economic advancements?

### ***Limitations of The Study***

This study is rather limited to recognise all of the poets' exact worldview about modernity. It may happen that only the particular poems suggest the voice of negativities about the modern world but it could not generalise their point of view throughout the Romantic period. Therefore,

we could not say that these poets completely rejected modernity despite had succinctly described their disappointment about the modern world in the selected poems. The results that we have here also could not represent the Romantic poets' entire stance about modernity and the modern world as we believe more extensive studies must be carried out to represent such notion.

### ***Significance of the Study***

First of all, this study intends to unearth the negativities felt by these three Romantic poets about an era that they had to live through and how these feelings were expressed into their poems. This could allow us to see the other side of modernity which may have been foreseen by the selected poets, way before the actual and complete modern world took place.

Secondly, this study could also unfold the exact areas that have always been part of a civilisation or modernisation and what are the dangers that come along with it, based on the poets' point of view. It substantially explains the causes of various social ills that have spread all around the world that have tied their very own umbilical cords to the nature of any modern society.

### **Literature review**

The Romantic era that started around the 17<sup>th</sup>- 18<sup>th</sup> century has left an outstanding history for many post civilisations to learn from. It was a time of exploring knowledge, where an abundance of works on literature, arts and science was carried out significantly. The movement has affected a few continents in the world such as in continental Europe, Britain and the Americas (Murray 2013).

Fulford, Lee, Lee & Kitson (2004) found many poets in this movement were fascinated with the new knowledge and one of them is Percy Bysshe Shelly, who is a major English Romantic poet. Shelly was found to be amused by nature and how science was used to interpret the happenings around him. Besides Shelly, Wordsworth is also another Romantic figure who was very much intrigued by nature and the realm of spirituality. Oerlemans (2004) asserts that Wordsworth highly believed in nature that it could not possibly exist on its own and this notion has been vastly expressed in many of his writings. It is indeed an era where nature, beauty and imagination were celebrated mostly through literature. By looking at these major characteristics of Romanticism, this current study would like to investigate if there are any traces of negativities that defy the ideal conventions of this period as de Man (2000) has argued in his book that Wordsworth once condemned the changes made in writing during his time by abandoning the traces of imagination and nature resources.

The exploration of knowledge in science has inadvertently caused the rise of modernity in the Romantic period. More writings were found to direct their meaning to explain about scientific interpretations and this is believed to be the catalyst to increase the people's social status of this era (et al, 2004). As their social status advanced, colonialism started to take place and more powers were exercised which had bred the existence of capitalism and materialism. Whitehead also extrapolated in his book (2011) that the Romantic Period had caused man to no longer feel amazed with nature and God's creation but rather turned to processes of engineering due to the advent of science. This has proved that the modern world is slowly abolishing the beauty of nature and spiritualism and this has caused regrets among the three selected poets when they believed that the changes have taken over their previous way of thinking and lifestyles.

Romanticism is also believed to open doors to many global economic and social opportunities. Gottlieb (2014) deduced in his book that in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of globalisation started to spread around Europe. It was the moment of cosmopolitanism where central political power must take place to restructure the economical and social systems of every civilisation known to man. Implicitly or explicitly, we could say that the Romantic era has exposed man to many contemporary alternatives in operating their daily activities, thus providing more job opportunities to enhance their economy. Relating it to this study, we have found that it is rather peculiar to have those who defied such prospects and this is what this study intends to examine; the factors that have caused the negativities among the selected poets.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

This study has chosen to analyse the data by using metaphor analysis as proposed by Steen (1994) as this kind of framework could allow the readers to understand the concept of meaning that can be related to the social and cultural aspects. Even though he has introduced a rather complex framework that can also cross with other domains such as sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics, we have decided to analyse all three poems by looking at only three aspects as follows:

- a. Allegory
- b. Connotation
- c. Metaphor

The chosen criteria are found to be apt for this research as we intend to go beyond the immediate or literal meaning which could connect us with the speakers i.e. poets. According to Freeman (2002), the text chosen by a writer explains a lot about his thinking premise and how he interprets people's behaviour and experience and therefore, all of these three analysis tools will be used simultaneously by looking at the poets' word choice which signifies their feelings and thoughts about the modern world. Our focus of this study is to delve into the hidden message of the poems which could provide details of the feelings of the poets which may be intended to be conveyed to the readers for them to get a clearer vision of the world back then.

### ***Instruments***

To be able to answer the Research Questions of this study, we have selected three poems; "The World Is Too Much with Us" (Wordsworth, 1802), "London" (Blake, 1794) and "To Earthward" (Frost, 1914) which were respectively written by three Romantic poets namely William Wordsworth, William Blake and Robert Frost (please refer to Appendix 1). These poems were found to carry the same subject matter that talks about modernity in the era of Romanticism.

### ***Data Analysis***

The analysis of the poems focuses on the language used i.e. the poets' word choice and sentence structure. The poems appeared to rely heavily on images and symbolism which therefore, the analysis of vocabulary is notably important in this study to get the grasp of accurate understanding of the message disseminated in each of the selected poetry.

To ensure detailed interpretations of the poems, we have created several appropriate themes to properly classify the messages conveyed by the poets. The themes are believed to be useful to

achieve the meaning saturation as they were hypothesised to provide insights related to negativities of the era of modernity, as constructed by the selected Romantic poets.

We have shortlisted three themes which are presumed to determine the relationships between negativities and the era of modernity. Firstly, we analysed the poems under the theme of ‘the downfall of nature’. We then turned to another theme which is, ‘the emergence of materialism and capitalism’ and finally, we have chosen ‘the rise of immorality’ as our final theme to interpret all of the selected poems.

## **Findings and Analyses**

### ***Discussion of the Findings***

As discussed in the previous section, we have decided to analyse the poems by interpreting the meaning according to three selected themes. All three poems (see Appendix 1) were examined simultaneously and the interpretations of the findings can be found in the following themes.

#### ***Theme 1: The Downfall of Nature***

The results that we have found under this theme highlight the human’s activities in the Romantic Era that seemed to abolish the origin of nature and how it was understood as one way to welcome the modern world. Modernity during Romantic Era began to rise when the field of knowledge started to expand as it appeared to open more opportunities in enhancing human’s abilities and skills which eventually led to a reconstruction of social and economy of a particular society (Linehan, 2006). By linking this theme to modernity, American Romantic figure; Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that to have a modern world does not mean that everything in the past must be forgotten or ignored (Barzinji, 2013). Thus, we could imply that in order to achieve a complete order of a modern world, there are some elements of nature must be progressively removed from the world, albeit some may prevail.

Frost’s poem, ‘To Earthward’ provides a substantial explanation about the destruction of nature as soon as modernity started to infiltrate into his era. This piece of writing clearly shows that he did not welcome the new world and this can be postulated by looking at the heavy usage of elements of nature in the poem like *downhill*, *grapevine*, *dew* and *petal of the rose* which may suggest that he preferred his life when he was younger when people loved nature more than anything else. All of these words were collocated with other vocabularies that promote his positivity about nature. In line one, stanza one, he started his poem with the word ‘love’ and it was joined with ‘sweet’ to provide the fullness of meaning of how much he loved his childhood when he could enjoy the grass and sand and how the air was considered pure and clean. This is to say that the opening of modernity has slowly eradicated the best of nature and he fully expressed his regrets in the last two stanzas where a number of negative tones were delivered when he utilised words like *sore*, *scar*, *hurt* and *rough*. The second last line in the last stanza, ‘To feel the earth as rough’ could be easily linked to modernity where buildings construction took over the world and the land no longer felt as it used to be.

Wordsworth’s poem ‘The World Is Too Much with Us’ also connotes an account of regrets towards the destruction of nature as modernity seeped in. He emphasised that ‘little we see in Nature of ours’ (line 3) that may refer to the people who seemed to be overwhelmed with worldly things that have made them ‘run out of tune’ (line 8). It seems to show that this poem provides a negative tone about the modern era and preserving whatever natural is always considered as the right way of life, as constructed by Wordsworth.

### ***Theme 2: The Emergence of Capitalism and Materialism***

Even though it was asserted by van Hooft (20012) that the era of modernism allows people to advance to another state of betterment in terms of abilities, skills and knowledge, Heelas (2009) quoted Gergen (2000) argued that the modern world has so far caused so many changes in humanistic traditions. Under these circumstances, we could deduce that modernism has permitted alterations in human's beliefs and culture that eventually led to the rise of capitalism and materialism. Giddens (2013) defined capitalism as profit-making productions which usually concur with the private capital owners to race in competitive markets. As the meaning suggests, with the rise of modernity, capitalist society can easily progress substantially due to the demands of the consumers that may cause unfair distributions of profit between capital owners and the workers. Therefore, we believe that as everyone in a modern society was trying to compete with each other; the value of humanity can easily diminish and this is the notion that these three Romantic poets were trying to justify in their writing.

Wordsworth's 'The World Is Too Much with Us' (Wordsworth, 1994) posits a belief that the modern era had put more value and appreciation on capitalism and materialism. He chose the word 'sordid' to be collocated with 'boon' which may suggest that this modern world should be seen as a great benefit but he instead viewed it as a plague that had led the people into a world that was full of greed and selfishness. Line two of the poem appears to provide the most significant meaning – 'Getting and spending – we lay waste our powers' indicates the nature of materialism where we get to earn and spend our money yet could not provide the right content as what Wordsworth believed in. A few words like *moon*, *sea*, *winds* and *flowers* are worth mention to signify the importance of nature because as soon as more people in the modern era had spent more time operating their worldly matters, their spirituality side was left behind. This is evident when he mentioned *God*, *Proteus* and *Triton* in the poem to show the inclination of his desires that he had always preferred spirituality and nature over anything else. Lines nine and ten strongly show his dislikes towards modernity as he said he would rather be 'outworn' than to be in line with the current trend.

### ***Theme 3: The Rise of Immorality***

Poole (2012) argued that the nature of modernity opens an incessant debate about morality; it becomes a subjective matter rather than believing on a set of agreed values and philosophies. The changes have caused impinged ideologies about moral that have altered the way people operated their daily activities. He further asserts that the modern society in the 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> century were about to embark in commercial activities that mainly involved in transforming the economic and social structures of that particular era.

Morality was believed to decay in the Romantic era as soon as modernity encroached and this notion was portrayed in William Blake's 'London'. He aimed his focus on this particular city which presented a negative image of human nature and how people were victimised by capitalism and changes in the political and economic structure. Blake used a number of allegories and metaphors to present his point of view about this city and its people. He described the faces of the people were full of *weakness* and *woe* (Stanza 1, lines 3-4) as he roamed around the city that may illustrate people's fatigue and depression combating with the challenging economy. The poet continued expressing his disgust in stanzas two and three by repeating the word *cry* three times to highlight the intensity of the downfall of human nature as modernity seeped in.

'London' depicts the suffering of the Londoners during Romanticism, as constructed by the poet. He stressed on the life of the poor (*chimney sweepers* - line 1, stanza 3) who were

sidelined whereas those in power kept on reaping the glories and wealth of the world. This is evident when he mentioned in stanza 3, 'And the hapless Soldiers sigh...Runs in blood down Palace walls...' Thus, all of the 'cries' heard during this time indicated the doom of morality where humanity was considered fading and people were shackled (*manacles* – line 4, stanza 2) to the new system of the city.

We believe that this poem heavily establishes a connection to this particular theme which could be the result of the activities related to capitalism and materialism. We could see that the demanding economic structure had also affected the nature of sacred family institution when 'harlots' (stanza 4, line 2) began to spur around London, destroying marriage relationships, which he considered as a sacred bond. Under this circumstance, we could interpret that the law and order of what Blake knew in his past were no longer upheld and valued in the modern world.

## **Conclusion**

### ***Implications of The Study***

This study has finally answered the Research Questions that we have prepared upfront. First and foremost, it is significant to be able to identify what are the negative modernisation traces that had been felt or foreseen by the selected Romantic poets. Earlier in this paper, we have highlighted a few themes that could guide us with our analysis and in chapter 4; we have found that not all poems carry the same traces of negativities as predicted. Although this may be true, we could not deny that all three poets landed on the same page of feeling dejected about the modern world.

We also have found that the overwhelming influence of modernity has also affected several aspects in which all of these poets had high regard for. It is argued by Manzo (1991) that modernism has the ability to change society's heritage that may cause all individuals to emulate and adapt to the changes gradually. Notwithstanding, it is easy to see that all of the selected Romantic poets appreciated nature and wished to keep the cultural practices that they have loved or learned in the past. This can be seen in the selected poems by Frost and Wordsworth.

Additional to that, we can now see how modernity has transformed the economic and social structures of a particular society. In the previous section, we have witnessed how these poets lamented over the challenging demand of consumerism and difficult political powers of their time. As a result of this situation, it had led to another negativity which had turned the people into materialistic individuals who lived on greed and kleptocracy.

Blake particularly had put emphasis on morality and how humans should act upon it but nonetheless, due to modernity; he believed that people of his time had ignored the needs of being moral that they had fallen into disgraced activities such as prostitution and extortion.

### ***Recommendations for Further Study***

To be able to see the wider scope of modernity during the Romantic Era, a follow-up study should be conducted by looking at more poems or proses written by other Romantic writers. Additional to that, studies that delve into the styles of the poems (number of stanzas, line and rhymes) can also be considered if they could render another side of interpretations besides the methods that we have chosen for this current study.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **THE WORLD IS TOO MUCH WITH US BY WILLIAM WORDSWORTH**

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
 Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—  
 Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
 We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!  
 This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;  
 The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
 And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;  
 For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
 It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be  
 A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
 Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
 Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

### **LONDON BY WILLIAM BLAKE**

I wander thro' each charter'd street,  
 Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.  
 And mark in every face I meet  
 Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,  
 In every Infants cry of fear,  
 In every voice: in every ban,  
 The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

How the Chimney-sweepers cry  
 Every blackning Church appalls,  
 And the hapless Soldiers sigh

Runs in blood down Palace walls

But most thro' midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful Harlots curse  
Blasts the new-born Infants tear  
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse

**TO EARTHWARD**  
**BY ROBERT FROST**

Love at the lips was touch  
As sweet as I could bear;  
And once that seemed too much;  
I lived on air

That crossed me from sweet things,  
The flow of—was it musk  
From hidden grapevine springs  
Downhill at dusk?

I had the swirl and ache  
From sprays of honeysuckle  
That when they're gathered shake  
Dew on the knuckle.

I craved strong sweets, but those  
Seemed strong when I was young;  
The petal of the rose  
It was that stung.

Now no joy but lacks salt,  
That is not dashed with pain  
And weariness and fault;  
I crave the stain

Of tears, the aftermark  
Of almost too much love,  
The sweet of bitter bark  
And burning clove.

When stiff and sore and scarred  
I take away my hand  
From leaning on it hard  
In grass and sand,

The hurt is not enough:  
I long for weight and strength  
To feel the earth as rough  
To all my length.