

Literary Creation and the Supernatural in English Romanticism

■ María del Pilar Bravo

Abstract

English Romanticism was an artistic and spiritual movement that took place in the 19th century. It attempted to depict emotional matter in an imaginative form, and imagination was believed to be superior to reason. The Romantics cultivated love and worship of nature, along with its simplicity and richness. Among other concurrent elements of English romanticism are the exploration of the supernatural and the “wise innocence” of childhood; dreaming as a field to exploit imagination; and apocalyptic and gothic depictions of reality. All these elements enriched the creative power of the Romantic writers.

Resumen

El romanticismo inglés fue un movimiento artístico y espiritual que tomó lugar en el siglo XIX. En él, se intentaba representar las emociones de una manera imaginativa y la imaginación se concebía superior a la razón. Los románticos cultivaban el amor y la devoción por la naturaleza y su simplicidad y riqueza. Entre otros elementos recurrentes del romanticismo inglés se encuentran la exploración de lo sobrenatural y la “sabia inocencia” de la infancia, el soñar como un espacio para explotar la imaginación y las representaciones apocalípticas y góticas de la realidad. Todos esos elementos enriquecieron el poder creativo de los escritores románticos.

Palabras claves: romanticismo, imaginación, creación, naturaleza, razón, sobrenatural, infancia, soñar, gótico.

Key words: Romanticism, imagination, creation, nature, reason, supernatural, childhood, dreaming, gothic.

The birth of the 19th century was also the beginning of a renewing force for literature: Romanticism. In England as in the rest of Europe, this spiritual and artistic movement strongly rejected rationalism as a constraint for imagination, creativity and artistic autonomy. Classicism was also seen as a threat to freedom of creation, which provoked a whole new conception of Man. We no longer could see ourselves as the measure of everything around us, but as just one more component of that great source of life and creativity: Nature.

English Romanticism was peculiarly characterized by its conception of creation as an artist's natural gift or faculty. This implied that each painter, writer, sculptor, etc. was able to construct his own world by means of his own imagination. No work was better or worse than that of others, because it was the creation of God, with his own intentions and feelings: "The great achievement of English Romanticism was its grasp of the principle of creative autonomy, its declaration of artistic independence" (Engell & Jackson, 1983, 148). Thus, literary creation was for the Romantics, the artist's production after having reconstructed or given a new interpretation to the world around him. It was the offspring of imagination applied to the writer's impressions from real life.

In some cases, such as in Wordsworth's, this literary creation is the result of depicting reality in such a way that exhorts us to open our eyes to the beauty of life. In a way, he makes us feel like we spend our existence being unable to appreciate it on our own. He was recognized as a Romantic for his allusions to childhood, nature, the self and faith as opposed to reason, more than for his exploitation of the supernatural: "Mr. Wordsworth, was to (...) give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling, analogous to that of the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us"¹.

In other cases such as in Coleridge's, Blake's and Shelley's, literary creation was the product of transforming reality into something beyond reason, but not beyond the imaginable: The Supernatural. It was for most Romantics an attack on the pre-established limits of reason. It was also the possibility of creating fantastic characters, situations, places and objects to give the human mind relief from the saturation of moral and social patterns and taboos. These aspects

¹ COLLERIDGE, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria*. Chapter XIV. Page 527

would not have allowed Shelley, for example, to imagine a scientist who broke the laws of nature in order to create a human being in a laboratory – if she had not been a Romantic in essence. Although the supernatural is not present in all the Romantics' creations, it was an important strategy for Romanticism to achieve its purposes.

With the supernatural, the Romantics took for granted the readers' "faith" or disposition to believe in the situations they proposed. Through their literature, they offered the reader the possibility to experience new worlds, which they could hardly see in real life.

Now, let's consider some aspects of the supernatural in the English Romantics' works. In Shelley's *Frankenstein*, she dreamed of a scientist creating a human being by injecting life into a body of desired characteristics. This creature became the symbolization of the absurdity of human reason; the symbolization of the extreme desire of Dr. Frankenstein to produce a perfect man. Shelley added to her story the ingredient of horror with which she has impressed her readership throughout history since her novel first appeared.

In Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, he also added horror to the story of a heartless mariner who kills a "harmless" bird: an albatross. Then, it becomes an evil spirit and claims revenge on its murderer, who must go through every kind of calamity to get rid of the curse for having committed such a sin. Some other features that show us the presence of the supernatural in this poem are the personification of Death and Life-in-Death in an evil couple, and the appearance of angels. In these two stories – *Frankenstein* and *The Ancient Mariner*-, we can see a common aspect: The coming back to life after death that shows us, once more, the writers' power to create and destroy and to rebel against gods as Prometheus did.

In the case of Byron, the supernatural is present in his dream of "Darkness" and Keats, in *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, tells us about a supernatural woman with whom a knight falls deeply in love. She is the idealization of a man's love, the product of that man's imagination, so believable so as to destroy his life.

The supernatural was not the only distinctive aspect of English Romanticism. There were other important aspects that must be mentioned in order to understand the whole picture of this movement. Childhood, for example, is a recurrent topic for writers such as Wordsworth and Blake. These two Romantics also refer to childhood

as the age of wisdom and innocence, from which every adult should learn: "The child is father of the man" (Wordsworth, 1888). It is, for them, the ideal stage of human life.

Childhood is sometimes referred to with nostalgia, as in Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality*: "There was a time when Meadow, grove and stream,/ To me seem/ Apparell'd in celestial light,/ The glory and the freshness of a dream./ It is not now as it hath been of yore..."(Wordsworth).

For Blake, on the other hand, the innocence of childhood, as opposed to the experience of Man, is the source of imagination that loses its intensity with physical growth.

Nature is also a compelling topic of recurrence in Romanticism. In almost every work of the Romantics, Nature is present. It is for them the Muse of their creations: "Nature is thought of, not so much as a structure or system presented objectively to man, but rather as a total creative process in which Man, the creation of Man, and the creation of Man's art, are all involved" (Frye, 1963).

Nature is the source and end of life. In Blake, we find the Tree of Life and the Poison Tree. In Coleridge and Shelley we find the Sea as the setting where the life of many Mariners and the life of a monster, a product of human consciousness, end.

Nature is also the scenery of these Romantics' dreams. In Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, the dream was about a "Savage place as holy and enchanted as ever beneath a waning moon was haunted". In this poem Coleridge remarks on the elements of nature with unparalleled exoticism, depicting the environment where he sets his visions of a legendary character: Kubla. In Blake's *A Dream* a sad tone is present for an "Emmet lost its way". In this case, the Emmet represents a soul befuddled by some calamity in life, and tired of looking for its direction. In Byron's *Darkness*, the dream is apocalyptic, where lights are extinguished as nature and life are, by starvation. Dreams were also a Romantic strategy to introduce the reader to a world of possibilities, parallel to reality.

The gothic feature is also present in many of the Romantics' creations. Sometimes it also involves supernatural phenomena, mystery and horror. For example, we have the darkness of the apocalyptic dream of Byron, or that of the many scenes in which the stories of *Frankenstein*

and the *Ancient Mariner* are told, as well as the gloomy places of the same Frankenstein's story.

The apocalyptic vision of some Romantics was the aspect that impresses the readership the most. In Byron's *Darkness*, for instance, there is a detailed description of the way a man saw the end of life on earth. In his dream – his imagination - this apocalypse was the end of Man's passions, which are represented by light and its heat: "...the icy earth swung blind and blackening in the moonless air...And men forgot their passions in the dread..." It was a moment of hopeless turmoil, where people and animals struggled to avoid starvation, until finally, darkness and desolation invaded the universe. This poem seems to be the product of a sudden moment of melancholy, since it is full of gloomy and macabre descriptions.

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, in the last scenes of the novel, the monster expresses, with an apocalyptic tone, his resolution to kill himself as the last resort – after having killed his creator and all his family- in order to exterminate his wretchedness and remorse: "...the bitter sting of remorse will not cease to rankle in my wounds until death shall close them forever...I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly and exult in the agony of the torturing flames." Here, the apocalyptic tone has a purpose: to end a chain of hatred and misery.

For Blake, the apocalypse also has a purpose. For him, it is the need to die from ignorance and to be reborn to be able to create, to imagine. In his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he shows us the knowledge of Hell as an enriching one. On the contrary, Religion is for him an attempt to destroy existence, since it endeavours to reconcile the Devourer and the Prolific, whose eternal and mutual hatred is necessary, in order to keep balance on earth.

In order to convey his apocalyptic vision, Blake uses divine and horrific beings as the Bible does. For example the Book of the Apocalypse: "An angel came to me and said...". "The cherub with his flaming sword", "Dragon-man", "Eagle-like man", "Giants", etc. In Plate 14, Blake says: "The ancient tradition that the world will be consumed in fire at the end of six thousand years, is true as I have heard from hell", but, as I said before, this apocalypse is for him necessary in order to be reborn with a new capacity to imagine and see things as infinite as they are: "If the doors of perception" – senses -"were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite".

In conclusion, the essence of Romanticism, and the principle that allowed the Romantics to create a new conception of the world around them, was their belief in the power of creativity and imagination. Imagination gave the Romantics the possibility to dream of situations that surpassed reality; situations that poked fun at reason, by playing with the supernatural.

The supernatural, together with elements such as the emphasis on the simplicity and richness of nature, the innocence and wisdom of children and country people, the continuous desire to explore and exploit the enigma of Death and existence, among other trends, made Romanticism one of the most far-reaching literary movements in England.

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María del Pilar Bravo holds a degree in Philology and Languages from National University of Colombia and is candidate for a Master's degree in Education in the Externado University. She is an English Language Teacher at the Centro Colombo Americano, Bogotá.
e-mail: piliexpress@yahoo.com