“Breaks my dream, And I am in the wilderness alone.”:

Bryant’s “The Prairies “as a Revolution in American Literature

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*“I have neither given nor received help on this work, nor am I aware of any infraction of the Honor Code.”*

William Cullen Bryant’s “The Prairies” dismissed a neoclassical focus on science, reason and logic, and the society over the individual and embraced a romantic emphasis on nature, imagination, and the individual. This sheer elimination of mid-18th century literary ideals, and the addition of opposing romantic standards prompted an American literary revolution. This revolution from neoclassicism to romanticism, along with the many other revolutions to follow, are perfectly depicted in *The Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson* by Emerson’s statement: “Every revolution was first a thought in one man's mind, and when the same thought occurs to another man, it is the key to that era” (Emerson 154).

American neoclassicism was a mid-eighteenth century literary movement influenced by the British imitations of the ancient Greeks and Romans. The classical forms, simplicity, and symmetry of the Greco-Romans intrigued an eager American society going through a drastic social change. From the late 1700s to early 1800s, America was undergoing a social and political search, thus turning to the guidance of the ancient Greeks idea of the Republic, a government run by the people. Influential writers of the neoclassical period include common household names: Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander Hamilton. Some recognizable neoclassical literatures include: *The Autobiography of Ben Franklin,* Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, and Hamilton’s *The Federalist*. These works, along with the help of others, demonstrate the neoclassical emphasis on science, reason and logic, and society over the individual.

American neoclassicism focused science as an explanation for the people, ideas, and events that surround them. People such as Thomas Jefferson were “known the world over for his spirit of scientific inquiry and as the creator of a number of remarkable inventions” (Baym 337). This scientific recognition in society can be seen throughout the works of neoclassical authors. J. Hector St. John De Crevecoeur uses scientific methodology through his “Letters from anAmerican Farmer”. He states, “men are like plants […] We are nothing but what we derive from the air we breathe, the climate we inhabit” (De Crevecoeur 312). De Crevecoeur is influenced by the scientific revelation that we are all products of our own environments. His scientific thoughts lead him to question: “Is there then no superintending power who conducts the moral operations of the world” (321). This neoclassical interest in science spread into religious ideas during this period of time. As hinted at in De Crevecoeur’s quote, a new religious philosophy, Deism, constituted that God stays out of all human affairs and only proves his existence through the observation of natural laws. A significant, neoclassical figure, Ben Franklin, even admits in his autobiography that, “[he] soon became a thorough deist” (Franklin 284), due to its logical, scientific proof. People of this time looked for the most logical explanation for the people, ideas, or events in their lives.

Reason and logic is used as justification or explanation throughout neoclassicism. In regards to politics, we see in Thomas Jefferson’s autobiography*,* he uses logic and reason when trying to promote cutting ties with England, while remaining non-controversial. He states that when the government is considered destructive to a society, “it is right of the people to alter or abolish it” (Jefferson 340). Although this seems the most logical action to take in this situation, he mentions that throughout the Declaration of Independence there were words or phrases changed to stray away from any controversy or disagreement that could occur. An example is when mentioning the king of Great Britain and his “history of unremitting injuries and usurpations”, the word “unremitting” is changed to “repeated” to dismiss the negative, relentless connotation behind it. In a less serious matter than the use of reason and logic in politics, we see Ben Franklin, in his autobiography, use this neoclassical trait to talk himself out of the guilt of eating cod while on an all-vegetable diet. He concludes it is reasonable to eat the cod because he states, “you eat one another, I don’t see why we mayn’t eat you” (Franklin 270). As seen through the reason and logic used in politics, it was known to these neoclassical writers to place the benefit of themselves behind that of their audience.

Neoclassicism emphasizes the importance of the society over the individual. This neoclassical quality developed from the social philosophy, Utilitarianism. The idea that society is more important than the individual influenced people such as, Ben Franklin, to create things like the first public library to benefit the society as a whole. Throughout his writings, Franklin continuously dismisses his own opinions to further benefit his readers over himself. When talking about religion, Franklin mentions that he “had purposely avoided them; for being fully persuaded of the Utility and Excellency of [his] Method, and that it might be serviceable to People in all Religions” (Franklin 307). Similarly, In *The Federalist*, Alexander Hamilton addresses his audience to reconsider the Constitution because it would be the “safest course for [their] liberty, [their] dignity, and [their] happiness” (Hamilton 348), not for his own benefit. However, this neoclassical ideal, along with science, and logic and reason cease to exist once a new literary movement finds its way to America.

Romanticism was a focus on everything that neoclassicism was not. American romanticism occurred between 1820 and 1865, during a time period of great expansion. With this expansion, comes the idea of endless possibilities and opportunities. Thus, these romantic artists created a period of glorification of the past and nature, while focusing on creating an aesthetic experience. Famous authors include: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allen Poe, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. These romantic writers composed commonly known works such as: Whitman’s *“*Leaves of Grass*”*, Poe’s “Tell-Tale Heart*”*, and Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown*”* and “The Minister’s Black Veil*”*. Romantic emphasis on the importance of nature, imagination as a source of truth, and a focus on the individual are exemplified through these works and many others in through this literary movement.

Romanticism stresses the importance of nature. Nature appreciation, nature as a source of nourishment, and nature as a guide are a few ways this importance is exemplified through romantic writings. In Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself*”,* he answers the question: “*What is the grass?*” (line 98), through the comparison of it to the “handkerchief of the Lord, a scented gift and remembrance designedly dropt” (lines 103-104). He gives a piece of nature, the grass, a glorious description of appreciation. Similarly, in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Self-Reliance*”,* he shows an appraisal of “what pretty oracles nature yields us on this text in the face and behavior” (Emerson 550). Emerson continues his stress of nature in “Each and All*”*, when he states, “Again I saw, again I heard, / The rolling river, the morning bird;/ Beauty through my sense stole; I yielded myself to the perfect whole” (lines 48-51). He feels a sense of nourishment and wholesomeness through his recognition of the nature surrounding him.

Disregarding the true surroundings, and entering an imaginative world is a tendency of the romantic authors. The characters of works such as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young GoodmanBrown*”* and “The Minister’s Black Veil*”*, portray unrealistic, dream-like plots and contain imaginative spirals or bursts. Young Goodman Brown travels into a dark forest and becomes involved in a witch meeting where he runs into many, thought to be religious, prominent figures in his community. Even though it is still unsure at the end of the story if “Young Goodman Brown [had] fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch meeting” (Hawthorne 628), he still returns to his community the next morning “staring around him like a bewildered man” (628). Although the witch meeting Young Goodman Brown encountered could have been all his imagination, he still believes it to be true and allows it to influence the way he now views those prominent people in his community. Similarly, in another of Hawthorne’s works, he depicts a well-known, respected minister, Mr. Hooper, going through a revelation of secret sin. The minister wears a black veil that shocks his church congregation. This black veil “to their imagination, seemed to hang down before his heart, the symbol of a fearful secret between him and them” (640). This imaginative idea that his veil means he was hiding something from the congregation as a whole, continued to influence them to be fearful of him. As the minister separated himself from the congregation, it was important to romantic writers to separate and take focus on the individual outside of the society as a whole.

Romanticism stressed the importance of the individual. As seen in many romantic works, such as the two Hawthorne’s writings mentioned above, the story revolves around one person, either a narrator or a character. It was important in romanticism to celebrate the individual. In the first line of Walt Whitman’s, *Song of Myself*, he exclaims, “I celebrate myself, and sing myself” (Whitman line 1). He, a solitary narrator, is celebrating himself and his ideas. The ideas of the individual are similarly stressed in Emerson’s “Self-Reliance”through his emphasis “to believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men” (Emerson 549). He is accentuating the importance to believe in yourself, without the help of the social influences around you. This quality along with the importance of nature, and imagination as a source of truth are important to the foundation of romanticism as a whole.

William Cullen Bryant published his poem “The Prairies” in 1834, in the middle of the literary period, American romanticism. Bryant fully dismisses previous neoclassic literary ideals, and emphasizes those of romanticism, thus revolutionizing American literature. Through Bryant’s four transitional parts of “The Prairies”, he portrays the romantic qualities through his appreciation of nature, interest in the past, influence of nature as a guide, and imagination as a source of truth.

Bryant begins “The Prairies” with the monologue of solitary narrator. He is alone on his horse in the wide open prairies appreciating and observing all that surrounds him. The narrator “[beholds them for the first, / and [his] heart swells, while the dilated sight, / takes in the encircling vastness” (lines 4-6). The swelling of his heart symbolizes the nourishment and delight the narrator feels while overlooking the prairies. While continuing to observe, he is firm in his mentioning that “Man hath no part in all this glorious work”, to protect and distinguish the purity of this nature versus that of common society (line 24). The nature appreciation continues while he travels through the prairies and refers to the “flowers whose glory and whose multitude rival the constellations!” (lines 30-31) This grandeur description places a delightful tone to the viewing of the spontaneous span of flowers he is observing. The narrator compares the amount of flowers and the constellations; The constellations which are made by a process of spontaneous combustion, perfectly describe and epitomize the spontaneity of the nature he is observing in and throughout the prairies.

In “The Prairies”, the narrator’s imaginative journey starts to take an interest in those that previously inhabited these lands. As himself and his steed are traveling, he is inclined to think of “the dead of other days” on which his horse is walking upon (line 40). He is sympathizing with this “race, that long has passed away”, in reference to an ancient race that natives have since wiped out of the prairies (line 45). He journeys into that of the antique past when he compares the discipline and multitude of this ancient race to that of the Greeks. He uses the Greeks hard work and importance of “the glittering Parthenon” (50), to compare to the ancient races, “ample fields […], here [where] their herds were fed, (50-51). The narrator uses this comparison to emphasize an important factor in the lives of this forgotten race. He makes it known, “All is gone; /All- save the piles of earth that hold their bones;/ […] The barriers which they builded from the soil” (65-68). The narrator is once again sympathizing with ground on which they built themselves and where their last fragments of remembrance would be found. Through his travels, he sympathizes with what most people would overlook, simply the ground on which he is walking upon.

As the narrator is journeying upon the land, the observations of all that surrounds him in the prairies, makes him come to a realization. “Thus change the forms of being. Thus arise,/ Races of living things, glorious in strength,/ And perish, as the quickening breath of God,/ Fills them, or is withdrawn” (line 86-89). Through his illustrations of end of this ancient race and realization of the developments of natives he comprehends life as organic. He learns these changes are inevitable and will continue to occur, as life circles through a beginning, middle, and end. He goes on to mention the beavers that once covered the streams and the bison that roamed “in herds that shake, / The earth with thundering steps- yet here I meet, / His ancient footprints stamped beside the pool” (99-101). Nature guided the narrator to these imaginative footprints as a symbol of the past within the present, demonstrating life as continuous.

This imaginative episode of the past and present concludes with the truth that life still continues throughout this land. The continuity of life is heard through the prairies as the narrator “[listens] long, / To his domestic hum, and think [he hears],/ The sound of that advancing multitude,/ Which soon shall fill these deserts”(114-117). Like he imagined the beings of the past he does so to those of the future. Within the narrator’s imaginative venture into the future, he is disturbed abruptly and state, “A fresher wind sweeps by and breaks my dream, / And I am in the wilderness alone” (124-125). I used part of this quote in the title of the paper because I find it an important part of the poem due its abrupt nature and clarification that the narrator was in fact using his imagination throughout the poem. Thus, he imagined the ancient race and all events that occurred throughout his journey; However, this imagination still leads to the truth of inevitable change and the continuity of life found within nature, more specifically, within the prairies.

As “The Prairies” revolutionized America literature from a period of neoclassical reason to romantic imagination, the same dismissal of those ideals was due to romanticism as a whole. Neoclassicism ended in 1865 due to the end of the civil war and the cry for the happily ever after ending. But with this happily ever after, comes another end of literary standards; And so, the cycle repeats, mimicking the cycle of life in nature.

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