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“Man’s better nature triumphed”: Bryant’s “The Prairies” as a Revolutionary Romantic Poem

In his poem, “The Prairies,” William Cullen Bryant rejects the traits of neoclassicism and adopts the qualities of romanticism. These two literary ideals completely contradicted each other, the reason this poem is revolutionary in literature. It disposes of the neoclassic characteristics valued during the 18th century and into the 19th century, not long before the poem’s publication in 1834. These traits included a focus on science, an emphasis on reason and logic, and the stress on the importance of society. However, this poem embraces romantic characteristics, such as a connection with nature, an emphasis on emotion and imagination, and the significance of the individual.

Neoclassicism began in Europe in 1660 and in America in 1765. During this period, social order was rapidly changing and the idea of the divine right of kings was dying away, both the consequence of the rise of the middle class. Americans began to think in a more reasonable and utilitarian way, leading them to consider cutting ties with England. The neoclassical period lasted in America until 1820, when romanticism arose. Some famous neoclassical works include *The Autobiography of* *Thomas Jefferson*, *The Autobiography* by Benjamin Franklin, and *Letters from an American Farmer* by J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur. Neoclassical literature exhibits the ideals of or emphasis on science, reason and logic, and society.

The neoclassic ideal of science was used in literature with an emphasis on Francis Bacon’s scientific method (later refined by Isaac Newton) and Isaac Newton’s laws of motion. Additionally, scientific traits appear throughout Franklin’s *The Autobiography* as, for example, when Franklin decides to be a vegetarian, but then explains that eating fish would be acceptable: “when the Fish were opened, I saw smaller Fish taken out of their Stomachs; Then, thought I, if you eat one another, I don’t see why we mayn’t eat you” (270). Another example is seen in Crevecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, when he declares “[m]en are like plants; the goodness and flavor of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow” (312). Throughout the neoclassical period, science is used to help the writers, as well as the readers, understand the world around them.

Science can also be linked with the characteristics of logic and reason. René Descartes, the father of modern mathematics and philosophy, is recognized for his use of reason, his most famous quote being “I think therefore I am.” An example of reason and logic in neoclassical literature can be found in *The Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson*, when Jefferson discusses cutting out and changing parts of the Declaration of Independence to accommodate for the Americans who still held ties with England (340). For example, when Jefferson asserts “…jurisdiction over these our states,” he changes “these our states” to “us” because he believes that calling the colonies “states” would offend some Americans and make them feel completely cut off from England (343). Jefferson changes the wording so Americans do not feel entirely separated from England, but instead that they still have ties to their home country. Throughout *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crevecoeur asks questions to get his readers to think logically and reasonably. Some of these questions include: “In this great American asylum, the poor of Europe have by some means met together, and in consequence of various causes; to what purpose should they ask one another what countrymen they are?” and “By what invisible power has this surprising metamorphosis been performed?” (311).Reason and logic also influenced spiritual and religious ideas. For instance, deism is a religious philosophy that while God created the universe, He no longer intervened in the world. During neoclassicism, human reason and logic replaced personal relationships with God. Deists believed that God created moral laws, but He did not enforce them; instead, it is up to individuals to discover these laws. Therefore, deists attempt to live moral lives in society—which is another important neoclassic characteristic.

The idea that society is more important than the individual is significant in neoclassicism. This trait can also be defined as utilitarianism, the belief that a morally good action is one that helps the greatest number of people. Utilitarianism is considered to have been founded by Jeremy Bentham, but it was refined and renamed by John Stuart Mill, author of *Utilitarianism*. In *The Autobiography,* Franklin constructs a list of thirteen virtues, stating that they appeal to all religions because of the stress on utilitarian benefits:

tho’ my Scheme was not wholly without Religion there was in it no Mark of any of the distinguishing Tenets of any particular Sect. I had purposely avoided them

[…]

I would not have anything in it that should prejudice anyone of any Sect against it. (307)

Another example appears when Franklin establishes a lending library in Philadelphia, stating:

The Institution soon manifested its Utility, was imitated by other Towns and in other Provinces

[…]

and our People having no public Amusements to divert their Attention from Study became better acquainted with Books, and in a few Years were observ’d by Strangers to be better instructed and more intelligent than People of the same Rank generally are in other countries. (298)

These libraries were open to the public, allowing all people to access books and become more educated, which benefitted society as a whole. In one of the most famous American documents, the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson states “that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (340). This statement resembles society over the individual because these rights are given to everyone, and everyone is seen as equal. In 1820, the focus on science, reason and logic, and society over the individual took a completely different turn.

Like neoclassicism, romanticism also started in Europe before making its way to America. Established in 1798 in Europe and in 1820 in America, the romantic movement is seen as an extreme reaction to the neoclassical period because their traits are antitheses. Romanticism lasted until 1865 in America, when realism began. Some important romantic literary works are “To a Waterfowl” by William Cullen Bryant, “Young Goodman Brown” and “The Minister’s Black Veil” by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and “Nature” by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Romanticism focused on nature, the emotions and imagination, and the individual—the complete opposite of the values cherished in neoclassicism.

Romanticism accentuates the relationship between man and nature, and how man looks to nature as a guide. In romantic literature, there is often an abundance of imagery revolving around nature. For example, in “Young Goodman Brown,” Hawthorne says “He had taken a dreary road, darkened by all the gloomiest trees of the forest, which barely stood aside to let the narrow path creep through, and closed immediately behind” (620). In Emerson’s “Nature,” he suggests that nature is an educator for man: “The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship” (530). Throughout the piece, he suggests that having a connection with nature will help man learn about the connections between God and man. Emerson also believed that nature exerted an effect on man’s thought process. “Nature is the vehicle of thought,” he wrote (516). In “To a Waterfowl” by William Cullen Bryant, the narrator watches a bird flying across the late afternoon sky and believes he is doing so purposelessly, until he realizes that the bird is being directed by a higher power. The narrator says, “There is a Power whose care / Teaches thy way along that pathless coast” (*l.* 13-14). In romantic literature, nature is often used to convey how important the relationship between nature and man really is, which seems always related to one’s emotions.

In contrast to neoclassicism, which emphasizes reason and logic, romanticism focuses on emotion and imagination. Events in romantic literature are often non-realistic, and even mystical or paranormal. Romantic writing sometimes has a sympathetic interest in the past, which can add in the emotional effects as well. Towards the end of Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” he says, “Had goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest, and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?” (628). This line suggests that perhaps Brown fell asleep and imagined everything that happened in the story. Whether what happened was real or fake, it still affected Brown emotionally: “A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man, did he become, from the night of that fearful dream” (628). An example of mysticism found in “Young Goodman Brown” can be found when Brown is walking into the forest: “there is this peculiarity in such a solitude, that the traveler knows not who may be concealed by the innumerable trunks and the thick boughs overhead” (620). Mysticism is also evident in Hawthorne’s “The Minister’s Black Veil” when there is an encounter between Reverend Hooper and the deceased: “A person, who watched the interview between the dead and living, scrupled not to affirm, that, at the instant when the clergyman’s features were disclosed, the corpse had slightly shuddered, rustling the shroud and muslin cap, though the countenance retained the composure of death” (639). The dead cannot actually move, which then relates this scene to the ideal of imagination, but from the mysticism, readers can tell how uncomfortable this experience was. Imagination and emotion exaggerate romantic literature past the point of being realistic.

While neoclassicism emphasizes society over individual, romanticism focuses on individual benefits. In romantic writing, there is usually one narrator or character whose views are focused on, which exhibits the significance of the individual. In “Nature,” Emerson includes many statements about the individual, one of them being “Build, therefore your own world” (536). This statement encourages people to create their own life independently. This idea can also be seen in Bryant’s “To a Waterfowl” when he says, “In the long way that I must tread alone, / Will lead my steps aright” (*l.* 31-32). These lines go hand in hand with the single character trait of romantic writing. In “The Minister’s Black Veil” by Hawthorne, emphasis is also put on a single character, Reverend Hooper. While his entire congregation is mentioned for their fear of the veil, throughout the story Hawthorne focuses on the minister and his veil, which he wears to “hide my face for sorrow” and “cover it for secret sin” (641). Worth is placed on the individual and what benefits the individual rather than the whole society.

Owing to the fact that this poem abandons neoclassical traits and accepts romantic values, Bryant’s “The Prairies” is considered to be a revolutionary romantic work. The poem opens with these lines: “These are the Gardens of the Desert, these / The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful, / And fresh as the young earth, ere man had sinned— / The Prairies.” (*l.* 1-4). At the very start, one sees the romantic trait that places high value on finding a connection with the fresh and spontaneous in nature. This characteristic is also seen as the poem continues: “I behold them for the first, / And my heart swells, while the dilated sight / Takes in the encircling vastness” (*l.* 4-6). It is apparent in these lines the effect nature has on the narrator and how important and amazing it is to him. Throughout the first part of the poem, the narrator continues to describe the scene, with its abundance of imagery and fascination for the fresh and spontaneous nature. Shown also are the aspects of the narrator’s faith throughout the poem. For example, when he says, “fresh as the young earth, ere man had sinned,” he means that nature is as fresh as it was before man [Adam] sinned (*l.* 3). Faith is also seen in the lines that go as follows: “have ye fanned / A nobler or a lovelier scene than this? / Man hath no part in all this glorious work” (*l.* 22-24). The narrator is suggesting that man did not create the earth, but a higher, spiritual power did, while also stating how pure and fresh nature is. The connection between the narrator and the freshness and spontaneity of nature is prominent in the first part of the poem.

The narrator continues through the scene and reflects on the history of the inhabitants of the prairies. The romantic trait of having a sympathetic interest in the past is conveyed throughout this section of the poem. He begins by talking about the first people who occupied the land: “A race, that long has passed away, / Built them;—a disciplined and populous race” (*l.* 45-46). These lines also exhibit the romantic attribute of primitivism and the beginning of civilization. The narrator continues by explaining how this race was eradicated and how the Indians became the new inhabitants of the prairies: “The red man came— / The roaming hunter tribes, warlike and fierce, / And the mound-builders vanished from the earth” (*l.* 58-60). The narrator portrays empathy for the races and cultures and all of their material things that have been lost and forgotten when he says, “All is gone— / All—save the piles of earth that hold their bones” (*l.* 65-66). While the narrator is speaking of all the things that have subsided and been forgotten, he presumes that nature is the one thing that does not truly change. He proclaims, “Man’s better nature triumphed,” meaning that man’s morally better, more honorable side of character prevails (*l.* 79). This correlates to the idea that man is born naturally good, a common belief of this time period. Throughout this section of the poem, there are aspects of primitivism and a significant sympathetic interest in the past.

In the third section, the quality of romanticism involving nature as an educator and a guide is eminent, a fact revealed in the first few lines, when the narrator says, “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” (*l.* 86-89). These lines show the lesson that the narrator has learned from nature: that the world around us changes, and cultures can die away just as quickly as they can emerge. He maintains the subject of changes by mentioning the migration of the Indians to the West: “The red man too— / Has left the blooming wilds he ranged so long, / And, nearer to the Rocky Mountains, sought / A wider hunting ground” (*l.* 89-92). He includes animals as well, and their change of habits, to support the lesson that he has learned from nature. For example, “The beaver builds / No longer by these streams, but far away” and “In these plains / The bison feeds no more” (*l.* 92-93, *l.* 97-98). The narrator is reflecting on the lesson that nature has taught him about change in many aspects of our lives during this section of the poem.

In the last section of the poem, the narrator concludes that even with the lost and forgotten populations and cultures, the prairies are still full of life: “Still this great solitude is quick with life” (*l.* 103). The narrator uses very descriptive imagery and sensory writing to talk about the animals, nature, and people in the prairies, creating a beautiful sight in the minds of his readers. He says, “The bee, / A more adventurous colonist than man, / With whom he came across the eastern deep, / Fills the savannas with his murmurings, / And hides his sweets, as in the golden age, / Within the hollow oak” (*l.* 109-114). When speaking of the people he says, “From the ground / Comes up the laugh of children, the soft voice / Of maidens, and the sweet and solemn hymn / Of Sabbath worshippers” (*l.* 117-120). The narrator paints this amazing picture of how lively and organic the prairies are, but suddenly says, “All at once / A fresher wind sweeps by, and breaks my dream, / And I am in the wilderness alone” (*l.* 122-124). With this line, the narrator ends the poem by revealing that it was all a daydream.

As a piece of romantic literature, this poem discards the neoclassical traits of science, reason and logic, and society over the individual, while embracing the traits that define romanticism, which include a focus on nature, emotion and imagination, and the importance of the individual. One sees traits of romanticism in Bryant’s *Letters of a Traveller* as well, for example, in his statement “this magnificence of nature and art” (Letter XXII). As a result of the contrast between neoclassical and romantic traits, Bryant’s “The Prairies” is a piece of revolutionary literature in the 19th century.

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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.”*