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“Thus change the forms of being”:

Bryant’s “The Prairies” Impact on Early American Literature

William Cullen Bryant’ poem “The Prairies” is filled with passion and emotion. This poem exemplifies the Romantic Era well. He writes in free verse, a technique not used in the Neoclassical times. Bryant’s dismissal of the Neoclassical ideals while moving into and using Romantic ideals served as a literary revolution into Romanticism.

Before Bryant’s “The Prairies” was written, the Neoclassical Era was established. Neoclassicism started in Europe in 1660 and did not reach America until 1765. It lasted in Europe until 1798 and lasted until 1820 in America. The Neoclassical movement was a time when the social work went through a dramatic change; the middle class rose with the opening of trade, and the divine right of king was becoming less apparent with the rise of the middle class. Neoclassical work was identified by its use of the four principle characteristics of the Era, the idea that society is more important than the individual, emphasis on reason and logic, stress on the classical forms (i.e. order, pattern…), and interest in science.

Ben Franklin wrote an autobiography dedicated to his son that greatly exemplifies the neoclassical traits. Franklin discusses the idea of deism, that God created the world but then removed himself from it and is no longer involved. According to this idea, there is no such thing as having a relationship with God. Deism was the first form of Neoclassicism. Franklin writes:

In short, I became a thorough Deist. […] I grew convinced that *Truth, Sincerity,* and *Integrity* in Dealings between man and man, were of the utmost importance to the Felicity of Life, and I form’d written Resolutions, (which still remain in my Journal book) to practice them ever while I lived. (284)

Franklin does not believe that God is still a part of the world after he created it. Neoclassical ideals focus on factual information, nothing is left up to chance or faith, thus the emphasis on science. Franklin has established in himself certain morals and characteristics that are of utmost importance to him, and through this autobiography, he hopes to pass onto his son, as well as the rest of society. Through his autobiography, Franklin exemplifies the Neoclassical trait of honoring society over the individual. In hopes that his book would inspire and encourage others to follow in his footsteps, Franklin had the wellbeing of society in mind as he wrote this autobiography.  
 John Crevecoeur wrote twelve letters about the Puritans’ colonization of the New World, perhaps hoping, with his letters, they could further understand how to better society. His first few letters were about the Puritans’ success and how they were flourishing, but as time went on his letters became more about how the Puritans were failing. They were getting attached to worldly possessions and money, the opposite of why they journeyed over. Crevecoeur uses an analogy of plants to connect with the science emphasis of the Neoclassical Era. He writes:

Everything has tended to regenerate them; new laws, a new mode of living, a new social system; here they are becoming men: in Europe they were as so many useless plants, mowed down by want, hunger, and war; but now by the power of transplantation, like all other plants they have taken and flourished! Formally the poor; here they rank as citizens. (311)

Crevecoeur’s letters are very rationally laid out. Reason and logic were an important part of neoclassical works and Crevecoeur exemplifies this as well as the science aspect. He writes: “Its situation is admirable, being built at the confluence of two large rivers, which receive in their course a great number of inferior streams; all navigable in the spring for flat-boats” (319).

Crevecoeur’s letters have a very methodical pattern to them. They are structured and focused on reason and logic. Everything has a reason or purpose. Neoclassical work did not leave holes or unknowns, there was order pattern and clarity and that is exactly what Crevecoeur’s letter exemplify.

A methodical writing style did not stick with literary works as Neoclassicism faded out with the rise of Romanticism when the French Revolution and the English Industrial Revolution took place. Romanticism started in Europe in 1798, but did not reach America until 1820. The Romantic Era greatly differed from the Neoclassical Era in many ways. Romanticism emphasized nature while neoclassicism emphasized science. Romantic works focused on the individual where Neoclassical works would focus on society as a whole. Where neoclassical works would have an emphasis on reason and logic, Romanticism focused on feelings and imagination. There was no specific writing style in the Era, there was more free verse instead of rhyme and meter.

Romantic works were not always poems, short stories, or books, but music was a large part of this Era as well. Hector Berlioz composed an orchestra piece about his relationship and is filled with imagination, emotion, and emphasis on him as an individual. The symphony has five sections, the first three are imagine reality and the last two are imagine nightmare. Berlioz goes from being in love, and on a cloud of happiness, to being cheated on and crushed beyond belief. He feels betrayed and depressed and you can hear that through the change in the music. The emphasis and use of emotion throughout the entire piece is overpowering. Berlioz lets his emotions and imagination take control and soar throughout the whole piece.

Romantics believed that God is nature and that through nature, you can see God. The Hudson River School exemplified this trait well. The Hudson River School was not an actual school; it was a group of people who tutored help each other with their paintings. The painters of the Hudson River School moved up North in order to escape from war. They used luminism, utilizing the effects on the aesthetics of a landscape to show God through nature in their paintings.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, a romanticist, wrote many short stories and books in his lifetime, he did not become famous until the publishing of his book *The House of Seven Gables.* Hawthorne wrote with passion and feeling, something not found in Neoclassical works. He wrote about the feelings and imagination of an individual. In his short story “Young Goodman Brown” Hawthorne writes of a dream had by young goodman Brown. Throughout the short story he explained the feelings and emotions and Brown’s imagination and dream. There are many hidden meanings and symbolism throughout the story, something also not found in Neoclassical works. Hawthorne writes:

“Faith!” shouted goodman Brown, in a voice of agony and desperation; and the echoes of the forest mocked him, crying – “Faith! Faith!” as if bewildered wretches were seeking her, all throughout the wilderness. […] “My Faith is gone!” he cried after one stupefied moment “There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, devil! For to the is this world given.” (625)

“Faith” is Brown’s wife’s name, but is also a symbol for the faith in Brown’s life. When Brown loses his wife, he also has lost his faith in God. Romantics emphasized emotion and feeling in their work, and they focused on the individual. Instead of further discussing the society Brown made up in his dream, Hawthorne wrote about Brown’s reaction and how his dream further affected him.

Hawthorne first written work was a collection of short stories put together into his book *Twice Told Tales.* Unfortunately, this book was unsuccessful until Edgar Allen Poe introduced the world to short stories. One of Hawthorne’s more famous short stories was “Fancy’s Show Box.” Hawthorne discusses whether sin is actually sin if only thought about, or did the sin have to be acted upon in order for it to become real. He writes: “What is guilt? A stain upon the soul. And it is a point of vast interest, whether the soul may contract such stains, in all their depth, and flagrancy, from deeds which may have been plotted and resolved upon, but which, physically, have never had existence.” Hawthorne raises the question of whether sin is guilt, or if one must react to that thought. This story, this question, shows Hawthorne’s ability to demonstrate Romantic characteristics. Hawthorne lets emotion and imagination take control of his work. He provokes thought and question where Neoclassical stories would have definite answers.

In the Neoclassical Era, definite answers usually meant scientific facts to explain or back up theories. In Romanticism, nature is their guide. Writers and artists use nature to fuel their work. Writers and musicians use allegories to show God’s light and presence throughout their work. William Cullen Bryant exhibits this trait in his poem “To a Waterfowl.” Bryant uses nature to describe a hunter’s feelings and emotions as he observes a bird’s journey across vast territories. He writes: “Seek’st thou the plashy brink // Of weedy lake, or marge of river wide, // Or where the rocking billows rise and sink // On the chaffed ocean side?” (*l*. 9-12). Bryant’s thorough explanation of the hunter’s view of the bird and his surroundings shows the romantic emphasis on nature. Nature provokes feelings and emotions which is, once again, an aspect of romanticism.

William Cullen Bryant changed the face of Early American Romantic literature with his poem “The Prairies.” Bryant uses many different aspects of the Romantic Era to expose the literary world to the form of writing. He split his poem into four parts, the first section of his poem discusses the prairie itself. Bryant relates the prairie to an oasis. He writes: “The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful,” (*l*. 2) There is nothing that compares to the beauty and nature of the prairie. Bryant’s first section of this poem perfectly exemplifies the trait of using nature as a source of instruction, delight, and nourishment for the soul, and the celebration of man’s connection with nature. Bryant connects man with the beauty and other aspects of nature. He writes:

As if the ocean, in tis gentlest swell, // Stood still, with all his rounded billows fixed, and motionless forever. –Motionless?– // No—they are all unchained again. The clouds // Sweep over with the shadows, and beneath // The surface rolls and fluctuates to the eye; (*l*. 8-13)

Bryant knows a man’s life is not always “picture perfect” there are bumps and bruises along the way and he uses nature to show and explain that. Bryant affirms through this section that there is freedom for the individual. Anyone can be anything as long as they put their mind to it.

With the tough times in life, good times are sure to follow and Bryant, once again, uses nature to express this. The first section goes on to portray how God’s hand stretches across all nature, He is the reason we abide in this glorious world. Bryant writes: “Man hath no part in all this glorious work: // The hand that built the firmament hath heaved // And smothered these verdant swells, and sown their slopes // With herbage, planted them with island groves, // And hedged them round with forests” (*l.* 25-28). Nature’s beauty reflects God’s work, this represents the characteristic that high value is placed on finding connection with the fresh and spontaneous in nature and in self. The beauty of nature reflects the beauty of human nature.

Nature continues as a theme throughout the whole poem, persistent with his representation of romanticism. Throughout the second part of his poem, Bryant depicts an individual riding his steed through the prairies. He goes on to discuss the relationship between the Native Americans and the European moving to the New World and proceeds to talk about the lost “race.” He writes: “A race, that long has passed away, // Built them; --a disciplined and populous race” (*l.* 45-46). Bryant shows his sympathetic interest in the past. Romantic connect with the past, present, and future. As the individual rides along on his steed using his imagination to view the past through the eyes of the prairie. Romantics greatly value the past and utilize their history to improve their lives today. Bryant writes: “In a forgotten language, and old tunes, // From instruments of unremembered form, // Gave the soft winds a voice. The red man came-- // And the mound builders vanished from earth” (*l.* 56-60). The Native American population died down immensely when the Europeans came to the New World but Romantic enthusiasts sift through the history to further improve their lives.

Bryant continues on in his third section to depict the Native American’s lives after the Europeans practically invaded their country. Bryant starts out this section with the line “Thus change the forms of being” (*l.* 86). When the Europeans came the Native American’s world was turned upside down. Bryant writes: “The beaver builds // No longer by these streams, but far away, // On waters whose blue surface ne’er gave back” (*l.* 92-94). Bryant takes a sharp turn into a more somber state. This goes along with the romantic trait that life in nature is often contrasted with the unnatural constraints of society. Nature continues to be beautiful even through the sorrows and evil of mankind. While life is constantly changing, the beauty of nature stays the same. He writes: “Beyond remotest smoke of hunter’s camp, // Roams the majestic brute, in the herds that shake // The earth with thundering steps—yet here I meet // His ancient footsteps stamped beside the pool” (*l.* 99-102). Looking past the turmoil of civilization there is still beauty and hope in nature. Romantics believe in the natural goodness of man; the idea that man in a state of nature would behave well but is hindered by civilization.

The last section of “The Prairies” discusses the belief in the perfectibility of man; spiritual force immanent not only in nature but also the mind of man. There’s a story behind the phrase “down to earth” Someone who is connected to nature, connected to their roots has a different essence about them. They are calm, simple, and hopeful; all aspects found in nature. Bryant writes: “From the ground // Comes up the laugh of children, the soft voice // Of maidens, and the sweet solemn hymn // Of Sabbath worshippers” (*l.* 116-119). There is nothing quite like the purity of nature and the newness it brings to those filled by it. Nature depicts sincerity, spontaneity and faith in emotion as markers of truth; faith in imagination as a source of truth. At the end of the poem Bryant brings the reader back to reality, out of the individual’s imagination. He writes: “All at once // A fresher wind sweeps by and breaks my dream, // And I am in the wilderness alone” (*l.*121-124).

This poem was filled with imagination, nature, emotion, free verse, and countless other Romantic traits. “Thus change the forms of being.” Thanks to Bryant’s impeccable romantic writing skills, neoclassicism faded out and romanticism was born. Readers were able to connect their emotions to his work and with that, a whole new world of literature opened up. However, poems were not Bryant’s only works. His life was filled with countless adventures and he captured those moments in his work. In his book *Letters of a Traveler* Bryant transports the minds of his readers with his ability to write. He recounts: “In the forest cantons the driver of your carriage will point out from time to time in some gorge of mountains, where the stream comes down through the forest, a large building in which glass is made” (Bryant, 24). Even in his books, Bryant depicts the romantic writing style. His use of nature and free verse make it almost impossible to deny.

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