

Exploring the Mythical Imagination: A Comparative Analysis of British Romantic Literature and Mythological Narratives

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Abstract

This study embarks on a captivating journey into the intricate realm of British Romantic Literature, where the mythical imagination of poets and writers intertwines with age-old mythological narratives. With the aim of illuminating the profound connections between these two seemingly distinct domains, this comparative analysis delves into the creative works of renowned British Romantic authors and their engagement with mythological themes. The exploration of these intersections reveals a nuanced understanding of how myth, imagination, and literature intersect, resulting in an enriched tapestry of storytelling that transcends temporal boundaries. Our investigation commences by delving into the works of iconic Romantic figures such as John Keats, William Wordsworth, and Mary Shelley, among others. These authors, influenced by the mythological traditions of both ancient and contemporary cultures, craft narratives that resonate with timeless themes of heroism, creation, and transcendence. We analyze their poetry and prose, exploring how mythological elements infuse depth and meaning into their literary creations, ultimately offering insights into the Romantic movement's underlying mythopoeic tendencies. Furthermore, our comparative approach extends beyond the examination of individual authors to encompass the collective Romantic imagination. By analyzing recurring motifs, archetypes, and narrative structures across British Romantic Literature, we unveil the collective mythical consciousness that permeates this period. This study offers a new perspective on how the Romantic poets and novelists collectively reimagined and reshaped mythological traditions to reflect the unique cultural and societal context of their time. This exploration of the mythical imagination in British Romantic Literature highlights the enduring relevance of myth in shaping human creativity, narrative, and cultural discourse.

Keywords: Mythical Imagination, British Romantic Literature, Mythological Narratives

Introduction

The realm of literature has always been a fertile ground for the expression of the human imagination, giving life to countless worlds and narratives that reflect the aspirations, fears, and ideals of the societies that produce them. The British Romantic period, spanning roughly from the late 18th to the early 19th century, was a time of profound artistic and intellectual ferment, characterized by a profound fascination with the mythical and the imaginative. In this period, poets and writers sought to delve deep into the wellspring of human creativity, and the result was a body of work that continues to captivate and inspire to this day.

The Romantic movement was not merely a literary one; it was an all-encompassing shift in the cultural, artistic, and intellectual paradigms of the time. This period, which found its roots in

the wake of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, was marked by an intense longing for the uncharted territories of human emotions, the sublime, and the spiritual. It was a period of introspection, of grappling with the complexities of human existence, and of exploring the realms beyond the material world. This, in turn, led to a profound exploration of mythology.

Mythology, in its myriad forms, has always been an essential part of human civilization. These narratives of gods, heroes, and monsters serve as the collective dreams and aspirations of cultures across the globe, shedding light on the fundamental aspects of the human experience. In British Romantic literature, the mythical imagination found an ideal canvas for its expression, and this period witnessed an enchanting interplay between the mythical and the literary.

This comparative analysis aims to illuminate the profound interconnection between British Romantic literature and mythological narratives, a bond that shaped some of the most iconic works of the era. This exploration will delve into several key aspects, seeking to unravel the ways in which mythology influenced British Romantic literature and how, in turn, the Romantic imagination reinterpreted and breathed new life into ancient myths.

One of the most prominent features of British Romantic literature was the rekindling of the sense of the sublime—a concept deeply rooted in mythological narratives. The sublime, a fascination with the vast, the mysterious, and the awe-inspiring, was a central theme in the works of Romantic poets like William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Blake. This concept, however, was not entirely novel; it had its origins in the ancient Greek concept of "the sublime," as found in the works of Longinus. Moreover, the Romantics were deeply influenced by ancient mythology, where gods and natural forces often embodied the sublime. Thus, this exploration will trace the lineage of the sublime from ancient mythology to the Romantic poets, highlighting the role that myth played in shaping their ideas of the sublime.

The Romantic period was also characterized by a fascination with the supernatural, often drawing from mythological sources to weave narratives of magic and wonder. A notable example is Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," a poem that takes inspiration from the mythic and exotic world of Kublai Khan. This illustrates the Romantic desire to explore the otherworldly, the enchanted, and the mysterious, evoking the spirit of mythological narratives. By comparing these works with their mythological counterparts, we can gain insight into how the Romantics utilized myth as a source of inspiration and transformation.

Furthermore, the Romantics, through their poems and prose, often engaged with the idea of the hero's journey and the quest for self-discovery—a theme deeply rooted in the mythologies of diverse cultures. This analysis will explore the parallels between Romantic heroes like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner and ancient mythological heroes, such as Odysseus, and Hercules. It will illuminate how these Romantic narratives echoed and reimagined the age-old mythic patterns of the hero's quest, with a focus on individual growth and moral exploration.

In addition, the Romantic era was a time of radical cultural and political change, and this period of upheaval had its own mythical dimensions. The French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution were events that transformed societies and called into question established norms and values. Romantic writers like William Blake, who often incorporated biblical and mythological imagery into their works, utilized these ancient narratives to critique contemporary society and explore the implications of these radical changes. The Romantics, inspired by the timeless resonance of mythological narratives, sought to reinvent and recontextualize these ancient stories to reflect the evolving human experience of their time. This comparative analysis, therefore, aims to explore how British Romantic literature served

as a bridge between the mythical past and the modern present, offering readers a fresh perspective on enduring myths while connecting the contemporary world to its mythic roots.

Rekindling the Sense of Sublime in British Romantic Literature

The British Romantic era, spanning from the late 18th to the early 19th century, marked a significant shift in literary and artistic sensibilities. One of the central themes that emerged during this period was the "sublime." Rooted in the philosophical ideas of the time, the concept of the sublime encompassed feelings of awe, wonder, and terror in the face of the vast, awe-inspiring forces of nature. British Romantic literature was instrumental in rekindling the sense of the sublime, imbuing it with new life and meaning. This essay explores how the Romantics rekindled the sense of the sublime through their works, philosophy, and engagement with nature.

The Enlightenment, which preceded the Romantic era, emphasized reason, science, and empiricism. While these values contributed significantly to the progress of knowledge and society, they also tended to diminish the sense of the sublime. Rationality and reason sought to explain and demystify nature, which led to a more utilitarian perspective. The Romantics, however, rekindled the sense of the sublime by opposing the mechanistic view of the universe and instead highlighting the emotional and spiritual aspects of human existence.

Romantic poets like William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Blake were instrumental in reviving the sense of the sublime. Wordsworth, in his autobiographical poem "The Prelude," celebrated the transcendent experiences he had in nature. He believed that these experiences could provide access to a deeper understanding of life and the universe. His famous poem, "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," exemplifies this by capturing the profound emotions he felt in the presence of nature. The beauty and sublimity of the natural world evoked a sense of wonder and spiritual connection.

Coleridge, in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," used supernatural and awe-inspiring elements to convey a sense of the sublime. The poem's narrative, filled with ghostly apparitions and supernatural occurrences, elicits a profound sense of dread and wonder in the reader. Coleridge's exploration of the supernatural within the natural world highlights the mysterious and often terrifying aspects of existence, rekindling the sense of the sublime.

William Blake, a visionary poet and artist, also contributed to the revival of the sublime. His works, such as "The Tyger" and "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," grapple with the dualities of human nature and the divine. The tiger in "The Tyger" represents the darker, more fearsome aspects of creation, eliciting a sense of awe and terror. Blake's exploration of these themes rekindled the sense of the sublime by embracing the complex and mysterious aspects of the human experience.

The Romantic poets' rekindling of the sublime was deeply intertwined with their philosophical beliefs. Immanuel Kant's "Critique of Judgment," published in 1790, played a pivotal role in shaping the Romantic notion of the sublime. Kant distinguished between the "mathematical sublime," which arises from the perception of vast, overwhelming objects, and the "dynamic sublime," which emerges from the contemplation of natural forces, like storms or volcanoes. The Romantics were particularly drawn to the dynamic sublime, as it connected to the unpredictable and awe-inspiring aspects of nature.

The Romantics also embraced the idea of the "sublime terror," which emphasized the profound and often unsettling emotions evoked by the sublime. Edmund Burke's "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful" (1757) greatly influenced this concept. The Romantics found inspiration in Burke's exploration of the terror associated

with the sublime and used it as a means to reconnect with the more primal and emotional aspects of human nature.

In addition to poetry and philosophy, the Romantics' interactions with nature played a crucial role in rekindling the sense of the sublime. The British countryside served as a powerful backdrop for their artistic and philosophical explorations. Wordsworth, who famously described himself as a "worshipper of nature," believed that the natural world had the power to transcend the ordinary and transport individuals to a higher state of consciousness. He often took long walks in the Lake District, seeking inspiration from the landscape. Such experiences allowed the Romantics to directly engage with nature, fostering a deeper connection and understanding of its sublime qualities.

The Romantics' revival of the sublime extended beyond literature and philosophy, influencing art and architecture as well. Artists like J.M.W. Turner captured the overwhelming power of nature in their paintings, evoking the same sense of awe and wonder that the Romantic poets conveyed in their works. Architectural elements inspired by the sublime, such as towering cathedrals and gothic structures, emerged during this period, reflecting the desire to incorporate the sublime into various aspects of life. The British Romantic period, spanning from the late 18th to the early 19th century, was a time of artistic and intellectual exploration. At its core, Romanticism was characterized by a deep fascination with the supernatural. This fascination found its roots in various mythological sources, which provided a rich tapestry of legends, folklore, and ancient beliefs that inspired the Romantic poets, novelists, and artists of the time. This essay explores the enduring allure of the supernatural during the British Romantic period and how it drew from diverse mythological sources to fuel the creative expressions of this era.

The Fascination with the Supernatural in the British Romantic Period: Mythological Roots and Literary Expression

Romanticism and the Supernatural

Romanticism as we discussed earlier was a literary and artistic movement that emerged as a reaction against the rationalism and industrialization of the Enlightenment era. It was characterized by a deep reverence for nature, a celebration of individualism, and a fascination with the inexplicable and supernatural. This fascination with the supernatural found its roots in various mythological sources that had shaped the cultural and intellectual landscape of Britain.

The fascination with the supernatural in the British Romantic period found its most enduring expression in literature. The Romantic poets, including William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and Lord Byron, delved into the supernatural in their works. Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is a haunting tale of a cursed mariner's encounter with spectral figures, while Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci" explores themes of enchantment and otherworldly beauty. These poems exemplify the Romantic interest in the supernatural, often employing elements from mythology and folklore to create a sense of wonder and mystery.

Ancient Mythology

One of the most prominent mythological sources that inspired the Romantics was ancient Greco-Roman mythology. The Romantic poets and writers were enamored with the tales of gods and goddesses, mythical creatures, and epic adventures. These ancient myths provided a rich backdrop for their creative endeavors. For example, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" draws on the rich tapestry of mythological imagery, while John Keats' "Endymion" is a reimagining of the Greek myth of the moon goddess Selene and the shepherd Endymion. The Romantics found in these myths a source of inspiration and a means to explore the mystical and the otherworldly.

Celtic and Norse Mythology

Beyond the classical mythology, the Romantics were also drawn to the mystique of Celtic and Norse mythology. The tales of the Celtic druids, the Arthurian legends, and the Norse sagas provided a rich source of supernatural elements. Writers like Sir Walter Scott delved into Celtic folklore in his works, while the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of artists deeply influenced by Romanticism, drew from Norse mythology in their paintings and poetry. These mythologies added a sense of mystery and a connection to the ancient past that appealed to the Romantics' longing for a deeper, more mystical understanding of the world.

Folklore and the Gothic Tradition

The fascination with the supernatural during the Romantic period extended beyond classical and ancient mythologies. The Romantics also looked to folklore and the Gothic tradition for inspiration. Folklore, with its tales of fairies, ghosts, and otherworldly creatures, offered a rich source of material. Writers like the Brothers Grimm collected and published folktales, and these stories, with their fantastical elements, influenced the Romantic writers. Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" and Bram Stoker's "Dracula" are examples of how the Gothic tradition and folklore elements were incorporated into Romantic literature, exploring themes of the supernatural, the uncanny, and the darker aspects of human existence.

Mystical and Occult Influences

The fascination with the supernatural in the British Romantic period also drew from mystical and occult influences. The Romantics were intrigued by esoteric knowledge, mysticism, and the idea of hidden truths. Figures like William Blake were deeply engaged with mystical thought, and his visionary poetry and artwork reflected his interest in the spiritual and the mystical. Additionally, the Romantic period witnessed a revival of interest in the occult, with secret societies and the study of alchemy, astrology, and the Kabbalah becoming popular among the intellectual elite. These mystical and occult influences contributed to the Romantic fascination with the supernatural, as they sought to uncover the hidden dimensions of reality.

Political and Cultural Upheavals in the Romantic Period and their Mythical Undertones

The Romantic period, spanning roughly from the late 18th to the mid-19th century, was a time of profound political and cultural upheavals that left an indelible mark on the arts, literature, and the collective imagination of the era. This period, characterized by a passionate embrace of emotion, nature, and individualism, was deeply entwined with mythical undertones that provided a unique lens through which artists and thinkers of the time examined and reacted to the tumultuous changes taking place.

Political Upheavals

The Romantic period was marked by significant political upheavals, chief among them being the French Revolution (1789-1799). The revolution's ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity inspired a generation of Romantic writers and artists. The belief in the power of the individual to shape their destiny and challenge oppressive systems reverberated through their works.

Poets like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge sought to capture the spirit of these revolutionary ideals in their poetry, expressing the hope of societal transformation. The mythical undertone here lies in the notion that individuals could act as heroes in their own narratives, akin to mythical figures embarking on epic quests.

Cultural Upheavals

The Romantic period was a time of cultural upheaval, manifesting in a rejection of the Enlightenment emphasis on reason and a resurgence of interest in emotion and the irrational.

Romanticism placed a high value on nature and the idea of the sublime, where the awe-inspiring power of the natural world was revered.

Mythical undertones in this cultural shift can be seen in the Romantic fascination with the folklore and legends of different cultures. Writers such as the Grimm Brothers collected and published fairy tales that were rooted in centuries-old traditions. These tales carried archetypal figures like heroes, villains, and magical beings, which added a mythical dimension to the cultural upheaval of the time.

Mythical Imagery in Literature

Romantic literature is replete with mythical elements. Writers often used myths and legends as a source of inspiration. For instance, Lord Byron's poem "Prometheus" draws on the Greek myth of Prometheus, who defied the gods to bring fire and knowledge to humanity. Byron's work echoes the spirit of rebellion and the quest for knowledge that were prevalent during the Romantic era.

Similarly, Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" can be seen as a modern myth, exploring themes of creation, the misuse of knowledge, and the consequences of playing god. It delves into the mythical idea of creating life, similar to the divine act of creation found in many ancient myths.

Visual Arts and Mythical Imagery

The Romantic period also saw a resurgence of interest in visual arts. Painters like Caspar David Friedrich and J.M.W. Turner embraced nature's awe-inspiring beauty and its mythical undertones. Friedrich's "Wanderer above the Sea of Fog" captures the Romantic's fascination with the sublime in nature, with the lone figure symbolizing the individual's connection to the vast, mysterious world.

Turner's paintings, on the other hand, often featured mythological or historical scenes, blending the mythical with the contemporary to create evocative, emotionally charged works of art.

Music and Mythical Allusions

In music, composers like Ludwig van Beethoven and Richard Wagner incorporated mythical themes into their compositions. Beethoven's "Symphony No. 6" (the Pastoral Symphony) reflects his love for nature and mythical undertones, conveying the idea of humanity's connection to the natural world. Wagner, in his famous four-opera cycle "Der Ring des Nibelungen," drew on Germanic and Norse mythology to create a grandiose musical myth.

The Romantic period was therefore a time of profound political and cultural upheavals, intertwined with mythical undertones. It was a period where the human spirit, inspired by political revolutions and cultural shifts, sought to transcend the ordinary and embrace the extraordinary. Whether through literature, visual arts, or music, the Romantics found in mythology a powerful tool to express their hopes, fears, and dreams. The Romantic fascination with myths and legends served as a bridge between the tumultuous real world and the realm of the imagination, offering a way to make sense of and transcend the challenges of their time. This connection between political and cultural upheavals and the mythical elements of the Romantic period continues to captivate and inspire us today.

Romantic Narratives Reimagined through the Timeless Hero's Journey in the Romantic Era

The Romantic period ushered in a profound transformation of artistic and literary sensibilities, marked by an intense idealism, a reverence for nature, and a deep exploration of the human spirit. Amid this creative awakening, a recurring theme emerged - the reinterpretation and revival of romantic narratives within the age-old mythic framework of the hero's quest. This

fusion of mythic heroism with Romantic ideals birthed a unique narrative style that continues to enthrall readers and scholars.

Romanticism and Its Transformative Spirit

The Romantic era arose as a reaction to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the industrialization reshaping society during the Industrial Revolution. Romantics sought a fresh aesthetic, turning their focus toward nature, emotion, and individualism. These themes found their voice in the works of poets, novelists, and painters who aimed to forge a deeper connection with the human experience. At the heart of this connection lay the reinvention of heroism through the prism of the hero's quest.

The Hero's Quest: A Timeless Mythic Blueprint

The hero's quest, deeply rooted in myth and legend, revolves around a central character, the hero, embarking on a transformative journey replete with trials, challenges, and self-discovery. This narrative pattern transcends temporal and cultural boundaries, finding echoes in ancient myths such as the Greek hero's odyssey and in more recent tales like King Arthur's quest for the Holy Grail.

Romantic Literature's Reimagination of Heroism

Prominent Romantic writers like William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Mary Shelley drew inspiration from the hero's quest archetype, infusing it with their distinct visions and ideals. In Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the mariner undertakes a perilous voyage, facing supernatural trials that culminate in a spiritual transformation echoing the hero's journey. Coleridge merges the hero's quest with themes of guilt, redemption, and the supernatural, creating a hauntingly Romantic narrative.

Similarly, in Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," the poet embarks on an introspective and emotional journey, contemplating the passage of time and the transformative power of nature. Here, the hero's quest takes the form of an inner exploration, aligning with Romantic emphasis on individualism and the sublime.

Nature as Ally and Foe

Romantic heroes often found both companionship and adversity in nature. In the Romantic worldview, nature embodied both sublimity and a wellspring of profound inspiration. In the hero's quest, nature served as a symbolic and dynamic backdrop for the hero's trials and self-discovery. Influenced by transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, the Romantics celebrated the union of the human spirit with the natural world.

Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" exemplifies this duality, as Victor Frankenstein embarks on a treacherous quest into the secrets of life. His ambition and obsession parallel the hero's hubris, a recurring theme in mythic quests. Shelley portrays nature as both exquisite and indifferent, reflecting the Romantic view of nature as both a companion and an adversary to the hero.

Love and Idealism in Romantic Heroism

Love played a pivotal role in Romantic literature and frequently drove the hero's quest. Love was portrayed as a motivating force, propelling the hero to undertake extraordinary feats. In John Keats' "Lamia," the hero, Lycius, becomes enamored with the supernatural Lamia, embarking on a quest-like pursuit of forbidden knowledge fueled by love, desire, and the pursuit of ideal beauty.

Moreover, the Romantic era's focus on individualism and the celebration of the extraordinary in everyday life often gave rise to heroes who defied societal norms. This rebellion against

convention was a core element of the hero's quest, as seen in Lord Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," where the hero, Childe Harold, rejects societal constraints to embark on a journey of self-discovery.

The Romantic period undeniably ushered in a time of profound artistic and literary innovation, characterized by the reimagination of age-old mythic patterns within the hero's quest. Through the Romantic lens, writers and poets infused this archetype with themes of individualism, love, nature, and idealism, resulting in narratives that continue to resonate with readers and scholars. The heroes of Romantic literature undertook quests that were not solely physical but often emotional and intellectual, mirroring the rich and multifaceted landscape of human experience. As we continue to explore and appreciate the works of the Romantic era, we uncover the enduring allure of heroes who dared to dream, challenge, and embark on quests that still reverberate through the annals of literature.

Conclusion

British Romantic literature, spanning from the late 18th to the early 19th century, holds a unique and enduring place in the world of literary history. It serves as a remarkable bridge between the mythical past and the modern present, offering a profound exploration of human experience, emotions, and cultural transformation. The Romantic era, characterized by its emphasis on nature, individualism, and a fascination with the past, played a pivotal role in reshaping literature and, by extension, the way we perceive the world.

As we conclude our exploration of British Romantic literature's role as a bridge between the mythical past and the modern present, it becomes evident that this period's profound impact extends beyond its temporal confines. It has left an indelible mark on contemporary literature, philosophy, and even our understanding of human nature.

Rediscovering Mythical Past

One of the central themes in British Romantic literature is the revival and reinterpretation of the mythical past. Writers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Blake delved into folklore, legends, and ancient traditions, seeking to reclaim and reinvigorate these timeless stories. Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," for example, delves into the mystical and surreal, channeling the aura of a mythical past. Such efforts helped preserve and adapt the wisdom of the past for the present and future generations.

Nature as a Source of Inspiration

The Romantics held a deep reverence for nature. In the works of poets like William Wordsworth and John Keats, we see an almost spiritual connection with the natural world. This emphasis on nature as a source of inspiration, a wellspring of profound emotions, continues to shape modern environmentalism and our understanding of humanity's place in the natural order. The Romantic celebration of the landscape as a reflection of the sublime instills in us a sense of awe and reverence for the world around us.

Individualism and Freedom

The Romantic era celebrated individualism and personal freedom. Writers like Lord Byron and Mary Shelley explored the complexities of human nature, often defying societal norms. Their works reflect the struggles of individuals to assert their identity and break free from the constraints of tradition, setting the stage for the modern emphasis on personal autonomy and self-expression.

Revisiting the Past with a Critical Eye

While Romantic literature sought to rekindle the past, it also brought a critical lens to historical events and societal norms. The works of Jane Austen, for instance, presented a nuanced view of social hierarchies, gender roles, and relationships in the Regency era. This critical examination of the past laid the foundation for a more sophisticated and analytical approach to history and social issues in modern literature and scholarship.

Influence on Modern Literature and Culture

The Romantics' exploration of emotions and inner turmoil, their passion for the natural world, and their critique of society have left a profound mark on subsequent generations of writers, artists, and thinkers. The echoes of Romanticism can be seen in the works of authors like J.R.R. Tolkien, J.K. Rowling, and Neil Gaiman, who continue to draw from the well of myth, nature, and individualism.

Reflection of the Human Experience

Ultimately, British Romantic literature serves as a timeless mirror to the human experience. The themes explored by Romantic poets and novelists—love, suffering, aspiration, and the quest for meaning—continue to resonate with readers today. In an ever-changing world, the Romantics remind us of the enduring aspects of the human condition and offer solace, inspiration, and a sense of connection.

In conclusion, British Romantic literature stands as a bridge between the mythical past and the modern present, a testament to the enduring power of the written word. Its ability to transcend time and influence generations of writers and thinkers attests to its profound significance. The Romantics, through their exploration of nature, individualism, myth, and history, have bequeathed to us a literary legacy that continues to inspire, enlighten, and provoke thought. In the words of John Keats, they have "unweave the rainbow" and uncover the beauty and wonder of both the past and the present.

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