

# Romanticised Slavery in Selected English Romantic Poems

Sahar Abdul Ameer Haraj, University of Al-Qadisyiah, College of Education, Dept. of English, Iraq, Emails: [sahar.abudalameer@qu.edu.iq](mailto:sahar.abudalameer@qu.edu.iq) and [sahar.alhusseini@gmail.com](mailto:sahar.alhusseini@gmail.com)

Romantic poets utilise images of slavery, which was a very debatable issue during the Romantic era, for the sake of making this matter present in the English people's mind, to enable them to distinguish the varied ways the institutions in the society preserved, as well as nurtured the evils in the society. Slavery for the Romantics was practiced inside the authorised system and it, as well as the way the slaves depicted, was a problem of concern. The Romantics use the concept of slavery to challenge oppression and to support economic reform. They attempt, through their depictions of slaves, to convey the concept of alterity, which is to be familiar with the *selfness* of another, and to strengthen the individual's self-awareness as well as ethical awareness.

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## Introduction

*In every cry of every Man,  
In ever infant's cry of fear,  
In ever voice, in every ban,  
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.*  
(London, William Blake)

Romanticism, the movement which appeared during the eighteenth century, partakes in a thoughtful social insinuation on the ages that follow, especially the nineteenth century, as far as the English culture is concerned. Among such deep implications was the connection between Britons themselves and the viciousness related to chattel slavery. This connection sheds light on the role of the artist/poet and the very ugly crimes related to his/her era. Slavery in relation to the Romantics acquired a very significant interpretation due to the thoughts and aims of the Romantics and their own ideas of emancipation as well as the efforts they provide in this respect. One must view their own works related to slavery from the political perspective as well as through other notions like ethnicity, philosophy, and antislavery (Lee, 2002).

The span of the Romantic Movement lasts from the 1780s to the mid 1830s and this time was the suitable time and the most important one for the British Empire as well as its expansion (Kitson,

2000). This was due to the significant political, as well as historical, events during this specific period for it coincided with the French revolution and the wars between Britain and France, Spain, the civil war in America and the loss of many American colonies on the part of Britain. Thus, it was quite clear that slavery became a basic theme in Romantic Literature. For this theme reflects the viewpoint as well as the reactions of the Romantics towards slavery.

In England, during the romantic period, slavery was abolished in a legal way in 1772. This was due to the efforts of certain abolitionists, who participated a great deal in putting a legal end to slavery together with certain other events and experiences that pushed the matter forward because they believed that slavery and the slave trade was immoral and it should reach an end (Craton, 1979). Events like revolts as well as insurrections like the "Baptist War", the name given to the slave insurrection that occurred in Jamaica between the late 1831 and the beginning of 1832, led to the end of slavery. Because in this event there was a direct fight between the black slaves and the white slave-owners as well as the government. The result involved bloody and extreme violence to the black slaves. It is thought that this event was the major cause behind the Parliament's passing of the first Emancipation Act later that same year. Later in 1834, the Parliament voted to free slaves but partially, this is to say in return for financial recompense to plantation possessors. It was a partial freedom because only children under six were completely freed, with others turned into "apprentices". It was only in 1838 that the complete abolishment of slavery was granted to slaves and they got their full freedom (Walvin; 2001)

These events as well as achievements were the results of the discourse around servitude and it was led within a greater discourse around human races universally as well as their connection with each other. Chiefly two major theories were conducted in this respect (Kitson, 2000). The first one was related to the notion that the black as well as the whites were two completely dissimilar kinds, with – in relation to the Jamaican slave owner Edward Long (1774) - the African considered near to the orangutan or ape than to mankind (Kitson, 2000). Africans were thus seen as the “vilest of human kind”, and as lacking moral as well as knowledgeable capacities (Kitson, 2000). This helped to explain as well as to preserve slavery, because this would not be actually different from usual livestock keeping.

Conversely, this 'two-species-theory' was not a largely acknowledged notion in the eighteenth century - primarily due to the doctrinal motives. Robert Young sums up the overriding view of race at that time as "the idea of humans being of different species, and therefore of different origins, conflicted with the Biblical account; moreover the pressure of the Anti-Slavery campaign meant that the emphasis was very much on all humans belonging to a single family" (Kitson, 2000).

However, this does not mean that all humans descend from one sole family, implying that every race was regarded alike. Actually, Kitson remarks that the "hierarchy of races" (Kitson, 2000) was largely believed in. This time with the 'Negro' placed at the last level of it. And he also states that this formation is derived from the work of the German anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who offered a scriptural account of race, which suggested that the diversities of

humanity may well be regarded as "degeneration". Blumenbach considered the European race the best as well as the least degenerated one, regarding all other races (Malayan, Mongolian, American and Ethiopian) had diverged from. Although Blumenbach debated in the convention of Montesquieu, this alteration was only because of the altered circumstances as well as the repudiated conceptual aptitude as a determining factor of race. It is understandable how these concepts of racial degeneration might be utilised to validate colonialism as well as slavery (Durr, 2011).

Despite the overall attitude that there is a difference between blacks and whites and that black people are inferior to white people, it was not the view of all people. The British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson emphasised the equality of all races and he went further in his debate on the Christian universalist view of race, relying on, the conception that all human beings derived from the "same original". Besides, Clarkson considered a man not a thing, and thus could not be traded. Such notions were made obvious in the works of Clarkson, leading his readers to reconsider their suppositions about European dominance as well as slavery. (Kitson, 2000)

Abolitionism in the Romantic era frequently represented an implied language of disagreement to the controlling culture in Britain as well as a straightforward campaign alongside the brutalities of the empire. Nonetheless, abolitionists hardly gave chance to those who had been exposed to slavery speak - they assumed the disputes of the slaves from diversified intentions of their own. The consequences of their fictional images of the discourse of enslaved people were nonetheless influential, conveying the deep feeling of their 'middle-class English readers' (Kitson, 2000). However, there were many publications of famous writers dealing with the problem, for instance William Cowper's street ballads "The Negro's complaint" as well as "Sweet Meat has Sour Sauce" (Erdman, 1952). This in connection with the 1787 "Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade", which planned town gatherings, and also registered the aid of writers as well as artists, enhanced Erdman's pleas, "the most agitated reform movement of the time". Concurring with the initial stage of this movement was William Blake's poem "Little Black Boy" (Erdman, 1952). All through the Romantic epoch, slavery was a problem though England abolished slavery early in the 19th century; it abolished the slave trade in 1807 as well as later ended slavery in 1834. Consequently, in England, prevailing from images, were discussions about slavery. The Romantics were among the English community who were influenced by those images as well as discussions. Yet the Romantic poets dealt with disputes of slavery in diagonal means. The purpose was to discriminate themselves from the Abolitionist movement on one hand and to argue as well as expose slavery in means not weighed down from sentimentalism.

Undeniably, much existing Abolitionist literature during that time orbited around emotional petitions. Yet Romantic poets raised images of slavery for the sake of leading their readers to not only consider slavery as an evil and morally wrong institution, but to think more about how the system preserved as well as nurtured those evils. The way certain events, related to slavery, was addressed was not from the point of view of human rights but rather than the anxious incongruities over property rights. This led the Romantics to view this issue, slavery, as relating

to the legal system that cares only about chattel property as well as economic property. Slaves were portrayed as sheer pieces of chattel, transportable pieces of possession. (Stromski, 2001).

The Romantics employ the conception of slavery in several ways and for dissimilar purposes. It was an effort to face tyranny as James Walvin, a critic, contends for the sake of advocating economic reform (Walvin; 2001). The utilisation of the image of slavery might be as Debbie Lee, a critic, maintains that for the sake of presenting through them the notion of transformation, to say one identifies the selfness, or awareness, of another, reinforces one's own self-consciousness as well as ethical responsiveness. (Lee, 2002)

The Romantics, partly designated as well as portrayed slavery in response to its portrayal within sentimental literature, the thing preferred by abolitionists. Mostly the abolitionists enlist sentimental literature for the sake of spreading their anti-slavery message, thus they would afford images that intended merely to appeal to the reader's sentiments, stating that slavery is an evil institute because of the horrifying fears it compels, then trying to make the reader share in indignation over those fears. Aside from this passionate appeal this literature did not encompass deeper messages.

Although slavery is not explicitly talked about within Romantic poetry, and although Romantics did not habitually come out openly on the side of abolition, the theme, as well as the debate of slavery accentuated much of their writing. One shared feature which all these poems have is that they request—regularly force—the hearers to look upon the individual slave, and then inquire about that slave's connection to the reader, as well as how the two are analogous.

Among the Romantics who utilise the theme of slavery in their poetry is William Blake for whom man's freedom is part of his philosophy. He consulted the matter not from the black and white viewpoint but rather a theological point of view; he regarded it as a kind of unawareness of the Christian charity as well as brotherhood. It is not only related to the enslavement of the body, but it is also a mental enslavement. For Blake, man is basic, and he should acquire harmony with himself, with the universe and with others. Only by this, the world is to achieve perfection. Blake believes in equality, whether racial or sexual, and that the enslavement of the mind comes from being with a narrow mind or insight or in blindly following materialism. Sometimes enslavement comes from viewing oneself as superior to others or in following the conventions.

Such highlighted conception might be found in his "The Little Black Boy" (1789), one of the poems in his *Songs of Innocence*. Slavery is clearly depicted in this poem when speaking about a black boy who knows not what his guilt is. Blake places emphasis on the notion of whiteness of the soul of the black boy. The poem shows the sufferings of the black boy due to his dark skin, yet simply he says it is because of the exposure to the sun.

*Look on the rising sun: there God does live  
And gives his light, and gives his heat away.  
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive  
Comfort in morning joy in the noonday.* (Blake, Poetry foundation.com)

And this darkness of my skin prevents you from seeing the whiteness of my soul. This is a kind of wisdom the blacks try to show to the whites, or it is a kind of freedom of the mind on the part of the blacks faced by the enslavement of the mind on the part of the whites. It is Blake's view that the clouds of blackness will disappear and only the beams of the white soul will remain. Theologically, the body will vanish, and the soul will be forever. Consequently, the cause of his darkness, the sun as his mother told, will be source of strength to him because the sun is a source of light and heat as well. Thus, the sun will bring him the ability to face god and bear beams of love to Christ rather than to shade like the white boy (Gupta, 1999).

*When I from black and he from white cloud free,  
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy:  
Ill shade him from the heat till he can bear,  
To lean in joy upon our fathers knee.  
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,  
And be like him and he will then love me.* (Blake, Poetry foundation.com)

Thus, the black boy tries to pass a lesson to the English in general, the English boy in particular, that I am of help to you till the time you get freed from your imprisonment and are able to understand that we are equal and brothers and I will shade you till the time the you be able to bear the sun and I will be your shade till you acquire your strength. Together with slavery as a theme Blake presents the theme of equality in the presence of God. This is to say that the white boy with his angelic features has a privilege that the black boy does not have, and his salvation is only through his death. Blake says that in heaven there is no blariness to be found according to the skin or its colour. The poem once more considers equality and universal humanity. Blake abhors racism and slavery.

Blake in his *Visions of Daughters of Albion* (1793) shows his rejection to slavery of marriage, mental slavery that of superiors and slavery of experience over significance. The poem is about Oothoon, a persona metaphorically presented to stand for enslaved British Women in Blake's society who have been ferociously raped by Bromion, as well as consequently banned by her supposed lover Theotormon. Obviously from this plot one can see that a major issue to be talked is slavery in relation to gender-based domination which is an issue related to British women throughout Blake's time. He says: "ENSLA'D, the Daughters of Albion weep."

In the *visions* after being raped, Oothoon being rent with the thunder of Bromion, declared:

*Thy soft American plains are mine and mine thy north & south  
Stamp with my signet are the swarthy children of the sun.*

(Blake, 1793)

When Blake brings equality between America and 'plains' in Oothoons body, he meant to hold the radical spirit of America and calling up their system of slavery to say that Bromion when he says that Oothoon is stamped, with his sign, as if he is referring to branding slaves. Consequently,

Oothoon now after being raped is a slave now to the same persona. Besides the enslavement of the mind, also in the poem Oothoon says, "Tell me what is a thought? Of what constituent is it made?" Here she means that the patriarchal society has already entrenched its ideology and that society and its institutions have already been created for us. Thus, society has constructed a kind of knowledge that taught men (like Bromion and Theotormon) to act in this way, in relation to women. This constructed knowledge taught Oothoon how to act as well and not only Bromion and Theotormon. It is a patriarchal religious constructed knowledge. Oothoon says:

*Father of Jealousy [the patriarch Urizen], be thou accursed from the earth!  
Why hast thou taught my Theotormon this accursed thing?*

(Blake, 1793)

Theotormon finally sits "Upon the margined ocean conversing with shadows dire" (Damrosch, 2012a) inspecting his relation to Plate 1 of Visions considering his relation as if trapped in the metaphorical caves that is apparent. He cannot overcome the socially gathered awareness that is indoctrinated from society's institutions, "conversing with shadows" (Damrosch, 2012b). Symbolically speaking, the cave stands for entrapping cultural ideologies of gender keeping them chained to their principles since they cannot emancipate themselves. He is still unable to reconcile her "defiled" state.

Man is central to Blake's vision. According to him, when man restores himself to harmony, the universe and all life will be perfected, and he portrayed slavery in negative light.

In *Visions*, the daughters of Albion aspire towards, due to the idea that America embraces the promise that one day; all forms of discrimination will reach an end. In America, they sought that races would live in harmony; women would be able to privilege their own sexuality. Similarly, Blake knows that however America has freed itself from British rule, it still practices slavery. Oothoon is a female slave who has an unbounded spirit but is physically bound. Bromion is the slavedriver who possesses her then rapes her for the sake of increasing her market value while Theotormon is her envious lover who was unable to diagnose her godly humanity. The focus of the poem is on the love of Oothoon for Theotormon who is not frightened to enter the arena of love. Thus, she is a slave and has a master who followed a constructed social ideology.

On the metaphorical level Bromion is not only the rapist, he is also the slaver who assumes to possess Oothoon like America who possesses the African slaves in the North and the South as well, "the soft soul of American plains." There is also the fact that Oothoon is calling upon the British to save her from the cruelty of this slave. On another level, Oothoon stands for the women enslaved by marriage and asking her lover leave the accusations of adultery. This is only because she is with a very pure heart the same as she was before. Physically, Oothoon suffers from Bromion and psychologically as well but from Theotormon. Thus, the sufferings of Oothoon are due to varied kinds of slavery: social, religious, physical and psychological due to oppression and discrimination as well. Thus, her issue is an issue of human being which is the issue of liberty and emancipation from any kind of enslavement.

Thus, the solution for Blake is through emancipation from enslavement, especially for women and this is to be achieved through one's "cry, Love! Love! Love! Happy, Happy Love! Free as the mountain wild!" (Blake, 1793). The solution for Blake is love because it (free love) might lead to the Platonic view of the soul.

Another example among the Romantics who dealt with slavery in his poetry is William Wordsworth. In his "To Toussaint L'Ouverture" he says:

*TOUSSAINT, the most unhappy man of men!*  
*Whether the whistling Rustic tend his plough*  
*Within thy hearing, or thy head be now*  
*Pillowed in some deep dungeon's earless den;—*  
*O miserable Chieftain! where and when*  
*Wilt thou find patience? Yet die not; do thou*  
*Wear rather in thy bonds a cheerful brow:*  
*Though fallen thyself, never to rise again,*  
*Live, and take comfort. Thou hast left behind*  
*Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;*  
*There's not a breathing of the common wind*  
*That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;*  
*Thy friends are exultations, agonies,*  
*And love, and man's unconquerable mind.* (English Poetry II, 1909–14)

In this poem Wordsworth mentions Toussaint L'Ouverture also identified as Saint Domingue, the one who led the first popular revolution against slavery. Actually, he suffered imprisonment and finally death, yet he was influential in inspiring others to revolt as well as to resist slavery. Wordsworth says that he should rest as well as lay in peace due to this influence and inspiration to others. The poem shows Wordsworth's hatred towards slavery from a sympathetic rather than political viewpoint. This is due to his relation to the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson. However, slavery here is condemned because not only you suffer. Your suffering did not end actually it expands through the sufferings of your friends (friends in slavery) who feel your agonies and loss.

The Romantics use slavery as a theme in opposing to freedom, yet also in relation to slave trade thus calling for personal freedom which is completely contrasted with enslavement. Such a view is to be politically judged. Wordsworth, in his "The Mad Mother," introduces a mother who is a former slave. She describes her experience as well as her child's in relation to slave experience. She has been subjected to sexual assault which she reveals through a feverish vision. She says: "fiendish faces, one, two, three, /Hung at my breasts, and pulled at me," This assault is the reason behind her madness. The only relief she got is when the baby suckles her breast because it brings coolness to her fiery mind and it loosens the very tight and deadly bands on her chest, which is symbolic of the band of the slave's which has been devised in

order for slaves not to escape. The mother is supposed to be presented in universal terms, so that what matters is the experience and the feelings of the mother. She states

*Suck, little babe, oh suck again!  
It cools my blood; it cools my brain;  
They lips I feel them, babe! They  
Draw from my heart the pain away.*  
(Wordsworth, 1798)

The woman then tried to find a solution to this alienation she herself is experiencing by admitting that she knows the forest and how to live in it, off the land, she says :

*I know the poisons of the shade,  
I know the earth-nuts fit for food;  
Then, pretty dear, be not afraid;  
We'll find thy father in the wood.*  
*Now laugh and be gay, to the woods away!  
And there, my babe, we'll live for aye.*  
(Wordsworth, 1798)

This is a sense of displacement that is experienced by this lone dark woman; she is uprooted due to imperial exploitation (Youngquist, 2013). The poet sheds light on this issue.

Another example among the romantic poets who used slavery as them in their poetry is S.T. Coleridge. In his "The Rime of The Ancient Mariner," Coleridge he interrogates the associations between English guilt, disease, and slave trade. Debbie Lee explains the poem as being concerned with slavery. It is about a man telling a voyage of his at sea, where he shoots an albatross and seems to have been cursed as well as fated the ship's crew. Though Coleridge would speak more openly about the slave trade at times, Lee places the poem in relation to the disease Yellow Fever (which was thought to have initiated in the Caribbean, and which slaves were thought to be immune to) and connects the narrator's responsibility over killing the albatross with the guilt felt as well as practiced by regular inhabitants of England for their indirect contribution in slavery. Though Lee links the poem to slavery, other critics interpret it as being captivated with the unidentified and in relation to the Gothic. Such arguments do not challenge Lee though, as "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" expresses to the English people mysteries about the slave trade; as if the journey on the ship made when bringing the blacks to Britain during the slave trade and the sin committed led to the lack of rest in relation to both the blacks and whites at the same time. From this starts the journey of two distracted feelings of guilt and the new ideology of employing the other depending on his being inferior.



*Oh! dream of joy! is this indeed  
The light-house top I see?  
Is this the hill? is this the kirk?  
Is this mine own countree?  
We drifted o'er the harbour-bar,  
And I with sobs did pray—  
O let me be awake, my God!  
Or let me sleep alway. (Coleridge, 1975)*

Another example from Coleridge that shows his abhorrence towards slavery is his "The Greek Prize Ode" In this poem he calls for liberation which instantaneous and universal as well, he says:

*No longer with prophetic fear shall the Mother  
take her grimy babe to her breast: no; because  
the Day of Slavery has already been stretched  
too far. You who, Slaves of puffed-up Masters,  
have never, wretches, seen a tear moisten Pity's  
cheek, [though] suffering things shattering to  
hear, for you, your Children taste of [?] Justice,  
gathering the roses of Tranquility, and surely the holy  
reverence for Liberty, mother of prizes.['] (Wood, 2003)*

Thus Coleridge, strongly, spoke against slavery as well as the preservation of the slave trade. He says "a slave is a person perverted into a thing" as well as slavery is "a deviation from justice as an absolute subversion of all morality" (Buzzard, 2016)

## **Conclusion**

English romantic poets mostly tackled the issue of slavery due to the fact that slavery was a predominant topic throughout the Romantic epoch. It was one of the ills of the society. Such ills the Romantics considered related to the institutions and their wrong views and practices because these institutions adopted as well as prolonged those ills. They tried to show how those systems underlie the issue of slavery. It is perceived from a political point of view, and from the point of view of inferiority of those slaves being considered others. The Romantics tried to show their anti-slavery so that the reader can sense and share the outrage against slavery and its horrors.

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