

The Imagination of Romantic Poetry under Different Regional and Cultural Backgrounds: Comparison and Analysis of Kubla Khan and Mount Skyland ascended in a Dream-A Song of Farewell

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Abstract: Romanticism is an important branch of the literary genre, and imagination is an important feature of it. From different historical backgrounds, Both British poets and Chinese have each profound insight into the imagination in their romantic poetry creations. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, as a pioneer of English Romantic poetry, his dream fragment Kublai Khan established an unshakable position in the poet's literary circle, while Li Bai was a well-known romantic poet in the prosperous Tang Dynasty. His representative work, Mount Skyland ascended in a Dream-A Song of Farewell, shocked the entire Chinese poetry circle as soon as it came out. This essay analyzes the poets' poetic thoughts on imagination by studying the different backgrounds of the two poets, the cultural traditions they contacted, and the philosophical thoughts they infected and meanwhile compares and analyzes the image characteristics of the two poets' representative works to explore the concrete expression of the poet's imagination in the poems. It is found that there are similarities and differences spatially and emotionally in terms of imagery. Moreover, the imagination in romantic poetry not only creates a series of illusory images and casts a phantom veil on the whole poem but also insinuates the poet's poetic thought and inner emotional appeal.

Keywords: Romanticism, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Li Bai, imagination, imagery

1. Introduction

As a fundamental literary trend, Romanticism, which emphasizes individualism and enthusiasm, is one of the most significant zeitgeists flowing in the river of both ancient and modern literature. Some main factors contribute to the diversity of Romanticism, such as different cultures, historical backgrounds, and literary traditions. Romanticism in the West and the oriental countries radiate particularity while sharing general similarities. Similarities provide a platform on which each romantic creator acts simultaneously, whereas differences make each actor unique. As an integral characteristic, imagination plays a crucial role in this platform.

Imagination as the sine qua non of romantic poetry can be found in nearly every poem. The fountain of it can date back to Aristotle from Ancient Greek. He pointed out in his book Ethics that art is a kind of production and creation; the source of the work lies in the creator instead of the object

itself [1]. During the Renaissance, the household playwright William Shakespeare also explicated the effect of imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* [2]. Distinct from reason in the Classic Age, the Romantic Period, when emotion pervaded the literature works, is a golden age of imagination. "By the time of the Romantic period, literature was becoming virtually synonymous with the 'imaginative': to write about what did not exist was somehow more soul-stirring and valuable than to pen an account of Birmingham or the circulation of the blood. The word 'imaginative' contains an ambiguity suggestive of this attitude: it resonates with the descriptive term 'imaginary', meaning 'literary untrue', but is also, indubitably, an evaluative term, meaning 'visionary' or 'inventive'" [3]. The overwhelming charm of imagination in artistic creation stood out and reached an unprecedented height.

Representing the highest achievement in English poetry, the English Romantic period has been considered the second great period in English literature. In this period, many remarkable poets emerged, such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats, to name just a few. Among them, "the lake poet" Samuel Taylor Coleridge is a preeminent poet meriting attention. He blazed the new trail with Wordsworth and helped usher in the Romantic endeavor [4]. The advent of *Lyrical Ballads*, written by two of them, marked the beginning of Romanticism in Britain. Coleridge possessed highly sophisticated and innovative characteristics and was called one of the "two great seminal minds of England" by John Stuart Mill.

Regarding the creation of poetry, Coleridge maintains his distinct poetic thesis. In his *Biographia Literaria*, he believes that creators should not only be in possession of good ideological character but also rich imagination for thought is the body of poets, fantasy is the clothes of poets, and imagination is the soul of poets [5]. One of his iconic poems, *Kubla Khan*, is a clear illustration. The poet noted in the subtitle that this poem is a dream fragment. In this poem, Coleridge used his magnificent imagination to portray numerous striking imagery. Through the 50-odd lines, the readers can spontaneously throw into a vivid tableau and can not help gasping in admiration of this marvelous dream. *Kubla Khan* is characterized by striking imagery deriving from the poet's consummate imagination, which makes it a rarity in English romantic poetry.

On the other side of the world, China's venerable nation enjoys a high reputation for Romanticism. Throughout its history, no specific period is defined as the romantic period like Britain, but the shadow of Romanticism is ubiquitous. Therefore, Romanticism, like a thread, runs through the entire Chinese literary circles on which the Tang Dynasty is a remarkable and indispensable node. The Tang Dynasty was a certain age during which romantic literature developed to a high degree of maturity. The entire literary world experienced unprecedented prosperity since the Warring States Period. Li Bai, a stunning genius, wrote numerous universally acclaimed romantic poems using his unique creative method and pushed Chinese romantic poetry to its peak. As a romantic poet, Li Bai showed an exceptive preference for the imagination. Almost all his poems resonate with the sound of Romanticism, and the salient feature of Li Bai's poems is their vagarious imagery. *Mount Skyland ascended in a Dream-A Song of Farewell* is the epitome of it [6]. In this poem, Li Bai's imagination, fiery passion, and blurred artistic conception throw readers into the illusory realm and touch readers' minds, setting off raging waves.

From different countries, the two romantic poets share some similarities in their poetic thesis, style, and writing techniques. In contrast, these two romantic poets own their traits due to different cultures, historical backgrounds, and literary traditions. This essay will specifically analyze and compare the two poems based on the poetic thoughts of the two poets from these three aspects and study the similarities and differences of the illusory nature of romantic poetry in the different contexts of region and culture.

2. Coleridge and Li Bai as the Romantic Poets

2.1. Poetic Thoughts Derive from Different Historical Backgrounds

Coming from two countries that not only geographically are far from each other but also socially different, Coleridge and Li Bai are both renowned Romantic poets.

The outburst of the French Revolution in 1789 left a lasting mark on many European intellectuals, especially Coleridge. As a feverish proponent, Coleridge was still a student at Cambridge University at that time. He embraced the ideas of liberal democracy brought about by the French Revolution. The approval of the Declaration of the Rights of Man spread the seeds of equality, liberty, and fraternity in his heart. Coleridge also wrote *The Fall of the Bastille* as a passionate radical to endorse the bourgeois revolution. However, this romantic passion was soon extinguished by the change in the French political situation. After King Louis XVI's execution, the Reign of Terror as a Jacobin dictatorship and then the White Terror as Napoleonic wars shattered Coleridge's illusions about a liberty world. In 1802, Coleridge completely abandoned the original supportive attitude toward French Revolution. Instead, he started to assail its radicalization. Coleridge said his opinions are utterly untainted with French metaphysics, politics, ethics, and theology. Of the French Revolution, he described his thoughts most adequately in the words of Scripture: "A great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake; and after the earthquake, a fire; and the Lord was not in there "[7]. The French Revolution had left an imprint on his mind that Coleridge came to stick into the nice fantasy to extricate his soul from the harsh reality. Coleridge changed his attitude towards the French Revolution mirrors, and his thought changed from radical to conservative.

When Li Bai was young, he lived in the area around BaShu for almost twenty years, where the ideal leisure cultural environment, magnificent landscape, and mysterious ancient legends made the literati extremely romantic and thus established Li Bai's romantic style of poetry, known as independent free consciousness and elegant writing style. Two main elements account for many of Li Bai's romantic poems: landscape and mythology. In his landscape poetry, Li Bai used bizarre imagination and exaggeration to make the words astonishing and the prose touching, which allowed the extraordinary natural imagery and the lofty heroic character to intermingle unaffectedly without losing their separate identities. The second main factor, mythology, also frequently appears in his romantic poetry. For example, in his poem, *Mount Skyland ascended in a Dream-A Song of Farewell* mentioned several myths: fairy isle Yingzhou, the Lords of Clouds, and more.

2.2. Poetic Thoughts Derive from Different Literary Traditions

Coleridge set a precedent in English Romanticism as one of the pioneers of the English Romantic Movement. As he recalled in *Biographia*, the copy of *Sonnets, Written Chiefly in Picturesque Spots* by the clergyman-poet William Lisle Bowles was 'delighted and inspired' and had renewed his 'fancy, and the love of nature, and the sense of beauty in forms and sounds. Bowles appears a minor writer now, but his interweaving of inward feeling and outward description struck Coleridge deeply and provided a kind of model [8]. He even wrote a preface on the printed sheet of sonnets to praise the 'seer and indissoluble union between the intellectual and the material world. He observed, ' In every work of art, there is a reconciliation of the external with the internal.' Hence, from Coleridge's perspective, the concrete and abstract internal worlds are inextricably linked. The illusive spiritual world is not unreasonable. By presenting a pleasant fictitious world, the maker wants to reflect the other side of the harsh reality, making a strong contrast and radiating genuine feelings. So these two opposite worlds are complementary, making the poem an organic whole.

As one of the founders of romantic poetry in China, Qu Yuan's writing style significantly impacted Li Bai's. Qu Yuan's romantic style is manifested through metaphors, symbols, exaggeration, and other techniques to reproduce magnificent myths and legends, which are noticeable in many of Li Bai's poems that can be regarded as an inheritance to some extent.

2.3. Poetic Thoughts Derive from Different Philosophical Thoughts

For Coleridge, the trip to Germany in 1798 was of great significance. It was a spiritual pilgrimage [9]. Coleridge's ideology is related to German rationalist philosophy, romantic theory, and religious mystery, among which Kant's philosophical aesthetics and Schiller's theory of Subjective Idealism play an important role. Deeply influenced by them, his thought became conservative and mysterious. He judged Newton's Materialism as a fallacy by saying, 'Any system based on the passivity of the human spirit must be wrong.' which was taken as Romanticism's core insight.

Li Bai read multifarious poetry and books during his childhood and had profound insights into Confucianism and Taoism represented by two ancient Chinese philosophers, Confucius and Lao Zi. His romantic style of poetry, influenced by two contradictory thoughts of Confucianism's active accession to society and Taoism's passive world-weariness, shows a unique charm. For example, in his poem "Parting from my Children at Nanling for the Capital", Li Bai wrote: 'Looking up at the sky I laugh aloud and go, Am I a man to crawl amid the brambles low' [6]. These two lines are the catharsis of the poet's strong emotions and reveal an ambitious figure of the poet fully and precisely. In his poem, Mount Skyland ascended in a Dream-A Song of Farewell; however, Li Bai declared, 'How can I stoop and bow before the men in power And so deny myself a happy hour' [6]. In contrast, a lofty man who never flatters the dignitaries surfaces from the two lines. The infiltration of Confucianism and the admiration of Taoist views worked together to form Li Bai's peculiar romantic style of poetry.

2.4. Poetic Thoughts about Imagination

Coleridge generated profound insight into imagination after being baptized in German philosophy. Coleridge believed that imagination is the core ability of poets; creators need to have a good ideology, character, and rich imagination. The form of human thinking went through a developmental movement from fantasy to imagination. Fantasy initially recognized the visible and invisible things in the objective world, while imagination melted, dispersed, digested, and recreated a brand-new internalized reality conformed to the subject's taste. Coleridge put more emphasis on the hierarchy between the two [10].

Li Bai's imagination was magnificent, unlike the contemporary Saint Poet named Du Fu. An elegant, bold style mainly characterizes his poems. Li Bai's poems are full of imagination, like a horse galloping in the sky, and contain the poet's strong and fiery feelings. Moreover, it is precisely because of these whimsical ideas that his poems are unique.

The two poets' different inner thoughts on "imagination" enable their works to show different characteristics in the illusory.

3. The Fantastic of Kublai Khan and Mount Skyland Ascended in a Dream - A Song of Farewell

3.1. The Fantastic Writing Background

Kubla Khan is a poem about a dream. It is said that Coleridge wrote it in a semi-conscious state one night after smoking opium. According to the poet himself, the poem was about two or three hundred lines long, but only the broken chapters were written. He could not finish it because someone took him away when he was writing the last line of the present fragment, and when he came back after

about an hour, the rest of the verse had disappeared from his memory. Although the poem is only a fragment, the strange imagination, mysterious feeling, and musical verses give it enduring charm, reaching the zone that the poet deliberately seeks to make people "willing to believe it for a while" [11]. While Li Bai explained the creation background at the beginning of *Mount Skyland Ascended in a Dream-A Song of Farewell*, "Longing in dreams of Southern land, one night". The word "dream" not only clearly explains the illusory nature of the poem but also foreshadows the description of the dream below, leading the reader to sleepwalk with the poet. At the end of the second paragraph, the poet unexpectedly wrote, "Suddenly my heart and soul stirred, I Awake with a long, long sigh. I found my head on pillow lie, and fair visions have gone by." The sudden turn of the pen and the abrupt stop of the dream are just like an alarm waking up the readers in the poet's illusory dream.

The background of both poems is related to the poet's dreams. Coleridge wrote in a trance, half-dreaming and half-awake state, while Li Bai directly entered an entire dream after simply explaining the location of the dream - Tianmu Mountain at the beginning, and the poet's consciousness was also completely immersed in sleep.

3.2. The Fantastic Imagery

3.2.1. Strong Contrast of Kubla Khan's Pairwise Imagery

The whole poem of *Kubla Khan* can be divided into three sections. The poet starts from the three angles of vision, smell, and hearing and presents a bright, brilliant, dark, and restless world to the readers through his rich imagination and passionate description [12]. There are many clusters of imagery in poetry, seemingly unrelated to each other. However, on close reading, readers can find a group of opposite or relative images throughout the poem, and the presentation of these images is a kind of metaphor. The "splendid pleasure-dome" corresponds to the "cold caves of ice"; the "tranquil and peaceful above-ground world" corresponds to the "noisy and restless underground world"; the "Mighty Khan" corresponds to the "wailing woman". These images seem complicated, but throughout the poem, they form an organic whole in art. The paired imagery forms a strong contrast showing the fusion of consciousness and subconscious and the collision of waking and dreaming. No one knows whether the poem's pleasure-dome existed, but the illusory dreams and emotions let the reader wander between dreams and reality. Dream-filled hallucinations animate the imagination. The poet allowed his thoughts to lead his poem across the Eastern and Western geographical boundaries, shuttling between the ancient and the modern, stretching the dimension of time and space. The hazy and fantastic artistic conception and romantic and melodious mood are full of high-spirited and unrestrained magnificence, and the magical artistic expression makes this poem even more divine.

3.2.2. The Spectacular Imagery of Mount Skyland Ascended in a Dream - A Song of Farewell

One of the characteristics of Li Bai's poems is the colorful, magnificent imagery. In this poem, the poet used many spectacular images as a foil for personal feelings. A series of breathtaking pictures that conveyed the surging emotions also greatly enhanced the romantic color of the poem.

In the first paragraph, the poet briefly introduces the motivation of sleepwalking by exaggerating rhetoric: the extraordinary momentum of Tianmu Mountain in the legend and his yearning for it. In the second paragraph, he went straight into the dream. The poet flew in the sky above Mirror Lake when he fell into a dream. The word "fly" showed the illusory nature of the dream and the poet's spirit. From the lake moon's tranquility to the sunrise's splendor, from the labyrinthine roads to the scary forest, the realm becomes more strange and unreal. Finally, the dream of fairyland: Suddenly breaks asunder. So blue, so deep, so vast appears an endless sky, where sun and moon shine on gold and silver terraces high Clad in the rainbow, riding on the wind, The Lords of Clouds descend in a procession long Their chariots were drawn by phoenix disciplined, and tigers playing for them a zither

song. Row upon row, like fields of hemp, immortals throng. These magnificent, colorful scenes, like a vivid picture presented in front of the reader, let the reader spontaneously immerse in the dream scenery and fairy atmosphere.

3.3. Compare and Analyze the Two Poems' Similarities and Differences in Imagery

3.3.1. Both Poems Adopt Illusory Imagery

Imagination is the fertilizer of imagery. The poets used their exquisite imagination, endowed each image with vitality, made it active between paper and pen, and combined it into vivid picture scrolls. These two poems' strong visual effects give readers a sense of being on the scene. However, it is worth mentioning that the imagery in *Kubla Khan* and *Mount Skyland Ascended in a Dream* are all fictional imagery based on the reality of the poets. Although the prototype can be found in the real world, the two poets describe them as fictional imagery beyond reality with their unrestrained imagination and outrageous ink. Poetry, as the chamber of the poet's spirit world, the poet uses superb skills to turn seemingly plain text into sophisticated snares on the way to it. The reader can unlock them successfully through careful reading and then enters and revels in the poet's spiritual world for a long time.

3.3.2. Spatial Dimension of Poetic Imagery

The visual effect of imagery in *Kubla Khan* and the *Mount Skyland Ascended in a Dream* is open and broad. The imagery of *Kubla Khan* passes through three worlds: the underworld, the earth, and heaven. Almost every imagery has its opposite, forming a pair of image groups. These groups of corresponding imagery overlap and replace. While producing a strong contrast effect, they not only constitute a strange and magnificent fantasy but also reveal the poet's rich imagination so that the readers can, through space restrictions, create associations under the guidance of the poet. However, compared with Coleridge's poem, which shuttles among the three realms, Li Bai's thoughts are shuttling between the earth and the celestial realms. While sleepwalking, the poet first described the magnificent and precipitous scenery of *Shimmering Stream* and then tried to describe a strange and fantastic mythical land for readers. As the thunder rumbled, the mountains collapsed, and the stone gate of the fairy house opened. The vision is transformed from dark to bright, and the poet transformed two spatial dimensions masterly.

3.3.3. The Temporal Dimension of Poetic Imagery

The imagery of *Kubla Khan* spans from the past to the present, while the imagery of *Mount Skyland Ascended in a Dream* is only focused on the present. Coleridge began with a lavish description of the magnificent pleasure dome built by Kubla Khan. Seemingly describing a magnificent landscape, the poet also recalled the hero's great achievements. In the third verse of the poem, the poet's thoughts suddenly travel from ancient times to the present, and he recalls his fantasy of a young girl playing music, whose singing is so melodious that he wanted to build such a pleasure-dome in the sky. Between the two different time dimensions, the poet skillfully connected them with the imagery of the pleasure dome to fill the temporal gap. Compared with Coleridge's poem, which shuttles in two different temporal dimensions, Li Bai's poem stays in the same temporal dimension. Although there is a recollection of the deceased in this poem: Li Bai's praise of the landscape poet Xie Lingyun, all other imagery is in the same temporal dimension and based on the poet's scene at that time.

3.3.4. Emotional Color of Poetic Imagery

There are both positive images in Coleridge's poem, like "splendid pleasure-dome", "tranquil and peaceful above-ground world", and "Mighty Khan", and negative images, like "cold caves of ice ", "noisy and restless underground world", and "wailing woman under the moon". These groups of imagery jump and overlap, making readers feel awe and appalled as well as confused and mysterious. In contrast, the images in Li's poems are all positive, for instance, the lake, the sea, the fairies, the dragon, and the tiger. The jump of the imagery renders out the magnificent beauty of the dreamland, giving people a sense of relaxation and happiness.

4. Real Inner Heart Under the Color of Illusion

Dreams reflect real life. Although covered with a veil of illusion, reality will not be changed.

Coleridge once said, "The soul is in action, itself an actor and an audience, and this factual theory of the mind refers both to the traces of what is experienced in the conscious state and to the unconscious experience of life, the dream." No one knows whether the Pleasure-dome exists, but it represents the ideal pursuit of beauty in the poet's mind. The reader seems to hear the call from the distant past in Coleridge's dream, which contains the power of stirring the mind. Furthermore, this hazy dream is Coleridge's longing for romance and idealism. At that time, the poet was at a low point in his life. He used to be a loyal and radical supporter of the French Revolution, but later the fact that France declared war on Britain completely broke down the last defense in his heart. The poet was once depressed in the face of the collapse of his spiritual world. However, in the depths of the poet's soul is eager for redemption, a desire for beauty. Coleridge believes that, unlike science, poetry does not pursue the truth of science. The meaning of poetry is to convey a kind of beauty, pleasure, and satisfaction and to give multiple holistic cognition. This beauty does not only exist in the real world; it is more of an idea, the poet's obsession. The strong emotions accumulated in the poet's heart finally exploded after opium. The poet used his unrestrained brushwork to express his poetic concept - "Imagination is the soul of poetry creation" along with the eruption of emotion and manage an eternal masterpiece.

Li Bai's poetic style is fresh and elegant, attaching importance to nature, emphasizing individuality, and pursuing freedom and unfettered life. Like Coleridge, Li Bai did not pursue authenticity in writing poems but a kind of pleasure. With the help of poetry as a medium, the poet broke out his strong emotions hiding in his heart. At this time, Li Bai went to Chang'an with passion and the great ideal of serving the country. He thought he could be appointed highly by the imperial court, but it turned out that treacherous villains were in power. In the end, he had to leave Chang'an alone, wandering around. At such moments, the poet could only use dreams to express his resentment. The poet's final finishing touch: "How can I stoop and bow before the men in power and deny myself a happy hour?" This is not only the theme of the whole poem but also the poet's truest intention. *Mount Skyland Ascended in a Dream* as a farewell poem has a strong political color. On the grounds of remembering a dream, this poem expresses the desire for light and freedom and the dissatisfaction with the dark reality, expressing the rebellious spirit of contempt for power.

5. Conclusions

Poetry, as the articulation of ideals and feelings, though different from contents, are the epitome of the poet's poetic thoughts and attitudes towards the world. Romantic poetry soaked in imagination is packed with overwhelming emotion. By analyzing the two poet's personal experiences, the reader can discover the fountain of their poetic thoughts. Times make great minds. French Revolution and Travel to Germany contribute to Coleridge's conservative and mysterious poetic thoughts. Moreover, Bashu's unique cultural environment, Confucianism, and Taoism contribute to Li Bai's free and

elegant style. By comparing these two romantic poems, the reader can better understand how imagination, as the top trait of Romanticism, exerts influence in particular situations and as a magic brush sketching vivid fictional pictures consisting of abundant imagery. Two romantic poets from different regions, with their rich literary talents, extraordinary imagination, and superb writing skills, presented the reader with two unexceptionable poems, between which the differences create a unique literary charm, making them break through the blockade of time and space and become two blooming flowers in the big garden of world literature.

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