

Poetry for Social and Emotional Well-being

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Abstract: Poetry has long served as a medium for expression and soothing human emotions. This paper delves into the role of poetry in nurturing social and emotional well-being, with a particular focus on the Romantic poets and their successors. The Romantic era, led by luminaries such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and John Keats, emphasized the profound connection between nature, imagination, and the human spirit. Wordsworth's concept of poetry as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" underscores its therapeutic potential. The exploration extends beyond Romanticism to contemporary poets like Maya Angelou and Rupi Kaur, whose works resonate with themes of resilience, identity, and collective healing. While the Romantics sought solace in nature and personal introspection, modern poets often confront social inequities, using poetry as a platform for empowerment and emotional liberation. This study reaffirms poetry as a timeless art form that bridges personal and collective healing, making it indispensable for nurturing social and emotional well-being.

Keywords: Emotional Well- Being, Social Wellbeing, Resilience, Romantics, William Wordsworth, John Keats, Maya Angelou, Rupi Kaur.

INTRODUCTION

Poetry has always generated wonderful feelings in the readers. It is seen as an art that expresses complex thoughts, genuine emotions and beautiful experiences. For a long time, the feelings of joy, sorrow, love and despair have been articulated profoundly by the poets, resonating the wider societal themes. In the recent years, the therapeutic effect of poetry has gained popular attention in the context of emotional and social wellbeing. Poetry, of the Romantic age to the contemporary age, serves as both emotional outlet and a healing tool. It also serves as the voice of empowerment creating the feeling of wellness. The present chapter examines the impact of poetry on social and emotional wellbeing, with a focus on the contributions of the Romantic poets and it also aims to examine the legacy continues to inspire poets like Maya Angelou and Rupi Kaur.

The late 18th century is marked in Literature as the period of emergence of the Romantic Movement. A shift in the perspective of the poets towards the individual and the society was remarkably visible in this new age. Instead of rigid structures of the Enlightenment, the romantic poets focused on emotions, personal experiences and the unfathomable beauty of nature (Guerin *et al.*, 2017). Romanticism believed in the "power of imagination and emotional expression" that lead one to self-discovery and progress. William Wordsworth, one of the pioneers of the Romantic movement has described poetry as "spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions" (Wordsworth, 1802). This shows that the art of poetry has the ability to express, mould and transform emotional

states of an individual. The act of poetry writing, according to Wordsworth is both 'reflecting on and processing' deep emotional experiences. In 'Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey', the poet describes nature as a restorative force which is capable of humbling the person and promoting peace and emotional clarity (Wordsworth, 1798).

Nature played an important role during the Romantic era to establish the connection between poetry and emotional wellbeing. The nature acted as a source of solace and rejuvenation, according to Wordsworth, like a sanctuary for the sorrowful or disturbed mind. This therapeutic ability of the nature seems to have got appreciation and resonance in modern times with the new age writings supporting the role of natural surroundings for mental benefits (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989). Thus, the modern ecological and psychological study with its focus on the nature's power for emotional wellbeing was envisioned by the Romantics in the 18th Century. The Romantic poets also believed that poetry had the power to help one understand the emotions, do an introspection and express oneself, leading to heal oneself and proving the therapeutic value of the art.

Another key figure of the Romantic age, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was a spokesman of the relationship between imagination and emotional wellbeing. In the poem 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' the poet reflects a deep engagement with the emotions of isolation, guilt and redemption.

The mariner's journey may be looked at as a spiritual and emotional one. This shows the role of poetry to serve as a mirror to one's inner struggles. This exploration of the human emotions may be compared to the modern psychological concepts of catharsis – an emotional release leading to psychological relief. Poetry thus may be a therapeutic tool for the ones to face their own challenges and achieve a relief – an emotional catharsis.

Another notable poet in the Romantic canon is John Keats who has explored the themes of suffering, human spirit and beauty. Keats ponder on the nature of mortality and the transient happiness in the Ode. The readers immerse themselves in the emotional experience through the poem's rich imagery and language. The emphasis given to beauty as a means of transcendence shows the therapeutic effect of such aesthetic experiences which is like the modern research suggesting that art can reduce stress and enhance wellbeing. Thus, Keats' poems highlight that any art, can soothe the emotional turbulence. This theory can be seen as being adopted in the modern practices of art therapy.

While the Romantic poets focused on introspection and emotional growth, the modern poets viewed poetry not only with therapeutical ability but also a means to engage with social issues. Maya Angelou and Rupi Kaur use poetry as a platform to discuss the themes of identity, resilience, and healing. 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' (1969) by Maya Angelou brings forth the emotional impact of suppression, racism and the trauma. It also highlights the need for empowerment and gives the message of hope. Maya Angelou's work focuses on voicing oneself and keeping up the identity even during adversities. Such themes resound the present studies about mental health and social justice. Moreover, Maya Angelou's works aim at providing a feeling of solidarity for the communities that are marginalised, provide them emotional support and thus through poetry facilitate healing.

In the same way, the works of the poetess Rupi Kaur have become popular for its emotional connect and emotional depth. *Milk and Honey* (2014) and *The Sun and Her Flowers* (2017) are two collections of poems by Rupi Kaur where the poet highlights the importance of loving oneself and emotional expression leading to healing. Using minimalist style and powerful illustrations, the poet resounds experiences for readers bringing in a

sense of empowerment. Rupi Kaur's poems point directly to the readers' emotions and provide a platform for the readers to engage directly with their feelings and heal themselves. The similarity with the Romantic poets is demonstrated by Kaur's in her poems with the words for emotional catharsis and self-awareness. Kaur's poems, thus, engage with contemporary social issues of cultural conflict, gender and identity creating a space for emotional healing.

Poetry as an art has always been as medium to express the emotions and to heal oneself. From the works of the Romantic poets to the empowered voices of the contemporary writers, the therapeutic potential of the art is evident. The present work will examine how the Romantic poetry emphasises emotional resonance and its curative connection with nature. The paper also aims to explore the role of poetry in fostering social connection and empathy through shared experiences and societal concerns. Furthermore, the focus is to analyse poetry's possibility for emotional relief and its relevance in promoting mental and emotional wellbeing with special reference to the works of Maya Angelou and Rupi Kaur.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Romantic poets shared the thought that emotions acted as the guiding force of human experiences. M H Abrams (1971) supports William Wordsworth's description of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". He highlights how the poets of the Romantic Age expressed their emotions as a response to personal or societal issues. This heightened sharing of emotion creates a bond between the readers and the poet. This creates a space for emotions to be understood and experienced.

The poets of the Romantic age looked at Nature as a source of healing and rejuvenation. Wordsworth's poems picture the power of memories of nature to provide solace in the sorrowful situations. Keats' Ode to a Nightingale and Shelley's Ode to the West Wind illustrate how Nature becomes a refuge and a great force to transform the human spirit. Jonathan Bate (1991) argues that Romantic poetry evokes ecological consciousness and the healing power of Nature can be well connected to the contemporary research and discussions on mental wellbeing.

The Romantic poets considered poetry to be bond between 'individual experience and collective understanding'. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in

Biographia Literaria (1817), contends that verse ought to draw in both the intellect and emotions, encouraging empathy. Present day scholars like Martha Nussbaum (2001) recommend that Literature, especially poetry, develops compassion and empathy by taking the readers into a journey of various emotional landscapes. The romantic poets have placed emphasis on the themes of love, misfortune, bliss, and sadness that promote a shared emotional experience that rises above time and culture.

Lyrical poetry, which is one of the most important features of Romanticism, portrays personal emotions and also collective expression. The concept of ‘negative capability’ by John Keats show that the poets have the ability to transcend their own identity and hold on to a different emotion. Studies have examined how social bond is enhanced through emotional engagement facilitated by poetry. Hogan (2010) explores poetic metaphors and structures create empathy and connect the readers to both the content and the poet. This finding is similar to the “contemporary research in cognitive literary studies that suggests lyrical poems have the ability of stimulating emotions through rhythm, structure and metaphors” Jacobs (2015). These findings strengthen the belief that Romantic poetry has the ability to connect individual experiences and collective human emotions.

Jerome Mc Gann (1983) argues that poems of the Romantic poets offer content for personal catharsis and social criticism. The poems show the poet’s concern for the matters of contemporary relevance which in turn works on emotional wellbeing. Romanticism was not a mere look into one’s emotions or nature. The romantic poems also focused on social and political issues. Proof is visible in William Blake’s ‘Songs of Innocence and Experience’ (1789, 1794) where the poet projects the injustice in the society. The child labour and oppression is pictured in the poems. Shelley’s poems, similarly, show political unrest and resistance.

Poetry is known to serve as an outlet for emotions and is the most important element in the literary theories both of the Romantic age and of the contemporary era. Sigmund Freud (1908) and Julia Kristeva (1980), the famous psychoanalytic critics, examine the impact of poetry on transformation of disturbing emotions to show its therapeutic potential. Wordsworth words on poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquillity” also aims at

the same curative power of poetry. Modern studies on poetry therapy (Mazza, 2017) highlight the 17th century belief that poetry can process trauma and reduce the emotional burden and thus serving as a powerful cure.

Edmund Burke’s ‘A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful’ paved the path to the Romantic poets’ exploration of emotions of terror and wonder in nature. This concept gives a framework for showing the psychological effect created by poetry. The same idea is resonated in the poems of Coleridge and Byron where extreme emotions are penned artistically. Similarly, modern interdisciplinary researches show the capability of poetry to build emotional resilience. Zeman et.al. (2013) shows that the emotional region of the brain is activated by poetic metaphors and structures. This again can be aligned with the curative properties of poetry as believed by the Romantic poets. For example, John Keats’ ‘Ode on Melancholy’ (1819) shows how suffering can be a part of growth and beauty. Listening to poems or reading poems of struggle, sorrows and endurance, the coping skills in the readers can be developed and thus poetry is a therapy.

Modern literary scholars like Wolfson (2000) believes that Romantic poems help in social and emotional wellbeing. He suggests poetry to be included in psychological and therapeutic stages. According to the researcher, focus on introspection and self-expression in the Romantic poets is similar to the modern focus on mental health care approaches like narrative therapy.

In this digital era, poetry is easily accessible through different platforms and this has surely revitalised its role in making lives better through emotional and social wellbeing. Rupri Kaur is an example for the poets who demonstrate the ability of poems to articulate emotions and create connections through social media. Gregory Nagy (2019) believes that like the Romantics, the modern writers too use their poems to express personal emotions and collective sorrows. This assures that power of poetry to promote emotional and social well being is timeless.

The literature referred to focuses on the effect of poetry on emotions and its curative power. The poetry, according to the review, has a connection to nature and plays the role in evoking empathy and building social bonds. It thus, promotes wellbeing through its therapeutic power.

Researchers have examined how the romantic poems explore emotions through description of nature. Furthermore, research in cognitive theory shows that poetry has the power to enhance social and emotional health. However, though many studies focus on the dimensions of philosophy and aestheticism of Romantics, the gap is visible in exploring the present relevance of poetry to evoke resilience and mental health. This study, therefore, focuses on bridging this gap and compares the romantic poems with the modern ones to know their engagement with the beautiful nature to bring in emotional healing. The study is expected to contribute to a better knowledge of role of poetry in emotional and social wellbeing.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is qualitative research that focuses on textual analysis of select texts to examine the emotional impact and therapeutic power of poetry. A close reading of the select works of William Wordsworth, John Keats, S T Coleridge, Maya Angelou and Rupi Kaur is done to analyse how their poems picture human emotions, nature and overall wellbeing. The study compares romantics with modern poets to know the articulation of emotions and the effect of their words to evoke empathy. The study also looks at the therapeutic role of poetry in emotional healing and how the language, imagery and themes of poems help in wellbeing- both emotional and social.

OBJECTIVES

- To examine how Romantic poetry emphasizes emotional resonance and its curative connection to nature
- To explore the role of poetry in fostering social connection and empathy through shared experiences and societal concerns
- To analyse poetry's possibility for emotional relief and its relevance in promoting mental and emotional well-being in the present context

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Poetry has long been celebrated not only as an art form but also as a means of personal and collective healing. From the evocative landscapes of Romantic poetry to the introspective free verse of contemporary poets, the power of poetry to soothe, inspire, and transform is undeniable. This essay explores how poetry, particularly from the Romantic period and beyond, contributes to social and emotional well-being.

The Romantics and Emotional Resonance

Romantic poets yearned for a deeper, more intuitive connection with nature, often expressing a realistic worldview where divinity was inherent in nature. They saw the natural world as a source of beauty, inspiration, and profound philosophical insight, a stark contrast to the Enlightenment's rationalistic and utilitarian perspective. These poets sought to reclaim the emotional, the spiritual, and the imaginative from the clutches of industrial modernity and rationalistic science.

Wordsworth

One of the greatest poets of the 17th century Romantic Movement is William Wordsworth and his works are known to be characterised by deep engagement with the vibrant nature. Nature, for Wordsworth is a source of wisdom and not just 'poetic contemplation'. It is also a source of moral instruction and consolation and also of spiritual connection. This is clearly visible and felt in the poem 'Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey'. Here, the poet is seen to be returning to the Wye valley after five long years and the poet is seen reflecting on the nature's influence on his mind and life. The verses show the spiritual and tranquil energy that the poet gains from the recollection of the beautiful valley even though he is physically at a distant from it. This shows the nature's deep influence on anyone. The poet's perception of nature when he was young was as a thing of aesthetic pleasure and this changes to a matured, deep, spiritual understanding later.

'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud', one of the poems of Wordsworth, readers see the thousands of daffodils dancing and fluttering in the breeze and rejoices with the poet. The image of flower becomes therapeutic later. When he is in a 'pensive mood', the image of daffodils comes back to him and illuminates his spirits. This proves that Wordsworth believed that nature supports and uplifts the human mind with its inspirational and therapeutic power. The poet views nature as a living source, a noble force which has a big role to play in human wellbeing - emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. This belief became the foundation for the Romantics' perception on the relationship between nature and man. Wordsworth looks at nature as a source that nurtures and provides comfort and wisdom. He seems to feel the spiritual connection with nature and so he pictures it as a guiding light towards spiritual enlightenment and morality.

Likewise, another noteworthy poet among the Romantic poets is John Keats who believed in the intimate and objective connection between man and nature. Keats looked at nature as a thing of beauty, of aesthetics, transient and for sensory pleasure. He also believed that it helps one escape the 'harsh realities of life' at least temporarily. This is clearly seen in the poem 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Here, the poet showcases his approach to nature- sensual and escapist. The beautiful and immortal song of the nightingale provides a temporary consolation to the poet. This is what the poet expects to be the respite from the sorrows and mortality of life. The song of the nightingale, representing nature as a whole, acts as a source to transcend the poet from the mortal world to the timeless world that he is yearning for, the immortal one.

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:

In 'To Autumn', the poet has personified the beautiful season as a harvester preoccupied in work. The beauty of Autumn is celebrated by the beautiful and detailed description of the season's bounty. The beauty of the blossoming flowers and the ripening fruits show Keats' sincere admiration towards the natural aesthetic world. Nevertheless, the subtle hint that the breath-taking autumn heralds' winter is also acknowledged in the poem. These points to the philosophy that beauty and life are transient. Thus, Keats' reflective and sensory picturization of nature shows a craving for immortal beauty that is timeless and also shows his acceptance of the life's transient nature. The poet seems to expect the readers to accept and appreciate the beautiful but transient pleasures of nature while confronting the realities of mortal life. Keats' aesthetic description of nature is with an abundance of sensory images and details. The emphasis on the fleeting beauty of nature characterises his poems, bringing in a clear note on impermanence and an urge and wish for real beauty that is permanent.

"SEASON of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees."

Samuel Coleridge

Another remarkable poet of the period, Samuel Coleridge, presents a multifarious relationship

with nature in his poems. Although, he shares his poetic ideas with Wordsworth, yet inclines towards exalted religious beliefs, with the absolute interaction between human and external world.

In his popular poem, Rime of ancient Mariner he juxtaposes nature as grandeur and terrifying power. The poem reflection how the Mariner's unacceptable act of killing an albatross brings a series of calamities to the crew. The poet portrays a series of supernatural happenings through the nature's rage against the mariner's reckless crime. The unpleasant icy wasteland that the mariner and his crew travel serves as a reflection of nature's vindictive justice and its integral balance. This phenomenon of nature evaluates Coleridge's ideology of respecting nature and its phenomenon.

"God save thee, ancient Mariner!
From the fiends, that plague thee thus! —
Why look'st thou so?"—With my cross-bow
I shot the ALBATROSS."

Kubla-Khan, a fragmented poem of Coleridge, portrays another perspective of his idea of nature. It describes the spectacular dome in a landscape that unites the ephemeral beauty of nature with amazing power of human imagination. The poem's setting, Xanadu, is a blend of natural splendour and architectural grandeur, highlighting nature's transformative influence on human creativity. This place, birthed from Coleridge's opium-induced dream, underscores the poet's fascination with the unconscious mind's ability to shape and interact with perceptions of nature

Coleridge shares Wordsworth's spiritual connection with nature but often veers towards its psychological implications. He employs nature as a catalyst for exploring the human psyche,

Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou was an American poet, memoirist, and actress whose several volumes of autobiography explore the themes of economic, racial, and sexual oppression. Maya Angelou's poems deeply reflect both social and emotional well-being through their exploration of themes like resilience, self-empowerment, community, and healing. Here's how each one reflects these aspects:

Caged bird a phenomenal poem, brings out the condition of the caged bird and the free bird. The caged bird displays its restriction to fly freely, but it sings with a coarse tone indicating the emotional trauma and the suffering of the people who are not

free. Contrastingly, the free bird brings home the idea that people are free to act in accordance to their will. Although at one level, it speaks about the birds in different situations; at a deeper level Angelou brings out the critical portrait of oppression and the determination to rise above the restrictions and showcase the agility and resilience. In this way, the poem depicts the social and emotional well-being through the symbols of the birds.

“The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.”

On the pulse of morning, Angelou embarks on the idea that human beings can change for better. Provided they work in close affinity with nature and also learning from their past which can enable them to accomplish greater things despite differences.

Still, I Rise explores the theme of determination and resilience of marginalised people. Maya Angelou's work often focused on the experience of being a black woman in America. Read within that context, “Still I Rise” becomes more than a call for strength in the face of hardship: it's also a modern-day ode to the power and beauty of blackness.

“You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.”

Phenomenal Women gives the message to the world that empowerment comes with confidence, no matter one is seen as beautiful or fashionable by the world. Alone is poem which focuses on togetherness in the face of being alone., that is an irony. It brings the idea as to what is to be a human in the huge world. It is calling to the society to come together.

Equality, deals with equality, racism and discrimination and are imparted through the use of repetition and metaphors. The phrase “equality and I will be free” is repeated again and again. This emphasizes that Angelou wants is to be free from racism and wants everyone to be equal.

On the whole, these poems reflect the complexities of the human condition, offering both personal

affirmation and calls for collective action. Angelou's work reminds us that emotional resilience often grows from recognizing our worth and building connections with others—whether through personal self-empowerment or collective support.

Rupi Kaur

Rupi Kaur, a Canadian poet, illustrator, and author. Rupri Kaur was born in India in 1992 and moved to Canada four years later. She is a contemporary poet, channels themes such as love, loss, trauma, healing, femininity, and migration. Through a minimalist style that speaks directly to a modern, global audience. Her collections, such as *milk and honey* and *the sun and her flowers*, delve into personal and collective experiences of pain, love, and recovery, often rooted in her identity as a South Asian woman and immigrant. Her work fosters a sense of universality in healing, making the intimate deeply relatable.

Kaur's resilience takes a more introspective and healing tone, focusing on personal trauma and recovery. In *milk and honey*, she writes, “you have to stop searching for why at some point you have to leave it alone.” Her work embraces the messy, nonlinear process of healing and finding strength. While Angelou's resilience often addresses systemic barriers, Kaur's is rooted in emotional survival, self-love, and reclamation of personal space.

The Sun and her Flowers deals with excelled journey of growth and healing. An effort to find a home within is seen. It deals with the themes of love and loss, trauma and abuse, healing, femineity and the body.

“Despite knowing
they won't be here for long
they still choose to live
their brightest lives
- sunflowers”

Angelou's and Rupri Kaur's poems in general deal with- a call for collective action intended towards the betterment of the society and emotional well-being, in the backdrop of atrocities in the contemporary society of their times.

CONCLUSION

The poets chosen for the study extensively deal with the subjects pertinent to human emotions and their well-being in relation to the collective healing of the society through nature's incredible strength

to being solace and comfort. Modern poets like Angelou and Rupi Kaur on the other hand convey the themes of awakening the society and revolt against oppression and inequality.

By articulating complex emotions, poetry provides an outlet for feelings that might otherwise remain suppressed. Maya Angelou's empowering verses inspire resilience and self-worth, demonstrating poetry's capacity to uplift and empower. In recent years, poetry therapy has emerged as a formal practice, using poetry reading and writing as tools for emotional healing. Programs in schools, hospitals, and community centres incorporate poetry to help individuals process trauma, build self-esteem, and foster creativity. The introspective nature of poetry encourages mindfulness, allowing individuals to reflect deeply on their experiences and emotions.

Moreover, digital platforms have democratized access to poetry, enabling individuals worldwide to share and engage with poetic works. This global exchange not only enriches cultural understanding but also highlights the universal nature of human emotions.

Maya Angelou and Rupi Kaur, though separated by generations, share a profound resonance in their exploration of resilience, identity, and collective healing. Angelou's works, such as *Still I Rise* and *Phenomenal Woman*, embody the strength of marginalized voices, often weaving in the struggles and triumphs of African-American women. Her poetry and autobiographical narratives celebrate self-determination, courage, and the unyielding spirit to overcome systemic oppression.

Both poets stand as voices of empowerment, inviting readers to confront trauma, reclaim identity, and embrace the resilience inherent in

human experience. Together, they exemplify how poetry can empower individuals and communities, transcending boundaries of time and culture.

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