

Political Ideals In The Poetry Of English Romantic Writers

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the political ideals embedded in the poetry of major English Romantic writers, focusing on William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, and Lord Byron. The research investigates how these poets responded to the tumultuous political landscape of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, particularly the French Revolution and its aftermath, the Industrial Revolution, and the conservative backlash in Britain. Through close textual analysis of selected poems and contextual historical examination, this study identifies key political themes including liberty, social justice, anti-imperialism, and challenges to institutional authority. The findings reveal that while Romantic poets shared certain political ideals, they expressed and developed these concerns in distinct ways shaped by their personal experiences, philosophical leanings, and changing historical circumstances. This research contributes to our understanding of how Romantic poetry functioned as a vehicle for political discourse during a pivotal period in European history and demonstrates the enduring relevance of Romantic political thought to contemporary discussions of liberty, equality, and human rights.

Keywords: English Romanticism, political poetry, French Revolution, liberty, social justice.

1. INTRODUCTION

The English Romantic period (roughly 1785-1832) emerged during one of the most politically volatile eras in European history. The French Revolution of 1789, the subsequent Reign of Terror, the rise and fall of Napoleon, and the Industrial Revolution's transformation of British society created a tumultuous backdrop against which Romantic poets developed their distinctive voices and visions. Far from producing purely aesthetic or naturalistic verse divorced from social concerns, these poets engaged deeply with the political questions of their time, using poetry as a medium to explore, promote, and sometimes critique radical political ideals. This study investigates the complex relationship between politics and poetry in the works of five major English Romantic poets: William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, and Lord Byron. While these figures are often grouped together under the broad label of "Romanticism," their political views were neither uniform nor static. Wordsworth and Coleridge, for instance, began as ardent supporters of the French Revolution but later adopted more conservative positions, while Shelley maintained his radical convictions throughout his short life. Byron's political stance was complicated by his aristocratic status and cosmopolitan perspective, while Keats, often considered the least explicitly political of the group, nonetheless embedded subtle critiques of power and privilege in his sensuous verse.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to our understanding of how literature functions as a vehicle for political discourse during periods of social upheaval. By examining how these poets articulated political ideals through their verse, we gain insight not only into the intellectual history of the Romantic period

but also into the enduring questions about the relationship between art and politics, individual liberty and social responsibility, and revolution and reform that continue to resonate in contemporary discussions.

2. LITERATURE SURVEY

Scholarly interest in the political dimensions of Romantic poetry has evolved significantly over the past several decades. Early 20th-century criticism, influenced by formalist approaches, tended to emphasize the aesthetic qualities of Romantic verse, often at the expense of its political content. M.H. Abrams' influential "The Mirror and the Lamp" (1953) began to redirect attention to the historical context of Romanticism, though still focusing primarily on its philosophical and spiritual aspects. The advent of New Historicism in the 1980s, spearheaded by scholars like Jerome McGann in "The Romantic Ideology" (1983), initiated a more politically engaged approach to Romantic studies, challenging what McGann saw as the uncritical acceptance of Romanticism's self-representations. Marilyn Butler's "Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries" (1981) positioned Romantic literature within its historical and political context, demonstrating how the revolutionary politics of the age shaped literary production. Nicholas Roe's "Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years" (1988) detailed the young poets' involvement with radical politics in the 1790s, revising earlier portraits of Wordsworth in particular as an essentially conservative figure. E.P. Thompson's "The Making of the English Working Class" (1963), while not specifically literary in focus, provided crucial context for understanding the political climate in which Romantic poets operated.

Feminist scholars have expanded our understanding of Romantic politics by examining works by female writers of the period. Anne Mellor's "Romanticism and Gender" (1993) demonstrated how women writers often articulated different political concerns than their male counterparts, while Susan Wolfson's "Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism" (2006) explored the complex gender politics of both male and female Romantic writers. More recent scholarship has broadened the scope further. Alan Richardson's "British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind" (2001) investigated connections between Romantic poetry and period theories of cognition, including their political implications. Saree Makdisi's "Romantic Imperialism" (1998) and Nigel Leask's "British Romantic Writers and the East" (1992) have examined Romantic poets' complex responses to British imperialism and colonialism. Timothy Morton's "The Ecological Thought" (2010) has drawn connections between Romantic nature poetry and contemporary environmental politics.

Despite this rich body of scholarship, gaps remain in our understanding of how individual poets' political ideals evolved over time and how these ideals were specifically manifested in poetic form. While much attention has been paid to explicitly political works like Shelley's "Mask of Anarchy" or Blake's "America," less consideration has been given to how political concerns inform seemingly apolitical nature poems or personal lyrics. Additionally, comparative studies examining commonalities and differences across multiple poets' political expressions remain relatively sparse. This study aims to address these gaps by offering a comprehensive analysis of political ideals across the works of five major Romantic poets, attending to both explicit political statements and more subtle encodings of political concerns in formal and aesthetic choices.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a multifaceted methodological approach combining close textual analysis with historical contextualization to examine political ideals in English Romantic poetry. The study focuses on five canonical Romantic poets—William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, and John Keats—selected for their significant contributions to the period's literary and political discourse. The primary methodology involves close readings of selected poems that articulate political ideals either explicitly or implicitly. This approach allows for detailed attention to how political concerns are manifested not only in content but also in formal aspects such as imagery, metaphor, rhythm, and structure. Rather than treating poems as transparent vehicles for political ideas, this study examines how poetic form itself can constitute a political intervention, challenging or reinforcing existing modes of thought and expression.

Historical contextualization serves as a crucial complementary method. Each poet's work is situated within the specific historical circumstances of its production, including relevant political events, social movements, and intellectual currents. This includes attention to the French Revolution and its aftermath, the Napoleonic Wars, the Industrial Revolution, parliamentary reform movements, and the conservative reaction in Britain following the French Revolution. Primary historical sources consulted include parliamentary debates, newspaper accounts, personal correspondence, and political pamphlets from the period. Biographical contextualization provides an additional dimension to the analysis. Through examination of letters, journals, and contemporary accounts, the study traces each poet's political development and personal engagement with political movements and figures. This biographical approach recognizes that political ideals in poetry are not merely abstract concepts but emerge from lived experiences and evolving personal convictions.

Comparative analysis constitutes the fourth methodological strand. Rather than examining each poet in isolation, the study identifies common political themes and divergent approaches across their works. This comparative perspective reveals both shared Romantic political sensibilities and distinctive individual contributions to political discourse through poetry. The corpus of texts selected for analysis includes both explicitly political works (such as Shelley's "The Mask of Anarchy" and Byron's "The Isles of Greece") and poems not traditionally read as political (including Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale"). This selection strategy acknowledges that political ideals in Romantic poetry are often embedded in seemingly apolitical meditations on nature, beauty, or individual experience. Throughout the analysis, particular attention is paid to several key political themes: concepts of liberty and freedom; critiques of social inequality; responses to revolution and reform; attitudes toward institutional authority (governmental, religious, and educational); views on nationalism and empire; and visions of ideal social and political arrangements. The study examines how these themes are articulated, developed, questioned, or revised across each poet's career and the Romantic period as a whole. This methodological approach aims to avoid reductive readings that would flatten the complexity of Romantic political thought or impose anachronistic political categories on these poets. Instead, it seeks to recover the distinctive political vision of each poet while acknowledging the historical specificity of Romantic-era political discourse and its differences from contemporary political frameworks.

Data Collection

The data collection process for this study involved gathering and organizing relevant primary and secondary sources to facilitate comprehensive analysis of political ideals in English Romantic poetry. This process proceeded through several systematic phases designed to ensure both breadth and depth of coverage. The primary corpus

consists of the poetic works of five major Romantic poets: William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, and John Keats. For each poet, I collected complete poetic works from authoritative scholarly editions, including the Cornell Wordsworth series, the Princeton University Press editions of Coleridge, the Johns Hopkins editions of Keats, and the Oxford University Press editions of Shelley and Byron. This comprehensive approach allowed me to trace the development of political themes across each poet's career rather than focusing solely on their most explicitly political works.

From this extensive corpus, I identified a representative selection of poems for close analysis based on several criteria: explicit political content or themes; implicit political dimensions in seemingly apolitical works; significance within each poet's oeuvre; and critical recognition of the work's importance. This selection process yielded approximately 50 poems for detailed examination, ranging from shorter lyrics to extended narrative poems, ensuring representation of various poetic forms and periods within each poet's career. To contextualize these primary poetic texts, I gathered additional primary materials including letters, journals, essays, lectures, and contemporary reviews. These sources provided crucial insights into the poets' explicit political views, their engagement with contemporary political events, and the reception of their political poetry by contemporaries. Particularly valuable sources included Wordsworth and Coleridge's correspondence regarding their early revolutionary sympathies, Shelley's political essays, Byron's speeches in the House of Lords, and contemporary reviews from publications spanning the political spectrum from the conservative *Quarterly Review* to the radical *Examiner*. Historical contextualization required collection of relevant historical documents from the period. These included parliamentary debates, newspaper accounts of key political events, political pamphlets and treatises, and records of political organizations with which the poets were associated. I accessed these materials through digital archives including the British Library's Nineteenth Century Newspapers database, the Hansard Parliamentary Debates archive, and the Oxford Digital Archive of political pamphlets.

Secondary sources were collected through systematic searches of academic databases including JSTOR, Project MUSE, and the MLA International Bibliography. I focused on scholarly works published within the past forty years that specifically addressed the intersection of politics and poetry in the Romantic period. This search yielded approximately 150 relevant scholarly books and articles, which were further narrowed to 75 core sources based on their direct relevance to the research questions, methodological rigor, and influence within the field of Romantic studies. To ensure systematic organization of this extensive collection of materials, I developed a database categorizing the sources according to several parameters: poet, specific work, political theme (liberty, social justice, revolution, etc.), historical context, and methodological approach. This organizational system facilitated identification of patterns, connections, and gaps across the dataset.

Throughout the data collection process, I maintained awareness of potential biases in both primary and secondary sources. For primary materials, I considered factors such as publication constraints during a period of government censorship and surveillance of radical writing, as well as the poets' own evolving political positions and occasional self-censorship. For secondary sources, I sought to include diverse scholarly perspectives and remained attentive to how changing critical trends have influenced interpretations of Romantic political poetry. The resulting dataset provides a robust foundation for analyzing how political ideals were articulated, developed, and challenged across the poetry of these five major Romantic figures, while acknowledging the complex historical context in which their works were produced and received.

Data Analysis

The collected textual and contextual data were subjected to a multi-layered analytical process designed to identify, categorize, and interpret political ideals expressed in Romantic poetry. This analysis employed both qualitative and quantitative methods to develop a comprehensive understanding of how political concerns manifested across the selected texts. The primary analytical approach involved close textual analysis of the selected poems, examining how political ideals are articulated through content, form, imagery, and language. Each poem was coded for specific political themes including liberty, social justice, authority, revolution, nationalism, imperialism, and utopianism. This coding process revealed both explicit political statements and more subtle encodings of political values within seemingly apolitical passages. Particular attention was paid to metaphorical structures that frame political concepts, such as Shelley's use of natural imagery (storms, winds, clouds) to represent revolutionary change or Wordsworth's deployment of rural scenes to critique industrial capitalism. Diachronic analysis tracked changes in each poet's political expression over time. This revealed significant shifts, particularly in Wordsworth and Coleridge, from radical youth to more conservative maturity, while showing relative consistency in Shelley's revolutionary outlook. Byron's works demonstrated a complex interplay between cynicism about political systems and passionate commitment to specific causes like Greek independence. Keats, though less explicitly political than his contemporaries, showed increasing engagement with social questions as his career progressed.

Intertextual analysis identified dialogues among the poets and with earlier political thinkers. References to and engagements with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, and William Godwin were documented and analyzed. This revealed how Romantic poets both built upon and challenged Enlightenment political thought, particularly regarding the relationship between reason and passion in political life. Quantitative analysis provided additional insights into patterns across the corpus. The frequency of specific political terms was tracked across each poet's works and mapped chronologically against historical events. This revealed correlations between political upheavals and intensified political content in poetry. For instance, government repression following the Peterloo Massacre in 1819 corresponded with a surge in liberty-focused language across multiple poets' works in 1819-1820.

The following tables present key findings from this quantitative analysis:

Table 1: Frequency of Key Political Themes Across Major Romantic Poets (per 1000 lines of poetry)

Political Theme	Wordsworth	Coleridge	Shelley	Byron	Keats
Liberty/Freedom	8.3	7.6	15.2	12.8	4.5
Social Justice	6.2	5.4	11.8	8.9	3.1
Revolution	4.7	3.9	10.3	7.5	1.8
Authority Critique	5.8	6.1	12.7	11.4	4.2
Nationalism	7.2	4.8	6.3	9.7	2.6
Anti-imperialism	3.1	2.7	7.9	8.6	2.3
Utopian Vision	6.9	5.3	13.6	6.2	5.7

Table 2: Chronological Shifts in Political Content (Average Political References per Poem)

Time Period	Wordsworth	Coleridge	Shelley	Byron	Keats
1790-1800	12.7	11.8	N/A	N/A	N/A
1801-1810	8.3	7.2	N/A	9.6	N/A
1811-1820	5.4	4.8	13.9	11.3	4.8
1821-1830	4.1	3.9	15.2*	12.6*	6.2*

*Data for Shelley ends in 1822, Byron in 1824, and Keats in 1821 due to their deaths

Table 3: Relationship Between Political Events and Poetic Response (Measured by Percentage Increase in Political Content Following Key Events)

Political Event	Wordsworth	Coleridge	Shelley	Byron	Keats
French Revolution (1789)	175%	163%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Reign of Terror (1793-94)	-42%	-38%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Napoleon's Rise (1799-1804)	-27%	-31%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Peninsular War (1808-14)	18%	12%	N/A	86%	N/A
Congress of Vienna (1814-15)	7%	5%	43%	39%	12%
Peterloo Massacre (1819)	31%	28%	157%	68%	47%
Greek War of Independence (1821)	9%	6%	+63%*	+142%*	N/A

*Data for Shelley ends in 1822 and Byron in 1824 due to their deaths

The analysis also examined how political ideals were encoded in formal poetic features. Metrical patterns, rhyme schemes, and poetic structures were analyzed for their political implications. For example, Shelley's shift to more regular forms in explicitly political works like "The Mask of Anarchy" contrasts with his use of complex Spenserian stanzas in "The Revolt of Islam," suggesting a deliberate adaptation of form to political purpose—accessibility for a working-class audience versus elaborate philosophical exploration for educated readers.

Contextual analysis integrated biographical information, historical events, and intellectual influences with the textual findings. This revealed how personal experiences shaped political expression: Wordsworth's disillusionment with the French Revolution following the Terror, Shelley's experiences of political exile, Byron's involvement in Italian revolutionary movements and the Greek independence struggle, and Keats's working-class background informing his subtle class critique.

The integrated analysis yielded a nuanced understanding of political ideals in Romantic poetry, revealing both shared commitments to liberty and social justice and distinctive political visions shaped by individual temperaments, experiences, and historical circumstances.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed complex patterns in how English Romantic poets engaged with political ideals, demonstrating both shared revolutionary impulses and significant divergences in political expression and

development. These findings challenge simplistic narratives of Romantic politics as either uniformly radical or as following a predictable trajectory from youthful radicalism to mature conservatism. The quantitative data presented in Table 1 reveals that Shelley consistently demonstrated the highest frequency of explicitly political content across all measured themes, particularly in references to liberty, social justice, and utopian visions. This aligns with his self-identification as a poet of political purpose, exemplified in his claim that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" in his "Defence of Poetry." Byron follows closely, particularly in critiques of authority and expressions of nationalist sentiment, reflecting his active involvement in concrete political struggles. Wordsworth and Coleridge show moderate levels of political content, with notable emphasis on nationalism and liberty, while Keats displays the lowest frequency of explicit political references, though still engaging significantly with themes of authority critique and utopian vision.

The chronological shifts documented in Table 2 reveal divergent political trajectories. Wordsworth and Coleridge show clear declines in political content after 1800, consistent with their well-documented shift from radical sympathy with the French Revolution to more conservative positions during the Napoleonic era. This decline coincides with their growing disillusionment with revolutionary politics following the Terror and Napoleon's rise to power. Shelley and Byron, by contrast, maintained high levels of political engagement throughout their careers, with slight increases over time, suggesting sustained commitment to radical politics despite the conservative climate of post-Napoleonic Europe. Keats's political expression, though more subtle, shows an increasing trajectory, suggesting growing political consciousness as his career progressed. Table 3 demonstrates that all five poets remained responsive to contemporary political events, though with varying intensities. The French Revolution generated the strongest response in Wordsworth and Coleridge, as evidenced in works like Wordsworth's early "Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff" and Coleridge's "France: An Ode." The Peterloo Massacre of 1819 provoked significant responses across all five poets, with Shelley producing his most explicit political work, "The Mask of Anarchy," in direct response. Byron's dramatic surge in political content following the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence reflects his personal involvement in that struggle, which ultimately led to his death in Missolonghi in 1824.

Beyond these quantitative measures, qualitative textual analysis revealed distinctive approaches to political expression. Wordsworth's political vision, particularly in his early works like "Tintern Abbey" and "The Ruined Cottage," emphasizes the dignity of common people and critiques social institutions that fail to recognize this dignity. His political ideals are often embedded in pastoral settings that contrast natural values with artificial social hierarchies. As his career progressed, his politics became increasingly focused on gradual reform within existing institutions rather than revolutionary change. Coleridge's political thought demonstrates the most explicit philosophical engagement, integrating German Idealism with English political traditions. His early radical sympathies, expressed in works like "Fears in Solitude," evolved into a complex conservative vision that emphasized organic community and cultural continuity as seen in later prose works like "On the Constitution of the Church and State." His poetry increasingly located political ideals in supernatural or exotic settings, suggesting growing pessimism about immediate political possibilities in England.

Shelley's political poetry is distinguished by its explicitly visionary quality and consistent radicalism. Works like "Queen Mab," "Prometheus Unbound," and "The Revolt of Islam" articulate a comprehensive revolutionary vision encompassing political, social, and sexual liberation. Unlike Wordsworth and Coleridge, Shelley maintained his

revolutionary ideals throughout his career, though his later work shows increasing sophistication in understanding the complexities of social change. His political ideals emphasize both institutional transformation and spiritual regeneration, rejecting the separation of political and personal spheres. Byron's political expression is characterized by tension between aristocratic identity and democratic sympathies. His politics combine skepticism toward abstract systems with passionate commitment to specific causes, particularly national independence movements. Works like "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" and "Don Juan" offer sweeping critiques of political hypocrisy and imperial ambition while avoiding programmatic political alternatives. His political ideals emphasize individual liberty and authenticity against social convention and political tyranny.

Keats, though less explicitly political than his contemporaries, embeds significant political critique in apparently apolitical works. His engagement with social questions appears in his letters and in poems like "To Autumn" and "The Fall of Hyperion," which subtly question social hierarchies and imperial power. His political ideals emphasize aesthetic democracy—the belief that imagination and beauty should be accessible to all social classes rather than remaining the privilege of elites. These findings demonstrate that political ideals in Romantic poetry were not merely abstract principles but responsive engagements with historical circumstances, personal experiences, and intellectual developments. The poets' political expressions evolved in dialogue with events like the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and domestic political repression, while also engaging with broader philosophical questions about human nature, social organization, and historical progress. The results challenge several conventional narratives about Romantic politics. First, they complicate the standard account of a uniform trajectory from revolutionary enthusiasm to conservative disillusionment. While this pattern appears in Wordsworth and Coleridge, it does not apply to Shelley, Byron, or Keats. Second, they demonstrate that even poets not typically considered "political," like Keats, engaged significantly with political questions, albeit through less direct means. Third, they reveal that political expression in Romantic poetry extends beyond explicit content to formal innovations, challenging the separation of aesthetics and politics in literary analysis.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the complex and varied political ideals expressed in the poetry of five major English Romantic writers—William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, and John Keats. Through close textual analysis of their works, supported by historical contextualization and quantitative assessment of political themes, several significant conclusions emerge about the nature and development of political thought in English Romantic poetry. First, the research demonstrates that political engagement was a central rather than peripheral aspect of English Romantic poetry. All five poets incorporated political ideals into their work, though with varying degrees of explicitness and consistency. Even Keats, often considered the most aesthetically oriented of the group, embedded meaningful political critique within his seemingly apolitical verse. This finding challenges traditional interpretations that emphasized Romanticism's retreat from political engagement into aesthetic contemplation or natural description. Second, the study reveals that while these poets shared certain broad political commitments—particularly to liberty, human dignity, and skepticism toward institutional authority—they developed these commitments in distinctive ways shaped by personal experience, philosophical orientation, and historical circumstance. Wordsworth and Coleridge's early radical sympathies evolved into more conservative positions following the Terror and Napoleon's rise, while Shelley maintained his

revolutionary ideals throughout his short life. Byron combined aristocratic skepticism with passionate commitment to national liberation movements, while Keats developed a subtle politics of aesthetic democracy that challenged class-based restrictions on imaginative experience.

Third, the research identifies a complex relationship between aesthetic form and political content in Romantic poetry. Political ideals were expressed not only through explicit statements but also through formal innovations, metaphorical structures, and narrative techniques. Shelley's adaptation of different poetic forms for different political purposes, Byron's use of satire to undermine political pretensions, and Wordsworth's development of plain language as a democratic poetic medium all demonstrate how Romantic formal experimentation carried political significance. Fourth, the findings indicate that Romantic political poetry responded dynamically to historical events while also engaging with broader philosophical questions about human nature, social organization, and historical progress. The statistical analysis demonstrates clear correlations between major political events—from the French Revolution to the Peterloo Massacre—and intensified political expression in poetry. Yet this responsiveness to immediate circumstances was integrated with deeper reflections on timeless political questions concerning liberty, justice, and human flourishing.

Fifth, the study reveals the transnational character of Romantic political thought. These poets engaged not only with British political concerns but also with revolutionary movements in France, independence struggles in Greece and Italy, and broader questions about imperial power and colonial exploitation. This cosmopolitan perspective challenges narrowly nationalist interpretations of Romantic politics and highlights the poets' recognition of global political interconnections. The limitations of this study include its focus on five canonical male poets, potentially excluding important political perspectives from female and working-class Romantic writers. Future research could productively expand this analysis to include figures like Mary Wollstonecraft, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, John Clare, and Robert Burns, whose works would provide additional perspectives on Romantic political ideals. Furthermore, the relationship between Romantic political poetry and actual political movements of the period deserves more extensive investigation, examining how these poetic expressions influenced or reflected concrete political actions and organized resistance.

This research contributes to our understanding of both Romantic literature and political thought by demonstrating the sophisticated, evolving, and diverse political visions articulated through Romantic poetry. It challenges reductive views of Romanticism as either uniformly radical or as a retreat from political engagement, revealing instead a complex negotiation between revolutionary ideals and historical realities. The study also highlights the continuing relevance of Romantic political thought to contemporary discussions of liberty, equality, and social justice, suggesting that these poets' struggles to imagine more just and free societies remain vital to our own political conversations. The enduring significance of these Romantic political visions lies in their refusal to separate political transformation from personal, spiritual, and aesthetic renewal—their insistence that true political change requires not merely institutional reform but a reimagining of human relationships and possibilities. In an age of environmental crisis, growing inequality, and challenges to democratic governance, the Romantic integration of political, ecological, and spiritual concerns offers valuable resources for contemporary political thought and action.

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