

# Romanticism



## Introduction to Romanticism

Romanticism has very little to do with things popularly thought of as "romantic," although love may occasionally be the subject of Romantic art. Rather, it is an international artistic and philosophical movement that redefined the fundamental ways in which people in Western cultures thought about themselves and about their world.

## Historical Considerations

It is one of the curiosities of literary history that the strongholds of the Romantic Movement were England and Germany, not the countries of the romance languages themselves. Thus it is from the historians of English and German literature that we inherit the convenient set of terminal dates for the Romantic period, beginning in 1798, the year of the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge and of the composition of *Hymns to the Night* by Novalis, and ending in 1832, the year which marked the deaths of both Sir Walter Scott and Goethe. However, as an international movement affecting all the arts, Romanticism begins at least in the 1770's and continues into the second half of the nineteenth century, later for American literature than for European, and later in some of the arts, like music and painting, than in literature. This extended chronological spectrum (1770-1870) also permits recognition as Romantic the poetry of Robert Burns and William Blake in England, the early writings of Goethe and Schiller in Germany, and the great period of influence for Rousseau's writings throughout Europe.

The early Romantic period thus coincides with what is often called the "age of revolutions"--including, of course, the American (1776) and the French (1789) revolutions--an age of upheavals in political, economic, and social traditions, the age which witnessed the initial transformations of the Industrial Revolution. A revolutionary energy was also at the core of Romanticism, which quite consciously set out to transform not only the theory and practice of poetry (and all art), but the very way we perceive the world. Some of its major

precepts have survived into the twentieth century and still affect our contemporary period.

## **Imagination**

The imagination was elevated to a position as the supreme faculty of the mind. This contrasted distinctly with the traditional arguments for the supremacy of reason. The Romantics tended to define and to present the imagination as our ultimate "shaping" or creative power, the approximate human equivalent of the creative powers of nature or even deity. It is dynamic, an active, rather than passive power, with many functions. Imagination is the primary faculty for creating all art. On a broader scale, it is also the faculty that helps humans to constitute reality, for (as Wordsworth suggested), we not only perceive the world around us, but also in part create it. Uniting both reason and feeling (Coleridge described it with the paradoxical phrase, "intellectual intuition"), imagination is extolled as the ultimate synthesizing faculty, enabling humans to reconcile differences and opposites in the world of appearance. The reconciliation of opposites is a central ideal for the Romantics. Finally, imagination is inextricably bound up with the other two major concepts, for it is presumed to be the faculty which enables us to "read" nature as a system of symbols.

## **Nature**

"Nature" meant many things to the Romantics. As suggested above, it was often presented as itself a work of art, constructed by a divine imagination, in emblematic language. For example, throughout "Song of Myself," Whitman makes a practice of presenting commonplace items in nature--"ants," "heap'd stones," and "poke-weed"--as containing divine elements, and he refers to the "grass" as a natural "hieroglyphic," "the handkerchief of the Lord." While particular perspectives with regard to nature varied considerably--nature as a healing power, nature as a source of subject and image, nature as a refuge from the artificial constructs of civilization, including artificial language--the prevailing views accorded nature the status of an organically unified whole. It was viewed as "organic," rather than, as in the scientific or rationalist view, as a system of "mechanical" laws, for Romanticism displaced the rationalist view of the universe as a machine (e.g., the deistic image of a clock) with the analogue of an "organic" image, a living tree or mankind itself. At the same time, Romantics gave greater attention both to describing natural phenomena accurately and to capturing "sensuous nuance"--and this is as true of Romantic

landscape painting as of Romantic nature poetry. Accuracy of observation, however, was not sought for its own sake. Romantic nature poetry is essentially a poetry of meditation.

## **Symbolism and Myth**

Symbolism and myth were given great prominence in the Romantic conception of art. In the Romantic view, symbols were the human aesthetic correlatives of nature's emblematic language. They were valued too because they could simultaneously suggest many things, and were thus thought superior to the one-to-one communications of allegory. Partly, it may have been the desire to express the "inexpressible"--the infinite--through the available resources of language that led to symbol at one level and myth (as symbolic narrative) at another.

## **Other Concepts: Emotion, Lyric Poetry, and the Self**

Other aspects of Romanticism were intertwined with the above three concepts. Emphasis on the activity of the imagination was accompanied by greater emphasis on the importance of intuition, instincts, and feelings, and Romantics generally called for greater attention to the emotions as a necessary supplement to purely logical reason. When this emphasis was applied to the creation of poetry, a very important shift of focus occurred. Wordsworth's definition of all good poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" marks a turning point in literary history. By locating the ultimate source of poetry in the individual artist, the tradition, stretching back to the ancients, of valuing art primarily for its ability to imitate human life (that is, for its mimetic qualities) was reversed. In Romantic theory, art was valuable not so much as a mirror of the external world, but as a source of illumination of the world within. Among other things, this led to a prominence for first-person lyric poetry never accorded it in any previous period. The "poetic speaker" became less a persona and more the direct person of the poet. Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Whitman's "Song of Myself" are both paradigms of successful experiments to take the growth of the poet's mind (the development of self) as subject for an "epic" enterprise made up of lyric components. Confessional prose narratives such as Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) and Chateaubriand's *Rene* (1801), as well as disguised autobiographical verse narratives such as Byron's *Childe Harold* (1818), are related phenomena. The interior journey and the development of the self recurred everywhere as subject material for the Romantic artist. The artist-as-hero is a specifically Romantic type.

## Contrasts With Neoclassicism

Consequently, the Romantics sought to define their goals through systematic contrast with the norms of "Versailles neoclassicism." In their critical manifestoes--the 1800 "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, the critical studies of the Schlegel brothers in Germany, the later statements of Victor Hugo in France, and of Hawthorne, Poe, and Whitman in the United States--they self-consciously asserted their differences from the previous age (the literary "ancien regime"), and declared their freedom from the mechanical "rules." Certain special features of Romanticism may still be highlighted by this contrast. We have already noted two major differences: the replacement of reason by the imagination for primary place among the human faculties and the shift from a mimetic to an expressive orientation for poetry, and indeed all literature. In addition, neoclassicism had prescribed for art the idea that the general or universal characteristics of human behavior were more suitable subject matter than the peculiarly individual manifestations of human activity. From at least the opening statement of Rousseau's *Confessions*, first published in 1781--"I am not made like anyone I have seen; I dare believe that I am not made like anyone in existence. If I am not superior, at least I am different."--this view was challenged.

## Individualism: The Romantic Hero

The Romantics asserted the importance of the individual, the unique, even the eccentric. Consequently they opposed the character typology of neoclassical drama. In another way, of course, Romanticism created its own literary types. The hero-artist has already been mentioned; there were also heaven-storming types from Prometheus to Captain Ahab, outcasts from Cain to the Ancient Mariner and even Hester Prynne, and there was Faust, who wins salvation in Goethe's great drama for the very reasons--his characteristic striving for the unattainable beyond the morally permitted and his insatiable thirst for activity--that earlier had been viewed as the components of his tragic sin. (It was in fact Shelley's opinion that Satan, in his noble defiance, was the real hero of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.)

In style, the Romantics preferred boldness over the preceding age's desire for restraint, maximum suggestiveness over the neoclassical ideal of clarity, free experimentation over the "rules" of composition, genre, and decorum, and they promoted the conception of the artist as "inspired" creator over that of the artist as "maker" or technical master. Although in both Germany and England there was continued interest in the ancient classics, for the most part the

Romantics allied themselves with the very periods of literature that the neoclassicists had dismissed, the Middle Ages and the Baroque, and they embraced the writer whom Voltaire had called a barbarian, Shakespeare. Although interest in religion and in the powers of faith were prominent during the Romantic period, the Romantics generally rejected absolute systems, whether of philosophy or religion, in favor of the idea that each person (and humankind collectively) must create the system by which to live.

## **The Everyday and the Exotic**

The attitude of many of the Romantics to the everyday, social world around them was complex. It is true that they advanced certain realistic techniques, such as the use of "local color" (through down-to-earth characters, like Wordsworth's rustics, or through everyday language, as in Emily Bronte's northern dialects or Whitman's colloquialisms, or through popular literary forms, such as folk narratives). Yet social realism was usually subordinate to imaginative suggestion, and what was most important were the ideals suggested by the above examples, simplicity perhaps, or innocence. Earlier, the 18th-century cult of the noble savage had promoted similar ideals, but now artists often turned for their symbols to domestic rather than exotic sources--to folk legends and older, "unsophisticated" art forms, such as the ballad, to contemporary country folk who used "the language of common men," not an artificial "poetic diction," and to children (for the first time presented as individuals, and often idealized as sources of greater wisdom than adults).

Simultaneously, as opposed to everyday subjects, various forms of the exotic in time and/or place also gained favor, for the Romantics were also fascinated with realms of existence that were, by definition, prior to or opposed to the ordered conceptions of "objective" reason. Often, both the everyday and the exotic appeared together in paradoxical combinations. In the *Lyrical Ballads*, for example, Wordsworth and Coleridge agreed to divide their labors according to two subject areas, the natural and the supernatural: Wordsworth would try to exhibit the novelty in what was all too familiar, while Coleridge would try to show in the supernatural what was psychologically real, both aiming to dislodge vision from the "lethargy of custom." The concept of the beautiful soul in an ugly body, as characterized in Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, is another variant of the paradoxical combination.

## **The Romantic Artist in Society**

In another way too, the Romantics were ambivalent toward the "real" social world around them. They were often politically and socially involved, but at the same time they began to distance themselves from the public. As noted earlier, high Romantic artists interpreted things through their own emotions, and these emotions included social and political consciousness--as one would expect in a period of revolution, one that reacted so strongly to oppression and injustice in the world. So artists sometimes took public stands, or wrote works with socially or politically oriented subject matter. Yet at the same time, another trend began to emerge, as they withdrew more and more from what they saw as the confining boundaries of bourgeois life. In their private lives, they often asserted their individuality and differences in ways that were to the middle class a subject of intense interest, but also sometimes of horror. ("Nothing succeeds like excess," wrote Oscar Wilde, who, as a partial inheritor of Romantic tendencies, seemed to enjoy shocking the bourgeois, both in his literary and life styles.) Thus the gulf between "odd" artists and their sometimes shocked, often uncomprehending audience began to widen. Some artists may have experienced ambivalence about this situation--it was earlier pointed out how Emily Dickinson seemed to regret that her "letters" to the world would go unanswered. Yet a significant Romantic theme became the contrast between artist and middle-class "Philistine." Unfortunately, in many ways, this distance between artist and public remains with us today.

## **Spread of the Romantic Spirit**

Finally, it should be noted that the revolutionary energy underlying the Romantic Movement affected not just literature, but all of the arts--from music (consider the rise of Romantic opera) to painting, from sculpture to architecture. Its reach was also geographically significant, spreading as it did eastward to Russia, and westward to America. For example, in America, the great landscape painters, particularly those of the "Hudson River School," and the Utopian social colonies that thrived in the 19th century, are manifestations of the Romantic spirit on this side of the Atlantic.

## **Recent Developments**

Some critics have believed that the two identifiable movements that followed Romanticism--Symbolism and Realism--were separate developments of the opposites which Romanticism itself had managed, at its best, to unify and to reconcile. Whether or not this is so, it is clear that Romanticism transformed

Western culture in many ways that survive into our own times. It is only very recently that any really significant turning away from Romantic paradigms has begun to take place, and even that turning away has taken place in a dramatic, typically Romantic way.

Today a number of literary theorists have called into question two major Romantic perceptions: that the literary text is a separate, individuated, living "organism"; and that the artist is a fiercely independent genius who creates original works of art. In current theory, the separate, "living" work has been dissolved into a sea of "intertextuality," derived from and part of a network or "archive" of other texts--the many different kinds of discourse that are part of any culture. In this view, too, the independently sovereign artist has been demoted from a heroic, consciously creative agent, to a collective "voice," more controlled than controlling, the intersection of other voices, other texts, ultimately dependent upon possibilities dictated by language systems, conventions, and institutionalized power structures. It is an irony of history, however, that the explosive appearance on the scene of these subversive ideas, delivered in what seemed to the establishment to be radical manifestoes, and written by linguistically powerful individuals, has recapitulated the revolutionary spirit and events of Romanticism itself.

*Adapted from A Guide to the Study of Literature: A Companion Text for Core Studies 6, Landmarks of Literature, ©English Department, Brooklyn College.*