

The Industrial Revolution and the Romantic Spirit

The Industrial Revolution refers to a series of significant shifts in traditional practices of agriculture, manufacturing, and transportation, as well as the development of new mechanical technologies that took place between the late 18th and 19th centuries in much of the Western world. During this time, the United Kingdom, as well as the rest of Europe and the United States soon after, underwent drastic socio-economic and cultural changes during this time. These changes in part gave rise to the English Romantic spirit, especially in the United Kingdom. During the late 18th century, the United Kingdom's economic system of manual and animal based labor shifted toward a system of machine manufacturing while more readily navigable roads, canals, and railroads for trade began to develop. Steam power underpinned the dramatic increase in production capacity, as did the rather sudden development of metal tools and complex machines for manufacturing purposes.

The Industrial Revolution had a profound effect upon society in the United Kingdom. It gave rise to the working and middle classes and allowed them to overcome the long-standing economic oppression that they had endured for centuries beneath the gentry and nobility. However, while employment opportunities increased for common working people throughout the country and members of the middle class were able to become business owners more easily, the conditions workers often labored under were brutal. Further, many of them were barely able to live off of the wages they earned. During this time, the industrial factory was created (which, in turn, gave rise to the modern city). Conditions within these factories were often dirty and, by today's standards, unethical: children were frequently used and abused for labor purposes and long hours were required for work. A group of people in the United Kingdom known as the Luddites felt that industrialization was ultimately inhumane and took to protesting and sometimes sabotaging industrial machines and factories. While industrialization led to incredible technological developments throughout the Western world, many historians now argue that industrialization also caused severe reductions in living standards for workers both within the United Kingdom and throughout the rest of the industrialized Western world. However, the new middle and working classes that industrialism had established led to urbanization throughout industrial cultures, drastic population increases, and the introduction of a relatively new economic system known as capitalism.

The Romantic Movement developed in the United Kingdom in the wake of, and in some measure as a response to, the Industrial Revolution. Many English intellectuals and artists in the early 19th century considered industrialism inhumane and unnatural and revolted—sometimes quite violently—against what they felt to be the increasingly inhumane and unnatural mechanization of modern life. Poets such as Lord Byron (particular in his addresses to the House of Lords) and William Blake (most notably in his poem “The Chimney Sweeper”) spoke out—and wrote extensively about—the psychological and social affects of the

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newly industrial world upon the individual and felt rampant industrialization to be entirely counter to the human spirit and intrinsic rights of men. Many English Romantic intellectuals and artists felt that the modern industrial world was harsh and deadening to the senses and spirit and called for a return, both in life and in spirit, to the emotional and natural, as well as the ideals of the pre-industrial past.