

Introduction to the Romantic Age of English Literature

Definition

- Contrary to what you may think, the term *Romanticism* is not just about romantic love (although love is sometimes the subject of romantic art).
- Romanticism is an international artistic and philosophical movement that re-defined the ways in which humans in Western civilization thought about themselves and their world.



Historical Considerations

English Literary History

- English Literary History begins the Romantic Period officially in 1798, with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge, and ends it in 1832, with the deaths of Sir Walter Scott and the German Romantic poet, Goethe.

Romanticism as an International Movement

- Affected all of the arts (literature, music, painting, philosophy)
- Began in the 1770s and extended through the second half of the 19th century (1870).

“The Age of Revolutions”

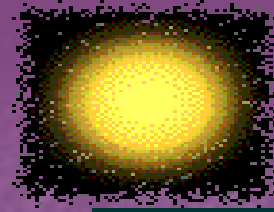
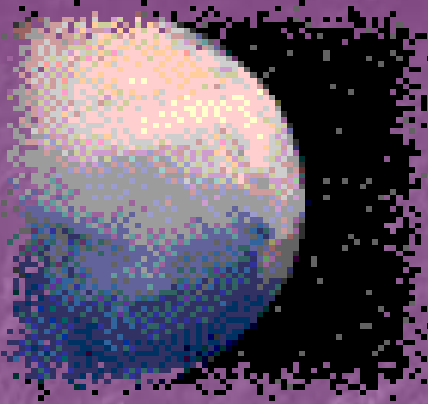
- Since the early Romantic period includes the American (1776) and the French (1789) revolutions, it has been called the “age of revolutions” (changes). It was a time of massive energy (intellectual, social, artistic). It set out to transform not only the theory and practice of all art, but also the ways in which human beings perceived the world. Some of its ideas survive even to our present day.

The Role of Imagination

- Imagination now replaced reason as the supreme faculty of the mind—hence the flowering of creative activity in this period. For Romantic thinkers, the imagination was the ultimate “shaping,” or creative power, the approximate human equivalent to divine creative powers.
- As the poet Wordsworth would suggest, humans not only perceive and experience the world around them; they also, in part, create it. The imagination unites reason and feeling, enabling humans to reconcile differences and opposites—this reconciliation is a central ideal for Romantics. Finally, the imagination enables humans to “read” nature as a system of symbols.



Nature



Celebration of Nature

- Nature often presented as a work of art from the divine imagination
- Nature as a healing power
- Nature as a refuge from civilization
- Nature viewed as “organic,” (alive) rather than “mechanical” or “rationalist”
- Nature viewed as a source of refreshment and meditation

Symbolism and Myth

- Valued as the human means for imitating nature in art
- Could simultaneously suggest many things in a creative way
- Based on a desire to “express the inexpressible” through the resources of language

Emotion, Lyric Poetry, and the Self

- Greater emphasis on the importance of intuition, instincts, and feelings
- Wordsworth's definition of good poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" was a turning point in literary history.
- Ultimate source of poetry found in the individual artist and his/her traditions (present and past)

Value of Art

- Source of illumination of the world within the self
- Led to a prominence for first-person lyric poetry; the “speaker” became less a persona and more the direct person of the poet. Ex. Wordsworth’s *Prelude* and Whitman’s “Song of Myself”
- Also a wealth of autobiographical verse described as poetry about someone else: Byron, *Childe Harold*

Contrasts with Neoclassicism (the Age of Reason)

- Shift in focus from rationalism to the imagination
- Shift toward a more expressive orientation toward the literary art
- Freedom of expression
- Freedom of the individual

Individualism

- Summed up in opening statement of Rousseau's *Confessions* :
- "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."

The Romantic Hero

- As the Romantic writers show us, our heroes were not always cowboys:

- 1. The hero as artist
- 2. The hero striving beyond the moral restrictions of society
- 3. The hero who reappears from the ancient classics

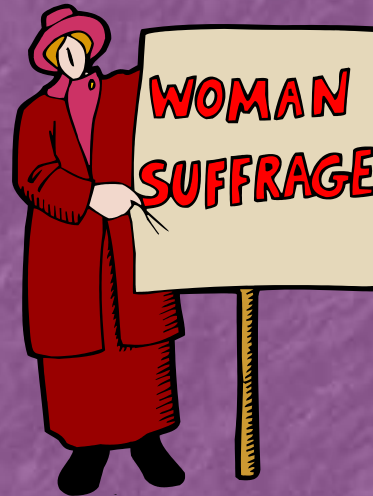


The Everyday and the Exotic

- Romantic writers embraced everyday realism (poetry of Wordsworth)
- Also sought the folk legends of the past
- Promoted exotic ideas suggested by technology and the imagination (a beautiful soul in an ugly body, as in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*).

The Romantic Artist in Society

- The Romantics were often ambivalent toward the “outside” world. On the one hand, they were socially and politically passionate—involved in worthy causes and social issues. On the other hand, they isolated themselves from the public.



Spread of the Romantic Spirit

- All of the arts—from music, to painting; from sculpture to architecture—were affected by and continue to be affected by the revolutionary energy underlying the Romantic movement. Strains of Romanticism infuse every age and every generation.

Works Cited

- Abrams and others. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 7th edition. NY: W. W. Norton, 2000.
- <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/rom.html>