

BRITISH ROMANTICISM

Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity. William Wordsworth

Romanticism as a literary movement lasted from 1798, with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* to sometime between the passage of the first Reform Bill of 1832 and the death of Wordsworth in 1850. During this period, emphasis shifted to the importance of the individual's experience in the world and one's subjective interpretation of that experience, rather than interpretations handed down by the church or tradition.

Romantic literature is characterized by several features. It emphasized the dream, or inner world of the individual and visionary, fantastic, or drug-induced imagery. Romantic literature emphasized the individual self and the value of the individual's experience. The concept of "the sublime" (a thrilling emotional experience that combines awe, magnificence, and horror) was introduced. Feelings and emotions were viewed as superior to logic and analysis.

For the romantics, poetry was believed to be the highest form of literature, and novels were regarded as a lower form, often as sensationalistic, even by those most addicted to reading them. Most novels of the time were written by women and were therefore widely regarded as a threat to serious, intellectual culture. Despite this, some of the most famous British novelists wrote during this period, including Jane Austen (*Sense and Sensibility* 1811, *Pride and Prejudice* 1813, and *Emma* 1816), Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (*Frankenstein* 1818), and Sir Walter Scott (*Ivanhoe* 1820, *Waverley* 1814, *Rob Roy* 1817). In addition, this period saw the flowering of some of the greatest poets in the English language: the first generation of William Blake ("Cradle Song," "The Tyger," "Auguries Of Innocence"), Samuel Taylor Coleridge ("Kubla Khan," "The Suicide's Argument," "The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner), and William Wordsworth ("The Daffodils," "London, 1802," "Desideria"), followed by Lord Byron ("She Walks In Beauty," "When We Two Parted," "The Dream," "The Destruction of Sennacherib), Percy Bysshe Shelley ("Ode To A Skylark," "Ode To The West Wind," "Ozymandias") and John Keats ("O Solitude," "When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be," "Ode To A Nightingale").

Characteristics of Literary Romanticism

Romanticism is a strong, pervasive reaction against Neo-Classicism and Enlightenment ideals. As a literary movement, it is always spelled with a capital "R;" however, it has virtually nothing to do with romantic love. Literary Romanticism has the following qualities:

- Emphasis on **imagination and emotion** over reason and logic – emotional displays are a mark of independence and superiority – feelings are seen as a guide to truth and conduct.
- Emphasis on **individual experiences** as centre of life and art – solitude is much sought after.
- Emphasis on **anticipation and remembrance** of an event rather than on the event itself (Romantics were not "living in the moment")

- Emphasis on **nonconformity**, which is highly prized
- Glorification of children and **childhood** – children seen as “wise” in their inexperience, which makes them closer to God
- Emphasis on the **sublime**, which is often symbolized by mountains
- **Nature** and “natural” equated with spontaneity, purity, connection with God – unplanned gardens are the best. Nature is seen as teacher/moral guide. Nature inspires a sense of awe and wonder of the universe. The romantics viewed nature as a place of spiritual purity and peace, where people could be redeemed by contact with the divine force immanent in the natural world.
- Interest in the **past** and the exotic, along with a renewed interest in the Middle Ages and in folklore. Interest in Gothic cathedrals and castles, especially ruins. Interest in monasteries, convents, monks, nuns, pilgrims and hermits as solitary seekers of truth. Interest in **supernatural** subjects.
- Interest in the search for **beauty**.
- Hatred of war, but tendency towards rebellion and **revolution**
- Belief that **poetry** is spontaneous and free, and that it should be written in common, concrete language everyone can understand

Themes

Dreams and Visions

Perhaps the most notable example of the emphasis on dreams and visions in romantic literature is Coleridge’s poem “Kubla Khan”¹(1816), which he claimed to have written during a dream while deeply asleep. The idea that a person could compose poetry while asleep was commonplace among romantics.

The Self

During the romantic period, for the first time in history, people became aware that there were parts of each individual’s personality beyond the access of ordinary consciousness. This idea was further developed during the twentieth century as part of modern psychological theory, but at the time of the romantics it was a novelty. The romantics were fascinated with self-exploration and with the particulars of the individual’s experience in the world. Previous writers had focused on politics, business, trade, and the lives of royalty or other famous people. The lives of ordinary people had been deemed unworthy of general interest. However, the romantics were influenced by the events of the American and French revolutions and their underlying political theories, and like the revolutionaries they believed the ordinary individual had the same rights and worth as any leader. This sociopolitical theory inspired writers to consider the worth of the individual in their work and to focus more on the experiences of ordinary people.

¹ a poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge written in 1797 but not published until 1816 . It was written after the poet dreamed about a palace built by the Mongol ruler Kubla Khan. He was unable to finish the poem, however, because a ‘person from Porlock’ (a village in Somerset) interrupted him while he was writing, and he forgot the dream.

Emotion and Feeling

In keeping with an emphasis on the individual self, the romantics valued emotion, intuition, and feeling over logic. They sought “the sublime,” a state of being in which a person was simultaneously awed, frightened, and filled with a sense of majesty and wonder. A poet’s response to a wild, remote, and grandiose place in nature often invoked the sublime, as did the immense night sky, gigantic geological upheavals, and rivers. They appreciated the ruins of cathedrals and ancient religious sites. Romantics also relied on their intuitive sense of things—as opposed to physical facts—to interpret the world. If a writer sensed the presence of the divine in a natural spot, for example, the reality of this presence was not questioned, but accepted as a given because the person had felt it.

Style

Rejection of Rigid Poetic Forms

In keeping with their glorification of the unlimited freedom and potential of the individual, the romantics rejected old poetic conventions—such as the heroic couplet used by Alexander Pope—and asserted the value of the language spoken by ordinary people. They believed that the form of a verse should be shaped by the subject matter, in contrast to the neoclassicists before them, who used rigid forms and shaped their material to fit them.

Emphasis on Poetry

An interesting aspect of the romantic period was the emphasis on poetry. Most of the great romantic writers were poets instead of novelists, as novels were widely regarded as inherently inferior to poetry.

References

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