

UNIT 13

ROMANTIC AGE 1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CHARACTERISTICS

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13.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, you shall,

- Learn about historical background of Romantic age
- Understand major characteristic of Romantic age

13.1 INTRODUCTION

Romantic age was an imaginative, literary, musical and intellectual movement that originated in Europe towards the end of the 18th century, and in most areas was at its peak in the approximate period from 1800 to 1850. Romanticism was characterized by its emphasis on emotion and individualism as well as glorification of all the past and nature, preferring the medieval rather than the classical. It was partly a reaction to the Industrial Revolution, the aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment, and the scientific rationalization of nature. It was personified most strongly in the visual arts, music, and literature, but had a major impact on historiography, education, social sciences, and natural sciences. It had a significant and complex effect on politics, with romantic thinkers influencing liberalism, and nationalism.

The movement emphasized intense emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic experience, placing new importance on such emotions as anxiety, horror and terror, and especially that experienced in

confronting the new aesthetic categories of the sublimity and beauty of nature. In contrast to the Rationalism and Classicism of the Enlightenment, Romanticism revived medievalism and elements of art and narrative perceived as authentically medieval in an attempt to escape population growth, early urban sprawl, and industrialism.

The nature of Romanticism may be approached from the primary importance of the free expression of the feelings of the artist. The importance the Romantics placed on emotion is summed up in the remark of the German painter Caspar David Friedrich, "the artist's feeling is his law". For William Wordsworth, poetry should begin as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", evoking a new but corresponding emotion the poet can then mold into art.

To express these feelings, it was considered the content of art had to come from the imagination of the artist, with as little interference as possible from 'artificial' rules dictating what a work should consist of. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and others believed there were natural laws the imagination at least of a good creative artist would unconsciously follow through artistic inspiration if left alone. The concept of the genius, or artist who was able to produce his own original work through this process of *creation from nothingness*, is the key to Romanticism, and to be derivative was the worst sin. This idea is often called 'romantic originality'.

According to Isaiah Berlin, Romanticism embodied "a new and restless spirit, seeking violently to burst through old and cramping forms, a nervous preoccupation with perpetually changing inner states of consciousness, a longing for the unbounded and the vague, for perpetual movement and change, an effort to return to the forgotten sources of life, a passionate effort at self-assertion both individual and collective, a search after means of expressing an unappeasable yearning for unattainable goals".

13.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Politics

The political context of the beginning of the Romantic Period is the French Revolution in 1789, the focus of which was to create political and social freedom, equality and brotherhood. The intention was to abolish the power of the ruling classes and to create democracy. These ideas were prevalent in America where the Declaration of Independence had been signed already in 1776. In England political reform gradually developed after some minor disturbances, but without a direct revolution, and in 1832 The Reform Act was passed with the intention of increasing parliamentary representation and reducing corruption.

Industry

At the end of the 18th century manual labor and draught-animal power had come to be replaced by machine-based production. This development started in the textile industry, but quickly spread to other areas of production. As the development of the railway engine introduced the production of trains, and as factories came to be built away from agricultural centers, people began to move from agricultural areas to towns and cities. Thousands of people moving from country to town between 1750 and 1850 changed England from a society based mainly on farming to a society where urban slums were now visible in many cities. Working conditions were grim, people worked up to 16 hours a day, and the pay was miserable. The consequence was, however, that by 1800 England was the most industrialized country in the world, and exports had risen by 500% since 1700. But even if the per capita income increased as a consequence of industrialization, all family members had to work for families to survive. Poverty among the urban population was great, and insufficient housing was common during that era.

13.3 LITERARY CONTEXT

In 1785, the pre-romantic poet William Cowper wrote in *The Task* “that God made the country, and manmade the town”. The Romantics were enthusiastic about nature and especially appreciated areas in nature which had not been touched by human intervention. Simple rural life, which had not been influenced or ruined by the Industrial Revolution and in which man still lived in harmony with nature, was seen as ideal. Parallel to this, childhood was considered a pure period in life characterized by freedom and not distorted by adult norms and conventions. This idea spread after the publication in 1798 of *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and is reflected in much Romantic poetry. A key idea in *Lyrical Ballads* was to speak for the ordinary people in a language which could be understood by everybody. The romantics focused on the individual’s right to imagine and to articulate his emotions and deal with everyday life. In this connection, the task of the poet to express the ideas and feelings experienced by people became important. This can be seen as a reaction to the previous Age of Reason when the general and the rational had played a dominant part.

Novel: Another genre in the romantic period was the novel. Three main categories of the novel can be defined the first of which is the Gothic novel. Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* is gothic novel. Gothic novels dealt with fantastic and gruesome creatures and incidents and often contained supernatural elements. This novel can be interpreted as a parable of man’s interference with nature, a criticism of some people’s trust in the powers of science or it can be seen as a symbol of alienation. The setting of Gothic literature would often be haunted castles among

ruins and graveyards in wild landscapes far away from civilization. We can still see the influence of gothic literature in fiction and films today.

Another type of novel is the novel of manners. An author whose novels of manners have become extremely popular through their adaptation for film and TV and mash-up novels are those written by Jane Austen. She was particularly interested in social hierarchies, human relations and people's treatment of each other.

The Historical Novel

Important novelist, of this kind of novel is Sir Walter Scott, who dealt with another important aspect of romanticism, namely history or the past, as can be seen in *Ivanhoe* from 1819, his novel about knights and the Crusades. From a literary point of view Sir Walter Scott's death in 1832 marks the end of the Romantic Period.

Poetry

The most notable feature of the poetry of the time is the new role of individual thought and personal feeling. Where the main trend of 18th century poetics had been to praise the general, to see the poet as a spokesman of society addressing a cultivated and homogeneous audience and having as his end the conveyance of 'truth', the Romantics found the source of poetry in the particular, unique experience. Blake's marginal comment on Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses* expresses the position with characteristic passion: "To Generalize is to be an Idiot. To Particularize is the alone Distinction of Merit." The poet was seen as an individual distinguished from his fellows by the intensity of his perceptions, taking as his basic subject matter the workings of his own mind. Poetry was regarded as conveying its own truth; sincerity was the criterion by which it was to be judged.

13.4 CHARACTERISTICS OF ROMANTIC AGE

Nature and the Common Man

It was the age of the 'noble savage'. The Romantics had enough of rationalism and their literature reflected a glorification of nature, the common man and the emotions inherent in each of them. The ideals of the Romantic period were to simplify and return to a less complicated way of life which, because it was more 'natural', and was considered to be superior. The heroes of romantic literature didn't have to be royal or "great" people, but the everyday common person who found wisdom in the world around her and chose a lack of sophistication that was thought to be more honest and forthright.

Classical Ideas and Mythological Imagination

As the authors of romantic literature avoided rationalism, they turned to mythological imagination to create their stories. When they turned to

classical ideas of Greek and Roman literature, it was the mystical elements that they drew upon. The myths were the stuff of great stories and those ideals were woven into the literature of the romantic period. Romantic authors were often fascinated with the supernatural and were the signs of the horror genre. Literature of the period attempted to evoke fear.

Heroes and Nationalism

Whereas neoclassicism had demanded that heroes be noble, the heroes of the romantic period were drawn from the common people. They were also distinct in nationality, with literature drawing upon the history and folklore of the country from which the author came. The heroes were often patriots or folk heroes who helped to form a nation and protect it from outside influences.

Romanticism played an essential role in the national awakening of many Central European people lacking their own national states, not least in Poland, which had recently failed to restore its independence when Russia's army crushed the Polish Uprising under Nicholas I. Revival and reinterpretation of ancient myths, customs and traditions by Romantic poets and painters helped to distinguish their indigenous cultures from those of the dominant nations. Patriotism, nationalism, revolution and armed struggle for independence also became popular themes in the arts of this period. Arguably, the most distinguished Romantic poet of this part of Europe was Adam Mickiewicz, who developed an idea that Poland was the Messiah of Nations, predestined to suffer just as Jesus had suffered to save all the people. The Polish self-image as a "Christ among nations" or the martyr of Europe can be traced back to its history. During the periods of foreign occupation, the Catholic Church served as bastion of Poland's national identity and language, and the major promoter of Polish culture. The partitions came to be seen in Poland as a Polish sacrifice for the security for Western civilization. Adam Mickiewicz wrote the patriotic drama *Dziady*, where he depicts Poland as the Christ of Nations. He also wrote "Verily I say unto you, it is not for you to learn civilization from foreigners, but it is you who are to teach them civilization ... You are among the foreigners like the Apostles among the idolaters". In *Books of the Polish Nation and Polish Pilgrimage* Mickiewicz detailed his vision of Poland as a Messiah and a Christ of Nations that would save mankind. *Dziady* is known for various interpretations. The most known ones are the moral aspect of part II, individualist and romantic message of part IV, as well as deeply patriotic, automatic and Christian vision in part III of the poem.

Unusual Settings

Romantic literature didn't limit itself to just rural settings or those of a particular nationality, though that was definitely one of the characteristics. Authors of this school often chose unusual settings from the past or future, settings with magical or mythic elements or even off-

planet. Just as romantic literature was the forerunner of the horror genre, it was also the forerunner of the fantasy and science fiction genres.

Sublime

According to the Romantics, we experience the sublime when we're out in nature. But not just *any* nature—we have to be facing nature at its outstanding, it's most awe-inspiring. Think big mountains, crazy deep valleys, and a huge thunderstorm with lightning striking everywhere. What happens when we are confronted with nature at its grandest is that we are both terrified and uplifted all at once. It's a hard feeling to describe. The sublime was so important to the Romantics because (1) they loved nature and anything having to do with nature, and (2) they believed that the sublime transcended the rational. That is, the feelings of awe and terror evoked by the sublime are beyond words and the emotions that the sublime creates overwhelm rational thought.

Apart from this,

- Emphasis on emotional and imaginative spontaneity was there
- The importance of self-expression and individual feeling. Romantic poetry is one of the heart and the emotions, exploring the 'truth of the imagination' rather than scientific truth. The 'I' voice is central; it is the poet's perceptions and feelings that matter.
- An almost religious response to nature. They were concerned that Nature should not just be seen scientifically but as a living force, either made by a Creator, or as in some way divine, to be neglected at humankind's peril. Some of them were no longer. Shelley was an atheist, and for a while Wordsworth was a pantheist (the belief that god is in everything). Much of their poetry celebrated the beauty of nature, or protested the ugliness of the growing industrialization of the century: the machines, factories, slum conditions, pollution and so on.
- Emphasis on the imagination as a positive and creative faculty
- An interest in 'primitive' forms of art for instance in the work of early poets (bards), in ancient ballads and folksongs. Some of the Romantics turned back to past times to find inspiration, either to the medieval period, or to Greek and Roman mythology.
- An interest in and concern for the outcasts of society: tramps, beggars, obsessive characters and the poor and disregarded are especially evident in Romantic poetry
- An idea of the poet as a visionary figure, with an important role to play as prophet (in both political and religious terms).

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 1

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS.

1. Define Romantic Age.

2. Discuss major features of Romantic Age.

3. Discuss literary context of Romantic Age.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 2

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

1. Romantic age was an imaginative, literary, musical and intellectual movement that originated in Europe towards the end of the century.
2. For, poetry should begin as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", evoking a new but corresponding emotion the poet can then mold into art.
3. At the end of the century manual labour and draught-animal power had come to be replaced by machine-based production.
4. Walter Scott's died in
5. The political context of the beginning of the Romantic Period is the French Revolution in

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 3

CHOOSE THE CORRECT OPTIONS FROM GIVEN BELOW.

1. When were the Lyrical Ballads published?

- (a) 1797
- (b) 1798
- (c) 1800

2. The Lyrical Ballads closes with

- (a) Kubla Khan
- (b) Immortality Ode
- (c) Lines Written above Tin tern Abbey

3. Who wrote the famous Preface to the Lyrical Ballads?

- (a) Coleridge
- (b) Southey
- (c) Wordsworth

4. William Blake's Song of Innocence came out in.

- (a) 1776
- (b) 1789
- (c) 1787

5. Wordsworth's first publication was.

- (a) Descriptive Sketches
- (b) Poetical Sketches
- (c) Lyrical Ballad

13.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have learnt,

- What is Romantic age and its contribution in the English literature,
- Major features and characteristics of romantic age.

13.6 KEY WORDS

- **Intellectual:** relating to the intellect.
- **Medieval:** relating to the Middle Ages, resembling or likened to the Middle Ages, especially in being cruel, uncivilized, or primitive.
- **Aristocratic:** of, belonging to, or typical of the aristocracy.
- **Aesthetic:** concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty.
- **Grim:** very serious or gloomy.
- **Miserable:** wretchedly unhappy or uncomfortable.
- **Folklore:** is the expressive body of culture shared by a particular group of people; it encompasses the traditions common to that culture, subculture or group.
- **Distinct:** recognizably different in nature from something else of a similar type.
- **Patriots:** a person who vigorously supports their country and is prepared to defend it against enemies or detractors.
- **Spontaneity:** the condition of being spontaneous; spontaneous behaviour or action.
- **Tramps:** walk heavily or noisily.
- **Unusual:** not habitually or commonly occurring or done.
- **Genres:** a style or category of art, music, or literature.

13.7 BOOKS SUGGESTED

1. Duncan Wu. *Romanticism: an Anthology*. 3rd edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005;
2. Jerome J. McGann. *The New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
3. Smith, Logan Pearsall (1924) *Four Words: Romantic, Originality, Creative, Genius*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
4. Barzun, Jacques. 2000. *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life, 1500 to the Present*. ISBN 978-0-06-092883-4.

ANSWERS

Check Your Progress- 2

1-18th, 2- William Wordsworth, 3-18th , 4-1832, 5-1789.

Check Your Progress- 3

1-B, 2-C, 3-C, 4-B,5-A