

The Literary Background



The Romantic Period

INTRODUCTION

The Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions of the eighteenth century changed Britain radically. A largely rural society, where people lived in small communities and led relatively simple lives, became predominantly urban and industrialised. The social price for economic progress was high: many people lived and worked in appalling conditions. These profound social changes produced a climate of turbulence and instability in which a strong desire to break with the past emerged.

By the end of the century, many poets and artists had started reacting against the dehumanisation and regimentation of the new urban industrial society. They believed in the importance of the individual and of personal experience.

These artists were called **Romantics**. The word 'romantic' comes from the French word for medieval epic sagas, 'roman'. The term was initially used in the mid-seventeenth century in a derogatory way. It was thought that the characters and settings of the medieval sagas were unrealistic and so the term 'romantic' was used to mean 'exaggerated, unconvincing'. Later, it took on a positive meaning and was used to describe the expression of personal feelings and emotions. Romanticism was a European movement which involved writers, artists and philosophers in Germany, France, Italy and England.

Origins of the word
'Romantic'

Romanticism in Britain

In England, Romanticism found its greatest expression in the poetry of William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, George Gordon Byron Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats. These poets were highly individual and never considered themselves as part of a movement. However, their work had a common quality and shared characteristics which were later defined as 'romantic'.

Imagination had a special role for the Romantics. The poets of the Augustan age saw the artist as an interpreter concerned with showing the beauty of what was already known. Romantics instead viewed the artist as a creator, who used his imagination to explore the unfamiliar and the unseen. The poet was a visionary who, through imagination, found true beauty in the material world that surrounded him, and deeper meanings in the inner worlds created by his mind. Imagination was the special faculty which set the artist apart from his fellow men. Through the power of imagination, the poet could imitate the process of divine creativity.

The Romantic poets considered nature to be morally uplifting – a kind of spiritual experience. They frequently expressed the idea that man had a deep relationship with the natural world. In the new world of industrial squalor the Romantics took refuge and sought consolation and inspiration in nature. They considered the natural world to be a living mirror to the soul and believed that it could be a better teacher than scholarly learning:

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music! on my life,
There's more of wisdom in it.

ROMANTIC POETRY

Imagination

► Visual Link E4

Nature

► Visual Links E2 and E3

► Text E6

Style

The Romantic poets abandoned the accepted conventions for writing that had been established in the first half of the eighteenth century. The Augustans had based their literary style on imitating the balance and symmetry of classical Greek and Latin literature.

Although some Romantic poets (for example Keats and Shelley) adapted the classical form of the *ode** and used elements of Greek mythology in their work, they rejected the idea of imitating classical models as too restrictive of the creative imagination. The Romantics broke free from the restraints of the *heroic couplet** and the conventions of a special poetic diction. They wrote in the simple 'language really used by men' (Wordsworth, the *Lyrical Ballads*); they captured the intense emotion of individual experience in language, which was intended to be closer to everyday speech and more accessible to the general reader.

The poet

The poet was considered to be a supremely individual creator, who gave freedom to his creative spirit. The rise of journalism, the spread of literacy and the emergence of a lucrative book market made artists and writers less dependent on noble patrons. For the first time in the history of English literature, writers could find their own audience in a freer cultural context and truly be, as Wordsworth said, 'a man speaking to men'.

Romantic heroes

The Romantic writer viewed himself as a prophet preaching in the wilderness, a gifted visionary who lived outside respectable society. Not surprisingly, the heroes of many Romantic novels and poems are social outcasts: Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or the many tormented heroes of Byron and Shelley. Unlike the Augustan writer, who looked outwards to society for general truths to communicate to common readers, the Romantic writer looked inwards to his soul and to his imagination to find private truths for special readers.

The cult of childhood Visual Link E3

Another important element in Romanticism was the cult of childhood. The neo-classicists believed that children had savage instincts that needed to be civilised: children were important because, through social training, they could become sophisticated adults who contributed to society. The Romantics, on the contrary, saw the child as pure and uncorrupted. They believed that children were close to God, had powerful creative imaginations and could be 'the father of the Man' (*My Heart Leaps Up*, Wordsworth).

The past

Linked to the cult of childhood was the Romantic nostalgia for the past. Fleeing from the hypocrisies and spiritual emptiness of the Industrial Revolution, the Romantics took refuge in what they considered to be the superior nobility of the past. The Middle Ages, with its stories of knights and damsels in distress, had a special appeal. Old literary forms such as ballads, with their magical atmosphere and haunting settings, became popular. The historical novel was one of the most appreciated forms of fiction of the period.

Criticism

The outstanding literary achievement of the Romantic poets was not always appreciated by their contemporaries. Many writers of the period dismissed their work as insignificant. Although the anti-Romantic campaign continued, notably in the work of Matthew Arnold (► Module F) and T.S. Eliot (► Module G), the Romantic period is regarded by most literary critics as the golden age of English poetry.

Conventionally, the Romantic period is said to have ended in 1832, the year in which Sir Walter Scott died. However, its influence was felt throughout the century and is evident in the twentieth-century works of writers such as W.B. Yeats (► Module G) and D. H. Lawrence (► Module G).

Fra: Fields of Vision 1, E114-116