The Romantic Tradition

The Romantic Movement swept the Western world in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In general, Romanticism was a revolt against science, authority, materialism, and discipline and an affirmation of individuality, imagination, and national heritage. A natural reaction to the strictures of 18th century thought, Romanticism emerged from the same forces that gave rise to the American and French Revolutions and to agitation for political, social, and economic change. In some countries the impact of Romanticism was profound, affecting the very foundations of society. In others, Romanticism pervaded philosophy, music, art, and literature but exerted less dramatic influence on the other facets of national life.

The Romantic Period in English literature covers the years between 1798 and 1832. The liberal, creative Romantic spirit that infused literature, however, did not transform English political, economic, and educational institutions, which remained thoroughly conservative and in many ways more akin to the 18th century than to the 19th. While intellectuals applauded the American and French experiments in democratic government, the ruling classes were alarmed by the specter of political upheaval and the destruction of social barriers. The dichotomy between artistic ideals and official practice existed throughout most of the romantic period, until change finally came as the inevitable result of historical and cultural development. (McDougal 428)

Revolution and Reaction

Toward the end of the 18th century, two revolutions occurred outside England that indirectly threatened the stability of the British political and social system. During the 1770s the American colonies revolted against British rule, eventually winning their independence and forming a government based on the principles of freedom and equality. While the American Revolution divided British public opinion and aroused some awareness of the need for reform, its impact on British society was not nearly as great as that of the French Revolution, which demonstrated that it was possible for a long-standing government to be successfully challenged on its own soil.

The French Revolution began on July 14, 1789, when a group of French citizens stormed the Bastille, a Paris prison for political prisoners. In the weeks that followed, the revolutionaries placed limits on the powers of King Louis XVI, establish a new government, and approved a document called the Declaration of the Rights of Man, affirming the principles of “liberty, equality, and fraternity.” France became a constitutional monarchy.

Opposing Views

From the start, the revolution evoked strong reactions from both liberals and conservatives throughout the rest of Europe. In England, the ruling class felt threatened by the implications of the events in France, while most intellectuals, including several of the most important and influential writers of the Romantic Age, enthusiastically supported the revolution and the democratic ideals on which it was grounded. One ardent supporter of the revolution was Charles James Fox, leader of the Whig party, who declared, “How much the greatest event it is that ever happened in the world! And how much the best!” Poet William Wordsworth also spoke out in support of the revolution…Whig political thinker Edmund Burke (1729 – 1797) who had sympathized with the American Revolution, condemned the events in France. In Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790) he argued that the French, unlike the Americans, were attacking the very fabric of their society with complete disregard for their roots and ancestry. Burke warned that the revolution was bound to grow violent and mourned that “the age of chivalry is gone…and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever.”

The Reign of Terror
Edmund Burke’s views did not win wide acceptance in Britain until his dire predictions began coming true. As royalists, moderates, and radicals jockeyed for power, the French Revolution became more and more chaotic. In 1792, France declared war on Austria, touching off an invasion by Austrian and Prussian troops, whose leaders proclaimed the intention of restoring the French king to full authority. Fuming with patriotic indignation, a radical group called the Jacobins gained control of the French legislative assembly, abolished the monarchy, and declared the nation a republic. Mobs attacked and killed many prisoners – including former aristocrats and priests – and soon French refugees began pouring into England with tales of these bloody “September massacres”. Within weeks the revolutionaries had tried and convicted Louis XVI on a charge of treason. When Louis XVI went to the guillotine early in 1793, a revolutionary leader, Georges Danton, exclaimed, “the kings of Europe would challenge us. We throw them the head of a king!”

Following the execution, revolutionary violence reached its peak, as the Jacobins, under the leadership of Maximilian Robespierre, began what is called the Reign of Terror. Before the terror ended in the summer of 1794, revolutionary authorities had imprisoned thousands of royalists, moderates, and even radicals, sending some 17,000 of them – including Danton and finally Robespierre himself – to the guillotine.

British Reaction

The September massacres and the reign of terror were so shocking that even Britons who had sympathize with the French Revolution now turned against it. Conservative British, already hostile to the revolution, demanded a crackdown on reformers within Britain, whom they denounced as dangerous Jacobins. Adding to British alarm was the success of France’s new “citizen army,” which expelled the Austrian and Prussian invaders and then set out to “liberate” other European nations from despotic rule. British leaders did not want France, or any other nation, to win dominance on the European continent. In 1793, France took the initiative by declaring war on Britain. Thus began a series of wars that would drag on for twenty-two years, creating fear and rigidity within Britain and effectively squelching during that time all hope of reform within British society.

The Tory government led by William Pitt (the Younger) began the reaction by outlawing all talk of parliamentary reform outside the halls of Parliament, banning public meetings, and suspending certain basic rights. Later, Pitt’s government crushed the rebellion in Ireland. Liberal minded Britons had no political outlet for their hopes and dreams. Many turned to literature and art as a way to find in the pristine world of romanticized nature the source of beauty and truth.

The Napoleonic Wars

Britain’s battles against France took a new turn after 1799, when a military leader named Napoleon Bonaparte came to power in Paris. Napoleon had grandiose plans for French military expansion, and he was an able leader. After a brief break in French-British hostilities in 1802-1803, war resumed in earnest. Napoleon, who had declared himself emperor of France, planned an invasion of Britain, but had to abandon the plan after a British fleet under Lord Nelson defeated the French fleet at the Battle of Trafalgar, off Spain, in 1805. Napoleon’s armies fought well against Britain’s European allies, however, and by 1807 they controlled almost all of Europe, as far east as the borders of Russia. Britain ruled the ocean, but Napoleon ruled Europe.

In 1812, Napoleon finally over extended himself by invading Russia. There his armies suffered a series of bloody defeats. At the same time, Napoleon was experiencing reverses in the West. His forces were defeated in the Peninsula War (1808-1814) in Portugal and Spain and, in 1814, British and allied armies closed in on him and forced him to abandon his crown. Napoleon was not finished, however. Exiled to the Mediterranean island of Elba, he plotted a return, and in 1815 he managed to escape to France, assemble an army, and resumed rule for a period known as the Hundred Days. Napoleon’s attempt to regain his former glory ended on the battlefield at Waterloo, Belgium, in 1815, when the Duke of Wellington, British hero of the Peninsular War, led an allied army to a decisive victory.
All over Britain, people celebrated the end of the Napoleonic wars with bonfires and other festivities. Royalists hailed the restoration of monarchical authority throughout Europe, while radicals mourned the failure of the revolutionary ideals of liberty and equality.

Coping with Society’s Problems
Throughout the long wars with France, British government kept a tight lid on domestic dissent. It ignored the problems caused by the industrial revolution—including the overcrowding of factory towns, the unpleasant and unsafe working conditions in the factories, and the long working hours and low pay experienced by the workers—and the problems only got worse.

Rumblings Among the People
Britain’s government claimed to be following a hands off policy, but in fact it sided openly with employers against workers, even helping to crush the workers’ attempts to form unions. Meanwhile, the working class grew steadily larger and more restless. In the factory towns of northern England workers protested the loss of jobs to new machinery in the violent Luddite Riots (1811-1813). In Manchester, mounted soldiers charged a peaceful mass meeting of cotton workers and killed several of them in what came to be known as the Peterloo Massacre (1819). To many, it seemed that British society was splitting into two angry camps—the working classes, who demanded reform, and the ruling classes, who resisted fiercely.

Beginnings of Reform
During this time, Britain had a series of weak and ineffective royal heads. George III, long subject to bouts of insanity, went irretrievably mad in 1811. His eldest son, the scandal-plagued and unpopular George, Prince of Wales, ruled as Regent from 1811 to 1820—the period known as the Regency. Then the old king died and the Regent became George IV. When he died in 1830, his brother took over as William IV—an old and weak, but amiable king, who ruled until 1837.

The weakness of these kings helped to enhance the power of the prime ministers—in theory named by the king, but in practice chosen by the strongest party in Parliament. The Tory leaders who held power during and immediately after the Napoleonic Wars rejected all suggestions of reform. A new generation of Tories emerged in the 1820s, however, and a trickle of reforms began. A law was passed in 1824 permitting Britain’s first labor unions to organize, and in 1829 the Catholic Emancipation Act restored economic and religious freedoms to Roman Catholics.

The trickle grew into a stream of reforms following a Whig victory in the election of 1830. The Reform Bill of 1832 brought sweeping changes to British political life. By extending voting rights to the small but important middle-class (males only), this loss threatened the traditional dominance of the land-owning aristocrats in Parliament. Moreover, in 1833 Parliament passed the first law governing factory safety. That same year, it also abolished slavery.

The Beginnings of Romanticism
Writers of the Romantic Age reacted strongly to the events of their time. They felt stirrings of excitement or repulsion as they contemplated the French Revolution. They saw the dramatic changes being wrought by the Industrial Revolution and longed for the simplicity and purity of the past. They sensed the rumblings of discontent and desperation that could not be silenced, even by the repressive measures of the war years. Those who had applauded the French Revolution, envisioning a new age of democracy and equality in Britain, were left in a state of bitter disappointment. They turned their attention to literary endeavors, creating a romantic style that offered a new perspective on the world—a perspective that focused on nature and ‘the common people.’

New Literary Concerns
Just as the French revolutionaries had at first discarded the customs and procedures that had traditionally governed French society, the Romantic writers abandoned many of the dominant attitudes
and principles of 18th century literature. New literary concerns emerged, many of which had been shaped by the French revolutionary spirit or by the effects of the Industrial Revolution. The romantic writers’ interest in the trials and dreams of common people and their desire for radical change developed out of the democratic idealism that characterized the early part of the French Revolution, while their deep attachment to nature was a response to the consequences of industrialization. These and other characteristics of Romantic literature represent a distinct departure from the concerns associated with 18th-century classicism and rationalism. Because of this dichotomy, the prevailing ideas and attitudes of Romanticism are most easily grasped when viewed in contrast to those of the 18th-century.

It is customary to set the beginning of Britain’s Romantic Age in 1798, the year in which William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge published the *Lyrical Ballads*, establishing the Romantic principles that would dominate British literature for several decades. However, the ideas of Romanticism arose on continental Europe well before the turn-of-the-century. Even in Britain, a handful of poets-most notably Thomas Gray, Robert Burns, and William Blake-had displayed some of the characteristics of Romantic thinking before *Lyrical Ballads* was published.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Though he died before the start of the Romantic Age, Swiss born writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), a leading philosopher of 18th-century France, planted one of the seeds from which Romanticism grew. Rousseau saw society as a force of evil that infringed on personal liberty and human happiness. “Man is born free,” he wrote, “and everywhere he is in chains.” He reasoned that humanity should revert to its natural state, abandoning its stifling social institutions and outworn philosophies and listen instead to nature, instinct, and intuition.

Rousseau prepared the way for political revolution. The Americans who declared their independence in 1776 quoted Rousseau often, and the French revolutionaries of 1789 quoted him even more frequently. Rousseau also prepared the way for a new artistic movement, Romanticism. During the latter part of the 18th century, in the German-speaking areas of Europe, which were not yet a unified nation and often suffered from the repressive policies of powerful Prussia and Austria, a group of nationally-minded writers began incorporating Rousseau’s ideas into major works of poetry, drama, and fiction.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The most influential of this group was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832). In search of inspiration, Goethe turned to the German literature of the Middle Ages, early vernacular works filled with myth in superstition, adventure and passion, not unlike the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*. In these works Goethe found not only a source of pride for a new generation of German writers but also a primitive simplicity much in keeping with Rousseau’s ideas and values. A fascination with medieval times—the same Middle Ages that “enlightened” thinkers had despised-soon became characteristic of the emerging artistic movement. In fact, the movement would later be named the Romantic Age because of its interest in medieval romances—imaginary tales of adventure written in one of the Roman dialects, the early forms of languages derived from Latin.

The Romantic Age in British Poetry

Romanticism was a movement that affected not only literature but all the arts. In music, it produced such brilliant European composers as Germany’s Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) and Austria’s Franz Schubert (1797-1828), but no one of comparable stature in Britain. In painting, it influenced the intensely personal and warmly spontaneous rural landscapes of Britain’s Jon Constable (1776-1837) and J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851). However, it is for literature, and especially for poetry, that Britain’s Romantic Age is most famous.

Wordsworth and Coleridge: A Break with the Past

When William Wordsworth (1770-1850) asked his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) to collaborate with him in the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, he was well aware that their collection of
poetry would make a distinct break with the past. To underscore that break, Wordsworth included in the second (1800) and third (1802) editions of *Lyrical Ballads* a preface explaining the new poetic principles he and Coleridge had employed. That preface defined poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” and explained that poetry “takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” An emphasis on the emotions, then, was central to the new Romantic poetry the two men were creating.

Equally important was subject matter. According to the preface, poetry should deal with “incidents and situations from common life” over which the poet throws a “certain coloring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented... in an unusual way.” Wordsworth’s poems gave “the charm of novelty to the sayings of everyday,” as Coleridge later said. Coleridge, on the other hand, provided the “coloring of imagination,” creating imaginative settings and mysterious sequences of events.

Finally, Wordsworth’s preface spoke about incorporating human passions with “the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.” An emphasis on nature would become another important characteristic of British Romantic verse, and Wordsworth would frequently be described as a “nature poet.”

The Romantic view of nature was quite different from that of most 18th-century literature. Nature was not a force to be tamed and analyzed scientifically; rather, it was a wild, free force that could inspire poets to instinctive spiritual understanding. In “The Tables Turned” Wordsworth advised readers to, “Come forth into the light of things,/Let Nature be your teacher.”

In idealizing unspoiled nature, Wordsworth and the other Romantics were not merrily abandoning the philosophies of classicism and rationalism; they were condemning the Industrial Revolution and its encroachment on the English countryside.

*Lyrical Ballads* met a cool reception at first, but with time it came to be regarded as the cornerstone of Britain’s Romantic Age. Also with time, Wordsworth and Coleridge became respected members of Britain’s literary establishment. Their literary ideas began to seem less radical than they once had, and their political thinking-deeply marked by events in France-grew more conservative.

The Second Generation of Romantic Poets

Wordsworth and Coleridge blazed away for a new generation of British Romantic poets, the so-called “second generation” of poets, which included Byron, Shelley, and Keats. Coming of age during the Napoleonic era and the Regency, these younger poets rebelled even more strongly than Wordsworth and Coleridge against the British conservativism of the time. All three died abroad after tragically short lives, and their viewpoints were those of disillusioned outsiders.

George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824), did not begin life as an outsider. On the contrary, he was part of the British aristocracy—a member of the House of Lords, an intimate of high-born men and women. Although critics responded unfavorably to his early poetry, Byron persisted and finally achieved success when he published *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812). Handsome, egotistical, and aloof, Byron became the darling of elegant society—but not for long. Shocked by Byron’s radical politics and scandalous love affairs, London hostesses began to shun him, and Byron left Britain in 1816, never to return. He died of a fever while fighting with Greek revolutionaries in their struggle to win independence from Turkey.

Because they had abandoned their democratic ideals, Byron wrote scornfully about Wordsworth and Coleridge. However, much of his work reflects their Romantic style. His long narrative poems often feature brooding, passionate, rebellious figures. Such “Byronic” heroes and heroines became a common feature of the literature of the Romantic Age. On the other hand, some of Byron’s work—such as his *Don Juan* (1819-1824) owes more to 18th-century mock epics than it does to Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Byron’s friend Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) was also well-born and politically radical—more consistently radical, in fact, than Byron.

Like Byron, Shelley was shunned for his radical ideas; he left Britain for good in 1818. Unlike Byron, however, Shelley did not attain fame in his own lifetime. Yet he is now remembered for the fervor he brought to lyric poetry in such intensely personal and emotional verses as “To a Skylark” (1821).

Jon Keats (1795-1821), the third great figure in the second generation of Romantic poets, was also a master of lyrical poetry. Unlike Byron and Shelley, Keats was born outside elegant society, the son of a London stable keeper. Keats trained to be a doctor, then abandoned his medical career to pursue his
passion for poetry. He produced many of his greatest poems in a burst of creativity during the first nine months of 1819—works like *The Fall of Hyperion* and “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Unfortunately, however, Keats was already struggling against tuberculosis. Hoping to recuperate in a warmer climate, he traveled to Italy, where he died at the age of twenty-five. By his own request, his epitaph reads: “here lies one whose name was writ in water.”

The Romantic Age in British Prose
Poetry was the dominant literary form during the Romantic Age, but not the only one. Many significant prose works also appeared, mainly in the form of essays and novels. This was a dry period for drama; only two theaters were licensed to produce plays, and they tended to feature popular spectacles rather than serious plays. However, Shelley and other poets did write closet dramas, verse works intended to be read rather than produced on the stage.

The Romantic Essayists
British readers of the Romantic Age could find brilliant literary criticism and topical essays in a variety of new periodicals. The earliest of these periodicals reflected the conservative and neoclassical ideals of an earlier age; they roundly condemned the Romantic poets and their work. In time, however, periodicals that were more sympathetic to the Romantics came into being. The three great essayists of the era were Charles Lamb (1775-1834), William F. Hazlitt (1778-1830) and Thomas de Quincy (1785-1859).

The Romantic Novelists
Unlike the Romantic poets, the novelist of the Romantic Age did not make a sharp break with the past. In fact, the three main types of romantic novels—the Gothic novel, the novel of manners, and the historical romance—all represented elaborations on earlier forms.

The Gothic novel first appeared in the middle of the 18th century. It featured a number of standard ingredients, including brave heroes and heroines, threatening scoundrels, vast eerie castles, and ghosts. The Romantic fascination with mystery and the supernatural made such novels quite popular during the Romantic Age. One of the most successful was *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), written by Shelley’s wife, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851).

The Romantic novel of manners carried on in the tradition of earlier writers by turning a satirical eye on British customs. The most highly regarded writer of novels of manners was Jane Austen (1775-1817), whose works include *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Her incisive portrayals of character are more reflective of the classical sensibility of the 18th century than the Romance notions of the New Age.

Historical romances—imaginative works of fiction built around a real person or historical event—had appeared long before the Romantic Age, but they attain their peak of popularity in the work of Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832). Passionately devoted to his native Scotland, Scott wrote about the days of knights and chivalry. Although he expressed the Scottish nationalism not unlike the nationalism of Germany’s Romantic writers, Scott remained popular with England’s ruling class, who apparently did not view his tales of a bygone age as a threat to the status quo.

The close of Britain’s Romantic Age is usually set in 1832, the year of the passage of the First Reform Bill; however, the ideas and ideals of Romanticism remained a strong influence on many writers for following generations.

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