

What is Romanticism?

Romanticism was (and is) an international movement that swept Western Europe and Russia at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries. It expanded to North America beginning around 1830. As a movement, Romanticism drew its inspiration and energy from various sources:

- the “rage for roots” triggered by linguistic discoveries
- a growing sense that the creative possibilities inherent to the rigid formalism of Enlightenment philosophy and art had been exhausted
- growing fatigue with “rule by the few”
- the resounding successes of the French and American revolutions and such later popular wars for independence as those in Greece, Poland, and Spain.

The relationships among linguistics, nationalism, and Romanticism

Some of the earliest stirrings of the Romantic movement may be traced back to the mid-18th-century interest in linguistics. Sir William Jones (1746-1794) discovered that Sanskrit, Arabic, Greek, and Latin are, more or less, mutually unintelligible dialects descending from an original language. Soon, other linguists discovered that nearly all of the thousands of languages spoken between India and Iceland are linguistically related and that, therefore, an original ancestor language was once spoken by an original ancestor people. This theory came to be known as the “Aryan Hypothesis.”

This linguistic research soon became bound up in various nationalist movements of the 18th and 19th centuries. Europe, once united under the Holy Roman Empire, had been for some centuries devolving into a number of kingdoms and principalities held together more by common culture and vernacular language than by faith. A “rage for roots” spread throughout Europe and, with it, a keen interest in the myths and folklore of each language group’s rural folk. German scholar Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) coined the term “folk-spirit” to describe the essence of a people. Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm (among others) collected popular fairy tales as a means of better defining the folk-spirit of the German people.

Importance to Romanticism and Romantic poetry: Romanticism generally portrayed the products of the uncultivated popular imagination as equal or even superior to those of the educated court poets and composers who had previously monopolized the attentions of scholars and connoisseurs. The basic idea was that the uncultivated were more “natural” and “authentic” than the educated whose style was now considered “artificial” and “affected.”

Romanticism as an aesthetic movement

During much of the 17th and 18th centuries, artists in all media, including literature, looked backward to the Classical Greco-Roman world. Learned allusions, complexity, grandiosity, and adherence to Classical notions of unity, propriety, and harmony were valued over subjectivity, straight-forwardness, and originality. As linguistic theories and nationalist longings began to create interest in the authentic spirit of a people, artists began to search for ways of expressing

this quality—both in their work and in their public personae. In addition, Romantic-era artists began to grow restless under the restrictions placed on creative expression by the vogue for artificiality and rigid formalism of the previous age. A new, more subjective and “organic” notion of aesthetic and philosophical value began to emerge.

Naturalism: The new romantic taste favored (relative) simplicity and naturalness; and these were thought to flow most clearly and abundantly from the “spontaneous” outpourings of untutored rural people—or from the meditative reveries of poets.

Coleridge and Wordsworth’s seminal “[Preface to the Lyrical Ballads](#)” captured the essence of this movement in England—at least as it manifested itself in literature. According to the poets, they chose as the subjects of their best-selling volume of poetry rural folk, sometimes speaking in dialect, and self-consciously made the narrator’s voice and perceptions the orienting center of their poems.

Interest in Shakespeare and Medieval art and literature flourished at this time—an effect of the interest in discovering the true “folk-spirit” of the English people. The Romantics made much (a bit too much) of Shakespeare’s lack of college education, casting him as something of a rustic genius. Most importantly, he was an *English* genius and, thanks to the Romantics high estimation of his importance, his reputation has been preeminent ever since.

Gothicism: The interest in the Medieval art and architecture was, similarly, a celebration of Western European creativity. The fairies, witches, demons, and monsters of the medieval imagination reappear in a new genre, the Gothic novel. Coleridge’s poetry frequently takes a Gothic turn, as, for example, in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*.

Emotionalism: As a further reaction to the strict formality and cool rationality of Enlightenment era art, emotion—particularly Gothic horror, amazement, sexual titillation, as well as the tender sentiments of affection, sorrow, and longing—became the subject of Romantic period art of all kinds. It is this sometimes sentimental feature of Romantic poetry that is most foreign to modern tastes. Its tendency to wallow in sorrow, to emphasize longing, and position its narrators as occupying places of lonely alienation occasionally crosses the line into the mawkish and melodramatic. Romantic poetry and novels are characterized by sentimentality and characters in thrall to powerful emotions and in search of sublime experiences.

Exoticism: A further means by which the Romantics distanced themselves from the emphatic empiricism of the Enlightenment, was to imagine parallel worlds and times through which to contemplate new ways of approaching relationships, religion, and politics. The Romantics often symbolized alternative modes of living and thinking—as well as the authenticity and naturalness of those living in pre-civilized states—with images of foreign places. We see Spain, Italy, and particularly the Near East and northern Africa as the setting for a number of poems and novels of the period.

Emphasis was placed on the exoticism of these places, often through the use of endlessly repeated stereotypes of the presumed decadence and strangeness of Africans and Arabs or the supposedly relaxed, colorful, and sensual living of southern Europeans. But the Romantic age

was also a period in which Europeans traveled more than ever to examine at first hand the far-off lands of which they had read. Several of the major Romantic poets traveled extensively throughout Continental Europe and lived abroad for extended periods.

The Importance of Individualism

The Romantic period was also the period of the industrial revolution, which created a new and very wealthy class of businessmen and entrepreneurs that was much larger than the ancient aristocracies of Europe. This new class tended to see themselves as struggling against aristocratic codes of behavior—and tax codes. The result was to find satisfaction not in being a member of a class but in the struggle to make one's own fortune. Artists, and particularly authors, also became increasingly entrepreneurial at this time, making their fortunes from the creative productions that expressed their unique individual vision and talents.

People came to regard conformist social pressures and traditional canons of behavior as adversarial forces that the individual must conquer in order to discover and express his/her true nature. Finding and expressing oneself came to be regarded as the purpose of a meaningful life—as opposed to the traditional value placed upon submission to the will of God and his appointed kings on earth.

In the literary arts, Romantic heroes differed from traditional literary heroes in that they tended to challenge rather than champion the social and moral values of their time. Most romantic writers saw themselves as heroes—the champions of a cult of the senses and of the heart. Later, Nineteenth-Century intellectuals celebrated the heroic personality, especially in its dedication to the causes of liberty and equality. Nietzsche's notion of the *ubermensch* is one expression of the Romantic-era fascination with the individual's potential for self-creation and self-motivated action in the world.

Arguably, the most notorious exemplar of individualism in the early 19th century was Napoleon Bonaparte. The dramatic way in which he rose to the head of France in the chaotic wake of its bloody revolution, led his army to a series of triumphs in Europe to build a brief but influential Empire, and created new styles, tastes, and even laws with disregard for public opinion fascinated the people of the time. Byron admired Bonaparte's daring and individuality, even if he deplored the excesses of his autocratic rule. Of Napoleon, Byron observes:

XXVI

There sunk the greatest, nor the worst of men,
Whose spirit antithetically mixt
One moment of the mightiest, and again
On little objects with like firmness fixt,
Extreme in all things! hadst thou been betwixt,

Thy throne had still been thine, or never been;
For daring made thy rise as fall: thou seek'st
Even now to re-assume the imperial mien,
And shake again the world, the Thunderer of the scene!

XXXVII

Conqueror and captive of the earth art thou!
She trembles at thee still, and thy wild name
Was ne'er more bruited in men's minds than now
That thou art nothing, save the jest of Fame,
Who woo'd thee once, thy vassal, and became
The flatterer of thy fierceness, till thou wert
A god unto thyself; nor less the same
To the astounded kingdoms all inert,
Who deem'd thee for a time whate'er thou didst assert.

XXXVIII

Oh, more or less than man—in high or low,
Battling with nations, flying from the field;
Now making monarchs' necks thy footstool, now
More than thy meanest soldier taught to yield:
An empire thou couldst crush, command, rebuild,
But govern not thy pettiest passion, nor,
However deeply in men's spirits skill'd,
Look through thine own, nor curb the lust of war,

Nor learn that tempted Fate will leave the loftiest star.

XXXIX

Yet well thy soul hath brook'd the turning tide

With that untaught innate philosophy,

Which, be it wisdom, coldness, or deep pride, Is gall and wormwood to an enemy.

When the whole host of hatred stood hard by,

To watch and mock thee shrinking, thou hast smiled

With a sedate and all-enduring eye; --

When Fortune fled her spoil'd and favourite child,

He stood unbow'd beneath the ills upon him piled.

XL

Sager than in thy fortunes: for in them

Ambition steel'd thee on too far to show

That just habitual scorn, which could condemn

Men and their thoughts; 'twas wise to feel, not so

To wear it ever on thy lip and brow,

And spurn the instruments thou wert to use

Till they were turn'd unto thine overthrow;

'Tis but a worthless world to win or lose;

So hath it proved to thee, and all such lot who choose.

XLI

If, like a tower upon a headlong rock,

Thou hadst been made to stand or fall alone,

Such scorn of man had help'd to brave the shock;
But men's thoughts were the steps which paved thy throne,
Their admiration thy best weapon shone;
The part of Philip's son was thine, not then
(Unless aside thy purple had been thrown)
Like stern Diogenes to mock at men;
For sceptred cynics earth were far too wide a den.

XLII

But quiet to quick bosoms is a hell,
And *there* hath been thy bane; there is a fire
And motion of the soul which will not dwell
In its own narrow being, but aspire
Beyond the fitting medium of desire;
And, but once kindled, quenchless evermore,
Preys upon high adventure, nor can tire
Of aught but rest; a fever at the core,
Fatal to him who bears, to all who ever bore.

—*Childe Harold*, Canto III, ll. 316-78

Key themes of the Romantic Period

Revolution, democracy, and republicanism

The motto of the French Revolution—*Liberté, égalité, fraternité* (liberty, equality, and brotherhood)—sums up an essential political preoccupation of the Romantic Period. While some conservative voices (most notably, Edmund Burke [1729-1797]) defended the ancient prerogatives of hereditary power (aristocracy and monarchy), the decadence and luxury of the European aristocracy had convinced many that the truest basis for political power was the consent of the governed. Writers like William Godwin (1756-1836), Thomas Paine (1737-1809),

and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) were fierce apologists for democratic government and the various social changes necessary to creating an informed and involved citizenry.

A number of Romantic-era writers, caught up in the democratic spirit of the age took up a variety of social causes to free oppressed groups:

- Slavery (Anna Laetitia Barbauld, William Blake, P.B. Shelley)
- Workers Rights (Shelley, Byron, Wat Tyler)
- Women's Rights (Mary Wollstonecraft, P.B. Shelley)

The Sublime and Transcendence

Many artists during the Romantic period became fascinated with the notion of the “sublime,” a state that such Classical authors as Plato (424-327 BCE) and Longinus (213-73 CE) defined as physical, moral, intellectual, metaphysical, aesthetic, spiritual, or artistic “greatness.” This greatness has such great magnified that it cannot be calculated, measured, or imitated. Sublimity is usually associated with the power it has on the perceiver's senses, mind, and imagination. Classical writers tended to imagine that the sublime was a quality of great beauty. Enlightenment philosophers such as Edmund Burke, however, insisted that sublimity and beauty were mutually exclusive qualities. The emphasis here was on the mixture of ecstasy and terror that an encounter with the sublime generates. An encounter with beauty, by contrast, generates feelings of pleasure, not terror or ecstasy. This is why seeing tornado or a tsunami—or standing on the edge of a cliff or having a vision of God—are sublime experiences. They create in us complex feelings that mix terror with ecstasy.

Many artists and intellectuals during this time sought out sublime experiences which, in part, explains the fascination with travel literature, mountain climbing, powerful storms, and other sensational experiences. Wordsworth's long biographical poem, *The Prelude*, recounts, among other things, the poet's ascent of Mount Snowdon and the powerful emotions he experienced during that expedition. Likewise, Shelley's “Mount Blanc” depicts and reflects on the nature of the sublime as revealed in nature's power and indifference to human life. Byron depicts some of his memorable romantic heroes as standing on the edges of precipices, or weathering ocean storms, or experiencing the vastness of a wilderness alone. Each of these situations is based on the author's personal experience of the sublime and his attempt to render it in words on the page.

The power of the imagination, genius, and the source of inspiration

It was a given during the Romantic period that one had a personal genius or personality which constituted the individual's personality. Writers of this time not only sought to transmit this unique “genius” into art, but were also fascinated by the nature of genius. The Latin origin of the word genius involves belief in tutelary spirits. If someone were particularly talented, the ancient Romans would have considered his genius to be a particularly powerful spirit working through that individual. This quasi-spiritual explanation for particularly creative and capable individuals pervades Romantic-era thinking about the human mind and the individual, particularly the “man of genius.”

Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats—among others—wrote about the nature and power of the human imagination and speculated about the source(s) of the artist's inspiration. We can appreciate their fascination. If the imagination is a mental faculty, what distinguishes it from, say, reason or simple perception? Why are some people more imaginative than others? Can the imagination be cultivated and improved—or is it a special gift that one either does or does not possess? And what, exactly, is inspiration and where does it come from? Why is it that one day a gifted artist struggles in his/her medium and other days something great takes shape with seeming ease?

Blake, a deeply religious man, found it easy to conclude that inspiration is a gift of the Holy Spirit. In this, he is little different from the ancient Greek poet Hesiod who claimed to have received literal inspiration from the “nine daughters of Zeus” (the Muses). As a shepherd walking the sacred mountain of Helicon, Hesiod says the Muses “breathed a sacred voice into my mouth.” In other words, the origins of inspiration are so mysterious they can only come from the gods—or God. The literal meaning of the word *inspiration* is “to breathe in.”

Even the self-proclaimed atheist, Shelley, struggles to express the forces that impel an artist's creative work in anything other than supernatural terms. In his *Defence of Poetry*, he reiterates a version of Plato's eternal realm of ideas—a transcendent and eternal realm to which, according to Shelley, the poet has occasional access through inspiration. Using words, which merely symbolize the truths of this eternal realm, the poet does his best to capture the essence of this vision. But where does inspiration come from? In the end, Shelley can only reiterate Coleridge's metaphor that an “invisible wind” blows through the poet's soul, causing it to “sing” much as an aeolian harp sings in a window on a breezy day.

Proto-psychology & extreme mental states

While true psychology would not become a discipline for several decades yet, Romantic-era artists were fascinated by madness, grief, and other extreme emotional and mental states. And while they lacked our modern terminology for discussing the mind and its operations, many were nevertheless quite astute. William Blake, for example, noted that repressing desire can lead to violence and explicitly linked sexual repression to war.

Many Romantic-era writers created characters who were mad or shattered by terrible grief. William Cowper's *The Task* features “Crazy Kate,” a woman driven insane when her fiancé, a sailor, sets out on a voyage but is lost at sea. Wordsworth depicts a woman driven to madness and strange repetitive behaviors by the loss of an infant in his “The Thorn.” And Blake's notion of the Fall boils down to novel idea that the constituent elements of God's personality begin to disintegrate and, ultimately, to go to war with one another.

Nature and the Natural

In general, Romantic-era writers rejected traditional religious belief. Coleridge was ordained a Unitarian minister (a fringe sect in his time) but never took a pulpit. Wordsworth, while he emphasized his identification with the Church of England later in life, styled himself a “worshiper of nature” in his famous poem “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern

Abbey.” In these younger years, Wordsworth seems more persuaded by Transcendentalist and pantheist notions of religion. Blake, while he called himself a Christian, might better be characterized as a mystic. Much like a second-century Gnostic believer, Blake inverted nearly every value and reinterpreted every story in the Bible. Shelley publicly proclaimed himself an atheist, though his writings indicate he was not doctrinaire about his rejection of traditional doctrine. Shelley frequently thought about the possible existence of ghosts and other supernatural entities and phenomena. Lord Byron paid the customary lip-service to the customary pieties but was in no way religious or interested in the spiritual.

But, without a God and eternal truths upon which to rely, how does one claim authority for such values as equality, liberty, and fraternity? Upon what does the poet’s claim of a special status and “true” perception rest if there is nothing above us but sky and nothing operating in this world but indifferent physical processes? One of the more influential answers during the Romantic era was that nature was the dwelling place of God. In this view, God and the natural universe were one and the same. Especially for the young Wordsworth, Nature taught the humble walker in the woods moral truths and the majesty of Mont Blanc taught even Shelley’s atheist heart a kind of humility before the vastness, power, and eternal movement of Nature. We find that nature is frequently used as a metaphor for the sublime: the power and mystery of forces that inspired awe, solace, and self-discovery.

Related to Romanticism’s deification of Nature was its assumption that goodness and naturalness are synonymous, particularly when it comes to human morality and imaginative endeavor. Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was an exceedingly influential thinker during the Romantic era. He held the idea that humans are inherently (i.e. naturally) good, but became corrupted by society. For Rousseau, “natural man” is close to nature and therefore unspoiled by social institutions. This idea appears in all kinds of poetry and novels of the period in the form of hermits living in the woods, wandering bards who sing ravishing songs one day only to move on the next, solitary thinkers wandering the woods, and protagonists who take journeys and make discoveries—all while feeling alone and unable to “mix with the herd.”

Radical Romantic-era politics were exceedingly optimistic about human nature, always assuming that human beings are essentially good and that their vices are the result of want and a poor education. Democratic and republican movements of the time always advocated mass education and fair wages as a means to free the human heart and mind from poverty and ignorance—and the crimes and vices that arise from these evil conditions.