

Romantic innocence

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Romantic Innocence Though Romanticism at large is not concerned with lost innocence only, but a whole array of human emotions, it is certainly an important theme for writers of this literary epoch. Several Romantic poems testify to this, as well as other Romantic or pre-Romantic literary texts. In the England of the 18th century, scientific progress along with industrialism had effected great changes in society.

Europe on the whole was shifting rapidly: economically, socially and politically. In France, Enlightenment writers such as Rousseau had already started questioning whether “ Reason” as such could solve all human problems, and in England too, Swiftian satire, for instance, had shown how insufficient rational thought can be in effecting solutions to upcoming problems, not the least social ones – of which there were to be plenty in the growing urban areas, as Industrialism progressed.

Romanticism in literature was asserting itself towards the end of the century, and someone like William Blake, for instance, in his collection of poems, Songs of Innocence and of Experience, strongly questioned the state of affairs where individuals were fed into the ugly mouths of industrial society – like innocent lambs crammed into the gaping jaws of the tyrannical machinery of economic progress, administered by a state which subscribed to laissez-faire economic politics, cheered by industrialists, bankers, financiers and manufacturers.

The sentiment that much of this was against nature itself was prevalent among many romantic poets and writers. “ In every cry of every Man,/ In every Infant’s cry of fear,/ In every voice: in every ban,/ The mind-forg’d

manacles I hear”, wrote Blake, 1 and his was not the only voice of criticism. Blake juxtaposes, as it were, two areas of human experience (Innocence/Experience) – but with his lament at “lost innocence”, there is also the view that these phases are inevitable in human experience – perhaps complementary.

William Wordsworth, on the other hand, indeed brings forth the view that nature carries a beauty threatened by materialism: The world is too much with us; late and soon, Getting and spending we lay waste our powers: Little we see in Nature that is ours; We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon
2 The poem focuses on the loss of natural values by subscribing to distasteful materialism. The general idea is that we are more at a loss than gain in treating nature – and ourselves – this way. At this Romantic horizon a lost paradise takes shape: an innocent nature disdained by human greed or folly.

This sentiment, obviously, is an ancient one. Where did we lose our step, once out of Eden? Blake would probably say that we never wholly did, whereas Wordsworth might have suffered more from nostalgia? 1 2 Blake, Songs of Experience: “London”, 1791 William Wordsworth, “The World Is Too Much With Us” Sources: Alastair Henry, Catharine Walker Bergstrom: Texts and Events, Studentlitteratur 2008 (2001) William Blake: Songs of Innocence and of Experience William Wordsworth: “The World is Too Much With Us”