

Romanticism- rene (french literature)

[Literature](#), [French Literature](#)



The French Revolution of 1789 brought an upset of the social order in France: monarchy and religion, the two institutions that had retained order and promoted the growth of a great society for decades, were rejected. It is not difficult to see Chateaubriand's *Rene* as an allegory describing post-Revolutionary France and the predicaments that the Revolution brought to French citizens. Chateaubriand's short interlude draws a parallel between *Rene* and France- both have been cut off from previous social order, which provokes a feeling of nostalgia.

In *Rene's* world, like in the new France, there is no connection to the former religious way of life or the traditional government. Even the title of Chateaubriand's work can be seen as a metaphor for a need for return to the past due to the fact that *Rene* means reborn or born again in French. The title provokes contemplation for the renewal of pre-Revolutionary society. Furthermore, Chateaubriand focuses on lack of memory to point to the necessity for the rebirth and restoration of pre-Revolutionary French society. The first time there is a lack of memory in *Rene*, it occurs on an individual basis.

On the very evening of the passing of *Rene's* father the "indifferent passer-by trod over his grave"; "aside from his daughter and son, it was already as though he had never existed" (89). *Rene's* father, a ruin of the past himself, stands as a symbol for pre-Revolutionary society. Just as the ideals and morals of pre-Revolutionary France -which had influenced *Rene* since birth- had died quickly at the start of the Revolution, *Rene's* father, the "creator" of his "thought", had passed away in his arms from a "disease which wrought him to his grave in a short time" (88).

Even though he had just died that evening, Rene's father is barely commemorated or remembered. Chateaubriand inspires horror within readers for how quickly things can be forgotten. Rene's father is just as insignificant to current society as a later referenced monument of a past catastrophe that caused the suffering of many people. But unlike the monument, Rene's father "had taken on a sublime quality in his coffin" (88). Possession of a "sublime quality" implies a reverence for his father, as though he has inspired awe and brought veneration to Rene even after his death.

His father, although just a ruin of the past to the current world, is still able to arouse the mind with a sense of grandeur and serve as "an indication of [pre- Revolutionary societies] immortality" in another world (88). Throughout the entirety of the interlude, Rene's happiness is located in the past. His childhood is the only place where he has ever "found freedom and contentment" (87). Rene describes his childhood in a solely positive manner when he says: "The morning of life is like the morning of day, pure, picturesque, and harmonious" (87).

The "sweetness" of "illusions of [his] childhood and homeland" have never "faded away", and continue to "fill [his] soul with delight" (87). When Rene returns to the woods where he was brought up -the location where he experienced the only happy moments of his life- he discovers that his elder brother has sold his family heritage and the new owner has failed to take care of the estate. Nature has taken over the dwellings of his ancestors, leaving the home of his childhood completely devastated.

Rene tells us that “ everywhere the rooms were neglected”: thistle was growing “ at the foot of the walls”, the steps were “ covered with moss”, and the windows were broken (105). The places that embody Rene’s childhood memories are completely destroyed, resulting in a lack of remembrance for his past- the sole location of his happiness. From the beginning of the story, Rene has been dissatisfied with his life: in the depths of his heart he has a “ strain of sadness” and a void he desires to fill (88).

In his search to fill his void, Rene decides to visit the ruins of past civilizations: First I visited peoples who existed no more. I went and sat among the ruins of Rome and Greece, those countries of virile and brilliant memory (90). The beauty of past art, even if merely ruins, has survived long after the cultural systems that created them were lost. These creations of mankind are effective testaments to the greatness of past societies.

By presenting “ brilliant” ruins of things past, Chateaubriand communicates his nostalgia for pre-Revolutionary society and the eagerness he feels for Frenchmen of his day to come to their senses and remember the superiority of the past. During his travels, ruins of things past force Rene to assess Christianity. When he flees to other countries, ruins are places of Christian martyrdoms and hidden spiritual and sacred events. For instance, while in Italy Rene sees a “ host of masterworks” that he describes as “ vast edifices consecrated to religion by the arts” (91).

These beautiful monuments of Christianity are sacred and serve a purpose. Rene recalls the importance that Christianity once played in society when he refers to “ the mountain peaks of Caledonia” where Christian heroes were once present: The Christian faith, itself a daughter of the lofty mountains,
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had placed crosses over the monuments of Morven heroes... Loving peace even as the divinities of Selma loved war, it now shepherds flocks where Fingal once joined battle and has strewn angels of peace amongst clouds once occupied by murderous phantoms (91).

The sentiment that lies behind these ruins is principally religious and represents a moral effort in the middle of scenes of nature to return to a religious way of life that has been forgotten since the Revolution, when religion “ was undermined, and Christianity attacked as ridiculous in its beliefs, cruel in its methods, and an enemy of culture” (1, Putter). The presence of the Christian faith in past society brought peace and angels to a battleground where people once suffered, served as a protector and guide for the people, and commemorated the dead.

At full length, Chateaubriand uses ruins as a symbol for forgotten suffering and, in doing so, calls upon post-Revolutionary Frenchmen to remember their past: Often in the faint, dream-wafting rays of that planet, I thought I saw the Spirit of Memory sitting pensive by my side. But I grew weary of searching through graveyards... One day, as I was walking in a large city, I passed through a secluded and deserted courtyard behind a palace. There I noticed a statue pointing to a spot made famous by a certain sacrifice... Workmen were lying about indifferently at the foot of the statue or whistled as they hewed out stones.

I asked them what the monument meant; some knew little indeed, while the others were oblivious of the catastrophe it commemorated. Nothing could indicate so vividly the true import of human events and the vanity of our existence (90-91). The stone monument in this account should have a

solidified memory of a massacre and commemorate the suffering of many people. However, unless there are people who know what it represents, then it means nothing and is an empty sign. The indifference to human suffering by these workmen inspires displeasure within readers that brings with it a realization of the importance of the past.

The “ Spirit of Memory” here is “ pensive”, expressing a thoughtfulness for ruins that is marked by sadness. By showing an overall indifference to the past that has entailed so many important events and people, Chateaubriand exposes the anxiety he feels in a world that has forgotten its past and hence will become pointless and insignificant. All the ruins and monuments of things past in the interlude of Rene carry no meaning in current French society and are not respected by its people.

Ruins and monuments are not museums to post-Revolutionary France, just graveyards where a collection of tombs has no meaning and forms empty signs. Rene flagrantly says he grew “ weary of searching through graveyards” (90). These words communicate Chateaubriand’s dissatisfaction with a new fruitless society where a lack of remembrance for the past has brought the “ vanity of human existence” and valueless, immoral, people (90). Chateaubriand’s focus on lack of memory in post-Revolutionary society makes the case that the recent shift in French society destroyed a world that once respected the past and had values.

Just as Rene visits the ruins of brilliant past civilizations, Chateaubriand calls upon the reader to recognize the need for the rebirth and renewal of the great pre-Revolutionary France. Chateaubriand hoped that France might be able to revive its once great past society that held a clear set of values and

morals, and respected its history, ancestors, and religion. In the end of the story, Rene perishes in a massacre. Long after he has passed away, people “still point out a rock where he would go off and sit in the setting sun” (114). Rene has become the first memory of the past that is commemorated and respected.

This rock that Rene once meditated on is a victory of memory. Chateaubriand teaches the reader, and the world, the importance of memory in these last moments of Rene: this is not just a rock that people point to, but also a true monument that tells the story of an important heroic man that current society should always remember. In a sentence, Chateaubriand has created a new memory, a new monument: Rene. By creating a new monument that is a victory of memory in current society, Chateaubriand argues for the rebirth and restoration of pre-Revolutionary France where memory mattered, childhood was happy, and society had order.