

The era of british romanticism essay sample



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The British romantic era starts from the 1700's to the 1800's, Romanticism, a philosophical, literary, artistic and cultural period which initiated as a result prevailing Enlightenment ideals of the day. This romantic period in the history of British poetry was right in the middle of a time when the society was going through tremendous reforms. It is characterized by a shift from the structured, intellectual, reasoned approach of the 1700's to use of the imagination, freedom of thought and expression, and an idealization of nature. The verse of the English Romantic poets is as daunting in its scope and complexity as it is dazzling in its technique and beautiful in its language. Originally romanticism as a movement was also a revolt against aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment and a reaction against the scientific rationalization of nature. Romanticism was a reaction against the order and restraint of classicism and neoclassicism, and a rejection of the rationalism which characterized the Enlightenment. The movement validated strong emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic experience, placing new emphasis on such emotions as apprehension, horror and terror, and awe, especially that which is experienced in confronting the sublimity of untamed nature and its picturesque qualities.

Inspiration for the romantic approach initially came from two great shapers of thought, French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau and German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Originally it was thought that a romantic writer is someone who reinforces his or her own uniqueness through their work. In a preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), by English poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge it has been quoted that romantic poems were a language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that

sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart [1].

Poets such as William Wordsworth were actively engaged in trying to create a new kind of poetry that emphasized intuition over reason and the pastoral over the urban, often eschewing consciously poetic language in an effort to use more colloquial language. Wordsworth himself in the Preface to his and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* defined good poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" though in the same sentence he goes on to clarify this statement by asserting that nonetheless any poem of value must still be composed by a man "possessed of more than usual organic sensibility [who has] also thought long and deeply". The two poets reiterated the importance of feeling and imagination to poetic creation and disclaimed conventional literary forms and subjects. Thus, as romantic literature everywhere developed, imagination was praised over reason, emotions over logic, and intuition over science—making way for a vast body of literature of great sensibility and passion.

This literature emphasized a new flexibility of form adapted to varying content, encouraged the development of complex and fast-moving plots, and allowed mixed genres. An early German influence came in romantic literature from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose 1774 novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* had young men throughout Europe emulating its protagonist, a young artist with a very sensitive and passionate temperament. Madame De Stael introduced this German romantic writing in France in the 1800s, she emphasised on the importance of the medieval and the Christian writing in this form of literature. These attributes replaced the

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on-going era of rationalism and agnosticism which also with itself brought an end to the Age of Reason which in every way contradicted the theories and beliefs of the romance writers. Her open-mindedness aided in the flourishing of a new type of literature.

Victor Marie Hugo was a French poet, novelist, and dramatist of the Romantic Movement. He is considered one of the greatest and best known French writers. In France, Hugo's literary fame comes first from his poetry but also rests upon his novels and his dramatic achievements. Hugo emerged as a true Romantic with the publication in 1827 of his verse drama *Cromwell*. The subject of this play, with its near-contemporary overtones, is that of a national leader risen from the people who seeks to be crowned king. But the play's reputation rested largely on the long, elaborate preface, in which Hugo proposed a doctrine of Romanticism that for all its intellectual moderation was extremely provocative[2]. Hugo was described romanticism as " Liberalism in Literature" and the point he wanted to make through his work and otherwise was that romanticism political implication as well.

Many of the libertarian and abolitionist movements of the late 18th and early 19th centuries were given rise by the romantic philosophy—the desire to be free of convention and tyranny, and the new emphasis on the rights and dignity of the individual. Liberalism first became a distinct political movement during the Age of Enlightenment, when it became popular among philosophers and economists in the Western world. Liberalism rejected the notions, common at the time, of hereditary privilege, state religion, absolute monarchy, and the Divine Right of Kings. The 17th century philosopher John Locke is often credited with founding liberalism as a distinct philosophical

tradition. Locke argued that each man has a natural right to life, liberty and property. [3]

Just as the insistence on rational, formal, and conventional subject matter that had typified neoclassicism was reversed, the authoritarian regimes that had encouraged and sustained neoclassicism in the arts were inevitably subjected to popular revolutions. Political and social causes became dominant themes in romantic poetry and prose throughout the Western world, producing many vital human documents that are still pertinent. The year 1848, in which Europe was wracked by political upheaval, marked the flood tide of romanticism in Italy, Austria, Germany and France.

Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, who for some most typify the romantic poet in their personal lives as well as in their work, wrote against social and political wrongs and in defense of the struggles for liberty in Italy and Greece. The general romantic dissatisfaction with the organization of society was often channeled into specific criticism of urban society.

This feeling of oppression was frequently expressed in poetry—for example, in the work of English visionary William Blake, writing in the poem “Milton” (about 1804-1808) of the “dark Satanic mills” that were beginning to deface the English countryside; or in Wordsworth’s long poem *The Prelude* (1850), which speaks of “... the close and overcrowded haunts/Of cities, where the human heart is sick.”

According to popular belief that romantic poetry is about two people who are in love with each other, the central interest to the Romantic Movement was the concern with nature and natural surroundings. The romantic poets took

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delight in unspoiled scenery and in the innocent life of rural dwellers which is perhaps the first recognizable literary theme in such a work as "The Seasons" (1726-1730), by Scottish poet James Thomson.

It was a formative influence on later English romantic poetry and on the nature tradition represented in English literature, most notably by Wordsworth. Most of the romantic poets were fascinated by the nature, by its untainted beauty and with their work they wanted to showcase that anything as ordinary as a Daffodil can be enchanting, in his poem Wordsworth says " I wandered lonely as a cloud, That floats on high o'er vales and hills, When all at once I saw a crowd, A host, of golden daffodils; Beside the lake, beneath the trees, Fluttering and dancing in the breeze" [4]. In these line it can be clearly seen that the mere sight of a field full of narcissus flowers (Daffodils) has brought the author immense joy in lonely times.

Romanticism was really about bringing forth a change, introducing the challenge of the unseen, it was completely about doing something that was done before, to go beyond the conventional ideas of writing and 'express'. Romanticism was arguably the largest artistic movement of the late 1700s. Its influence was felt across continents and through every artistic discipline into the mid-nineteenth century, and many of its values and beliefs can still be seen in contemporary poetry. Romantic poets cultivated individualism, reverence for the natural world, idealism, physical and emotional passion, and an interest in the mystic and supernatural.

Romantic poetry was often combined with this feeling for rural life is a generalized romantic melancholy, a sense that change is imminent and that

a way of life is being threatened. The melancholic strain later developed as a separate theme, as in "Ode on Melancholy" (1820) by John Keats. In addition of this William Wordsworth also thought that the rustic and humble life is better suited for the essential passions of the heart. He thought that when people lived a simple life their thoughts and emotions were purer and simpler without the hint of greed or discomfort.

In general the romantic poets claimed that poetry should express, in genuine language, experience as filtered through personal emotion and imagination; the truest experience was to be found in nature. The concept of the Sublime strengthened this turn to nature, because in wild countrysides the power of the sublime could be felt most immediately. Wordsworth's romanticism is probably most fully realized in his great autobiographical poem, "The Prelude" (1805-50). In search of sublime moments, romantic poets wrote about the marvelous and supernatural, the exotic, and the medieval. But they also found beauty in the lives of simple rural people and aspects of the everyday world.

In Keats's great odes, intellectual and emotional sensibility merge in language of great power and beauty. Shelley, who combined soaring lyricism with an apocalyptic political vision, sought more extreme effects and occasionally achieved them, as in his great drama *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). His wife, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, wrote the greatest of the Gothic romances, *Frankenstein* (1818).

Of all the poets Shelley is the one who mostly invokes the feeling of dualism. 'Ozymandias' punctures the idea of human ambition and acknowledges the

permanence of passion. 'To a Skylark' is a skeptical that the poet can approach nature in its artistry, but marshals all its lyric force to just do that.

Shelley was a serious intellect with philosophical interests. In "Hymns to Intellectual Beauty" and "Mont Blanc", he is able to incorporate inquiries on the transcendence of truth and the nature of divine into the poetic form. Although his own romantic exploits certainly leave him vulnerable to charges hypocrisy & caddishness, but his poetry evokes a tremulous, elevated sexuality that transcends mere sensuousness. Never has erotic freedom enjoyed such a compelling argument.

Lord Byron was the prototypical romantic hero, the envy and scandal of the age. He has been continually identified with his own characters, particularly the rebellious, irreverent, erotically inclined Don Juan. Byron invested the romantic lyric with a rationalist irony.

Don Juan is the showcase of Byron's forte in full-flower: the polysyllabic, improbable, almost gymnastic rhyme. Over the course of this meandering epic, he touches almost every aspect – psychological, emotional and physical of human love, while making it all look so simple and easy.

Other minor romantic poets include Robert Southey—best-remembered today for his story "Goldilocks and the Three Bears"—Leigh Hunt, Thomas Moore, and Walter Savage Landor.

In the spirit of their new freedom, romantic writers in all cultures expanded their imaginary horizons spatially and chronologically. They turned back to the Middle Ages (5th century to 15th century) for themes and settings and

chose locales as can be seen in the Asian setting of Xanadu evoked by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his unfinished lyric "Kubla Khan."

The trend toward the irrational and the supernatural was an important component of English and German romantic literature. It was reinforced on the one hand by disillusion with 18th-century rationalism and on the other by the rediscovery of a body of folktales and ballads.

The romantic era was also rich in literary criticism and other nonfictional prose. Coleridge proposed an influential theory of literature in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817). William Godwin and his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, wrote ground-breaking books on human, and women's, rights. William Hazlitt, who never forsook political radicalism, wrote brilliant and astute literary criticism. The master of the personal essay was Charles Lamb, whereas Thomas De Quincey was master of the personal confession. The periodicals *Edinburgh Review* and *Blackwood's Magazine*, in which leading writers were published throughout the century, were major forums of controversy, political as well as literary.

William Blake an eccentric genius, he is famous not only for his poems, but for the illuminated plates on which he printed them. An excellent example (the title page to *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*) appears at the right. His poetry is highly visual, and reading only the text of the poems without medium of the illuminated plate is an incomplete experience.

Blake's personal spirituality and his views of theological issues frequently filter into his work, perhaps most famously in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and in *Jerusalem*. His most famous works are likely those in *Songs of*
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Innocence and of Experience. The poems often function in pairs, one from the perspective of childlike “innocence,” the other from the perspective of disillusioned “experience.” He was a rebel, and most of his rebellion was tied up with his concern for humanity above hierarchy and authority.

Yet his ironic satire of the English society can many a times go unnoticed because of the simplicity of his songs. In poems like “Pretty Rose Tree”, “The Garden of Love” and “Ah Sunflower”, Blake takes stable notions as the virtue of sexual fidelity, the value of organized religion, even the very concept of heaven and complicates it. He famously wrote “I must create my own system or be enslaved by another man’s”. In his *Marriage of Heaven & Hell*, *The Four Zoas* and other prophetic books, he advances Feminism, abolitionism and other refusals against the status quo in a grand apocalyptic, and visionary voice.

One might expect that the popular romantic verse of women poets, such as Felicia Dorothea Browne Hemans, celebrated domestic virtues. It is surprising to note that their poems contain pointed social commentary and wide ranging erudition that these women, writing under difficult circumstances, incorporated in their work.

Echoes of the English romantics can be heard in today’s popular music lyrics of the 20th century, including American rock ‘n’ roll, but their real legacy comes in the form of the English-language poets, especially in America, who have profited from them, responded to them, and reacted against them.