

ROMANTICISM

1780s-1830s

“Spirit of the Age”

- A Romantic idea—the notion that an inner force rather than a rational ideal or external guide permeates and motivates individuals and groups.
- Parallels can be found in the other arts of the time in what is called “Romantic exaltation.”
- Friedrich Schlegel called Romanticism: “a progressive universal poetry.”
- The word Romanticism is derived from Rome, evoking a grand world-empire of the classical past, including glories of the imagination and thought of the classical world.
- Romance also evokes national histories and traditions, rural folktales, mystery, magic, and a “transhuman” universality.

“A World Within the World”

- Phrase “a world within the world” is derived from Wilhelm von Humboldt, a linguist.
- Linguists of the time studied the “seemingly universal relationships of human languages and hence of human cultures.”
- Humboldt, by striving for universality, undid his peers in that he learned well over a 100 languages, including exotic ones, such as American Indian languages.
- Humboldt’s goal was to understand and respect the differences among cultures.

Humboldt's Viewpoint

- The language you speak governs all of your perceptions.
- Kant earlier argued that there are no “things in themselves” accessible to our awareness, but only subjective perceptions of things; Humboldt asserted that there aren't even perceptions in themselves, but only the words we give to them.
- Since words vary radically among languages, so do the structures that create meaning.
- Through Humboldt, we see how Romanticism develops into the kind of mystical nationalism that emerged during the French Revolution.
- A country isn't just where you live, but a spiritual essence that grounds your entire being.

Romantic Poet: William Wordsworth

- “All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply” (27).
- “What is a Poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him? He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them” (29).

Overview

- During the Romantic era, the rigid ideas about the structure and purpose of society and the universe were breaking down.
- Emphasis shifted to the importance of the individual's experience in the world and his or her interpretation of that experience.
- The individual's experience mattered rather than the interpretation handed down by the church or tradition.
- Romantic literature emphasizes the dream or inner world of the individual.
- Drug-induced visions were prevalent.
- It turned toward pantheism, the view that God is part of the universe and not separate from it.

Romantic literature

- Literature emphasized the sublime, a thrilling emotional experience that combines awe, magnificence and horror.
- Feeling and emotion were viewed as superior to logic and analysis.
- Poetry was believed to be the highest form of literature.
- Themes include dreams and visions, pantheism, the self (each individual's personality that lies beyond consciousness), and emotion and feeling.
- Romanticism stressed a rejection of rigid forms and a glorification of the potential of the individual.

Historical Context

- The American and French Revolutions spread interest in democracy throughout Europe. However, by 1799, France was ruled by a military dictatorship.
- Despite this, intellectuals were thrilled and inspired by the revolutionaries rising up and demanding their rights.
- The Romantics believed in the worth, potential, and freedom of the individual, and exalted this freedom over the traditional acceptance of social hierarchy and political repression.

Industrial Revolution

- The Industrial Revolution was a period of social and economic change that began in the mid 1700s and lasted until the late 1800s.
- The change was instigated by the invention of various mechanical means of mass producing products for less cost.
- During this time, morality rates declined and the population grew. There were more workers for the factories and a large market for the goods produced.
- Transportation was improved so there were more roads and canals built. City populations swelled and relied on cheaply built housing.
- The first British railway between Stockton and Dalington was built in 1821.

Factories and their influence

- Factories, which were often unsafe, hired women and children, as well as men. Housing was unsafe and unsanitary. Factories polluted both air and water, belching coal smoke into the air and releasing dyes from garments into rivers.
- Factory work was repetitive and dehumanizing.
- Romantic writers were aware of the contrast between the stressful, contaminated life of the city worker and the pure, peaceful, natural life of the country laborer.
- Writers both applauded advances in science, and condemned the mills that, fueled by the greed of industrialists, exploited women and children.

Religious Influences

- The Church of England was the official religious body during the Romantic period.
- Many people felt it lost touch with the population, having churches run by parsons who never actually visited them.
- The growing urban population often was overlooked by the church.
- Many Romantic writers felt the established church was hypocritical.
- The Methodist church had the greatest impact on the Romantics. Methodists believed that humans were fallen sinners seeking redemption. They also believed in emotional conversion rather than intellectual contemplation. Their joy at Christ's gift of salvation fit the Romantic worldview.