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## **The Historical Development of Romanticism**

**Literature / Second Year**

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**2023/2024**

## **Introduction:**

It should be noted that literary movements categorise certain dominant literary schools whose members, during certain periods of time, share and favour certain philosophical concepts, themes, or aesthetic qualities. To have a broad conception of romanticism, to understand how and why it came into being, we first need to relate it to previous literary movements. Romanticism appeared as a reaction against the literary and philosophical beliefs of Neoclassicism, which lasted from 1660 until 1798. The proponents of Neoclassicism argued that writers or poets should imitate the classical texts of Ancient Greece and Rome following their aesthetic qualities and ideals. They also supported the contention that the individual was born to be part of his social fabric, devoid of any particular traits or styles. Society constructed the individual's identity and behaviour by dictating the social accepted norms or standards that ensured the continuity and stability of society, not the individual. The Neoclassicists pointed out that human beings are flawed and need to be controlled by decorum and reason. They claimed that art should have no purpose other than to entertain and educate people. This function could guarantee immunity against chaos, impoliteness and social conflicts.

Scholars suggest that "romanticism" as a term itself is relatively immune to narrow definitions. In the Middle Ages, the word "romantic" meant those vernacular languages which were derived from Latin, the language of learning and education at that time. Additionally, "roman" denoted "courtly romance", i.e. an imaginative work of fiction. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in France and Britain, it carried pejorative connotations such as "fanciful, bizarre, exaggerated, chimerical" (Cuddon 768). In France, however, it had positive connotations such as "sentimental", "tender", "gentle" "sad". From then on, the word "romance" acquired significance worldwide, especially in literary movements.

## **The Forerunners of the Romantic Movement:**

### **1) Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805)**

The German poet Friedrich Schlegel was pointed at as the first person who had brought the term “romanticism” to literary contexts, defining it as "literature depicting emotional matter in an imaginative form". He considered imagination to be superior to reason. He emphasised its importance of personal and subjective experiences in shaping new literary forms and styles.

### **2) Kant's Book the *Critique of Judgment* (1790)**

For Kant, art is a matter of pleasure. It is the embodiment of the individual's experiences and dreams. Here, we understand that Kant favours “aesthetic genius” over the “scientific mind”. In other words, art is a reliable means of revealing absolute truth; where science stops, art begins. Thus, art is the expression of the “inexpressible”. It is a bridge between the metaphysical and physical worlds. It is a journey to worlds of higher ideals and experiences. Kant also believes that when human beings discover absolute truth, individuals will enforce unity and order. He also presents the idea of the **sublime**, which is an intense mixed feeling of fear and beauty that will later be used creatively by the Romantics in their poetry.

## **II. Romanticism**

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in Britain, the term “romantic” explored other dimensions, from its focus on sentiments and sensibilities to passionate devotion to nature and its beauty accompanied by glorification of the individual over society. It attempted to correct Neoclassicists' principles and to propose alternative hypotheses and ideas regarding human nature. Romanticism began in 1798 with the publication of a collection of poems, *Lyrical Ballads*, written by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and

ended in 1850, with Wordsworth's death. One should not be oblivious to the fact that the emergence of the Romanticist movement coincided with remarkable developments such as the French revolution, political upheavals, the industrial revolution, the Napoleonic wars, and the questioning of the authority of the Church. All these changes had led to a greater awareness of the significance of individual freedom over social rules and orders imposed by science, tradition, or the Church.

The Romantics, disillusioned with wars and unpleasant realities, tried to create imaginative, ideal worlds that inspired reflection on inner reality and dreams of people. Tired of the Church's lies and manipulation, they turned to the doctrines of **pantheism**, which is the belief that regarded the universe as a manifestation or extension of God, or that God is in unity with His creations rather than separate from it. This unity was manifested in literature in the elevated forms, language and styles of poetry rather than in novels that had a lower aesthetic value. This period was also characterised by women novelists who represented the emancipated spirit of the Romantic Movement. In the era of Neoclassicism, women had no intellectual achievements or participation in society. Thus, they were seen as a threat to the then male-dominated culture. The period witnessed greatest poets and novelists such as Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Sir Walter Scott, William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats.

### **III. The Primacy of Aesthetics:**

Romanticism devoted meticulous attention to aesthetic values, ideals and appreciation of art. It regarded art as an expression of one's longing for the beautiful, which the self aspires to see, taste, experience, or read. **Aesthetics** is "a branch of philosophy that explores the nature of art, beauty, and taste, with the creation and

appreciation of beauty”. Consequently, the main purpose of art is not action, but abstraction and contemplation:

- ✓ Art becomes a source of truth.
- ✓ Art plays a great role in healing the human soul: unifying humans with nature.
- ✓ The exaltation of imagination faculties or senses.
- ✓ The unity of reason with feelings in appreciating the beautiful.

In his poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, John Keats comments on the relationship between beauty and truth:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

In their *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge and Wordsworth conclude that truth lies solely in poetry and that man dies while poetry lives forever.

“Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge—it is as immortal as the heart of man”

## **Conclusion**

We have seen an overview of the philosophical and literary contexts that led to the emergence of Romanticism, which was seen by critics as a reaction to the values and beliefs of the Neoclassicists who had given reason, society and science central importance over the experience and freedom of the individual. We also explored the Romantics’ key concerns and how they reacted to the recent changes and developments of their era. Furthermore, we have expanded on the main subject and focus of aesthetics,

revealing that it is a branch of philosophy that specialises in setting the accepted standards of beautiful art.

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