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The Characteristics of Romanticism

Literature / Second Year

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Introduction:

In the previous topic, “The Historical Development of Romanticism”, we explored the literary and philosophical contexts that had given rise to Romanticism. We demonstrated how Neoclassicism concentrated on rationality and science as a means of disclosing absolute truth, turning full attention to society's interests over the individual's. We also explained how the Romantics suffered spiritual and physical anguish caused by wars and revolutions, which created an urgent desire to transcend reality for something more imaginative, beautiful and soothing.

One may feel tempted to list some of the main characteristics of Romanticism so that we can arrive at a fundamental understanding of the application of their principles to poetry and fiction. These principles are:

deepened appreciation of the beauties of nature; a general exaltation of emotion over reason and of the senses over intellect; a turning in upon the self and a heightened examination of human personality and its moods and mental potentialities; a preoccupation with the genius, the hero, and the exceptional figure in general, and a focus on his passions and inner struggles; a new view of the artist as a supremely individual creator, whose creative spirit is more important than strict adherence to formal rules and traditional procedures; an emphasis upon imagination as a gateway to transcendent experience and spiritual truth; an obsessive interest in folk culture, national and ethnic cultural origins, and the medieval era; and a predilection for the exotic, the remote, the mysterious, the weird, the occult, the monstrous, the diseased, and even the satanic¹

The aforementioned features of romanticism emphasise that nature is essential to the individual, whose desire for nature is comparable to a fish's need for water.

¹ **Romanticism.** "Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011.

Correspondingly, the literary text becomes a clear reflection of this harmonious relationship, which is transformed into artistic innovations in style and form. The Romantics enthusiastically embrace the idea of the “genius”, which means that the poet inherently has some powers beyond the mind’s capacity to explain. United with nature, he or she rises above physical worlds and objects towards utopian visions and ideas. It is obvious that the Romantics dislike formal “rules and traditional procedures” because “imagination” requires that the individual be free and passionate. This should reflect their focus on the importance of spontaneity and freedom of speech, thought and action. As a result, they were eager to embrace new and eccentric ideas and things. There are other features that we should mention below, too:

- ✓ Nature is seen as a refuge from the artificiality of civilisation.
- ✓ The Romantics try to create unity between nature and the world of the spirit.
- ✓ Nature is viewed as a spiritual and healing force.
- ✓ Nature is “organic” (that is, it lives, grows, feels, breathes, etc.), unlike the Neoclassicists who view nature as a machine, mechanical and predictable.
- ✓ The poem is also “organic”, which means it develops from within until it reaches an “organic unity” and a “perfect form”.
- ✓ They adopt the lyric form of poetry, which fits the expression of intense feelings.
- ✓ Rhyme, metre and alliteration restrict the poet’s creativity and spontaneity.
- ✓ The poem should be open-ended, showing that life is characterised by “incompleteness” or is a “fragment” that mirrors the mystery and unknowability of the universe.
- ✓ The Romantics prefer symbolism and myth to allegory because, while allegory conveys one trait or meaning, symbolism and myth produce various meanings.
- ✓ By using symbols and myth, they concentrate on the “inexpressible” or the “infinite”.
- ✓ Art or poetry mirrors and lightens the poets’ inner world or self.
- ✓ The poet is a hero who undergoes an inner journey of self-development and – exploration.

- ✓ Romantics see themselves as outcasts from society.
- ✓ They reject all absolute systems (rules, law, etc.) and adopt personalised ones.
- ✓ Romantic poetry is characterised by simplicity and innocence.
- ✓ Romantics are obsessed with the exotic, supernatural and uncivilised, as opposed to logic and reason.
- ✓ They glorify the past, particularly the Medieval period.
- ✓ Writing fiction or poetry reflects romantic writer's addiction to opium that provides a journey of imagination into extreme feelings and experiences.
- ✓ Romantics write in a simple style and focus on humble, rustic themes.

We can divide the Romantics into two generations. The first emphasise the relationship between **nature and the self**. It includes:

William Blake (1757-1827)

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

The second, however, are interested in the relationship between **art and life**. It includes:

George Byron (1788-1824)

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

John Keats (1795-1821)

A comparison between Neoclassicism and Romanticism:

| | Enlightenment/Neo-Classicism | Romanticism |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| literary forms | elevated, proper language, artifice; | innovation and originality "primitive"; folk & fairy tales. romance. common language; every day experience; humble, rural; fanciful, picturesque, rugged |
| literary mode | satiric mode; reason provides knowledge; talk about ideas | lyric mode: self-expression feelings provide knowledge. Poetry takes its origin from emotion recalled in tranquility" |

| | | |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| Reality | empirical, physical, mathematical | long ago, far away, transcendent, supernatural; internal |
| aesthetics/nature | order: measured, compressed, controlled, balanced | organic, dynamic, audacious, expansive; combine contraries: grotesque, sublime |
| Plot | driven by ideas, events, reason | driven by character, emotions, passion, tragic endings |
| Characters | universal; everyman; puppets | unique, sacred individual; outcasts, rebels, nonconformists, Satanic hero-villain, mad scientist, Great Outlaw |
| authority, wisdom | age & experience; located in society | youth & innocence; located in the individual |
| Society | order & authority inherently good; should protect man | inherently oppressive to man alienation |
| ideal man | The writers brings intelligence and wit to the service of mankind One Truth: intellectual | - poet brings nature's miracles to our attention, puts us in touch with joy -Many truths of daily experience |
| man in nature | brutish | innately good; noble savage |
| limits | man should be satisfied within his limitations; work is noble | no limits, dissatisfaction, adventure, leisure: "painful feeling of incomplete destiny" |

(<https://www.coursehero.com/file/13103356/Enlightenment-and-Romanticism/>)

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