

Background

Romanticism is the name given to a dominant movement in literature and the other arts – particularly music and painting – in the the period from the 1770s to the mid-nineteenth century:

- It is regarded as having transformed artistic styles and practices
- Like many other terms applied to movements in the arts, the word covers a wide and varied range of artists and practices
- It is a retrospective term, applied by later literary, art and musical historians. None of the artists we refer to as Romantics would have so described themselves
- It was a European phenomenon, particularly powerful in Britain, France and Germany, but also affecting countries such as Italy, Spain and Poland. There was also, to some extent, an American version of the movement.

Reaction to earlier age

Like many other literary movements, it developed in reaction to the dominant style of the preceding period:

- The eighteenth century is often described by literary historians as the Augustan Age because it sought to emulate the culture of the reign of the Roman Emperor Augustus (27 BCE – 14 CE)
- Classical standards of order, harmony, proportion and objectivity were preferred – the period saw a revival of interest in classical architecture, for instance
- In literature, Greek and Roman authors were taken as models and many eighteenth century writers either translated or produced imitations of poetry in classical forms
- In its early years, Romanticism was associated with radical and revolutionary political ideologies, again in reaction against the generally conservative mood of European society.

Central features of Romanticism include:

- An emphasis on emotional and imaginative spontaneity
- **The importance of self-expression and individual feeling.** Romantic poetry is one of the heart and the emotions, exploring the 'truth of the imagination' rather than scientific truth. The 'I' voice is central; it is the poet's perceptions and feelings that matter.
- An almost religious response to nature. They were concerned that Nature should not just be seen scientifically but as a living force, either made by a Creator, or as in some way divine, to be neglected at humankind's peril. Some of them were no longer Christian in their beliefs. Shelley was an atheist, and for a while Wordsworth was apatheist (the belief that god is in everything). Much of their poetry celebrated the beauty of nature, or protested the ugliness of the growing industrialization of the century: the machines, factories, slum conditions, pollution and so on.

- A capacity for wonder and consequently a reverence for the freshness and innocence of the vision of childhood. See *The world of the Romantics: Attitudes to childhood*
- Emphasis on the imagination as a positive and creative faculty
- An interest in 'primitive' forms of art – for instance in the work of early poets (bards), in ancient ballads and folksongs. Some of the Romantics turned back to past times to find inspiration, either to the medieval period, or to Greek and Roman mythology.
- An interest in and concern for the outcasts of society: tramps, beggars, obsessive characters and the poor and disregarded are especially evident in Romantic poetry
- An idea of the poet as a visionary figure, with an important role to play as prophet (in both political and religious terms).

Who were the Romantics?

Some authors have been regarded as pre-Romantic:

William Blake (1757-1827) a visionary poet who was also an artist and engraver, with a particular interest in childhood and a strong hatred of mechanical reason and industrialization;

Robert Burns (1759-1796) who worked as a ploughman and farm labourer but who had received a good education and was interested in early Scots ballads and folk-song;

Walter Scott (1771-1832), another Scot, who developed his interest in old tales of the Border and early European poetry into a career as poet and novelist.

The **first generation of Romantics** is also known as the Lake Poets because of their attachment to the Lake District in the north-west of England:

- William Wordsworth (1770-1850) who came from the Lake District and was the leading poet of the group, whose work was especially associated with the centrality of the self and the love of nature;
- Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) was Wordsworth's closest colleague and collaborator, a powerful intellectual whose work was often influenced by contemporary ideas about science and philosophy;
- Robert Southey (1774-1843), a prolific writer of poetry and prose who settled in the Lake District and became Poet Laureate in 1813; his work was later mocked by Byron;
- Charles Lamb (1775-1834) was a poet but is best-known for his essays and literary criticism; a Londoner, he was especially close to Coleridge;
- Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859) the youngest member of the group, best known as an essayist and critic, who wrote a series of memories of the Lake Poets.

The **second generation** of Romantic poets included:

- George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824);
- Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) was one of the leading poets;
- John Keats (1795-1821) was a London poet, especially known for his odes and sonnets and for his letters, which contain many reflections on poetry and the work of the imagination.

The poets named so far are those who, for many years, dominated the Romantic canon – that group of writers whose works were most commonly republished, read, anthologized, written about and taught in schools, colleges and universities.

More recently, however, a revised Romantic canon has begun to emerge, which lays more emphasis on women, working-class and politically radical writers of the period:

Work by these writers can be found in two anthologies, both with useful introductions discussing the justification for extending the canon in this way:

Duncan Wu. *Romanticism: an Anthology*. 3rd edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005;

Jerome J. McGann. *The New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.