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Romanticism

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1 Approaching Romanticism

- What are the significant social, political and cultural events and developments of the period from approximately 1750 to 1850?
- What historical information and insights may be helpful in coming to and developing a thorough understanding of literature, particularly Romantic texts, written during this period?
- What possible meanings are there for the term 'Romantic' in the historical context?
- What is the place of the Romantic, in any of its possible senses, in the modern world?

Tensions and possible definitions

The terms 'Romanticism' or 'Romantic' are used frequently in discussion or writing about the arts and their cultural context over the past 200 years – an assertion that can easily be verified through even a cursory glance at relevant books or web-sites. However this widespread use of the term can be misleading, and beguiling in its apparent simplicity. For behind the commonly understood notion of what Romanticism actually is – what it stands for in artistic terms – lie a number of tensions, controversies, confusions and contradictions. As with so much else, especially when dealing with literary criticism in cultural contexts, the deeper one goes the less certain any meaning seems. It may well be that an important part of whatever Romanticism turns out to be is the suggestion that we should be able to live with, and even creatively celebrate, this uncertainty. Nevertheless, there is also a need to find some sort of common ground and clarity in understanding Romanticism, without which it would become to all intents and purposes meaningless. It is the underlying purpose of this book to try to establish this common ground, whilst simultaneously acknowledging diversity of meaning, interpretation and creative manifestation.

Margaret Drabble's definition of Romanticism has already been quoted in the Introduction; the emphasis is on emotion, imagination, individuality and a certain sense of opposition to what had gone before – namely, the **Enlightenment** of the late 17th and 18th centuries with its espousal of reason as the key to all understanding. Another opening quotation, from John Beer, stresses creativity; the third, by Marilyn Gaull, gives a sense of reaction against **Classicism**. Already it should be clear that there is some common ground here. One problem, however, is

that none of these terms can be pinned down by a simple definition, because they are all subject partly to culturally formed value systems, and partly to the slipperiness of language itself.

Take the word 'imagination': does it imply a positive, creatively liberating force without which nothing could be achieved by human beings; or does it refer to a possibly dangerous escapist position, refusing to confront reality? Perhaps there are elements of both in the semantic field – the range of feasible meanings, connotations and associations – of the word, and the tension between the two opposing views gives rise to interesting creative possibilities at the heart of whatever Romanticism may be. Again, it is the exploration of such areas, rather than their pinning down, that is at the heart of understanding, and the sense of context is the map needed for this exploration.

▶ What associations does the word 'imagination' have in your mind? What would your own definition include?

The birth of Romanticism

The features of the Romantic landscape to be explored are many and varied, changing over time and in appearance depending on the vantage point. The use of the term 'Romantic' is in itself significant, and has been understood differently at different times. In fact, it only gained common currency towards the end of the period studied here, and seems to have emanated from German origins – an interesting pointer to the international, or at least European, scope of the development of Romanticism. In Britain in the second half of the 18th century, there had been references to 'romances', a form somewhere between a long narrative poem or ballad and a folk tale. These romances – frequently French in origin, then translated – often featured chivalrous deeds in past ages. Clearly, there is a semantic link between the terms 'romance' and 'Romanticism', but as has happened so often in the history of words, the term 'romance' was originally used disparagingly. In 1751, for example, in a review of Smollet's *Peregrine Pickle*, John Cleland belittled

> … romances and novels which turn upon characters out of nature, monsters of perfection, feats of chivalry, fairy enchantments, and the whole train of the marvellously absurd [which] transport the reader unprofitably into the clouds.

A few years later, in 1755, Dr. Johnson (1709–1784) decried the 'Romantick' as 'wild, … improbable; false, … fanciful'. Later in the century, however, when the term had become more widely used, the 'romance' was seen more positively – especially in the context of the taste for all things gothic. The **gothic** author Clara

Reeve (1729–1807), for instance, in her appropriately titled *The Progress of Romance* (1785) praised the form as 'an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things'. The birth of what came to be called Romanticism occurred in the latter part of the 18th century, as popular and critical taste began to endorse the characteristics of the romance, and to transfer some of these characteristics – particularly the fascination with the imaginatively exotic and with extremes of emotion – to other art forms. The result, as the philosopher Isaiah Berlin has noted, was 'a shift of consciousness [that] cracked the backbone of European thought'.

National and international perspectives

So the term 'Romanticism' gradually acquired its meaning, simultaneously accruing new connotations and associations – as do all new words entering the flow of a living language. One important association was the sense of the Romantic in opposition to the order and formal symmetry of what was called the Classical, or **Neo-Classical** (to suggest a recovery of ancient Greek and Roman cultures), with its strong emphasis on civilised good order. The Classical aesthetic – or way of conceiving and viewing art – had itself derived from Greek and Roman models. As early as 1774 the literary historian Thomas Wharton noted the distinction in his *History of English Poetry* (1774–1781):

> That peculiar and arbitrary species of Fiction which we commonly call Romantic, was entirely unknown to the writers of Greece and Rome. … [These fictions] formed the groundwork of that species of fabulous narrative called romance.

Elsewhere, Wharton mentions, in the same context, poets such as Edmund Spenser (1552–1599) and English mythical heroes like King Arthur. The Englishness of all this, as noted in the title of Wharton's book, was no accident: in a sense, it indicated a growing national need to move away from Classical models in favour of something distinctively English – or, increasingly, British. In this there was a vivid reflection of what was happening in Germany, which was then not a single nation but a collection of separate states, and where there was a fast developing nationalist movement. There was also cross-fertilisation of ideas between intellectuals and artists in Britain and Germany, given sharp focus through the influence of radical and revolutionary ideas inspired by the French Revolution in 1789, and through the later wars against Napoleonic France.

A series of lectures given in Berlin between 1801 and 1804 by the German philosopher and critic, August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845), is widely regarded as one of the first self-consciously defining moments for Romanticism. Meanwhile, Schlegel's younger brother Friedrich (1772–1829) was applying ideas about the

Romantic to modern poetry, asserting, for example, that 'Romantic poetry is a progressive universal poetry'. Certainly, there are some powerful insights into the nature of the arts at the beginning of the 19th century, many of which found ready followers and disseminators in Britain. Of these, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) was the most influential (although he was not always too fastidious about naming his sources). The significance of August Schlegel's lectures makes them worth quoting in some detail:

> The whole play of vital motion hinges on harmony and contrast. Why should this phenomenon not also recur on a grander scale in the history of mankind? Perhaps in this notion the true key could be found to the ancient and modern history of poetry and the fine arts. Those who have accepted this have invented for the particular spirit of modern art, in contrast to ancient and classical, the name 'romantic'. The term is certainly not inappropriate. The word is derived from romance …
>
> … the poetry of the ancients was the poetry of possession, ours is that of longing; the former is firmly rooted in the soil of the present, the latter hovers between recollection and yearning. … Among the moderns feeling has become altogether more intense, imagination more ethereal, thought more contemplative.

There are many insights and claims here, and the themes will be revisited throughout this book. Worth noting, especially, is the sense of newness – 'the moderns' – and the liberating quality this newness inspires. This has implications for the study of Romanticism generally: Romantic texts cannot go on being 'new' indefinitely. However, the *study* of Romantic artefacts may be constantly renewed, and as a result interpretations will be modified, and creative engagement may be perpetually refreshed. This indeed is the spirit of Romanticism: if it means anything, it must constantly re-invent, rediscover and re-assert itself. Another German commentator, and a contemporary of the Schlegel brothers, Friedrich Hardenberg (1772–1801; known as 'Novalis') emphasised this quality: 'The world must be romanticised. So its original meaning will again be found. To romanticise is nothing other than an exponential heightening.'

The evidence just quoted may suggest that contemporaries were aware of something Romantic in the air. However, it would be a mistake to think of Romanticism as anything like a coherent movement or philosophy. With hindsight, of course, it is possible to select historical evidence to justify a particular point of view, but this can be misleading. As Marilyn Butler, a modern critic and historian of Romanticism, maintains, 'Romanticism, in the full rich sense in which

we now know it, is a posthumous movement; something different was experienced at the time.' (from *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, 1981). In other words, developing the landscape metaphor touched on above, those people closely involved at the time of the Romantic revolution were generally caught up in their own localities and paths and didn't notice any larger topographical change, anything bigger. Perhaps it is only when the passage of time allows some distance that the contours of a new landscape, mapped in more detail, become discernible. Nor does the uncertainty end here. Another modern commentator, Hugh Honour, suggests:

> The word Romanticism has come to be used in a bewildering variety of ways, as a term of abuse or praise, as a chronological, aesthetic or psychological category, to describe erotic emotions or purely cerebral processes. As none of these forms of usage is indefensible, and all may be traced back to the early Nineteenth Century, those who have attempted to establish a precise definition have often given up in despair.
>
> (from *Romanticism*, 1991)

The point here, however, lies in knowing what to look for: precision is likely to be elusive, but the very diversity of Romanticism does offer potentially liberating possibilities in its exploration. In the end, moreover, Romanticism does seem to embody certain key characteristics; and as a historical phenomenon, as William Vaughan puts it, '… whatever else is said about the Romantic movement, no one can deny that it really did happen' (from *Romantic Art*, 1994). So, what are these key characteristics?

▶ Look carefully at what Marilyn Butler and Hugh Honour have to say about Romanticism. Do they support or contradict each other?

Key characteristics of Romanticism

The list below is intended as a guiding summary. The various themes and characteristics it comprises make sense only within the context of further exploratory study – partly using this book, but also ranging further and wider beyond its boundaries. Neither is the list limited only to Romantic literature, but is intended to apply loosely to all art forms. There is, further, a great deal of overlap, in that some points refer strongly to certain individuals within the broad area of Romanticism and not to others. For the purposes of this list the past tense has been used, suggesting the historical period most closely associated with Romanticism. However, many of the attitudes and ideas here could easily be held by people today, who have been either consciously or unconsciously influenced by Romanticism.

- Hitherto unknown levels of importance and prestige tended to attach to individuals and their particular creative talents. Frequently, this was in an iconoclastic sense: in other words, departing from, and sometimes seeking to dismantle altogether, the traditional conventions in the appropriate genre, or type of writing.
- Following from this point, subjectivity (a strongly personal viewpoint, often in a visionary sense) was valued highly; sometimes this was at the expense of the quest for scientific, rationally ascertained objectivity (or what is demonstrably true in the 'real' world).
- The form and meaning of this subjective experience often aspired to a spiritual, sometimes mystical, significance, expressed also in quasi-religious symbolic language. As such, there was a real, or perceived, threat to established religion and its values.
- At a time when nature was just beginning to be threatened by the gathering forces of urbanisation and industrialisation, it acquired greater value – especially in its grander, wilder aspects. For some, veneration of nature was akin to a religious experience.
- Conventional and time-honoured codes of morality were increasingly questioned, especially by the more radical Romantics, in favour of more individualistic, and personally liberating, ethical codes.
- By extension, the existing social order was often found wanting in its embodiment of traditional value systems. Romantics could be fiercely individualistic on the one hand, and radically socialist on the other. Not infrequently, there was the possibility of contradiction, or at least tension, here.
- Politically, Romantics were generally in favour of radical, or even revolutionary, change – at least in the early days of Romanticism. Subsequently, a split is discernible between those who retained this position, and others who became more conservative and individualistic, and who developed notions of society as developing in organic rather than revolutionary ways.
- Rationality – the belief that an outlook and procedures based on the application of reason are the most apt for humanity – was found wanting. Emotions, sometimes in extreme, passionate form, were valued highly by Romantics.
- Romantics frequently focused on and admired the state of innocence, and the accompanying senses of wonder, alienation, or even terror and madness.
- As implied by the previous point, there was often great fascination for altered states of consciousness, sometimes drug-induced, and for art forms which both helped to achieve and vividly express such states; for example, Coleridge's mythical location 'Xanadu' from his poem 'Kubla Khan'.

- Hero-figures and heroic deeds were accorded huge significance, expressed dramatically throughout different art forms, and often through chosen lifestyles. Lord Byron is perhaps the most notable example here.
- An appropriate national past was discovered – or sometimes fabricated – in an attempt to discern and continue a tradition of exoticism and heroism. There was a fascination for myths and legends from the distant past, as recounted in ballads and folk tales.
- Simultaneously, and sometimes confusingly, rebellious anti-heroes were also sought out, invented or re-interpreted, for example, Prometheus for Mary Shelley, and Milton's Satan for William Blake.

All of these points will be explored more fully in a variety of contexts throughout this book. Taken together, they suggest, as the American critic Arthur Lovejoy wrote in 1924, that

> … we should learn to use the word 'Romanticism' in the plural. … What is needed is that any study of the subject should begin with a recognition of a *prima facie* plurality of Romanticisms, of possibly quite distinct thought-complexes, a number of which may appear in one country.

The French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), a Romantic himself, made the vital point that 'Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subject, nor in exact truth, but in a way of feeling'. In order to understand this way of feeling more profoundly, it is necessary to examine in some detail the contextual factors at work. As a guiding principle, Marilyn Butler's insight rings true: 'No form is confined to a single political message. Everything turns on how it is used, and on how the public at a given time is ready to read it.' (from *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, 1981). And the reading must be in the fullest, suggestive sense of the word: not only in the reading of printed text, but also in the ways we might 'read' a situation, for example, or 'read' someone's character.

▶ Examine again the various key characteristics of Romanticism listed above, and try relating them to modern culture and the arts. Aim to come to some sort of judgement as to whether the examples chosen from modern culture meet any, some or all of the tentative criteria for Romanticism.

You may wish to look at examples from:

- music across a range of styles and genres
- films and television drama

- literature in various forms intended for various readerships
- advertising imagery and the arts of persuasion
- developments in modern art.

As a result of your research, to what extent would you say the modern age – particularly in its cultural manifestations in the broadest sense – is essentially Romantic?

The historical and political contexts of Romanticism

Placing the exponents of Romanticism in historical and political context is not simply a matter of 'framing' them in a particular time and place, but rather of exploring their active involvement in the events and movements of the day. In a time of profound and widespread social and political upheaval, from which we are still feeling the reverberations today, the influence of the Romantics was often considerable. Their involvement could take many forms, but perhaps the nearest we can get to a common factor is the sense of creative expression shared by so many Romantics across a wide range of genres and styles. The arts and politics became inextricably linked, and this is one of the most lasting legacies of Romanticism.

It would be difficult to over-estimate the impact of the key historical trends occurring during the period of Romanticism: there were political and social revolutions the like and speed of which had never previously been experienced. Overshadowing all other events was the cataclysmic influence of the French Revolution of 1789, which ' … sharpened the historical sense in a way that no other event had ever done' (Hugh Honour in *Romanticism*, 1991).

(As a way of attempting to map these historical changes against some of the most significant events of Romanticism, the Time line on pages 6–7 may help to give a fuller perspective.)

In the field of politics (defined broadly as opposed to any narrow conception of party or parliamentary politics), the Romantics were intensely active in both thought and deed. This in itself was something of a departure: the link between creative endeavour and politics had never before been so explicit, had never been such a liberating, energising force. The focus changed too, and reflected a shift in emphasis, away from the concerns of royalty and the aristocracy as somehow embodying the affairs of state, towards far more democratic notions of politics. In this the Romantics were self-consciously breaking new ground. By 1821 the Romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), was able to claim in his *A Defence of Poetry* that poets revealed 'less their spirit than the spirit of the age', and, potentially at least, 'are the unacknowledged legislators of the world'.

As Marilyn Gaull writes:

> When Homer sang of national wars, or Chaucer performed at court, or Shakespeare dramatised the chronicles of kings, politics and poetry shared the same frame of reference: the activities and interests of the aristocracy, the centre of political power. But during the Romantic period, poets became active in political activities that had no poetic precedence, for they lived in an age of democratic revolution, engaged in political dissent, and identified with the people.
>
> (from *English Romanticism: The Human Context*, 1988)

Ideas and philosophies

One of the key issues central to any historical study, and pertinent to the exploration of Romanticism, is the question of how far new ideas and philosophies influence, or even determine, the course of history. Certain elements of Romanticism might suggest that the influence is considerable, perhaps crucial: the emphasis on hero figures and heroic deeds, for example, or the general sense of the importance of new ways of looking at the world. In its extreme form, this view (that ideas determine history) has been termed philosophical idealism, and philosophers broadly influential in the development of Romanticism, such as Kant, Hegel or even Coleridge, were central figures here. This may be beguiling, of course, in that the Romantics themselves need not necessarily be the most trustworthy commentators on the movement – if it can be called this – of which they were part.

An alternative, opposing, view of history suggests that ideas – and the people who think them – are essentially the product of actual historical forces of a social, political and economic nature. Karl Marx, the founder of Communism, whose own ideas developed towards the end of the Romantic period (his 'Communist Manifesto' was published amidst the revolutionary ferment of 1848) did much to promote such a view of history. In its extreme form, this interpretation of history has been termed historical materialism. Many modern Marxists, however, are at pains to deny that Marx was ever a crude historical materialist. They point instead to his development of Hegel's notion of the dialectical processes of historical change – the suggestion that ideas and events are inextricably linked and that the attempt to separate them to see which comes first is ultimately futile. Further, that the conflict between historical forces – which may include philosophies and artistic creations – creates new realities, born of struggle: essentially, a synthesis. This may well be a helpful tool in understanding Romanticism, itself clearly born of intense struggles in the realms of philosophies and historical events.

The influence of the Enlightenment

The culture of the 18th century, and the essential context of the birth of Romanticism, was that of the Enlightenment. As with so much else, the meaning of this term is fraught with difficulties and tensions; nevertheless, it was the dominant cultural force of the time – and for its adherents, it was a profoundly civilising influence. Key figures here, stretching back to the intellectual achievements of the 17th century, were the rationalist philosophers Descartes, Bacon and Locke, and scientists such as Isaac Newton. The central tenet of the Enlightenment was that through a spirit of rational, scientific enquiry humanity could realistically aspire to an ideal of peace and harmony. For some, even ultimate perfection was possible. The obstacles to this perfection were seen to be those inherited from a discredited past: prejudice, irrational beliefs, emotional instability and extravagance of feeling. In asserting this, Enlightenment thinkers often sought inspiration from a different, and more distant past: the period of history known as the Classical, based on first the Greek and later the Roman empires and cultures. In terms of artistic expression, the Enlightenment way of thinking emphasised structural order, harmony, symmetrical proportion, and carefully maintained boundaries in what was acceptable: in other words, or so it was felt, the fundamentals of good taste. Such a position, because of the professed inspiration from classical models, became known as the Neo-Classical.

Romanticism can be seen as a reaction against all the Enlightenment stood for, and for much of the 19th and 20th centuries this was the dominant interpretation. A more subtle sense of how Romanticism arose from its 18th century context tends to see both continuities and contrasts, as opposed to a sharply dividing watershed between an ordered Neo-Classical outlook on the one hand and a rebellious, inspired Romanticism on the other. Several characteristics which are generally seen as quintessentially Romantic were already gaining influence and credibility in the first half of the 18th century, including political idealism, attraction to nature, a fondness for children and the child-like, and a questioning of orthodox religious positions. Radical political philosophers such as Thomas Paine (1737–1809) and William Godwin (1756–1836), influential in both the American and French Revolutions as well as in British radicalism, had their roots firmly in Enlightenment ideas on the perfectibility of humanity and in belief in reason as the essential means of attaining it. William Blake, regarded as one of the most profoundly Romantic of British poets and artists – for he is famous as both – shared many Enlightenment attitudes: his insistence on the need for firm outline of form in art and the disarming simplicity of his early 'Poetical Sketches', for example.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to ascribe too much significance to continuities like these, for there were clear discontinuities too – perhaps more significant in the general trend of cultural and social history. As the 18th century