

## The Romantic Movement

It should be noted right at the beginning that writers in Wordsworth's life time did not think of themselves as "Romantic". Contemporary critics and reviewers grouped them into a number of separate schools: "the Lake School" of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey; "the Cockney School" of Keats, Leigh Hunt and Hazlitt; and "the satanic School" of Byron, Shelley and their followers. The term "romantic" was applied to these works almost half a century later by English historians.

Following leading historians of yesterday, it is customary to divide the romantic writers into two generations.<sup>1</sup> The first generation consists of the Lake poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey. These writers had witnessed the French Revolution first hand; the excesses of the revolution made them disillusioned. The second generation comprises of Keats, Shelley, Byron and others. Their works breathes a spirit of moral reform. According to Legouis and Cazamian the writers of the first group were in "moral harmony" with the public. They did not enter into an open conflict with them. On the other hand, the second generation came into a conflict with existing society over cultural and moral values.

The Romantic Movement is often characterized as a revolution and a revolt. It is seen as a revolt against neoclassical ideals of decorum, hierarchy, reason and order. In place of these, Romantic writers favoured the spontaneous, the emotional and the irrational. The Romantic Movement is also called the Romantic revival because the old Elizabethan spirit of romanticism was revived in this age.

Despite their differences of thought and opinion, many writers of the Romantic age did feel that there was something distinctive about their time, an intellectual and imaginative climate called "the spirit of the age". Thus some common features can be detected in their works.

### Chief features of Romantic Poetry

#### 1. **Change in the concept of poetry and poet.**

Romantic theory described poetry as an expression of the inner urges of the soul of the poet. Most Romantic poets concurred by referring primarily to the mind, emotions, and imagination of the poet, instead of to the outer world as perceived by the senses, for the origin, content and defining attributes of a poem. In accord with this view, the lyric poem written in the first person became a major Romantic form.

#### 2. **Depiction of Nature.**

In the Romantic Age, natural scene became a primary poetic subject and all the major Romantic poets (except Byron) described natural phenomena with accuracy. It would, however, be wrong to believe that the description of nature for its own sake was the chief aim of these poets. Romantic "nature poems" are in fact meditative poems where the natural scene serves to raise an emotional problem or personal crisis in the poet.

#### 3. **Glorification of the Ordinary**

Romantic poetry is essentially democratic. Rural, rustic life is glorified in the poems of Clare, Wordsworth and Burns.

#### 4. **Celebration of the unusual, the supernatural and the macabre**

Credit should be given to the Romantic writers for opening up to the readers the dark depths of psyche.

### Limitations of Romantic Poetry

According to C. M. Bowra, the Romanticist's revolt against their eighteenth century predecessors made it necessary for them to impose certain limits on their poetry. They confined their poetry to certain fields of experience and excluded many things outside. C. M. Bowra identifies three limitations:-

1. First, "the Romantic outlook denied any real space to orthodox religion".<sup>ii</sup> Though each poet envisioned a transcendental world, their views were different from one other. Each had his own world which he shared with no one else. In addition, their descriptions of such worlds are vague. Unlike theologians, they did not want to present a concrete picture of the transcendental world. Bowra states, "Their other world was not something which awaits the delivered soul, but a mystery lurking behind visible things, and a mystery it must remain if it was to keep its hold on the poets."<sup>iii</sup> In fact, the Romantics are concerned not with the mystery of faith but with the mystery of imagination, a mystery that is their own making. To the Romantics, the mind was the ultimate reality and hence they could not follow orthodox doctrines.

2. Secondly, the Romantic idea of beautiful was limited in scope. To them the truly beautiful things were those that "exalted them to some vision beyond". To quote C. M. Bowra:-

The Romantics thought that beauty is a final quality of reality revealed through visible things. It was for them to seek it, and they believed that they knew it by the enchantment which it laid upon them.<sup>iv</sup>

This view narrowed their outlook. Further, it contributed to their eccentricity and made their poetry strange.

3. The Romantic poets gave great importance to the element of wonder. It is interesting to quote Bowra, whose words remind us of Viktor Shklovsky's concept of art<sup>v</sup>:

Most of them believed that the spirit must be quickened by releasing it from the bonds of habit, from the conventional frame which stifles a man's capacity, and that this can be done by awaking a delighted amazement even at familiar things.

This love for wonder, however, made the Romantics adore the strange and the unusual.

4. Bowra did not mention this as a separate point as it comes under points one and three. This is the fact that Romantics gave more importance to imagination as a medium of perception than reason. At times, they even seemed to oppose reason. Blake, for instance, portrayed reason as the tyrant god Urizen. Of course, the Romantics never praised irrationality or thought reason as unimportant. However, in lesser hands, this

tended to become so. Moreover, Bowra points out that “In rejecting philosophy and natural science, the Romantics accentuated the isolation of poetry from the current thought of their time.”

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<sup>i</sup> Some contemporary writers contest this division.

<sup>ii</sup> C. M. Bowra, *Romantic Imagination*, 281.

<sup>iii</sup> Bowra, 281.

<sup>iv</sup> Bowra, 283.

<sup>v</sup> According to Shklovsky, art is opposed to habit. Habit deadens our perception. Art restores this power by making familiar objects unfamiliar. It makes a stone stony. What art helps us to realize is the artfulness of an object, the object itself is not important. Bowra’s explanation uncannily hint towards a similar theory. See Coleridge’s and Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry*.