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English Literature 2

from the Early Romantics to the Modern Times



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from the Early Romantics to the Modern Times



Memorix - English Literature 2
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Il volume è scritto in lingua inglese ed è strutturato in modo da permettere, già scorrendo l'indice, di rintracciare velocemente gli autori e i generi di interesse. Ciascun capitolo è corredata da numerosi riquadri in cui sono riportati stralci di brani ("Reading the text"), sono approfonditi argomenti connessi al tema trattato, sono spiegati termini letterari e non.

Particolare attenzione è stata riservata alla disamina della poetica/estetica dei principali scrittori e all'analisi critica delle opere maggiormente rappresentative.

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Part One

The Age of Sensibility



1. The Romantic Age (1776-1837)

Key concepts

- The Romantic Age is known as the Age of Revolution because it was marked by important political and social revolutions, such as the American War of Independence, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution.
- British Romanticism started in approximately 1790 after a preparatory phase and it mainly developed in poetry.
- The most relevant features of Romantic poetry are: emphasis on the individual's emotions and experience; exaltation of nature; celebration of childhood; exaltation of the creative power of imagination and the conception of the artist as sage, philosopher or prophet.

1.1. Social and Historical Background

The Romantic Age broadly covers the period dating from the American Declaration of Independence (1776) to the First Reform Bill (1832).

During this period Britain was ruled by:

- George III (1760-1820);
- George IV (1820-1830), who was also Prince Regent from 1811 to 1820, when George III had become senile;
- William IV (1830-1837), George IV's brother.

The Romantic Age is also known as the 'Age of Revolution'. In fact, it was marked by significant political and social revolutions:

The American War of Independence (1775-1783), between the American Colonies and Britain. It was caused by economic and political reasons. In fact, the Colonies did not accept Britain's policy of taxation and wanted to have their own representatives in the British Parliament. King George, however, refused, and the representatives of the thirteen Colonies rebelled. They appointed George Washington commander-in-chief of the

American forces and, in 1776, they signed the *Declaration of Independence*, which was eventually recognized with the *Treaty of Paris* (1783). The American Revolution was a radical event that had a deep impact on world affairs. It developed the belief in the principles of republicanism and peoples' rights to choose their systems of laws.

French Revolution (1789-1794). It socially and politically transformed France from an absolute monarchy to a republic based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. The effects of the French Revolution were widespread all over Europe. In particular, it promoted social and political radicalism. In Britain, the Tories or Conservatives, mainly landowners and nobles, were afraid of the social consequences of its principles so they tried to intimidate all sympathisers of the Revolution. By contrast, most of the Whigs or Liberals, mainly the merchant classes and common people, greeted the Revolution with enthusiasm and hoped that it could speed up Parliamentary reform. However, the political effect of the Revolution was to block any reform for about thirty years.

Napoleonic Wars (1799-1815). They were started in order to oppose revolutionary France and Napoleon's progressive conquest of Europe. Britain became the leader of the coalition which tried to stop Napoleon's power. Unlike its partners, which were regularly defeated, Britain kept the resistance alive, thanks to the financial support from the Bank of England, which gave the government the money for the war expenses, and the powerful navy which obtained significant victories. The most important was that of Trafalgar (1805), where British commander Horatio Nelson defeated Napoleon and stopped his plan to invade England. Napoleon was finally defeated at Waterloo (1815), with the Anglo-Allied forces under the command of the Duke of Wellington.

Industrial Revolution. It changed Britain from an agrarian to an industrialised economy. The process started around 1780

in the textile and metal industries and was favoured by, and interrelated with, other important factors:

- **population growth**, which provided an increasing number of consumers and workers. This guaranteed low wages and low prices, but high profits;
- **new technological inventions**: the most important ones were those of machinery for the spinning and weaving of textiles by Hargreaves and Arkwright, and the steam engine by James Watt, which was useful in many industries;
- the **creation of factory industries** in the coal and iron fields;
- the **transport revolution**, in fact new roads and canals were built to transport raw materials to the factories and finished goods to market. With the invention of rail-locomotives by George Stephenson communication further improved;
- increase in **foreign and domestic commerce**.

Agricultural Revolution.

It is strictly linked to the Industrial Revolution.

Thanks to machines, farming became a more modernised and technologised activity to meet the increasing demand for food which followed the increase in population. The technological innovations, together with the spread of **enclosures**, involved:

Enclosure is the process by which land is 'enclosed' with fences or hedges. In this way, **common land** (i.e., land owned by one person but over which other people had some rights, such as arable farming and grazing livestock) was taken into fully private ownership and use. As a consequence, one or more private owners completely excluded the others.

- the abolition of farming based on the rotation of fields in favour of a more efficient system;
- the distribution of equivalent areas of land to the owners, who were free to farm what they wanted and in any way they wanted;
- a change in the size of farms. In fact, poorer farmers and cottagers could not survive under the new system, so they

were forced to sell out their small pieces of land to richer great landowners and become labourers on their farms or leave the countryside to find work in the industrial towns.

Social Revolutions and Reforms. The Industrial and Agricultural Revolutions on the one hand, and the French Revolution on the other, caused dramatic changes in the lives of many people and provoked increasing demand for reforms. In particular:

- the shift of population from the countryside to the towns caused the formation of a new class: the **working class**;
- workers' living and working conditions were terrible: their houses had no water supply or sanitation; they worked twelve or more hours a day; work in factories, especially mines, was very dangerous; children and women were also exploited in textile and mining industries. Workers, however, progressively started to form **trade clubs** and **associations** to ask for better working conditions and higher wages, although the government declared them illegal with the *Combination Acts* (1799);
- in 1811 a number of textile-workers attacked factories and started destroying machines. The revolt was a response to unemployment provoked by the massive introduction of machinery. The violent protest came to be known as **Luddism** after the name of the workers' leader, Ned Ludd. Luddism continued throughout 1811 and 1812 despite the government decision to punish rioters with death;
- influenced by the principles of the French Revolution, British radicals asked for reforms of the electoral system and universal suffrage. They believed that Parliament should represent the people and not the land-owning aristocracy, as had happened with the enactment of the **Corn Laws**. However the Tories, who held power for most of the period, restricted freedom of speech and any type of association.

The first and second **Corn Laws** (1815, 1828) were enacted to please great landowners. The laws excluded almost all foreign wheat, in order to raise the price of domestic wheat. This starved the workers.

The clash between government and reformers resulted in the **Peterloo Massacre** (1819), when troops charged a crowd of about 60,000 people who had gathered to ask for electoral reform. Fifteen people were killed and many were wounded.

The social and political unrest represented by Luddism, workers' associations and radicalism were progressively resolved after the 1820s. Meeting of workers were permitted and this led to the birth of the first **Trade Union** (1824). In 1829 the *Bill for Catholic Emancipation* was passed, so Catholics obtained the same rights as Protestants, although with some exceptions. In 1829 the Civilian Metropolitan Police was also created so as to maintain order without military intervention.

During William IV's reign the Whig government promoted electoral reform with the **First Reform Bill** (1832) which extended the right to vote. Although Queen Victoria ascended to the throne in 1837, the year in which the First Reform Bill was passed is believed to mark the beginning of the Victorian Age.

1.2. Cultural and Literary Background

Romanticism is a complex artistic, literary, and intellectual movement that originated in Western Europe. As a European movement, it dates from about 1770 to approximately 1848. The three main branches of the Romantic Movement were German, French and English:

- in Germany Romanticism had a preparatory stage in the *Sturm und Drang* movement of the 1770s

Romanticism comes from the word '**romantic**', dating back to the first half of the 17th century, when it was used in the sense of extravagant, unreal, wild or even absurd. During most of the 18th century the word still had a negative connotation, because it was associated with Gothicism, medievalism and sentimentalism, as opposed to rationalism and classicism. By the end of the 18th century, however, it was related to liberating emotions and imagination not necessarily to be suppressed by reason.

and was essentially philosophical. Its most important representatives were Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), the philosopher August Wilhelm von Schlegel (1767-1845) and the poet and dramatist Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805);

- in France Romanticism mainly developed in drama and literary criticism and was influenced by **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**'s ideas: the conception of man as good by nature, the insistence on the virtues of rural life and humble people and the vision of nature as a life-giving force;
- in Britain Romanticism started around the 1790s after a preparatory phase characterized by the writing of Ossianic and Graveyard poetry and early Gothic fiction. British Romanticism mainly developed in poetry. By 1825 it could be considered concluded; in fact, all of the major English Romantic writers had either died or had already produced their best works.

British Romanticism, like European Romanticism, was marked by some historical events that fostered new ideas and caused intellectual debate. This is particularly true of the American and French Revolutions, whose ideals of independence, equality and reform influenced important British politicians and intellectuals such as:

Edmund Burke (1729-1797). He served for many years in the House of Commons as a member of the Whig party and wrote about the political events of the time. In his *Speech on Conciliation with America* (1775), he supported the American colonies in their struggle for independence from England. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), however, Burke attacked the French Revolution, describing it as a plunge into savagery. Burke believed in the institution of the British government of his time and was afraid of French radicalism. Moreover, he believed that new political and social systems could be built only on the wisdom of previous ages, not on the destruction of the old, as had happened with the French Revolution.

Thomas Paine (1737-1809). He was an Anglo-American radical. In 1776 he supported the American Revolution in his *Common*

Sense, a pamphlet written in a language that the common man could understand. In 1791-92 he wrote *The Rights of Man* in which, unlike Burke, he defended the French Revolution. Paine stated that revolution was possible when government did not safeguard its people, their natural rights or their national interests. He also made proposals to reform British government and society such as: a written Constitution; the elimination of aristocratic titles; lower taxes for the poor. Paine expressed his radicalism also in *The Age of Reason* (1794-95 and 1807), in which he attacked the corruption of the Christian Church and its attempts to gain political power. He promoted, on the other hand, **deism**, a form of religion based on truths acquired through the application of reason.

William Godwin (1756-1836). He was a social philosopher, political journalist, and religious dissenter who advanced atheism, anarchism, and personal freedom. Like Paine, he published *Political Justice* (1793) as a response to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Godwin, however, focused more on philosophical principles. He affirmed that humanity would inevitably progress and proposed a society in which human beings used their reason to decide the best course of action. Godwin also wrote an influential novel *Caleb Williams* (1794) to depict the injustices of English social and political life. In the novel he attacked aristocratic privilege and denounced the power of legal institutions to destroy individuals.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797). She was a writer and a feminist. In 1797 she married Godwin. Mary was a sympathizer of the French Revolution, and in 1790 she wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), the first response to Burke's pamphlet. In this work Mary attacked aristocracy and advocated republicanism. Wollstonecraft, however, is mainly remembered as a passionate advocate of social equality for women. Her major work, in fact, is *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), in which she advocated an educational system that allowed girls the same advantages as boys, for the benefit of all society.

The following table presents a general survey of Pre-Romantic and Romantic literatures:

| PRE-ROMANTICISM | | | |
|---|--|---|---|
| POETRY | | FICTION | |
| Ossianic Poetry James Macpherson | Graveyard Poetry Robert Blair Edward Young Thomas Gray | Scottish Poetry Robert Burns | Gothic Fiction Horace Walpole Clara Reeve Ann Radcliffe William Beckford Matthews Gregory Lewis |
| ROMANTICISM | | | |
| POETRY | | | |
| First Generation of Romantic Poets They are characterized by their attempt to theorise about poetry. They supported the French Revolution but after the disillusionment caused by the Napoleonic Wars, they adopted conservative views. | | Second Generation of Romantic Poets They all died very young and away from home. Their poetry represents the clash between the ideal and the real and their desire to change society and nature. Individualism and escapism is also stronger than in the poets of the first generation. | |
| William Blake | William Wordsworth | Samuel T. Coleridge | George G. Byron Percy B. Shelley John Keats |
| PROSE | | | |
| Fiction | | | Non-Fiction |
| Evolution of Gothic Fiction | Historical Novel | Novel of Manners | Charles Lamb Leigh Hunt |
| Mary Shelley C. Maturin | Walter Scott | Jane Austen | Thomas De Quincey Samuel Coleridge |
| DRAMA | | | |
| Coleridge, <i>Remorse</i> (1813) | | Byron, <i>Manfred</i> (1817), <i>Cain</i> (1821) | |
| | | Shelley, <i>The Cenci</i> (1819), <i>Prometheus Unbound</i> (1820) | |

As the outline shows, the Romantic Age was, above all, the age of poetry. The main features of romantic poetry are:

- a **new conception of literature**, which must reflect all that is spontaneous and unaffected in nature and man, and be free to follow its own fancy in its own way;
- the emphasis on the **individual's identity, emotions and experience** as a form of reaction to the social and political pressures of the period;
- the **exaltation of nature** which becomes the main subject of the works of the Romantics. Through communion with nature, Romantics feel they can achieve a sort of transcendence or 'unity of being' and they can feel the correspondences between natural landscapes and man's feelings and values. Their works exhibit a preference for the **sublime aspects of nature**: mountains, glaciers, chasms, storms, rough seas or earthquakes but, of course, other aspects of nature are also depicted, such as flowers, trees or animals. All the aspects of nature fill Romantics with pleasure, while the industrial towns and cities make them feel dehumanized. Nature satisfies many needs: it is a manifestation of God on Earth, a moral force, a source of poetic inspiration, joy and consolation in time of trouble;
- the **rejection of materialistic and mechanist philosophies**. For the Romantics human society can be explained through reference to an organic model, borrowed from nature, which stresses the interdependence and differentiation of all the components or subjects involved;
- the **celebration of childhood** as a phase in man's life close to the ideal 'state of nature', in which man is innocent and his feelings and impulses are more sincere, fresh and authentic;
- the **creative power of imagination**, a faculty which can dissolve and remake the objects of the external world. The work of artistic imagination parallels that of God in creation. This power is manifest during childhood but it is gradually lost as the child grows up;

- the **artist as sage, philosopher or prophet** who possesses imagination in the highest degree and, for this reason, can see clearly and deeply into the real essence of things. Although the poet is different from other men, he is all the same a man speaking to them. Indeed, his function is to point out what is wrong in society and what ideals common people should pursue.

Test your Knowledge

1. Which of the following affirmations on the Romantic Age is false?

- a) It was a period of political stability
- b) It can be considered concluded by the end of the 1830s
- c) It was a period of great social unrest
- d) It was marked by the Agrarian and Industrial Revolutions

2. Luddism was:

- a) an economic movement promoting the development of working factories
- b) a political protest carried out by radicals to ask for the right to organize themselves in associations
- c) a social protest against the increasing use of machinery in industries
- d) a political movement supporting the principles of the French Revolution

3. Which of the following cannot be considered a major factor which favoured the Industrial Revolution?

- a) Technical Innovations
- b) Transport Revolution

- c) Enclosures
- d) Corn Laws

4. Who, among the following thinkers, was against the French Revolution?

- a) Thomas Paine
- b) Mary Wollstonecraft
- c) Edmund Burke
- d) William Godwin

5. What is one of the main characteristics of the Second Generation of Romantic poets?

- a) They best represented the clash between the real and the ideal
- b) They all died away from home
- c) They outlived the poets of the first generation
- d) They were mainly conservatives

6. Which of the following affirmations on Romantic poetry is false?

- a) It rejected materialist philosophies
- b) The poet was seen as a common and humble man
- c) It celebrated nature
- d) Artistic creation was seen as the work of God

Keys

- 1) a.** The Romantic Age was a period of political instability. In fact, Britain was deeply influenced by the democratic and radical principles of the French Revolution and was involved in the Napoleonic Wars.
- 2) c.** In 1881 a number of textile-workers attacked factories and started destroying machines as a form of protest against the massive introduction of machinery, which had provoked unemployment. The movement was known as Luddism after the workers' leader, Ned Ludd.
- 3) d.** Corn Laws. They are, in fact, laws which excluded almost all foreign wheat in order to raise the price of domestic wheat.
- 4) c.** In fact, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Burke described the French Revolution as a plunge into savagery.
- 5) a.** The third and fourth options are both wrong. The second is correct, but it cannot be considered a major feature of the romantic poets of the second generation.
- 6) b.** The romantic poet is a sage, philosopher, prophet or even a shaman. He is different from other men, but he must speak to them to point out what is wrong in society and what ideals common people should pursue.

English Literature 2

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