



TOPICS
Introduction
Tintern Abbey, Tourism, and Romantic Landscape
The Gothic
The French Revolution
Texts and Contexts ▶
Explorations
Web Resources
Illustrations
Romantic Orientalism
The Satanic and Byronic Hero
Connections to NAEL
REVIEW
Summary
Multiple Choice Quiz
Making Connections
ARCHIVE
Overview
Publication Chronology
Chronological Index
Author Index
Audio Readings
Site Map

The Romantic Period : Topics

The French Revolution - Apocalyptic Expectations : Overview

Looking back to his early radical years from his conservative middle age, the English poet Robert Southey (1774–1843) declared that

few persons but those who have lived in it can conceive or comprehend what the memory of the French Revolution was, nor what a visionary world seemed to open upon those who were just entering it. Old things seemed passing away, and nothing was dreamt of but the regeneration of the human race. >> [note 1](#)



In the prologue to his successful play *The Road to Ruin* (1792), Thomas Holcroft predicted that the French Revolution would "fertilize a world, and renovate old earth!" And in *The Prelude* (1805), Wordsworth remembered the early years of the Revolution as a time when all Europe

was thrilled with joy,
France standing on the top of golden hours,
And human nature seeming born again.
(6.340–42; NAEL 2.346)

Human nature regenerate in a world made new: this was the theme of many enthusiasts in England during the first four or five years after the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789. These concepts are obviously theological. They originate in the apocalyptic and millennial passages of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, and their use indicates that for a number of British idealists, the early enthusiasm for the revolution had the momentum and excitement of a religious movement.

The term *apocalypse*, derived from the Greek word meaning "revelation," designates the disclosure, in the Bible, of God's providential design for the end of human history. In its fully developed form, an apocalypse is a prophetic vision, elaborately symbolic of the imminent events that will abruptly end the existing world order and replace it with a new and perfected condition both of humanity and of the world. The root elements of apocalypse are the concern of the Hebrew prophets with the catastrophic punishments to be visited upon Israel and its enemies in "the latter end of the days," as well as with the expectation of a Messiah, a deliverer from suffering in this disaster-ridden world. These elements are collected in the writings attributed to the prophet Isaiah, which foretell, after God has vented His wrath, the advent of a renovated world of ease, joy, and peace. "For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth," in which "the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock" (Isaiah 65.17–25). The Hebrew Bible also contains a full-fledged apocalypse, the Book of Daniel.

Passages predicting an imminent apocalypse occur in the New Testament, both in the Synoptic Gospels and in the Epistles of Paul. The New Testament then concludes with the most spectacular and intricately ordered of all apocalyptic prophecies, the Book of Revelation. A series of seven symbolic events signalize the conflict between the forces of Christ and of Antichrist, culminating in a prodigious violence in which the stars fall like ripe figs and the harvest of the earth is cast "into the great winepress of the wrath of God." (6.13). This fierce destruction, however, is a cleansing one, preparatory to the inauguration of the Kingdom of Christ on earth, which will last one thousand years — in Latin, a "millennium," from which are derived the terms "millennial" and "millenarian" to signify the belief in a blissful earthly condition at the

end of history. At the end of the millennium, the forces of evil are loosed again and finally defeated, after which the original creation, its function in the divine plot accomplished, will pass away, to be replaced by a new creation and by a new Jerusalem that will reconstitute, for the deserving elect, the paradise that was lost at the Fall: "And there shall be no more death . . . neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (21.4).



Two distinctive images occur persistently in later writings that derive from biblical apocalypses. One is the image of a sacred marriage that signifies the consummation of history. In Isaiah, the final redemption is figured as a marriage between the people of Israel and their land (62.2–5); in Revelation, it is figured as a marriage between Christ and the new, or purified, Jerusalem, "coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (21.2, 9–10). The second recurrent image represents the final condition of blessedness as a renovated heaven and earth. "For, behold," the Lord said to Isaiah, "I create new heavens and a new earth" (65.17, also 66.22). Thus also Revelation: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away" (21.1, also 21.5).

The apocalyptic and millennial books in the Bible are readily convertible into a scenario for political revolution, since they consist of an infallible text ordaining a necessary destruction of the forces of evil and guaranteeing the outcome of this violence in peace, plenty, and consummate happiness. In the [Civil Wars in seventeenth-century England](#), for example, there were fervent apocalyptic expectations among radical parliamentary sects that were shared by Oliver Cromwell, as well as by John Milton.



The late eighteenth century was another age of widespread apocalyptic expectation, when the promise of the American Revolution, followed by the greater and more radical expectations raised by the early years of the French Revolution, revived among a number of English Nonconforming sects the millenarian excitement of Milton and other seventeenth-century predecessors. "Hey for the New Jerusalem! The millennium!" Thomas Holcroft exulted in 1791. >> [note 2](#) Preachers such as Richard Price, Joseph Fawcett, and Elhanan Winchester, as well as Joseph Priestley, who was not only a great chemist but a founder of the Unitarian Society, all interpreted the convulsions in France in terms of the prophecies in both the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures. They thus invested the political events of the day with the explosive power of the great Western myth of apocalypse and expanded a local phenomenon into the expectation that humanity, everywhere, was at the threshold of an earthly paradise.



The phenomenon is of great literary importance because, during their formative period in the early 1790s, the first generation of Romantic poets incorporated in their poems a vision of the French Revolution as the early stage of the abrupt culmination of history, in which there will emerge a new humanity on a new earth that is equivalent to a restored paradise. In 1793, while still a student at Oxford, Robert Southey wrote *Joan of Arc: An Epic Poem*. In it Joan is granted a vision of a "blest age" in the future when, in a violent spasm not quite named the French Revolution, humanity shall "burst his fetters," and "Earth shall once again / Be Paradise". >> [note 3](#) In the *Song of Liberty* that he appended to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in 1792, Blake represents a revolutionary "son of fire" moving from America to France and proclaiming an Isaian millennium: "Empire is no more! and now the lion & wolf shall cease"

(*NAEL* 8, 2.122). In the short prophetic poems of revolution that he wrote in the early 1790s, Blake introduced the Giant Form that he names "Orc," the spirit of Energy that bursts out in total political and spiritual revolution. See also Blake's *America: A Prophecy* [1793], plates 6, 8, 16, and, for an earlier, nonsymbolic work on the events in France, *The French Revolution*. In 1793 Wordsworth concluded his *Descriptive Sketches* with the enthusiastic prophecy (which precisely matches the prophecy he

attributed to the Solitary in his later poem *The Excursion*) that events following the French Revolution would fulfill the millennial prophecy of the Book of Revelation. In those happy early years of the revolution, Coleridge shared this expectation, in a historical sequence that he succinctly summarizes in his prose *Argument of the plot of Religious Musings* (1794) as "The French Revolution. Millennium. Universal Redemption. Conclusion."

Two decades later, the young Percy Shelley recapitulated the millenarian expectations of his older contemporaries. His early principles, Shelley said, "had their origin" in those views that "occasioned the revolutions of America and France."

>> note 4 Shelley's *Queen Mab*, which he began writing at nineteen, presents a vision of the woeful human past and the dreadful present, as preceding a blissful future "surpassing fabled Eden," of which most features are imparted from biblical millennialism.

Looking back in 1815, Thomas Noon Talfourd — an eminent jurist who was also a poet and playwright — analyzed the fashion in which the French Revolution had shaped the great literature of the age:

At one moment, all was hope and joy and rapture; the corruption and iniquity of ages seemed to vanish like a dream; the unclouded heavens seemed once more to ring with the exulting chorus of peace on earth and good-will to men. . . .

But "on a sudden" the "sublime expectation[s] were swept away" in "the terrible changes of this August spectacle." And an immediate effect "of this moral hurricane . . . this rending of the general heart" was "to raise and darken the imagination," and so to contribute "to form that great age of poetry which is now flourishing around us." >> note 5 Talfourd recognized the religious, apocalyptic nature of the enthusiasm and hopes evoked by the early years of the revolution; he recognized also, however, that the essential feature of the French Revolution as a cultural influence was that it had failed. The greatest poetry of the age was written not in the mood of revolutionary exaltation but in the mood of revolutionary disenchantment and despair, after the succession of disasters that began with the Reign of Terror in 1793–94. A number of the major Romantic poems, however, did not break with the formative past, but set out to salvage grounds for hope in a new and better world. That is, Romantic thought and imagination remained apocalyptic in form, but with a radical shift from faith in a violent outer transformation to faith in an inner moral and imaginative transformation — a shift from political revolution to a revolution in consciousness — to bring into being a new heaven and new earth.