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The Romantic Period : Topics

Summary

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Notes:

- Some of the best regarded poets of the time were in fact women, including Anna Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Robinson.
- Many writers of the period were aware of a pervasive intellectual and imaginative climate, which some called "the spirit of the age." This spirit was linked to both the politics of the French Revolution and religious apocalypticism.
- Wordsworth influentially located the source of a poem not in outer nature but in the psychology and emotions of the individual poet.
- Romantic poems habitually endow the landscape with human life, passion, and expressiveness.
- Although we now know the Romantic period as an age of poetry, the prose essay, the drama, and the novel flourished during this epoch.

Summaries

Writers working in the time period from 1785 to 1830 did not think of themselves as “Romantics,” but were seen to belong to a number of distinct movements or schools. For much of the twentieth century scholars singled out five poets—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Percy Shelley, and Keats—and constructed a unified concept of Romanticism on the basis of their works. Some of the best regarded poets of the time were in fact women, including Anna Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Robinson. Yet educated women were targets of masculine scorn, and the radical feminism of a figure like Mary Wollstonecraft remained exceptional.

The Romantic period was shaped by a multitude of political, social, and economic changes. Many writers of the period were aware of a pervasive intellectual and imaginative climate, which some called “the spirit of the age.” This spirit was linked to both the politics of the French Revolution and religious apocalypticism. The early period of the French Revolution evoked enthusiastic support from English liberals and radicals alike. But support dropped off as the Revolution took an increasingly grim course. The final defeat of the French emperor Napoleon in 1815 ushered in a period of harsh, repressive measures in England. The nation’s growing population was increasingly polarized into two classes of capital and labor, rich and poor. In 1819, an assembly of workers demanding parliamentary reform was attacked by sabre-wielding troops in what became known as the “Peterloo Massacre.” A Reform Bill was passed in 1832, extending the franchise, though most men and all women remained without the vote.

Wordsworth and Coleridge’s sense of the emancipatory opportunities brought in by the new historical moment was expressed in their *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), which revolutionized the theory and practice of poetry. Wordsworth influentially located the source of a poem not in outer nature but in the psychology and emotions of the individual poet. In keeping with the view that poetry emphasizes the poet’s feelings, the lyric became a major Romantic form. It was held that the immediate act of composition must be spontaneous —arising from impulse and free from rules. For Shelley, poetry was not the product of “labor and study” but unconscious creativity. In a related tendency, Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and later Shelley would all assume the

persona of the poet-prophet.

Romantic poetry for present-day readers has become almost synonymous with “nature poetry.” Romantic poems habitually endow the landscape with human life, passion, and expressiveness. Wordsworth’s aim was to shatter the lethargy of custom to renew our sense of wonder in the everyday. Coleridge, by contrast, achieved wonder by the frank violation of natural laws, impressing upon readers a sense of occult powers and unknown modes of being. The pervasiveness of nature poetry in the period can be linked to the idealization of the natural scene as a site where the individual could find freedom from social laws.

Books became big business, thanks to an expanded audience and innovations in retailing. A few writers became celebrities. Although we now know the Romantic period as an age of poetry, the prose essay, the drama and the novel flourished during this epoch. This period saw the emergence of the literary critic, with accompanying anxieties over the status of criticism as literature. There was a vibrant theatrical culture, though burdened by many restrictions; Shelley’s powerful tragedy *The Cenci* was deemed unstageable on political grounds. The novel began to rival poetry for literary prestige. Gothic novelists delved into a premodern, prerational past as a means of exploring the nature of power. Jane Austen, committed like Wordsworth to finding the extraordinary in the everyday, developed a new novelistic language for the mind in flux.