UNIT 9: THE ROMANTIC AGE I

UNIT STRUCTURE

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9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will able to:

- discuss the ideals that characterise the Romantic Age
- explain the background that led to the intellectual movement
- explain the literary forms and features of the age
- appreciate the contributions of the age to the history of English Literature

9.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to the **Romantic Age** in the history of English literature. This was a period which was radical in its assertion of nationalism, democracy, liberty and the individual spirit. The Romantic Age was followed by the "age of revolution" i.e. the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Revolution (1789-1799). The ideals that characterised the French Revolution were **"Liberty, Equality and Fraternity"** and this historical revolution in France against the old traditions, the Royalty, the influence of the Catholic Church and the privileged nobility, inspired the ideals of the early period of the Romantic period.

- reaction against the ideals of the 18th century Enlightenment age
- focus on imagination over reason, passion over rationality
- romantic ideals of imagination, emotion, intuition and freedom
- experience of the sensory and the spiritual
- fascination with myths and the supernatural, gothic and the exotic
- devotion to Beauty
- love and worship of Nature
- interest in the rural, country life and opposed to the ills of urban life

The politicians and the philosophers manifested a new spirit of the age and extolled the worth of the 'individual' which then found a reflection in Romantic literature.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What were the ideals that characterised the French Revolution?

Q 2: When is the romantic period considered to have begun?

Q 3: What was the economic status of England?

Q 4: Which major development coincided with the Romantic Age?

Q 5: Briefly state the ideals that characterised the Romantic Age.

9.3 LITERARY FORMS AND FEATURES OF THE ROMANTIC AGE

In between 1770 to 1830, all kinds of printed texts were available due to innovations in printing, which led to a widespread readership of imaginative literature. An anonymous writer in 1824, in the ***Blackwood Magazine*** wrote **"Since the interesting era of the French Revolution the people of these Kingdoms have been an inquisitive, doubting and reading people…Their feelings received then an extraordinary impetus"**. At first, it was the political turmoil which found a reflection in the literature of the age but later when it was over, the period saw the development of creative literature. The traditional forms underwent changes in the Romantic writings; it broke earlier conventions and inspired a new sophistication and creativity.

Poetry and Romantic Fragment:

In the Romantic period, writers like Blake and Byron highlighted a new approach to the literary forms of the **'epic' and 'epic poetry'.** For an instance, Blake made use of personal mythology in his epic poem "Milton" and Byron experimented with the conventions of the epic form as represented in his satiric epic poem "Don Juan". It is interesting to note that John Milton who had written *Paradise Lost* was also a great epic poet of the 17th century. In his *A Defense of Poetry* (1840), Shelley defines the epic as a poetry which has **"a defined and intelligible relation to the knowledge, and sentiment, and religion, and political condition of the age in which [the poet] lived, and of the ages which followed it"**. Keats' *Hyperion* (written from 1818-1819) which remained an incomplete fragment is an example of an epic poem in blank verse.

Also the **'Romantic fragment'** emerged as a new accidental form during the period, for an instance, Coleridge's incomplete poem "Kubla Khan", Shelley's incomplete work *The Triumph of Life*, owing to his sudden death and Byron's unfinished *Don Juan* due to his death in Greece. Also, epic or epic poetry had lesser known women writers, like Anne Yearsley's "Brutus, A Fragment" (1796), Mary Linwood's *The Anglo- Cambrian* (1818), Eleanor Ann Porden's *Third Crusade* (1822) and Helen Maria Williams' brief epic *Peru* (1794).

Biographical, Autobiographical and Semi-autobiographical Works:

Owing to the emphasis on the experience of an 'individual' during this age, there was also a significant body of **biographical**, **autobiographical** works and **semi-autobiographical** works. The writers who found a means to share their lives partly through their personal writings or narrative are Byron, Shelley, Walter Scott, Coleridge, Lamb, Hazlitt, Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Leigh Hunt and De Quincey, to name a few. Thus, life writing found a keen readership in the Romantic period.

Romantic Drama:

All the major romantic poets had experimented with **Romantic drama**, written and meant for reading rather than stage performance. Romantic drama had a hybrid characteristic because it drew from mixed

sublime and the supernatural. It is important to note that the most important characteristic that differentiates the English Romantics from the writers of the eighteenth century is the emphasis and significance of the **'imagination'**. Also, the joint publication of ***Lyrical Ballads*** **by Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1798** was considered as a significant milestone for the Romantics as it had launched the English Romantic movement.

9.4.1 Poetry

In Wordsworth's famous phrase, poetry was a **"spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and he had called poetry a "sensitive plant"**. In the Romantic period there were various schools of poetry which debated their ideas on what made good poetry. The first generation Romantic poets were William Blake, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the second generation Romantic poets were Lord Byron, Percy B. Shelley and John Keats. There were also Romantic women poets like Felicia Hemans, Charlotte Smith, Mary Tighe and Letitia Landon who had based their poetry on the female experience.

The basic characteristics of **romantic poetry** were spontaneous flow of inspiration in the creation of sublime poetry instead of following set traditional methods, the emphasis on imagination and creative passion, romanticising the 'ordinary' as fit subjects of poetry (i.e. the common man, any incident or the regular mundane things), a sense of wonder for the supernatural elements of life, inspiration from Nature and idyllic locales.

Lyric poetry was a popular form in the romantic age due to its 'variety' and the 'dramatic potential'. You will be interested to know, that to the ancient Greeks, a lyric was **"a poem sung to the lyre or another instrument"**. Almost all the major poets of the Romantic age experimented with this form and wrote songs that could be accompanied by the piano or the harp, like Lord Byron's *Hebrew Melodies*, Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies* and Robert Burns' lyrics for over 350 Scottish songs, among other writers. There was a variety of lyric kinds which drew from the Hebrew Bible, ancient classics, native folk songs, nursery rhymes. According to Edmund Gosse, lyrical poetry was **"nothing more than another name for poetry itself"**.

of subjects from various fields, of which literature i.e. novels, poems, plays comprised an important part too.

Magazines were extremely popular in the eighteenth century like the ***Gentleman's Magazine*** which covered true crime stories and the Ladies' Diary aimed at the women readership which contained articles on history, geography and other gossip. The literary magazines like *The Athenaeum* published some of the leading writers of the time.

The Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, the ***London Magazine*** and the ***New Monthly Magazine*** (of which poet Thomas Campbell was the editor) were outstanding in both their creative and critical output. *The Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* published poetry, tales and novels in series. Keats' poetry, Hazlitt's *Table Talk*, Lamb's *Essays of Elia* and De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* were first published in the *London Magazine*. Thus, it was through these periodicals that there came to be three distinct forms of the Romantic essay which were classified as:

- **the political essay** based on political aspects like the political essays by Coleridge published in the *Morning Post* and the *Courier*
- **the familiar essay** on various aspects like Lamb's personal *Essays of Elia* or Hazlitt lectures and essays on romantic travels to new countries etc.
- **the historico-cultural review** like Thomas Carlyle's "The Sign of the Times"

9.4.3 Fiction

The novel was the first literary genre which came out from the printing press in between 1770 to 1830, the peak years of readership. It is interesting, to note that just as women authors outnumbered men from the 1890s, women readership dominated the market. The major novelists of the period are Jane Austen, Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Ann Radcliffe, Walter Scott and Mary Shelley. Among the significant women novelists are Jane Porter, Frances Burney and Susan Ferrier.

During this period, there was distinctly a continued interest in the genre of the **gothic** and the **sensational novel** like Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, William Beckford's *Vathek*, William Godwin's *Caleb*

Hemans, Walter Scott, James Payn, Bryan Procter and Norman Nicholson were inspired by the Lake District in their writings, although they were not a part of the Lake Poets.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: Name the first and the second generation Romantic poets.

Q 9: Name a few women Romantic poets. What did their poetry reflect?

Q 10: Why did the coffee houses of the early eighteenth century turn into major hubs for intellectuals?

Q 11: Mention the names of some of the important novelists of the time.

Q 12: Name a few works of Walter Scott. Why were his novels considered as regional novels?

Q 13: Who were the leading figures of the lake poets?



9.5 LET US SUM UP

After having gone through the unit, the learner will be more familiar with the ideals and features that characterise the spirit of the Romantic Age. The unit will provide you with a better perspective on the cultural history of the Romantic Age and explain the background in context that led to the intellectual movement. Moreover, a thorough study of the unit will enable you to appreciate the literary forms and practices of the Romantic age, as well as, note the contributions of the Romantic Age to English Literature.



9.6 FURTHER READING

1) Bowra, Maurice. (2009) *The Romantic Imagination* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

2) Roe, Nicholas. (ed.) (2007) *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Ans to Q No 9: Hemans, Smith, Tighe, Landon who wrote poetry on female experience.

Ans to Q No 10: In the early eighteenth century, coffee-houses became a hub for intellectual meetings and a place that gave rise to a coffee house culture where newspapers like Richard Steele and Joseph Addison's *The Spectator* or *the Tatler* were circulated, which provided news, information and gossip in a good measure.

Ans to Q No 11: These are political essay familiar essay, historico-cultural review.

Ans to Q No 12: Jane Austen, Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Ann Radcliffe, Walter Scott, Mary Shelley, Jane Porter, Frances Burney, Susan Ferrier.



9.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1: Trace the development of the Romantic Age

Q 2: Describe the various literary forms of the Romantic Age.

Q 3: State the characteristic ideals of the Romantic Age and its literary features.

Q 4: Describe both Poetry and Fiction as major literary forms of the Romantic Age.

Q 5: Explain the development of the steady "print culture" in the eighteenth century.

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