UNIT 8: INTRODUCTION TO ROMANTIC CRITICISM

UNIT STRUCTURE:

8.1 Learning Objectives

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8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- *Understand* the basic concepts of Romantic criticism
- *Identify* the major exponents of Romantic criticism
- *Situate* and contextualise Romantic criticism in the history of English literature

8.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to the different aspects of Romantic Criticism. Romanticism, as an artistic, literary, and intellectual movement, began in Europe toward the end of the 18th century and flourished in the first half of the 19th century in most places in Europe. Romanticism can be seen as a revolt against the aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment as well as a reaction to the scientific rationalization of nature. Embodied most strongly in art, music, and literature, it had a tremendous impact on historiography, education, politics and the natural sciences. Romanticism legalised intense emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic experience, elevated folk art and ancient custom to noble status, made spontaneity a desirable characteristic. Romanticism reached beyond the rational and Classicist

ideal models, embraced the exotic, the unfamiliar, and the distant. It also viewed the individual imagination as a critical authority. This unit offers you a brief introduction to Romantic criticism. Along with contextualising the critical approach in the socio-cultural context of the literature of the time, attempt has been made to distinguish it from Neoclassical criticism. However, it is always advisable to read the major critical texts of each critic in order to understand the characteristics of each critic and the period or school s/he represents.

8.3 HISTORY OF ROMANTIC CRITICISM

The Romantic period in English literature begins around the end of the 18th century and lasts till the 1830s. More specifically, from the point of view of the literary historian, Romantic period in English (and also in German) literature began in 1798, the year of the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge and of the composition of *Hymns to the Night* by Novalis, and ended in 1832, the year which marked the deaths of both Sir Walter Scott and Goethe. As an international movement of all the arts, Romanticism began at least in the 1770's and continued into the second half of the 19th century. This extended chronological spectrum (1770-1870) also permits recognition as Romantic the poetry of Robert Burns and William Blake in England, the early writings of Goethe and Schiller in Germany, and the great period of influence for Rousseau's writings throughout Europe. The early Romantic period thus coincides with what is often called the 'age of revolutions'—including the American (1776) and the French (1789) revolutions. Though there lays vast difference in the philosophy and treatment of subject matters among the writers of the Romantic era, it is noteworthy that almost everyone were responding to certain socio-political movements taking place in their time. It was a socially tumultuous period and the influx of different revolutionary ideas created chaos and conflict in the socio-cultural lives of people.

The definition of Romanticism has been a topic of debate in the field of literary history throughout the 20th century. The generally accepted

view is that it was part of the reaction against the Age of Enlightenment, the classic Western traditions of rationality and the very idea of moral absolutes and agreed values. Most Romantics can be said to be broadly progressive in their views, but a considerable number always had, or developed, a wide range of conservative views, and nationalism was in many countries strongly associated with Romanticism. According to some scholars, Romanticism is essentially continuous with the present; for scholars like Robert Hughes it is the inaugural moment of modernity; and others like Chateaubriand, 'Novalis' and Samuel Taylor Coleridge believe that it is the beginning of a tradition of 'Counter-Enlightenment', – a resistance to Enlightenment rationalism, which is associated most closely with German Romanticism.

Both the fictional and nonfictional writings of the Romantic period were highly influenced by the French Revolution, which inspired writers to address themes like democracy and human rights. The French Revolution, bringing a violent end to feudal powers and monarchy, asserted the right and supremacy of the individual free will. The new philosophy of the rights of all men was expressed in both politics and literature, which led to the 'Liberalism in Literature.' This literature was inspired by the ideals of equality, fraternity and liberty and revolted against the tyranny of set formulas, rules and conventions. They individual spirit has been dignified. This new form of philosophy became one of the main guidelines of a new school of Romantic poets, writers and philosophers. Romantic's search for fresh subject, their belief in nature, their emphasis upon spontaneity and their belief that everyone has a right to express his own idea are the features of individualism, which was the prime demand of French Revolution. In the beginning, the Revolution got huge support from the writers because of the opportunities it seemed to offer for political and social change. In later years, the poets used the spirit of the revolution to help characterize their poetic philosophies. The Industrial Revolution brought about a different and related reaction in literature that addressed the rights of the laboring classes and improved labor conditions. This revolutionary spirit prompted Romantic poets like

Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley to posit new theories about the function and form of poetry.



LET US KNOW

The term 'Romantic' first appeared in the mid 17th century English to describe 'the fabulous, the extravagant, the factious, and the unreal.' Towards the middle of the 18th century, "romantic" in English and '*romantique*' in French were commonly used as adjectives of praise for natural phenomena. The term started to be commonly used in literature towards the end of the 18th century in Germany where August Schlegel and Friedrich Schlegel talked about *romantische Poesie* (romantic poetry) in the 1790s. The use of the word spread widely in France, by Madame de Staël, who, in her *De L'Allemagne* (1813) made persistent use of the term. In England Wordsworth wrote in the 1815 edition of his preface to his poems about 'romantic harp'; but the word was still not in use as we see Byron writing in 1820, "I perceive that in Germany, as well as in Italy, there is a great struggle about what they call 'Classical' and 'Romantic', terms which were not subjects of classification in England, at least when I left it four or five years ago". The term 'Romanticism' began to be used in the sense we use today since the 1820s only.

Romanticism, as a school of thought, tries to establish the prevalence of instincts and emotions over rationalism and common sense. The poets and the writers not only sought to emancipate themselves from the fetters of neo-classical rules but also experimented with the old forms, revived some of them, which went into the oblivion because the neo-classical writers considered them vulgar and undignified. In course of such experimentation with forms, revival of form or creations of new forms, following tendencies were noticed:

- More emphasis was given on imagination than intellect. The poets allowed free play of imagination in their poetry. It is a reaction against the neo-classical obsession with intellect.

- Interest was developed in the remote, the exotic and the mysterious. The poets of the romantic period turned to medieval age for inspiration unlike the neoclassicists who turned to Classical writers.
- They gave free reign to their emotion and passion. They abhorred classical restraint and obsession with reason.
- The preoccupation with imagination and emotions made Romantic poetry primarily subjective, which is in contrast with the classical preference for objectivity in poetry.
- The 'poetic diction' of the 18th century was rejected as artificial and unnatural. The Romantics advocated the use of 'rustic', 'common' language as ideal for poetry.
- A chief motto of the Romantics was "Return to nature". It opposed the Neoclassical insistence on the urban experiences. Love of nature for them meant love of mankind, humanism and a world view that encompassed the idea of freedom and equality.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How would you differentiate the themes between Neoclassical and Romantic criticism?

Q 2: How did the French Revolution influence the development of Romantic literature?

Q 3: How has the term 'Romantic' been used in the intellectual history of the early 19th century?

8.3.1 Major Exponents of Romantic Criticism

Romantic Literary criticism in English literature is basically associated with and dominated by the writings of William Wordsworth in his 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817). Apart from them, poets like John Keats, PB Shelley as well as essayists like

Hazlitt, De Quincey also contributed to the development of criticism in the Romantic period. Let us now discuss some of the major exponents of Romantic criticism in English literature.

Wordsworth:

Wordsworth is one of the most important Romantic exponents in English literature in the sense that he is the only romantic poet who made his poetic experiences the locus of his critical discourse. Instead of theorising his idea of poetry, like his friend Coleridge, he was insisted on unraveling the workings of the mind of the poet. That is why; his literary criticism ceases to be criticism in its most literal sense. Rather, his *Preface* to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, an important document of Romantic literature in English can be seen as a poetic 'manifesto,' or 'statement of revolutionary aims.'

The revolutionary idea that Wordsworth brought to English Romantic literature was the rejection of 'the Pseudo Classical' – Neoclassical – theory of poetic diction. As a poet, his aim was to deal with the rustic and humble life: 'to choose incidents and situations from common life' for which the appropriate language would be the language used by the common men in day-to-day simple situations: 'a selection of language, really used by men'. The rustic language in its simplicity, for Wordsworth, is highly emotional and passionate. Charged with the natural emotions of the human heart, it comes from the heart, and thus goes direct to the heart. Therefore, such a language is highly expressive of the essential truths about human life and nature; it is more 'philosophical' than any other language.

Apart from his take on 'poetic diction', Wordsworth's definition of poetry is emblematic of the Romantic notion of poetry. As far as the nature of poetry is concerned, Wordsworth held the opinion that "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Poetry, having its origin in the internal feelings of the poet, is a matter of passion, mood and temperament. It cannot be

produced by strictly adhering to the rules laid down by the Classicists. However, it has been clarified by him that good poetry is never an immediate expression of powerful emotions; it is the result of deep and long meditation: 'poetry has its origin in emotions recollected in tranquility.' There are four stages in the composition of poetry. The first stage is of observation or perception of objects, characters, or incidents, which infuses powerful emotions in the mind of the poet. The next stage is about the contemplation or recollection of that emotion in tranquility. At this stage, memory comes into play and brings out what had been lying in the unconscious for days, months or years. The third stage is that of filtering wherein the poet is purged of non-essential elements and thus makes his experience communicable to all men. The fourth stage is where the actual task – the composition – begins.

There have been a series of severe criticism of Wordsworth's critical notions about poetry among his contemporaries. That his conception about the language of poetry was unsound is best exemplified by his own practice: most of his best poetry is written in language far removed from the language of ordinary people. Wordsworth's status in the history of English criticism is not exceedingly high. Coleridge himself exposed the hollowness of Wordsworth's notions in his *Biographia Literaria*.

Coleridge:

Coleridge was a far greater critic than Wordsworth because of the fact that he had depth of study and observation, a deeper understanding of the creative process. Besides, he was a pioneer in many respects. He gave a new conception of the very function of a critic: a critic should appreciate and interpret but not judge a work of art. According to his own conception of the poetic process where he claims that for the existence of truth there must be a knower and a known, a subject and an object, or the Self and Nature. Out of the interaction and fusion of the two arises a

creative work. This work is neither Self nor Nature but a different entity altogether having laws of its own. Coleridge's criticism of Shakespeare is based on this conception of the creative process. He reacted to the Neoclassical critics like Dr. Johnson, who considered Shakespeare to be a great dramatist on the ground that Shakespeare was 'the poet of nature' holding in his art 'a faithful mirror of manners and of life.' For Coleridge, to mirror nature is not the functions of a poet. Poetry is neither Nature nor Self but the outcome of the counteraction of the two, and, therefore, an independent entity with laws, which it is the function of a true critic to explore and explain. Thus, he develops the idea of 'organic unity'. Coleridge is one of the earliest critics to distinguish between fancy and imagination. While he confines fancy to 'fixities and definities', imagination is defined as the chief creative force of an artist.

The critical theories of Coleridge seem to be part of a larger system of aesthetics he might have wanted to develop in future. His criticism was also influenced by the metaphysics of the German Philosophers like Lessing, Schlegel and Kant. However, despite being a remarkable critic, he failed to develop his own 'school' of criticism. Most of his critical writings are concentrated in the only monument of his criticism: *Biographia Literaria.*



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What is Wordsworth's idea on the selection of the object for poetry?

Q 5: How does Coleridge define the term 'Imagination'?

8.3.2 Important Concepts

The Romantic poets and critics developed the theory of poetry as a reaction to the 18th century theories of poetry as

imitative of human life and nature by suggesting that poetic inspiration was located not outside in nature, but inside the poet's mind, in a "spontaneous" emotional response. This new theory of poetry also posited new possible subjects of poetic expression in a revaluation of the outcast, delinquent, rustic, common and the supernatural. In the development of the theory, the thinkers have touched upon many important topics essential to the study of literature. Let us discuss some of these topics.

Imagination:

The Romantics raised imagination to the level of a supreme creative faculty central to the composition of poetry. This contrasted distinctly with the Neoclassical and 18th century arguments for the supremacy of reason. The Romantics tended to define and to present the imagination as our ultimate "shaping" or creative power, the approximate human equivalent of the creative powers of nature or even deity. It is dynamic, an active, rather than passive power, with many functions. Imagination is the primary faculty for creating all art. For Wordsworth imagination is the faculty that helps humans to constitute reality, for, we not only perceive the world around us, but also in part create it. Wordsworth's colleague Coleridge has a major role to play in defining imagination in a more specific manner. He contrasted it with another human faculty 'Fancy'. Rejecting the empiricist assumption that the mind was a tabula rasa on which external experiences and sense impressions were imprinted, stored, recalled, and combined through a process of association, Coleridge divided the 'mind' into two distinct faculties: 'Imagination' and 'Fancy.' While 'Fancy', as a lower faculty in the creative process, deals with '*fixities and definites*', 'Imagination' assumes the central position in the process of poetic creation.

Uniting both reason and feeling, Coleridge considers imagination as the ultimate synthesizing faculty, enabling humans to reconcile differences and opposites in the world of appearance.

The reconciliation of opposites is a central ideal for the Romantics. He divides Imagination into two categories: Primary Imagination and Secondary Imagination. Of these, Secondary Imagination, which is rare to the common humans and common to the artistic minds, is of the highest creative power because it 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate'.



LET US KNOW

The IMAGINATION then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead. (Coleridge *Biographia Literaria*)

Nature:

The idea of 'nature' was redefined in the Romantic period as the term 'Nature' began to mean many things, apart from the conventional, to the Romantics. Nature was often presented as itself a work of art, constructed by a divine imagination. Though particular perspectives with regard to nature were diverse: nature as a healing power, nature as a source of subject and image, nature as a refuge from the artificial constructs of civilization, including artificial language, the prevailing views accorded nature the status of an organically unified whole. It was viewed as

'organic,' rather than, as in the scientific or rationalist view, as a system of 'mechanical' laws. Romanticism displaced the rationalist view of the universe as a machine with the analogue of an "organic" image, a living tree or mankind itself. At the same time, Romantics gave greater attention both to describing natural phenomena accurately and to capturing "sensuous nuance"—and this is as true of Romantic landscape painting as of Romantic nature poetry. Romantic nature poetry is essentially a poetry of meditation. The writings of Wordsworth show that he considered nature as a friend, a philosopher and a guide.

Emotion and the Self:

The Romantic emphasis on the creative faculty of imagination was aided by greater emphasis on the importance of intuition, instincts, and feelings. The Romantics called for greater attention to the emotions as a necessary supplement to purely logical reason. By defining all good poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", Wordsworth located the ultimate source of poetry in the individual artist, in the tradition stretching back to the ancients. Here the classical method of valuing art primarily for its ability to imitate human life was subverted. In Romantic theory, art was valuable not so much as a mirror of the external world, but as a source of illumination of the world within. The interior journey and the development of the self recurred everywhere as subject material for the Romantic artist.

Symbolism and Myth:

The Romantic conception of art gave utmost importance to symbolism and myth. For the Romantics, symbols were the human aesthetic correlatives of nature's emblematic language. They were valued too because they could simultaneously suggest many things, and were thus thought superior to the one-to-one communications of allegory. Partly, it may have been the desire to express the 'inexpressible'- the infinite - through the available

resources of language that led to symbol at one level and myth at another.

Individualism:

The Romantics poets and critics asserted the uniqueness and self-expressivity of the individual. Consequently, they opposed the character typology of Neoclassical drama. In style, the Romantics preferred boldness over the preceding age's desire for restraint, maximum suggestiveness over the Neoclassical ideal of clarity, free experimentation over the 'rules' of composition, genre, and decorum, and they promoted the conception of the artist as 'inspired' creator over that of the artist as 'maker' or technical master. Although interests in religion and in the powers of faith were prominent during the Romantic period, the Romantics generally rejected absolute systems, whether of philosophy or religion, in favor of the idea that each person must create the system by which to live.

The Everyday and the Exotic:

The Romantics showed great interest in the everyday, common social world around them for poetic inspiration. Though certain realistic techniques were used in addressing the subject matters, such as the use of 'local color' through down-to-earth characters, like Wordsworth's rustics, or through everyday language, or through popular literary forms like folk narratives, their presentation of social realism was usually subordinate to imaginative suggestion. Besides, the ideals of simplicity or innocence were treated as the most important elements of their subject. The poets often turned for their symbols to the domestic rather than the exotic sources; there turned to folk legends and older, 'unsophisticated' art forms, such as the ballad, to contemporary country folk that used 'the language of common men'. Thus, their strive for the common, rustic let them reject the Neoclassical 'artificial' poetic diction. Most importantly, they have turned towards the children who were for the first time presented

as individuals, and often idealized as sources of greater wisdom than adults.

However, various forms of the exotic in time or place also gained favor, as opposed to everyday subjects, as part of the Romantic fascination with realms of existence that were, by definition, prior to or opposed to the ordered conceptions of 'objective' reason. Often, both the everyday and the exotic appeared together in paradoxical combinations. In the *Lyrical Ballads*, for example, Wordsworth and Coleridge agreed to divide their labors according to two subject areas, the natural and the supernatural: Wordsworth would try to exhibit the novelty in what was all too familiar, while Coleridge would try to show in the supernatural what was psychologically real. However, both aimed at one thing: to get away from the tyranny of convention of classical realism.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: What type of new poetic theory emerged during the Romantic period?

Q 7: What role did 'imagination' play among the Romantics?



8.4 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you must have developed a fair idea about the basic characteristics of Romantic criticism. We have learnt that Romanticism can be seen as a revolt against the aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment as well as a reaction to the scientific rationalization of nature. Both the fictional and nonfictional writings of the Romantic period were highly influenced by the French Revolution. It tries to legalize intense emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic experience, elevate folk art and ancient custom to noble status, make spontaneity a desirable characteristic for poetic creation, and tries

to establish the prevalence of instincts and emotions over rationalism and common sense. Apart from the most renowned Wordsworth and Coleridge, John Keats, PB Shelley, Hazlitt, De Quincey have contributed to the development of Romantic criticism in English literature. Wordsworth's "Preface" is a seminal text in Romantic criticism in the sense that here, the poet-critic has provided some revolutionary definitions of the poetic process, poetic language and the subject matter of poetry. Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* is his only monumental piece where he discusses the nature of poetic art, comments on the appropriate subject matter and language of poetry and, most importantly, differentiates fancy and imagination and identifying imagination as central to the creative faculty of an artist.



8.5 FURTHER READING

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8.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: Neoclassicism: emphasis on intellect, Romanticism: Emphasis on imagination, interest in the remote, the exotic and the mysterious… …Neoclassicism: well-defined, close, rationality, Romanticism: free reign to emotion and passion… …Neoclassicism: classical restraint and obsession with reason… …Romantic poetry was primarily subjective, Neoclassical poetry objective… …Neoclassical adopted 'poetic diction'; Romantics advocated the use of 'rustic', 'common' language for poetry.

Ans to Q No 2: French Revolution inspired writers to address themes like democracy and human rights… …the Revolution, brought an end to feudal powers and monarchy, asserted the right and supremacy of the individual free will… …the new philosophy of the rights of all men was expressed both in politics and literature which led to the 'Liberalism in Literature.' … …Romantic literature was inspired by the ideals of equality, fraternity and liberty, and revolted against the tyranny of set formulas, rules and conventions.

Ans to Q No 1: In the mid 17th century, the term was used to describe 'the fabulous, the extravagant, the factious, and the unreal'… …towards the middle of the 18th century, 'romantic' in English and '*romantique*' in French were commonly used as adjectives of praise for natural phenomena… …towards the end of the 18th century, the term was used in Germany by August Schlegel and Friedrich Schlegel to discuss *Romantische Poesie* (romantic poetry).

Ans to Q No 4: Subject is the low and rustic life – that condition, free from all outside influences, men speak from their own personal experience–"convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions."–'simple language" is more permanent– a far more philosophical language – expressive of the basic truth of life.

Ans to Q No 5: Coleridge divided the mind into 'Imagination' and 'Fancy'– Fancy deals with '*fixities and definites*'–Imagination is the creative faculty in poets–it is the ultimate synthesizing faculty— reconciliation of opposites–divides imagination into Primary and Secondary – Secondary Imagination is of the highest creative power – it 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate'.

Ans to Q No 6: The Romantic poets developed a theory of poetry in reaction to the 18th century theories of poetry that imitated human life and nature… …they suggested that poetic inspiration was located not outside in nature, but inside the poet's mind, in a "spontaneous" emotional response… …this new poetic theory posited new possible subjects of poetic expression in a revaluation of the outcast, delinquent, rustic, common and the supernatural.

Ans to Q No 7: The Romantics raised imagination to the level of a supreme creative faculty central to the composition of poetry… …this contrasted distinctly with the Neoclassical and 18th century arguments for the supremacy of reason… …the Romantics writers tried to present imagination as a dynamic, active, the primary faculty for creating all art.



8.7 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Can it be argued that Neoclassicism led to the development of Romantic criticism in English literature? How are both of the literary periods interrelated?

Q 2: Trace the development of Romantic literary criticism in the socio-political and cultural context of Europe.

Q 3: Elaborate the idea of Imagination as a major theme in Romantic literary criticism.

Q 4: How did the Romantic critics tackle the question of the subject matter and language of poetry? Explain.

Q 5: Do you think that there is difference in attitude towards the idea of poetry among the Neoclassical and Romantic critics? Discuss.

Q 6: How do the Romantic critics differ from the Neoclassical critics in their conception of the relation between the individual self and poetry?

Q 7: Discuss in detail the main aspects of Romantic criticism. In what ways can we call Romanticism a reaction to Neo classical ideals?

Q 8: Do you agree that Romanticism is marked by an emphasis on individual experience? Discuss with reference to Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Q 9: Who are the famous German thinkers and philosophers and how are they to be regarded as the harbingers of Romanticism in England?

Q 10: The French Revolution got huge support from the writers because of the opportunities it seemed to offer for political and social change. Discuss.

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