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.

It was roughly at the tail end of the 18th century, that the Romantic period was considered to have begun and reached its peak from around 1800 to 1850. Here, it must be noted that the notions of what was considered "Romantic" and the usage of the term differed from country to country which is why a **diverse nature was attributed to Romanticism**. For an instance, the terms "romantic" in English and "romantique" in French were adjectives used in admiration of nature but the French usage was devoid of the implied sensuality, as in the English usage. Romanticism in the real sense was a "transatlantic cultural movement" or in other words a movement spanning across cultures and this is why it bore subtle differences across the countries that adopted it.

As far as England is considered, the Romantic Movement coincided with **the Industrial Revolution** that marked the end of the century. The economic status of England was that of a wealthy nation and it came to be known as **"the workshop of the world"** which engaged in spending huge sums of wealth on the army and providing subsidies to her allies in Europe, while raising food prices at home. Although, the privileged nobility, the aristocrats and the nouveau rich (newly rich) enjoyed their positions, the unequal distribution of wealth posed serious problems of sustenance for the working classes and the poor. However, this had led to subsequent reforms in England and the two radical works which were Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* had inspired a reformatory zeal during the period.

During this time, there was also a major intellectual reaction to the philosophy of Enlightenment which idealised the advancement of knowledge through science, skepticism, reason or the rationale. The Romantics emphasised on emotion over reason, imagination over the rationality and asserted that no empirical or scientific knowledge could reveal the ultimate truth in the great mysteries of life. They extolled the virtues of passion, imagination, freedom, the supernatural and the spiritual.

In a nutshell, the ideals that characterise the Romantic Age are:

- emphasis on individuality, one's creative gifts and subjective experience
- in contrast to the literary ideals of the neoclassical ideals
- 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.

Some of the major literary forms of the Romantic age are as discussed below:

Conduct Books:

After 1770, **conduct books** by women writers became very popular just as **children's literature**. The writers of children books included, John Newbery, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, William Godwin, Charles and Mary Lamb among others. During this time, **lending or circulating libraries**, **book clubs** and **book societies** provided an easy access to books and played a vital role in popularising poetry and novels, in particular the genre of **Sensibility and Gothic Fiction**.

Publishing of Radical Works:

The early 1790s saw the publishing of **radical works** such as Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791-1792), Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and also the circulation of radical pamphlets, newspapers and weeklies like *Lessons from the Swinish Multitude* (1793), *The New Morality* (1798) and *Political Register* (1802-1835) among others. Also **literary criticism** which appeared in leading magazines was very influential in establishing the works of writers like Thomas De Quincey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Lamb, Leigh Hunt, William Hazlitt, William Goldwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. *The London Magazine* published De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, Lamb's *Essays of Elia* and parts of Hazlitt's *Table Talk.*

The works of De Quincey established him as master of personal confession; Coleridge's celebrated ideas of 'fancy' and 'imagination' found an expression in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817); Lamb was the master of the personal essay; Leigh Hunt penned satirical reviews; Hazlitt in his familiar style infused irony and political radicalism in his criticism and the couple Godwin and Wollstonecraft wrote radical works on human rights

and the rights of women. Therefore, the **periodicals** and **literary magazines** such as the *Edinburgh Review* (1802), *The Quarterly Review* (1808), *Blackwood's Magazine* (1817), *The Westminster Review* (1824), *The Spectator* (1838), *The Athenaeum* (1828) and *Fraser's Magazine* (1830) significantly established a rich body of literary criticism during the period.

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 genres for an instance, Byron's *Manfred* (1817) was subtitled as 'A Dramatic Poem' and Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), a closet drama (meant for reading) was subtitled as 'A Lyrical Drama'. Also, Shakespeare was a major influence on Romantic drama like Shelley's visionary verse drama *Cenci: A Tragedy, in Five Acts* (1819). Drama during this age emphasised on psychological and the inner experience like Joanna Baillie's three-volume *Series of Plays: In Which It Is Attempted to Delineate the Stronger Passions of The Mind* (1798-1812).

Literary Features:

In a nutshell, the literary features of the age are as given below:

- in contrast to the literary ideals of the age of Enlightenment (Neo-classical Age)
- belief in the 'imagination' and insight
- emphasis on the subjective experience and individuality
- significance of emotions, sentiments and creativity
- freedom to explore the sensory and the spiritual
- extolling and upholding the beauty of Nature
- approval of the use of fancy controlled by judgement
- conveying the moments of vision
- exploring the realm of the supernatural and the transcendental
- representing the experience of common man
- role of the poet as an interpreter more than a creator



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: Name the various kinds of literary forms practiced in the Romantic age.

Q 7: Mention the literary features of Romantic literature.

9.4 MAJOR LITERARY FORMS

Let us now discuss some of the major literary forms and the major writers of the romantic age. Romantic literature is characterised by, in Victor Hugo's phrase **"liberalism in literature"** its emphasis on the creative, the sublime and the supernatural. It is important to note that 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"**.

There was also a revival of the **Romantic Sonnet** which until the second half of the eighteenth century had remained an unpracticed form for a hundred years. The sonnet was to many **"the perfect vehicle for crystallizing a fleeting experience"**. In the hands of the Romantic sonneteers, the sonnet form received a crucial revival, especially in between the years 1775-1777. They experimented with the sonnet form by combining and projecting subjective experience or the self through nature or natural landscape. Some of the noted works are Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784), William Lisle Bowles's *Sonnets, Written Chiefly on Picturesque Spots, During a Tour* (1789), Mary Robinson's *Sappho and Phaon* (1796), Coleridge's *Sonnets from Various Authors* (1796), Wordsworth's 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty' in his *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807) and also the sonnets of Keats and Shelley. Some of the finest sonnets of the period are Wordsworth's "Lines Composed upon Westminster Bridge, Sept. 3, 1803, several odes of Keats drawn from the sonnet form among others.

9.4.2 Periodical Essay and Literary Criticism

The various periodicals which were printed periodically established a steady "print culture' in England. In the eighteenth century periodicals along with reviews, literary magazines, pamphlets, journals and newspapers were identified by the Romantics as a developing **"periodical press"**. 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.

Newspapers like ***The Examiner*** offered poetry, literary criticism, and politics and ***The Spectator*** (1828) which was one of the leading newspapers published aspects of socio-politics and culture. Among the leading **Reviews** were the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Quarterly Review* but there were also other reviews like the *Westminster Review*, *Critical Review*, *Monthly Review* and *Edinburgh Review*. These reviews contained a variety 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"

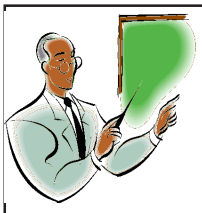
9.4.3 Fiction

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 Williams*, Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey*. These novels dealt with the realm of the horror, romance, the supernatural and the mysterious. In opposing the gothic or the sensational novel, the gifted novelist Jane Austen who was influenced by the works of Frances Burney's wrote **realistic novels** like *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park, Emma, Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. Her works portrayed the experience of inner self and delved closely on themes of the English life. She belonged to a family of the landed gentry and thus observed life around her, presenting a faithful reflection of the English society.

The novelist Walter Scott wrote classics such as *Ivanhoe*, *Rob Roy*, *The Lady of the Lake*, *Waverley*, *The Heart of Midlothian* and *The Bride of Lammermoor*. His novels were famous for their characteristic locales of Scotland or the Scottish Highlands and its local history and culture as reflected in the narrative of *Waverly*. His works blended history, legend and poetry. Similarly, the novels of Maria Edgeworth like *Castle Rackrent* and Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale* were both set in the locales of Ireland which is why their novels were considered as **regional novels**.



LET US KNOW

The Lake Poets: The Lake District also known as the Lakes or the Lake District. It is a popular holiday destination located in North West England and the scenic beauty of which inspired the Romantic poets. At the turn of the 19th century, as a part of the Romantic Movement, a group of poets residing beside the Lake District of England formed into what came to be known as the group of Lake Poets. *The Edinburgh Review* praised and published much of their works.

The leading figures of the Lake Poets are **William Wordsworth**, **Samuel Taylor Coleridge**, and **Robert Southey**. Several other poets and writers like Wordsworth's sister Dorothy Wordsworth, Charles Lloyd, Hartley Coleridge, John Wilson, and Thomas De Quincey were also associated with the Lake Poets. Also other poets and writers like Felicia 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.

3) Wu, Duncan. (ed.) (2006) *Romanticism: An Anthology.* Cowley Road, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

4) Website: http://www.bloomsburyacademic.com/

9.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity

Ans to Q No 2: The end of the 18th century, peak from around 1800 to 1850.

Ans to Q No 3: England was a wealthy nation also known as, “the workshop of the world”, Huge sums were spent on the army with a raise in food prices, the nobility and the nouveau rich became rich, there was unequal distribution of wealth, rising problems of working classes and reforms in England.

Ans to Q No 4: It coincided with and as a reaction to - Industrial Revolution, end of the century.

Ans to Q No 5: The characteristic ideals were namely : worth of individuality, different neoclassical ideals, reaction against Enlightenment age, imagination, emotional, sensory, spiritual, supernatural, Beauty, Nature, rural life

Ans to Q No 6: Various literary forms were conduct books, children’s literature, sensibility and gothic literature, radical works, literary magazines, literary criticism, periodicals, epic, epic poetry, Romantic fragment, biography, autobiography and Romantic drama

Ans to Q No 7: The literary features were in contrast to literary ideals of neoclassical age emphasising imagination and insight, subjective

experience and individuality, emotions, sentiments and creativity, exploration of sensory, Nature's beauty, fancy controlled by judgement, moments of vision, supernatural, transcendental, common man's experience… role of poet

Ans to Q No 8: The first generation poets: Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge second generation poets: Byron, Shelley and Keats.

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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