

Appreciating English Literature

Part Four

Romanticism

Romanticism was an intellectual and artistic movement that originated in the latter part of the 18th century. It was a reaction against the scientific rationalisation of nature during the Enlightenment, and is commonly expressed in literature, music, painting and drama.



Romanticism

Very few concepts are more important to the understanding of Romanticism than the sublime, the beautiful and the picturesque. Edmund Burke's definitions in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* are key. He defines the sublime as a quality of art or experience that "excites the ideas of pain and danger" that produces "the strongest emotion that the mind is capable of feeling" and whose "effects are admiration, reverence, and respect." These were the emotions that Romantic poets tried to create in their poems. Burke adds that the sublime is associated with "greatness of dimension," "infinity," and "difficulty" and by things that are rough or rugged.

Romanticism

Furthermore, the sublime has long been understood to mean a quality of greatness or grandeur that inspires awe and wonder. From the 18th and 19th centuries onwards, the concept and the emotions it inspires have been a source of inspiration for artists and writers, particularly in relation to the natural landscape.

The sublime is an enigmatic experience that involves our taking pleasure in being overwhelmed by sights, sounds, sensations or ideas that are larger, greater or more powerful than us, or otherwise threatening to us. In classical antiquity, and in British and European culture, the sublime has fascinated generations of artists and thinkers in different ways. It has been connected with our experience of everything from nature and art to religion, science, and social and political life.

Romantic Poets

William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron

Central features of Romantic poetry include:

- **An emphasis on emotional and imaginative spontaneity**
- **The importance of self-expression and individual feeling**
- **An almost religious response to nature**
- **A capacity for wonder and consequently a reverence for the freshness and innocence of the vision of childhood**

Romantic Poets

William Blake (1757-1827): a visionary poet who was also an artist and engraver, with a particular interest in childhood and a strong hatred of industrialisation

William Wordsworth (1770-1850): who came from the Lake District and was the leading poet of the group, whose work was especially associated with the centrality of the self and the love of nature

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834): Wordsworth's closest colleague and collaborator, a powerful intellectual whose work was influenced by contemporary ideas about science and philosophy

Romantic Poets

The second generation of Romantic poets included:

George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824)

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

John Keats (1795-1821)

All these poets remains among the most widely read, anthologised, written about and taught in schools, colleges and universities.

Blake

**Love seeketh not Itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care;
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair.**



Wordsworth

“Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity”

**For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:**



Coleridge

**In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round;
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.**



Keats

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.



Shelley

**Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies**

**Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!**

**Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,**

**Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened Earth**

**The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?**



Byron

“The great object of life is sensation – to feel that we exist, even though in pain.”

**Once more upon the waters! yet once more!
And the waves bound beneath me as a steed
That knows his rider. Welcome to their roar!
Swift be their guidance, wheresoe'er it lead!
Though the strain'd mast should quiver as a reed,
And the rent canvas fluttering strew the gale,
Still must I on; for I am as a weed,
Flung from the rock, on Ocean's foam, to sail
Where'er the surge may sweep, the tempest's breath prevail.**



