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**Chapter Eight****THE AGE OF ROMANTICISM(1798—1832)**

From the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1798 to the death of Sir Walter Scott in 1832, a new movement appeared on the literary arena. The essence of this new movement is the glorification of instinct and emotion, a deep veneration of nature, and a flaming zeal to remake the world.

**1. Historical background**

The political and social factors that gave rise to the romantic movement were the three revolutions. Under the influence of the American and French revolutions, national liberation movements and democratic movements swept across many European countries. England was no exception. Though the government allied hand in glove with the reactionary forces on the Continent, political reforms and mass demonstrations violently shook the very foundation of aristocratic rule in England. No less important were the consequences of the industrial revolution. It brought great wealth to the rich and worsened working and living conditions of the poor. With the invention of new machines, many skilled workers were replaced by women and children and working hours for young children lasted fourteen to sixteen hours a day. Ignorant of the real causes that brought them such disaster, workers in various places attributed their miseries and growing poverty to the introduction of the new machines. Hence there broke out a machine-breaking movement, called the Luddite movement, named after Ned Ludd, who in a fit of temper, destroyed some stocking frames in 1779. Workers organized themselves and gave voice to their distress by

breaking machines. The riots lasted from 1811 to 1818. The government took repressive measures against it.

## 2. Intellectual background

The shift in literature from emphasis on reason to instinct and emotion was intellectually prepared for by a number of thinkers in the later half of the 18th century.



Rousseau(1712—1778), the French philosopher, is generally regarded as the father of romanticism. He rejects the worship of reason. Reason, he maintains, has its use, but it is not the whole answer. In the really vital problems of life it is much safer to rely on feelings, to follow our instincts and

emotions. He contrasts the freedom and innocence of primitive men with the tyranny and wickedness of civilized society, and even insists that the progress of learning is destructive to human happiness. He preaches that civilized men should “return to nature”, to a primitive state of life. He praises the natural man as “the noble savage” and attacks the civilized man as “the depraved animal”. *The New Heloise* (1761) and *Emile* (1762) sowed the seeds of romanticism.

Another thinker who contributed to this shift of emphasis from reason to instinct and emotion was Edmund Burke(1729 — 1797). As a political philosopher he is known for his *Reflection on the Revolution in France* (1790), in which he repudiates the



revolution, claiming that no one has the right to destroy the institutions and traditions that have been passed down to him through generations and to destroy them is to destroy civilization itself. However, Burke's early work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756) is an important piece that deals with aesthetics, i. e., the theory of beauty. He distinguishes between two kinds of beauty—the sublime and the beautiful. The idea of sublimity is first found in *The Poetics* by Aristotle (382 B. C. – 322 B. C.) and *On the Sublime* by Longinus (213? – 273?). According to Longinus, sublimity is a kind of masculine beauty, more powerful and loftier than the beautiful. Burke further associates this kind of beauty with the feeling of danger and power whereas the beautiful is associated with smallness, elegance, and smoothness. He links the sublime and the beautiful to human emotions and physical senses as well as imagination, thus elevating the function of instincts and emotions.



Still another thinker who exerted much influence on this change was Thomas Paine (1737–1809). He published *The Rights of Man* in 1791, an answer to Burke's *Reflection* published in the previous year. *The Rights of Man* asserts that "man has no property in man" and justifies the radical actions of the French people in the revolution, claiming that it is the right of the people to

overthrow a government that opposes humanity. This assertion of individual rights is in direct opposition to Neo-classicist's thinking of binding oneself to traditions and conventions.

### 3. Characteristic features of the romantic movement

(1) Subjectivism: Instead of regarding poetry as “a mirror to nature”, the source of which is in the outer world, romantic poets describe poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” which expresses the poet’s mind. The interest of the romantic poets is not in the objective world or in the action of men, but in the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of the poets themselves. Even the description of natural and human objects is modified by the poets’ feelings. In short, romanticism is related to subjectivism, whereas neo-classicism is related to objectivism. The poetry of the Romantic Age in England is distinctive for its high degree of imagination.

(2) Spontaneity: Wordsworth defines poetry as “the *spontaneous* overflow of feelings”. This emphasis on spontaneity is opposed to the “rules” and “regulations” imposed on the poets by neoclassic writers. Romanticism is an assertion of independence, a departure from the neo-classic rules. A work of art must be original. The role of instinct, intuition, and the feelings of “the heart” is stressed instead of neo-classicists’ emphasis on “the head”, on regularity, uniformity, decorum, and imitation of the classical writers.

(3) Singularity: Romantic poets have a strong love for the remote, the unusual, the strange, the supernatural, the mysterious, the splendid, the picturesque, and the illogical. All these qualities are those that the neo-classic writers tried to avoid.

(4) Worship of nature: The romantic poets are worshippers of nature, especially the sublime aspect of a natural scene. Romantic poets read in nature some mysterious force. Some treat nature as a living entity that shares the poet’s feelings. Some even regard nature as the revelation of God.

(5) Simplicity: Romantic poets take to using everyday language spoken by the rustic people as opposed to the poetic diction used by neo-classic writers. Under the influence of the American and French

revolutions, there was a growth of democratic feelings, and an increasing belief that every human being is worth being praised. Hence there was a revival of folk literature, a real awakening of interest in the life of the common people, a sense of universal brotherhood, and a growing sympathy for the suffering of the people. The romantic movement is characterized by a humanitarian idealism. Many poets had a vision of the brotherhood of mankind, universal sharing, and the ultimate freedom of human spirits.

(6) There is a dominating note of melancholy in the poems of the romantic poets. The theme of exile, isolation, and a longing for the infinite, for an indefinable and inaccessible goal is commonly found in their works.

(7) It was an age of poetry by which the poets outpoured their feelings and emotions. Romantic poets loved to use a freer verse form, not the standard form of "heroic couplets" preferred by neoclassic writers.

Romanticism is a term that denotes most of the writings that were written between 1798 and 1832. However, it cannot be applied to all writings. Nor is it applicable to all writings of a particular writer. Many different qualities contradicting each other are seen in the works of different writers or in the work of a single writer, so there might be elements that are not romantic.

It should be known that the term "romanticism" was not known to the poets themselves in their lifetime. It was a term applied to them half a century later by literary historians. Contemporary critics treated them as independent individuals or grouped them into separate schools.

## WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1770—1850)



Wordsworth was born and grew up near the Lake district, a beautiful scenic spot in northwestern England. From his very early years, he had a profound love for nature, which characterizes all his works. His parents died when he was very young, and he was put under the care of his relatives. He went to study at Cambridge from 1787 to 1791. In 1791 he went to France to learn French in preparation for the career of a tutor. There he was greatly impressed by the revolutionary zeal, and he would have joined in the revolution if there had not been pressures from his relatives across the channel to call him back to England. He was also involved in a love affair with a French girl and would have married her if the war had not broken out between England and France. His revolutionary enthusiasm died down as he was shocked at the massacre during the Reign of Terror under the rule of Robespierre. From 1799 to his death he was politically very conservative and lived in retirement at Gras-mere in the Lake district in the company of his sister Dorothy Wordsworth and his friend Coleridge. In 1843 after the death of Southey he was made poet laureate.

The life and thinking of Wordsworth are illustrated in the long poem *The Recluse* which remains unfinished. *The Prelude* (1850) is also a long poem which



tells the growth of his mind. In 1798 he published *Lyrical Ballads* in collaboration with Coleridge. The preface to this collection of poems is an important piece of literary criticism in English literature. It can be read as a declaration of romanticism, in which Wordsworth openly expresses his theory of poetry, which is contrary to the theory of neo-classicism.

Wordsworth is most celebrated for his poetry of nature. His love for nature is boundless. To him nature means more than rivers, trees, rocks, mountains, lakes, and so on. Nature has a moral value and has its philosophical significance. Nature is for him the embodiment of the Divine Spirit. He believes that God and universe are identical, that God is everything and everything is God. To Wordsworth nature is the greatest of all teachers, and those who are uncorrupted by urban society, especially those simple rustic people, can communicate directly with nature which gives them power, peace, and happiness.



**Grasmere Lake Wordsworth lived from 1799**