



E-Content

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UNIT 27 INTRODUCTION TO ROMANTIC POETRY

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27.0 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this unit are to:

- 1) provide a comprehensive view of the Romantic Movement, its beginnings, its sources of inspiration, its important features, its major figures and their contributions.
- 2) enable you to analyse, identify and appreciate Romantic poetry, and
- 3) make you realise the importance of the Romantic Movement in English literature as a significant and fruitful literary epoch.

27.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to the Romantic Movement in England. It deals with the political, social, literary and other factors which brought about this movement; it considers various definitions of the term, 'Romanticism'; it devotes a good part to a discussion of the salient features of Romanticism. The work of the early romantic poets is covered in section 27.5. Then the major romantic poets and their

contribution to the movement are discussed in detail. After providing an account of Robert Burns's use of the folk song and William Blake's use of mysticism and symbolism, the unit moves on to the major figures of the Romantic Movement in England, William Wordsworth and Samuel Tylor Coleridge, who are deemed to be the pioneers of Romantic poetry in English. After a brief survey of Wordsworth's work, his theory of poetry as stated in the Preface (1800) to *Lyrical Ballads* is examined critically. The literary partnership between Wordsworth and Coleridge and their later differences are considered with reference to Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. The deviations from his stated principles in the actual writing of Wordsworth's poetry are briefly illustrated. A section is set apart for Coleridge's poetry and criticism. The last section of the unit introduces you to the second generation of Romantic poets, Byron, Shelley and Keats.

The lesson provides self-check exercises at the end of each important section so that you can assess your comprehension of the material presented. Questions covering the entire lesson are given at the end of the unit.

The major points discussed in the lesson are recapitulated briefly in "Summing up". The unit concludes with a suggested reading list which is a selected and annotated bibliography relevant to the subject matter of the unit.

27.2 BACKGROUND TO THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT

Historians of English Literature have designated the period from 1798 to 1832 as the Romantic period. Wordsworth and Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798; Sir Walter Scott died in 1832. Also, the Reform Bill which extended the right to vote to the middle class and labourers was passed by Parliament in 1832. During this period, England moved from a primarily agricultural to a modern industrialized society. Thus the balance of power passed on from the land-owning aristocracy to the owners of industrial units which employed large numbers of people. The mill-owners and their employees had developed different perspectives. In the political arena there were revolutions of far-reaching consequences to England. The American Revolution led to the Declaration of Independence (1776) by the thirteen colonies. The French Revolution was a shattering and sundering event which affected the whole of Western Europe in several ways.

The French Revolution received enthusiastic support in the beginning from the liberals and radicals in England. The Declaration of the Rights of Man by the French National Assembly was welcomed. Edmund Burke disapproved the events in France in his *Reflection on the Revolution in France* (1790). Tom Paine issued a spirited rejoinder to Burke in his *Rights of Man* (1791-92). Tom Paine pleaded for a democratic republic for England by peaceful or violent means. Another book, *Inquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) by William Godwin made a great impact on Wordsworth, Shelley and others. Godwin predicted that eventually all property would be distributed equally and all government would disappear. Later events in the French Revolution, notably the execution of the royal family, the guillotine of innocent people during the Reign of Terror, and Napoleon's dictatorship disenchanted the early supporters.

The economic sphere also saw great convulsions. The manufacturing class became more powerful than the agricultural class. With the invention of James Watt's steam engine which replaced wind and water as sources of energy in 1765, there was a revolutionary change in the means and pace of production. The population of England was becoming either owners and traders or wage earners without property. Thus the people were effectively divided into the rich and the poor. With the introduction of more machinery into industry, there was more unemployment. The soldiers demobilised after the French wars aggravated the labour market. There was an economic depression in 1815 caused by the fall in wartime demand for manufactured goods. These political, economic and social factors caused agitations

and riots by the working class. The ruling class responded by more repressive measures. The unrest culminated in passing the Reform Bill which met the political aspirations of at least some sections of the population.

There were important developments in other spheres also. Capt. James Cook circumnavigated the globe (1768-71) and discovered Australia and the Sandwich Islands. Fascinating accounts of life in the South Seas led to a re-thinking on the nature of society and the political systems. Ocean travel became safer with Cook's accurate charting of the coastlines.

The exploitation of new markets in India and elsewhere gave a fillip to commerce. This in turn led to the development of industry and technology. The dissemination of ideas kept pace with the improvements in the communications network. The pamphlet became a powerful means for debating controversial issues. For instance, the debate on the French Revolution was conducted through pamphlets. Eventually the pamphlet was replaced by the periodical for debate on political reforms further. Parliamentary Reform was inspired by the achievement of the middle class in France. Public opinion in England favoured representation to big towns leading to the passage of the Reform Bill.

The Romantic writers lived through such momentous changes in the political, economic, social and literary spheres. The idea of revolution informed the Romantic Movement from the beginning. Many major writers of this period were aware that great changes were taking place around them and that these changes would inevitably find their way into literature also. The French Revolution seemed to be the great divide and the beginning of a new era in the history of mankind. William Hazlitt rightly observed in his book, *The Spirit of the Age*. "There was a mighty ferment in the heads of statesmen and poets, kings and people.... It was a time of promise, a renewal of the world - and of letters".

The French Revolution swept away time-honoured hierarchies in different spheres. The new slogans, liberty, equality and fraternity promised a free and egalitarian society. Monarchy was abolished and the feudal structure was demolished. The principle of the dissolution of hierarchies carried into literature meant that the epic and tragedy which were at the top of the literary pyramid had to yield place to such forms as the lyric, the ode and the ballad. In language, the cultivated speech of the elite was sought to be replaced by the speech of the common people. In the choice of themes, great events had to make way for more commonplace incidents. The characters depicted in poetry need not be kings or queens; humbler folk like a leech-gatherer, or a highland lass, or even an idiot boy, is good enough for poetic composition. Thus the French Revolution caused a democratisation of literature in genre, in language, in themes and in characters. The spirit of the age demanded these changes and the creative writer responded enthusiastically.

Self-Check Exercise 1

1. Which years specify the Romantic period in English literature?

2. What is the special significance of these years in English literary or political history?

3. Name two important changes which occurred in the political and economic spheres in this period.

4. What is Tom Paine's theme in *Rights of Man*?

5. What did Godwin predict in his book?

6. Explain briefly the impact of the French Revolution on literature.

27.3 DEFINITION OF ROMANTICISM

The term, 'Romanticism', is controversial. F.L. Lucas, in his book, *The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal* (1948), counted as many as 11,396 definitions. The term comes from the name, 'Rome'. In the seventh and eighth centuries there were three main languages in Europe; (1) lingua Latina which was the language of the scholars, (2) lingua barbara which was the language of Germanic tribes, and (3) lingua romana rustica which was a group of vulgar Latin dialects from which the Romance languages, namely, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Rumanian are derived. The term, 'Romantic', is related to the Romance languages, the peripheral tradition, rather than to Latin, the main tradition.

The term, 'romantic', was first used in the late seventeenth century to describe paintings with certain bizarre qualities. When Le Tourneur referred to Shakespeare as a romantic writer, he meant that the English playwright was not a neo-classic writer. What is meant by a romantic writer is one who insists, implicitly or otherwise, on his own uniqueness. In the Age of Reason, many writers said that they represented their age. This was not so with the Romantics. Wordsworth and Coleridge who worked together for sometime never applied the term, "romantic", to themselves. Goethe defined "classic" as good health and "romantic" as sickness. This distinction is more psychological than aesthetic and it has received much currency. Around 1800, when Madame de Staël introduced German romantic literature into France, she stressed the medieval and christian qualities in that literature. These qualities replaced rationalism and agnosticism of the Age of Reason. She felt that the aridity of the eighteenth century was over and that the new literature celebrated the open heart. Heine, the German poet, held an opposite view. Victor Hugo described romanticism as 'liberalism in literature'. The important point is that romanticism has political overtones.

The term implies a literary and philosophical theory which tends to see the individual at the very center of all life and all experience. The individual is placed at the center of art. Literature is therefore an expression of his unique feelings and particular attitudes.

As Thrall and his associates say, romanticism, "places a high premium upon the creative function of the imagination seeing art as a formulation of intuitive imaginative perceptions that tend to speak a nobler truth than that of fact, logic, or the here and now." Romanticism spread through most of Western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It affected literature, art, music, philosophy, religion and politics.

It may be more easy to understand the term, 'romanticism', by examining its salient features in the next section.

Self-Check Exercise 2

1. Explain the origin of the term, 'Romantic'.

2. What was implied in Le Tourneur's description of Shakespeare as a romantic?

3. How did Goethe differentiate the two terms, 'Classic', and 'romantic'?

4. What features of romanticism did Madame de Staël identify in German romantic literature?

5. What is Victor Hugo's definition of romanticism?

27.4 SALIENT FEATURES OF ROMANTICISM

Romanticism is opposed to the artificial conventions, the reigning literary tradition and the poetic establishment. The Neo-classical theory of poetry conceived it as imitation and as something acquired by training. The function of poetry, according to this view, is to instruct and to please. Art is a mirror in which we find a reflection of life. For the Romantics, the source of poetry is the poet himself. As Wordsworth puts it, poetry is a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". It is an inborn gift and not something acquired. Poetry is the expression of emotion. The poet's imagination creates poetry. The traditional view that poetry is a painstaking endeavour is discarded by the Romantics. Blake thought that poetry comes from inspiration, vision and prophecy. Keats said that poetry should come "as naturally as the leaves of a tree".

Romantic poets made daring innovations, in the themes, forms, language and style of poetry. Lowly and eccentric characters like an idiot boy or a leech gatherer are material for poetic treatment by Wordsworth. Supernatural themes are used by Coleridge (*The Ancient Mariner*) and Keats (*The Eve of St. Agnes*). Romantic poetry often deals with the "far away and long ago", exotic places and forgotten events figure in Romantic Poetry. It draws inspiration from folk literature and the literature of the Middle Ages and of classical antiquity. Yet another innovation is the use of symbolist techniques, notably, by Blake and Shelley. The latter poet's "West Wind" and "Skylark" are good examples.

The Romantic poets displaced humanity by external nature as poetic subject-matter. Thus the description of landscape and its aspects become prominent. In fact, poets like Wordsworth saw in nature the power to chasten and subdue. While neoclassic poetry is written on other people - Pope's *The Rape of Lock* is an example - Romantic poetry is about the poet himself. The latter is highly subjective. The Romantic poets also had a fascination for solitary figures, social non-conformists, outcasts and rebels such as Prometheus, Cain, Don Juan and Satan.

Another significant innovation is the use of everyday speech of ordinary people instead of lofty poetic diction. We shall discuss this in detail later. The Romantic poets looked for new metres and stanzas to replace traditional forms. The heroic couplet gave place to the ballad, the sonnet, the Spenserian stanza and other experimental verse forms. Rural life is idealized in Romantic poetry. The wild, the irregular and the grotesque in Nature and art fascinated the Romantic poets. Taboo themes like incest are used without any inhibition. Conformity to tradition and decorum as observed by the earlier generation are no longer respected.

Classicism and Romanticism are generally considered somewhat antithetical. Classicism is concerned with the social, the formal, the intellectual and the static whereas Romanticism is concerned with the individual, the informal, the emotional and the dynamic. For instance, the common qualities, not the differences, of individuals figures in classical literature. Joseph Addison's Sir Roger is a basic human type. But the Romantics took their cue from Rousseau who said, "If I'm not better than other people, at least I'm different". The Neo-classical writers were interested in conformity, formality, acceptance of approved standards and patterns of behaviour. Careful workmanship is the hallmark of classicism. The unities are preserved by the classical writers whereas the Romantic writers do not observe them. Classicism focusses on the intellectual, romanticism on the emotional. The former is interested in describing static scenes in Greek sculpture whereas the latter attempts to catch the transient moments. Keat's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" depicts the activities of people etched on a static urn.

Thus the Romantic Movement was a revolutionary movement in many ways.

Self-Check Exercise 3

1. Explain the basic difference between the Neoclassical and Romantic theories of poetry.

2. Name two important innovations in Romantic poetry.

3. What type of themes and characters are chosen by the Romantic poets?

4. What Poetic forms were favoured by the Romantics?

5. Explain the antithetical relationship between classicism and Romanticism.

27.5 EARLY ROMANTIC POETS

Some of the features of Romanticism which we discussed above are seen much earlier than 1798 in a number of poets:

- 27.5.1 James Thomson (1700-1748)** took a deep interest in nature. His poem, "*The Seasons*" (1730), evokes interest in the processes of nature. He is fascinated by the fearful aspects of nature such as floods and storms. He is described as "a poet of pictorial landscape". He speaks of the interactions between man and Nature in "*The Seasons*". The great variety and beauty of Nature move him deeply. The following lines remind us of Wordsworth:

Now the soft Hour
Of walking comes for him who lonely loves
To seek the distant Hills, and there converse
With Nature, there to harmonize his Heart,
And in pathetic Song of breathe around
The harmony to Others.

("The Seasons", II, 1379-84)

- 27.5.2 Mark Akenside (1721-1770)** was another fore-runner of Wordsworth. He attempted to revive the Greek forms of the lyric. His most important poem, "*The Pleasure of Imagination*" (1744) is at once didactic and descriptive. The poet sees that the beauty and harmony of all nature is shown directly to the purified intellect:

Once more search, undismayed, the dark profound
Where nature works in secret; view the beds
Of min'ral treasure, and th'eternal vault
That bounds the hoary ocean; trace the forms
Of atoms moving with incessant change.
Their elemental round; behold the seeds
Of being, and the energy of life
Kindling the mass with ever-active flame:
Them to the secrets of the working mind
Attentive turn;

"*The Pleasure of Imagination*". Book I, 11 512-52.

- 27.5.3 Joseph Warton's (1722-1800) "*The Enthusiast*" (1744)** presents Rousseau's primitivism and the Romantics' love of the antique. It speaks of the communion with nature, the superiority of the Noble Savage and the idyllic innocence of the New World:

Happy the first of Men, ere yet confin'd
To smoky cities; who, in sheltering Groves,
Warm caves, and deep-sunk Vallies liv'd and lov'd
By Cares unwounded.

"The Enthusiast", 11. 78-81).

27.5.4 William Collins (1721-1759) exercised pervasive influence on almost all the Romantic poets. He finds that landscape evokes ideas and emotions. He particularly loves Nature at twilight. His "Ode to Evening" is the forerunner of Keats's "To Autumn". Romantic tendencies such as a return to the past and anti-intellectualism may be noticed in his "Ode on Popular Superstitions". Coleridge is impressed with Collins's use of superstitions and classical legends. Collins's favourite theme of the twilight scene is illustrated in the following lines:

Now Air is hush'd, save where the weak-ey'd Bat,
With short shrill Shriek flits by on leathern Wing,
Or where the Beetle winds
His small but sullen Horn,
As oft he rises 'midst the twilight Path,
Against the Pilgrim born in heedless Hum:

"Ode to Evening", 11.9-14

27.5.5 Thomas Gray's (1716-71) well-known poem, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, pays attention to nature and humble life which are dear to the Romantic poets:

Now folds the glimmering landscape on the sight,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;

(11.5-8)

Gray's later writings indicate the swing in the taste towards Medieval literature and Scandinavian folklore. His letters anticipate the Romantics' love of scenery and nature. He records the different moods of nature in charming detail. Such descriptions paved the way for Wordsworth's memorable descriptions of nature. Here is a short piece from Gray:

"In the evening walked alone down to the lake by the side of *Crow Park* after sunset and saw the solemn colouring of night draw on, the last gleam of fading away on the hill-tops, the deep serene of the waters, and the long shadows of the mountains thrown across them, till they nearly touched the hithermost shore. At distance heard the murmur of many waterfalls not audible in the daytime".

(*Journal in the Lakes*)

27.5.6 William Cowper (1731-1800) is yet another precursor of romanticism. For him, love of Nature and religious worship are related activities. He believes that contemplation in the midst of Nature will bestow wisdom more easily than will reading of books. He prefers the beauty of the countryside, he portrays Nature in his poems. Cowper also attacks Alexander Pope for his "smoothness" and advocates the 'manly rough line'. This idea is later developed by Wordsworth. Cowper 'anticipated the romantic generation in his political liberalism, in his humanitarianism, and most of all in his sympathetic and faithful rendering of external nature'. Contrasting the rural with the urban scene, he wrote:

God made the country, and man made the town,
What wonder then that health and virtue, gifts
That can alone make sweet the bitter draught

That life holds out to all, should most abound
And least be threatn'd in the fields and groves?
("The Task", Book I.11.749-753).

Self-Check Exercise 4

1. What particular features make Thomson akin to Romantic poets?

2. What Romantic trait is noticeable in Akenside's poetry?

3. Which principle of Rousseau do you observe in Warton?

4. What Romantic tendencies in Collins won the appreciation of Coleridge?

5. In what particulars can Gray's *Elegy* be called Romantic?

6. What is the justification for calling Cowper a precursor of Romanticism?

27.6 ROBERT BURNS (1759-1796)

Burns is the most beloved poet of the Scots; he is also a symbol of their national spirit. He was interested in a number of things which were later considered essentially romantic tendencies. He was steeped in Scottish folklore; he loved freedom; he respected the common man; He was attracted by nature; swimming against the current in his time, he believed that emotion was a better guide than reason.

27.6.1 The Use of Folk Song

Scottish patriotism in the eighteenth century longed for independence and unity. It seized upon any symbol of its uniqueness. Burns went in search of the Scottish ballad tradition both to oppose and reject the English culture. He is probably the best eighteenth century example of the influence of folk poetry on the mainstream English poetry. There are two tendencies in Burns's life:

1. the cultivated tradition of polite poetry in the eighteenth century.
2. peasant poetry about peasants among whom he lived.

Burns did not believe in any rules of composition. His poetry was strongly influenced by folk poetry. The folk elements in his poetry are:

27.6.2 Themes

The themes are generally death, birth, youth, old age, love and grief. Seasonal activities like harvesting and May dances and seasonal changes like snowfall are also used. Settings and dramatic situations are often stylized. Tableaus repeating certain fixed scenes occur in folk poetry.

27.6.3 Form

The form of folk poetry is that of a debate, a series of riddles or tests. Birds and flowers are given human qualities. Number three is significant; three riddles, three actions, etc.

27.6.4 Vocabulary

The vocabulary is simple. Many stock phrases are used. Because of the oral origins of folk poetry, stock phrases and patterns aided the memory of the oral poet. Formal devices such as the refrain impose limits on language in folk poetry and indicate its origin in dance.

27.6.5 Rhyme

Folk poetry is not rigid in its use of rhyme as Neoclassical poetry was. Assonance, alliteration and internal rhyme are common in this poetry. Observe these poetic devices in the following line of Burns:

There Wild Woods *grow* and rivers *row*.

There is variety in rhyme schemes. The metre in folk poetry is flexible.

Burns wrote many traditional and also original songs, but he wrote only three long poems. There was a movement favouring the short, pointed lyric.

Burns wrote a poem entitled "To a Mouse", which is certainly a lowly subject. Writing on such subjects was against the grain of Neo-classicism. Another poem, "The Cotter's Saturday Night", shows his interest in the humble people. He had sympathy for the oppressed, sharing the ideals of the French Revolution. He had expressed dangerous sentiments such as the following just before the Revolution:

A fig for those by law protected!
Liberty's a glorious feast!
Courts for cowards were erected,
Churches built to please the priest.

("The Jolly Beggars", 11.292 ff)

Burns expressed strong patriotism for Scotland: he revolted against religious orthodoxy; he satirized Presbyterian and Calvinist faith in Scotland in his poems. "Holy Willie's Prayer" and "The Holy Fair". He is thus a precursor of the later Romantic poets like Shelley who re-examined religious belief in a more serious way.

27.6.6 Love Poems

Burns's greatest poems are his love poems. They are also influenced by folk poetry. Repetition as a poetic device to produce an incantatory effect may be found in: My

Love is like a Red, Red Rose". Neo-classical poets like Pope avoided repetition for the sake of economy and for the progression of ideas.

Another poem of Burns, "Ye Flowery Banks" is a lament which presents a native view of nature. In this girl's song, the traditional rose-thorn image is used to indicate loss of chastity. Happy nature is contrasted with the melancholy speaker and there is a return to the place of former happiness. Burns resorts to suggestion rather than direct statement in this as well as in other poems. These are all intimations of Romanticism.

The range of Burns's love-songs is great. He could write of love from his personal experience and from a woman's point of view. He could write of love in old age with equal charm. Male protectiveness appears repetitively in many of his love songs including "A Red, Red Rose". Patriotism is another recurring theme in his songs. "Auld Lang Syne" is called "the world's greatest song of human fellowship and friendship".

Though Burns's poetry is based on local people and situations, he is not a 'regional' poet in any narrow sense. He stresses the elemental, the universal and the permanent moods and thoughts in all humanity. He used the real language of man as he found it in the folk literature of his country and thus showed the path to Wordsworth. His use of lowly subjects and simple diction was a worthwhile example to Wordsworth and through him to other Romantic poets.

Self-Check Exercise 5

- i. What Romantic tendencies are present in Burns's poetry?

2. To which age did Burns belong chronologically?

3. Mention one symbol of Scottish patriotism which Burns sought passionately.

4. What are the contradictory but concurrent tendencies in Burns's poetry?

5. What are the principal themes of folk poetry.

6. Explain briefly the formal features of folk poetry.

