

## Background: The Romantics 1780-1830



The Romantic Age is a term used to describe life and literature in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Many of the most important English writers of the period turned away from the values and ideas characteristic of the Age of Reason toward what they perceived as a more daring, individual, and imaginative approach to both literature and life.

In general, the Romantic writers placed the individual, rather than society, at the center of their vision. They tended to be optimists who believed in the possibility of progress and improvement, for humanity as well as for individuals; thus, most espoused democratic values.

By and large, the Romantic writers understood the greatness of the writers of the Age of Reason, but they felt the need to strike out in new directions in search of fresh ideas and forms compatible with a new, developing sensibility.

They tended to believe that the Augustan dedication to common sense and experience, reasonableness, and tradition,

though in many ways admirable, had resulted in a limitation of vision, an inability to transcend the hard facts of the real world to glimpse an ideal order of possibility.

These new attitudes and approaches were closely linked to a political event of great importance—the French Revolution, which began in 1789. English history in this period is largely the story of England's involvement with the Revolution. For a time, almost every important British writer responded warmly to the cry of the French people for "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." William Wordsworth later declared: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven!"

Whereas the writers of the Age of Reason tended to regard evil as a basic part of human nature, the Romantic writers generally saw humanity as naturally good, but corrupted by society and its institutions of religion, education, and government. The French Revolution gave life and breath to the dreams of some Romantic writers for a society in which there

would be liberty and equality for all.

One of the most significant aspects of nineteenth-century English life was the slow but steady application of the principles of democracy. England emerged from the eighteenth century a parliamentary state which the monarchy was largely a figurehead. The English Parliament was far from a true representative body, however, until, after years of popular agitation, Parliament finally passed the First Reform Bill in 1832. This bill extended the franchise, or right to vote, to virtually all the middle class; it did not enfranchise the working class.

The Industrial Revolution, which flanked the Romantic Age, involved the change that took place in England (from about 1750-1850) from an agricultural to an industrial society and from home manufacturing to factory production. The Industrial Revolution helped make England prosperous and powerful, but it involved exploitation of the workers, who lived under deplorable conditions.

became progressively more important as the Romantic movement flourished in the early nineteenth century in the poetry of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats.

Throughout the Age of Reason interest centered in the ancient classics of Greece and Rome as models for writers. However, a few authors turned to other aspects of the past. Among them was Bishop Thomas Percy who, in 1765, published *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, a collection of ballads dating back to medieval times. These forgotten evidences of England's past became extremely popular with the Romantics. They relished the medieval atmosphere, the sense of mystery and the supernatural, the elemental themes of courage and valor, hatred and revenge, love and death.

The literature of this brief period has about it a sense of the uniqueness of the individual, a deep personal earnestness, a sensuous delight in both the common and exotic things of this world, a blend of intensely lived joy and dejection, a yearning for ideal states of being, and a probing interest in mysterious and mystical experience. If the Romantic vision of the world was occasionally tinged with bitterness or outrage, it was because the Romantic confronted an increasingly mechanical and materialistic society which threatened to extinguish humanity's awareness of the rhythms of nature that shape all life.



John Keats

not always democrats and democrats were not always revolutionaries. Perhaps the safest thing to say is that romanticism represented an attempt to rediscovers the mystery and wonder of the world, an attempt to go beyond ordinary reality into the deeper, less obvious, and more elusive levels of individual human existence.

It is in literature that we can best see the emergence and growth of this romantic spirit in England. In the eighteenth century Robert Burns had written of the joys and sorrows of humble village folk. Thomas Gray had written of the life and work of plain country people, as well as of the beauties of nature. Various elements present in the eighteenth century—the belief in intuition, the emphasis on individual emotion rather than common experience, the interest in humble life, a belief in the healing power of the natural world—

As the Industrial Revolution gathered force, towns became more and more villages, forced by economic necessity to seek work in the growing factories, huddled together in slums. Workers—men, women, and children—labored from sunrise to sunset for meager wages. No child able to pull a part in the suffocating coal mines or to sweep a floor in the textile factories was considered too young to work by many employers and some parents. For the children of the poor, religious training, medical care, and education were practically nonexistent.

Gradually English society began to awaken to its obligations to the miserable and helpless. Through the efforts of reformers, the church and government assumed their responsibilities. Sunday schools were organized; hospitals were built; movements were begun to reform the prisons and regulate the conditions of child labor. The effects of revolution abroad, the demand for a more democratic government, and a growing awareness of social injustice at home were all reflected in a new spirit that over a period of years affected practically every aspect of English life.

The Romantic Age in England was part of a movement that affected all the countries of the Western World. The forms of romanticism were so many and varied that it is difficult to speak of the movement as a whole. It tended to align itself with the humanitarian spirit of the democratic revolutionaries, but romantics were

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# —Before You Read—

William Blake's Poetry

## Meet William Blake

"I must Create a System," wrote William Blake, "or be enslav'd by another Man's." Visionary, mystic, and revolutionary, Blake remained an original and unorthodox thinker throughout his life. Some of his contemporaries considered him insane, and his genius was not widely appreciated until long after his death. But fellow poet William Wordsworth said of Blake, "there is something in the madness of this man which interests me more than the sanity of Lord Byron and Walter Scott."

As a child, Blake wanted to become an artist, so at age ten he attended a drawing school in London. At fifteen he was apprenticed to an engraver, an artisan who cuts or carves designs into a hard material from which prints can be made. After completing his apprenticeship, Blake entered the Royal Academy, but he soon left because of a personal conflict with Sir Joshua Reynolds, the school's president and England's most famous and respected artist at the time.

When he was twenty-five, Blake married Catherine Boucher, an uneducated woman from a poor family. In her he found a suitable companion, because she accepted his eccentric lifestyle and his intense spirituality. "I have very little of Mr. Blake's company," she once told a friend. "He is always in Paradise." The couple was befriended by a group of progressive writers and artists who admired Blake's unusual thoughts and helped him publish his first book of poems when he was twenty-six.



Blake's books of poetry were unique in their combination of visual and literary art. He produced most of them by a method of relief etching that he invented. In this method, which he called "illuminated printing," Blake used pens and brushes to apply an acid-resistant substance to a copper plate. He then exposed the plate to acid, which ate away the uncoated parts and left a

raised pattern of lines—the text and illustration for a single page. Each page was printed and then hand-colored by Blake and Catherine, and each book was bound by hand.

This way of making books was so time-consuming that Blake produced only a few copies. The originals that survive are ranked among the art treasures of the world. Full of striking designs that shimmer with glowing color and line to accompany his equally brilliant poems, these books constitute Blake's unique contribution to both art and literature.

**"If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite."**

**"I know my execution is not like anybody else. I do not intend it should be so. None but blockheads copy one another."**

**"Poetry fettered fetters the human race. Nations are destroyed, or flourish, in proportion as their poetry, painting, and music are destroyed or flourish!"**

—Blake

*William Blake was born in 1757 and died in 1827.*