

# **The Romantic Age**

## **Society and Letters**

### **The meaning of Romanticism**

Romanticism was a literary and artistic movement that emerged during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction against the extreme rationality prevailing during the Augustan period.

It marked a break with classical culture, a new interest in local and national traditions, a concern with the marvelous or strange and a renewed emphasis on feelings and emotions.

The term “Romanticism” was first coined by the German Romantic poet Friedrich Schlegel, the word itself comes from “romance”, which in the Middle Ages denoted the new vernacular languages derived from Latin.

### **The Romantic movement in Europe**

Romanticism had its origins in Germany in the 1770s. The *Sturm und Drang* movement was a revolutionary literary movement that reflected anti-Enlightenment and anti-Classicism attitudes, and its adherents stressed the importance of inspiration rather than reason, key figures are Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, or Friedrich von Schiller.

In France, Romantic ideals were introduced mainly through Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Madame de Staël. Rousseau introduced a new view of men, he proposed the idea that man is naturally good and that the evils of humanity come from civilization, he regarded the primitive man as the “noble savage”, this inspired a new interest in peasant poetry and the cult of nature.

### **Pre-Romanticism in England: a new sensibility**

By the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century a growing number of artists started to put the emphasis on feeling rather than rational thought, for example the “Graveyard poets” who chose subjects that created a strong sense of melancholy, sadness and gloom.

### **The English Romantics**

In English literature the Romantic movement indicates the span of time between 1798, when Wordsworth and Coleridge published their *Lyrical Ballads*, and 1832.

The most important English Romantic poets are grouped in two generations:

- **First Generation:** included Wordsworth and Coleridge. This generation produced the initial *manifesto* of English Romanticism: in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* they rejected the poetic diction of the Augustan Age as artificial, and proposed to deal with subjects from common life using the language really used by men. Coleridge, in particular, introduced the supernatural and the subject matter from far away and long ago, two of the most appealing alternative worlds were the Middle Ages, because of its supposed anti-intellectualism and mystery, and the Orient, associated with the dominance of emotion over reason and with personal desires over social restraint. The social restraint regarded women too, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin had revolutionary ideas about the role of women, their role shouldn't depend on sex, but rather on the social, educational, and political rights that women must be given.
- **Second Generation:** included Keats, Shelley, and Byron. They developed the aspects introduced by the first generation, but took them to greater extremes. They also expressed their ethical values in politics, they believed in the ethical values of revolution, for example Shelley and Byron helped the Carbonari movement in Italy against Austria, and Byron died in Greece helping Greeks against Ottoman despotism. Italy was very important to the second generation of English Romantics because it represented the childhood of civilization. Art, literature, architecture had had their birth and childhood in Italy, before time corrupted them, and so, to some extent, Italy embodied the Romantic myth of the innocence of men found in childhood

## A new response to Nature

Before Romantics, no one had responded with such intensity to the variety and beauty of the natural world. Romantic poetry suggests that Nature holds secrets about Man and his relation to the universe, time, space, to his own inner nature and to the secrets of his origin and destiny.

## The Sublime

A characteristic feature of the Romantic movement was the call for greater freedom of the expression of emotions, sentiments and fantasy and for greater spontaneity in thoughts and actions. An important concept in this sense is the Sublime.

It was an idea associated with fear, natural magnificence, vastness and intense emotion.

Burke made a distinction between:

- Beautiful → the “beautiful” was associated with harmony, delicacy, and balance
- Sublime → the “sublime” was associated with strength, fear, obscurity, solitude and vastness.

## **The artist and the power of imagination**

For the Romantics, imagination was fundamental, because they thought that poetry was impossible without it. It creates imaginary worlds, and they felt that their task was to shape fleeting visions into concrete forms. They saw imagination as the very source of spiritual energy, regarding it as divine.

The Romantic artists put themselves at the centre of their work because they rejected the corrupted society. So, they put themselves in isolation in unpopulated and wild areas. There they communed with their spirit, and in writing they sent back messages to the rest of their fellow men about what they found in their imaginative and spiritual wonderings.

The Romantics believed that only a few selected men were attuned to the imagination. Therefore