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Romanticism

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ROMANTICISM

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Special Studies

by
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ROMANTICISM

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INTRODUCTION

Romanticism actually blossomed out in the beginning of the nineteenth century. The term romantic was first used by Fridrich Schlegel to identify the new mental revolution that was taking place all over the world. This new movement was not concerned with just one phase of living such as politics, but everything from literature, music, and art; to science. The Romantics were not content with the existing sciences, but turned their avid minds to new, intriguing fields of knowledge. The Age of Enlightenment had set the stage for the idealistic Romantics.

It is the purpose of this paper to explore the age of confusion in which the Romantics lived, but were able to rise above the ugliness surrounding them, to write of the beauty and simplicity of each day. Even as a modern "would-be-romantic" writer, Archibald MacLeish stated in his Pulitzer Prize winning play, "J.B.", "The one thing certain in this hurtful world is love's inevitable heartbreak", it is possible for man to see the truth of his universe, but create beauty from that truth. This paper has been written to illustrate the filth now being hailed as "realism of man" is not necessarily the entire scene and I believe the Romantics plainly show this. Even today, we have great men like MacLeish who are willing to bring the image of mankind away from the now popular concept of the "sick", irresponsible, failure back to the proud and beautiful hero of the Romantic Age.

It was a pleasure to read the simple, beautiful literature

of this time gone by in contrast to the current style. What is our
excuse?

HISTORY OF THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT

F.L. Lucas¹ stated in his book, "The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal", that, "the word Romanticism has turned from a historical label into a war cry. No one knows quite what it does mean. It is indeed true that no longer does the word represent men who were ambitious to create a better world to live in, but Romanticism has become associated only with the beautiful literature that emerged from within it.

Many things were happening in Europe at this time to aid the Romantics. The world was just awakening from their dullness of the Middle Ages and the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution brought about the need for a new culture and leadership. Napoleon and his wars had almost completely destroyed everything so it was up to that generation to either rebuild or perish. Therefore, it can be said these men were constructive, creative, and zealous in their cause. They did not come from one school of thought or background but from all ways of life. Some Romantics were republicans, socialists, others were liberal or conservatives, while many believed in orthodox creeds others were atheists but they all shared the common desire to rebuild after the great upheaval. The Romantic was characterized by idealism and the issues he fought for were larger than himself; he was fighting for cultural nationalism. They considered each group of people a unique product of history worth preserving.

¹F.L. Lucas, The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal (London: University Press, 1954), p. 8.

As Jacques Barzun so beautifully wrote it, They compared Europe to a bouquet, each flower growing in its appointed soil, a simile which only slowly degenerated into the racial abolition of blood and fatherland".¹

Jean Jacques Rousseau has been called the "father of Romanticism because he was the first to openly break away from the doctrines of the Enlightenment. It was his live and work that set forth the seeds for the new movement. One of the new traditions created by him was the goal to find out what man was really like. This brought about many new fields of science, to be established later, including psychology. Many people were anxious of this new movement because of the harsh, critical, and destructive way of life that had existed for so long. These man did not bind people with rules and authority but were led by their feelings and emotions. Actions counted less than how one felt, for example Rousseau wrote of the love life of Madame de Warens, "her conduct was reprehensible but her heart was pure". This freedom that flowed into all phases of life was to be a fairly short period but one which would bring to the world some of her most beautiful art, music, and literature.

This new way of thinking brought with it a new approach to science called the Biological Revolution. No longer were physics and mathematics the complete answers to everything. The Newtonian

¹C. Hugh Holman, A Handbook to Literature (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1935), p. 432.

mechanics were not number one in importance anymore, the theories of vitalism were taking the limelight. Man had become interested in Anthropology, Zoology, and other studies concerning living structures. Again the world was affected by the Romantic ideas of the individual and his emotions. A new theory to come out of this creative pattern and rock the world for years to come was the theory of evolution to be given later by Charles Darwin.

Romanticism had its idfferent effect on each country. Although the style of writing varied from writer to writer, the countries could be identified by their history. The influence in Germany was Medievalism. As F.W. Stokes wrote, "The first Romantic School in Germany woke to consciousness in a world where mental confusion and uncertainty accompanied the break-up of the social order of the Age of Reason and the discredit which had befallen its ideals".¹ Men such as Goethe, Schiller, Herdern and Wieland were to help lead their country to become one of the main intellectual forces in Europe.

The identifying characteristic of France was individualism caused by the French Revolution. It had brought such competition between the bourgeoisie and the poor class that all were struggling to be identified and for prestige. The Romantics gave importance to the individual and his problems.

In England the definition of Romanticism was nature. They

¹F.W. Stokes, German Influence in the English Romantic Period (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), p. 7.

had been through such tremendous civil strife including the present Industrial Revolution that the common thought was upon the simple things. The Romantic artist was not an exception to the rule, though a need existed for his art, music, or literature many times he was not recognized until after death.

These men were not messiahs not did they claim to be. In fact, although they all agreed that they must be creative in their purposes for reconstruction, they very definitely did not agree on how to go about it.

THE ROMANTIC WRITERS

The writers of Romantic literature were concerned the the "realness" of life as they saw it; in the exactness of their writings. Goethe declared that he had never written a line that did not come out of his own experience. The Romantic would write about the beauty of a hill or the fragrance of a flower while the Classicists never bothered themselves with such trivial matters. This return to the things of nature and lyrical poetry brought about the first breach with the classical tradition.

The Romantic was one to be caught up in what he considered to be a "good cause" as evidenced in Wordsworth's early zeal for the revolutionary cause and Shelley's crusade for the Irish people. They were generally against the tyrant, the rationalist, and the materialist. As he longed for a new order of things, he also dreamed of love and death, the latter probably because of his attachment to thoughts of melancholy. It was not exactly an unusual state of affairs for the Romantic to have his love life criticized or even winked at because of his indiscretions. He was concerned with the rights of the individual over that of the masses; emotion and imagination more than that of cold reason; the idea of nature wild and unspoiled as opposed to so-called civilization. Although the character makeup of these men may indeed be strange, it is because of their traits we have been given a heritage of some of the most beautiful and delightful writings known to man. It certainly should be within our capacity to appreciate these men with

having to approve of some of their actions.

The Romantic writings can be identified by the emotional and sensitive style presented. Listed below are the main thoughts of the Romantics although others exist.

1. Sentimental contemplation.
2. Return to nature.
3. Love of natural nature.
4. Influence of Milton and earlier poets.
5. Idealization of the humble life.
6. Gothism and an interest in relics of an idealized past.
7. Sympathy for rural life and activities.
8. The pleasures of melancholy.
9. Symbolism and mysticism.

These will not be discussed necessarily in the order they appear because several of the passages of literature used as illustrations contain several of the main characteristics of Romanticism.

The first romantic literature to be examined is "Don Juan" written by Lord Byron, but first perhaps a few words about the actual character of Byron himself will help explain the real heart felt motives behind his writings. Byron, the Lion of London, is probably the most singularly identified Romantic of our times. Born in high society only to be rejected he turned his extremely sharp, and often vicious fangs upon them and riddled the flanks of the establishment. With not so much as an adieu, he went from

one love affair to another. His short life was full of crises and high adventures. This life is seen clearly within his writings.

Lord Byron's entire work of Don Juan seems to be the sentimental contemplations of the characters and their feelings. Byron expresses in Canto II, verses 177 and 188 his deep feeling of the beauties of nature as well as the splendor of love through the characters of young Juan and Haidee.

It was a wild and breaker-beaten coast,
 With cliffs above, and a broad sandy shore,
 Guarded by shoals and rocks as by an host,
 With here and there a creek, whose aspect wore
 A better welcome to the tempest-tost;
 And rarely ceased the haughty billow's roar,
 Save on the dead long summer days, which make
 The outstretch'd ocean glitter like a lake.

They were alone, but not alone as they
 Who shut in chambers think it loneliness;
 The silent ocean, and the starlight bay,
 The voiceless sands, and dropping caves, that lay
 Around them, made them to each other press,
 As if there were no life beneath the sky
 Save theirs, and that their life could never die.

In the person of Haidee, daughter of a fisherman-pirate, the reader can experience a sense of the continual idealization of the humble life. Byron lavishes the qualities of goodness and purity in her, indicating her beauty and sensitivity is equal to that of any queen.

Earlier, in Canto I, verse 92, in the process of acquiring his first love, Donna Julia, he writes of his concern about the how and why of his existence; while again pointing up the Romantics

notice of the world about him:

He thought about himself, and the whole earth,
 Of man the wonderful, and of the stars,
 And how the deuce they ever could have birth;
 And then he thought of earthquakes, and of wars,
 How many miles the moon might have in girth,
 Of air-balloons, and of the many bars
 To perfect knowledge of the boundless skies;
 And then he thought of Donna Julia's eyes.

It is also in Don Juan we can see the romantics as influenced by Milton or other earlier poets. In a later canto borrowed from the legend of Catherine the Great by allowing Juan to win her affections. Milton would often use legendary, traditional, or even mythical material as did the Greeks, and so Juan is counted by Byron as one of Catherine's lovers. Don Juan was to say the least, most fortunate in winning famous ladies hearts, and his creator favored our hero with the charms of the highly sought Helen of Troy.

The final illustration to be given from Don Juan, Byron wrote as an older, disillusioned man, revealing the melancholy traits with in himself:

I would to heaven that I were so much clay,
 As I am blood, bone, marrow, passion, feeling-
 Because at least the past were pass's away-
 And for the future-(but I write this reeling,
 Having got drunk exceedingly today,
 So that I deem to stand upon the ceiling)
 I say-the future is a serious matter-
 And so-for God's sake-hock and soda-water!

Perhaps this verse reveals Byron's feelings of his life as clearly as anything he ever wrote.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe shows his character Faust as a man thought by others to have everything for a good life; by his education, intellect, and service to others. Yet, his thoughts return to what is considered by him to be a wasted youth. A time spent by him in the concentration of books rather than the sweetness of life and love. All through Faust (a story with the touches of the story of "Job" as found in the Bible) we can shiver from the gothic, mystic suggestions of Goethe. His living quarters sound like something from the now-popular horror movies, and his dabbling in the black arts seem quite in character for the mysticism, gothism, and melancholy expected in romantic literature. Who then indeed, is even a little surprised at the appearance of Mephistopheles, a devil, who plays the part of an all-right guy.

The beauty of the simple life is evidenced in the pure spirited, simple loviness of the character of Grechen. Although she had several sadnesses in her life, such as the dearth of her father and sister, and many tasks were expected of her dismal life—she finds the simple life very pleasant.

Again we see the romantics concern with death as Mephistopheles reminds Faust of his death wish, and by the time one has read three or four stories of the romantic period, it would seem somewhat out of character if some real or symbolic expression of a death or death wish.

At any rate, the story of Faust is not just concerned with such mystic ideas as devils, and death, but witches, spirits, and

the good-guys, the angels, winning out at the end.

John Keats draws the reader into his colorful imagination of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn". We can almost smell the freshness of the countryside as he describes the scene for us. We are told of a civilization gone by, one in which sacrifices were given, and mysterious priests were commonplace. The reader senses the sadness felt by Keats as he realized each moment brings one closer to death, and yet this sadness would never be a part of the young lovers on the urn. For although their lips would never touch, neither would their youth and beauty fade.

In every line of this poem, one can know the leisure and abundance of such a simple existence. Keats seems to long that he could be in such a light and easy life.

"Ozymandias", written by Percy Bysshe Shelly in December, 1817, is the sonnet concerned with a man's contemplations as he looks upon the stone image of Ozymandias. One has the feeling of vast nothingness in two ways: first, because of the desolation of the land--all desert, wasteland as far as the eye can see. Secondly, because he is saying that no matter how great and mighty one's works, nothing besides remains. He indicates that although this man was great in life, after life he may not be as well off as a man who lived a more simple existence.

William Wordsworth's poem "Ode in Intimations of Immortality" is throughout the story of the beauty of the simple things of

nature, and the thoughts on life that should bring us closer to a truer happiness. He comments on the loveliness of such things as a rainbow, a rose, or the birds; but somehow their beauty is not as fresh as he saw it in childhood. The little child, he feels is closer to God, and as one becomes older he drifts farther away. He is saddened as he thinks about the outcome of life that wears us down, yet as he comes to the closing part of the poem he writes some of the most beautiful lines written by man:

Though nothing can bring back the hour
 Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
 We will grieve not, rather find
 Strength in what remains behind;
 In the primal sympathy
 Which having been must ever be;
 In the soothing thoughts that spring
 Out of human suffering;
 In the faith that looks through death
 In years that bring the philosophic mind.

With these few examples the writer of this paper hopes to have made clear the historic motivations surrounding these magnificently sensitive men, and the type of writings created to free themselves. Oh that the present world could do as these creators, and look beyond the suffering and anxiety of Viet Nam, the constant failure of our governmental systems, and the fear of our many enemies, to see the beauty and simplicity of our world.

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