M.A. English

Course

IV

BRITISH LITERATURE – II

BLOCK

I

Romantic and Victorian Poetry

School of Distance Education
The English and Foreign Languages University
Hyderabad – 500 605, India

Written by

Sreedharan T (Units 1-3)

C. Vijayasree (Units 4-6)

Course and content editor

T. Nageswara Rao

Format and language editors

T. Sriraman

Lavanya Kolluri

Jibu Mathew George

Cover design by

G. Prem Raj

Pageset by

T. Deepthi

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BLOCK I

Romantic and Victorian Poetry

Contents

INTRODUCTION TO THE BLOCK

This block introduces you to the poetry of two prominent epochs in the history of English Literature, namely the Romantic and the Victorian. Units 1 to 3 deal with Romantic poetry and Units 4 to 6 take up the poetry of the Victorian era. Unit 1 of this block serves as a broad introduction to the Romantic period. It briefly describes the political, economic and social backgrounds that influenced the literature of the period. The unit also provides an overview of literature produced under various genres as well as its thematic concerns. Unit 2 discusses the life and work of two famous poets who inaugurated the Romantic movement in English – William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Similarly, Unit 3 looks at the poetry of two later Romantics – Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats.

Though the Victorian era is known as the golden age of the English novel, its poetry was no less significant. Unit 4 aims to provide you a context for the reading of the Victorian poets that are discussed in Units 5 and 6. This introductory unit describes the socio-political and literary conditions of the Victorian Age. Unit 5 will tell you about the poetry of Robert Browning, Alfred Lord Tennyson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Unit 6 deals with the work of four other Victorian poets – Matthew Arnold, Arthur Hugh Clough, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

The activities and discussions in each unit will help you reflect on the two periods in general as well as the various aspects of the poems discussed. After reading the units carefully, we hope you will also be able to come up with ideas and interpretations of your own. We would like to advise you to acquire the texts of the poems which are analyzed in the units and read them carefully.

Unit 1

Romantic Poetry

Contents

Unit 1

Romantic Poetry

1.0 Objectives

This unit gives a broad, general introduction to the Romantic period of English Literature. Beginning with an explanation of the term 'Romantic' and its origins, we then provide a description of the economic, political and social background that shaped the period. After a brief overview of the prose, poetry and novel in this period we end with a note on some of the main thematic threads running through the work of this period.

1.1 Introduction

The Romantic period in English Literature is generally considered to have begun from 1785 and ended in 1830. Some literary historians locate the beginning in 1789, the year of the French Revolution. As a term, 'Romanticism' is hard to define precisely and comprehensively – particularly the literary sense of the word. For instance, in *The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal* (1948) F. L. Lucas counted 11,396 definitions of 'Romanticism,' thus attesting to its protean nature. The word 'Romantic' first appeared in English in the middle of the 17th century; the OED gives 1659 as its earliest appearance. However, it is a word that was in currency in different forms for a long period of time. For instance, during the Middle Ages the word 'romance' represented the new vernacular languages derived from Latin – in contradistinction to Latin itself, which was the language of learning. The words *Enromancier, romancar, romanz*, were all used at that time to indicate books 'translated' into the vernacular. The works thus produced were then called *romanz, roman, romanzo*, or romance. Later some of these terms were extended to include imaginative works composed in these languages as well. A *roman* or *romant* also came to signify a 'popular book'.

During the twelfth century, stories that depicted courtly love, written in verse and called 'Chivalric Romances' dislodged epics and heroic poems in popularity. Chivalric or Courtly Romance, unlike the epic, did not represent a heroic age of internecine power struggle. The standard plot of a Courtly Romance was a quest undertaken by a young, brave knight in order to gain the love or favour of a lady. Filled with nail-biting tournaments, fights with dragons and monsters, it upheld chivalric ideals of courage, loyalty and honour. While the epics were played out on large canvases with heroic characters caught in the tussle between the gods, romance shifts the focus from the gods and their actions to this world, and to human destinies. This shift shows us how the word 'romance' at that time was principally associated with certain specific, identifiable themes and motifs. Later French heroic romances which made their appearance in the mid-seventeenth century also came to be known as 'Romance.' These works with their fantastic plots and

wild adventures were called so in order to indicate their similarity with the old Romances. However, as these French 'Romances' had plots that were far removed from ordinary life, the term 'Romantic' acquired the connotation of something far-fetched, unreal, or purely imaginary.

The English use of the term 'Romantic' to describe mediaeval and Renaissance writing that did not derive from classical origins had reached Germany in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Friedrich von Schlegel, (1772-1829) the German critic and philosopher, is credited with using the term *romantisch* in literary contexts for the first time. He defined the word 'Romantic' as "literature depicting emotional matter in an imaginative form." Friedrich Schlegel, who is considered to be the principal philosopher of German Romanticism, and his brother August Wilhelm Schlegel, the translator and critic, together founded *Das Athenäum* (1798-1800), the chief journal of the Romantic Movement. August Schlegel's most influential work of criticism, *Vorlesungen über schöne Literatur und Kunst* [Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature (1815)] established the canons of Romanticism. In these lectures he also defined the function of a literary critic: a critic should try to understand the individuality and originality of a work rather than evaluate it according to accepted aesthetic standards. Apart from shaping the trajectory of German criticism, Schlegel also played a seminal role in influencing German romantic drama. His outstanding and influential translations of seventeen Shakespeare plays not only helped to make Shakespeare popular in Germany, but also served to establish the great English playwright as one of the foremost models of the Romantic spirit. August Schlegel is also credited with formulating the antinomy between the 'Classical' and the 'Romantic.' According to Schlegel the ideas associated with the 'Romantic' first appeared in the Middle Ages with the works of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. He identified these works with progressive and Christian views and considered them 'organic' and 'plastic.' Classicism on the other hand, with its mechanical emphasis on the purity of the genre, and language that embodies precision, polish and control, represented the spirit of rationalism.

Later on, the word 'romance' came to acquire certain derogatory connotations – of something that is fanciful, bizarre, exaggerated, and chimerical. In France a distinction was made between *romanesque* (also derogatory) and *romantique* (which meant 'tender,' 'gentle,' 'sentimental' and 'sad'). It was used in the English form in these latter senses in the eighteenth century, carrying the connotation of "tender affection and melancholy ideas." Such an inflection accords with the German writer and composer E. T. A. Hoffmann's (1776 – 1822) view, which characterized "infinite longing" as the essence of Romanticism. Negative charges of 'escapism' were also to be laid at its door. Born out of conflict and disagreement, the concept and definition of the word 'Romantic' has remained elusive and fluid, escaping attempts to distil it into one definition.

Unlike in Germany, where the *Romantische Schule* with a definite programme flowered, in England there was no consciously directed 'movement.' By the middle of the eighteenth century, England was witness to a period of transition and experimentation in poetic styles and subjects. The tendency to view poetry as a refined and pleasing communication to educated ears of an urban populace was rejected in practice long before it was acknowledged in theory. Such shifts in the view of the nature and function of poetry did not occur overnight but emerged gradually. The attitude to poetry of the self-styled Augustan age of Queen Anne was scarcely established before it began to be questioned and replaced by more complex, often obviously contradictory attitudes. Melancholy, an interest in the primitive, the rustic and the uncivilized, a sense of impending change, are all clearly visible in poetical works by mid-eighteenth century. Needless to say, it was the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge (anonymously published in 1789) that proclaimed to the world the 'coming of age' of a new kind of poetic sensibility – the Romantic. However, one must bear in mind that Wordsworth and his contemporaries did not think of themselves as romantic poets, nor did they use the word 'romantic' except in a general sense. The generation following theirs gave them that name, and in fact this nomenclature became fixed only after 1850. Indeed, their contemporaries hardly saw any similarity between these poets. In fact, they were grouped under different labels: Wordsworth and Coleridge were referred to as the 'Lake Poets,' while Keats, Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt and their friends were dismissed as the 'Cockney School'; Byron and Shelley were clubbed together as the 'Satanic School.'

While one can without difficulty enumerate the artistic and philosophical tenets of Neo-Classicism, the distinguishing characteristics of Romanticism defy easy definition. However, critics have attempted to define it by identifying the shared characteristics of the works produced by the artists, philosophers and poets of the romantic period. Romanticism was a rebellion against the dogma of reason as well as the rejection of the 17^{th} and 18^{th} century literary forms and themes. It involved a spirit that stood for political liberalism, a passion for nature and landscape, intellectual self-consciousness, a discriminating or flamboyant cultivation of emotion, a mingled sense of obligation and aversion towards society as a whole.

ACTIVITY A

What do we understand by the terms 'Classical' and 'Romantic'?

DISCUSSION

The word "classical" in literary study refers to ancient Greek and Roman writing whereas "classicism" designates later writing influenced by ancient models. Classicism is also counterposed to Romanticism. Classicism is noted for its adherence to regulation, restraint, decorum, and clarity. Romanticism

emphasises a spontaneous, individualistic, radical (nonconformist) manner of expression. Among the names most commonly associated with classicism in England are Dr Samuel Johnson, John Dryden, and Alexander Pope.

1.2 Background: Economic and Political

During the latter half of the eighteenth century, England was passing through a difficult phase – politically, economically, and psychologically. The traumatizing loss of the American colony (1785) was still fresh and smarting in the public psyche and the echoes unleashed by the convulsive wave of the French Revolution and its captivating war cry 'liberty, fraternity, equality' reverberated on English shores, bringing in its wake the fear of the spread of the 'malaise.' To compound these, England was soon at war with France, a war that lasted on and off for decades, and was fought on multiple fronts from India to America. The economic hardship caused by the war with France, which lasted till 1815, and the cycle of inflation and depression made the ruling class nervous. This fear, coupled with the fear of a largely disgruntled population being influenced by ideologies imported from the Continent, resulted in a slew of measures that were repressive. Public meetings were banned and the right of *habeas corpus* was suspended for the first time in over a hundred years. Often minor protests were dealt with harshly and even advocates of moderate political reforms were charged with treason.

English society was in the throes of changes precipitated by the rapid pace of industrialization. Added to this was the catastrophic social implications of what is called the 'enclosure movement' that deprived the ordinary citizen of the use of the 'commons.' The 'commons' – land which was used by the entire village till then – was enclosed and incorporated into larger privately held holdings. This had a disastrous effect on the life of the countryside and the economic well-being of the village folk. Although one may advance the argument that enclosure was necessary to implement efficient methods of agriculture to feed a growing population, one cannot deny the fact that it ruined the fabric of society in the villages. It broke up villages and created a landless class who had no choice but to work as farm labourers for a pittance, or to migrate to the emerging industrial towns. Life as an industrial labourer was difficult, involving long hours of work under harsh discipline, subsistence wages, and unhealthy, almost sordid living conditions. The mechanization of the industries and the ensuing layoffs further aggravated a situation that was already barely under control. Added to this was the large number of demobilized troops that swelled an already large workforce. Faced with unemployment and banned by law from unionizing, the frustrated workforce of England expressed their despair and anger in sporadic protests and "Luddite"[1] machine-breaking acts.

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[1] *Luddite Rising*: Movement so called after its mysterious leader "General Ludd" consisting of organized groups of English craftsmen who rioted by destroying the

The liberal reformers committed to the philosophy of 'laissez-faire' as set down by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), adopted a policy of 'let alone,' with the result that in the unfair power equation of the market the moneyed prospered and the poor suffered. England thus became Benjamin Disraeli's "Two Nations" – the capitalists and the labourers, the rich and the poor. However, it was also a time of prosperity for England. The British Empire was expanding aggressively, opening up new markets. Goods once considered exotic were readily available for those who could pay for it. New resorts such as Bath, where the plantation owners from the West Indies and East Asia and the nouveau rich 'nabobs' relaxed during vacations after the 'rigours' of a colonial existence, became centres of ostentatious display of wealth. Interestingly words like 'terrorist' and 'shopping' were added to the English language during this time; while the former was used to refer to the French revolutionaries, the latter exemplified the ethos of an emerging capitalist society.

Reflect on this

Nature is an important and recurring theme in Romantic Poetry. During the course of the Industrial Revolution nature was increasingly under threat from commercial exploitation. Do you think that this aspect has a bearing on the importance given to nature by the poets? Do we value something more when faced with its imminent loss?

1.3 Family and the Role of Women

Periods of change are also times when conservative factors assert their authority. The upheavals of the times, the actions that expressed the genuine aspirations of the majority of people to have some say in the political affairs of the country, were seen as a threat to the very bedrock of British society – its family. The English conservatives feared that the challenge posed by the French Revolution was as much to the 'proper' order of relations between

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machinery of the new textile industries that were taking away their livelihoods. The disturbances started in Nottingham in 1811 and quickly spread to Lancashire, Yorkshire, Derbyshire, and Leicestershire. The "Ludds" or Luddites operated at night, wearing masks; their leader, real or imaginary, was known as "King Ludd". They offered no violence to individuals, and often enjoyed strong local support in their areas. In 1812 a Luddite band was shot down on the orders of an employer called Horsfell, who was later murdered in reprisal. In consequence, the government of Lord Liverpool ordered ruthless repressive measures which led to a mass trial at York in 1813, at which most of the convicted Luddites were sentenced to be hanged or transported. Luddite rioting recurred in 1816, when the Great Depression caused by the end of Britain's war with France caused much hardship; nor did it cease altogether until the renewed prosperity of the 1820s.

men and women as to the 'proper' distribution of power among the various classes of society. English society, confronted with a threat from outside to its cherished ideals, responded by reinforcing its conservative notions regarding family and the role of women. The English family was perceived as a reflection of the royal family of George IV, where the man was the King and the woman presided over the domestic sphere around the hearth. Not surprisingly, this new idealization was backward-looking, and it froze the role of middle class woman through a distorted conception of proper femininity. The word 'class' should be underscored here, as the large number of women who toiled for inhuman hours in the factories did not come under this definition of new femininity.

Women during the Romantic period had limited schooling, and clearly circumscribed public roles, where they were expected to adhere to a rigid code of sexual behaviour. They were 'bombarded' with literature that vehemently emphasized the physical and mental differences between men and women and taught them that their sole role in life was to bear and rear children, look after their husband and their household. In fact, during that time a married woman in England had no identity as an individual even before the law. Seen against this backdrop the achievements of the women writers during the Romantic period assume an added significance.[2] It is ironic that some of the best-regarded poets of the time were women – Anna Letitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson. Wordsworth and Coleridge were in fact junior colleagues of Mary Robinson when she was poetry editor of *The Morning Post* in the late 1790s. Though we now consider Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats as the principal canonical figures of the Romantic period, their contemporaries would have been considerably surprised at such exclusive praise. However, even then, educated women writers (largely self-educated or privately educated) were seen as an active threat by the male establishment and were scornfully referred to as 'bluestockings.' Even before the Romantic period there had been women writers who made a living through writing. However, it was during this period in English history that women began to compete with men in terms of the numbers of books written, sales and literary reputations. But it must be noted that most of these women writers were ideologically very conservative and took pains to emphasize that they resided well within the roles drawn out for women and that they did not pose any threat to the established order of things.

Reflect on this

Middle-class women who wanted to support themselves had very few options open to them during the Romantic period. Many took to writing to support themselves. Romantic novels and Gothic novels by women writers became very popular. Do you think that these women were skilfully exploiting the prevailing tendencies in the publishing market?

[2] J. R. de J. Jackson's comprehensive bibliography, *Romantic Poetry by Women* lists over nine hundred published female poets.

1.4 Literacy and its Impact on Publication

The discoveries and developments in the printing and publishing sector that took place during this period were nothing short of revolutionary. The invention of the steam-press and the paper-making machine (1803) made it easier to produce newspapers on an industrial scale. For the first time in history, the populace could keep abreast of what was happening in the political sphere and on the Continent through newspapers. The tremendous leaps made in the area of transportation also played a critical role. The mail-coach which crisscrossed the country at the previously inconceivable speed of 12 miles an hour made it possible for even the people residing in the countryside to get newspapers albeit a bit late. Dorothy Wordsworth records in her remarkable journal the excitement involved in the expedition to collect the newspaper from the mail-coach which generally passed a few miles beside their house in the middle of the night.

By 1780, the literate population of England had swelled due to the lessons provided in Sunday schools. Simultaneously, reading material became cheaper, and the spread of circulating libraries enabled people to borrow books. The poor people who could not afford to buy newspapers pooled money and bought copies, and more often than not they were read aloud for the benefit of the illiterate ones. David Wilkie's (1785-1810) masterpiece, *Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Waterloo Dispatch* memorably captures such a scene. The painting portrays retired soldiers at the Chelsea Royal Hospital listening attentively, with one of their comrades reading aloud from the Waterloo Gazette. It is difficult to imagine such a scene from an earlier time, but by 1822 it seemed to precisely capture the historical moment. No wonder, when put on show, the painting was besieged, forcing the Royal Academy of Arts to place rails in front of it.

With publication becoming big business, unauthorized publication of popular books also made their appearance during this time. Many popular books were mass produced without the knowledge of the author or the publisher. At times this had remarkable consequences. For instance, though Shelley often complained bitterly about pirated editions of his works selling like hot cakes, and cheating him of the money that was legitimately his, it was these very pirated editions of *Queen Mab* that survived and thwarted later attempts to sanitize his oeuvre. And, when Robert Southey was the Poet Laureate of England, he was embarrassed by the unauthorized republication of the insurrectionary drama *Wat Tyler* (1794), which he had written during his youthful radical phase. He had recanted soon after, and had embraced conservative, even reactionary views. The Courts, when approached for redress, refused to take action against the publisher, arguing that the law was for the law-abiding and did not apply to "sedition!".

The newfound popularity of the press was perceived as a potential threat even by the government, which passed a series of laws to suppress unfavourable commentaries on its functioning. Many writers of newspaper articles, including Leigh Hunt, received sentences of two years for writing reproving articles of a moderate nature. Such measures were supported wholeheartedly not only by conservatives, but even by former rebels like Robert Southey, who ironically argued for stiffer punishments (including transportation to the penal colonies for minor infringements by writers and journalists). However, most of the major Romantic poets had close associations with newspapers. Coleridge was invited to write for *The Morning Chronicle*. His "Dejection: An Ode" appeared in *The Morning Post* in 1802. A number of poems of Keats and Shelley appeared in *The Examiner*; so did Hunt's exaltation of Keats and Shelley which brought them into critical limelight. Shelley wrote "England 1819" after reading in the papers about the Peterloo Massacre. Newspapers were the principal means by which these poets kept abreast of the happenings in England while travelling in the Continent or when they stayed away from home.

ACTIVITY B

Do you think that there is some connection between the possibility of receiving harsh punishment for publishing seditious literature and the fact that many young rebellious poets like Shelley and Byron spent a large part of their working life on the Continent?

DISCUSSION

Many writers were charged with writing seditious literature during this period. They were imprisoned for two years or more for writing articles critical of the government. If Leigh Hunt had published Shelley's poem on the Peterloo Massacre, both Hunt and Shelley would have been imprisoned.

1.5 Romantic Prose

The spread of newspapers and the emergence of journals, both political and literary, encouraged writers to use these media as a platform to discuss new theories of science, economics, the arts, and politics. It also encouraged a new form of writing – the personal essay – which held up the very personality of the writer for public consumption. Distinct from the essays of Addison and Steele, these essays present the writer himself as mediator, critic, poet, eccentric, and cast the reader in the intimate role of an audience/confessor. Created with skilful ingenuity by Lamb, Hazlitt and De Quincey, these essays, with their highly personal, intimate-feeling commentaries, were often presented as arising out of everyday events – the incidents and accidents – in the author's life. These essays, based as they were on an eclectic range of

topics, became an integral part of the contemporary literary scenario. Though these literary pieces were written within tight deadlines, and were a means of livelihood to many of the writers, they attempt to simulate the tone of a personal journal or autobiographical sketches. In fact, they displayed an autobiographical exploitation of personality meant for a public that reminds one of today's voyeuristic television audience of reality shows. The Rousseauistic posture that scorns societal restraints and celebrates uninhibited individual imagination could also be discerned in works such as De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. However, we must bear in mind that though recollections and nostalgia might play a significant role in such works, ultimately these works are not about a candid display of the author's personality. Instead they exhibit or flaunt a personality that is carefully crafted and delineated.

Apart from the personal essay which has become the hallmark of Romantic prose, other prose writings also flourished during this time. Essays, reviews, political and religious pamphlets were written and eagerly appropriated by an audience that was just being exposed to mass media. The establishment of the *Edinburgh Review* in 1802 and *The Quarterly Review* in 1809 saw the emergence of a new kind of essay – fashioned by the critic or the specialist reader who exercised the right to tell others what to read. For instance, Charles Lamb (*Specimens of English Dramatic Poets*, 1808), William Hazlitt (*Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, 1817), and Coleridge wrote a large amount of practical criticism, which helped to elevate the reputations of Renaissance dramatists and poets neglected in the 18th century. In *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Coleridge also endeavoured to evolve fundamentally new critical principles of literary evaluation. Critical evaluation of literary works and plays were in existence before the Romantic period. But periodicals like *Monthly Review* or the *Critical Review* which date to an earlier period reviewed everything in print, and did not exercise any discrimination in the choice of matter selected for reviewing. The *Edinburgh Review* and *The Quarterly Review*, on the other hand, were much more selective and consequently much more powerful in fashioning the taste of the reading public. In fact, the origin of the debate on whether the critical essay belongs to the realm of literature can be traced to this period.

1.6 The Rise of the Novel

Unfettered by the constraints of pedigree, with a large ready-made consumer base, the novel grew exponentially during the Romantic period, provoking its critics to dismiss it as the products of "novel-mills." The novels that were written during this period were characterized by escapism, romantic love and unrealistic adventure. It was Walter Scott's Waverly series and Jane Austen's *Emma* which challenged and overthrew such perceptions to an extent. The fact that these works were taken seriously by the critics, who also traced the genealogy or history of the genre during this period, allowed the novel to hold

its own as a distinctive literary form against the more established literary genres.

The period was witness to bold experimentation with the novel's form and matter. The novelists threw off their obsession with worlds that one could escape into and began engaging with the real world and even went so far as to link novels with philosophy and history. The Jacobin novelists used the form to expound political theories and to represent political upheavals. Loyalists used the very tool of the Jacobins to attack them, and wrote reactionary novels. These skirmishes also resulted in exposing the various possibilities of the genre. One such novel which reveals the bold experimentation of the author is *Caleb Williams, or, Things as They Are*, by William Godwin, which had for its plot a psychological drama of surveillance and entrapment.

Another hugely popular form was the "gothic" which looked to the Continent of the past, both for its locale and its plot. Gloomy castles, devious Catholic monks, sadistic despots, dungeons, and supernatural elements afforded its admirers the pleasurable terror of being entrapped in a premodern, prerational state. However, the readers were expected to overlook the fact that though the situation was medieval, the heroines shared the prevailing strengths and values of a woman of the late eighteenth century. Horace Walpole, Clara Reeve, Sophia Lee, Matthew Lewis and the high priestess of gothic, Ann Radcliffe, made the genre hugely popular. But it also drew the scorn of the more discerning and it was these excesses that Jane Austen lampooned in *Northanger Abbey*. However, in the hands of authors like Maria Edgeworth, the novel became a powerful tool to showcase the unique culture of her land, and her loving detailing of the customs and practices of Ireland is important even for anthropological reasons. Scott, the unchallenged master of this genre, learnt much from her, marrying the gothic with the regional with fantastic results. Jane Austen's "remorseless gentleness" in exposing the foibles of her class links her with the romantic preoccupation with improvement of the mind. Her themes, drawn from the everyday and the insignificant, depict a tightly constructed plot. In other words, they illustrate in a different light the Wordsworthian pursuit of finding the extraordinary in the ordinary.

ACTIVITY C

Do you know of any poem written during the Romantic period that is 'gothic' in orientation? Identify the elements that are commonly associated with the concept of the 'gothic'.

DISCUSSION

Coleridge stated that in *Lyrical Ballads* he endeavoured to depict "persons and characters supernatural" and some of his poems in this collection have elements of the 'gothic.' Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is another

instance of the Gothic. The term "gothic" was used to signify novels that depicted romance in the backdrop of supernatural events occurring in decrepit, hideous castles. Most Gothic novels are tales of mystery and horror, intended to chill the spine and curdle the blood. They contain a strong element of the supernatural and have features like wild and desolate landscapes, dark forests, ruined abbeys, feudal halls and medieval castles with dungeons, secret passages, winding stairways, oubliettes, sliding panels and torture chambers, monstrous apparitions and curses, a stupefying atmosphere of doom and gloom, heroes and heroines in the direst imaginable straits, wicked tyrants, malevolent witches, and other demonic powers of unspeakably hideous aspect.

1.7 Romantic Poetry

When we examine the distinct characteristics that we now associate with Romantic poetry, we may wonder if it really constitutes a break from tradition. Elements that we identify as 'Romantic' occur extensively in the writings of Spenser and Shakespeare. Critics have claimed that the first great burst of Romanticism in England coincides with the blossoming of secular romance in the twelfth and thirteenth century in works such as *Launcelot and Guinevere*, *Tristan and Iseult*, and *Aucassin and Nicolette*. These works with their themes of chivalry and love were a blatant assertion of their authors' interest in human affairs, in defiance of the then current preoccupation with the spiritual. Critics also draw our attention to the celebration of individualism, the extravagant, the supernatural and the mystic, in Renaissance literature to challenge the concept of radical 'revolt' initiated by the Romantic poets against tradition; which brings us to the question: Were the Romantic poets merely reclaiming an earlier tradition or were they actually charting a new territory in unknown waters?

One has to also bear in mind that English literary tendencies had begun moving towards what we now identify as the Romantic from mid-eighteenth century. It was at this time that poets started questioning the rigid demands of classical rules. In a number of poems written during this period one can discern a movement away from neo-classical themes and settings. For instance, we can see that the urban setting so preferred by Neoclassical writers gives way to rural landscapes and backdrops in the poems of Gray, Burns, Chatterton, and Goldsmith. In fact these poets are referred to as the 'pre-romantics.' In 1954 Robert Mayo published a path-breaking study in which he compared the poems published by Wordsworth and Coleridge as *Lyrical Ballads* with poems published in contemporary magazines and miscellanies. Based on this study Mayo concluded that the 'Preface' of the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was not the manifesto of a new movement; that the anonymous publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 in no way constituted a break from tradition. In his view it was merely the "flowering of an already established age."

So was there anything distinct about the Romantic period and its poets? To comprehend this, one has to have some idea of the beliefs that are intrinsic to the Enlightenment; and also why the Romantic poet's grappling with his identity was inconceivable during an earlier era. The earlier world view as something 'given' had begun to sound suspiciously hollow to the 19th century man. Metaphysics then was not derived from the nature of the world, but was abstracted from the nature of the mind and projected on to the world. This single shift in attitude and perception altered the way human beings experienced the self and the world. Previous world views had assumed, as a matter of fact, the accessibility of the mind to an incontrovertible truth – either divinely revealed or accessed through thought or intuition. Far from this position was the quandary faced by the Romantic thinker: for him the issue was not that we cannot know the world, rather he realized that we cannot even know whether we know or not. This profound change in the perception of things undergirds all romantic questioning.

1.8 The Challenge of Romanticism

At its most basic the Romantic creed is a revolt against the dogma of reason and of rules. Society as a divinely ordered structure where every person had his or her place was no longer acceptable. Rousseau and Diderot in France and Wesley in England challenged the concept of a static society. This became the clarion call for change and improvement. Its repercussions were to be felt not only in Continental Europe and France but in far away America as well. The idea that the current state of affairs in society was not the ideal one increasingly gained currency. Simultaneously, Rousseau's questioning of the very concept of progress as a movement forward posed a serious challenge to thinkers. His repudiation of original sin, and his endorsement of the superiority of the noble savage, overturned current conceptions concerning culture, nature, and nurture. His call 'back to nature' was to the intellectuals not just an escapist route, but also a call to sweep away obsolete and corrupt institutions like the monarchy and the Church.

The precedence given to the mind and thought during the Enlightenment was challenged during this period by English empirical philosophers like Locke, Hume, Hartley, and Priestley[3]. This questioning of rationalism was earnestly

[3] Empiricism is a doctrine in philosophy that affirms that all ideas and knowledge are a posteriori, that is, derived from and based on experience, and denies that they can ever be a priori, that is, discoverable without having to rely on the senses. In particular, empiricists oppose the view that people are born with certain innate ideas and argue that at birth the mind is a complete blank. John Locke was the first philosopher to give it systematic expression. Other empiricists include David Hume and George Berkeley. Rationalism, represented by such thinkers as the French philosopher René Descartes, the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, and the 17th and 18th century German philosophers Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Christian Wolff, provides a contrast to empiricism.

embraced by the Romantic writers. The contention of these philosophers that all knowledge is derived through the senses exerted considerable sway over the Romantics. In its extreme form, empiricism leads to the conclusion that all knowledge has its origin and existence in experience, and that it can never go beyond experience. However, the empiricist idea that the mind at the time of birth is a tabula rasa (clean slate) on which impressions are inscribed through experiences is rejected by poets like Wordsworth. By the end of the 18th century the shift away from reason towards feeling and imagination began to be reflected in literature as well as the visual arts. This is evident for instance in the visionary illustrations of the English poet and painter William Blake, in the brooding, sometimes nightmarish pictures of his friend, the Swiss-English painter Henry Fuseli, and in the sombre etchings of monsters and demons by the Spanish artist Francisco Goya.

Viewed in this context, William Blake, the self-educated artist and engraver, is truly representative. His work consists in part of simple, almost child-like lyrics (*Songs of Innocence*, 1789), as well as of powerful but lengthy and obscure declarations of a new mythological vision of life (*The Book of Thel*, 1789). All Blake's poetry expresses a revolt against the ideal of reason (which he considered destructive to life) and advocates a life of feeling. Blake was a radical in thought, who longed to break free from all authoritarian clutches – which included the Empire, the repressive moral codes, and even institutions like marriage. Blake's opposition should be seen in the context of his contemporary society that was hierarchically oppressive and rigidly class-bound. He was also strongly opposed to the denial of civil rights to citizens, particularly to married women who he felt were trapped in an institution that was simultaneously a physical and a mental prison. Blake's response to the French Revolution was also typically 'romantic.' In Britain, the initial response of the intelligentsia to the events unfolding on the Continent was one of euphoria. When things started to go horribly awry in revolutionary France, and the revolutionaries unleashed the "reign of terror," the optimism felt by these early supporters quickly turned into disappointment, even despair[4]. Many including Blake experienced the cataclysmic events in biblical terms and thought of the unfolding tragedy as the forerunner of the prophecies mentioned in the Bible. To writers affiliated to traditions of radical Protestant dissent like Barbauld, Coleridge, Wollstonecraft and Blake, the imminence of Apocalypse (the end of the world as described in the Bible) and the coming of the Kingdom of God was part of a living faith. This idea or image of the apocalypse was conceived not just in the political or collective sense alone, but also in the sense of the transformation of inner consciousness: the

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Rationalists asserted that the mind is capable of recognizing reality by means of its capacity for reason, a faculty that exists independent of experience.

[4] "I started in life," William Hazlitt wrote, "with the French Revolution, and I have lived, alas! to see the end of it. . . . Since then, I confess, I have no longer felt myself young, for with that my hopes fell."

breaking of the "mind-forged manacles," as Blake termed it, of narrow orthodoxies and contingent situations. Later younger writers like Byron, Shelley, and Hazlitt were equally convinced that revolution was at hand; and that they were the "harbingers of change." The only difference was that they expected a rational citizenry to usher in the change rather than a transcendentalist principle like God. In their view, it was the transformative power of creative imagination that held the key to unlock that untapped potential. The passionately conceived image of the "poet-prophet," as one who would "sweep away dead thoughts," was not confined to Shelley alone; it also reflects a closely held belief that was shared by a number of his fellow poets.

ACTIVITY D

Consider how the Romantic poets visualize the role played by creative imagination in transforming the individual and society.

DISCUSSION

The Romantic poets were dissatisfied with the condition of the society around them and passionately wished to transform it. They envisaged themselves as poet-prophets who would be the harbingers of change.

1.9 The Spirit of the Age

The Romantic poets were convinced that there was something distinctive about their time, and hence their writings reflect the excitement they felt in living during such a momentous period, and of being politically and intellectually part of it. When Keats wrote that "Great spirits now on earth are sojourning," or when Shelley talks of a "new birth" in his "Defence of Poetry," they were merely giving voice to a widely shared sentiment. Hazlitt's series of essays, *The Spirit of the Age*, albeit opinionated, attempts to capture the zeitgeist by forwarding an invaluably contemporary view of Romantic poetry. As mentioned earlier, the French Revolution had a tremendous impact on the life and imagination of the people. Most of the British writers and poets were also deeply affected by it. Three important works written during this time epitomize the radical social thinking triggered by the Revolution. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) justified the French Revolution against Edmund Burke's attack in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791-92) argued for a democratic republic for England. He even went so far as to argue that if lesser pressures failed, it should be achieved through popular revolution. William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), also written in response to Burke's treatise, had a profound influence on both Wordsworth and Shelley. In this work Godwin foretold an inevitable but peaceful evolution

of society to a final stage in which property would be equally distributed, and government would wither away. However, as the Revolution charted an increasingly grim course, its English sympathizers rejected it. The accession to power by Jacobin extremists, and their efforts to purify the new republic by unleashing the Reign of Terror; the "September Massacres" (1792) which saw the mass guillotining of the imprisoned nobility; later, the execution of the king and queen; France's invasion of the Rhineland and the Netherlands; Napoleon's vaulting imperialistic, dictatorial ambitions – all these snuffed out whatever little vestige of faith people had about the Revolution[5].

English society was still deeply conservative, both politically and socially. The new classes created by the shifting modes of production – the manufacturing classes – were beginning to demand a voice in the government proportionate to their wealth. The demand for the abolition of slave trade had gathered momentum, but the Parliament rejected a bill abolishing slave trade in 1791. It is no wonder that the young poets and writers longed for a revolution that would sweep away moribund rules and the hypocritical and moralistic attitude of the English society. The stifling social atmosphere of England also prompted many writers to escape to the Continent, albeit for a short while. In fact, the pervasive presence of Nature in poetry and painting during this period may have a reactionary reason behind it. The natural world is valorized all the more because the human world is viewed as degenerate, or in a state of decline. Natural locales (not cultivated fields, which hold the stamp of man), wild uninhabited wastelands, forests, caves and chasms, and the untamed sea, become the chosen site of the Romantic poet / hero where he aspires to live untrammelled by social laws and constraints.

Inspiration for the Romantic approach came, initially, from two great shapers of thought, the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. It was Rousseau who established the cult of the individual and championed the freedom of the human spirit, announcing, "I felt before I thought". More formal precepts came from Goethe and his compatriots, the philosopher and critic Johann Gottfried von Herder and the historian Justus Möser, who collaborated on a group of essays entitled *Von deutscher Art und Kunst* (1773, Of German Style and Art). In this work the authors extolled the Romantic spirit as manifested in German folk songs, Gothic architecture, and the plays of Shakespeare. Goethe sought to imitate Shakespeare's free and untrammelled style in his *Götz von Berlichingen* (1773; trans. 1799), a historical drama of a 16th century robber knight. The play, which justifies revolt against political authority, inaugurated the Sturm und Drang (Storm and Stress) movement, a forerunner of German

[5] Wordsworth writes in *The Prelude* how the oppressed

> become Oppressors in their turn,
> Frenchmen had changed a war of self-defence
> For one of Conquest, losing sight of all
> Which they had struggled for. . . . (11. 206 – 09).

Romanticism. In this tradition also was Goethe's novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774; The Sorrows of Young Werther, 1779). One of the great influential documents of Romanticism, this work exalts sentiment, even to the point of justifying committing suicide over unrequited love. It set a tone and mood much copied by the Romantics in their works and often in their personal lives: a fashionable tendency to frenzy, melancholy, world-weariness, even self-destruction.

1.10 Alienation of the Romantic Poet / Hero

To tread the fine line between his urge to actively engage with society, which is borne out in his desire to alter the societal fabric, and his desire to escape from that very society, is a haunting concern for the Romantic poets. This contradictory impulse is most vividly enacted by the Byronic hero who spurns human society while audaciously pursuing a celebration of individualism. The Romantic hero is not only haunted by melancholy or boredom but he is also a fiery rebel against society. He is also a man of mystery. The concept of the individual authoring his character and through it his destiny was a preferred theme for the German philosophers, from whom the Romantics drew their inspiration. When Kant asserted that the human mind creates the universe it perceives, and thereby creates its own experience, the Romantics found it encapsulated their felt-reality of the world. The poets often wrote in solitude, and portrayed poetry as the product of solitude. Expectedly, solitary figures, starkly portrayed against a natural backdrop, like Wordsworth's "Solitary Reaper," or the "Leech Gatherer," or Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner," occupy a significant niche in the Romantic oeuvre. Isolated heroes banished from society or punished for their infringement of moral or social laws are preferred romantic figures. The mythological Greek hero Prometheus, who like Satan, positions himself in opposition to the will of God is one of the most visible. However, unlike Satan, who plots for and revels in the fall of mankind, Prometheus suffers for flouting Zeus' decree in order to help mankind.

Like the lure of solitude, the temptation of the forbidden held an abiding fascination for the Romantic poet. The 'Mariner' who pays dearly for committing a forbidden act; the seductive, yet forbidden appeal of the Byronic hero; the destructive temptation of the forbidden in Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" – all express this fascination with what is forbidden. That this was not just embodied in art but came to be enacted in life too is borne out by the stormy lives of Byron and Shelley. In fact, often the poetry of this period redefined heroism as striving after the unattainable – a longing that nonchalantly brushed aside limits innate to man. Shelley succinctly phrased it "the desire of the moth for a star." Blake confidently asserted that nothing "[l]ess than everything" would "satisfy man." Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* records the travails of such a man who succeeds in overreaching himself. However, women writers of the period, especially poets, resist the temptations of the romantic hero, and Barbauld went so far as to gently admonish Coleridge for escaping into a "fairy bower" of romance and advised him to

engage with the real world. Jane Austen also mockingly holds up a young man who is warned against losing himself in the "impassioned descriptions of hopeless agony" as enshrined in romantic poetry. Austen's tongue-in-cheek remedy for such an 'illness' is to take large doses of 'prose' regularly!
Quite often the poet imaginatively projects an entire world and presents it persuasively to the reader. In David Daiches' words:

> Whether the romantic poet moves out into the country with Wordsworth, or into a symbolic Middle Ages, as Keats sometimes did, or proceeds to have a passionate Platonic love affair with the universe such as we find in Shelley, he is illustrating in one way or the other his isolation, his inability to draw nourishment from the conventional attitudes and culture patterns of a select society, his desire to escape from his loneliness not by normal human companionship but by discovering man in general through external nature.

An abiding preoccupation with the mind and its limits is a theme close to the heart of the Romantics. The need to understand the mysteries of the mind and the unconscious, to delineate and probe states and situations that involve psychological extremities recur in their works. Wordsworth, for instance, was intrigued by visionary states of consciousness that he associated with the mystique of childhood. He felt that adult judgment stood in the way of partaking in such a mental condition, and sought to overcome it. Coleridge and De Quincey shared an addiction to opium and they recorded the dreams and the nightmares they experienced under the influence of the drug. The altered state of consciousness that they experienced under the influence of the drug often became the fodder for their writing. The supernatural, the magical, the bizarre and the unusual also held a strong charm for these poets. Coleridge affirmed that his intention while writing poems for the *Lyrical Ballads* was to evoke wonder and awe – "the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural" – which he masterfully achieved in poems like *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel* and *Kubla Khan.* Other poets too like Shelley and Keats were bewitched by the lure of the magical and the extraordinary.

ACTIVITY E

Isolation or alienation is considered to be a marked feature of many protagonists in Romantic poetry. Discuss.

DISCUSSION

Protagonists in Romantic poetry are often characters who enact their destiny in splendid isolation. Isolated heroes banished from society or punished for their infringement of moral or social laws like Prometheus or the Ancient Mariner or the Byronic hero are preferred romantic figures.

1.11 The Revival of the Old

For many writers who occupied the margins of mainstream culture, writing under the banner of Romance also meant connecting with their past. This is especially true of Scottish and Irish writers. Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), which set off the trend, can also be seen as the reclaiming of a tradition that these writers associated with Spenser and Shakespeare. The Romantic period's medieval revival was also eagerly embraced by women writers. Maria Edgeworth wove into her tales details of lost practices that demonstrate how peoples' way of looking at things have their roots in the peculiarities of the place. Others like Robinson, Letitia Landon, Felicia Hemans, and Joanna Baillie also display a marked affinity for historical details in their works. It is one of the ironies of life that opposites are drawn toward one another. The eighteenth century with its foregrounding of genteel culture, and a literature that bore the unmistakable stamp of an urban society, was in fact the prelude to a way of thinking that categorically rejected it in preference for the 'ungenteel' and the primitive. Increasingly, as the century advanced, the polished life of educated men in cities, and their pastimes, ceased to interest poets, and early ballads and folk songs experienced a revival. A work such as Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) exerted a considerable influence in shaping the emerging zeitgeist.

The nostalgia for the past mingled with the tendency toward the melancholic produced a fondness for ruins, graveyards, the gothic, and the supernatural – hence their appearance as recurrent motifs in the works produced during this period. In English literature, Wordsworth's "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" (from the *Lyrical Ballads*), the Gothic novels of Matthew Gregory Lewis, and *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by Horace Walpole are representative. *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), by the Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott, and his historical novels, the Waverley series (1814-1825), combine all these concerns: love of the picturesque, preoccupation with the heroic past, and delight in mystery and superstition.

1.12 Mysticism

Mysticism and mystical traditions had a strong appeal for the Romantic poets. William Blake had moved away from the prevailing religious traditions and sought inspiration in the occult tradition which was predominantly European. The mystical ideas of the Swedish visionary Emanuel Swedenborg, and the German religious thinker Jakob Boehme, the esoteric tradition of Rosicrucianism and the Jewish cabalistic tradition – all left their mark on Blake. A visionary and mystic who often experienced poetry as sharply drawn images (he was an engraver by profession), his poetry is peopled with angels and prophets, gigantic demonic characters, and their titanic encounters. Wordsworth and Coleridge too were deeply drawn towards the mystical in two different ways. For instance, Wordsworth saw the Absolute as manifested

in the temporal in Nature, whereas Coleridge sought the mystical through the supernatural.

1.13 Romantic Poetics

Wordsworth's "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" is at times called the Manifesto of the Romantic Movement. Although this presupposes a homogeneity for a literary period that is far from homogeneous, it draws attention to the importance accorded to the Preface. Why is the 'Preface' considered seminal to the understanding of Romantic poetics? The importance of the Preface is that Wordsworth gathered disparate ideas and organized them into a coherent theory and used it as a rational explanation for his own practices and beliefs. And these precepts can be applied to understand the governing principles behind much of Romantic poetry. In other words, the concepts forwarded in the Preface can function as a touchstone for Romantic poetics.

Wordsworth made a conscious choice when he rejected the themes made popular by Dryden and Pope and declared that he was interested in the 'ordinary.' While humble life had found a place in the pastoral, the treatment accorded by Wordsworth to this subject was far removed from the stylized treatment afforded by the pastoral poems. Wordsworth carried his exploration of the ordinary as fit subject for poetry into even further extremes by including the disgraced, the outcaste and the delinquents – "convicts, female vagrants, gypsies, idiot boys and mad mothers" – inviting at times the scorn of his contemporaries. Yet Wordsworth's project was hardly confined to the merely mimetic – to present things as they are – but to throw over "situations from common life . . . a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things would be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect." To recreate a lost sense of wonder in the familiar became his poetic credo.

The oft quoted Wordsworthian definition of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" captures the essence of the romantic aesthetic. Such a view foregrounds the poet's subjectivity as the central locus of the poetic impulse and of the poem itself. In other words, it is the poet's feelings that generate the poetic impulse and form. This unwavering focus on and celebration of subjectivity is considered to be a distinctive Romantic innovation. The word 'spontaneous' is also critical. Although Wordsworth concedes that the composition of the poem takes place in "emotion recollected in tranquillity," he has no doubt about the importance of powerful feelings behind the creative impulse. Keats echoes this sentiment when he declares that "if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all."

Samuel Johnson in his *Dictionary* (1765) had defined "fancy" as one of the synonyms of "imagination." However, Coleridge makes a cardinal distinction between the two. In *Biographia Literaria* he presents 'fancy' as a 'mechanical' process which receives the elementary images gathered from the

senses and memory and reassembles them in a new spatial and temporal order. Fancy receives and reassembles; but does not recreate in the manner of real imagination. The real imagination, as Coleridge defines it, is either primary or secondary. The primary mediates between sensation and perception and is considered to be the "prime agent" of all human perception, whereas the secondary imagination is involved in recreating perceptions by attempting to idealize and unify them. Both Coleridge and Wordsworth felt that imagination should be regarded as the superior faculty, the transubstantiator of experience; while fancy (a contraction of fantasy; Latin phantasia, a transliteration from the Greek) should be considered as a kind of assistant to imagination.

The validity and the indispensability of the visionary and creative imagination in all the great human concerns is the chord that Shelley strikes again and again in his "Defence of Poetry." In terms of power and cogency, it would be difficult to find a writer who can match Shelley in his denunciation of the pernicious effects of an acquisitive society with its narrowly material concept of utility and progress; which has permitted man to make enormous progress in science and in his material well-being without a proportionate development of his "poetic faculty," the moral imagination – with the grotesque result, that "man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave." In a passage which is not found in certain editions of the Defence, Shelley defines poetry as "the expression of imagination;" he postulates it as "connate with the origin of man." Equally central to Shelley's theory is the concept of the "sympathetic imagination" – the faculty by which an individual is enabled to overleap the limits of his own neural, emotive, and ideological absorptions, and identify himself with the thoughts and feelings of other men. Shelley asserts that the faculty which in poetry enables us to share the joys and sufferings of imagined characters is also the basis of all morality, for it compels us to feel for others as we feel for ourselves. The ancient belief that the highest poetry is "inspired" was not fully shared by Shelley. In his view, it is not god or muse outside the poet, but the unconscious depths within the poet's own mind that generate the wellsprings of poetry.

Keats regarded nothing that he said on art and aesthetics as final. As far as he was concerned, each statement constituted only a stage in his continuing exploration into what he called "the mystery." However, of one thing he was certain. "I am certain of nothing," Keats admits in one of his letters, "but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of imagination. . . . What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth." He was also convinced that art in its intensity is capable of making all that is "disagreeable evaporate." Keats thought hard and persistently about life and art, and the seeds of ethical or critical ideas that he picked up from his intellectual contemporaries (Hazlitt, Coleridge, Wordsworth) flowered and fruitioned in the rich soil of his imagination. Expectedly, a number of Keats' comments on poets and poetry like "empathy," "negative capability," "egotistical sublime," have become significant points of reference in aesthetic theory.

Romantic poetry abounds in description of Nature, and description, in this case, is never indulged in for its own sake. For the Romantic poet, observation and accurate description of nature and natural phenomena are important, but not necessarily a sufficient condition for poetry. Wordsworth in fact dismisses this activity of observing Nature by categorically stating that "its exercise supposes all the higher qualities of the mind to be passive, and in a state of subjection to external objects." While we have romantic poems with unparalleled descriptive passages on Nature – Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Keats' "Nightingale," – these poems present nature only as a stimulus to "the most characteristic human activity, that of thinking" (Abrams 1993: 128). In fact, the longer Romantic nature poems only present the natural scene as a catalyst for meditative reflection, sometimes using the scene to tackle and resolve a personal crisis.

The Lyric, a form ideally suited for expressing the poet's feelings and describing nature came to be idealized by the Romantic poets who often referred to it as the "most essentially poetic of all genres." Also, the Romantic insistence that poetry should primarily express the poet's feelings found its full resonance in the character of the lyric. Thus the minor poetic form of the lyric became a major Romantic form. Being a "fragment," the lyric symbolized a break from the tradition as defined by Neoclassicism, with its emphasis on unity, wholeness, and rational design. A number of lyrics composed during this time aimed to attain a sense of sublimity. Robust imaginative grandeur, a sense of infinity, irrationality, even fear and terror – these were achieved less through sophisticated style and rhetoric than by the force of individual genius. The lyric also underwent changes in the hands of the Romantic poets: for instance, the 'I' or the speaker is no longer a 'Petrarchan lover' or a 'Cavalier gallant' as in Elizabethan and 17th-century love poems, but a persona which shared many aspects of the poet's life and character. This is true not only of short lyric poems, but even of longer poems like Byron's "Childe Harold," "Manfred," and Don Juan. Not surprisingly, in the minds of the readers, the image of the hero and that of the poet alchemized into one.

The Romantics cherished the image of the poet as a visionary or seer, as much as they portrayed him as lost and forlorn, a man of mystery, and a rebel. However, in critical terms, to present Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats as constituting a single, solid phalanx, will be tantamount to misrepresenting their life and oeuvre. The spontaneity, lyricism, reverie, synaesthesia, the yearning to unify the inner and the outer landscape through the catalytic, synthesising powers of vision and imagination, to express what is thus perceived and experienced in a way that would haunt, vitalize, and enrapture the mind of the reader – these defining concerns and characteristics of what is designated as the romantic sensibility do manifest in distinct ways in their works. An ardent reaching after what Wordsworth called "the hiding-places of man's power" pulsates and surfaces as an intense, enduring (even obsessive) concern for the Romantics. At the heart of their diverse quests and

mappings, in their preoccupation with the elusive, yet integral links between creative form and creative energy, between being and creating, we may find the query that W.B. Yeats, the 20th century poet who is sometimes called the last of the Romantics, memorably voiced in "Among School Children":

> O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
> Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
> O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
> How can we know the dancer from the dance?

For the Romantics, the poetic symbol manifested its meaning organically, affording aesthetic pleasure and beauty, as well as embodying moral truth. In their view, the poetic symbol magically expressed universal ideas through the particular – through the concrete details, images, and metaphors.

The Romantics were convinced of the power of the symbol and its clear dominance over allegory. Symbol, unlike allegory, does not mechanically impose meaning and morality onto poetry. It facilitates – what Friedrich von Schiller (1759 – 1805), the German poet, dramatist, philosopher, and historian, defined as the critical function of art – the power to reconcile and transcend reality through a heightened state of consciousness. In Schiller's view, which considerably influenced Romantic poets like Coleridge, beauty enables a person to ennoble his nature. By harmonizing duty and inclination through art, which Schiller associated with the "play impulse" or "play drive," each of us can become a "beautiful soul" (*schöne Seele*). Understandably, Schiller visualized the process of reading a poem as "play" – a serious play that reconciled the particular and the general, and brought an uplifting sense of freedom to the reader and the poet, one that braced them up and shored them from the alienation and despair of the everyday world. By infusing colour, contour and character, poetry – for the Romantics – humanized a world that was increasingly becoming faceless and dehumanized. It was a means and spur to engagement – even as it provided an escape.

1.14 Summing up

In this unit we have tried to introduce some of the main ideas and movements that shaped English Literature in the Romantic Period. We explained the important social, economic and political factors that influenced thought and literature during this period. Then, we looked at the chief characteristics of poetry, prose and fiction written during the period. We ended with a description of the spirit of the age, the poetics, the themes and the challenges of Romanticism.

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