



Literary Romanticism: A Brief Introduction

By Adam and Missy Andrews

Romanticism as a literary movement arose in Europe during in the aftermath of the French Revolution. In many ways, Romanticism was a reaction against the formal, orderly literature of the 18th century. Its beginning is commonly associated with the publication of William Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. In England, the Romantic period ended in 1832 with the death of Sir Walter Scott, one of its most famous novelists. In America, however, the Romantic impulse continued through the Civil War – Harriet Beecher Stowe and Abraham Lincoln were both affected by Romanticism, as were many of the preachers and politicians of the antebellum period.

As with all literary movements, Romanticism is somewhat difficult to define. Romantic authors tended to share certain general assumptions about the world, however, including faith in mankind's innate goodness and eventual perfectibility. They saw men as equal at birth, individually unique and capable of infinite self-development. They stressed the value of expressing human abilities that were common to all from birth rather than from training. Romantics owed a debt to French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose image of the noble savage became their ideal vision of humanity freed from the stifling boundaries of civilization.

Romantics in England were poets more often than not, although novelists such as Scott and Jane Austen also belong to the period. The works of Romantic authors are likely to deal with themes such as the following:

Radical individualism

18th century literature had described men and women as limited beings in a strictly ordered

world which changed little from generation to generation. The limits of the human species were often the subjects, not only of fiction but also of philosophy and political theory. The glory of 18th century literature was to exult in order, precedent, long-established principles and common sense.

Romantic authors reacted strongly against this tradition, and put immense faith in the power and potential of the individual man. The individual who refuses to submit to limitations (whether of species, class, race or sex) is often the hero in Romantic fiction, because he is the true human being. Earlier ages might have called this striving sin; the Romantics called it a triumph.

Romantic works often depict characters isolated from society or at least struggling against its rules and regulations: Cain, Satan, Faust, Prometheus, Napoleon, the Ancient Mariner and Hester Prynne are good examples.

Nature

The description of scenery and natural imagery figured prominently in many works of the Romantic period. Nature was often used as a symbol of the freedom of the human soul when unfettered by the restraints imposed by society. Scenic beauty reminded Romantic authors of the possibilities of the human soul, and they used Nature as a model for harmony in the world. If we could all act according to our pure, essential natures, they argued, we would get along much better. Romantic works therefore tend to advocate the emotional, intuitive and sensual side of the human experience against the orderly, restrained demands of established human society. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is a wonderful example of this theme in action, complete with symbolism and imagery that perfectly illustrate the Romantic faith in Nature.

The novels of James Fenimore Cooper also show these assumptions very clearly.

Imagination

Among Romanticism's most characteristic traits is faith in the individual imagination and its ability to triumph over the senses. Romantic authors believed that the chief aim of life was learning to "see" the world through the imagination, and so transcend its troubles and difficulties. The Romantics saw a supernatural power in the individual imagination – a power strong enough literally to remake the world. By demonstrating this imagination at work in their poems and novels, they hoped to effect a revolution just as real as the ones the French and Americans had attempted in the late 18th century. The essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, though not fiction, are important in this regard, as are the poems of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Lord Byron.

English Romanticism

Important English authors in the Romantic tradition include William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley, John Keats and Sir Walter Scott. Jane Austen also belongs to the period, though her novels also have much in common with works of the Victorian period which came a generation later.

Parents and teachers who want to give their high school students an exposure to classic English works from this period can choose from titles such as *Frankenstein*, *Ivanhoe*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* or *Pride and Prejudice*, to name but a few.

American Romanticism

The most famous American Romantics include Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Good reading list for American Romanticism might include titles like *The Legend of Sleepy*

Hollow, *Last of the Mohicans*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Telltale Heart*, *Moby Dick* or *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Worldview Issues

Some Romantic authors questioned the truths of Christianity and sought to escape the demands that a Christianized civilization made upon them. Others sought to imbue Christian ideas with new vitality by expressing them in the Romantic idiom. The important components of the Romantic worldview were not necessarily anti-Christian, but they did lend themselves to skepticism about traditional religion.

As he reads Romantic fiction, the observant reader may see various authors engaged in a great struggle to reconcile Romantic faith in the individual human soul with traditional Christian doctrines of original sin. The relationship between these two ideas was one of the most important philosophical issues of the early nineteenth century – we should expect to find it throughout the classic works of the period.

Adam and Missy Andrews direct the Center for Literary Education and homeschool their six children. Adam is a Ph.D. candidate in history at the University of Washington in Seattle and a Henry Salvatori Fellow of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. Missy holds degrees in English Literature and Christian Studies from Hillsdale College. Adam and Missy are the authors of *Teaching the Classics: A Socratic Method for Literary Education*.