

Romanticism

Romanticism was a reaction to rigid classicism, rationalism, and deism. Strongest between 1800 and 1850, the Romantic movement differed from country to country, and from individual to individual. Because it emphasized change, it was considered revolutionary. It was an atmosphere in which events came to affect not only the way humans thought and expressed themselves, but also the way they lived socially and politically.

Characteristics

Romanticism appealed to emotion more than to reason (that is, truth and virtue can be found as much by the heart as the head). It rejected classical emphasis on order and the observance of rules (that is, let the imagination create new forms and techniques).

It also rejected the Enlightenment view of nature as a precise harmonious whole (that is, nature is alive, vital, changing, filled with the divine spirit), as well as the cold, impersonal ideas of deism (that is, it viewed God as inspiring nobility of soul and deplored the decline of Christianity).

Romanticism rejected the enlightened view of the past, which ran afoul of real human history (that is, it viewed the world as an organism that was growing and changing with each nation's history unique); it expressed optimism about life and the future.

Romantics enriched European cultural life by encouraging personal freedom and flexibility. By emphasizing feeling, they enabled humanitarian movements to form and fight slavery, poverty, and industrial evils.

Romantic Literature, Art, Music, and Philosophy

The English Romantics William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge epitomized the movement, along with Robert Burns: George Gordon, Lord Byron; John Keats; Percy Bysshe Shelley; Alfred, Lord Tennyson; and Sir Walter Scott. The greatest German figures were Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Heinrich Heine. Johann Gottfried von Herder, and Friedrich von Schiller. French romantics were Honoré de Balzac, Alexandre Dumas, Victor Hugo, and Stendhal (aka Henri Beyle). The outstanding Russian exponents were Aleksandr Pushkin and Nikolay Gogol.

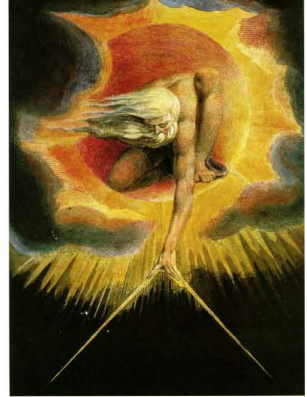
The leading romantic painters in popular taste were the Frenchman Jacques-Louis David the Englishmen Turner and John C. Constable, and the

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Spaniard Francisco G. Goya. Examples of their work shown in Figure 6-2 show how romanticism can never be conceived as a monolithic movement.



Musée du Louvre, Paris, France



British Museum, London, England



Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany



Musée du Louvre, Paris, France

Figure 6-2. David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1784) (top, left) may be neoclassical, but here we also see how the recently revived melodrama adds emotionalism to a classical subject from Livy. William Blake's *Ancient of Days* (1794) (top, right) shows a religious fervor in the movement, as Caspar David Friedrich in his *Two Men Looking at the Moon* (1819) (bottom, left) typifies the romantic obsession with sublime landscapes and lone reveries. Madame Vigée LeBrun, the first modern woman to practice painting as a profession, shows the romantic exaltation of a work by another woman, Madame de Stael's *Corinne* (1807), as seen through her eyes in her painting of 1808 (bottom, right).

One side of romantic art, then, preferred the dreamy, religious, nature-worshipping self; the other found fodder in violence, death, disaster, and

patriotic remembrance, as can be seen in the paintings of Goya, Gericault, Turner, and Delacroix (see Figure 6-3).

Music did not change as dramatically as did literature. Composers still observed the classical forms, but began incorporating new ideas and innovations. Ludwig van Beethoven was a transitional figure for pure romantics, such as Hector Berlioz, Fryderyk Chopin. Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, and Karl Maria von Weber.

Romantic philosophy stimulated an interest in idealism, the belief that reality consists of ideas, as opposed to materialism. This school of thought (Philosophical idealism), founded by Plato, was developed through the writings of:

1. **Immanuel Kant**, whose work *Critique of Pure Reason* advanced the theory that reality was twofold-physical and spiritual. Reason can discover what is true in the physical, but not in the spiritual, world.
2. **Johann Gottlieb Fichte**, a disciple of Kant, and Friedrich Schelling, collaborator of Fichte. Fichte is considered a great egotist among the Idealists (the “I” is all), whereas Schelling was the great religious mystic, one sought out by the future King Max of Bavaria for inspiration.
3. **Georg Wilhelm Hegel**, its greatest exponent. Hegel believed that an impersonal God rules the universe and guides humans along a progressive evolutionary course by means of dialectic, a process by which one thing is constantly reacting with its opposite (the thesis and antithesis), producing a result (synthesis), that automatically meets another opposite and continues the series of reactions. Hegel’s philosophy exerted a great influence on Karl Marx, who turned the Hegelian dialectic upside down to demonstrate that the ultimate meaning of reality was a material end not a higher or spiritual end as Hegel suggested.



Prado Museum, Madrid, Spain



Musée du Louvre, Paris, France



Figure 3.1. The Napoleonic war-machine as it mowed down Spanish Insurgents. Theodore Gericault's famous *Raft of the Medusa* (1818) (top, right) shows both the despair and the desperate hopes attendant upon a shipwreck. J.M.W. Turner's wistful *Fighting Temeraire* (1839) (bottom, left) shows the passing of a great ship from the Napoleonic Wars, destined for dry dock amid the new squalor of industry. Eugene Delacroix's sumptuous *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827) (bottom, right) depicts not only the horror of a massacre, but also the Byronic disdain and boredom of the sated monarch.

Impact

Romanticism challenged the clear simplicity and unity of thought that had characterized the eighteenth century. A single philosophy no longer expressed all the aims and ideals of Western civilization. Romanticism provided a more complex, perhaps truer, view of the real world, but it in turn would be challenged for its excesses in the subsequent realist and impressionist movements.