

Romantic Poetry (1798-1832)

Introduction:

Romanticism is generally defined as an expression of sharpened sensibilities and heightened imaginative feelings. It is the glorification of beauty. Emotions and feelings are the base of Romanticism and this school of thought has continued to hold its sway since its inception. Actually the romantic literature of the nineteenth century is considered to be the revival of the humanism and ideals of the Elizabethan period and is often referred to as literature of romantic revival. The Romantic Movement is believed to have begun in 1798 with the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth. However, it is a culmination of a number of events and tendencies observed in English Poetry right from the publication of *The Seasons* by James Thomson in 1740. It is also seen as a reaction to the artificiality and rigidity of the Neo-classical period. The French Revolution and the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity prescribed by it is an event that triggered the rise of romantic poetry. The publication of *The Rights of Man* in two parts (1791 and 1792) by Thomas Paine paved the way for romantic literature. Similarly, *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft also were instrumental in the development of the romantic poetry. The German philosophy of Hegel, Kant and Fichte also influenced the romantic poetry. The Romantic Period consists of two parts called as the two generations of romantic poetry- the Older Generation / First Generation Romantic Poetry and the Younger Generation/ Second Generation Romantic Poetry. William Wordsworth, Samuel T. Coleridge, Cowper and Sir Walter Scott are called the Older Romantics while Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats and Lord Byron are called the Younger Romantics. The Younger Romantics are also ‘younger’ in the sense that they did not live long to become old. All of them died before the age of forty.

Definition/s:

1. “addition of strangeness to beauty”- Walter Pater
2. “renaissance of wonder” – Watts Dunton
3. “Romanticism is a withdrawal from outer experience to concentrate upon inner experience.”- Lascelas Abercrombie
4. “the reawakening of the Middle Ages” – Helner, Beers and Phelps
5. “”Liberalism in Literature” – Victor Hugo
6. “extraordinary development of imaginative sensibility”- Herford
7. “an accentuated predominance of emotional life, provoked and directed by the exercise of imaginative vision” – Legouis and Cazamian

Characteristic / Salient features of Romantic Poetry:

1. Subjectivity: All romantic literature is subjective. It is an expression of the inner urges, personal emotions, and thoughts of the author/poet. The poet does not necessarily follow any restrictions, rules of expression but gives free way to his emotions. The poet is

guided by his inspiration and intuition in his expression. There is no restriction of theme, or subject matter either. Romantic poetry is a reaction and protest against the rules, regulations and customs laid down by the neo-classical age.

2. Imagination: In romantic poetry reason and intellect are subdued and their place is taken by imagination, emotion and passion. The poetry of all the romantic poets exhibits a heightened emotional sensibility and flights of imagination that perhaps were never experienced before. The imaginative power gives what may be called “an existence, a shape to airy nothing”, to use Shakespeare’s words. He can see the extraordinary in the ordinary things and incidents. He is then inspired to write poetry where he gives free expression to his imagination.

3. Spontaneity: “All good poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling :it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquility”. This definition by Wordsworth sums up the significance of the spontaneity in romantic poetry. The feelings are spontaneous and not forced, premeditated. The romantic poet has a ‘more than common sensibility’ which helps the poet see and feel beyond what the common man feels.

4. Love for Nature: The romantics display a love for the beauty of the physical nature. They are impressed by the beauty and simplicity of country or rural life and the spiritual calm experienced in the company of wild flowers, the green fields and the chirping birds. They provide a beautiful escape from the sordid realities and suffocating din of the city life.

5. Love for the Supernatural: A sense of wonder and mystery of the universe permeates the romantic poetry. The love for the supernatural coupled with the imaginative power leads to the delineation of the supernatural world of fairies, witches, goblins, the magical and the mysterious.

6. Melancholy: The romantic poets are dissatisfied with the existing order of the world. This dissatisfaction could be with personal life, the age or with general condition of humanity itself. The romantics ‘look before and after and pine for what is not’. The romantic poet either aims to reform the situation or escape from it into the past.

7. Escape into the Middle Ages/ the Past: The romantic poets seek to escape into the remote past or the Middle Ages as they not only provide them with an escape from the sordid realities of the present but also delight their hearts by their colour, magic and pageantry. Some romantic poet imagine a better and happier world, a ‘utopia’ for such an escape. The revolutionary idealism characterizes much of the romantic poetry making it visionary in tone.

8. Democratic sensibility: The romantics are basically lovers of freedom. The French Revolution which was the immediate cause for the rise of the romantic poetry advocated the principles of liberty, fraternity and equality. The romantics are against all sorts of tyranny. They revolt against it. They also believe in the essential dignity of man. There is an instinct for the elemental simplicities of life. Their hearts go out for the rights and happiness of the poor and the deprived. This essential affinity for the common man, his freedom, his rights etc. lends the democratic sensibility to romantic poetry. Romantic poetry gives importance to the common man, his life, his language as against the neo-classical poetry that deals with the life and language of the elite class.

9. Lyricism: Romantic poetry is lyrical, musical in its expression and is written in metrical forms like Ode, Ballad, Song, and Sonnet and so on. These lyrical forms are conducive to the expression of deeply felt emotions. They may or may not use metre and prefer the free verse for most of the times. Rhyming is also not consistent. But musical element is attained beautifully through the use of various sound devices.

10. Pantheism: Some romantic poets show deep faith in nature's power to inspire, instruct and even heal. The dignity and respect are extended to nature. Wordsworth for that matter sees God in nature and for him worshipping nature is worshipping God.

Major Romantic Poets:

1. William Wordsworth (1770 – 1850): Wordsworth is considered to be the father of romantic poetry and his *Lyrical Ballads* marked the onset of romantic poetry in English. The Preface attached by Wordsworth to the 1800 and 1802 editions of the *Lyrical Ballads* outlines his views on poetry and in fact the tenets of romantic poetry. Apart from the *Lyrical ballads*, Wordsworth's fame rests on the long autobiographical poem *The Prelude* which records the growth of his mind and the influences on his mind. The *Preface* is a document of his views on poetry, poet, the subject of poetry, poetic diction, metre etc. Descriptions of nature, Pantheism, democratic sensibility are simplicity of diction, free verse are some of the characteristic features of his poetry.

2. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834): A close friend of Wordsworth, Coleridge's contribution to the *Lyrical Ballads* was "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", a ballad replete of retributive justice and repentance. "Kubla Khan"- a dream fragment and "Christabel" are among his other popular works. His "Ode on Dejection" is also a significant poem. His important contribution included *Biographia Literaria* and it records his views on poetry, imagination, fancy and also his criticism of Wordsworth. Supernatural element, imaginative power, humanism, medievalism, musical quality and the element of mystery are some of the characteristic features of his poetry.

3. Sir Walter Scott (1771-1812): Scott is remembered for his narrative and lyric verse. His numerous narrative tales, ballads and lyrics have earned him a lasting place among the romantic poets the tales of chivalry and martial vigour recreate the Scottish life of his times. He began his career with German translations. "The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border", "The Lay of the Last Minstrel", "Marmion", "The Lady of the Lake" are some of his famous works *Lochinvar* and *Where shall the love rest* are two extremely famous songs by Scott. Chivalry, martial vigour, romantic scenery, picture of Scottish life, beautiful character delineation, picturesqueness are some striking features of Scott's poetry.

4. Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792 -1822): Shelley has left a vast body of work of highest order. His significant works include *Prometheus Unbound*, *Adonais*, *Hellas*, *Alastor*, *The Cenci*, *Queen Mab*, *The Revolt of Islam* etc. "Ode to the West Wind", "The Skylark", "Stanzas Written in Dejection Near Naples" are exquisite lyrics by Shelley. Spontaneity, pessimism, musical quality, imagery, love for wild in nature, revolutionary idealism and optimism are some of the salient features of his poetry.

5: John Keats (1795-1821): The youngest and the one who had a very short life, Keats was the most promising of the romantic poets. His genius is often compared to that of Shakespeare. A great lyricist he is remembered for his brilliant sonnets and odes. His famous

works include *Endymion*, *Hyperion*, *Isabella*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *Lamia* and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* apart from his sixty odd sonnets and Odes like “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, “Ode on Intellectual Beauty” and “Ode on Autumn”. Hellenism or his love for beauty, sensuousness, love for the remote past, exquisite word –paintings are some striking features of his poetry.

6. Lord (George Gordon) Byron (1788-1824): Lord Byron belongs to the second generation of the romantic poets. He has been over-discussed as a man and underestimated as a poet. He was of the royal Stuart blood on his mother’s side, has great personal beauty but also a physical deformity. He was introspective, self-centred, precocious and eager for love and admiration. His *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* is a result of his journey across the European continent describing the people and life in various European countries as also his views about life. *The Poetic Tales*, *The Vision of Judgement* *Don Juan*, *The Prisoner of Chillon*, and *Beppo* are some of his famous works. Revolutionary spirit, satire, subjectivity, rebellious nature are some of the characteristic features of his poetry. He popularized what is often termed as the Byronic hero through his works.

Conclusion:

Romantic poetry is thus both, a revolt and a revival; it is a revolt against the rigid and artificial traditions and conventions of the neo-classical age and revival of the humanism and freedom of the Elizabethan period.