19th Century American Literature

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**Introduction to Romanticism**

Note about the concept of Romanticism as a unified idea: Professors like to put things into boxes called periods. For example…these writers are of the Enlightenment Period…those writers are Realist. The idea is to try to group writers together according to their way of thinking to help students form a broad idea of the movement of ideas through time. In the case of Romanticism, this is an extremely difficult process. Romanticism contains so many different ideas that it almost has no definition at all. And many of the writers that we call Romantic would probably be very angry about that.

The word Romantic with a capital “R” is different from the word romantic with a small “r.” As we will see, Romanticism contains many ideas besides romantic love, although that is definitely part of it.

What is Romanticism?

* 1. Historical Period: This again is difficult to say…there is a lot of controversy about the dates but in general the period can be thought to run from 1757 to 1850, but, again, these dates are flexible. William Blake was born in 1757 and Wordsworth died in 1850.
  2. Historical Background
     1. The Industrial Revolution: The industrial revolution had a profound effect on life for the average person. Here are a few ways that it directly impacted the Romantic spirit:
        1. The growth of an educated middle class. People in the growing middle class had more time and more money and more education. This led to a market for writing that was produced by new voices. Earlier only the wealthy elite had the time and money to write and buy books.
        2. A growing dissatisfaction with urban life. City life in this time was horrible. Many of the romantic poets questioned the long-term effects of pollution and horrible working conditions on humanity.
        3. Environmentalism. The environmental destruction brought on by the industrial revolution, especially in the cities, led people to appreciate the beauty of nature.
     2. Political Revolution: Revolution in America (1776) and then in France (1789) and the political writings that came out of them led to a strong belief in the ability of the individual to choose their own destiny. The oppressive control of government and the church came to be seen as evil. This had an especially profound effect on the young people of this generation who felt the need to break away from the ideas of the past.
     3. The Napoleonic Wars: Napoleon, while hated by many, was seen to represent a change in the way that individuals could affect history. He came from nothing and rose to power using his own wits.
  3. Representative Voices
     1. English Romanticism:
        1. William Blake
        2. The ‘Lake Poets’
           1. William Wordsworth
           2. Samuel Coleridge
           3. Dorothy Wordsworth
        3. John Keats
        4. Percy Bysshe Shelley
        5. Mary Shelley
        6. George Gordon, Lord Byron
        7. John Clare
     2. German Romanticism: “Sturm and Drang (Storm and Stress)”
        1. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
        2. Friedrich Schlegel
        3. Friedrich Schiller
        4. Gottfried August Burger
     3. American Romanticism (next class)
        1. Utopian writings
        2. Wilderness writing
           1. James Fennimore Cooper
        3. Knickerbockers
           1. Washington Irving
        4. American Gothic
           1. Edgar Allen Poe
           2. George Melville
           3. Nathaniel Hawthorn
  4. Central Ideas
     1. The Individual vs. the “Ordered Universe”: The Enlightenment focused on finding order in the universe. Romanticism is primarily interested in the power of the individual to create their own idea of the universe.
     2. Imagination: To the Romantic thinker, the imagination is a powerful tool. Basically, they believe that if you can imagine it, you can do it.
     3. The “Common Man”: Romantic poets are very interested in the culture of communities “unspoiled” by modern life. They believe that these people have great “purity” of thinking.
     4. Shakespeare: During this period Shakespeare becomes very important in Western culture. Prior to this he was considered a kind of “low” entertainment.
     5. Gothic Romance: Novels are being written with themes like horror, magic, suicidal passion, immorality, and vengeful murder.
     6. Nature: Nature is very important as a subject and a place to have terrifying or inspiring experiences. It represents the pure world, as opposed to the dirty cities, where people are unable to think or live “Romantic” lives.
     7. Language: Symbolism and Myth. The poetry and language of the Romantic period is very symbolic. They are attempting to capture, with metaphor and symbols, some of the power of the emotions they experience.
     8. Emotion: Sensibility and “The Sublime”. Sensibility is something we would call today “sensitivity.” Romantic poets try to experience strong emotions, share in the emotions of others, and share those emotions with their readers.
     9. Exoticism and Travel. Most of the great Romantic poets spend a lot of their time looking for exotic places. Travel is a way to experience strong emotions.
     10. Love and Sex. The Romantic poets followed the idea “If it feels good, do it.” Some of the Romantics had very controversial lifestyles.
  5. The affects of Romanticism on Art
     1. Painting
     2. Music
     3. The novel
     4. Poetry

**LINES COMPOSED A FEW MILES ABOVE TINTERN ABBEY, ON REVISITING THE BANKS OF THE WYE DURING A TOUR. JULY 13, 1798**

**By William Wordsworth (1798)**

FIVE years have past; five summers, with the length

Of five long winters! and again I hear

These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs

With a soft inland murmur…Once again

Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,

That on a wild secluded scene impress

Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect

The landscape with the quiet of the sky.

The day is come when I again repose

Here, under this dark sycamore, and view 10

These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,

Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,

Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves

'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see

These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines

Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,

Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke

Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!

With some uncertain notice, as might seem

Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods, 20

Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire

The Hermit sits alone.

These beauteous forms,

Through a long absence, have not been to me

As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:

But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din

Of towns and cities, I have owed to them

In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,

Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;

And passing even into my purer mind,

With tranquil restoration:--feelings too 30

Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,

As have no slight or trivial influence

On that best portion of a good man's life,

His little, nameless, unremembered, acts

Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust,

To them I may have owed another gift,

Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,

In which the burthen of the mystery,

In which the heavy and the weary weight

Of all this unintelligible world, 40

Is lightened:--that serene and blessed mood,

In which the affections gently lead us on,--

Until, the breath of this corporeal frame

And even the motion of our human blood

Almost suspended, we are laid asleep

In body, and become a living soul:

While with an eye made quiet by the power

Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,

We see into the life of things.

[…]

Discussion Questions:

1. Wordsworth says five years have passed since he visited this place. It is a very special place to him and he missed it. It makes him very happy to be there and he says that the memory of that place has made him feel better when he was far away “’mid the din (in the middle of the noise)/ of towns and cities.” Do you have a special place? Talk about a place that you can think of and feel happy…your “happy place.”
2. Wordsworth talks in line 41 about a “blessed mood.” It is a feeling where all the weight of the world is lifted. Even “the motion of our human blood” is almost stopped. In that quiet place of “harmony” and “joy” he says that we can “see into the life of things.” By this he means that we can have a clear understanding of life and our place in the universe. Have you ever had an experience like this?