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| **Introduction to Romanticism**      Romanticism has very little to do with things popularly thought of as "romantic," although love may occasionally be the subject of Romantic art. Rather, it is an international artistic and philosophical movement that redefined the fundamental ways in which people in Western cultures thought about themselves and about their world. **Historical Considerations**       The early Romantic period thus coincides with what is often called the "age of revolutions"--including, of course, the American (1776) and the French (1789) revolutions--an age of upheavals in political, economic, and social traditions, the age which witnessed the initial transformations of the Industrial Revolution. A revolutionary energy was also at the core of Romanticism, which quite consciously set out to transform not only the theory and practice of poetry (and all art), but the very way we perceive the world. Some of its major precepts have survived into the twentieth century and still affect our contemporary period.  |

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| **Nature**       "Nature" meant many things to the Romantics. As suggested above, it was often presented as itself a work of art, constructed by a divine imagination, in emblematic language. For example, throughout "Song of Myself," Whitman makes a practice of presenting commonplace items in nature--"ants," "heap'd stones," and "poke-weed"--as containing divine elements, and he refers to the "grass" as a natural "hieroglyphic," "the handkerchief of the Lord." While particular perspectives with regard to nature varied considerably--nature as a healing power, nature as a source of subject and image, nature as a refuge from the artificial constructs of civilization, including artificial language--the prevailing views accorded nature the status of an organically unified whole. It was viewed as "organic," rather than, as in the scientific or rationalist view, as a system of "mechanical" laws, for Romanticism displaced the rationalist view of the universe as a machine (e.g., the deistic image of a clock) with the analogue of an "organic" image, a living tree or mankind itself. At the same time, Romantics gave greater attention both to describing natural phenomena accurately and to capturing "sensuous nuance"--and this is as true of Romantic landscape painting as of Romantic nature poetry. Accuracy of observation, however, was not sought for its own sake. Romantic nature poetry is essentially a poetry of meditation.  |

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| **Symbolism and Myth**       Symbolism and myth were given great prominence in the Romantic conception of art. In the Romantic view, symbols were the human aesthetic correlatives of nature's emblematic language. They were valued too because they could simultaneously suggest many things, and were thus thought superior to the one-to-one communications of allegory. Partly, it may have been the desire to express the "inexpressible"--the infinite--through the available resources of language that led to symbol at one level and myth (as symbolic narrative) at another.  |

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| **Individualism: The Romantic Hero**       The Romantics asserted the importance of the individual, the unique, even the eccentric. Consequently they opposed the character typology of neoclassical drama. In another way, of course, Romanticism created its own literary types. In style, the Romantics preferred boldness over the preceding age's desire for restraint, maximum suggestiveness over the neoclassical ideal of clarity, free experimentation over the "rules" of composition, genre, and decorum, and they promoted the conception of the artist as "inspired" creator over that of the artist as "maker" or technical master. Romantics generally rejected absolute systems, whether of philosophy or religion, in favor of the idea that each person (and humankind collectively) must create the system by which to live.  |

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| **The Everyday and the Exotic**       The attitude of many of the Romantics to the everyday, social world around them was complex. It is true that they advanced certain realistic techniques, such as the use of "local color." Yet social realism was usually subordinate to imaginative suggestion, and what was most important were the ideals suggested by the above examples, simplicity perhaps, or innocence. Earlier, the 18th-century cult of the noble savage had promoted similar ideals, but now artists often turned for their symbols to domestic rather than exotic sources--to folk legends and older, "unsophisticated" art forms, such as the ballad, to contemporary country folk who used "the language of common men," not an artificial "poetic diction," and to children (for the first time presented as individuals, and often idealized as sources of greater wisdom than adults).       Simultaneously, as opposed to everyday subjects, various forms of the exotic in time and/or place also gained favor, for the Romantics were also fascinated with realms of existence that were, by definition, prior to or opposed to the ordered conceptions of "objective" reason. Often, both the everyday and the exotic appeared together in paradoxical combinations. The concept of the beautiful soul in an ugly body, as characterized in Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, is another variant of the paradoxical combination.  |

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| **The Romantic Artist in Society**       In another way too, the Romantics were ambivalent toward the "real" social world around them. They were often politically and socially involved, but at the same time they began to distance themselves from the public. As noted earlier, high Romantic artists interpreted things through their own emotions, and these emotions included social and political consciousness--as one would expect in a period of revolution, one that reacted so strongly to oppression and injustice in the world. So artists sometimes took public stands, or wrote works with socially or politically oriented subject matter. Yet at the same time, another trend began to emerge, as they withdrew more and more from what they saw as the confining boundaries of bourgeois life. In their private lives, they often asserted their individuality and differences in ways that were to the middle class a subject of intense interest, but also sometimes of horror. Yet a significant Romantic theme became the contrast between artist and middle-class "Philistine." Unfortunately, in many ways, this distance between artist and public remains with us today.  |

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| **Recent Developments**       Some critics have believed that the two identifiable movements that followed Romanticism--Symbolism and Realism--were separate developments of the opposites which Romanticism itself had managed, at its best, to unify and to reconcile. Whether or not this is so, it is clear that Romanticism transformed Western culture in many ways that survive into our own times. It is only very recently that any really significant turning away from Romantic paradigms has begun to take place, and even that turning away has taken place in a dramatic, typically Romantic way.       Today a number of literary theorists have called into question two major Romantic perceptions: that the literary text is a separate, individuated, living "organism"; and that the artist is a fiercely independent genius who creates original works of art. In current theory, the separate, "living" work has been dissolved into a sea of "intertextuality," derived from and part of a network or "archive" of other texts--the many different kinds of discourse that are part of any culture. In this view, too, the independently sovereign artist has been demoted from a heroic, consciously creative agent, to a collective "voice," more controlled than controlling, the intersection of other voices, other texts, ultimately dependent upon possibilities dictated by language systems, conventions, and institutionalized power structures. It is an irony of history, however, that the explosive appearance on the scene of these subversive ideas, delivered in what seemed to the establishment to be radical manifestoes, and written by linguistically powerful individuals, has recapitulated the revolutionary spirit and events of Romanticism itself.Adapted from *A Guide to the Study of Literature: A Companion Text for Core Studies 6, Landmarks of Literature*, ©English Department, Brooklyn College. <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/rom.html> |