

## Introduction to Romanticism

Critics have arrived at no one definition of Romanticism. There are certain hallmarks of the Romantic perspective, however, that can be identified to most everyone's satisfaction, and there is a general consensus about who the chief Romantic poets are. Beyond that, pinning down the Romantic sensibility becomes a little like identifying beauty; it is easier to recognize than define.

Romantic poetry often holds nature to be the highest good. The child, who is closer to original nature, is often held up as having a greater connection to truth than the adult. The mind of a child is untouched by the influence of society and memory; as such, children perceive the world innocently and therefore truly. Romanticism values inspiration and insight, and an innocent appreciation of things that are untouched by the human hand. The emotions of Romantic poetry are often extreme. Extreme depression often gives way to rapturous transcendence. The two emotions are often paradoxically linked; they are both manifestations of passions that lift the poet beyond the realm of ordinary experience.

Romantic poetry largely abandons the classical forms of poetry (metrical structures, rhyme schemes, stanza patterns, etc.) that have come before it. Predetermined form is anathema to the Romantic sensibility; the moment of Romantic transcendence comes when experience is unmediated by preconceived ideas. Poetry comes when the poet is lifted by inspiration above the bounds of the familiar, and the form of poems should be determined by something intrinsic in the moment of their creation. Form should come from within, it should not be imposed from without.

One of the most common and archetypal of all Romantic metaphors is that of the Aeolian Lyre, or harp. The Aeolian Lyre was a Greek instrument that was played solely by the action of the wind moving its strings. The lyre of Apollo, with which the god of reason and poetry accompanied himself, (the traditional metaphor of the poetic act) was replaced by the Romantics with the Aeolian Lyre<sup>1</sup>. The implications of this transition have much to say about the nature of the essence of the Romantic vision of experience. In moments of transcendent insight, the poet is merely an instrument through which passionate experience expresses itself in ways that are at once radically new and eternally unchanging. Many people have seen in this conception of the creative act a parallel with Taoist and Zen Buddhist artistic traditions that hold that an artist is only in touch with the essence of what would be expressed when his or her ego is transcended; otherwise the ego will mediate the artist's experience and shape the art into its own image.

Romanticism is, in many ways, a reaction against the doctrine of materialism, a philosophy that came to dominate post-enlightenment thought (and still holds sway today). Materialism can be defined as the belief that the universe is ultimately and exclusively material. Every emotion, action, decision, and phenomenon has no

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<sup>1</sup> See Coleridge's *The Aeolian Harp* and Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* for examples

explanation but that which is determined by the mechanical action of physical laws governing its constituent matter. The materialistic beliefs that took hold in the centuries preceding the Romantics suggested that the will of God was no longer the driving force in the universe; rather the laws of physics account for and limit all phenomena. There is therefore no “meaning” and no “essence” to the universe, and human life is reduced to metabolism, cell division and replication, and instinctual actions governed by the laws of survival. Enlightenment brought about the end of the age of faith, and in the great vacuum that marked the death of belief in a divinely ordered universe the Romantics tried to find a way to reconnect with a vision of the world that transcended the mathematical limits marking the bounds of the material universe.

Wordsworth believed that “mechanical materialism” had substituted a “universe of death for that which moves with light and life instinct, actual, divine, and true.” He and other Romantics believed that sensation, the act of apprehending the world, is not passive; the awakened mind instead gives a form to experience. He called this aspect of the mind the Imagination. The Romantics held that Imagination was necessary to comprehend the world as it truly was; holy and numinous and meaningful. Without Imagination, the world collapses into its meaningless and diminished material state, like a 3D movie seen without the 3D glasses.

In their poetry, Wordsworth and other Romantics tried to reconnect with the essence of experience to render the meaningful eternal world that was hiding behind the material world of sleep and illusion. They believed that this visionary world was manifest in each individual act or phenomenon of the material world. To see the visionary world one must understand that the metaphorical aspects of natural phenomena are not mere poetic devices, but messengers of mystical truth. In other words, the poetic truth contained in the metaphor of the Aeolian Lyre was more “real” than the facts of the world of matter. This Romantic understanding the material world is called by Blake the “Poetic Vision.” It was necessary to use this Poetic Vision to awaken humankind from the delusional slumber of materialism. An example of this perspective is shown in the excerpt from Blake’s *Auguries of Innocence*, as he wishes the reader of the poem,

To see the World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour

To have an experiential understanding of the truth of the perspective manifest in this passage is to understand the Romantic Vision. For those of the materialist perspective, the Blake’s meaning will be locked away within an irresolvable paradox.

The Romantics believed that the doctrine of materialism was not the delivery from superstition and religious delusion leading the world to rational salvation that it was promised to be. Looking at some of the legacy of materialism – the destruction and pollution of the earth’s resources, the atom bomb, etc. – it is possible to believe that they may have been in touch with something essential that was being lost as man left “the dark ages” of human thought. But then that is a Romantic view....