

**English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832**  
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Backgrounds to English Romanticism- European Romanticism and Sensibility

In week two of the English Romantics 1798 to 1832, we continue with our study of the backgrounds to English Romanticism, focusing on European Romanticism and Sensibility.

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The period 1780 to 1840 was marked by two clear strands of thought, often believed to be in conflict with each other: the Enlightenment and Romanticism. The enlightenment as we now know, focused on empiricism, logical behavior, logical thought, logical processes, on rationality and intellect, on mathematical precision and scientific acumen. Romanticism on the other hand, focused on imagination, the supernatural, the imaginative, the unreal. The two strands here were productively linked in the English Romantics and in the European Romantics as well.

Whether it was the emphasis on sensibility and sense or whether it was the emphasis on the primitive and the modern that you see the tension being manifest as, it produced interesting literature, interesting non-fictional tracts as well. During the long 18<sup>th</sup> century, starting roughly in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup>, there were large scale changes in attitudes towards privacy, nature, subjectivity, language, imagination, humanity in general and the self.

A keener interest in the self generated a literature with a fascination for psychologisms and psychological analysis. Many of you may recall that Wordsworth's famous, *The Prelude*, published over several revisions, revised versions during his lifetime was actually the study of what he called the rise of a poet's mind, the making of a poet's mind, the crafting of poetic consciousness. These texts of the time were full of self-conscious narrators. The preferred genre was a memoir. It used the lyric mode extensively as well because they believed it was the best form to document any consciousness of the self. Friedrich Schiller's *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, published in 1798, two years before the Lyrical Ballads, proposed that all modern poetry must be self-conscious, aware of itself as lacking the integrity and oneness with nature.

Wordsworth wrote very self-conscious poetry where he was aware of the observing self, *I am the one who sees*. So much of what romanticism sought to do emerged from ideas forged within the sensibility movement.

(Refer Slide Time: 2:39)

Notably we think in terms of David Hume and Adam Smith's man of sympathy or moral sentiments. We think of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire and Diderot's noble savage, Henry Mackenzie's man of feeling, Laurence Sterne's sentimental traveller and Goethe's Werther. All of these share the essential attributes of the hero of sensibility and that is a subject of our lesson today, sensibility.

The prominent thinkers and antecedents of the thought are David Hume, Adam Smith, Rousseau, Diderot, Voltaire, Henry Mackenzie, Laurence Sterne and Goethe. What is the hero of sensibility like? He has unspoiled natural virtue; he has an unusually keen perception. And perception is not just observation but the analytical ability accompanying observation and a deep capacity to feel. This is a foundation for sensibility. Immanuel Kant, the famous philosopher (1724 to 1804) proposed individualism and human ability for benevolence and sympathy, thereby rejecting the emphasis on rationality and reason.

Sensibility could help produce an ethical response towards other humans. This emphasis on sentiment, on sensibility and passion also saw artifices less significant than primitivism. So, the free flow of emotions and feelings, what Wordsworth would famously call – and we have looked at this before in our earlier lessons – a spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions was more valuable than logical mental processes.

(Refer Slide Time: 4:14)

This is from William Blake's famous poem 'London':

I wonder thro' each charter'd street,  
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

Pay attention to Blake's lines here. What is Blake doing? Blake is positing an observer. But this observer is recording human emotions. In every face I meet, what do I see? What do I encounter? Marks of weakness, marks of woe. This is the rise of sensibility. Blake is, as you know, a pre-romantic; he anticipates much of what the Romantics will do.

(Refer Slide Time: 4:57)

Rousseau's espousal of the "noble savage", and primitivism weighed in on the side of instincts and passion as opposed to reason and calculated rational thought, which was the highlight of the

enlightenment. This meant, further, a marked preference for nature rather than culture, where culture was the human artifice and nature was deemed to be pure and uncontaminated.

Now this is a binary that will persist down the ages - that there is something like pure, good, uncontaminated nature and then there is culture which is human, artificial, artifice and therefore not quite on the same scale.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:35)

This means Romanticism drew upon developments in the Age of Sensibility where there was a distrust of Reason. It was accompanied by the elevations of passions as a guide to moral behavior. It was part of the great humanitarian movement as well. There was a heightened faith in humanity and humanitarianism. As the mayor of London at one point declared, we live in an age when humanity is in fashion.

Also visible is an increasing emphasis on the faculties of empathy and imagination. The Age of Sensibility helped the romantics forge a clear emphasis on empathy, sympathy, imagination and passion, and thereby automatically turn the face away from logic, reason and rationality.

(Refer Slide Time: 6:27)

Tom Paine writes in *Rights of Man*,

When despotism has established itself for ages in a country, as in France, it is not in the person of the king alone that it resides. It has the appearance of being so in show, and in nominal authority. But it is not so in practice and in fact. It has its standard everywhere. Every office and department has its despotism, founded upon custom and usage.

What were formerly called revolutions, were little more than a change of persons, or an alteration of local circumstances. What we now see in the world, from the revolutions of America and France, are a renovation of the natural order of things, a system of principles as universal as truth and the existence of man - and this is a crucial part - and combining moral with political happiness and national prosperity.

Tom Paine in a text which is as driven by political ideas is making a connection which is something that impacts upon the English Romantics between the moral and the political. We continue thinking about this via other authors as well.

(Refer Slide Time: 7:34)

English Romanticism drew upon particular developments in theories of poetry, imagination and psychology circulating in Europe. German writers and thinkers, J W Goethe (1749-1832) and Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) were, from the 1770s, advocating the idea of poetic genius and the value of imagination. Nature was being regarded as almost divine, as quasi-divine, and a great deal of value was placed on spontaneity of feeling and organicism. Prototypes for the Romantic hero

were found in creations like Goethe's *Faust* and *Werther* (In *Faust* and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* respectively). *Werther*, we are told, was a household name in England at some point in time.

The age is marked by the movement away from neoclassical symmetry and order embodied in Augustan writers such as Dryden and Pope towards a new interest in asymmetry and irregularity. (Refer Slide Time: 8:28)

The critic, Inger Brodey lists 6 features of the age of sensibility that then spills over into Romanticism. Something I found useful and I hope you will too.

1. Ethical thought that stressed the significance of feeling over reason for moral behavior, resulting in a new psychology that stressed the ethical, didactic, and emotional effect of the faculty of sight
2. Scientific theories that stress the biological bases of emotion and sympathy
3. An emphasis on the importance of independence from authority, whether construed in political, cultural, religious or aesthetic terms
4. A consistent preference for rural simplicity over urbanity
5. Intense concern over the possibility of human intimacy and effective or affective communication.
6. A deep ambivalence about the desirability for order and system.

In other words, feeling takes the place of reason as a supreme faculty. Whereas, Enlightenment or neoclassical thought required vision for the perception of a rational, eternal order, sensibility tends towards affect—especially the possibility of sympathy towards visions of suffering.

(Refer Slide Time: 9:31)

This is Anna Laetitia Barbauld's "The Rights of Woman":

Yes, injured Woman! rise, assert thy right!  
Woman! Too long degraded, scorned, opprest;  
O born to rule in partial Law's despite,  
Resume thy native empire over the breast!  
.....  
Go, gird thyself with grace; collect thy store  
Of bright artillery glancing from afar;  
Soft melting tones thy thundering cannon's roar,

Blushes and fears thy magazine of war.

The tone is sentimental, and sounds almost like a rant, like anger. It is meant to draw upon the passions of the speaker but appeal to the passions of the listener as well.

Here is Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792):

(Refer Slide Time: 10:23)

For if it be allowed that women were destined by Providence to acquire human virtues, and by the exercise of their understandings, that stability of character which is the firmest ground to rest our future hopes upon, they must be permitted to turn to the fountain of light and not forced to shape their course by the twinkling of a mere satellite.

Now if you can pay attention to what these poems, these excerpts have highlighted, it is a question of sentiment. It is the appeal to you to pay attention to the suffering other, to pay attention to the crowds there who are suffering, to pay attention to the abandoned mothers, the helpless children. Sentiment which the Romantics would be particularly fond of, began to mean a synthesis of reason and emotion, especially in moral philosophers like David Hume and Adam Smith.

Sentiment, therefore, denoted intellectualized emotion or emotionalized thought, sounds like an oxymoronic construction: intellectualized emotion or emotionalized thought. This age was also characterized, as I have already mentioned before, by a pre-occupation with bodily mechanisms of emotion and experience. The growing emphasis on nature or natural simplicity, the ordinary and everyday rustic life and also kindness to animals, these are part of what everybody tried to do.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:37)

Language's referential powers, the possibility of objectivity for the human mind, and the possibility of translation all spurred debates. They sought a language for sentiment, for affection and passions rather than a language of reason and rationality. It was the flow of passions that language needed to capture.

But it also meant that the authors were torn between the demand for intense self-consciousness and the awareness of the dangers of solipsism, between the self and society. Wordsworth is a good example of this tension. What do I mean by this? It means very simply you could be conscious of yourself but you run the risk of being conscious only of yourself. It means the intense attention to oneself might result in a retreat from society itself.

And this is a tension you see in all of Wordsworth. Why is this a problem? It is a problem because Wordsworth as he put it in the preface to the “Lyrical Ballads”, is a man speaking to men. He needs to listen to, and talk to, other people. But Wordsworth’s poetry is constantly looking at himself.

Let me give you an instance. In the famous “Tintern Abbey” poem, there is a speaker looking from the Abbey, from the hill down to the Abbey and at the surrounding areas. What is important is, the speaker is conscious of being an observing speaker. That is, *I watch myself watching*, let us put it that way. Wordsworth is not only giving you an observing person, he is speaking about an observing person who is observing himself watching the world around. This might for many people sound suspiciously, notoriously close to solipsism and it is a fairly legitimate charge, that much of what Wordsworth is doing, the “poet of the egotistical sublime” as famously described, he is concerned not with emotions and not with the world around him. He is concerned with how his emotions are developing, how he is responding to nature. As I would suggest, Wordsworth is not so much interested in nature as he is interested in his responses towards nature and what nature does to him. This is a self-consciousness carried to its logical extremes.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:42)

There were other influences such as James MacPherson’s *The Poems of Ossian*, which became the favorite reading matter for many Romantics, whose fascination with antiquarianism was fueled by these texts about forgotten Celtic cultures. Forgotten Celtic cultures, ancient worlds, Stonehenge and others generated an interest in languages and alternative societies and stimulated an interest in the history of Britain and Ireland.

It influenced Romantics such as Robert Burns and William Wordsworth, seeking a poetic sensibility that showed man rooted in locality and nature. The idea of low and rustic life developed from this. It also resulted in what Ann Rigney and others have called Romantic Historicism. Documented brilliantly in James Chandler's book, *England 1819*, it is the romantic attitude towards history that James Chandler is documenting for a year. 1819 is the year of the Peterloo Massacre as well.

We have covered: Sensibility which proceeds from the Age of Sensibility, the long 18<sup>th</sup> century; the interest in the passions, in sympathy and empathy, in seeking a response to suffering and others; in developing a consciousness about consciousness – thinking about how I have acquired consciousness and how I have come to consciousness; and the interest in antiquarianism.