
UNIT 27 INTRODUCTION TO ROMANTIC POETRY

Structure

- 27.0 Objectives
- 27.1 Introduction
- 27.2 Background to the Romantic Movement
- 27.3 Definition of Romanticism
- 27.4 Salient Features of Romanticism
- 27.5 Early Romantic Poets
 - 27.5.1 James Thomson (1700-1748)
 - 27.5.2 Mark Akenside (1721-1770)
 - 27.5.3 Joseph Warton (1722-1800)
 - 27.5.4 William Collins (1721-1759)
 - 27.5.5 Thomas Gray (1716-71)
 - 27.5.6 William Cowper (1731-1800)
- 27.6 Robert Burns (1759-1796)
 - 27.6.1 The Use of Folk Song
 - 27.6.2 Themes
 - 27.6.3 Form
 - 27.6.4 Vocabulary
 - 27.6.5 Rhyme
 - 27.6.6 Love Poems
- 27.7 William Blake (1757-1827)
- 27.8 William Wordsworth (1770-1850)
 - 27.8.1 Wordsworth's Theory of Poetry
 - 27.8.2 Wordsworth's Practice of his Theory
 - 27.8.3 Wordsworth's Partnership with Coleridge
- 27.9 S.T. Coleridge (1772-1834)
- 27.10 The Second Generation of Romantic Poets
 - 27.10.1 Lord Byron (1788-1824)
 - 27.10.2 P.B. Shelley (1792-1822)
 - 27.10.3 John Keats (1795-1821)
- 27.11 Summing Up
- 27.12 Questions for Comprehension
- 27.13 Suggested Reading
- 27.14 Answers to Exercises

27.0 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this unit are to:

- 1) provide a comprehensive view of the Romantic Movement, its beginnings, its sources of inspiration, its important features, its major figures and their contributions.
- 2) enable you to analyse, identify and appreciate Romantic poetry, and
- 3) make you realise the importance of the Romantic Movement in English literature as a significant and fruitful literary epoch.

27.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to the Romantic Movement in England. It deals with the political, social, literary and other factors which brought about this movement; it considers various definitions of the term, 'Romanticism'; it devotes a good part to a discussion of the salient features of Romanticism. The work of the early romantic poets is covered in section 27.5. Then the major romantic poets and their

contribution to the movement are discussed in detail. After providing an account of Robert Burns's use of the folk song and William Blake's use of mysticism and symbolism, the unit moves on to the major figures of the Romantic Movement in England, William Wordsworth and Samuel Tylor Coleridge, who are deemed to be the pioneers of Romantic poetry in English. After a brief survey of Wordsworth's work, his theory of poetry as stated in the Preface (1800) to *Lyrical Ballads* is examined critically. The literary partnership between Wordsworth and Coleridge and their later differences are considered with reference to Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. The deviations from his stated principles in the actual writing of Wordsworth's poetry are briefly illustrated. A section is set apart for Coleridge's poetry and criticism. The last section of the unit introduces you to the second generation of Romantic poets, Byron, Shelley and Keats.

The lesson provides self-check exercises at the end of each important section so that you can assess your comprehension of the material presented. Questions covering the entire lesson are given at the end of the unit.

The major points discussed in the lesson are recapitulated briefly in "Summing up". The unit concludes with a suggested reading list which is a selected and annotated bibliography relevant to the subject matter of the unit.

27.2 BACKGROUND TO THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT

Historians of English Literature have designated the period from 1798 to 1832 as the Romantic period. Wordsworth and Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798; Sir Walter Scott died in 1832. Also, the Reform Bill which extended the right to vote to the middle class and labourers was passed by Parliament in 1832. During this period, England moved from a primarily agricultural to a modern industrialized society. Thus the balance of power passed on from the land-owning aristocracy to the owners of industrial units which employed large numbers of people. The mill-owners and their employees had developed different perspectives. In the political arena there were revolutions of far-reaching consequences to England: The American Revolution led to the Declaration of Independence (1776) by the thirteen colonies. The French Revolution was a shattering and sundering event which affected the whole of Western Europe in several ways,

The French Revolution received enthusiastic support in the beginning from the liberals and radicals in England. The Declaration of the Rights of Man by the French National Assembly was welcomed. Edmund Burke disapproved the events in France in his *Reflection on the Revolution in France* (1790). Tom Paine issued a spirited rejoinder to Burke in his *Rights of Man* (1791-92). Tom Paine pleaded for a democratic republic for England by peaceful or violent means. Another book, *Inquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) by William Godwin made a great impact on Wordsworth, Shelley and others. Godwin predicted that eventually all property would be distributed equally and all government would disappear. Later events in the French Revolution, notably the execution of the royal family, the guillotine of innocent people during the Reign of Terror, and Napoleon's dictatorship disenchanting the early supporters.

The economic sphere also saw great convulsions. The manufacturing class became more powerful than the agricultural class. With the invention of James Watt's steam engine which replaced wind and water as sources of energy in 1765, there was a revolutionary change in the means and pace of production. The population of England was becoming either owners and traders or wage earners without property. Thus the people were effectively divided into the rich and the poor. With the introduction of more machinery into industry, there was more unemployment. The soldiers demobilised after the French wars aggravated the labour market. There was an economic depression in 1815 caused by the fall in wartime demand for manufactured goods. These political, economic and social factors caused agitations

and riots by the working class. The ruling class responded by more repressive measures. The unrest culminated in passing the Reform Bill which met the political aspirations of at least some sections of the population.

There were important developments in other spheres also. Capt. James Cook circumnavigated the globe (1768-71) and discovered Australia and the Sandwich Islands. Fascinating accounts of life in the South Seas led to a re-thinking on the nature of society and the political systems. Ocean travel became safer with Cook's accurate charting of the coastlines.

The exploitation of new markets in India and elsewhere gave a fillip to commerce. This in turn led to the development of industry and technology. The dissemination of ideas kept pace with the improvements in the communications network. The pamphlet became a powerful means for debating controversial issues. For instance, the debate on the French Revolution was conducted through pamphlets. Eventually the pamphlet was replaced by the periodical for debate on political reforms further. Parliamentary Reform was inspired by the achievement of the middle class in France. Public opinion in England favoured representation to big towns leading to the passage of the Reform Bill.

The Romantic writers lived through such momentous changes in the political, economic, social and literary spheres. The idea of revolution informed the Romantic Movement from the beginning. Many major writers of this period were aware that great changes were taking place around them and that these changes would inevitably find their way into literature also. The French Revolution seemed to be the great divide and the beginning of a new era in the history of mankind. William Hazlitt rightly observed in his book, *The Spirit of the Age*. "There was a mighty ferment in the heads of statesmen and poets, kings and people.... It was a time of promise, a renewal of the world - and of letters".

The French Revolution swept away time-honoured hierarchies in different spheres. The new slogans, liberty, equality and fraternity promised a free and egalitarian society. Monarchy was abolished and the feudal structure was demolished, The principle of the dissolution of hierarchies carried into literature meant that the epic and tragedy which were at the top of the literary pyramid had to yield place to such forms as the lyric, the ode and the ballad. In language, the cultivated speech of the elite was sought to be replaced by the speech of the common people. In the choice of themes, great events had to make way for more commonplace incidents. The characters depicted in poetry need not be kings or queens; humbler folk like a leech-gatherer, or a highland lass, or even an idiot boy, is good enough for poetic composition. Thus the French Revolution caused a democratisation of literature in genre, in language, in themes and in characters. The spirit of the age demanded these changes and the creative writer responded enthusiastically,

Self-check Exercise 1

1. Which years specify the Romantic period in English literature?

2. What is the special significance of these years in English literary or political history?

3. Name two important changes which occurred in the political and economic spheres in this period.

4. What is Tom Paine's theme in *Rights of Man*?

5. What did Godwin predict in his book?

6. Explain briefly the impact of the French Revolution on literature.

27.3 DEFINITION OF ROMANTICISM

The term, 'Romanticism', is controversial. F.L. Lucas, in his book, *The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal* (1948), counted as many as 11,396 definitions. The term comes from the name, 'Rome'. In the seventh and eighth centuries there were three main languages in Europe; (1) lingua Latina which was the language of the scholars, (2) lingua barbara which was the language of Germanic tribes, and (3) lingua romana rustica which was a group of vulgar Latin dialects from which the Romance languages, namely, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Rumanian are derived. The term, 'Romantic', is related to the Romance languages, the peripheral tradition, rather than to Latin, the main tradition.

The term, 'romantic', was first used in the late seventeenth century to describe paintings with certain bizarre qualities. When Le Tourneur referred to Shakespeare as a romantic writer, he meant that the English playwright was not a neo-classic writer. What is meant by a romantic writer is one who insists, implicitly or otherwise, on his own uniqueness. In the Age of Reason, many writers said that they represented their age. This was not so with the Romantics. Wordsworth and Coleridge who worked together for sometime never applied the term, "romantic", to themselves. Goethe defined "classic" as good health and "romantic" as sickness. This distinction is more psychological than aesthetic and it has received much currency. Around 1800, when Madame de Staël introduced German romantic literature into France, she stressed the medieval and christian qualities in that literature. These qualities replaced rationalism and agnosticism of the Age of Reason. She felt that the aridity of the eighteenth century was over and that the new literature celebrated the open heart. Heine, the German poet, held an opposite view. Victor Hugo described romanticism as 'liberalism in literature'. The important point is that romanticism has political overtones.

The term implies a literary and philosophical theory which tends to see the individual at the very center of all life and all experience. The individual is placed at the center of art. Literature is therefore an expression of his unique feelings and particular attitudes.

As Thrall and his associates say, romanticism, "places a high premium upon the creative function of the imagination seeing art as a formulation of intuitive imaginative perceptions that tend to speak a nobler truth than that of fact, logic, or the here and now." Romanticism spread through most of Western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It affected literature, art, music, philosophy, religion and politics.

It may be more easy to understand the term, 'romanticism', by examining its salient features in the next section.

Self-check Exercise 2

1. Explain the origin of the term, 'Romantic'.

2. What was implied in Le Tourneur's description of Shakespeare as a romantic?

3. How did Goethe differentiate the two terms, 'Classic', and 'romantic'?

4. What features of romanticism did Madame de Staël identify in German romantic literature?

5. What is Victor Hugo's definition of romanticism?

27.4 SALIENT FEATURES OF ROMANTICISM

Romanticism is opposed to the artificial conventions, the reigning literary tradition and the poetic establishment. The Neo-classical theory of poetry conceived it as imitation and as something acquired by training. The function of poetry, according to this view, is to instruct and to please. Art is a mirror in which we find a reflection of life. For the Romantics, the source of poetry is the poet himself. As Wordsworth puts it, poetry is a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". It is an inborn gift and not something acquired. Poetry is the expression of emotion. The poet's imagination creates poetry. The traditional view that poetry is a painstaking endeavour is discarded by the Romantics. Blake thought that poetry comes from inspiration, vision and prophecy. Keats said that poetry should come "as naturally as the leaves of a tree".

Romantic poets made daring innovations, in the themes, forms, language and style of poetry. Lowly and eccentric characters like an idiot boy or a leech gatherer are material for poetic treatment by Wordsworth. Supernatural themes are used by Coleridge (*The Ancient Mariner*) and Keats (*The Eve of St. Agnes*). Romantic poetry often deals with the "far away and long ago", exotic places and forgotten events figure in Romantic Poetry. It draws inspiration from folk literature and the literature of the Middle Ages and of classical antiquity. Yet another innovation is the use of symbolist techniques, notably, by Blake and Shelley. The latter poet's "West Wind" and "Skylark" are good examples.

The Romantic poets displaced humanity by external nature as poetic subject-matter. Thus the description of landscape and its aspects become prominent. In fact, poets like Wordsworth saw in nature the power to chasten and subdue. While neoclassic poetry is written on other people - Pope's *The Rape of Lock* is an example - Romantic poetry is about the poet himself. The latter is highly subjective. The Romantic poets also had a fascination for solitary figures, social non-conformists, outcasts and rebels such as Prometheus, Cain, Don Juan and Satan.

Another significant innovation is the use of everyday speech of ordinary people instead of lofty poetic diction. We shall discuss this in detail later. The Romantic poets looked for new metres and stanzas to replace traditional forms. The heroic couplet gave place to the ballad, the sonnet, the Spenserian stanza and other experimental verse forms. Rural life is idealized in Romantic poetry. The wild, the irregular and the grotesque in Nature and art fascinated the Romantic poets. Taboo themes like incest are used without any inhibition. Conformity to tradition and decorum as observed by the earlier generation are no longer respected.

Classicism and Romanticism are generally considered somewhat antithetical. Classicism is concerned with the social, the formal, the intellectual and the static whereas Romanticism is concerned with the individual, the informal, the emotional and the dynamic. For instance, the common qualities, not the differences, of individuals figure in classical literature. Joseph Addison's Sir Roger is a basic human type. But the Romantics took their cue from Rousseau who said, "If I'm not better than other people, at least I'm different". The Neo-classical writers were interested in conformity, formality, acceptance of approved standards and patterns of behaviour. Careful workmanship is the hallmark of classicism. The unities are preserved by the classical writers whereas the Romantic writers do not observe them. Classicism focusses on the intellectual, romanticism on the emotional. The former is interested in describing static scenes in Greek sculpture whereas the latter attempts to catch the transient moments. Keat's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" depicts the activities of people etched on a static urn.

Thus the Romantic Movement was a revolutionary movement in many ways.

Self-check Exercise 3

1. Explain the basic difference between the Neoclassical and Romantic theories of poetry.

2. Name two important innovations in Romantic poetry.

3. What type of themes and characters are chosen by the Romantic poets?

4. What Poetic forms were favoured by the Romantics?

5. Explain the antithetical relationship between classicism and Romanticism.

27.5 EARLY ROMANTIC POETS

Some of the features of Romanticism which we discussed above are seen much earlier than 1798 in a number of poets:

- 27.5.1 James Thomson** (1700-1748) took a deep interest in nature. His poem, "The Seasons" (1730), evokes interest in the processes of nature. He is fascinated by the fearful aspects of nature such as floods and storms. He is described as "a poet of pictorial landscape". He speaks of the interactions between man and Nature in "The Seasons". The great variety and beauty of Nature move him deeply. The following lines remind us of Wordsworth:

Now the soft Hour
Of walking comes for him who lonely loves
To seek the distant Hills, and there converse
With Nature, there to harmonize his Heart,
And in pathetic Song of breathe around
The harmony to Others.

("The Seasons", II, 1379-84)

- 27.5.2 Mark Akenside** (1721-1770) was another fore-runner of Wordsworth. He attempted to revive the Greek forms of the lyric. His most important poem, "The Pleasure of Imagination" (1744) is at once didactic and descriptive. The poet sees that the beauty and harmony of all nature is shown directly to the purified intellect:

Once more search, undismayed, the dark profound
Where nature works in secret; view the beds
Of min'ral treasure, and th'eternal vault
That bounds the hoary ocean; trace the forms
Of atoms moving with incessant change.
Their elemental round; behold the seeds
Of being, and the energy of life
Kindling the mass with ever-active flame:
Them to the secrets of the working mind
Attentive turn;

"The Pleasure of Imagination". Book I, 11 512-52.

- 27.5.3 Joseph Warton's** (1722-1800) "The Enthusiast" (1744) presents Rousseau's primitivism and the Romantics' love of the antique. It speaks of the communion with nature, the superiority of the Noble Savage and the idyllic innocence of the New World:

Happy the first of Men, ere yet confin'd
To smoky cities; who in sheltering Groves,
Warm caves, and deep-sunk Vallies liv'd and lov'd
By Cares unwounded.

"The *Enthusiast*", 11. 78-81)

27.5.4 William Collins (1721-1759) exercised pervasive influence on almost all the Romantic poets. He finds that landscape evokes ideas and emotions. He particularly loves Nature at twilight. His "Ode to Evening" is the forerunner of Keats's "To Autumn". Romantic tendencies such as a return to the past and anti-intellectualism may be noticed in his "Ode on Popular Superstitions". Coleridge is impressed with Collins's use of superstitions and classical legends. Collins's favourite theme of the twilight scene is illustrated in the following lines:

Now Air is hush'd, save where the weak-ey'd Bat,
With short shrill Shriek flits by on leathern Wing,
Or where the Beetle winds
His small but sullen Horn,
As oft he rises 'midst the twilight Path,
Against the Pilgrim born in heedless Hum:
"Ode to Evening", 11.9-14

27.5.5 Thomas Gray's (1716-71) well-known poem, *Elegy* Written in a County Churchyard, pays attention to nature and humble life which are dear to the Romantic poets:

Now folds the glimmering landscape on the sight,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;
(11.5-8)

Gray's later writings indicate the swing in the taste towards Medieval literature and Scandinavian folklore. His letters anticipate the Romantics' love of scenery and nature. He records the different moods of nature in charming detail. Such descriptions paved the way for Wordsworth's memorable descriptions of nature. Here is a short piece from Gray:

"In the evening walked alone down to the lake by the side of Crow Park after sunset and saw the solemn colouring of night draw on, the last gleam of fading away on the hill-tops, the deep serene of the waters, and the long shadows of the mountains thrown across them, till they nearly touched the hithermost shore. At distance heard the murmur of many waterfalls not audible in the daytime".
(Journal in the Lakes)

27.5.6 William Cowper (1731-1800) is yet another precursor of romanticism. For him, love of Nature and religious worship are related activities. He believes that contemplation in the midst of Nature will bestow wisdom more easily than will reading of books. He prefers the beauty of the countryside, he portrays Nature in his poems. Cowper also attacks Alexander Pope for his "smoothness" and advocates the 'manly rough line'. This idea is later developed by Wordsworth. Cowper 'anticipated the romantic generation in his political liberalism, in his humanitarianism, and most of all in his sympathetic and faithful rendering of external nature". Contrasting the rural with the urban scene, he wrote:

God made the country, and man made the town,
What wonder then that health and virtue, gifts
That can alone make sweet the bitter draught

That life holds out to all, should most abound
And least be threatn'd in the fields and groves?
("The Task", Book I.11.749-753).

Self-Check Exercise 4

1. What particular features make Thomson akin to Romantic poets?

2. What Romantic trait is noticeable in Akenside's poetry?

3. Which principle of Rousseau do you observe in Warton?

4. What Romantic tendencies in Collins won the appreciation of Coleridge?

5. In what particulars can Gray's *Elegy* be called Romantic?

6. What is the justification for calling Cowper a precursor of Romanticism?

27.6 ROBERT BURNS (1759-1796)

Burns is the most beloved poet of the Scots; he is also a symbol of their national spirit. He was interested in a number of things which were later considered essentially romantic tendencies. He was steeped in Scottish folklore; he loved freedom; he respected the common man; He was attracted by nature; swimming against the current in his time, he believed that emotion was a better guide than reason.

27.6.1 The Use of Folk Song

Scottish patriotism in the eighteenth century longed for independence and unity. It seized upon any symbol of its uniqueness. Burns went in search of the Scottish ballad tradition both to oppose and reject the English culture. He is probably the best eighteenth century example of the influence of folk poetry on the mainstream English poetry. There are two tendencies in Burns's life:

1. the cultivated tradition of polite poetry in the eighteenth century.
2. peasant poetry about peasants among whom he lived.

Burns did not believe in any rules of composition. His poetry was strongly influenced by folk poetry. The folk elements in his poetry are:

27.6.2 Themes

The themes are generally death, birth, youth, old age, love and grief. Seasonal activities like harvesting and May dances and seasonal **changes** like snowfall are also used. Settings and dramatic situations are often stylized. Tableaus repeating **certain** fixed scenes occur in folk poetry.

27.6.3 Form

The form of folk poetry is that of a debate, a series of riddles or tests. **Birds** and flowers are given human qualities. Number three is significant; three riddles, three actions, etc.

27.6.4 Vocabulary

The vocabulary is simple. Many stock phrases are used. Because of the oral origins of folk poetry, stock phrases and **patterns** aided the memory of the oral poet. Formal devices such as the refrain impose limits on language in folk poetry and indicate its origin in dance.

27.6.5 Rhyme

Folk poetry is not rigid in its use of rhyme as Neoclassical poetry was. Assonance, alliteration and internal rhyme are common in this poetry. Observe these poetic devices in the following line of Burns:

There Wild Woods grow and rivers **row**.

There is variety in rhyme schemes. The metre in folk poetry is flexible.

Burns wrote many traditional and also original songs, but he wrote only three long poems. There was a movement favouring the short, pointed lyric.

Burns wrote a poem entitled "To a Mouse", which is certainly a lowly subject. Writing on such subjects was against the grain of Neo-classicism. **Another** poem, "The Cotter's Saturday Night", shows his interest in the humble people. He had sympathy for the oppressed, sharing the ideals of the French Revolution. He had expressed dangerous sentiments such as the following just before the Revolution:

A fig for those by law protected!
Liberty's a glorious feast!
Courts for cowards were erected,
Churches built to please the priest.

(*"The Jolly Beggars"*, 11.292 ff)

Burns expressed strong patriotism for Scotland: he revolted against religious orthodoxy; he satirized Presbyterian and Calvinist faith in Scotland in his poems. "Holy Willie's Prayer" and "The Holy Fair". He is thus a precursor of the later Romantic poets like Shelley who re-examined religious belief in a more serious way.

27.6.6 Love Poems

Burns's greatest poems are his love poems. They are also influenced by folk poetry. Repetition as a poetic device to produce an incantatory effect may be found in: **My**

Love is like a Red, Red Rose". Neo-classical poets like Pope avoided repetition for the sake of economy and for the progression of ideas.

Another poem of Burns, "Ye Flowery Banks" is a lament which presents a native view of nature. In this girl's song, the traditional rose-thorn image is used to indicate loss of chastity. Happy nature is contrasted with the melancholy speaker and there is a return to the place of former happiness. Burns resorts to suggestion rather than direct statement in this as well as in other poems. These are all intimations of Romanticism.

The range of Burns's love-songs is great. He could write of love from his personal experience and from a woman's point of view. He could write of love in old age with equal charm. Male protectiveness appears repetitively in many of his love songs including "A Red, Red Rose". Patriotism is another recurring theme in his songs. "Auld Lang Syne" is called "the world's greatest song of human fellowship and friendship".

Though Burns's poetry is based on local people and situations, he is not a 'regional' poet in any narrow sense. He stresses the elemental, the universal and the permanent moods and thoughts in all humanity. He used the real language of man as he found it in the folk literature of his country and thus showed the path to Wordsworth. His use of lowly subjects and simple diction was a worthwhile example to Wordsworth and through him to other Romantic poets.

Self-check Exercise 5

1. What Romantic tendencies are present in Burns's poetry?

2. To which age did Burns belong chronologically?

3. Mention one symbol of Scottish patriotism which Burns sought passionately.

4. What are the contradictory but concurrent tendencies in Burns's poetry?

5. What are the principal themes of folk poetry.

6. Explain briefly the formal features of folk poetry.

- 7. What is the purpose of using stock phrases in folk poetry?

- 8. What poetic devices are frequently found in folk poetry?

- 9. How can we say that Burns sympathised with the French Revolution?

- 10. What intimations of Romanticism do you find in Burns's love poems?

27.7 WILLIAM BLAKE (1757-1827)

We shall now discuss William Blake, but only briefly, because there is a separate unit on him in his block. He was hardly known in his lifetime, but now he has a respectable place among English poets and artists. He was an engraver at a time when that art was losing its popularity.

Blake was a man of vision who saw ultimate truth at moments of great illumination. Vision is for him the great secret of life. His entire work - poetry or painting - is an attempt to develop this faculty of vision so that man may see to understand and thereby forgive and act rightly.

His *Songs of Innocence* (1789), created through a new process called "illuminated printing", are examples of originality. He equated his extreme sense of freedom and happiness to the condition of childhood. In these poems, he says that childhood is the original state of happiness, self-enjoyment and unity. In his *Songs of Experience* (1794) he expresses his deep indignation at the hypocrisy and cruelty in the world. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he affirms the re-integration of the human soul divided by Innocence (Heaven) and Experience (Hell) through Imagination.

Blake's poetry and painting are didactic. He wanted people to free themselves from convention and tradition and to depend on their own intuition to realize their potential. The mystical tone, the symbols, the revolutionary ideas and the newness of his art made people think that he was a lunatic. He was more revolutionary in themes, diction and technique than Burns or Wordsworth, but his genius was not recognised in his lifetime. He carved a place for himself in World literature because he swam against the current by defying reason in an age of Reason and because he gave importance to intuition and imagination in an age of scientific skepticism.

Self-check Exercise 6

- 1. What, in Blake's view, is the importance of the faculty of vision?

2. What is the relationship between innocence and experience as Blake sees it?

3. How did Blake's views go against the prevailing ideas?

27.8 WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1770-1850)

Wordsworth is a prominent leader of the Romantic Movement in England. He supported the French Revolution in its early phase, but his liberalism gradually dwindled. In 1795, he met S.T. Coleridge and this meeting was beneficial to both of them. They jointly authored *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) which is considered to be the beginning of the Romantic Movement in England. On the urging of Coleridge, Wordsworth explained the guiding principles of this new movement in his preface to the second edition of the book published in 1800. (We shall discuss the preface in detail in the next section). In addition to many lyrics, Wordsworth wrote *The Prelude* (1850), a sort of spiritual autobiography as its subtitle, "The Growth of a Poet's Mind," indicates. As the title suggests the *Prelude* is the first of a three-part poem *The Recluse*. The second part entitled *The Excursion* was published in 1814, but the third part was never written.

Wordsworth is better known for his short poems like "Tintern Abbey" and "Immortality Ode" than for his long and ambitious works. "Tintern Abbey" recounts three stages in the development of the poet's love of nature; (1) sensuous animal passion, (2) moral influence, and (3) mystical communion. "Michael" deals with the sturdiness of character and nature's healing power. The five "Lucy Poems" are also popular. In "Ode on Intimations of Immortality", Wordsworth attributes a child's wisdom and glory to the unconscious memory of a previous life. "Resolution and Independence" is yet another memorable poem. Wordsworth influenced modern thinking on the natural goodness of childhood, the moral value of simple living and the inspiring and healing powers of nature. Wordsworth seems to have attempted to translate into action both in his life and in his work the principle: "Simple living and high thinking". (A separate unit on Wordsworth discusses in detail his poetic achievement).

27.8.1 Wordsworth's Theory of Poetry

Wordsworth's observations prefixed to *Lyrical Ballads*, generally called "Preface" to the second edition of 1800, is his manifesto in which he discusses a number of issues related to the art of poetry. These issues include the nature of poetry, the creation of poetry, the impact of the poem on the reader, and the difference between the language of prose and the language of poetry. The poet's views on these important topics are scattered throughout the preface and we have to piece together what he had said on each question,

First, the question of the subject matter. "Incidents and situations from common life" are chosen. Wordsworth thought that rustic and humble life is better suited for "the essential passions of the heart". He believed that the emotions of the rural people are simpler, purer and perhaps better than those of the city-dweller. He also thought that people living in the midst of nature have a better moral attitude, and they become part of the sense of divinity present in nature.

The second innovation is the use of "a selection of language really used by men". Wordsworth attacked the so-called poetic diction of an earlier generation. Poetic diction is a painstaking invention and hence far removed from the living speech of ordinary people. The common speech or a selection of it, Wordsworth felt, is more appropriate to describe the incidents and situations from common life. Throughout the preface Wordsworth repeatedly states that "simple and unelaborated expressions" as his choice. "My purpose was to imitate, and as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men; and such personifications [of abstract ideas] do not make any natural or regular part of that language."

Wordsworth finds a moral justification for poetry. The aim of the poet, in his view, is to correct men's feelings, to render these feelings more consonant with eternal nature. A poet provides us with spiritual exercises in order to give us new feelings and make our feelings more sane and pure.

The creative process is explained by Wordsworth in the following words:

"Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity; the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on."

Implicit in this explanation of how poetry is created is a psychological approach.

Wordsworth discussed the difference between the language of poetry and the language of prose. He says: "It may be safely affirmed that there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition." This is a major point of disagreement between Wordsworth and Coleridge. Similarly, Wordsworth's views on metre are questioned by Coleridge. According to Wordsworth metre is a kind of restraining influence. By its regularity, metre holds passion in check. Also, metre seems to give poetry a kind of unreality:

"The end of poetry is to produce excitement in co-existence with an overbalance of pleasure... Now the co-presence of something regular... cannot but have great efficacy in tempering and restraining the passion by an intertexture of ordinary feeling, and of feeling not strictly and necessarily connected with the passion".

The Romantics give a high place to the poet; they endow him with the ability to speak to other men. Wordsworth asserts:

"He [the poet] is a man speaking to men; a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a comprehensive soul than are supposed to be common among mankind;"

A poet is related to other men who have the same ingredients, but the poet has them in greater measure.

Thus the preface discusses a wide range of topics concerning poetry and the innovations which *Lyrical Ballads* has introduced.

Self-check Exercise 7

1. What are the three stages in the development of Wordsworth's attitude to nature in "Tintern Abbey?"

2. Why did Wordsworth choose rustic life as his subject matter?

3. Explain Wordsworth's views on the use of the language of common people.

4. What, according to Wordsworth, is the aim of the poet?

5. How did Wordsworth explain the creative process of poetry'?

6. What is the difference between the language of poetry and the language of prose in Wordsworth's view? Is it valid?

7. What is the role of meter in poetry, according to the "preface"?

8. What is the position of a poet in society? How does he compare with ordinary men?

27.8.2 Wordsworth's Practice of his Theory

For all his commitment to "the language really used by men" Wordsworth could not help using archaisms, words of Latin origin, and inversion of normal word order in several of his **well-known** poems including "Immortality Ode" and *The Prelude*. For instance in "Immortality Ode", he used "apparelled" and "celestial", in *The Prelude* he used "recreate", "inscrutable", "discordant" which are polysyllabic words derived from Latin. Then there are archaisms like 'shod' (shoe) 'deigned (desired) 'springles' (traps). There are also inversions, of word order in plurases like "by the vision splendid! for the sake of rhyme. In "Resolution and-Independence", we **have**:

"Himself he propped, limbs, body, and pale face,"

Or again, "Motionless as a cloud that old Man stood".

Wordsworth must have realized that the demands of his poetic art are more important than a rigid adherence to his theory as enunciated in the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*.

27.8.3 Wordsworth's Partnership with Coleridge

Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge met in 1795. Coleridge spotted talent in Wordsworth and praised him as "the best poet of the age". The two friends met almost daily, discussed poetry, and composed large quantities of poetry. Their association was so close that the same phrases occur in the poems of both. They collaborated in some poems; they exchanged thoughts and lines of poetry. Coleridge helped Wordsworth in completing the latter's unfinished poems. *Lyrical Ballads* was the fruit of this extraordinary partnership. The famous "Preface" of 1800 was also a result of consultation between the two poets.

Of the two sorts of poetry based on the theme, Coleridge agreed to choose the supernatural and Wordsworth the ordinary. Accordingly, Coleridge wrote "The Ancient Mariner" and Wordsworth wrote many of his poems for the *Lyrical Ballads*.

However, serious differences developed between the two on important questions. Coleridge did not agree with many parts of the "Preface". He objected to them as he considered them "erroneous". Some of Wordsworth's statements appeared to contradict "other parts of the same preface and the author's own practice in the greater number of the poems themselves". One such question was the difference between the language of poetry and that of prose. Wordsworth thought that there was no essential difference between the two. Coleridge thought they were different. He argued that metre is essential for poetry which implies passion.

27.9 S. T. COLERIDGE (1772-1834)

Since there is a separate unit on Coleridge, we shall briefly touch upon the major achievements of Coleridge here. He was a man of many parts; poet, philosopher, journalist, preacher, lecturer, playwright, literary critic and literary theorist. He pioneered a movement against the mechanistic psychology of the eighteenth century. More than the other Romantics, he recognised the supremacy of imagination as a creative power. *Biographia Literaria* (1817), is a seminal work dealing with his philosophy of poetry and a critical statement of Romantic ideas. It is in this book that he explains how he had dealt with the supernatural in his poetry. He attempted to give "a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith".

Coleridge tries to differentiate between the two key terms, 'fancy' and 'imagination' in the same book. He called *imagination* the "shaping and modifying" power, *fancy*, the "aggregative and associative" power. The former "struggles to idealize and to unify", while the latter is only "a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space". To illustrate his point, Coleridge said that Milton had a highly imaginative, mind whereas Cowley had a fanciful one. Imagination itself is of two kinds, *primary* and *secondary*. Primary imagination, in Coleridge's view, is the organ of common perception through the senses, secondary imagination is poetic vision. The latter one is the faculty that the poet ideally exercises. Fancy seems to correspond with the eighteenth century notion of wit in poetry the faculty that enables the poet to put together metaphors and similes. Coleridge criticizes the mechanical sort of apparatus in poetry, exemplified by the fancy, which the imagination transcends. The use of the secondary imagination is a mystical operation. The secondary imagination mediates between man and nature and indicated the organic unity of the universe. Coleridge's discussion of Wordsworth's faults and merits is a balanced presentation. His criticism of Shakespeare and other Elizabethan playwrights is of great value. He attempted to find "the essences of Shakespeare's ideas to discover the laws that a great work of art creates within itself". He explained the nature of poetic expression and sought to

answer the question "What is poetry"? His views on criticism are particularly significant as he was also an accomplished poet.

Coleridge is remembered for three poems, *The Ancient Mariner*, *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel*. All the three have the stamp of originality, all of them arise from the world of dreams, the subconscious. *The Ancient Mariner* is a ballad with memorable images and phrases. *Kubla Khan* is a vision poem seen in an opium dream. *Christabel* is a poetic fragment which evokes the medieval atmosphere through suggestion.

As a literary theorist and as a poet, Coleridge made original contributions and his influence in these two areas is permanent.

Self-check Exercise 8

1. What are Wordsworth's shortcomings in practising his theory?

2. What are the positive aspects of Wordsworth's collaboration with Coleridge?

3. What are the points of disagreement between Wordsworth and Coleridge?

4. Explain Coleridge's ideas on fancy and imagination.

5. What is Coleridge's contribution to criticism?

27.10 THE SECOND GENERATION OF ROMANTIC POETS

Three poets Byron, Shelley and Keats, belong to the second generation of Romantic poets. Although they do not belong to a school, they have many resemblances. They were all "rebellious geniuses" who were not recognized or understood in their country and time. All of them died young before they could realize their full potential. They are thus "the inheritors of unfulfilled renown".

27.10.1 Lord Byron (1788-1824)

Byron's reputation as a poet and as a personality outside his own country was immense. He had influenced several French and German poets. His life itself was like a romantic poem and he is the hero of his poems. The 'Byronic hero' has

become a critical term to describe a youthful, daring, passionate, cynical, moody and rebellious figure. This type appeared first in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, a long poem which describes in Spenserian stanza, a tour in which the hero contemplates on the decaying monuments of European civilization and on human achievement. Byron describes the famous Coliseum in the following words:

Arches on arches! as it were that Rome,
Collecting the chief trophies of her line,
Would build up all her triumphs in one dome,
Her Coliseum stands.

(CXXVIII)

An example of Byron's cynical view of history is given below:

There is the moral of all human tales;
'Tis but the same rehearsal of the past,
First Freedom, and then Glory - when that fails,
Wealth, Vice, Corruption - barbarism at last.

(CVIII)

Byron was unlike other Romantic poets except, perhaps, Shelley. Also, he did not have much respect for the others because of his aristocratic background. Augustan wit and elegance suited his elitist tastes better than rustic life and common speech. He had great admiration for Alexander Pope unlike several romantic poets. He felt that measured against the poetic practice of Pope, he and his contemporaries were "all in the wrong, one as much as another... we are upon a wrong revolutionary poetical system, or systems, not worth a damn in itself".

Byron's *forte* is his verse satire which is not surprising because of his admiration for Pope and other Augustan writers. *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809) written in the popular Augustan verse form of the heroic couplet is brilliant. *Don Juan* (1818-21) written in *ottava rima* is an unfinished satire. It is described as a picaresque novel in verse in which a variety of themes, styles and tones are used. Considered Byron's best, *Don Juan* is a criticism of life. Goethe called it "a work of a boundless genius". Byron states his poetical preferences and prejudices thus:

Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope,
Thou shall not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey,
Because the first is crazed beyond all hope,
The second drunk, the third so quaint and mouthy
With Crabbe it may be difficulty to cope,

(CCIV)

The lone-of the poem is characteristic of Byron's verse satires. In *Don Juan* "he sought to depict life in the comic spirit, to strip off the tinsel of sentiment and illusion".

His other verse satires are *Beppo* and *The Vision of Judgment*. He also wrote two powerful dramas, *Manfred* and *Cain*. Russell Noyes says: "By the measure of his titanic energy and his impassioned self assertion, Byron has given us a more potent expression of 'raw and naked humanity' than all the romantic poets put together.. He has given us masterly pictures of love, hate, patriotism, honour, disdain, revenge, remorse, despair, awe, mockery".

27.10.2 . P.B. Shelley (1792-1822)

Shelley had very radical ideas; he was an idealist. He believed that mankind can be made perfect; tyranny can be abolished, freedom can flourish in all walks of life. He has hardly any equal as a lyric singer.

The main theme of **much** of his work is that when tyranny and suffering are eliminated from this world and **reason** and love are given **importance**, then the Soul of the Universe, The Spirit of Love **would** be revealed. This is the theme of his most ambitious work, *Prometheus Unbound* (1818-19).

Shelley, like Blake, was a poet of prophecy and of vision. "Ode to the West Wind" concludes with the prophecy:

If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Adonais (1821) is a **pastoral** elegy written in **Spenserian** stanzas on the death of Keats. Genius like that of Keats, unfortunately, is misunderstood. The critics hated Keats and that killed him. *Adonais* is regarded as one of the two or three great elegies in English.

Like Wordsworth Shelley spent a good deal of time in the **contemplation** of natural phenomena. He believed that Nature was the outward manifestation of the inner, divine beauty. He called the inner reality, 'Light', 'Beauty' of 'Sustaining Love' and he tried to identify himself **with** this.

Shelley was fascinated with clouds, wind, waterfalls and such other natural phenomena. They **became** symbols of great significance to him. The cloud represents the cyclic mutation of water and it also symbolises mutability and permanence inherent in the human spirit.

Light and sound attracted him. He found music everywhere; in fact, he heard a 'vast universal symphony': His own aspirations, his own poetic **fervour** are like the skylark which soars above scorning the ground. And the music of the skylark's song would inspire

Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow
The World should listen then.

Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry" written as a response to Thomas Love Peacock's. "The Four Ages of Poetry", supplements Wordsworth's "**Preface**" to *Lyrical Ballads*. Shelley's Platonic ideas find expression in the "Defence". He says that the poet reveals the noumenal World to mankind. The word, 'poet' as used by Shelley, includes all artists, **and** even philosophers. The artist is a superior being. Art improves imagination and so it is useful. Shelley asserts in the "Defence". "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World".

(There are two units on Shelley in the next block).

27.10.3 John Keats (1795-1821)

Among the Romantic poets, John Keats's dedication to poetry was **total**. Wordsworth and Coleridge were both interested in philosophy which deflected their attention; Blake's didactic intention coloured much of his work; Byron moved away **from** poetry to active participation in the liberation of Greece; Shelley's poetry and political beliefs were closely **linked**. But Keats strove hard throughout his brief career to achieve the essence of poetry.

"**On** First Looking into Chapman's Homer" written in his twenty-first year may be called his poetic efflorescence, In "Sleep and Poetry" he spoke of his **poetic** aspirations and his dedication to poetry. "Endymion" was written to compete with Shelley in writing a long poem. "**Hyperion**" was an ambitious venture a la *Paradise Lost*.

Keats wrote his most important poems in a period of nine months, January to September 1819. These are: *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, all the six great odes, and *Lamia*.

Keats presents all experience as a mass of inseparable and irreconcilable **opposites**: Melancholy dwells with Beauty; the dividing line between love-and death is thin. He believes that the great end of poetry is

that it should be a friend
To sooth the cares and lift the thoughts of man.

Keats's letters are an "indispensable accompaniment to [his] poetry". They contain some of his germinal ideas such as "negative capability". In a letter to his brothers, he says "The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth". His letters also show his concern for suffering and evil in the World. He does not accept traditional philosophy or institutional religion as an adequate palliative for the "complexity and contradictions of experience."

Not many poets including Shakespeare and Milton could write such distinguished poetry at the age of twenty-four when Keats's poetic **career** practically came to an end.

Keats published fifty-four poems in his life-time, another ninety-six **works** were published posthumously; his letters number about 300. This is an unmatched achievement within a short period of three years. Keats attempted a variety of poetic forms; Romance in *Hyperion* and *The Eve of St. Agnes*, epic in *Hyperion*. He wrote different kinds of lyric: Hymn in *Hymn to Pan*, the ballad in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, the sonnet in "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" and in the famous odes. *Lamia* was composed in heroic couplets in the manner of **Dryden**.

The Pre-Raphaelite movement owes its origin to Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. Browning, Tennyson, Hopkins and Yeats have acknowledged their debt to Keats. Because of his achievement as a poet and his wide-ranging and ever-growing influence Keats deserves to be called the "Poet's Poet" an appellation Charles Lamb gave Edmund Spenser in a different context.

Self-check Exercise 9

1, How is Byron different from the other Romantic poets?

2. What are Byron's affinities with the Augustan Poets?

3. What are some of the basic beliefs of Shelley?

4. What does the cloud represent for Shelley?

5. What is the usefulness of poetry as stated by Shelley in his "Defence"?

6. What, according to Keats, is the aim of poetry?

7. What is the usefulness of Keats's letters?

8. What is the justification for calling Keats, the "Poet's Poet"?

27.11 SUMMING UP

This unit makes an attempt to give you a comprehensive and concise view of the Romantic Movement in England.

Keep the definition and features of Romanticism in mind while reading the poems of the Romantics. Also, try to examine Wordsworth's principles and his actual practices.

You may also notice that although the Romantic poets have something in common, each of them is unique in his own way. Each of them made his own distinctive contribution to Romantic poetry.

27.12 QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Discuss the political, social, economic and other factors responsible for the Romantic Movement.
2. Explain the salient features of Romanticism.
3. Show how Thomson, Akenside and Collins are precursors of Romanticism.
4. What early intimations of Romanticism do you find in Robert Burns?
5. Discuss Wordsworth's **theory** of poetry.
6. Write a note on Coleridge's contribution to **poetry** and criticism.
7. Comment on the uniqueness of Byron and Shelley,
8. Write a note on Keats's achievement.

27.13 SUGGESTED READING

The following **books/articles** will be useful for understanding the Romantic Movement:

Abrams, M.H. *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 1953 (An original work of criticism, Discusses Romantic theory and critical tradition).

"The Romantic Period". The Norton Anthology of English Literature, II 1962. (Useful introduction to the Romantic Movement).

Bloom, Harold. *The Visionary Company*, 1960. (Brief discussions of the important poems are given).

Cazamian, Louis. "The Romantic Period". A *History of English Literature*, Part II, Book V, 1947.

(An insightful discussion of the features of romanticism and its practitioners).

Coleridge, S.T. *Biographia Literaria*, 1817, Chapters XIV and XVIII. Required reading for students of Romanticism. Coleridge dwells on his disagreements with Wordsworth.

Ford, Boris (ed.) From Blake to Byron. *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Vol. 5, 1957. Extremely useful for the study of the Romantic period.

Noyes, Russell. "Introductory Survey". *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*. 1956, (Valuable and comprehensive introduction.)

Weinberg, Kurt. "Romanticism" in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Ed. Alex Preminger, Enlarged edn. 1974.

(Comprehensive account of Romanticism throughout Europe.)

Wordsworth, William. "Preface" (1800) to *Lyrical Ballads*. (A seminal statement reprinted in many anthologies of criticism.)

27.14 ANSWER TO EXERCISES

Self-Check Exercise 1

1. 1798 to 1832
2. See 27.2, first four lines.
3. Extending voting rights to the middle class Growing importance of the manufacturing class.
4. Tom Paine advocated a democratic republic for England through peaceful or violent means.
5. See 27.2, second paragraph.
6. See 27.2 last paragraph.

Self-Check Exercise 2

1. See 27.3, first paragraph
2. See 27.3, second paragraph
3. See 27.3, second paragraph
4. See 27.3, second paragraph
5. See 27.3, second paragraph

Self-check Exercise 3

1. See 27.4, first paragraph
2. Read 27.4, second paragraph
3. Read 27.4, second paragraph
4. Read 27.4, fourth paragraph
5. Read 27.4, fifth paragraph

Self-check Exercise 4

1. See 27.5.1
2. See 27.5.2

3. See 27.5.3
4. See 27.5.4
5. See 27.5.5 first paragraph
6. See 27.5.6

Self-check Exercise 5

1. See 27.6
2. The **Augustan** Age
3. The ballad
4. See 27.6.1
5. See 27.6.1.1
6. See 27.6.1.2
7. See **27.6.1.3**
8. See 27.6.1.4, first paragraph
9. See 27.6.1.4 fourth paragraph
10. See 27.6.2, third paragraph

Self-Check Exercise 6

1. See 27.7, second paragraph
2. See 27.7, third paragraph
3. See 27.7, fourth paragraph

Self-Check Exercise 7

1. See 27.8, second paragraph
2. See 27.8.1, second **paragraph**
3. See 27.8.1, third paragraph
4. See 27.8.1, fourth paragraph
5. See 27.8.1, fifth paragraph
6. See 27.8.1, seventh paragraph
7. See 27.8.1, seventh paragraph
8. See 27.8.1, concluding paragraphs.

Self-check Exercise 8

1. See 27.8.2, first paragraph
2. See 27.8.3, first paragraph
3. See 27.8.3, last paragraph
4. See 27.9, second paragraph
5. See 27.9, second paragraph

Self-check Exercise 9

1. See 27.10.1, second paragraph
2. See 27.10.1, third paragraph
3. See 27.10.2, first paragraph
4. See 27.10.2, fifth paragraph
5. See 27.10.2, **last paragraph**
6. See 27.10.3, fourth **paragraph**
7. See 27.10.3, fifth paragraph
8. See **27,10.3**, last paragraph.