

# *ROMANTICISM (1789-1837)*

History Philosophy Ideology



## *Romanticism/romanticisms*

- Neither intellectual history nor literary history show unanimous consensus – diversity of authors and ideas
- Arthur Lovejoy "On The Discrimination of Romanticisms" (*Essays in the History of Ideas*, 1948) – vs unified vision:
  - moment of modernity (till Yeats's "the last Romantics");
  - beginning of a tradition of resistance to the Enlightenment
  - direct aftermath of the French Revolution
- **Charles Baudelaire:** "*Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subject nor exact truth, but in a way of feeling.*"

### *Not only the Big Five*

- Redesigning a new canon
- Women poets – e.g. Anna Baurbauld, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson – more popular than the Big 5 (Except Byron)
- Re-assessment of the “minors” (famous then): e.g. Collins, Crabbe and Cowper.
- Multitude of voices in an age of multiple changes (political – social – economic)

### *The rise of the middle class*

- Trading and manufacturing joined and superseded agriculture as major sources of wealth
- Middle classes demand a bigger voice in parliament
- Britain as modern industrial nation
- Concentration of people in towns
- City growth (e.g. Manchester)

### *New economy and politics*

- Mid 18th century: “Industrial Revolution” – machinery instead of hand labour
- Following decades: further technological development
- Enclosure of open fields and wastelands – incorporation in private estates

⇒ A new “landscape”

⇒ decline of village life and community values

⇒ emigration to towns

- Disraeli: “**The Two Nations**” – capital and labor, rich and poor
- Adam Smith: “Laissez faire” philosophy – “freedom” of contract, “freedom” to pursue private interests
- Drawbacks: exploitation of children and low wages
- Working-class protest: “Luddite” riots
- 1819: the “Peterloo Massacre”, Manchester

(Shelley, *England 1819*)

### The reverse of the coin

- Increasing wealth of merchants thanks to colonial markets
  - tea
  - Sugar
  - Indian muslin
  - laudanum
- *Shopping* and pleasure domes

### *An age of military revolutions*

- The American Revolution (1775-1783)
- The French Revolution (1789-1792)
- The war with France (1793-1815) – Reign of Terror
- Revolution in Santo Domingo (Haiti) (1791)
- Rebellion in Ireland (1798)
  - Parliamentary Union with Great Britain (1801)
- War between Great Britain and United States (1812-1815)

### *Revolution and reaction*

- French Revolution & Radical Thinking
  - Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790)
  - ❑ VS Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)
  - Tom Paine's *Rights of Men* (1791-92)
  - ❑ Pro popular revolution and republic
  - William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793)
  - ❑ Anarchic and ante-litteram communist ideas (equal distribution of property)

- Disillusionment with revolution

- Jacobin extremism
- "September Massacres" of nobility (1792)
- French Republic's invasion of the Rhineland and the Netherlands
- Robespierre's Reign of Terror
- Napoleon becoming an image of aggressive empire

- Conservative vs reformist attitudes
  - Prohibition of public meetings
  - Suspension of habeas corpus
  - No abolition of Test Acts or similar norms
  - Pro and versus abolition of slavery
  - ✓ Many writers vs (e.g. Barbault, Robinson, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Equiano, ...)
  - ✓ Fear of violence and rebellion in the colonies
  - ✓ Abolition passed only in 1807

- The “home front”: domestic fireside ~ protective state and “royal family”
  - Conservative idea
  - Idealisation and nationalisation of the home
- Double effects on women
  - Pressure: strict codes of behaviour, “spiritual guides” excluded from public life (domestic sphere)
  - Increasing importance of woman’s role for the nation’s welfare

- Revision of “woman’s place”: not just at home
- Justification of woman’s attempts in the public sphere of authorship
- Women’s search for negotiating strategies (except Wollstonecraft)
  - No actual open protest for political rights
  - 1832 Reform Bill excluded women (and the lower middle class and working class)
  - 1928 universal adult suffrage

*“The Spirit of the Age”*

*Romantic sensibility*

*“Great spirits now on earth are  
sojourning”*

(John Keats)

*“[A] revolution in our literature”*

(Francis Jeffrey)

## *Nationalism*

- Great impact of the French Revolution and ideas of “nation” and “nationality”
- Central theme of Romantic art and political philosophy
- First phase: focus on development of national languages and folklore
- Second phase: post-Napoleon nationalistic movements redrawing the map of Europe

- At first: Napoleonic nationalism and republicanism inspirational towards self-determination and a consciousness of national unity
- As the French Republic became Napoleon's Empire, Napoleon became not the inspiration for nationalism, but the object of its struggle
- German word *Volkstum* (=nationality) coined to express this resistance to the emperor



### *Nature*

- Something to honour as Nature is Truth
- Abiding trust in nature's goodness
  - emotions and instinct more important than reason as source of aesthetic experience (vs 18th cent. Empiricism)
  - glorification of "The Natural Man" – the "noble savage" – the primitive and untutored personality (e.g. natives)

### *Primitivism*

- Interest in old civilizations
- Archaeology develops as a science – Egyptian and Medieval became important areas of study ("romance")
- Glorification of Greek society

*Focus on detail*  
*The pathway to truth.*

- Tendency to look for the particular, specific, and unique, not the general or typical
- All creation is unified, a one-ness (“whole”); each detail is important
- Must always be sought, but we will probably never find it:  
melancholy

*Creative imagination*

- Disenchantment with national politics – limits of human intelligence
- Faith in individual consciousness – limitless possibilities of imagination
- Art and literature as vehicles of individual freedom from the “*mind-forg’d manacles*” of orthodoxies

## Augustan vs Romantic sensibility

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| • Realism                               | • Fantasy                                 |
| • “Sane” mind                           | • “Insane” mind – beyond logic            |
| • Urban world or man-made natural world | • Wild nature, constantly changing        |
| • Man = social animal (“civil society”) | • Man = isolated individual               |
| • Common man, human relationships       | • Outsider figures, wanderers, eccentrics |
| • Present - hic et nunc                 | • Past – exotic, far-off                  |