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## A Study of Romantic Age

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Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
But to be young was very Heaven! O times,  
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways  
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once  
The attraction of a country in romance!  
When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights  
When most intent on making of herself  
A prime enchantress – to assist the work,  
Which then was going forward in her name!

(William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*)

A time of dubiousness and turmoil was experienced in England when the nation was witnessing a drastic change in the society from 1776 to 1837. Major upheavals till 1800 include; social, political and economic conversions -transformation of an agricultural country to an industrial one, the laws of a free market developed by the economist Adam Smith in his book *Wealth of Nations* (1776) dominated people's lives, emergence of a new class – the Labour class. Also, the American Declaration of Independence (from Britain) in 1776 striking an early blow for the principle of democratic freedom and self-government, the French Revolution with its slogan of 'Equality, Liberty and Fraternity' influencing the intellectual climate in the Britain, Tom Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791) in which he called for greater democracy, Edmund Burke's more conservative *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), in the 1790s ideas on Utilitarianism in the measured writings of William Godwin were observed with some dismay. In *The Prelude*, a long autobiographical poem, Wordsworth wrote that in the early years of the French Revolution 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive', but he later recorded his feeling that the leaders of the French Republic had: 'Become Oppressors in their turn. / Frenchmen had changed a war of self-defence / For one of Conquest, losing sight of all / Which they had struggled for.'

Also, the latter years since *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), associated social and economic revolutions like: the twenty-two years' war, the end of 1811 was economically the worst year of the war for Britain, the war



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against France known as the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, and the ironical recalling of it in the Peterloo Massacre in 1819, later Benjamin Disraeli to identify nation as 'Two Nations' divided into poor and rich people's nation,

'The Greek War of Independence which began on 25 March 1821 and ended in effect six-and-a-half years later when the British, French, and Russians destroyed the Turkish and Egyptian fleets at Navarino'(Jump 359),

Reform Act of 1832 followed by the succession of Queen Victoria in 1837. Literary(Lynch and Stillinger) history also recorded the later phase as: 'The period from 1820 to 1832 was a time of continuing unrest'(Carter and MaRae 199).

In literature, Romantics started revolting with a tendency for 'Back to Nature' against the classical mode of writing. Inspired by paintings, poems and writings of William Blake and William Godwin the two major Romantics: William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge heralded the movement the 'Romantic Revival' with a publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, a literary landmark for a complete break away from the traditions and usages of the former age. The second edition of 'Lyrical Ballads' in 1800 contained a Preface in which the theories of poetry was discussed by Wordsworth which remained influential on many of his contemporaries.

Poetry was the most effective instrument in the hands of the Romantics. These poets are divided into two: the first-generation poets and the second-generation poets. The first-generation poets were inspired by the energy surrounding the revolution and sought to break the bonds of tradition in their youth. These poets including William Wordsworth and S T Coleridge, Robert Southey (also known as the 'Lake Poets') tended to privilege emotion over rationality with a touch of supernaturalism, down to earth characters, and were basically writing through/on/upon Nature. But since they all lived relatively longer, later their views became more conservative, more philosophical while the second generation of poets Lord Byron, John Keats



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and P B Shelley all died young so they never moved out of their radical period, but they were not as idealistic and hopeful as the first generation had been as the later were inspired by more modern day issues such as politics, society, and morality in simple writing and revolutionary ideas. They were more cynical and saw what was happening as a return to the pre-revolution authoritarian principles so they were more irreverent and satirical. Commenting on Romantic poets Aurobindorevealed his expectation from these which could not be fulfilled just because of:

...Keats and Shelley were taken before their powers could fully expand, Byron led far out of the path, Blake isolated in his own splendour of remoteness, Coleridge and Wordsworth drawn away to lose the poet and seer in the mere intellectual mind. All wandered round their centre of inspiration, missed something needed and stopped or were stopped short. (Aurobindo, The Future Poetry 147)

However, their poetry was as inspiring and passionate as their lives.

Studying the term, it can be said that there is considerable ambiguity in usage in terms 'romance' and 'Romanticism' which confirms the Oxford English Dictionary. The complicated inter-connections between the two terms lead to much confusion. Therefore, it is essential to study the term 'Romantic'. Etymologically, the term derives from Latin word 'Rome', a name of a popular city in Italy, exploring possibilities for us to interpret it as a mode of writing which was popular in Rome. Then, it was derived by the French which nowadays is an archaic word 'romaunt' in French, that stands for 'tale of chivalry', 'a verse romance', 'a romantic tale or poem' and so on, to this, modern word is 'roman'; also, in the Middle Ages 'romance' denoted to the new vernacular languages derived from Latin – in contradiction to Latin itself, which was considered a language of learning, that identifies 'Romance' as a modern word. In broader sense, 'Romance' can be defined variously with categories that range from the 'minute to the universal' and which are often 'mutually exclusive'. The American scholar A. O. Lovejoy once observed that the word 'romantic' has come to mean so many things that, by itself, it means nothing at all. The word 'Romantic' is



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used as an adjective or a noun which 'comes to refer a specific school of art, literature, and music.' (Fuchs 122) F. L. Lucas in his *The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal* (1948) counted 11,396 definitions of 'romanticism'. While Barzun in his *Classic, Romantic and Modern* (1961) sees the possibilities of multiple meanings of 'romantic' according to personal and individual needs like 'attractive', 'bombastic', 'conservative', 'emotional', 'exuberant', 'fanciful', 'formless', 'futile', 'heroic', 'irrational', 'materialistic', 'realistic', 'stupid', 'unreal' and 'unselfish'. The list can be furthered with 'adventurous', 'daring', 'extraordinary', 'gallant', 'melodramatic', 'passionate' and 'wild'. From thousands of available definitions, Crump's definition (as in Dave) helps us to understand the term Romanticism better:

Romanticism stands for freedom from all kinds of bondage of rules and regulations and leaves its pursuers in free delights and heralds the dawn of a new way of looking at life. Not the way of orderliness, clarity and tranquillity, but the way of exuberance and emotional enthusiasm. The period between 1798 to 1832 is the period of Romantic Revival. (Crump 6)

Vesey and Foulkes defines Romanticism philosophically in the context of later usage which is referred as: 'an outlook marked by refined and responsive feelings and thus inward looking, subjective, 'sensitive', given to noble dreams.' (Vesey and Foulkes 256) Romantic Movement, as Long explains, is a trend of the early nineteenth century 'to fetter the free human spirit' among religion beliefs and scientific achievements reflected in the contemporary writings marked by 'a strong reaction and protest against the classical mode of thinking' (26). While Hough avers on the Romantic Movement,

...completely throwing overboard the values that were held dear by the classicists headed by Alexander Pope. A new leaven was given to art and literature, and the poetry of the age witnessed a complete break away from the traditions and usages upheld by the Pseudo-classicists of the former age. (94)

Though, ambiguities and certainties in the term, an abridge understanding, limited to definitions and relevant to the purpose possibly explored in these words: Romantic period refers to the time from 1798 to 1832, to the characteristics of the Movement (as listed below), to the style and pattern of the poetry



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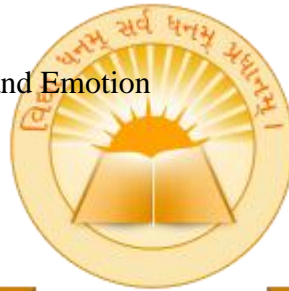
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composed during this time and to the poets known as the first and the second generation Romantic poets. The term 'Romantic' refers to the expression in terms of art of sharpened sensibilities and heightened imaginative feelings. Hence, emotions and imagination can be considered the bedrock of Romanticism. 'Curiosity' and 'Beauty' are integral elements of Romantic literature: one intellectual and the other emotional reflecting the mind and the heart. It can be further illustrated by some salient characteristics of Romantic poetry:

1. No Thralldom of Set Rules
2. Back to Nature
3. Sensation for Beauty and Truth
4. Medievalism and Hellenism
5. Predominance of Imagination and Emotion
6. Supernaturalism
7. Simplicity in Style



To conclude, it can be said that Romanticism was a powerful movement to such an extent that it influenced world literature within its reach, not limiting it to the said time period but until Ezra Pound picked the pen. One of the sources remained in the historical, social, economic, and political upheavals, major and minor.



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