

WORKSHEET ANSWER KEY

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Romanticism

Introduction to Romanticism

Romanticism has very little to do with things popularly thought of as "romantic," although love may occasionally be the subject of Romantic art. Rather, it is an international artistic and philosophical movement that redefined the fundamental ways in which people in Western cultures thought about themselves and about their world.

Historical Considerations

It is one of the curiosities of literary history that the strongholds of the Romantic Movement were England and Germany, not the countries of the romance languages themselves. Thus it is from the historians of English and German literature that we inherit the convenient set of terminal dates for the Romantic period, beginning in 1798, the year of the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge and of the composition of *Hymns to the Night* by Novalis, and ending in 1832, the year which marked the deaths of both Sir Walter Scott and Goethe. However, as an international movement affecting all the arts, Romanticism begins at least in the 1770's and continues into the second half of the nineteenth century, later for American literature than for European, and later in some of the arts, like music and painting, than in literature. This extended chronological spectrum (1770-1870) also permits recognition as Romantic the poetry of Robert Burns and William Blake in England, the early writings of Goethe and Schiller in Germany, and the great period of influence for Rousseau's writings throughout Europe.

The early Romantic period thus coincides with what is often called the "age of revolutions"—including, of course, the American (1776) and the French (1789) revolutions—an age of upheavals in political, economic, and social traditions, the age which witnessed the initial transformations of the Industrial Revolution. A revolutionary energy was also at the core of Romanticism, which quite consciously set out to transform not only the theory and practice of poetry (and all art), but the very way we perceive the world. Some of its major precepts have survived into the twentieth century and still affect our contemporary period.

Imagination

The imagination was elevated to a position as the supreme faculty of the mind. This contrasted distinctly with the traditional arguments for the supremacy of reason. The Romantics tended to define and to present the imagination as our ultimate "shaping" or creative power, the approximate human equivalent of the creative powers of nature or even deity. It is dynamic, an active, rather than passive power, with many functions. Imagination is the primary faculty for creating all art. On a broader scale, it is also the faculty that helps humans to constitute reality, for (as Wordsworth suggested), we not only perceive the world around us, but also in part create it. Uniting both reason and feeling (Coleridge described it with the paradoxical phrase, "intellectual intuition"), imagination is extolled as the ultimate synthesizing faculty, enabling humans to reconcile differences and opposites in the world of appearance. The reconciliation of opposites is a central ideal for the Romantics. Finally, imagination is inextricably bound up with the other two major concepts, for it is presumed to be the faculty which enables us to "read" nature as a system of symbols.

Nature

1. The author's tone is rational and unemotional, and it focuses on facts.

Recent Developments

Some critics have believed that the two identifiable movements that followed Romanticism—Symbolism and Realism—were separate developments of the opposites which Romanticism itself had managed, at its best, to unify and to reconcile. Whether or not this is so, it is clear that Romanticism transformed Western culture in many ways that survive into our own times. It is only very recently that any really significant turning away from Romantic paradigms has begun to take place, and even that turning away has taken place in a dramatic, typically Romantic way.

Today a number of literary theorists have called into question two major Romantic perceptions: that the literary text is a separate, individuated, living "organism"; and that the artist is a fiercely independent genius who creates original works of art. In current theory, the separate, "living" work has been dissolved into a sea of "intertextuality," derived from and part of a network or "archive" of other texts—the many different kinds of discourse that are part of any culture. In this view, too, the independently sovereign artist has been demoted from a heroic, consciously creative agent, to a collective "voice," more controlled than controlling, the intersection of other voices, other texts, ultimately dependent upon possibilities dictated by language systems, conventions, and institutionalized power structures. It is an irony of history, however, that the explosive appearance on the scene of these subversive ideas, delivered in what seemed to the establishment to be radical manifestoes, and written by linguistically powerful individuals, has recapitulated the revolutionary spirit and events of Romanticism itself.

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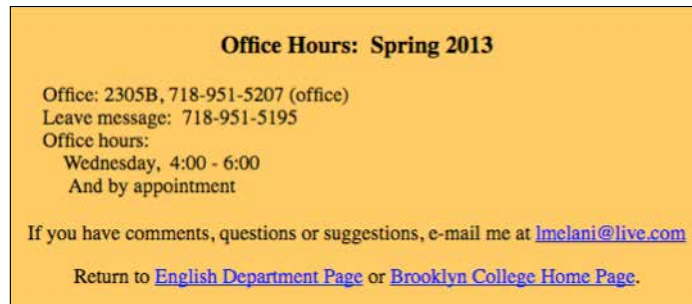
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