

Romanticism in English Literature of the 19th Century, Its Historical, Philosophical, Aesthetic Sources and Main Trends

Mirzayev Jakhongir Rahmatullayevich

2nd-year student, Faculty of Philology, Samarkand State University named after Sharof Rashidov

Abstract: This article argues that Romanticism in England is characterized by its national distinctiveness. The works of English romantics reflect a national tradition of portraying life in fantastic-utopian, allegorical, and symbolic forms, as well as a tradition of dramatic treatment of lyrical themes. It is also noted that the influence of Enlightenment ideas remained strong in English Romanticism. Furthermore, the sublime was not always understood as something exceptional; rather, it was often revealed in what was simple, ordinary, and outwardly unremarkable.

Keywords: romanticism, England, literature, distinctiveness, utopianism, allegorism, symbolism, representation, Enlightenment.

Romanticism as a literary movement emerged at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, during the transition from the feudal system to the bourgeois one. The formation of romanticism in literature took place during and after the French bourgeois revolution of 1789–1794. This revolution was a crucial moment in the history not only of France but also of other countries. The historical experience of the French bourgeois revolution was of great significance for the 19th century. The collapse of the feudal-aristocratic world and the triumph of new social relations brought about important shifts in people's consciousness.

As an ideological and artistic movement, romanticism reflected the discord between dream and reality, generated by a complex of socio-political causes characteristic of the turn of the 18th–19th centuries. Romantic art expressed dissatisfaction with the results of the French revolution, disillusionment with bourgeois civilization, with social, political, and scientific progress, and with the Enlightenment ideology whose ideals and promises could not be realized in bourgeois society.

The socio-historical basis of English romanticism had its own peculiarities. The bourgeois revolution had taken place in England in the mid-17th century, and by the end of the 18th century its results had become quite evident. Among the people, dissatisfaction was growing with the consequences of the industrial revolution. Under the conditions of the social contradictions of bourgeois England, the transition to machine production enriched only the entrepreneurs, while the living and working conditions of ordinary people deteriorated.

Romantic culture, with its specific principles, reflects the process of alienation of the individual in bourgeois society, the breaking of former social ties in a transitional epoch, and the uncertainty and instability of newly emerging relations. The individual finds himself isolated from the traditional centuries-old social system. A characteristic artistic principle of romanticism takes shape — the depiction of personality as self-valuable, independent of the deformed social circumstances, which the romantics sharply condemned. This personality lives in its unique inner world and, rejecting reality, creates through imagination or emotional activity an ideal world that corresponds to the impulses and aspirations of its subjective spirit. Yet romantics were fully aware that on the path of subjective creativity and in asserting the free will of the self-valuable personality, one inevitably clashes with the

cruel reality of contemporary society. Hence the emergence of romantic irony, which points to the impossibility of absolutizing individual freedom and self-value.

Romantic irony developed both in theory and in artistic practice (F. Schlegel, Hoffmann, Tieck, and Brentano in Germany; Musset in France; Byron in England). Its source lay in the unwillingness to submit life, in all its richness and diversity, to rigid restrictions and prohibitions. Romantic irony fostered the affirmation of individual freedom. However, over time, romantic irony underwent evolution: defending the inner freedom of the individual, the romantic poet realized at the same time that life subjected the individual to its power. Irony as universal negation, as a peculiar play of fantasy, gave way to the ironic attitude of the author towards himself and his characters.

The psychology of personality in the era of romanticism is marked by the expectation of radical changes, striving for the new, longing for the infinite, as well as doubts and vacillations as an expression of the uncertainty and tragic nature of transition from the old to the new. The psychology of man in this unstable and contradictory age is characterized by individualism, swinging between extremes of faith and skepticism, exaltation and irony, discord with reality and yearning for the ideal, intensity and complexity of emotional life, reflection, heightened attention to the subjective inner world, and the attempt to explain chaos not socially but philosophically, to define one's moral position, and to comprehend through free emotional life moral values.

The self-valuable personality of romantic writers lives by its inner world, which is an expression of the author's own unique soul. This is connected with the lyrical nature of romantic creativity; lyricism pours into poetic forms of special musical resonance. The detachment of personality from social circumstances and the rejection of rationalist explanations of life's contradictions led to the idea of evil as an eternal principle of life. The notion of universal evil gave rise to "world sorrow."

However acute the disagreements between movements and individual poets, however intense the polemics between them, common aesthetic principles undoubtedly existed, linked with the ideological quests of the era, forming a shared basis for the development of romanticism as a literary movement.

The first unifying criterion lies in the reaction to the epoch's revolutionary character, to the French bourgeois revolution and its consequences. Shelley, in a letter to Byron, noted that "the French revolution may be called the central content of the epoch in which we live." And although the romantics' attitudes toward revolutionary changes varied and were often contradictory, the very reaction to the revolution's historical significance defined historicism in depicting and evaluating reality, as well as conditioned their critical attitude to bourgeois society, developing after the revolution and revealing its corrupt nature.

The principle of rejecting contemporary bourgeois society is characteristic of romanticism as a whole, of all its movements. Yet this ideological stance took on different political forms. Wordsworth and Coleridge initially welcomed the French revolution but later turned away from it; Byron supported it, although he saw that injustice still reigned in post-revolutionary Europe; Shelley too remarked that the revolution "did not bring happiness to mankind." In rejecting reality and seeking the ideal, romantics turned either to the past (the eras of antiquity and the Renaissance) or to utopian visions of the future.

In the aesthetics of romanticism, the sublime and the beautiful occupy a large place. For the romantics, truth lay in recreating reality with the aid of poetic imagination. Poetry was seen as a powerful force influencing both the individual and society at large. In poetic creativity, the main elements were emotion and imagination. The flight of fantasy required special artistic devices. Hence the recourse to symbolic means: symbol, allegory, grotesque. Romantics considered imagination the highest form of cognition. Poetic imagination was placed above reason, just as poetry was declared the most important form of human activity. Art was revelation; poetic imagination, through intuition, penetrated the mysterious world of beauty. Romantics highly valued art's moral influence on the human soul. For some, art was a source of moral self-perfection; for others, a force urging revolutionary action.

Poetic imagination, which discloses beauty, was understood by romantics in different ways. The "Lake Poets" saw in it divine revelation; the London romantics believed imagination revealed the beauty of

the real world, though they contrasted this discovered ideal of beauty with reality itself. Byron, in his statements, denied the primacy of imagination in creativity. Nevertheless, in his works Byron demonstrates the characteristic romantic flight of imagination and poetic fantasy. For Shelley, imagination could reveal “intellectual beauty” actively influencing human consciousness and calling people to struggle. Romantics admired the genius of Shakespeare; Shakespeare’s imagination was perceived as the freedom of creative activity, as the capacity to penetrate into the world of human passions.

The enhanced role of emotion and imagination in romantic art, the subjectivity in depicting reality, and the particularly active role of the author in the world of artistic images were also conditioned by distrust of rational, intellectual explanation of reality. This is the second general criterion of romanticism. In the eyes of romantics, the rationalism of the 18th century was devalued, since in the post-revolutionary era it became clear that the “reign of reason” turned into the reign of the bourgeoisie. The mechanistic, rationalist approach to life was discarded. This does not mean that romantics entirely rejected reason and fell into irrationalism. Their subjectivism consisted in assigning reason a subordinate role, secondary to feeling and intuition; reason was recognized only insofar as it served imagination.

The aesthetics of romanticism is connected with the philosophical ideas of I. Kant and F. Schelling. The defense of the artist’s free imagination, unrestricted by rules, is close to Kant’s idea that genius stands above rationalist norms and freely creates its own world. The romantics’ opposition to the regulatory approach to art was largely determined by Schelling’s concept of the infinite as an eternal change of life forms, as unceasing development of thought. The philosophical aspect of English romanticism was expressed not only in artistic works but also in essays. W. Hazlitt and T. Carlyle stood out with their essays of a vivid philosophical and journalistic character.

Romanticism, arising in the epoch of transition at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, viewed life in its contradictions, in its becoming and development. Romantics opposed their artistic forms of thinking to the Enlightenment’s straightforwardness and metaphysics, depicting life in motion, in historical becoming — from past to future. Shelley, in *A Defence of Poetry*, wrote that the poet “not only intensely contemplates the present as it is, but also discerns the laws which ought to govern it; in the present he foresees the future, and his thoughts are the seed of later blossoms and fruits.” Romantics strove to understand reality in all its complexity and contradictions. Consequently, their art acquired a highly dialectical character. In their works, the principle of historicism develops, revealing the complex dialectic of the struggle between good and evil.

The third general criterion of romanticism is the appeal to the inner world of man, to the disclosure of his feelings, thoughts, and experiences. Rejecting hostile social reality, romantics withdrew into the subjective world of personal experience, discovering moral values in the human soul. Romantics characteristically turned to nature, where they sought harmony and beauty, and to folk art. They perceived society and the world as something universal. Interest in the individual was combined with the striving for the universal. Attention to the personal seemed to equate the inner world of man with the universal world of society and the cosmos. In the romantic method, the social and psychological take on philosophical-universal and symbolic significance. Shelley wrote in *A Defence of Poetry*: “Poetry is universal. It contains within itself in germ all motives or actions which are possible in the infinite variety of human nature.”

Among the many genres of romantic literature, the lyric-epic, philosophical-symbolic poem occupies a prominent place. It is distinguished by the expression of the author’s civic position, by intense subjective emotions, and by a polemical tone. The poem’s structure becomes increasingly free, tending toward a universal embrace of the problems of the epoch.

Romantic poetics developed in the struggle against the strict style of the classicists. Romantics opposed the sharp division of tragic and comic in art, the strict rules of vocabulary selection, and the classical unities. Romantic works are marked by a special emotional atmosphere of lofty feelings and passions, sincerity and directness of emotions, poetics of unexpected juxtapositions, the impression of

novelty and wonder, the blending of tragic and comic, paradoxical combination of heterogeneous details bound by a single lyrical feeling, and free composition.

It is often said that romantic art is devoid of humor. Indeed, comic elements recede before tragic themes. Yet humor can be found in the essays of Charles Lamb and in some poems of Byron and Shelley. But irony is far more typical of them as a means of satirical depiction. The dominance of irony is conditioned by the prevalence of tragic themes, for irony is closer to the tragic than humor. Romantic art, whatever imagery it drew upon — classical, biblical, oriental, folkloric — always reflected contemporary existence, responding to the problems of the time.

These foundations of romanticism as a literary movement and artistic method unfolded differently in the works of individual romantics, depending on their political positions and aesthetic tastes. In romanticism there are common typological traits, common principles of artistic method determined by the ideology of the post-revolutionary generation. Political disagreements among groups of romantics led to the emergence of various trends.

In English romanticism there were three main trends:

1. The “Lake Poets” (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey);
2. The revolutionary romantics — Byron and Shelley;
3. The London romantics — Keats, Lamb, Hazlitt, Hunt.

The relationship among these trends in English romanticism cannot be reduced simply to a division into revolutionary and conservative romantics; the mentioned currents did exist, but the literary process of that time cannot be represented only as an ideological struggle between revolutionary and conservative writers. The London romantics, for instance, were not revolutionaries, but they held fairly progressive positions. The true state of literary life would be distorted if political disagreements were allowed to obscure the entire complexity of ideological and aesthetic divergences and convergences. The poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge cannot be considered merely an expression of their conservative views; it influenced all of English Romantic poetry. And the revolutionary romantics, aesthetically and to some extent ideologically, felt the impact of the “Lake Poets.”

English Romanticism is distinguished by its national character. In the works of English romantics, the national tradition of fantastic-utopian, allegorical, and symbolic depiction of life is evident, as well as the tradition of a special dramatic revelation of lyrical themes. Enlightenment ideas remained strong in English Romanticism (in Byron, Scott, Hazlitt). The sublime in English Romanticism was not always understood as the exceptional. Often, the sublime was revealed in the simple, the ordinary, the externally unremarkable. Imagination discloses the marvelous, the magnificent, the heroic in the everyday and mundane, and relates the simple to the sublime, the desired, the ideal. The idealistic understanding of art’s essence is combined with the English tradition of sensualist empiricism. English romantics sought to see beauty in truth and truth in beauty; they actively searched for and affirmed the ideal. For English romantics, for Byron in particular, irony was a form of sober evaluation of the quest for the unknown, the ideal world.

In conclusion, English Romantic art as a whole was marked by a new vision of life. In its own distinctive way, it reflected the realities of human existence and conveyed the spirit of its era.

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