

Romanticism

Overview

If one term can be used to describe the cultural and intellectual forces that have shaped the modern world, it is Romanticism. Since the late 18th century, Romanticism has been called “the profoundest cultural transformation in human history since the invention of the city.” Romanticism was not a single movement, but instead it was a series of movements impacted art, literature, science, religion, economics, politics, and the individual's understanding of self. While the forces or movements within Romanticism used the same foundational principles, their results were often quite contradictory. In fact, some forces were almost completely perfect opposites.

What is Romanticism?

There are four elements or building blocks of Romanticism. First, it was a rejection of the **Enlightenment** and the emphasis upon human reason and purely logical thinking. The Enlightenment thinkers asserted that the world is logically ordered, therefore human reason can analyze, understand, and use it or manipulate it. Based on this thesis, a rational, logical, perfect society can be created with the human mind. On the other hand, **Romanticism** believed in intuition, feeling, inspiration, and the genius of human creativity. It took delight in the exotic—the sights, sounds, and stories of foreign lands, other cultures, and the fantasy world of the imagination. It looked on nature not as a world of objects to be manipulated and dissected but as something to be “felt” or “experienced.”

Second, Romanticism believed that truth and “right & wrong” were personal, not universal. “Reason” states that there is an “absolute truth” and that everyone's purpose is figure it out and to behave accordingly. Laws and religions are built on this idea: that the mind's job is to figure out this “absolute truth” and obey it. Romanticism said there are no absolute truths that apply to everyone. The individual, if he is in tune with his feelings, will then decide what is right and wrong for him.

Third, Romanticism glorified the individual, also called Individualism. Man did not have to obey the greater authorities of the “Church,” government or even parents. One of the best examples of this individualism was the **French Revolution**, with its demand for individual rights. The French Revolution was the first unfolding of Romanticism into Western civilization. These dynamic social changes soon spread throughout the world as a cultural revolution.

Fourth, Romanticism searches for a perfect world that currently does not exist: a utopia. This is a belief that either things **USED TO BE** better and we need to find a way back or that things **WILL BE** better and we must abandon the old ways completely. Along with this search was the conviction that it was possible to remake the world and even to change human nature for the better—by military force if necessary. This optimism frequently focused on the role of the great man or the hero to bring utopia to the people.

The Equal & Opposite Reactions within Romanticism

Nietzsche & Nihilism... No one saw more clearly where Romanticism could lead than Nietzsche. His perception of Romanticism was that its loss of all traditional values was best summed up in the statement “God is dead.” To Nietzsche and the Romantic movement, “God,” along with all of the rules and social policies founded upon the words of “God” were dead, useless, obsolete. Nietzsche called for a transformation of the old, religious based values into new ones. However... he could not envision what the new ones might be. Nietzsche feared that the final result of Romanticism, with its person quests for truth and utopia with no religious foundation, might be a belief in no values at all—a position called nihilism, the belief in nothing. At its extreme, nihilism rejected church, state, and family and embraced science as the cure-all for society's problems. The logical outcome of nihilism is the conviction that nothing matters but the self and its desires.

Religious Reaction... For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. As certain intellectuals pushed for the death of ‘Reason’, ‘Absolute Truth,’ and ‘God,’ there were many strong reactions. Certain groups began to demand that there ARE absolute truths and that a life where “nothing matters” is a life not worth living. They longed for a return to the stability of the Middle Ages, when Europe was cultural and religiously united, before it was fragmented by the Reformation. Those who saw the authority of religion slipping tried to turn the tide. They believed that the government could somehow impose these values on a society and bring about the religious utopia. In Great Britain and the United States churches sought to revive Christianity “going back” to the norms of 1st-century Christianity. Theologians tried to save Christianity by reinterpreting it as a religion of feeling and intuition. As this movement moved into the 20th century, it transformed into religious fundamentalism; as the major religions of the world (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, etc) sought to recreate religious utopias to re-create societies in terms of the values of the past.

Consequences of Romanticism

Throughout more than two centuries since its emergence, Romanticism has taken a number of twists and turns. Note: Some of its phases were complete contradictions of others... However, focus on how the movement emphasizes the four elements of Romanticism

Nationalism

An extension of the exaltation of the self, nationalism is having a strong pride in one's country or culture. Nationalism is a type of tribalism that pits “us against them” or “us against the world.” The nation typically has a “common enemy” to unify the people. This went hand in hand with Patriotism, where people have pride in their country, government, military, flag and anthem. Once again, this idea burst forth from the people of France after the Revolution. Citizens were attached to their native soil and had an understanding of what it means to be “French.” The same sentiment emerged in Italy and Germany, causing once fragmented people groups to want to unify.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity has a focus on a people with similar features, culture, land or heritage. During the 19th century there was a strong movement to support ethnic unity... and even competition between ethnicities. In Nazi Germany during the 1930s the slogan was “One nation, one people, one leader.” Later in the 20th century the United States had a civil rights movement that bred such slogans as “black power,” “black is beautiful,” “brown power,” “red power,” and—as a reaction—“white power.”

Politics

Within Government, the results of Romanticism were quite diverse. Some parts of the world used Romanticism (Feelings/Individualism/Personal truth) to promote a quest for Utopia through democracy. Others used Romanticism (Feelings/Individualism/Personal truth) to promote Utopia by going back to the old way of the Kings or Dictator rule. Some used Romanticism to promote an idea of a completely capitalist world, with no government involvement in economics. Others used Romanticism to promote the idea of Communism, where everyone shares everything to support everyone run 100% by the government.

The philosophy of utopianism, or trying to create a country where everything is perfect, was birthed around 1830. New groups that wanted to completely reconstruct society emerged from anarchists, socialists, Communists, and liberals in both Europe and North America. Most of the programs had an optimistic appeal. But it was their willingness to use excessive military force to gain their goals ultimately made them potentially very destructive.

Questions:

- What are the 4 Key points of Romanticism?
- Identify and Explain two ways that Romanticism would have a positive effect on society.
- Identify and explain two ways the Romanticism would have a negative effect on society.
- Using the understanding of Romanticism, identify how these pictures and poems would be considered "Romantic"



Love's Secret

William Blake

Never seek to tell thy love,
Love that never told can be;
For the gentle wind doth move
Silently, invisibly.

I told my love, I told my love,
I told her all my heart,
Trembling, cold, in ghastly fears.
Ah! she did depart!

Soon after she was gone from me,
A traveller came by,
Silently, invisibly:
He took her with a sigh.

