

GENERALIZATIONS ABOUT THE ENGLISH NEOCLASSICAL AND ROMANTIC PERIODS

* Thanks to Professor Richard Kroll of UC Irvine for the initial version of this guide on Romanticism. I have adapted and augmented it below.

See M. H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms*; *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*; and Walter Jackson Bate's *From Classic to Romantic*. Marilyn Butler's 1985 [*Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background, 1760-1830*](#) is a fine short introduction to the period.

The shift from Neoclassical premises to Romantic ones, although clearly recognizable at an intuitive level, has rarely been satisfactorily described. Walter J. Bate's attempt is perhaps becoming "dated," but it is reliable and thoughtful. The following broad assertions based on that volume may prove useful for getting acquainted with Romanticism:

Neoclassical Premises (ca. 1650-1789)

A. Defined by a broad social commitment: a social ethic; the need for society to continue in face of various attacks; neoclassicism's social imperative can be understood as a response to the deep divisions of the English Civil War (1642-1649) and the Commonwealth Period (1649-1660) before Charles II's ascension marked the Stuart monarchy's return in 1660 (the Restoration).

B. An inclination to *categorize* experience, nature, and literature—the neoclassical "kinds." Generalizations, genres, categories help us reduce the diversity of experience to order and distribute what has become known into clearly defined categories, or branches of learning.

C. The prevalence of satire. We think of the period as a decorous, elegant one, but the satire could be quite sharp, as anyone who is familiar with Swift's "A Modest Proposal" knows.

D. The importance of *probability*. The world was understood as intelligible and ordered in accordance with and discoverable by human reason. (Thus the frequent use of *analogy* as a literary figure, with the two terms of a comparison illuminating each other and helping to maintain necessary distinctions between things. Where metaphor tends to bring things together, analogy compares them but keeps them distinct.)

E. The prevalence of *moral categories*. The literary criticism of the era is based on the twin pillars of *mimesis* (accurate representation, "imitation of nature") and *morality*. Care must be taken to show regard for the public's moral state and their potential for improvement. Thus Dr. Johnson, while generally admiring Shakespeare, faults him for creating wicked characters who fascinate us with their charm and admirable qualities: the good should be good, and the bad, bad, reasons Dr. Johnson.

F. The primacy of *classical precedent*. Virgil had thought to write an original epic, says Pope, but he went back to Homer and discovered that the old Greek was the very essence of wisdom about human nature and the world around us. "Those rules of old discover'd, not devised / Are nature still, but nature methodiz'd" ("An Essay on Criticism.")

G. Obedience to *ordinary English grammar*. Dr. Johnson's dictionary (April 1755) marks a real advance in the standardization of English. (It's also fair to say, however, that the dramatic works of Thomas Kyd, Shakespeare and others probably helped to modernize English.)

H. Categorizing the appropriate types of speech for appropriate subjects: thus we use epic for high subjects, lyric for love poetry, etc.

I. Importance of the idea of mirroring nature in art (*mimesis*) so as to render it universally intelligible. Art should imitate human nature and faithfully delineate the natural environment. A play or poem or painting is not an excuse for "flights of imagination"; it should give us an accurate understanding of ourselves and the world. As Samuel Johnson says in his "Preface to Shakespeare," art "brings realities to mind," and as he makes Imlac say in *Rasselas*, an artist should not paint the eccentric streaks of a tulip because the point is to give us a representation that will "recall the original to every mind." Only a distilled *type* could do that.

J. Skepticism about language—another reason for analogy: metaphor tends to collapse the two terms of comparison: man = pig, etc. As Francis Bacon the empirical scientist had written, words tend to lead us away from things, and it is things we ought to be studying. Rationalist philosophy, too, tends to treat ideas as distinct from language, so again, words have much power to mislead us into erroneous thinking.

K. Importance of Horatian ethos: art should be both *utile et dulce*, useful and "sweet" or pleasant. Literature must both please and teach, with emphasis on the latter function; as the Renaissance poet and critic Sir Philip Sidney wrote in his "Apology for Poetry," the poet's task is to teach *by delighting*," and thereby to draw us towards a better version of our fallen selves. Or if you prefer the formulation of Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, literature should be something like a public conversation that gently elevates the morals and manners of those who engage in it—the author's authority is not that of an absolutist but that of an educated gentleman or woman.

Romantic Premises

A. The Romantics are concerned with the individual mind and spirit, with "the self"; they are not primarily interested in offering a social theory or ethic.

B. Romantic authors try to break down scientific categories of experience; experience is *whole* or *organic*, not easily sundered into component parts.

C. Romanticism is essentially *serious*: it entails a search for deeper spirituality and insight.

D. Romanticism defies ordinary probability, presenting us instead with unreal worlds, myths, dreams, and states of trance or exaltation. Sublimity is a favorite experience for Romantic poets.

E. Romantic authors tend to defy ordinary moral categories—Byron's *Manfred* is a fine example of this tendency. Shelley wrote an essay praising Milton's devil as morally superior to his God, and Blake offered a fairly similar (if more complex) viewpoint in which the Devil is characterized by energy and the ordinary Christian conception of God the Father is satirized as "Nobodaddy."

F. Romantics change the meaning of classical precedent: they see the classics as a myth of origin, not as a set of "given" values.

G. Romantic poetry sometimes suspends normal grammatical expectations, as Wordsworth does in his "Lucy" poems. *Correctness* is not the prime directive for Romantic expressivists.

H. Romantics claim that all speech is united in the highest kind of speech: *poetry*. The poetic word is placed on an almost scriptural level; it is capable of taking us beyond the dull reality ordinary speech makes accessible to us and towards a higher spiritual dimension, towards a vision of the world as integrated, whole, unified. Shelley, for example, claims in his "Defense" that the originators of civilization, whether they wrote or sang verse or not, were *poets* who saw order and connections where others saw only chaos and isolated things: poets "mark[ed] the before unapprehended relations of things" and were able to express those relations.

I. Romanticism posits an ideal of the artist as a *creator*: art is *expression*, not *mimesis* (imitation).

J. Romantic poets show skepticism about ordinary, alienated human language, which seems to serve more as a way of ignoring the important things in life than as a means of expressing anything authentic. But they also believe that in *poetry* we can recover the language of Eden: a universal language which will reintegrate man, spirit, and nature.

K. Romantics say that teaching readers to be urbane and moral is less important than leading them towards spiritual insight. Pleasure (Horace's "sweetness") thus overtakes social usefulness in the realm of poetry. In his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth writes that the poet's most pressing task is to give us the kinds of pleasure available to us as whole human beings. Coleridge says poetry "brings the whole soul of man into activity," implying, among other things, that it helps us to take delight in the operations of our own imagination and passions.