

The Romantic Movement

An aesthetic principle involving a changing view of man and man in relation to his world. Begins in Germany in late 18th century and spreads first to England, then to France and finally to Russia, Poland and Italy. Affected by liberal humanist thinkers (Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, Voltaire) and political and social upheaval of the late 18th and 19th century. (American and French Revolutions, rising nationalism)

18th Century Enlightenment

View of Universe

The order of the universe is benevolent, logical and mathematically precise. Through observing Nature as an example of God's divine, universal clockwork in action, one moves closer to a perception of God and his order, goodness and harmony as well as the absolute and unchanging moral and physical principles by which he runs the universe.

View of Man

Man a benevolent, rational being. Achieves both virtue and wisdom through understanding the divine clockwork and bringing himself and his society into conformity with it. Because truth is absolute, knowable and observable, one needs only to apply the faculty of reason, as guided by pure and refined sentiments, to reach the divine general and universal principles underlying the particulars. Passion and the senses need to be tightly controlled and channeled lest they lead man into a disorder and excess, or an absorption in the eccentric, particular and individual that prevents him from knowing and delighting in higher more abstract truths.

View of Society

To the extent that the traditional, hierarchical society reflects the "great chain of Being" and the authority of kings to rule according to "Divine Right", the existing social structures, while subject to some questioning and reform on particulars, are essentially seen as reflecting the same logical, orderly, benevolent clockwork as the universe.

Tragedy results when an individual's particular needs, passions or appetites drive him out of harmony with his society and lead him to upset the existing social and political order in defiance of the needs of the many. This usually results in his/her death or expulsion as society moves to remove the source of the disruption and return to the correct order.

The Romantic Movement

View of Universe

God an ecstatic, passionate mystical presence that suffuses the whole natural world with a divine, unifying spirit. By communing with Nature, man's passionate, ecstatic spirit instinctively reaches for and seeks to recover that complete and mystical union with the Infinite lost upon birth into the world.

View of Man

Man a tortured, giant spirit constantly striving after the eternal, infinite and ideal in the face of a mortal body, society and world which frustrate and deny his true nature. To achieve the spiritual merging of human and world soul, man must bypass the rational - which focuses only on the physical and finite in nature and excludes anything that does not fit into a logical, orderly system - and cultivate the neglected mystical, ecstatic, intuitive and passionate aspects of his being which will allow him to unleash the full strength of his transforming, imaginative genius on himself and his world, and be completely open to the *whole* of nature and experience as an expression of the giant cosmic soul.

View of Society

To the extent that man is seen as a creature good and noble by nature who is confined and tyrannized by the corrupt, restrictive conditions of existing society, man has complete license to (1) renounce society and move into closer communion with nature and the natural man or (2) radically reshape the political and social structures of his world to more closely conform with the needs of his naturally aspiring and evolving spirit. Idea of the "social contract". While kings owe a duty to God, they also owe a duty to their subjects, and if they fail in this duty, they may legitimately be resisted and replaced by their people acting collectively as magistrates or assemblies. Taken further by Rousseau who asserts that the sovereign power resides in the citizen body and government derives its authority from the consent of the common man. "Government by the consent of the governed", "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity".

Tragedy results when the particular needs, passions and desires of the individual cannot be fulfilled because of the limited, corrupt circumstances of the body, of society or of life itself, and he/she is corrupted, destroyed or expelled in the process of trying to become a higher being or create a better social order than can yet exist in the world.

II Aesthetics

Poet/artist/dramatist important because he achieves a mystical communion with the world spirit through the gift of his creative, imaginative genius and conveys it to the rest of mankind in the form of art.

1. In art, the imagination can at least temporarily provide a higher realm of beauty, imagination and exotic fantasy where the limitations and flaws of everyday, physical existence can be banished and man allowed a moment of wholeness denied him in the real world.
2. Art makes the "supersensuous sensuous" by giving a higher, eternal truth concrete, material form so that it can be apprehended by the limited human sensory apparatus; through the glimpses of ultimate truth provided by art, man becomes more fully aware of his potential - artistically, socially and politically.

Neo-classicism

God's universe - including, man and his creations - are orderly and rational, being governed by universal verities and laws. Art should follow suit.

Man's nature universal and predetermined. Important to portray the experience of the particular only insofar as it reveals a truth about a type or class of human being or human nature in general. Justifies decorum of character and subject matter the deliberate elimination or stylization of realistic detail to bring out the character's emblematic or essential characteristics, and the right to eliminate certain types of human character or behavior from the stage as abnormal, flawed, insignificant or substandard.

To the extent that art should be based on our rational observation of the workings of nature, the mystical and supernatural should be eliminated from drama because they are not a part of the normal, physical world as we observe and experience it, and they can never be convincingly rendered on stage in the same way that flesh-and-blood people can.

To the extent that Nature is orderly and rational, breaking down naturally into categories according to the characteristics and behavior proper to its kind and its standing in the divine hierarchy, dramatic form should do likewise. Justification for the unities, conventions based on past authority and traditions, and careful delineation of genres.

Romanticism

God's universe - and by extension, man and his creations - are exultant and passionate, encompassing an infinite variety of sensations, ideas and forms. Art should follow suit.

Man's spirit may be universal, but in terms of his actions in this life, he is a dynamic, evolving being in the process of discovering, transforming and fulfilling himself and his institutions to an end yet to be fully realized. Justifies ignoring decorum of character and subject matter. Man the particular more important than man the generality, leading to greater emphasis on the individual and his particular needs, perceptions and sensations. To the extent that all life and experience is a manifestation of God's infinite varied experience, even the flawed, eccentric and abnormal can teach us something of the divine spirit, and the more portraits of human nature that we see, the more we will ultimately know of the bounds of human nature and potential.

The use of the mystical, exotic or supernatural valid to try to capture a sense of soul states and spiritual, emotional truths beyond the limited realm of physical phenomena. Emphasis on creation of atmosphere, emotion and mood

To the extent that nature is infinite in its variety, dramatic form should imitate nature. Justification for ignoring the unities, conventions based on past authority and traditions, and careful delineation of genres. Even as nature's forms grow organically from the inside out into the shape, size and form proper to each, so should each work of art.

The works of genius cannot therefore be permitted to be without form; but of this there is no danger...Organical form...is innate; it unfolds itself from within, and acquires its determination contemporaneously with the perfect development of the germ. We ever where discover such forms in nature throughout the whole range of living powers, from the crystallization of salts and minerals to plants and flowers, and from these again to the human body. In the fine arts, as well as in the domain of nature - the supreme artist - all genuine forms are organical...In short, the form is nothing but a significant exterior...(which) gives a true evidence of its hidden essence.

A.W. von Schlegel 1808

III Contributions

Negative

Art, by definition, an inadequate means of spiritual expression to the extent that it too is physical and finite. Particularly true of the theatre, the most physical of the written arts. Attempts to transcend the stage's physical nature instead of working with it lead to formlessness and instability, partial failures or unstageable work in terms of time and structure. Many turn to closet drama.

Positive

While short-lived in and of itself, it shattered the grip of classicism and neo-classicism on the European theatre, and helped pave the way for:

Realism - with its emphasis on the particular and individual, and the idea that all forms and subjects are appropriate to the stage, including the tragedies and trials of the common man. Particular impact on acting, scene design and the development of melodrama.

Expressionism - with its emphasis on the irrational, on the portrayal of soul states, and on the presentation of the exotic, fantastical and surreal on the stage to convey emotional, mental, dream and archetypal realities.

Social action drama - with its valorization of the common man and his right to challenge and demand change of his social and political institutions when they impede his potential to become as fully human as is possible.