



WORLD LITERATURE II (ENG 252)

Rousseau and Romanticism: Study Guide

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ROUSSEAU

The romantic writers and poets made a genuine break with the rational, orderly thinking of the eighteenth century Enlightenment. While we still think of Voltaire as a symbol of the power of reason, his contemporary, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, was one of the early, prominent voices of nineteenth century romanticism. (Ayer, 171)

One of the enlightenment philosophes, Denis Diderot, described Rousseau as a madman and a damned soul and "wrote that the poets had been right in placing an immense interval between heaven and hell, implying that Rousseau resided in hell. Strachey's comment on this is that Diderot was wrong. `The...[huge gap], across which, so strangely and so horribly, he had caught glimpses of what he had never seen before, was not the abyss between heaven and hell, but between the old world and the new.'" (Ayer, 171)

The high priest of Romanticism was Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Rousseau's mother died at his birth, and his father raised him with no discipline and very little education. Rousseau grew up in beautiful, rural Switzerland, which taught him to love nature; however, thanks to his irresponsible father, Rousseau never learned self-discipline, nor did he have any patience with external controls. Rousseau never could tolerate any discipline, which can be seen in all of his writings, which are celebrations of the joys of radical individual freedom.

Rousseau ran away at sixteen and wandered for twenty years. He worked at various odd jobs during this time, but never stuck to anything.

Eventually he came to Paris where he wrote a few articles for the Encyclopedia and some music and poetry.

Rousseau published four important books:

New Heloise (1760)

Émile (1762)

Social Contract (1762)

Confessions (1781)

These books were very popular and made a profound impression on European thinking, especially influencing the Romantic movement. Rousseau has been called the father of the Romantic movement because his "enthusiasm for nature and his appeal to the emotions ...opened the way for...the Romantic... [movement].... His ideas stimulated or inspired..." many other writers. (Ergang, 641)

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NATURE VERSUS CIVILIZATION

New Heloise, Rousseau's first book is a romantic story told in the form of letters. One of the main themes is the beauties of nature and the simple life as opposed to the corrupt and artificial life in the cities. (Ergang, 640)

Rousseau thought that human beings were born naturally good and that they were corrupted by bad institutions such as governments, schools, cities and armies, which caused the social inequality, suffering and injustice that were everywhere around him. Rousseau's solution to the misery of life in his time was to change the laws and institutions.

These changes would occur by people returning to nature and the natural state of human goodness, uncorrupted by institutions that supported inequality and oppression. In such a natural state, Rousseau thought, the few would not oppress the many.

Rousseau's notion that nature was essentially kindly and good was the creation of his own imagination. However, as Ergang comments, Rousseau's "back to nature" gospel was...the most powerful regenerative force of the late eighteenth century, and of the nineteenth--one which turned the thought of Europe into new channels. There are few men in the history of modern times who have influenced the mind of the world as profoundly as did Rousseau. Politics, education, religion, aesthetics, morals, and literature all bear the impress of the ideas he proclaimed." (Ergang, 643)

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EMILE & EDUCATION

Émile (1762) has had tremendous impact on modern theories of elementary education. In **Émile**, Rousseau described a new form of education which was based on fostering the natural abilities of each child instead of trying to force all children into a single mold. This radically new method of education would preserve the child's natural goodness instead of corrupting it. (Ergang, 641)

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POLITICAL THEORY

In **Social Contract** Rousseau argues that the existence of all states is based on a "social contract" which may be written or simply understood. In this contract, the members of the state surrender their individual rights to the "general will."

Since the power of the state comes from the power of the people, each one of those people is ultimately the source of all state power, and therefore absolutely free.

According to Ergang, "the Social Contract is one of the most influential political treatises of all time. Hardly a measure was framed in the early part of the French Revolution which does not bear the mark of this 'Bible of democratic government,' as it has been styled." (Ergang, 641)

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Confessions was written between 1765 and 1770; it was published posthumously in 1781.

Rousseau had received much attention because of **New Heloise**, **Émile**, and **Social Contract**. Much of it was positive; however, much was outrage at his radical ideas and Rousseau had to flee the country to avoid being sent to prison. According to Ergang, this "...opposition... made him suspicious and misanthropic. His sensitiveness was aggravated to such an extent that he suffered much from imaginary as well as from real attacks. In the hope that he might justify himself to posterity, Rousseau wrote his autobiography or **Confessions**...." (Ergang, 642) Rousseau wanted to demonstrate that he was, despite all his faults, basically good.

"How could I become wicked, when I had nothing but examples of gentleness before my eyes, and none around me but the best people in the world."WL1631

Before Rousseau, almost no one wrote autobiographies except a few deeply religious people who wanted to guide others in their

spiritual development. People generally had seen themselves as members of a social unit, not as individuals, so the very concept of autobiography was not particularly interesting or relevant. Each person was thought to be much like each other.

However, according to J. M. Cohen, "By Rousseau's age ... men had begun to see themselves not as atoms in a society that stretched down from God to the world of nature but as unique individuals, important in their own right." (Cohen, 7) It was this emerging idea of the unique individual which made possible a book such as the **Confessions**, which started fully aware of how radical an undertaking it was:

"I am commencing an undertaking, hitherto without precedent, and which will never find an imitator. I desire to set before my fellows the likeness of a man in all the truth of nature, and that man myself.

"Myself alone! I know the feelings of my heart, and I know men. I am not made like any of those I have seen; I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence. If I am not better, at least I am different." (Norton WL1629-30)

Rousseau believed that emotion, which came from nature and from sexual love, was the core of his being and the source of his inspiration.

"My passions have made me live, and my passions have killed me. What passions? will be asked. Trifles, the most childish things in the world, which, however, excited me as much as if the possession of Helen or the throne of the universe had been at stake. In the first place--women. When I possessed one, my senses were calm, my heart, never. The needs of love devoured me in the midst of enjoyment; I had a tender mother, a dear friend; but I needed a mistress. I imagined one in her place...

"Thus I was burning with love, without an object..." (Norton WL1638)

This objectless yearning is the very essence of the romantic stance, the longing for the objects of imagination rather than the objects or persons really present. Rousseau makes his own emotions, his own longings, the subject matter of his writing. This is a far cry indeed from the objective distance Voltaire takes from poor Candide.

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THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT: WORLDVIEW AND POETRY

What, exactly, was so new about the Romantic world view? First of all, the Romantics turned away from the intellectual tradition of the Western World which held that reason was the way to know and understand the world. Instead, the Romantics chose to embrace imagination and feeling as truer ways of understanding the world.

While traditional western culture had thought of poets as holding up a mirror to nature and imitating what they saw there, the Romantic period changed that image to a fountain or a lamp which gave out from itself instead of simply mirroring the world around it.

The poet now was thought of as creating the poetic vision out of a mixture of imagination and personal experience, not simply finding and recording the world as it was or should be.

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ROMANTIC EXOTICISM

The Romantics loved wild landscapes and uncivilized peoples. They preferred quaint villages and foreign wildernesses to the cities of Europe. The Romantics were fascinated by exotic stories and eccentric individuals; they loved the "folk" and folktales and rejected much of the traditional, upper-class culture of the eighteenth century, preferring the Middle Ages, foreign nationals, and colorful ethnic cultures.

One example of this folktale, medieval exoticism is John Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci" which tells a tale about a knight languishing in thrall to a magical fairy lady. He had been riding along when he met a beautiful lady. They got along just fine until she took him home with her and lulled him to sleep; he dreamed of death-pale kings, princes and warriors:

They cried, "La belle dame sans merci

Thee hath in thrall!"
 I saw their starved lips in the gloam
 With horrid warning gaped wide,
 And I awoke, and found me here
 On the cold hill's side.
 And this is why I sojourn here,
 Alone and palely loitering;
 Though the sedge withered from the lake
 And no birds sing. (Norton, WL,)

Poor fellow, he's come to a typical, wretched, yet exotic Romantic ending. Notice, by the way, how the knight's paleness matches the withered sedge and how his misery matches the lack of birdsong. Romantic poets were particularly sensitive to the relationship between human emotions and the surrounding landscape.

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ROMANTIC LANDSCAPE

Indeed, the Romantic landscape is one of human emotion blended with rugged mountains, wild grottoes and untamed countryside. This interaction of emotion and scenery is typical of Romantic poetry, whether it involves giving human personality to a natural object, such as a tree, or tying the landscape to the mood of the poet. "A Spruce is Standing Lonely," by Heine is a good example of a Romantic poet infusing natural objects with human emotions:

A spruce is standing lonely
 in the North on a barren height.
 He drowns; ice and snowflakes
 wrap him in a blanket of white.
 He dreams about a palm tree
 in a distant, eastern land,
 that languishes lonely and silent
 upon the scorching sand. (Norton, WL)

The tree, just like a person, is lonely, sleeps and has dreams of an exotic love far away. The isolated landscape each tree sits in is a reflection of the isolated emotions of each tree, another typical Romantic device.

Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" personifies the wind into a spirit of nature:

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being, Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead Are driven,
 like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing...

Not only is the wind given a superhuman personality, but it can inspire the poet as in these further lines from the same poem, where the poet cries to the wind:

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
 What if my leaves are falling like its own!
 The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
 Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
 Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
 My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one! (Norton, WL)

Here the relationship between poet and nature is complete; nature in the form of the West Wind is personified into a spirit. The poet receives his inspiration from the spirit of the West Wind, and the poet wants to join his spirit to the spirit of the West Wind. Further, the poet's depressed mood meets its perfect match in the bleak autumnal scene.

Note, also, the line: "Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is." The image of the poet as a lyre, or an aeolian harp (a wind harp) is an important romantic concept. The poet does not just see the landscape and copy it; rather, he is a sensitive instrument upon which nature plays, like the wind upon the strings of a harp, and the consequent poem is a creative product of this interaction between nature and the poet.

Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" also expresses this interaction between the poet and nature:

O Lady! we receive but what we give,

And in our life alone does Nature live:

.....

Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth

A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud

Enveloping the Earth--

And from the soul itself must there be sent

A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,

Of all sweet sounds the life and element! (Norton, WL)

The beauty we see in the world is not out there in the world, but comes from human perception and emotion; beauty is a creature of our own creative imagination; this beauty is what the romantic poet creates in his poetry; he is not imitating the world as in a mirror, but setting it forth in luminous glory, as by the light of the lamp of his own imagination.

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ROMANTIC FANTASY

Fantasy was also much appreciated by the romantic poets. Perhaps the most famous fantasy poem of this period is "Kubla Khan" by Coleridge. It is a fragment, supposedly remembered from an interrupted opium dream, about a fantastic world:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea. (Norton, WL)

Such a poem is purely a creation of the poet's imagination; there is no observed landscape to be transformed by poetic creativity, but simply the poet's mind, and the words of the poem which create images that never existed before.

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ROMANTIC FEELING

"How do I feel?" was a major question for Rousseau and the Romantics. Where Voltaire and his friends believed that they could think through a problem and come to a reasonable answer, Rousseau and the Romantics cried, NO! thinking will not give us the answers we need to the meaning of life nor help us to experience the essential nature of being and the world; we must FEEL what is right and learn to know about the world through our feelings. This reliance on feeling over thought was based on a belief that human beings were naturally good and capable of recognizing the good when they experienced it. Rousseau, especially, thought that people's natural feelings were sound; only corrupt civilization could distort people into brutal, unfeeling monsters.

Romantic poet's feelings, however, were likely to be depressed, or at least feelings of dejection inspired a number of romantic poems, such as Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," Keats' "Ode on Melancholy," and Shelley's "Stanzas Written in Dejection-- December 1818, Near Naples," where the poet complains:

"Alas, I have nor hope nor health

Nor peace within nor calm around,

Nor that content surpassing wealth

The sage in meditation found,

And walked with inward glory crowned;

Nor fame nor power nor love nor leisure--" (Norton WL)

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REVOLUTION AND POLITICS

The French Revolution occurred in 1789. It overthrew the thoroughly corrupt Old Regime, but then dragged on into an extended

horror of killings within France, known as "The Terror" as well as war with other countries and more European revolutions in the nineteenth century. Violent change became the norm for this period. Such change was based at least partly on the hope for a better life; however the change itself was frightening and often destructive.

The French Revolution was a major influence on the Romantics, as were the wars and revolutions that followed. Romantic poets wrote about the corruption of governments and the human suffering caused by violence. One example of a Romantic political poem is Victor Hugo's "Memory of the Night of the Fourth" which describes a child shot by the soldiers of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte during civil disturbances in 1851:

"The child had been struck by two bullets in the head.
The dwelling was clean and modest, peaceful and good.
Above a picture, a blessed branch, and in the room
An old grandmother--weeping.
We undressed him in silence. His pale mouth open.
Death was clouding over his vivid eye
His arms hanging down seemed a cry for help.
In his pocket, a boxwood spinning-top." (Norton WL)

The poem continues with the grandmother speaking her grief and wondering why Mr. Bonaparte had to kill a child. The narrator explains that Mr. Bonaparte wanted fancy palaces and wealth and respect:

"That's why it has to be this way: old grandmothers
With their poor gray fingers shaking with age
Must sew in winding-sheets children of seven."
(Norton WL)

This poem expresses anger at the cruel irrationality of a government that somehow allows children to die in order to provide palaces for rulers. The attention to the details of a modest home, the top in the child's pocket, the old grandmother, these too are the stuff of romantic poetry. The effect is not elegant, but pathetic. We are intended to feel for the child's death and feel outrage at Mr. Bonaparte and his corrupt state.

Not all romantic poets were anti-establishment all the time. Some were more worried by the radical revolutionaries than by the corruption of governments. My favorite political poem of this sort is Heine's "The Migratory Rats." These rats, while delightfully rat-like, are also uncannily similar to a pack of nineteenth century radicals seeking to overturn everything and re-divide the world according to their needs.

There are two kinds of rat
The hungry and the fat;
The fat ones happily stay at home,
But the hungry ones set out to roam.
.....
A sensuous mob, they think
Only of food and drink;
They ignore, since food is their only goal,
The immortality of the soul.
For such a brutal rat
Fears neither hell nor cat;
No goods, nor money they ever acquire,
To redivide the world they desire. (Norton WL)

This poem is interesting because it does not idealize the fat rats, nor deny the reality of the hungry rats' needs, but it does not condone their method of dealing with their hunger--revolution. It is also amusing; I can imagine it as a scenario for a Disney cartoon.

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ROMANTIC LOVE

And of course, the Romantics wrote about human love, especially in its more unusual variations. "The Asra," also by Heine is a good example of the Romantic blend of exoticism and love. A beautiful daughter of the Sultan walks every evening by a fountain; a young slave stands by the fountain every evening, growing ever paler. Finally the princess asks him his name and kin. He

replies:

..... "Mohamet
Is my name, I am from Yemen,
And my kinsmen are the Asra,
They who die when love befalls them." (Norton WL)

What could be more romantic? An exotic, distant setting in the fabled, Arab world, a slave in love with a princess, a tribe of men who die of love, and the slave growing paler and paler, obviously dying of love for the princess. This is the stuff of romantic fantasy, indeed.

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ROMANTICISM AND THE MODERN WORLD

Perhaps most important for us, the Romantics were the start of the modern western worldview, which sees people as free individuals seeking fulfillment through democratic processes, rather than as bound members of a traditional, authoritarian community. The sixties hippies seeking peace and happiness; the eighties yuppies doing their own thing; the tearing down of the Berlin Wall in the name of freedom: all are direct descendents of the Romantics, tearing loose from the tight social fabric of the community and seeking happiness and fulfillment at a personal level.

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