

19th Century Educational, Cultural  
and Intellectual Developments in Europe:

# *The Arts*

History Essay  
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## 19th Century Educational, Cultural and Intellectual Developments in Europe:

### The Arts

The clearest main trends in arts during the 19<sup>th</sup> century were romanticism and as a reaction to it, realism. In this essay I will go through the main trends in nineteenth century arts, especially the novel, taking my examples mainly from England.

The roots of romanticism lay in the European upheavals that begun from the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars and continued after the Congress of Vienna as dissatisfaction and restlessness. The re-assessing of values that woke up along these events reached all branches of intellectual life was named Romanticism.

Though Neo-classicism (which was a eighteenth and nineteenth century French art style and movement that originated as a reaction to the Baroque and wanted to renew the ideals of ancient Greek and Roman art) was philosophically opposed to Romanticism (which was basically a reaction against Neo-classicism with its individualistic, beautiful, exotic and emotional ideas), they were the dominant European styles for generations and many artists were affected to a greater or lesser degree by both. Despite of this, Neo-classicism basically died out in the 1880s, when the ideas about courage, sacrifice and love of country were discarded by other ideas, mainly those of realism.

Britain was the first country where romanticism flowered fully in poetry and prose. The greatest British romantic writers, Wordsworth and Coleridge were both poets. William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was extremely influenced by the philosophy of Rousseau and the spirit of the early French Revolution. In 1798 Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772 - 1834) published their *Lyrical Ballads*, one of the most influential literary works in the history of English language. Disobedient to classical rules, Wordsworth and Coleridge abandoned baroque poetic conventions for the language of ordinary speech, at the same time awarding simple subjects with the loftiest majesty. This double rejection of classical practice was at first ignored and then harshly criticised, but by 1830 Wordsworth had triumphed.

Wordsworth thought that in poetry the topic was not the most important thing, but the sympathetic understanding and the poetic realisation of it. He mainly described nature, but also simple and uneducated people, including peasants but also children. Through his optimistic and emotional poems, Wordsworth represents the most venerable features of the British ideal of living and as such he is still referred to as one of the greatest poets of his country.

Whereas Wordsworth wanted to make usual unusual, Coleridge aimed at making unusual plausible. He was a more romantic, dreaming and a philosophising person by nature and was fond of distant (often also oriental, as in *Kubla Khan*) and imaginative topics. Sadly opium became fatal for Coleridge in 1834.

The first notable female classic in English literature is Jane Austen (1775-1817), a wise and sharp-eyed observer of reality and a realist among the romanticists. The only feature that made her a romanticist was her similarity to Wordsworth: the description of family life and simple subjects. The representatives of wealthy middle class, clergy and lower nobility of Southern England were those who Austen knew properly and who she described in her novels. She is especially known as a portrayer of different young women, who are foolish, capricious, witty and passionate. Austen's best-known novels are *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*.

When the early British romanticism had been rather domestic, in Lord Byron's (1788-1824) poetry it changed rebellious, wild and colourful. His defiant, suspicious and ironic style of writing had its origins in the French Revolution. When Europe after the wars was chained into the 'Holy Alliance', Byron had risen as a defender of freedom and oppressed people. Although, his poetry was not only criticism of the conditions but it was also due to his own, grim attitude. Byron's heroes were fateful and actually each of them portrayed the author himself. The most notable of his works is *Don Juan*.

In England the most notable romantic painters were Joseph M.W. Turner (1775-1851) and John Constable (1776-1837). Both were fond of nature, but portrayed it in rather different ways. Turner described nature's power and terror, such as wild storms, whereas Constable depicted Wordsworthian landscapes of rural England in which human beings were in harmony with their environment. Obvious successors of romantic visual arts include among others the Symbolists. Also Impressionism, and through it almost all of 20th century art, is also firmly rooted in the Romantic tradition.

In music romanticism realised most fully and permanently its aims of free expression and emotional intensity. Romantic composers altered the small classical orchestra, tripling its size by adding wind instruments, percussion and more brass and strings. The most significant compositions were Chopin's *Revolutionary Etude*, Beethoven's *Third Symphony* and Liszt's compositions for the piano.

Queen Victoria came to power in 1837. The individualism and social radicalism stepped aside during Victorian age and the commonplace, Christian middle-class view of life came about. Narrow-mindedness and superficiality followed. Whereas poetry had been the genre of romanticism, the novel was more important for Victorian age realism, more precisely said the middle-class realistic novel. Also the findings of scientific revolution (among them *The Origin of the Species* by Charles Darwin, also British) had much to do with realist ideas. Urbanisation in turn affected the description of family life and gender roles.

No other British novelist has received greater success than Charles Dickens (1812-1870). Dickens's works are characterised by attacks on social evils, injustice, and hypocrisy. He had also experienced in his youth oppression, when he was forced to end school in early youth and work in a factory. Dickens's career as a writer of fiction started in 1833 when his short stories

and essays to appeared in periodical. His *Skeetches by Boz* and *The Pickwick Papers* were published in 1836. Dickens's good, bad, and comic characters have fascinated generations of readers. Among the long list of Dickens's world-famous works are *Oliver Twist* (1837-9), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9), *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *David Copperfield* (1849-50), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and *Great Expectations* (1860-1).

In Victorian age abundant prose, female authors played a remarkable part. The most remarkable of them were probably the Brontë sisters; Charlotte (1816-55), Emily (1818-48) and Anne (1820-49). In their works they described love more truthfully that was common in Victorian age England. In the past 40 years Charlotte Brontë's reputation has risen rapidly, and feminist criticism has done much to show that she was speaking up for oppressed women of every age. The most famous works of the sisters are *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily and *Agnes Grey* by Anne.

Lord Alfred Tennyson is the English author often regarded as the chief representative of the Victorian age in poetry. Tennyson's works were melancholic, and reflected the moral and intellectual values of his time, which made them especially vulnerable for later critic. His poetry portrays well the new gentleman-ideal associated with the greatness of the British Empire, and is at times also rather patriotic and idyllic. His best-known collection of poems is probably the epic-lyric *Maud* (1855) including the poem *The Charge of the Light Brigade*.

The task of the naturalists was to show the other side to the matter, the dark side of the Victorian age society. The actual naturalism never came to England, though already in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century wholly another type of novels were written than in the 'good old' Dickens days and also in poetry winds of change were blowing.

In 1891 Oscar Wilde's only novel *Picture of Dorian Gray* appeared. A tale of horror, it depicts the corruption of a beautiful young man pursuing an ideal of sensual indulgence and moral indifference; although he himself remains young and handsome, his portrait becomes ugly, reflecting his degeneration.

Oscar Wilde is most famous for his sophisticated, brilliantly witty plays. *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and his masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) are the best known of them, though they all were extremely clever and filled with pithy epigrams and paradoxes. Wilde explained away their lack of depth by saying that he put his genius into his life and only his talent into his novels.

The Victorian style of heavily ornamented interiors displaying many pieces of furniture, collections of small ornamental objects and surfaces covered with fringed cloths prevailed in middle class homes in England during the second half of the 19th century. Techniques of mass production promoted the use of reproductions in many different styles. William Morris, the British poet, artist and architect rejected this luxury in favour of simplicity, good craftsmanship and good design during 1850s. The Arts & Crafts Movement was born. To the supporters of Arts & Crafts, the Industrial Revolution separated humans from their own creativity and

individualism; the worker was a small fraction in the wheel of progress, living in an environment of machine-made goods, based more on flamboyance than function. These supporters sought to re-establish the ties between beautiful work and the worker, returning to honesty in design not to be found in mass-produced items. Architecture, furniture, and the decorative arts became the focus of the movement.

Also realism as such flourished in visual arts between 1830 and 1870. As in literature, realism was an art movement and style in which artists discarded the formulas of Neo-classicism and the theatrical drama of Romanticism to paint familiar scenes and events as they actually looked. Typically it involved some sort of socio-political or moral message, in the portrayal of ugly or commonplace subjects. Gustave Courbet, Jean-Francois Millet and Honore Daumier are examples of realist painters.

Impressionism was a 19th century art movement that marked a momentous break from tradition in European painting. The Impressionists incorporated new scientific research into the physics of colour to achieve a more exact representation of colour and tone.

The sudden change in the look of these paintings was brought about by a change in methods: applying paint in small touches of pure colour rather than broader strokes, and painting outdoors to catch a particular fleeting impression of colour and light. The result was to emphasise the artist's perception of the subject matter as much as the subject itself.

Impressionist art is a style in which the artist captures the image of an object as someone would see it if they just caught a glimpse of it. They paint the pictures with a lot of colour and most of their pictures are outdoor scenes. Their pictures are very bright and vibrant. The artists like to capture their images without detail but with bold colours. Some of the greatest impressionist artists were among others Camille Pissarro and Claude Monet. Monet probably as the most famous impressionist was interested especially in portraying the plants in his garden, but also subtle changes in the atmosphere.

Symbolism began as a reaction to the literal representation of subjects preferring to create more suggestive and evocative works. It had its roots in literature with poets such as Baudelaire believing ideas and emotions could be conveyed not only through the meaning of words but also in their sound and rhythm.

The styles of the Symbolist painters varied considerably, but they shared many of the same themes particularly a fascination with the mystical and the visionary. The erotic, the perverse, death and shamelessness were also regular interests for the Symbolists. The leading figures of the movement included the two French men, Odilon Redon and Paul Gauguin, but Symbolism was not limited to France with other practitioners including the Norwegian Edvard Munch, the Austrian Gustav Klimt and the British Aubrey Beardsley.