

The Romantic Period (1776-1837)

The historical context

In 1776 America declares her independence from England and in 1789 the French Revolution breaks out. England is involved in many wars, before in America, then against France and Napoleon. The Duke of Wellington defeated the French emperor in the Battle of Waterloo (1815). Meanwhile English industry developed and the richness earned by middle-class people created contrasts between masters and workers. The workers organised in associations called "Ludite Riots". They asked better work conditions but also political changes. In fact they were attacked in the Peterloo Massacre (1819).

But then, in 1832, we have the First Reform Act which extended the right of vote (but only to middle-class people).

England expanded her commercial empire to find new markets since she had lost the American colonies.

The social context

Some people were in favour of the French Revolution (for example Tom Paine), some others opposed to it (like Edmund Burke). These two different visions influenced English political life (and also the social life).

From the economical point of view we have many revolutions:

- the Industrial one characterized by the passage from the domestic system to the one of factories. This revolution was helped by the population growth. Many factory towns developed;
- the Transport one helped to move goods and industrial products on the English territory (for example through railways);
- the Agricultural one with the introduction of enclosures.

Workers organised in the "Trade-Union Movement" to preserve their rights or get new ones for better work conditions.

The cultural context

From the cultural point of view the eighteenth century is dominated by Romanticism, which was born in Germany and spread in England and France.

The French Revolution showed the failure of Enlightenment. Reason can't understand everything. Feelings also lead men in life. The main ideas of the new culture are:

- the stress on imagination and individual experience;
- the rejection of neo-classical models and rules;
- the stress on nature as a living organic structure;

- a distinctive style which used imagery, symbolism and myth.

Human imagination can be hit by two different kinds of beauty: the beautiful (regular and harmonious things) and the sublime (gloomy things that arouse terror).

The idea of sublime, which consists on the combination that also a negative thing arouse strong emotions, was introduced by Burke.

The passion for the negative is called "Gothic rogue".

The story of English

The Industrial Revolution caused shift of population on this lead to the development of a standard English (identified with the language spoken in London).

Also Romantic writers and poets refused "poetic diction" and used the vocabulary of "common speech".

Since many authors were Scottish and wrote in Scots, we have a Scottish revival.

Finally, Irish and English interbred since there had been the Act of Union in 1803 and English administrators dominated Ireland. The local Gaelic went into a steady decline.

The story of British art

The principle of sublime dominated also art: strong emotions arousing strong feelings are represented in the pictures of William Blake and John Heinrich Fuseli.

Some other artists, like Turner, give a lot of importance to landscapes.

Large landscapes show the power of nature as a living organic structure.

In architecture a mixture of Indian and Chinese styles appears in the Royal Palace.

him at Brighton.