Historical Context

**THE ROMANTIC PERIOD**

1798 - 1832
The American Revolution

1776–1783: American Colonies revolt, defeat Britain, gain independence

How American Revolution affected Britain:

- Psychological blow
- Severe economic problems—war debts, no more revenue from American colonies
- Government by personal power of king comes to an end
The French Revolution

1789: storming of the Bastille
1792: “September massacre”
1793: Louis XVI beheaded

The French Revolution at inspired liberals & scared conservatives in England later turned violent, ended in dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte eventually led to conservative clamp-down in England
The Era of Napoleon

Napoleon Bonaparte—ruthless, tyrannical dictator of France; tried to take over Europe

1803–1815
England at war with France

1815, Waterloo, Belgium
England and allies send Napoleon’s army back to France
The Industrial Revolution

Beginning in England

- Production moves from homes to factories
- Factories located in cities
- Communal land taken over by rich owners
- People move to cities looking for work
- City populations swell
- Living conditions very poor
The Industrial Revolution

Policy of Laissez Faire

• *laissez faire*—“let (people) do (as they please)”
• let business owners operate without government interference

The Result:

• Rich grew richer while poor suffered more
• Children forced to do hard labor
Rise of English Romanticism: Reaction Against Rationalism

• cities filled with poor living conditions and disease
• artistic value placed on nature and exotic settings
• characteristic Romantic journey to the countryside, away from city

Romantic Escapism

• valued emotion and intuition over reason
• beauty in exotic locales and supernatural events
• poetry considered highest expression of imagination
The Romantic Movement

The Romantics

- dedicated to social change
- believed in individual liberty
- valued imagination
- thought of nature as transformative
- emphasized personal experience and emotions
The Romantic Movement

Romanticism—Three Useful Meanings

A Child’s Sense of Wonder
Fascination with innocence, youth, and the child’s fresh way of perceiving the world

Social Idealism
Questioning authority and tradition in order to imagine happier, fairer, healthier ways to live

Adaptation to Change
Becoming more aware of change and finding ways to accept it and adapt to it
The Romantic Movement

**Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems**

- collaboration of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth
- published 1798

“A new kind of poetry”:

- commonplace subjects; simple language
- immediacy, spontaneity, emotion, self-revelation
- celebrates bond between nature and the human mind
The Lure of the Gothic

Horror tales and Gothic architecture were popular in the Romantic period.

Gothic works expressed the dark side of human passions in the way that Romantic works expressed the ecstatic, melancholic, or harmonious effects of human passions.

Gothic works were forerunners of modern science fiction & fantasy.
Romanticism Develops

- Romantic artists, philosophers, and writers saw the limitations of reason.
- Truth resided in the expression of emotion, not in rational thought or logic.
- Reason & logic could not bring humans to a higher understanding of the universe.
- They celebrated the glories of the individual spirit, the emotions, and the imagination as basic elements of human nature.
- Romantic writing was the “overflow of emotion recollected in tranquility” according to William Wordsworth, a British Romantic poet.
Rationalism/Classicism

- Logic dominates nature & human nature; Objectivity
- Scientific curiosity; universe governed by fixed, unchanging laws
- Reason over imagination
- Organizations over individual
- Upholds tradition; resists change
- Rational thought: “I think; therefore, I am.”

Romanticism

- Emphasis on emotions; Subjectivity
- Intuition (inner perception of truth)
- Imagination
- Self-reliant individual, free of group pressure
- Change, progress, spiritual growth, reforms
- “Overflow of emotion.”
Romantic Themes & Motifs

- Idealized common man, uncorrupted by civilization
- Picturesque past
- Interest in remote places
- Concern with mystery; morbid, melancholy
- Individualism
- Humanitarianism

Romantic Heroes

- Frontier life idealized in novels
- Typical Romantic hero: youthful, innocent, intuitive, close to nature, passionate, expressive
- Cooper’s Natty Bumppo is the first American heroic figure
- Hero is usually alone against society