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## PRECURSORS OF ROMANTICISM: AN ASSESSMENT OF REVIVAL OF LEARNING

**Mr. Arif Mahammad Chaprasi**

Research Scholar (Ph. D), Department of English  
Seacom Skills University, Shanti Niketan  
West Bengal, India

### Abstract

“Return to nature” played a very striking part in the revival of Romanticism in England. Suffocated with the cramped and crowded city atmosphere, people longed for the freshness and newness of Nature. They wanted to come-back to the free and invigorating life of the world of leaves and flowers. Even when Pope was at the summit of his power and prosperity there were poets, like Thomas Parnell and Lady Winchelsea, who showed in their poetry a genuine sense for natural beauty and charms of rural life. However, it was in *The Seasons* (1730) of Thomson that nature came into her own for the first time. The seed sown by Thomson grew and flourished in the poetry of such poets as Gray, Goldsmith, Collins, Burns, Cowper, Crabbe and Blake. They are the most representatives of the pre-Romanticists, for with them tradition and the future are closely intermingled, and they show a genuine feeling for nature and for the simple humanity living in her lap. The paper intends to study the precursors of the Romantic revival and its relevance.

**Keywords:** Precursors of Romanticism, Nature, Blake, Goldsmith, Cowper, Thomson.

### Introduction

English romanticism was by and large a remarkable improvement of imaginative exhilaration. It was presaged by a period of vehement literary activity which showed some distinctively indispensable qualitative changes, in the treatment of content and expression of style. The poets in whom these changes became evident have been duly termed as the pre-romantic poets. The pre-romantic poets rebelled against the classical tradition of set and formal rules. They turned towards nature and ingenuousness of rural life. Some of them became increasingly interested in the remote past and medieval tales and ballads. [some others however, looked forward to the distant and radiant future.] They also became inquisitive in human nature in terms of the brotherhood of men and in the sensuous elements of love and adventure.

It may be noted that in the place of rigor consistency and discipline of Augustan school of poetry, the pre-romantic poets were invigorated a deep sense of marvel and mystery of life. They substituted the poetry of the intellect by that of passion and imagination. In place of the conventional diction and the classic couplets, they resuscitated earlier verse forms, such as the Spenserian stanzas and the odes. They in fact endeavoured to attain a simplification of language and diction. The pre-romantic poets sought to adopt new subjects, new forms and new moods or feelings and expressions.

The individualistic spirit of the Romantic precursors finds its best expression in the romantic treatment of nature. The natural description of Thomson, Collins, and Cowper or of Blake and Burns, was fresh, unaffected and unsophisticated. The sentiment of nature which Collins so charmingly conveys is expressed by Blake with a subtler and mystical magic. The poetry of Burns brings us into an intimate and living contact with the natural world to which there is no parallel in the literature of 18th century. The poetry of Burns suggests the unsuspected world of romance that may lie hidden even in the superstition of the country side. In another diction the mystical fancy of Blake revealed in the romantic realms of which he alone was the imaginative creator. The poets of this period who are generally regarded the precursors or forerunners of Romanticism are Cowper and Crabbe, Thomson and Collins, Gray and Goldsmith, Chesterton and Macpherson and Burns and Blake.

William Cowper’s (1731-1800) romanticism consists in his direct and realistic look-out of life. An introspective and realistic poet, Cowper dealt with romantic themes largely in the area off religion and humanitarianism. But the most romantic quality of Cowper’s poetry lies in the tendencies to become confessional. No poet before the romantics to become confessional. No poet before the romantics so purposely disclosed himself in his writings as Cowper did. *Olney Hymns* (1779), his first anthology of songs, gives utterance to the poet’s deepest religious faith and devotion. *Cowper Hymns*”, his first anthology of songs, give utterance to the poet’s deepest religious faith and devotion. Cowper revealed himself as a sincere and authentic poet of nature in his chef d’oeuvre *The Task* (1785). In addition to his religious spirit and his performance to the poetical treatment of nature, it is altogether natural that his poetry shows his association with the emotional temper of his age. Cowper’s romanticism is seen in his detestation of large town and delight in the beauty of rustic life.



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Classical in form, George Crabbe (1754-1832) was the most realistic of English poets. Crabbe's fame as a poet was by *The Village* (1783), a poem in which he describes the life and scenery of an obscure fishing hamlet on the coast of Suffolk. He had an extraordinary gift not only of relating nature especially in its gloomier aspects but also of depicting the wretched and sordid life of the poor. Crabbe was as fascinated as the romantics with the strange aberrations and peculiarities of man. His notable writings were *The Library* (1781), *The Borough* (1810), and *Tales* (1812) by which he became famous.

James Thomson (1700-48) who was the earliest precursor of romanticism expressed an earnest love and romantic treatment of nature. He was almost emotional and goopy in his treatment of man. His poem, *The Seasons* (1730) is an example of the earliest blank verse which dissents the classical ideals of 18th century poetry through the truthful treatment of rural beauties. He also composed *Liberty* (1735-1736), an extensive poem in blank verse. In the last year of his life, he published *The Castle of Indolence*, written in Spenserian stanzas.

William Collins (1721-59), was a lyricist of sweet music and romantic love of nature was an influential forerunner of English romanticism. His chef d'oeuvre *Odes* (1746), the invogue superstitions, is a tremendous illustration of romantic love for the mysterious, supernatural, the legendary and the fanciful. Collins' *Ode to the Evening* (unrhymed verse) displays his romantic treatment of nature and by his *Ode to Liberty* he acquires at least an indirect association with the emerging democratic guts. His *Persian Eclogues* (1742) are in the conventional style of Pope, and though they profess to deal with Persian scenes and characters the oriental setting shows no special information or inspiration, indeed.

While reflecting some characteristics of classical school, Thomas Gray (1716-1771) is also an important precursor of Romantic Movement. The love of nature which permeates most of his poetry is clearly evident in his *Ode on Spring* and *Ode on a distant prospect of Eton College* (1747). The romantic temper of Gray is best illustrated by his *Pindaric Odes* (1757), *The Progress of Poesy* and *The Bard* which are significant, so they show romantic interest in older literature and a romantic love of wild scenery and romantic fervour of exalted imagination. His best work is the *Elegy Written in Country Church Yard* (1751), where he shows his love of nature, depth of feeling and sympathy with common man.

The conflict between the classical and romantic tendencies and the final triumph of romanticism is represented in the most versatile works of Gray's contemporaries, Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774). He may be called a romantic in the sense that he combined vivid imagination with a fine sense of beauty, delicate and tender sentiment with an exquisite gift of humour. His two representative poems, *The Traveller* (1764) and *The Deserted Village* (1770), though classical in style and didactic in intention, revealed his romantic feelings as a genuine lover of nature having sympathy with the poor and the humble and the democratic spirit of the time.

The poetry of Robert Burns (1759-96) is broader, fuller richer and it appeals most strongly to the general human interest. It is this human quality that accounts for his universal popularity. He anticipated the tendencies that made the onward current of English life and literature interesting and attractive. However, Burns was a poet of nature in the fullest sense. The natural forms of his native Scotland, its hills and vales, its fields and streams and birds reflect in mind. His sole poetical work of any magnitude is his volume of *Poems* (1786), which he edited five times during his life time. At various times he availed to *The Scots Musical Museum* and to Thomson's *Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs*.

William Blake (1757-1827) was invested with new intuition and sense of mystics with which English literature at the close of 18th century was filled. With his absolute sincerity and mystic vision, Blake sought to reveal the treasure of a spiritual world which lay secret in his soul. Blessed as he was with his prophetic vision and inspiration, he seemed to be a solitary poet who ploughed a lonely furrow. Blake's first publication was *Poetical Sketches* (1783), a series of imitative poems. His masterpiece *Songs of Innocence* (1789), short lyric embodying Blake's view of the original state of human society, symbolized the joy and happiness of children. *The Book of Thel* (1790), *The French Revolution* (1791), *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), *America* (1793) and *Europe* (1794) were his significant writings. In 1794 he published *Songs of Experience* which was his last significant work as a lyric poet. However, Blake may be said to have reached the summit of romance.

It is evident that, the pre-romantic poets actually ushered in a new age in which there was the full flowering of the romantic temper and genius. But the period of the precursors of Romanticism was not to witness the high tide of imaginative awareness and individualistic movement which was to create the noblest body of English literature. The magnificent manifestation of the powers of imagination and insight was to blossom in the early years of 19th century. However, the pre-romantic age which illustrates the growth of individualism and imagination manifested itself in the direction of the growing love of nature, of an eloquent expression of



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emotion, of a larger and deeper interest in common man, of a wider reverence for religion and wistful yearning for the past and the unquenchable quest for the future and ideal.

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