

## AN OVERVIEW OF MAJOR LITERARY TRENDS

### UNE PRÉSENTATION GÉNÉRALE DES PLUS IMPORTANTS COURANTS LITTÉRAIRES

### O PREZENTARE GENERALĂ A CELOR MAI IMPORTANTE CURENTE LITERARE

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#### **Abstract**

*This paper presents some of the most important aspects related to three major artistic movements: Renaissance, The Enlightenment and Romanticism. There are many differences between them but one common theme was that of rebellion which actually led to major intellectual shifts. It all started with the Renaissance characterized by an explosion of learning due to the discovery of the less rudimentary printing press. But later on, a particular interest in scientific facts and data supported the Enlightenment ideals. Writers began to experiment with new ideas, showing a special interest in the individual which represented actually the beginning of Romanticism. It took place at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and it was a reaction against the previous artistic values. People began to believe in the power of beauty and emotions and their prevalence over thought and reason.*

#### **Résumé**

*Cet article présent quelques-uns des plus importants aspects liés aux trois courants littéraires majeurs: la Renaissance, l'Éluminisme et le Romantisme. Entre ceux-ci existent plusieurs différences, mais une thématique commune a été celle de la rébellion qui en fait a conduit à des modifications significatives de nature intellectuelle. Tout a commencé avec la Renaissance, caractérisée par une soif et un désir d'apprentissage suite à la découverte d'un mode moins rudimentaire d'imprimer. Mais ultérieurement, un intérêt à part pour les faits et les données scientifiques a donné naissance aux idéaux illuministes. Les écrivains ont commencé à expérimenter des idées nouvelles, étant axes principalement sur l'individu et sur le rôle spécial que celui-ci l'a occupé dans la sphère d'intérêt des romantiques. Ce courant s'est remarqué à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle et a représenté une réaction contre les valeurs artistiques antérieures. Les gens ont commencé à croire au pouvoir de la beauté et des émotions et à la victoire de celles-ci contre la pensée et la raison.*

#### **Rezumat**

*Această lucrare prezintă câteva dintre cele mai importante aspecte legate de trei curente literare majore: Renașterea, Iluminismul și Romanticismul. Există multe diferențe între acestea dar o tematică comună a fost cea a rebeliunii care de fapt a condus la modificări semnificative de natură intelectuală. Totul a început cu Renașterea, caracterizată printr-o sete și dorință de învățare ca urmare a descoperirii unui mod mai puțin rudimentar de tipar. Dar ulterior, un interes aparte în ceea ce privește faptele și datele științifice a dat naștere idealurilor Iluministe. Scriitorii au început să experimenteze cu noi idei, fiind axați cu precădere pe individ și pe locul special pe care acesta l-*

*a ocupat în sfera de interes a Romanticilor. Acest curent s-a remarcat la sfârșitul secolului XVIII și a reprezentat o reacție împotriva valorilor artistice anterioare. Oamenii au început să creadă în puterea frumuseții și a emoțiilor și în victoria acestora asupra gândirii și rațiunii.*

**Keywords:** *literature, trends, Renaissance, The Enlightenment, Romanticism*

**Mots-clés:** *littérature, courant littéraire, Renaissance, Illuminisme, Romantisme*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *literatură, curent literar, Renașterea, Iluminismul, Romantismul*

## **Introduction**

Literary movements represent ways of dividing literature, music or other artistic fields into categories of similar aesthetic features. They are analyzed in terms of style or literary genre giving birth to controversial ideas or principles. The first literary trend that emerged in the artistic history was Renaissance.

### **Renaissance – a fervent period of rebirth**

It was characterized by a genuine belief that humanity was tending to reach a perfect existence. The etymology of the word Renaissance has a French origin coming from the words *re-*, which means “back” or “again”, and *naissance* which means “birth”. Therefore it was a period of rebirth when humanity made a step forward, when the aristocratic landowners lost their dominance over the lower classes. It influenced the entire world as intellectuals rediscovered new perspectives of regarding life, traditions, artistic creation. Everyone showed optimism and believed in numerous ways of improving their lives. People wanted to forget about the Dark Ages and about the horrors of that epoch. The most important characteristics of the European Renaissance which spanned across three centuries were the rise of nationalism and democracy and the development of trade and commerce among middle class representatives. As people were more and more eager to travel and to see the world new trades and ideas were shaped and they were even taken over by other countries. Fashion in Italy for example, became popular in France or Great Britain. Tourism flourished and as a consequence, the young travelers would bring back to their countries new perspectives of regarding literature, culture and even politics. Before the Renaissance, the importance of the English language was underestimated, lacking any sort of refinement.

The most important innovation of this era was the printing press which was invented by Johannes Gutenberg in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Even if the history of printing with rudimentary means begins long before Gutenberg’s time, his great innovation enabled the mass production of books, changing thus the world of arts, making possible the dissemination of ideas all around Europe. During the same period of time, Protestant Reformation emerged. Because of the corruption observed within the walls of the Catholic Church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, people like Martin Luther, John Calvin and Erasmus decided to do something to put an end to it. Their initiative triggered a split in the church into Catholics and Protestants. Gutenberg’s printing press provided Martin Luther with the opportunity of translating the Bible into German and printing it in many copies to spread the message all over the world. The innovation above mentioned gave access to literature to all social classes. Prior to Gutenberg’s innovation oral tradition prevailed, as one person used to read a story aloud to a group of people. Afterwards, the printed material provided the opportunity for silent reading. This novelty actually became the symbolic image of the Renaissance period.

Even though the Italian Renaissance might seem more familiar, the rebirth of passion and creativity had a great influence on Renaissance England. Some of the most remarkable works of literature were produced in England in the years ranging from 1500 to 1660. This country had become a commercial power and therefore the literature became bold and trend-setting, with a special focus on drama and poetry. In an attempt to reveal beauty and truth in words, the writers of

the period often used music to accompany their verses. They also took into consideration the English court life and the opinions of noblemen. Poets possessed a certain wit that was desirable at the court but also dangerous. Kings and queens enjoyed watching and listening to verbal duels in which poets employed double meanings to protect their interests. The most representative in this respect used to be William Shakespeare, whose verse was varied and profound. His drama was focused on Greco-Roman stories and tragic tales of unrequited love. The ability to easily shift between tragedy and drama, to create characters that use complex words gave Shakespeare the opportunity to turn English into an exquisite and refined language, into something it had never been. However there was much controversy around the life and work of Shakespeare due to the difficulties in ascribing authorship as at that time copyright did not exist. If in the beginning, theatre used to be just a simple village festival, during the Renaissance period it became a cultural institution, still despised by some. Theatres brought along noise, crowds, pubs and brothels and thus they became a place for lazy people for children and people who would leave their schools or jobs just to see the plays. Under such circumstances, the Puritans, who were members of the English Protestants, expressed their disdain and campaigned against these places. They used to have censorious moral beliefs and considered that the only important thing was to work hard. In their view pleasure was something unnecessary and wrong. Another problem artists had to face was the lack of remuneration. They wanted to earn a living out of their skills and the only possible way to do this was by using the system of patronage. Rich people, lovers of art, used to spend huge amounts of money to satisfy their taste for finer things, taste that actually ensured a so-called *wage* for the artists.

In order to earn more, Renaissance artists used to dedicate their works to their patrons in order to convince them to be more generous. However, most of the artists used to have their own jobs, while writing verse, painting or other artistic skills remained at the stage of hobbies. But the optimism that characterized this period was coming to an end. By the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance was about to be replaced by other ideals and trends. The first factor that triggered such events was the rise of Puritanism. On the other hand, Queen Elizabeth's impossibility of producing an heir set the stage for political uncertainty and led to the decline of the arts.

#### *Shakespeare – a world of appearances*

The most influential writer of English literature, Shakespeare quickly acquired success both as a poet as well as a playwright and critic. He was very much appreciated by both Elizabeth I and James I and this brought him fame and fortune. After his death in 1616, his reputation grew as more and more of his works began to be published. The legacy of 37 plays and 154 sonnets profoundly affected the literature and culture of the centuries to come. One of the most well-known is *Romeo and Juliet*, story taken over from another writer but expressed with such a uniqueness and originality that it had become the most famous love story of all times. It is based on passion and romantic love at first sight between Romeo and Juliet. Love is displayed as such a powerful feeling that it defies all the other values and social conventions. Sometimes it is depicted as a negative emotion that turns the individuals against themselves while other times it is some sort of magic that makes people do unimaginable things. Love represents chaos and a mixture of beauty, violence and death that leads to the tragic conclusion.

Another masterpiece of the English literature is *Hamlet*. Shakespeare borrowed the idea from the story of a Danish prince whose uncle does atrocious things. He kills the prince's father and marries his mother only to get the opportunity to claim the throne. However, Shakespeare has a different approach, depicting Hamlet as a philosophically minded prince. He favours ambiguities and moral uncertainty, offers unreliable knowledge and deceiving ideas to such an extent that in the end the reader is still confused: reality is blurred and he does not know whether justice has been made. This story reflects the fundamental themes and motifs debated by Renaissance. As mentioned above, Renaissance was most widely spread in Italy focusing on the Greek and Latin texts that had been lost and rediscovered. During this epoch scholars put a great emphasis on the idea that all

human virtues, experience and understanding should be studied and developed. One of Hamlet's speeches reveals one of the Renaissance ideals, that of cultivating reason in order to get a better understanding of the surrounding world. Along with the spread of Renaissance, new ideas emerged related to the limitations of human understanding. The focus remained on the study of human experiences but some writers considered that such experiences were actually appearances that human beings would never be able to cross and to see what lies beyond them. And this is the approach that characterizes Shakespeare's play. The main character has a common dilemma, impossible to sort out; he constantly asks questions about supernatural facts emphasizing thus the challenge of knowing the truth about other people.

### **The Age of Enlightenment – science and reason versus religion and superstition**

It was also called the Age of Reason that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Science was the word that best characterized the epoch. Scholars of the time considered that the advances of science and industry were paving the way for the progress of humanity. The chances for a better life were constantly improving as people used to travel more and more and to produce more goods for less money. The Church however, was considered a symbol of regress, as its beliefs were preventing or hindering development. Therefore, many people began to reject religion and to practice a more personal kind of faith. *Criticism* and *argumentation* became the key words that would support and reflect the new modes of conversation. The two most representative figures of the Enlightenment were Francis Bacon, an expert in the field of ideas and language and Isaac Newton, a scientist who focused on observation and testing in order to support his ideas. One of the fathers of physics as he is known nowadays, Newton observed that the universe is governed by a set of unchanging laws, triggering with such assertions the anger of the Church. The Enlightenment ideas were emphasizing freedom and egalitarianism, considering that all people deserved fair treatment. Individuals were urged to debate, argument and discuss issues as a sign of progress. It was a period when humanity had the opportunity to develop an unfulfilled potential. The previous literary trend discussed in this paper was considered to be the seed, when ideas emerged, while the latter one was said to be the blossom, or the achievement of such ideas.

The steady progress of industrialization turned coffee shops into gathering places for discussing literature or other heated matters of actuality. Even if egalitarianism was the buzz word of the day, middle class men still owned the western world – women for example, as well as lower classes were not welcomed in such venues above-mentioned. The Industrial Revolution lowered the price of books and literature developed significantly towards the 18<sup>th</sup> century creating a more knowledgeable public, capable of entering in a political debate. Representative literary figures of the epoch were Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the latter one being the inventor of the autobiography. Due to their attempt to promote the Enlightenment philosophy which was criticizing the Church because of its intolerant views, both Rousseau and Voltaire's works were subject to much controversy. The most remarkable British writer of the period was Jonathan Swift. Even if the Enlightenment was a period characterized by a lack of literary success and productivity because of the great resonance Shakespeare's work has had along the centuries, Swift managed to establish himself as a classic of world literature. *Gulliver's Travels*, regarded by many as a book for children underwent a lot of controversy because each of the societies depicted represented metaphorical attacks of the 18<sup>th</sup> century British and European societies. He chose the allegory to reveal moral and political hidden meanings.

Enlightenment was different in Europe and in the American colonies because of the different political climate. Thomas Paine, a resonant name in the writings of the period, set forth his desire for the colonies to gain their independence from the British Crown. The most important principle of this trend was *No Taxation Without Representation*. This meant that even if the people in the British colonies were not represented in Parliament, they still had to be loyal to the king of England and pay taxes. The French Revolution represented a turning point in history as it put an end to the Enlightenment period. Although the progressive ideas of this period brought about significant

gains in all fields of life, many people considered that such principles were not practical. The society was not ready to deal with such an extended and literate public and it needed a longer period of time to find a solution to this problem, thus paving the way for the modern world.

*Gulliver's Travels – the insight of human consciousness*

One of the most important factors the author debates in this novel is whether physical power or morality should be in the limelight of social life. His character, Gulliver, first experiences a giant size in Lilliput which gives him the opportunity to feel superior to the short inhabitants of the country. Another display of force can be noticed when he visits Brobdingnag, the opposite realm of Lilliput. Here, he is harassed by the immense size of the people and animals around him. But power does not only refer to special physical abilities. It also means moral correctness. Religious, cultural or political debates trigger a sense of moral superiority. This novel might be considered a utopia as the writer explores ideal communities. This approach was first used by Plato in his Republic and later on by Thomas More in Utopia. But Swift's style is a bit different as he favours the group over the individual. Even if Lilliput cannot be regarded as a utopic place because of wickedness and conspiracies, the Lilliputians raise their children together as in a group. The Houyhnhnms on the other hand, have a utopic wisdom and simplicity; they do not have proper names because they are all equally good and their individualities are interchangeable. Despite visiting so many places, Gulliver cannot experience a feeling of belonging because he is different from all the societies, constantly alienated and ostracized.

This novel reflects a modern day problem: the alienation of the individual and the limits of human understanding. It is a satire aimed at self-centered characters, at all-knowledgeable persons. He considers that there is a limit for human understanding and they have to be able to live in a wise way without crossing such borders. Even though the Brobdingnagian king is rather ignorant about politics, his governing skills prove to bring prosperity. Swift claims that knowledge is useful to some extent because high aspirations and ambitions might interfere with the individual's happiness. He does not give much importance to feelings, passions and dreams, displaying an empty attitude. Swift sums up by saying that too much self-knowledge and a deep understanding of one's own individuality might prevent the person from living a happy life.

**Romanticism – a challenge to rational ideals**

This trend emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was characterized by a great variety of style, theme confusion and disagreement over its defining principles. Romanticism was first observed in England in poetry while in America, in the novel. The most important concept set forth by this movement was a focus on the individual rather than on society. The Romantic writers proved to be fascinated by human consciousness, melancholy and imagination. The power of reason so much praised during the Enlightenment, was superseded by feelings and emotions. Many English Romantic poets were interested in mythology and tales such as those of King Arthur, in country life and fantastic settings. Two of the most representative minds of this period were poets William Blake and William Wordsworth. Blake's creative spirit was often misunderstood because of the Biblical stories he used as source material. But still, his genius is still acknowledged today due to his work *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. A more prominent voice was the second writer, whose *Lyrical Ballads* marked the beginning of the Romantic Movement in England. He focused on nature and on the relationship between living things and still nature. His ballads were easy to read and understand and therefore had a great commercial success but this did not prevent them from displaying a profound effect on an entire generation.

In America, the political problems had a great influence on the development of a darker aesthetic and on individualist religious traditions. Many classic American writers who have been studied and analyzed a lot along the centuries were unknown in their times. Such examples are Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville. The latter one died penniless, being acknowledged as a brilliant writer only after his death. He was a master of symbols and hidden meanings related to mythology, history or religion. Being an educated person, he wrote *Moby Dick*, a novel that goes

very deep into whaling and into the darkness of supernatural forces. On the background of a revenge tale he depicts human nature and meditation.

America also had a remarkable Romantic representative in the field of poetry, that is Walt Whitman. His poetic vision best reflected by *Leaves of Grass*, reveals a spirit of democracy, inclusion and optimism. He even coined new words and situated himself in contradiction with Edgar Allen Poe's literary output. Poe preferred to explore both in his poems and short stories, the strange and grotesque elements of human nature. This led to his becoming a master of horror and the inventor of detective stories.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, another American Romantic, became widely known for his symbolist masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter*. He enjoyed giving way to interpretation, relaying on suggestion and imagination. Like his contemporary, Edgar Allen Poe, he created the character Pearl in order to reveal his special interest in the grotesque and supernatural forces. Appearances can be deceiving and nothing is at it looks like, because every object can have a double significance: a hidden and an apparent meaning. In his writings Hawthorne played with human consciousness, with pessimism, with the thin border between reality and fantasy and with the impossibility of understanding the world.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism began to fade away because the real problems of modern life required immediate solutions and immediate ways of expression. However, as scholars would say, this trend will live forever because the literary and inspirational sensibility it brought about cannot be forgotten.

To sum up, the major theme that prevails in all the three literary trends discussed in this paper is rebellion. It is a rebellion against past traditions, against old ways of thinking. There were significant differences in terms of reasons and approach, but each movement had a special impact on the development of social, cultural, historic or artistic life. Romanticism displayed a rebellion against the Enlightenment values; rationality was replaced by emotions. These literary movements are closely related as one could not exist without the other. It all began with the intellectual shifts that occurred during Renaissance, it continued with the scientific and romantic ideas emphasized further on, and the trend moved on triggering chain reactions.

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