Romanticism in Two Countries

A Comparison of its Effect on Literature, Culture and Politics in Iceland and England

Ritgerð til BA í Ensku

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Abstract
This thesis discusses Romanticism, a literary movement from the late eighteenth century that traces its origins to the French Revolution. Defining the Romantic movement has been a delicate subject for the many literary critics who have argued about its meaning. Romanticism took hold in different nations at different times, and thus it developed in various ways depending on the condition of the nation where it took place. Romanticism has always lacked an unequivocal universal meaning as it differed so significantly between each country. To approach this subject two countries, England and Iceland, are compared. At the time of Romanticism England was part of an Empire where the effect of the Industrial Revolution was on the rise, while Iceland was a nation of rural farmers living in difficult conditions under the Danish Crown. An analysis of the poetry written by each country’s greatest Romantic poets uncovers the differences between them. In England they focused more on their emotions, feelings, and inner self, while in Iceland they preferred an approach that had nature and independence for Iceland as the main themes of their poetry. This leads to the conclusion that the English poets were mostly introverted, while the Icelandic ones were extroverted. The result of this comparison is in line with what other literary critics have emphasized, that Romanticism cannot be viewed as a singular movement because each country developed its own unique strand of Romanticism.
## Contents

1. **Introduction** ..................................................................................................................... 1

2. **Background and Definitions of Romanticism** ................................................................. 2
   2.1. What is Romanticism? ............................................................................................................. 4

3. **Romanticism in England** .................................................................................................... 6

4. **Romanticism in Iceland** ..................................................................................................... 12
   4.1. Jónas Hallgrímsson - Iceland’s Greatest Romantic Poet ....................................................... 15

5. **Comparison of Romanticism in England and Iceland** ...................................................... 18

6. **Conclusion** ....................................................................................................................... 21

**Works cited** .......................................................................................................................... 23
1. Introduction

Literary movements throughout history have been many and varied. When it comes to literature, art, and culture, the Romantic period is of particular interest, as it brought about a certain awakening of consciousness concerning freedom and human rights in the western world. According to Bernbaum, the Romantic movement was one of the most powerful influences in literary history that formed our civilization. It affected how people thought and acted in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through theories such as nationalism, socialism, and realism. We must know the Romantics if we are to understand our cultural heritage (3).

“He who seeks to define Romanticism is entering a hazardous occupation which has claimed many victims (qtd. in Furst 1)” this warning was written by E. B. Burgum in an article he wrote about Romanticism in the year 1941 in the Kenyon Review. Many literary critics have argued about the concept of Romanticism, and have said that it is almost meaningless because it lacks definitive clarity. Romanticism was defined in various ways throughout the world and started at different times in many nations. Therefore, as the concept has been applied within multiple nations, each with its own theoretical definition, it lacks universal meaning as a literary movement (Benediktsson 222-224). That is why many scholars have emphasized the importance of exploring Romanticism from the viewpoint of a particular nation rather than applying the concept over multiple different nations (Pálsson 127).

However, despite the different interpretations of Romanticism, there are common themes in the poetic works of the period, namely: style, a focus on the imagination, the connection between the individual and nature, the importance of symbols, and the use of figurative language and myths, which are in complete opposition to the classical approach, which was the dominant literary movement before the advent of Romanticism in the eighteenth century (Benediktsson 222-224). Isaiah Berlin, the author of the book The Roots of Romanticism, is amongst those critics who believed that the concept had been applied too broadly, but was nevertheless of the opinion that the Romantic movement was pivotal in transforming the thoughts and lives of people in the Western world (1-2). Therefore, in this essay, Romanticism will be discussed as a movement with the emphasis being placed on its different manifestations in two countries, Iceland and England.
Romanticism was at its peak in the first decades of the 1800s. At that time Iceland was a nation of farmers living in rural communities while England, the first industrial nation, was an empire, a nation of the middle class in the midst of urbanization (Pálsson 125). Despite their differences, Romanticism was an important period in literature that had a great impact on both these countries in various ways. However, Romanticism had its own characteristics within each country, and cannot be considered as exactly the same movement in each place.

Firstly, definitions of Romanticism will be looked at from an academic standpoint: where it started, what characterized it, what forces influenced this movement, and what impact it had on Western Europe. The two countries, Iceland and England, will then be analyzed separately based on the theoretical chapter. The focus will be on the historical background, the state of development in the Romantic era, and the influences and enthusiasms of poets from each of the nations. For an illustration of the effect of Romanticism on the literary movement within each country, two poets, who are considered to be among the greatest of the Romantic movement, William Wordsworth and Jónas Hallgrímsson, will be discussed. Looking through the lens of their poetry will give us a better understanding and insight into the forces at work during that time. Finally, there will be a chapter comparing the differences between these countries with a summary as to what they had in common in culture and literature, how they interpreted Romanticism in diverse ways, and how the Romantic movement affected them differently.

2. Background and Definitions of Romanticism

Romanticism emerged in the eighteenth century during the Age of Enlightenment, an age which was characterized by belief in the universal authority of Reason (Baldick 79). As the name indicates, the Enlightenment increased access to knowledge and raised levels of education, and it was a popular movement as well as being practical and international (Ringler 8). The dominant literary movement in Europe at the time was Classicism or neo-Classicism, which was concerned with formal balance and proportion. The Classical movements were the exclusive property of the upper classes and were considered suitable for study in schools. The time when neo-Classicism was at its peak has often been referred to as the “Age of Reason”.

Sigurðardóttir 2
In literature it was all about the truth rather than insights. The poets followed the rules of the ancient Greek and Roman authors, and their favorite genres in literature were tragedy, comedy, epic, ode, epistle, elegy, fable, satire and eclogue (Baldick 168-169).

A major figure of the Enlightenment, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), was a French composer, philosopher and writer (Delaney). His writings had a great influence on the French Revolution and his quote, “Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains” (qtd. in Dumont 13), captured its sentiment. He had strong views about individual liberty, believing that man in his natural state was born free. He held that man is born brutish, with the ability to show compassion, but not to demarcate between good and evil, and should share the same equality and liberty as animals. Rousseau was a rebel against inequality, even though inequality is inevitable. What Rousseau meant was that, in the beginning, we are born free until society starts to take its form, and then with its continual growth come laws and rules that people have to obey, otherwise they are arrested and pressed with charges. The argument against Rousseau’s beliefs is that “we” set our own laws out of our free will and desire, so there must be some kind of liberty at work. “Because the law and orders should always be of importance of public nuisance for the people” (Dumont 12-13).

There are several causes for the French Revolution: crop failure causing a lack of food for the population, poverty, unemployment, and a general disturbance among the people of the French nation. The government’s extravagant spending of state funds while so many suffered also caused widespread anger among the populace. Finally, the nobles of the French state refused to play a political role on behalf of the general public and the farmers. The revolution started in 1789 when the people protested the fact that they were the king’s subjects. Their aim was to gain their own individual rights as citizens of the state and the sovereignty of the nation as proclaimed in the Declaration of Rights of the Man and the Citizen. This led to the king of France, Louis XVI, being executed in the year 1793. These were chaotic times, and the unstoppable revolution led to constant domestic conflicts, eventually resulting in Napoleon Bonaparte gaining power in France as an autocratic emperor (Vidal-Naquet and Bertin 198).
In 1820, a French writer and librarian named Charles Nodier, who was among the first generation of the French Romantics, wrote about what he believed had prompted the beginning of Romanticism. “Romantic poetry springs from our agony and our despair. This is not a fault in our art, but a necessary consequence of the advances made in our progressive society” (qtd. in Butler 3). Nodier believed that Romanticism was a certain kind of rebellion against the conditions of that time, a negative response to the revolutionary crisis. The eighteenth century has often been called the century of revolution; all of Europe experienced the shock of the Fall of the Bastille in 1789 and the consequent execution of Louis XVI. It coincided with deep social change in Western Europe, namely a growth in population and an expansion of trade and industry. The Industrial Revolution was transforming society and politics (Butler 3). Around the same time literature began to be transformed through the writings of Rousseau in France and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) and the Strum and Drang movement in Germany (Dumont 13).

The origin of Romanticism has been a delicate matter for literary critics, as most say that the French Revolution had something to do with its birth while others disagree. According to Bateson, the French Revolution was not the cause of Romanticism. He states that Nationalism, Romanticism, and the French and Industrial Revolutions were all consequences of a single cause, and the best label for these four elements is Individualism, which was flourishing in the European societies of those times (143). The ideology of Romanticism was, at its roots, nationalist and experiential (Thorslev 89). Nationalism is an ideology that was born during the late eighteenth century, and was one of the defining features of Romanticism. This concept reflects sovereignty and freedom, the people of one country forming a single economic and political unit, sharing a historic territory, a language, and a single public culture. The important thing was to find one’s roots and true nature within the centrality of self-expression and emotion (Hutchinson and Smith 4-5).

2.1. What is Romanticism?

Romanticism can be complex to define as it is not tied down to one certain single idea, but it can be seen as having three keywords: Nature, Symbolism and Imagination (Bateson 142).
According to the Oxford Dictionary, the definition of Romanticism is its “chief emphasis upon freedom of individual self-expression: sincerity, spontaneity, and originality. Rejecting the ordered rationality of the Enlightenment as mechanical, impersonal, and artificial, the Romantics turned to the emotional directness of personal experience and to the boundlessness of individual imagination and aspiration” (Baldick 222-223). The synonyms of Romantic in dictionaries are, for example: chimerical, wild, fanciful, sentimental and extravagant (Beers 6). Romanticism was thus a rebellion against the Enlightenment, a movement whereby emotions and the imagination were to take over from factual information and the utilitarian perspective of the Enlightenment (Jónsson 63).

Although many great minds have their own interpretation of Romanticism, McClintock writes in his book *The Romantic and Classical in English Literature* that the “beginning and presence of a creative, romantic movement is almost always shown by the love, study and interpretation of physical nature” (McClintock 187). Instead of the utility and information of the Enlightenment, Romanticism favored emotions, imagination, liberalism, novels, folktales, and nature (Brown 26). The Romantic poets believed that they were too close to contemporary difficulties to use them in a work of poetry. For them, distance in time and space was a keystone for the mind to wander off and enjoy itself. The Romantic poets glorified nature, it’s blue mountains, clear lakes, and green forests (Jónsson 63). Sir Leslie Stephen, author, historian and critic, even stated that Naturalism and Romanticism shared the same origin. For the Romantic poets, literature provided an escape from the routines of daily life, politics, and the Enlightenment, to something pure, wild, innocent, and free within their imagination – nature (Beers 102).

As stated before, Romanticism’s main ideas concerned poetry and the imagination, and the connection between mankind and nature. The Romantic style of poetry used symbols, figurative language, and myths in complete opposition to classicism. It has, however, been argued that the term Romanticism is almost meaningless since there is not one certain universal meaning of this concept and, therefore, it is useless as a name for a literary movement. Romanticism was also introduced and defined in various ways throughout the world and started at different times in many nations. (Benediktsson 222-224).
According to Lilian Furst, there are at least as many definitions of Romanticism as there are nations that were affected by the movement. Therefore, a singular definition, which everybody can agree on, has been impossible to make (1).

### 3. Romanticism in England

The Romantic period in England (1785-1832) was a complicated and short movement in comparison to other literary movements. England at the time was going through a great transformation, the Industrial Revolution, which involved agriculture, trade, production, and industrialism, which could be said to have caused an interruption in the connection between nature and the individual. People were starting to live in crowded conditions, no longer working for their bread with their neighbors and families, but in factories where machines took over from hand-made production. A great revolution in transport began when the first iron rails were laid in northern England for the new railways, and steam ships began to sail the seas. The standards of comfort rose higher, and capital increased along with the growth of the population: in 1801 the population in Great Britain was around nine million, but in 1831 it had increased to around sixteen and a half million. The death rate had been reduced because of higher standards of cleanliness, the increasing number of hospitals and dispensaries, as well as due to a greater knowledge of medicines and surgery (Ashton 1-7). These were times of great changes, not only in England, but in all of Western Europe, with the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and the Romantic Movement.

In England the Romantic Movement is often said to have begun when two friends, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) and William Wordsworth (1770-1850), published the *Lyrical Ballads* in the year 1798. Coleridge and Wordsworth shared a lifelong friendship; they inspired and influenced each other’s poetry. They shared an interest in the French Revolution and also planned the founding of a socialist colony in the wilderness of America, which they later cancelled when the reign of the military dictatorship of Napoleon filled them with terror (Borges 36). Both of them were very much under the influence of the French Revolution and Romanticism and had their own definition of the movement.
Wordsworth defined Romantic poetry as being, “…not the product of the moment when one experiences an emotion, but when the poet relives it and is at once actor and separator” (qtd. in Borges 35).

England’s greatest poets at that time are sometimes referred to as “the big six.” The members of this group, apart from the aforementioned Coleridge and Wordsworth, are William Blake (1757–1827), Lord Byron (1788–1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), and John Keats (1795 –1821). They were the most prominent and famous poets of this period (Cox 3). These poets shared something special, something that resonated through their writing, and that was their passion, the passion that they shared - the passion to write about nature, animals and human beings, as well as the social world, bestowing equality and respect on all natural life, including plants, the animal kingdom, and fossils, etc. The poet was always the subject, however: his experience, thoughts, expressions, definitions, and beliefs all merged to promote the artist as the hero (Butler 2).

British poets were constantly writing about themselves, making themselves the hero and expressing their own feelings. Deborah Forbes approaches this in her book *Sincerity’s Shadow* by asking the following questions: “Who or what is it that speaks to us in a lyric poem? What voice is this, which by its urgency, cadence, or some other indefinable quality compels us to listen?” (1). When answering these questions after reading a poem written by Jónas Hallgrímsson, and then one by Coleridge, they almost provide opposing answers. British poets were always trying to develop their self-consciousness and express their innermost feelings. “The Pains of Sleep” is an appropriate poem to draw attention to this self-consciousness, a poem full of self-expression written by Coleridge, who was most likely dealing with depression. His poems are full of emotions, and Deborah Forbes doubts that one can write with such great and deep emotion without having experienced them (Forbes 2). “The Pains of Sleep” is both emotional and physical, as Coleridge expresses that he is weak but yet not unblest, since he is surrounded by wisdom and eternal strength. What follows is only the first stanza as an example of his self-expression; the poem has three stanzas and becomes much more emotional with each stanza.
The Pains of Sleep

Ere on my bed my limbs I lay,
It hath not been my use to pray
With moving lips or bended knees;
But silently, by slow degrees,
My spirit I to Love compose,
In humble trust mine eye-lids close,
With reverential resignation
No wish conceived, no thought exprest,
Only a sense of supplication;
A sense o'er all my soul imprest
That I am weak, yet not unblest,
Since in me, round me, every where
Eternal strength and Wisdom are.

(Coleridge. S.)

This poem clearly portrays self-expression because it is about the poet himself, and no-one else. He uses the words “my limb”, “I lay”, “my use, “my spirit”, “I to”, “mine”, “my soul”, “I am,” etc. This constant self-expression made the British Romantic poets introverted, which was the opposite of the Icelandic Romantic poets, as we shall see.

The English Romantic poets were constantly trying to identify their self with their self-consciousness, they felt anxious that the embodied self-claimed to be more real than the self within. There are moments when some poets seemed desperate to earn some kind of recognition as both an individual and a real human being. The effort of getting this recognition could be scary, since they were revealing their inner self, their thoughts, and their dreams. This might be the reason why Wordsworth never published “The Prelude”, as he was seemingly never satisfied, always revising and adding to the poem (Rzepka 24-27).

The poets of “the big six” all followed Napoleon’s career through the media of the day; newspapers, public writings, and essays, etc. He had the figure of a hero, he was the man who had no fear, and he had started a revolution, influencing political history in France as long as the age itself.
Byron wrote about him as an “extraordinary” man, and Whately commented, “everything relating to this man is prodigious and unprecedented” (Bainbridge 13). Napoleon was spoken of as the greatest and the meanest, as if they respected him, admired him, but still thought of him as frightful, which was maybe the reason why he was so highly respected (Bainbridge 12-13). Even though the Romantics followed the same movement and most of them had the same admiration for Napoleon, the French and the English Romantics were different from one another. The English Romantics were more divided, while the French were more liberal and more radical (Alexander 220).


William Wordsworth was, as well as being a philosopher, one of the greatest Romantic poets, especially in England. As previously mentioned, he was a close friend of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Wordsworth was a poet of the Lake District, of Cumberland and Westmorland, who spoke with a strong Cumbrian burr (Darbishire 8). He was a poet of the Revolution who had a delight for nature. “Wordsworth had his passion for nature fixed in his blood; it was a necessity of his being, like that of mulberry leaf to the silkworm, and through his commerce with Nature did he live and breathe. Hence it was the truth of his love that his knowledge grew.” (Darbishire 19). His pure love for nature can be seen in many of his works, for example “An Evening Walk” and “The Vale of Esthwaite” (Darbishire 16).

As mentioned earlier, Wordsworth was a great supporter of the Revolution along with Coleridge, Southey, Burns, Campbell and Blake, the earlier generation of the Romantic poets. They were all supporters of human rights just like the French Philosopher, Rousseau, who ended up going against France (Palmer 470). Wordsworth not only followed the French Revolution through the media during that time, but he also went to France, seeing the revolution with his own eyes, and experiencing the enthusiasm of the people, who were full of hope after years of oppression. This nourished his imagination and inspired one of his greatest works of poetry. He went to France to learn the French language and to gain his independence and maturity, but he got much more than he was looking for (Drabble 100). In France he fell in love with a French woman named Annette Vallon; they had a daughter named Caroline who was born in 1792.
Lack of money forced him to go back to England (Drabble 16). Wordsworth arrived back home a changed man, full of inspiration with a whole new impression of the world. During his time there, France had been engaged in one of the stormiest and bloodiest social wars in history (Drabble 104). His experience of these struggles gave Wordsworth a shock that he was to never forget, and which altered him for the rest of his life - not only his inner self, but also his poetic language (Darbishire 23).

The physiological insight into the French Revolution that Wordsworth gained during his year’s residency there can be seen in his poem “The Excursion”, and in his greatest work “The Prelude”, which for the last 45 years of his life he constantly revised and adjusted. “The Prelude” is about Wordsworth’s life; his experiences, imagination, and feelings. It went unpublished until after his death (Wordsworth x). Many of his poems are about himself as a poet, for he believed that poetic power was the saving grace, the divine agency of rescue from the “visionary dreariness” of a life without joy. Since the poets could no longer pray to the angels or the gods to work miracles for them, they had to use their own minds instead (Durrant 1-2).

**The Prelude - Residence in France and Revolution**

“[...] And as it should be, yet no cure for those
Whose souls were sick with pain of what would be
Hereafter brought in charge against mankind.
Most melancholy at that time, O Friend!
Were my day-thoughts, my dreams were miserable;
Through months, through years, long after the last beat
Of those atrocities (I speak bare truth,
As if to thee alone in private talk)
I scarcely had one night of quiet sleep,
Such ghastly visions had I of despair,
And tyranny, and implements of death,
And long orations which in dreams I pleaded
Before unjust tribunals, with a voice
Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense
Of treachery and desertion in the place
The holiest that I knew of—my own soul. “

(Wordsworth 388)
In this stanza Wordsworth is talking to Samuel Coleridge, describing his nightmares after experiencing the terror in Paris, something that could not be described so dramatically unless he had been there in person and seen it with his own eyes. What is interesting about this part of the poem is “I speak bare truth, as if to thee alone in private talk,” where Wordsworth is convincing Coleridge that he is not exaggerating the conditions in France during the Revolution.

The violent experiences that Wordsworth relived in his poem completely appalled him, and his support for the Revolution waned. Wordsworth, along with others from the older generation of the Romantics such as Coleridge and Southey, became a resolute opponent of the Revolution, especially when France declared war on Britain in 1793, at which point Wordsworth and the others became English patriots. This change is reflected in his poetry. Parts of “The Prelude” have Wordsworth glorifying the revolution, but throughout the poems written during the rest of his lifetime he begins writing about the horror (Dawson 53).

The Prelude - Residence in France

An Englishman,
Born in a land whose very name appeared
To license some unruliness of mind;
A stranger, with youth's further privilege,
And the indulgence that a half-learnt speech
Wins from the courteous; I, who had been else
Shunned and not tolerated, freely lived
With these defenders of the Crown, and talked,
And heard their notions; nor did they disdain
The wish to bring me over to their cause.

(Wordsworth 324)

In these lines from “The Prelude”, Wordsworth is saying what a lucky man he is. He was born in Great Britain, an empire where he has lived and spoken freely with the defenders of the Crown. Since there was such a great difference in circumstances between Iceland and England during that time, one might think that it would not be so strange if Romanticism had a different influence on these nations’ poets, who wrote in different ways about different things in these two very different places.

Sigurðardóttir 11
4. Romanticism in Iceland

According to literary critics, Romanticism in Iceland started around the year 1830 and ended in 1882 when Realism took over (Óskarsson 107). When Romanticism first started in Iceland, the nation was under the Danish Crown. During that time the economy in Iceland was stagnant and the country’s future prospects were not very bright. Iceland was a nation of farmers and its main industry was agriculture; these were the times before the fishing industry took over. Iceland was a colony that was oppressed by the Danish Crown (Bjarnason and Gunnarsdóttir 39-40). In the beginning of the 19th century the living conditions in Iceland were poor with around 450 people dying of hunger in the year 1803 (Bjarnason and Gunnarsdóttir 31).

The first 300 years of Iceland’s history was that of a self-governed and independent nation, a Commonwealth, with chieftains who oversaw legal disputes that were solved during the summer meetings at their parliament, which was called the Althingi. At that time the Althingi was located at Thingvellir, a historically important place for the Icelandic people. Many of Iceland’s greatest events have taken place there, for instance the decision that Iceland should become a Christian nation in the year 1000. In the years 1262-1264 (the Old Covenant) Iceland forfeited its independence to the Norwegian King, establishing a personal union between the king of Norway and Iceland. In the year 1380 Denmark and Norway united their monarchies and consequently Iceland came under the sovereignty of Denmark (Ringler 6-7). The first step towards Iceland gaining its independence was in the middle of the nineteenth century. Iceland got its own constitution in 1874 and then Home Rule in 1904. Iceland attained its first minister and executive powers when it became a sovereign nation in 1918 with the union treaty, and then became fully independent on June 17, 1944. By then it had been controlled by Denmark for 550 years (Bjarnason and Gunnarsdóttir 103-105).

Romanticism was introduced into the Nordic countries in the years 1802-1803 by a man named Heinrich Steffens (1773-1845). He was a philosopher and a naturalist who travelled throughout Scandinavia and held a series of lectures at the University of Copenhagen. His mission was to circulate the message of Romanticism.
Among his audience was the Icelandic law student Bjarni Thorarensen (1786-1841). Thorarensen later became the first Icelandic poet to write and publish under the influence of Romanticism when he wrote the poem “Iceland,” which was published in *Klausturpósturinn* in the year 1818 (Pálsson 132). The poem begins like this:

Þú nafnkunna landið sem lífið oss veittir,
Landið sem aldregi skemmdir þín börn!
Hvört þinnar fjærstöðu hingað til neyttir,
Hún sé þér ódugnaðs framvegis vörn.
Undarlegt samland af frosti og funa
Fjöllunum sléttum og hraunum og sjá;
Fagur og ógurlegt ertu þá brunar
Eldur að fótum þín jökulum frá!

(Thorarensen qtd. in Pálsson 132)

A brief summary:
According to my interpretation of this poem, Bjarni misses his homeland, the remarkable country that gave its people life, the country that always took care of its children. The country that took advantage of its distance from other countries, therefore ensuring that its people have to be hardworking to survive. It has a bizarre combination of frost and fire, with views of mountains, plains, and lava fields. Beautiful and frightful fires from glaciers burn at your feet.

The Romantic movement is known for having had a great impact on Iceland’s fight for independence (Ringler 8). The Romantics in Iceland reinvented the country’s image, as its image had always been unclear in literature until their day. They presented the country in a new light when they talked about its great mountains, heaths, and countryside. What was also new in Icelandic literature during this period was the figurative language. Up until then, under the domination of the Enlightenment, figurative language had been very rustic. The favorite symbol the Romantics used in their poems was the Lady of the Mountain, or “Fjallkonan” as she is known in Icelandic, who symbolized their fight for independence: she was the mother of the nation and its protector. She wears an ice crystal crown on her head, with a fire that symbolizes Icelandic nature. In her arms she carries an ancient script and a sword, whereby the sword symbolizes her mental strength (Pálsson 136).
When the Romantic era began in Iceland, the nation thirsted for its independence. It saw itself as an island far away from other countries, which had once been its own separate political unit (Tägil 38). These were the times that gave birth to Nationalism in Iceland.

The majority of the Icelandic Romantic poets of that time were an elite of educated men who were living abroad and full of homesickness, so writing beautifully about their homeland seemed natural to them. Most of them were in Denmark, studying or working there, which made their nationalism and love for their country stronger than ever (Pálsson 141-142). Since Iceland was under the control of the Crown of Denmark during that time, a hatred of Denmark began, where the poets started comparing Iceland and Denmark, with Iceland always having the upper hand. Some people might find this a hypocritical stance, since most of them were living in Denmark, but the only reason they were there was for their education. In Iceland during that time, if you were going to be something or someone you had to educate yourself, and the nearest place to get a real education was Denmark (Pálsson 141-142). The poem “Íslands minni” written by Bjarni Thorarensen gives us a little taste of this dislike for Denmark and Danish nature:

Leiðist oss fjalllaust frón,
Fær oss oft heilsutjango
Þokuloftið léð,
Svipljótt land sýnist mér
Sífellt að vera hér, sem neflaus ásýnd er
Augnalaus með.

(Thorarensen qtd. in Pálsson 142)

Brief summary: According to my interpretation, Bjarni is speaking on the behalf of the Icelandic people because he uses the word ‘oss’ meaning ‘we’. He says that the country with no mountains (Denmark) is boring and damages your health. It is an unsightly country with foggy air. Constantly being there is like being noseless and eyeless.
In the year 1835 there was a breakthrough in Icelandic literary history when four Icelandic students living in Copenhagen, Brynjólfur Pétursson (1810-51), Konráð Gíslason (1808-91), Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-45) and Tómas Sæmundsson (1807-41) started an annual journal. Influenced by the Romanticism that was then ascendant in Denmark, they were against autocracy and confinement. They called their journal *Fjölnir*, and its creation in July 1830 was inspired by the French Revolution. The authors of *Fjölnir* referred to themselves as “studiosi juris” in the journal, which means law students, even though they were all heading in different directions. Konráð became a linguist, Brynjólfur a lawyer, Jónas a natural scientist and Tómas a theologian. They created in *Fjölnir* a literary platform which emphasized four points: 1) utility, 2) succoring beauty, 3) truth, and 4) all things that are good and decent. These varied precepts made *Fjölnir* a messenger of both Romanticism and the Enlightenment (Pálsson 122). *Fjölnir* became an important part of Icelandic national consciousness, and was the main chronicle of the Icelandic Romantics in the years that followed (Johannessen 7). Since most of the Icelandic poets were located in Denmark, they had to adjust their style of Romanticism because they were writing for a nation of farmers, and not for the Mid-European middle classes like most of the other Romantic poets in Europe at that time (Pálsson 125).

4.1 Jónas Hallgrímsson - Iceland’s greatest Romantic poet

Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-1845), the leader of *Fjölnir*, was a natural scientist and one of Iceland’s finest, most admired, and beloved poets. He opened the eyes of his nation to its beautiful natural surroundings, and transformed its literary sensibility (Ringler 3). He developed his love of nature when he was a boy. He was born and raised in Öxnadalur, where he experienced strong natural forces during his childhood, and this led to his interest in studying natural sciences starting at an early age (Ringler 10-11). Jónas was an educated man. At the age of sixteen he went to a boarding school in Bessastaðir, which at that time was the “cultural and educational center of the land”; the school prepared students for further education with an emphasis on Latin (Ringler 15). When Jónas graduated he wanted to go to Copenhagen to continue his studies but he could not afford it. Although poverty was to follow him his entire life, he did not give up easily and started working as a secretary in Reykjavik (Ringler 22).
He fell in love with a Danish woman named Christiane Knudsen, whom he proposed to in 1832, but she rejected him. That same year, Jónas finally got his chance to sail to Denmark, where he continued his studies at Copenhagen University. At first he studied law, but because of his lack of interest he changed his subject to natural sciences, principally natural history (Ringler 24-25).

After five years in Copenhagen, Jónas returned to Iceland for four months to use the research and knowledge he had gained from his education. He traveled through the highlands and went east, west, north and south. This journey gave him the inspiration for many of his works, including the poems “Mother Love”, “Gunnar’s Holm”, and “The Vastness of the Universe” (Ringler 32-33). At that time, Jónas was one of the most educated men in Iceland, and he was the leader of the group that published the journal Fjölnir, which was “Filled with patriotism and nationalism” (Ringler 28). Jónas died suddenly at the age of 38, when the wound he sustained after falling down some stairs and breaking his leg became gangrenous. Every year his birthday is celebrated in Iceland as a national day called the “The Day of the Icelandic Tongue” (Ringler 70-71).

In the first volume of Fjölnir, Jónas published one of his most famous poems, “Ísland, farsælda frón”. After this there was no turning back. Romanticism overtook Iceland along with the ideal of national sovereignty. Romanticism started to infect the Icelandic nation and Nationalism grew strong, along with the desire to fight for independence (Jónsson 69).

Iceland
Iceland, fortune isle! Our beautiful, bountiful mother!
Where are our fortune and fame, freedom and virtue of old?
All things on earth are transient: the days of your greatness and glory.
Flicker like flames in the night, far in the depths of the past.
Comely and fair was the country, crested with snow-covered glaciers,
Azure and empty the sky, ocean resplendently bright.
Here came our famous forebears, the freedom-worshipping heroes,
Over the sea from the east, eager to settle the land.
Raising their families on farms in the flowering laps of the valleys,
Hearty and happy they lived, hugely content with their lot.
Up on the outcrops of lava where Axe River plummets forever

Sigurðardóttir 16
Into the Almanna Gore, Althing convened every year.
There lay old Þorgeir, thoughtfully charting our change of religion.
There strode Gissur and Geir, Gunnar and Héðinn and Njáll.
Heroes rode through the regions, and under the crags on the coastline
Floated their fabulous ships, ferrying wealth from abroad.
O it is bitter to stand here stalled and penned in the present!
Men full of sloth and asleep simply drop out of the race!
How have we treated our treasure during these six hundred summers?
Have we trod promising paths, progress and virtue our goal?
Comely and fair is the country, crested with snow-covered glaciers,
Azure and empty the sky, ocean resplendently bright.
Ah! But up on the lava where Axe River plummets forever
Into the Almanna Gorge, Althing is vanished and gone.
Snorri’s old site is a sheep-pen; the Law Rock is hidden in heather,
Blue with the berries that make boys – and the ravens – a feast.
Oh you children of Iceland, old and young men together!
See how your forefathers’ fame faltered – and passed from the earth!

(Hallgrímsson, qtd in Ringler’s translation 39)

In *The Bard of Iceland* Ringler translated Hallgrímsson’s poem “Iceland” and included a short summary. When he wrote “Iceland” Hallgrímsson was working, as were his colleagues, towards *Fjölnir*’s purpose of reviving Iceland’s culture and economy until it resembled the days when the nation was independent. He used the Althingi at Thingvellir to remind his nation of the ancestors that used to be: Þorgeir, Gissur, Gunnar, Geir, Njáll and Héðinn, the Icelandic saga heroes once in charge of the Althingi, but no longer. Hallgrímsson wrote his poem like an inscription for Iceland’s gravestone, as a wake-up call to his nation to repossess their inheritance, to stand tall and act as their forefathers had. Through the poem he declared that Iceland could regain its lost independence, that it had not lost its beauty, only its autonomy, and what it lacked was heroes to stand tall and fight back. His poem achieved its aim, as the elements of Icelandic Romanticism featured in his poetry lead to Iceland’s independence (Ringler 102).

Hallgrímsson, just like Bjarni Thorarensen, uses “our”, “their”, and “we”. In doing this, he is speaking on behalf of the nation as an individual who is part of a
country that has lost its independence. He cannot fight for its independence alone; the people of the Icelandic nation have to stand together in this. Hallgrímsson and Thorarensen are being extrovert in their poems, speaking on behalf of the nation and not just for themselves as individuals with their own emotions.

Another example of this, to underline the characteristics of the Icelandic Romantics, can be seen in Hallgrímsson poem “A Toast to Iceland”, a short poem where Hallgrímsson is extrovert, nationalistic, and emotional:

A Toast to Iceland
Our land of lakes forever fair
Below blue mountain summits,
Of swans, of salmon leaping where
The silver water plummets,
Of glaciers swelling broad and bare
Above earth's fiery sinews —
The Lord pour out his largess there
As long as earth continues!

(Hallgrímsson, Jónas. 1939. Trans. Ringler 168)

Hallgrímsson is expressing emotionally the pride that the nation has for its country. By using the phrase “our land” and writing about its beauty, he takes the liberty of speaking on behalf of the Icelandic nation and its opinion. This more extrovert approach is the complete opposite to that of most of the English Romantic poets.

5. Comparison of Romanticism in England and Iceland

Even though there are various interpretations of Romanticism, England and Iceland shared common Romantic themes in their poetry. Poets from both nations wrote their poetry using a similar style, and in their poetry emphasized the connection between the individual and nature. As seen earlier from the works of these two countries, their poets focused on the imagination, especially when they referred to nature in their works. The poets of both nations were influenced by the French Revolution, but they differed in their approach to the subject. The English poets wrote directly about the French Revolution in their works, especially Wordsworth. This should not come as a
surprise as he was in France when some of the events of the Revolution were taking place, and he experienced them firsthand. The Icelandic Romantic poets, on the other hand, used the revolution as their prototype and inspiration in their fight for national independence.

Since the effects of Romanticism differ depending on place and time, it is difficult to define it as a single movement. When defining Romanticism it has to be done from the standpoint of a certain nation. When comparing Romanticism in Iceland and England it becomes clear that the differences outnumber the commonalities. As mentioned earlier, Romanticism in France was also different from the English version, the English Romantics being more divided, while the French were more liberal and radical. This shows that the differences between Icelandic and English Romanticism are not an isolated occurrence.

There are various reasons for the differences between Romanticism in these two countries, and they include nationalism and independence. Romanticism had a major impact on the Icelandic nation when it comes to nationalism. Romanticism was one of the main reasons for the birth of the independence movement. Icelanders were ready to start fighting for their independence, and in their poetry and art they often referred to the nation’s nature, history, and folklore – especially the Viking sagas. Hallgrímsson refers to these in “Iceland” when he writes about Njáll, Gissur and Geir, the lost and forgotten heroes of the Icelandic nation.

“There strode Gissur and Geir, Gunnar and Héðinn and Njáll / Heroes rode through the regions, and under the crags on the coastline / Floated their fabulous ships, ferrying wealth from abroad” (Ringler, 39). He obviously believed that Iceland had no heroes anymore, that they were lost and forgotten along with its independence. In their poems, the Icelandic Romantics were trying to reach the whole nation, attempting to invoke a sense of pride and to establish the yearning for independence, issuing a rallying cry for their countrymen to stand tall for their homeland.

In contrast to this, England, as part of Great Britain, was independent and possessed an empire. The traditional view is that Britain never went through a Nationalist phase, whereas Iceland went through an Independence movement during the Romantic period (Kaiser 21).
Since England was a part of an empire, Romantic English poets wrote differently compared to their Icelandic counterparts. They wrote a lot about their own emotions and experiences, making themselves the heroes of their art and therefore occupying the main role in their poems. Unlike the Icelandic poets, they were not trying to send a message to their nation, their poems were more about their own emotions and modes of expression. If we only take a look at the title of one of Wordsworth's most famous poems, “The Prelude - Growth of a Poet’s Mind”, we can see how introverted the poet is. It is about him, his thoughts and his own emotions.

In “The Prelude - Residence in France”, Wordsworth explains how lucky “he” is living as a free man, an Englishman, and this sense of freedom is probably one of the reasons why the British poets wrote differently to the Icelandic ones. For comparison there is the poem written by Jónas Hallgrimsson, “A Toast to Iceland”. The poem starts with “Our” - he is speaking on behalf of the nation. “Our land of lakes forever fair / Below blue mountain summits” - these lines show the pride he feels for his beautiful homeland and its nature; he is being extrovert. This can also be seen in one of Thorarensen poems, “Iceland”, beginning with “Þú nafnkunna landið sem lífið oss veittir, / Landið sem aldregi skemmdir þín börn!” (Translation: “You remarkable country that gave us life / The country that never damaged its children”). His poem is extrovert as well as being full of nationalism. This underlines how the Romantics in Iceland differed from the English ones, who usually lacked nationalism.

Another possible cause of the difference between the Romantic movement in Iceland and in England is point in time that it occurred. When Romanticism was making inroads into Icelandic culture in 1830 it was in its final stages in England, ending there around the year 1832. It is also worth noting the fact that there was a major difference in the circumstances of these nations during that time. England was part of an Empire that possessed colonies all over the world, it was the pioneer of the Industrial Revolution and its population was rapidly increasing. In Iceland, conditions were not as good as they were in England at this time. Iceland was a nation of farmers and the production methods of the Industrial Revolution had yet to reach the island’s shores. Furthermore, transportation systems were poor, which can lead to life-threatening situations when living on an isolated isle. Finally, unlike England, Iceland was not independent, as it came under the authority of Denmark.
6. Conclusion

Romanticism had a significant impact on literary history and its effects can still be felt in current literature. To this day, academics and literary critics are still debating about the exact definition of Romanticism. It shares some common themes such as style, a focus on the imagination, the connection between the individual and nature, and the importance of symbols, figurative language, and myths. However, throughout Western Europe the impact of Romanticism differed from place to place as each nation interpreted this literary movement in its own way. Therefore, the best approach to define Romanticism is from the standpoint of each specific nation, through looking at how each nation constructed its own version of the movement, and how the movement in turn affected the nation’s history, culture and literature.

Before the emergence of Romanticism towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment was the dominant intellectual movement. This period also marked the beginning of the French Revolution, when the people of France protested against the king’s authority and the fact that they were his subjects; they wanted to gain individual rights as citizens. Nodier, a French writer, who was amongst the first Romantics in history, said that they [the Romantics] could not help but be Romantic, that poetry sprang from their agony of despair. Romanticism was a rebellion against the Enlightenment, shunning its emphasis on rationality and utilitarianism, and instead embracing emotions and the imagination.

However, as stated before, Romanticism as a term has always lacked a universal meaning, as it differed so significantly between each country. This becomes clear when looking at two different countries such as England and Iceland, where local factors, history, and culture greatly affected each nation’s poetry, especially the sources of the poets’ inspiration and imagination. In England, then part of the growing British Empire, the Industrial Revolution was flourishing, with production becoming increasingly mechanized, and people flocking into urban areas, while improvements in healthcare helped increase the population. At the same time, the Romantic movement was born when its English pioneers, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, published their work *The Lyrical Ballads*. The English Romantics favored nature, along with being introverted, emotional, and self-conscious.
At the time Romanticism was starting in Iceland, the movement was already coming to an end in England. Iceland was under the Danish Crown, and had not been an independent nation for over 300 years. Romanticism was the spark of nationalism in Iceland, the inspiration for a nation that was ready to be independent again. Jónas Hallgrímsson and Bjarni Thorarensen were the pioneers of Icelandic Romanticism, especially Hallgrímsson in his poem “Iceland”. Like their English counterparts, the Icelandic Romantics favored nature, but unlike the English they were also nationalistic and extrovert.

Literary critics have argued about whether Romanticism should be considered a single overall movement when it has various versions depending on what nation it took place in. This becomes clear when comparing the movement in England and Iceland where the vast differences between the two nations makes it hard to define Romanticism as a single movement.

After my research on this topic I have come to the conclusion that Romanticism is still very much relevant. I feel that much of the discourse from the Romantic period is still prevalent, for there has been an awakening concerning the importance of nature, people are still nationalistic, and Iceland is still proud of its nature. I wonder how Jónas Hallgrímsson would feel if he was alive today. Would he feel pride or disappointment? He did not live to see the day Iceland became independent, a probable source of pride. On the other hand, one wonders what he would think about Iceland’s untouched and pristine nature being submerged under dams and hydroelectric power stations? Perhaps his poetry, now, would focus on his own emotions in a similar way to the English poets. In any case, the debate about nature, independence, and nationality continues to this very day, and Romanticism still has much to teach us.
Works cited


