NON-FICTIONAL PROSE LITERATURE OF THE ROMANTIC PERIOD:

The Romantic Period was specialized in poetry, though there were also a few prose writers whose works displayed the creative imagination which the age generally represented. They wrote for an ever-increasing audience which was less homogeneous in its interest and education than that of their predecessors.

S.T. Coleridge(1772-1834):

The first name among the prose writers that automatically comes to one’s mind is S.T. Coleridge. His ‘Biographia Literaria’ was a ‘biography’ of the aesthetic process. The work is the outcome of the author’s synthesis of the ideas of great German thinkers such as Kant, Schiller, Schelling and Schlegel with the British empirical thinkers of the eighteenth century. Coleridge wrote five chapters in the Biographia to show his growing dissatisfaction with those writers who viewed the world of nature and the human mind as a machine. Though Coleridge was greatly influenced by the German philosophers, it will be wrong to consider his aesthetic ideas as mere echoes of the voices of the masters he admired. Coleridge possessed a synthesizing mind capable of combining their ideas with the tradition of neo-classicism of the eighteenth century. The romantic elements in Coleridge’s prose can be best illustrated by the following excerpt:

“if a poem is to be symbolical, the symbols must come glowing with life into

the poet’s words as incarnations of his belief, as the body of his vision.”

Charles Lamb (1775-1834):

Charles Lamb contributed his essays to The London Magazine under the pseudonym of Elia. Besides these essays, he also wrote others in other journals. But more than anything it is his essays written as Elia that brought him real fame. In his ‘*Essays of Elia’*and ‘*Last Essays’* , in which is revealed his own personality, he talks intimately to the readers about himself, his quaint whims and experiences, and the cheerful and heroic struggle which he made against misfortunes. Unlike Wordsworth who was interested in natural surroundings and shunned society, Lamb who was born and lived in the midst of London street, was deeply interested in the city crowd, its pleasures and occupations, its endless comedies and tragedies, and in his essays he interpreted with great insight and human sympathy that crowded human life of joys and sorrows. Lamb belongs to the category of intimate and self-revealing essayists. He writes always in a gentle, humorous way about the sentiments and trifles of everyday. The sentimental, smiling figure of ‘Elia’ in his essays is only a cloak with which Lamb hides himself from the world.

In every essay Lamb’s style changes. This is the secret of the charm of his style and it also prevents him from ever becoming monotonous or tiresome. His style is also full of surprises because his mood continually varies, creating or suggesting its own style, and calling into play some recollection of this or that writer of the older world.

His essays are true to Johnson’s definition; ‘a loose sally of the mind.’ Though his essays are all criticisms or appreciations of the life of his age and literature, they are all intensely personal. They, therefore, give us an excellent picture of Lamb and of humanity.

It is this wonderful combination of personal and universal interest together with his rare old style and quaint humour, which have given his essays his perennial charm, and earned for him the covetable title of “The Prince among English Essayists”.

Lamb gave personal essay its real worth as he fictionalized his self in them with rare charm and for the readers it is an experience of the spirit of the age (Romanticism).

William Hazlitt (1778-1830):

William Hazlitt was another notable writer in the cultivation of the personal essay. He wrote in various journals of the time, viz. ‘The Examiner’, ‘The Edinburgh Review’, ‘The Champion’. He was a perceptive literary critic. His ‘Characters of Shakespeare’ and ‘Lectures on the English Comic Writers’ and ‘The Spirit of the Age’ contain interesting insights on aesthetics and literary history. He was a man of aggressive nature and in his judgment of others he was always downright and frank, and never cared for its effect on them. During the time when England was engaged in a bitter struggle against Napoleon, Hazlitt worshipped him as a hero, and so he came in conflict with the government. He shows an acute and accurate power of observation and often goes to the very foundation of things.

Hazlitt believed in a concept of gusto which, according to him could determine the greatness of any art. “Gusto in art is power or passion defining any object.” This notion springs from the mainstream of English Romantic thought, for it has similarities with Wordsworth’s note to “The Thorn”, published in 1800: “the Reader cannot be too often reminded that Poetry is passion: it is the history or science of feelings”. Hazlitt could write of the “divine” as an element of artistic vision. For that, however, he had no need of a deity. He regarded the imagination rather than God as a unifying and idealizing power.

Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859)

Thomas de Quincey is known for his poetic-prose. There is a special splendour of his style which combines the best elements of prose and poetry. Prose written by him are both imaginative and melodious in nature. Yet, he was a highly intellectual writer. Mostly he wrote in the form of articles for journals and he dealt with all sorts of subjects—about himself and his friends, life in general, art, literature, philosophy and religion. Of his autobiographical sketches the best-known is his ‘Confessions of an English Opium-Eater’*,*in which he has given us, in a most interesting manner, glimpses of his own life under the influence of opium. The subconscious world of the subject provides the writer ample scope to imaginatively recreate the experience. He wrote fine biographies of a number of classical, historical and literary personages including a historical essay on *Joan of Arc.*In all his writings De Quincey asserts his personal point of view, and as he is a man of strong prejudices, likes and dislikes. The splendour of his ‘poetic prose’ which is elaborate and sonorous in its effects, casts its own special spell. A number of his works show his personal psychological explorations, with a gorgeousness of style.