

# Characteristics of Romanticism in English Literature

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The Romantic period in English literature began in the late 1700s and lasted through the mid-1800s. Romanticism focuses on the emotional side of human nature, individualism, the beauty of the natural world and the simplicity of common people. Romantic authors value sentimental, heartfelt feelings and emotional experiences over historical and scientific facts.

## Imagination and Creativity

Romantic-period writers stress the imaginative and subjective side of human nature. Characters' thoughts, feelings, inner struggles, opinions, dreams, passions and hopes reign supreme. For example, in William Wordsworth's poem "The Prelude," the narrator is disappointed by his experiences crossing the Alps and imagines unlikely natural phenomenon on his journey, such as powerful waterfalls. Romantic authors don't allow facts or truths to inhibit them from expressing imaginative ideas, especially as they relate to nature.

## The Beauty of Nature

Romantic literature explores the intense beauty of nature, and Romantic writers invest natural events and objects with a divine presence. In Walt Whitman's poem "Song of Myself," the poet refers to the grass as a "hieroglyphic" and "the handkerchief of the Lord." Romantic authors understood progress and the changing tide toward industrialization, but they celebrated natural beauty over urbanization, commercialism and materialism.

## Individualism and Solitude

Romanticism appeals to individualism, rather than conventional norms or collectivism. For example, in "Frankenstein" by Mary Shelley, the monster is a Romantic hero because he symbolizes individuality and nonconformity. Shelley wanted readers to sympathize with the monster's plight, praising him for his simplicity, originality and distinctiveness. Even though Frankenstein lives in solitude and experiences rejection, readers see him as a genuine representation of humankind. Romantic authors valued independent thinking, creativity and self-reliance.

## Romantic Love

Characters in Romantic-era stories and poems experience deep, emotional, passionate love. They don't typically marry out of convenience or involve themselves in stagnant romantic relationships and are extremely unhappy if they choose to do so. Romantic love is intensely wistful and amorous. For example, Heathcliff -- the male protagonist in "Wuthering Heights" by Emily Bronte -- tears open his deceased lover's casket so he can lie beside her. This heart-wrenching display of love and devotion, demonstrates the unbridled passion of Romantic characters.

# Romantic Period Poetry Quick Facts

1. Dates of Romantic Period: 1770 to 1830

2. Romanticism was, in part, a reaction to the Industrial Revolution.

- Poets spoke out against businesses and industry exploiting the poor.
- There was an emphasis on the importance of the individual, that people should follow ideals instead of rules.

3. Key elements of Romantic literature

- Stressed the importance of expressing personal feelings.
- Deep belief in the power of nature for inspiration.
- Poets found the source of poetry in unique experiences.
- The poet was seen as an individual distinguished from others by the intensity of his/her thoughts.
- Great emphasis was placed on dreams, the supernatural, and the working of the mind.
- Above all else, emotion defines this genre of poetry, causing it to have a lyrical quality about it. (See Poetry Terms for definition) Because of this, you will often see phrases begin with “Oh!” to give the impression of a sudden rush of feeling.
- This type of emotionally charged language also creates a specific mood. (See Poetry Terms for definition)
- Another key quality of Romantic writing was its shift to the healing power of imagination, believing that poetry could enable people to transcend their troubles.

4. William Wordsworth (1770 to 1850)

- Considered the Shakespeare of his age.
- Grew up with his sister Dorothy, but was an orphan by age 13.
- His friendship and working relationship with Samuel Coleridge Taylor on the *Lyrical Ballads* (a collection of poems by both authors) is considered a defining work of the age.
- His legacy on the world of poetry includes
  1. Introducing nature as revolutionary toward the progress of man
  2. Using self-exploration as a way to better understand human nature.
  3. Placing poetry at the center of human existence and celebrating its “immortality”