

## Romanticism: Concept and Meaning

Romanticism was a transformative literary, artistic, and intellectual movement in English literature. It emerged in the late 18th century as a reaction against Neoclassicism and the Enlightenment, fully blossoming in the early 19th century. Romantics rebelled against rigid rules, rationality, and formal patterns, reviving classical ideals like balance and harmony but infusing them with individual emotion, imagination, and personal experience—elements absent in the decorum-bound classics.

The term derives from the French *romantique*, praising natural phenomena. It first appeared in German literature; Friedrich Schlegel, in his *Dialogue on Poetry* (1800), applied "romantic" to modern works, defining it as "literature depicting emotional matter in an imaginative form." As painter Caspar David Friedrich noted, art became "a voice from within." In English literature, it began in the 1790s with *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, prioritising creative intuition and imagination across literature, painting, and music. Romantics sought escape from harsh realities like disillusionment and the French Revolution's unfulfilled promises.

## Historical Context

Romanticism was shaped by two pivotal events:

- **French Revolution (1789):** Its ideals of liberty, equality, and individual freedom shattered social hierarchies, inspiring proletariats and bourgeoisie alike. Literature reflected this shift toward novelty in every genre.
- **Industrial Revolution:** A backlash against mechanization, urbanization, and nature's erosion. While Europe embraced industrialization, Romantics decried unemployment and the dehumanizing power of machines.

## Core Features of Romanticism

- **Emphasis on Emotion and Feeling:** Emotions surpass reason and classical rules. Wordsworth's poetic theory captures this: "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings... emotion recollected in tranquility," rooted in deep personal experience.
- **Importance of Imagination:** A transformative force revealing truths beyond logic. Coleridge distinguished it from "Fancy"—mere mechanical association—calling imagination the "mysterious power" of constructive genius.
- **Revolt Against Tradition:** Rejection of classical forms, diction, and themes in favor of simple, everyday language.
- **Interest in the Past and Supernatural:** Fascination with medieval history, folklore, myths, legends, and mysterious elements.
- **The Romantic Hero:** A solitary, rebellious figure clashing with society, as in Byron's protagonists.

## Romanticism in Literature

## **Romantic Poetry**

Subjective, lyrical works centered on nature, love, freedom, imagination, and melancholy.

## **Romantic Prose**

Marked by emotional intensity, with themes of the exotic, gothic, and historical.

## **Basic Tenets of Romanticism**

- Imagination as the supreme creative force.
- Individuality and personal freedom.
- Primacy of emotion and intuition over reason.
- Gothicism: Spiritual and supernatural elements.
- Glorification, personification, and idealization of nature.
- Celebration of rustic and pastoral life (primitivism).
- Rejection of Enlightenment rationalism.
- Nationalism, patriotism, and common diction.

## **Major Romantic Poets in English Literature**

- **William Wordsworth**: Nature, simplicity, common life.
- **Samuel Taylor Coleridge**: Imagination, supernatural.
- **Lord Byron**: Individualism, rebellion.
- **Percy Bysshe Shelley**: Idealism, freedom, revolution.
- **John Keats**: Beauty, sensuousness, art.

## **Conclusion**

Romanticism celebrates human emotion, imagination, nature, and individual freedom, rejecting rigid rules and rationalism for the inner world's creative expression. It endures as one of literature's most influential movements.