







# Romanticism

Sub : British  
Literature 19<sup>th</sup>  
Century (PG 1 )  
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- In England, the ground for Romanticism was prepared in the latter half of the eighteenth century through the economic, political, and cultural transformations.
  - The system of absolute government crumbled even earlier in Britain than elsewhere; nationalistic sentiment sharpened, imperialistic endeavors widened, and the century saw an increasing growth of periodical literature which catered to the middle classes.
  - The ideals of neoclassicism, such as decorum, order, normality of experience, and moderation, were increasingly displaced by an emphasis on individual experience.
  - The moral function of literature was increasingly counterbalanced by an emphasis on aesthetic pleasure and the psychology of the reader's response to beauty and sublimity.
  - An emphasis on originality and genius supplanted the primacy of imitation of classical authors or nature.

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- The early British practitioners of Romanticism included Thomas Gray, Oliver Goldsmith, and Robert Burns.
  - The English movement reached its most mature expression in the work of William Wordsworth, who saw nature as embodying a universal spirit, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge who, drawing on the work of Kant, Fichte, and Schelling, gave archetypal formulations to the powers of the poetic imagination.
  - Like their European counterparts, the English Romantics reacted at first favorably to the French Revolution and saw their own cultural and literary program as revolutionary.
  - As many critics, ranging from Lukács to Abrams and Raymond Williams, have noted, the Romantics saw themselves as inheriting a world disfigured by the squalor of bourgeois economic and political practice, a world fragmented by dualisms such as individual and society, past and present, sensation and intellect, reason and emotion; their task was to seek once again a unifying vision, usually through the aesthetic and cultural realms.

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- It is regarded as having transformed artistic styles and practices
  - Like many other terms applied to movements in the arts, the word covers a wide and varied range of artists and practices
  - It is a retrospective term, applied by later literary, art and musical historians. None of the artists we refer to as Romantics would have so described themselves
  - It was a European phenomenon, particularly powerful in Britain, France and Germany, but also affecting countries such as Italy, Spain and Poland. There was also, to some extent, an American version of the movement.

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- Like many other literary movements, it developed in **reaction to the dominant style of the preceding period:**
  - The eighteenth century is often described by literary historians as the **Augustan Age** because it sought to emulate the culture of the reign of the Roman Emperor Augustus (27 BCE – 14 CE)
  - **Classical standards** of order, harmony, proportion and objectivity were preferred – the period saw a revival of interest in classical architecture, for instance. In literature, **Greek and Roman authors were taken as models** and many eighteenth century writers either translated or produced imitations of poetry in classical forms.
  - In its early years, Romanticism was associated with **radical and revolutionary political ideologies**, again in reaction against the generally conservative mood of European society.







## Main features

**Central features of Romanticism** include:

- An emphasis on **emotional and imaginative spontaneity**. The **importance of self-expression and individual feeling**. Romantic poetry is one of the heart and the emotions, exploring the 'truth of the imagination' rather than scientific truth. The 'I' voice is central; it is the poet's perceptions and feelings that matter.
- An almost **religious response to nature**. They were concerned that Nature should not just be seen scientifically but as a living force, either made by a Creator, or as in some way divine, to be neglected at humankind's peril. Some of them were no longer Christian in their beliefs. Shelley was an atheist, and for a while Wordsworth was apantheist (the belief that god is in everything). Much of their poetry celebrated the beauty of nature, or protested the ugliness of the growing industrialization of the century: the machines, factories, slum conditions, pollution and so on.
- A **capacity for wonder** and consequently a reverence for the freshness and innocence of the **vision of childhood**. See The world of the Romantics: Attitudes to childhood

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- Emphasis on the **imagination as a positive and creative faculty**
  - An interest in '**primitive**' forms of art – for instance in the work of early poets (bards), in ancient ballads and folksongs. Some of the Romantics turned back to past times to find inspiration, either to the medieval period, or to Greek and Roman mythology. See Aspects of the Gothic: Gothic and the medieval revival.
  - An interest in and concern for the **outcasts of society**: tramps, beggars, obsessive characters and the poor and disregarded are especially evident in Romantic poetry.
  - An **idea of the poet** as a visionary figure, with an important role to play as prophet (in both political and religious terms).

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- The **first generation of Romantics** is also known as **the Lake Poets** because of their attachment to the Lake District in the north-west of England:
  - William Wordsworth (1770-1850) who came from the Lake District and was the leading poet of the group, whose work was especially associated with the centrality of the self and the love of nature;
  - Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) was Wordsworth's closest colleague and collaborator, a powerful intellectual whose work was often influenced by contemporary ideas about science and philosophy;
  - Robert Southey (1774-1843), a prolific writer of poetry and prose who settled in the Lake District and became Poet Laureate in 1813; his work was later mocked by Byron;
  - Charles Lamb (1775-1834) was a poet but is best-known for his essays and literary criticism; a Londoner, he was especially close to Coleridge;
  - Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859) the youngest member of the group, best known as an essayist and critic, who wrote a series of memories of the Lake Poets.