**https://prowritingaid.com/romanticism-characteristics**

**Romanticism** (or the **Romantic era**/**Period**) was an artistic, literary, and intellectual movement that originated in Europe toward the end of the 18th century and in most areas was at its peak in the approximate period from 1800 to 1840. Partly a reaction to the [Industrial Revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrial_Revolution), it was also a revolt against aristocratic social and political norms of the [Age of Enlightenment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Enlightenment) and a reaction against the scientific [rationalization](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rationalization_%28sociology%29) of nature.

Romanticism saw a shift from faith in reason to faith in the senses, feelings, and imagination; a shift from interest in urban society to an interest in the rural and natural; a shift from public, impersonal poetry to subjective poetry; and from concern with the scientific and mundane to interest in the mysterious and infinite. Mainly they cared about the individual, intuition, and imagination.

Although the movement was rooted in the German [**Sturm und Drang**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sturm_und_Drang)movement, which prized intuition and emotion over Enlightenment rationalism, the ideologies and events of the [French Revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Revolution) laid [the background](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanticism_and_the_French_Revolution) from which both Romanticism and the [Counter-Enlightenment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Counter-Enlightenment) emerged. The confines of the Industrial Revolution also had their influence on Romanticism, which was in part an escape from modern realities (industrialization, urbanization,secularization, and consumerism); indeed, in the second half of the 19th century, "[Realism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Realism_%28arts%29)" was offered as a polarized opposite to Romanticism.

**Characteristics of Romantic Literature**

1. **Awareness and Acceptance of Emotions:** emotions are more important than reason and formal rules. A focus on emotion is a key characteristic of nearly all writing from the Romantic period. When you read work of this period; you’ll see feelings described in all forms, including romantic and filial love, fear, sorrow, loneliness, introspection, psychology, melancholy, sadness and more. This focus on emotion offered a counterpoint to the rational, and it also made Romantic poetry and prose extremely readable and relatable.
2. [Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/84/84-h/84-h.htm) offers a perfect example of this characteristic of Romanticism. Here, Frankenstein’s monster shows great self-awareness of his feelings and offers a vivid emotional description full of anger and sadness.

I continued for the remainder of the day in my hovel in a state of utter and stupid despair. My protectors had departed and had broken the only link that held me to the world. For the first time the feelings of revenge and hatred filled my bosom, and I did not strive to control them, but allowing myself to be borne away by the stream, I bent my mind towards injury and death. When I thought of my friends, of the mild voice of De Lacey, the gentle eyes of Agatha, and the exquisite beauty of the Arabian, these thoughts vanished and a gush of tears somewhat soothed me. But again when I reflected that they had spurned and deserted me, anger returned, a rage of anger, and unable to injure anything human, I turned my fury towards inanimate objects. As night advanced I placed a variety of combustibles around the cottage, and after having destroyed every vestige of cultivation in the garden, I waited with forced impatience until the moon had sunk to commence my operations.

**3.Celebration of Artistic Creativity and Imagination:**

In contrast to the previous generations’ focus on reason, writers of the Romantic movement explored the importance of imagination and the creative impulse. Romantic poets and prose writers celebrated the power of imagination and the creative process, as well as the artistic viewpoint. They believed that artists and writers looked at the world differently, and they celebrated that vision in their work.

You can see this in [William Wordsworth](https://biography.yourdictionary.com/william-wordsworth)’s poem, “[The Prelude](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45542/the-prelude-book-1-childhood-and-school-time)."

Imagination—here the Power so called

Through sad incompetence of human speech,

That awful Power rose from the mind’s abyss

Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,

At once, some lonely traveller. I was lost;

Halted without an effort to break through;

But to my conscious soul I now can say—

“I recognise thy glory:” in such strength

Of usurpation, when the light of sense

Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed

The invisible world….

3. **Intuition:** Along the same lines, intuition and a reliance on “natural” feelings as a guide to conduct are valued over controlled, rationality.

**4. Glorification of Nature**

Romantic literature tends to emphasize a love of nature, a respect for primitivism, and a valuing of the common, "natural" man; Romantics idealize country life and believe that many of the ills of society are a result of urbanization.

a. Nature for the Romantics becomes a means for divine revelation.

b. It is also a metaphor for the creative process.

Natural elements also work as symbols for the unfettered emotions of the poet or writer, as in the final stanza of “[To Autumn](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44484/to-autumn)” by [John Keats](https://biography.yourdictionary.com/john-keats). Keats was aware that he was dying of consumption throughout much of his short life and career, and his celebration of autumn symbolizes the beauty in the ephemeral.

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they?

Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—

While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,

And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;

Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn

Among the river sallows, borne aloft

Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;

And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;

Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft

The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;

And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

**5- Idealization of women:** Romantic literature also explores the theme of *aesthetic* beauty, not just of nature but of people as well. This was especially true with descriptions of female beauty. Writers praised women of the Romantic era for their natural loveliness, rather than anything artificial or constrained.

A classic example of this characteristic is [George Gordon, or Lord Byron](https://biography.yourdictionary.com/george-gordon-noel-byron)’s, poem “[She Walks in Beauty](https://poets.org/poem/she-walks-beauty)."

She walks in beauty, like the night

Of cloudless climes and starry skies;

And all that’s best of dark and bright

Meet in her aspect and her eyes;

Thus mellowed to that tender light

Which heaven to gaudy day denies

**6- Themes of Solitude:** Writers of the Romantic era believed that creative inspiration came from solitary exploration. They celebrated the feeling of being alone, whether that meant loneliness or

a much-needed quiet space to think and create.

You’ll see solitary themes in many literary works from this period, including in this excerpt from [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](https://biography.yourdictionary.com/samuel-taylor-coleridge)’s poem “[Frost at Midnight](https://poets.org/poem/frost-midnight)."

The Frost performs its secret ministry,

Unhelped by any wind. The owlet’s cry

Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.

The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,

Have left me to that solitude, which suits

Abstruser musings: save that at my side

My cradled infant slumbers peacefully …

**7- Spiritual and Supernatural Elements**: The writers of the Romantic era did not turn away from the darker side of emotion and the mysteries of the supernatural. They explored the contrast between life and death. Many pieces have *Gothic motifs*, such as manor houses in disrepair,

dark and stormy nights, and more.

Some of the supernatural elements serve as symbols for emotions of guilt, depression, and other darker feelings, as you can see in this excerpt from [*The Fall of the House of Usher*](https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/the_fall_of_the_house_of_usher.pdf) by [Edgar Allan Poe](https://biography.yourdictionary.com/edgar-allan-poe).

I learned, moreover, at intervals, and through broken and equivocal hints, another singular feature of his mental condition. He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth --in regard to an influence whose supposititious force was conveyed in terms too shadowy here to be re-stated --an influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion, had, by dint of long sufferance, he said, obtained over his spirit-an effect which the physique of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the morale of his existence.

**8- Focus on Exoticism and History:**

Romantic-era literature often has a distinct focus on exotic locations and events or items from history. Poems and prose touch on antiques and the gifts of ancient cultures around the world, and far-away locations provide the setting for some literary works of this era.

One great example is [Percy Byssche Shelley](https://biography.yourdictionary.com/percy-bysshe-shelley)’s poem “[Ozymandias](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46565/ozymandias)."

I met a traveler from an antique land,

Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone

Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,

Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,

And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,

Tell that its sculptor well those passions read

**9- Vivid Sensory Descriptions:**

Another essential characteristic of nearly all Romantic-era literature is vivid sensory descriptions. The poems and prose of this period include [examples of simile](https://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-simile-poems.html) and metaphor, as well as visual imagery and other sensory details. Poets and other writers went beyond simply telling about things and instead gave the information readers need to feel and taste and touch the objects and surroundings in Romantic-era writing.

Wordsworth uses vivid descriptions, including similes and metaphors, in his famous poem, “[I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud](https://poets.org/poem/i-wandered-lonely-cloud)."

I wandered lonely as a cloud

That floats on high o’er vales and hills,

When all at once I saw a crowd,

A host, of golden daffodils;

Beside the lake, beneath the trees,

Fluttering and dancing in the breeze …

**10- Use of Personification:** Romantic poets and prose writers also used *personification* in their work. You can see [examples of personification](https://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-personification.html)of everything from birds and animals to natural events or aspects. These works even personify feelings like love or states like death.

You can see Romantic personification in the work of the famous naturalist and writer, Karl von Martius. Here is an excerpt about the trees of the Amazon from his book [*Flora Brasiliensis*](https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/9664#page/3/mode/1up).

I am impelled by some inner urge to tell you, gentle reader, these thoughts of my mind, since I am presenting to your eyes a picture of those most ancient trees which I once saw beside the Amazon River. Even today, after many years have gone by, I feel myself struck by the appearance of those giants of great age, in the same way as by the face of some giant human being. Even today those trees speak to me and fill my spirit with a certain pious fear, even today they excite in my breast that silent wonder with which my spirit was held at that time. This wonder is like a broad and deep river; the thoughts of the human mind are its waves; not all feelings of the heart are to be expressed with words....

**11- Focus on the Self and Autobiography:**

Many works of Romantic-era literature are deeply personal, and they often explore the self of the writer. You’ll see *autobiographical* influences in poems and prose of the period. One characteristic of this movement was the importance placed on feelings and creativity, and the source of much of this emotional and artistic work was the background and real-life surroundings of the writer. This self-focus preceded confessional poetry of the mid-1900s, but you can see its profound influence on that movement.

One key example of Romantic autobiography is [Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3913/3913-h/3913-h.htm). In this work, he endeavored to create an unvarnished look at his own upbringing and life.

I have begun on a work which is without precedent, whose accomplishment will have no imitator. I propose to set before my fellow-mortals a man in all the truth of nature; and this man shall be myself.

I have studied mankind and know my heart; I am not made like any one I have been acquainted with, perhaps like no one in existence; if not better, I at least claim originality, and whether Nature has acted rightly or wrongly in destroying the mold in which she cast me, can only be decided after I have been read.

### 12-  A Return to the Past:

Related to their critique of progress is the fact that Romanticists were fascinated with the past and resurrected it in various forms.

They used their writing to remind everyone of what the past had to offer and how far society had moved away from the good old days.

Many Romanticists glorified the Middle Ages and revived elements of literature—such as knights in shining armor and damsels in distress—that were perceived as more medieval.

Similarly, Romantic writers were interested in ruins and old artifacts of history. Many Romanticists traveled to Greece and Italy to glean inspiration from Greek and Roman ruins.

### 13- The Celebration of the Individual:

Many Romanticists saw themselves as self-reliant, independent individuals who stood apart from the rest of society, and some even chose to lead largely isolated, solitary lives. Romantics were also attracted to rebellion and revolution, especially concerned with human rights, individualism, freedom from oppression. The art often dealt with death, transience and mankind’s feelings about these things. The artist was an extremely individualistic creator whose creative spirit was more important than strict adherence to formal rules and traditional procedures.

1. The Byronic hero

b. Emphasis on the individual and subjectivity

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote an essay called Self-Reliance in 1841, describing the importance of determining your own path and relying on your own resources.

One well-known quote from the essay reads: "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.”

### The Purity of Childhood

Romanticists believed that children should be allowed to have a pure, happy childhood.

At the time, many children were forced to work in factories or as chimney sweeps, which was dangerous and grueling work for which they were paid extremely low wages. Romantic writers and poets depicted a different kind of childhood—a happy one full of play instead of work.

This is an excerpt from T.S. Arthur’s short story “An Angel in Disguise” (1851): "The sweetness of that sick child, looking ever to

her in love, patience, and gratitude, was as honey to her soul, and she carried her in her heart as well as in her arms, a precious burden."

Here, Arthur describes the way a child’s “love, patience, and gratitude” brings happiness to a family.

## Romantic literature

In literature, Romanticism found recurrent themes in the evocation or criticism of the past, the cult of "[sensibility](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sensibility)" with its emphasis on women and children, the heroic isolation of the artist or narrator, and respect for a new, wilder, untrammelled and "pure" nature. Furthermore, several romantic authors, such as [**Edgar Allan Poe**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_Allan_Poe) and [**Nathaniel Hawthorne**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathaniel_Hawthorne), based their writings on the [supernatural](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supernatural)/[occult](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occult) and human [psychology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychology). Romanticism tended to regard [satire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satire) as something unworthy of serious attention, a prejudice still influential today.

The precursors of Romanticism in English poetry go back to the first half of the 18th century, with figures such as [**Joseph Warton**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Warton)(headmaster at [Winchester College](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winchester_College)) and his brother [**Thomas Warton**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Warton), professor of Poetry at [Oxford University](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oxford_University) Joseph maintained that invention and imagination were the chief qualities of a poet. [**Thomas Chatterton**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Chatterton) is generally considered to be the first Romantic poet in English.The Scottish poet [**James Macpherson**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Macpherson) influenced the early development of Romanticism with the international success of his [**Ossian**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ossian) cycle of poems published in 1762, inspiring both Goethe and the young [**Walter Scott**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Scott). The [**Gothic novel**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gothic_novel), beginning with [**Horace Walpole**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horace_Walpole)'s [***The Castle of Otranto***](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Castle_of_Otranto) (1764), was an important precursor of one strain of Romanticism, with a delight in horror and threat, and exotic picturesque settings.

### English literature

In English literature, the group of poets now considered the key figures of the Romantic movement includes [**William Wordsworth**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wordsworth), [**Samuel Taylor Coleridge**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Taylor_Coleridge), [**John Keats**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Keats), [**Percy Bysshe Shelley**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Percy_Bysshe_Shelley), and the much older [**William Blake**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Blake), followed later by the isolated figure of [**John Clare**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Clare). The publication in 1798 of [***Lyrical Ballads***](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyrical_Ballads)**,** with many of the finest poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge, is often held to mark the start of the movement. The majority of the poems were by Wordsworth, and many dealt with the lives of the poor in his native [Lake District](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake_District), or the poet's feelings about nature, which were to be more fully developed in his long poem [***The Prelude***](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Prelude), never published in his lifetime.

In contrast [**Lord Byron**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_Byron) and [**Walter Scott**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Scott) achieved enormous fame and influence throughout Europe with works exploiting the violence and drama of their exotic and historical settings; Byron was "undoubtedly the greatest genius of our century", according to no less a figure than Goethe. Scott achieved immediate success with his long narrative poem [***The Lay of the Last Minstrel***](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lay_of_the_Last_Minstrel) in 1805, followed by the full [epic poem](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epic_poem) [***Marmion***](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marmion_%28poem%29) in 1808. Both were set in the distant Scottish past. Byron had equal success with the first part of [***Childe Harold's Pilgrimage***](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Childe_Harold%27s_Pilgrimage) in 1812.

The most significant novelist in English during the peak Romantic period, other than Walter Scott, was [**Jane Austen**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Austen), whose essentially conservative world-view had little in common with her Romantic contemporaries, retaining a strong belief in decorum and social rules, though critics have detected tremors under the surface of some works, especially [***Mansfield Park***](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mansfield_Park) (1814) and [***Persuasion***](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persuasion) (1817). But around the mid-century the undoubtedly Romantic novels of the [**Brontë family**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bront%C3%AB_family) appeared, in particular [**Charlotte's**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlotte_Bront%C3%AB)[***Jane Eyre***](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Eyre) and [**Emily's**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emily_Bront%C3%AB)[***Wuthering Heights***](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wuthering_Heights), which were both published in 1847.

Byron, Keats and Shelley all wrote for the stage, but with little success in England, with Shelley's [***The Cenci***](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cenci) perhaps the best work produced, though that was not played in a public theatre in England until a century after his death. Byron's plays, along with dramatisations of his poems and Scott's novels, were much more popular on the Continent, and especially in France, and through these versions several were turned into operas, many still performed today. If contemporary poets had little success on the stage, the period was a legendary one for performances of [**Shakespeare**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakespeare), and went some way to restoring his original texts and removing the Augustan "improvements" to them. The greatest actor of the period, [**Edmund Kean**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund_Kean), restored the tragic ending to [***King Lear***](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_Lear); Coleridge said that, “Seeing him act was like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning.”

#### Influence of European Romanticism on American writers

The European Romantic movement reached America in the early 19th century. American Romanticism was just as multifaceted and individualistic as it was in Europe. Like the Europeans, the American Romantics demonstrated a high level of moral enthusiasm, commitment to individualism and the unfolding of the self, an emphasis on intuitive perception, and the assumption that the natural world was inherently good, while human society was filled with corruptionThe Romantic movement gave rise to New England [**Transcendentalism**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transcendentalism) which portrayed a less restrictive relationship between God and Universe. The new philosophy presented the individual with a more personal relationship with God.

American Romanticism embraced the individual and rebelled against the confinement of neoclassicism and religious tradition. The Romantic movement in America created a new literary genre that continues to influence American writers. Novels, short stories, and poems replaced the sermons and manifestos of yore. Romantic literature was personal, intense, and portrayed more emotion than ever seen in neoclassical literature. America's preoccupation with freedom became a great source of motivation for Romantic writers as many were delighted in free expression and emotion without so much fear of ridicule and controversy. They also put more effort into the psychological development of their characters, and the main characters typically displayed extremes of sensitivity and excitement.