

Subject: Literature of the Language

Level: 2nd Year

British Romanticism

Romanticism is the term applied to the literary and artistic movement that took place between 1785 and 1832 in Western Europe. Occurring in the context of the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, and the social, political, and economic changes that occurred following the Augustan Age, Romanticism moved away from an emphasis on the importance of an empirical, material worldview and looked to the imagination and nature as sources of insight.¹ The beginning of the Romantic period in English literature was marked by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798.

Romantic literature is characterized by several features. It emphasized the dream, or inner, world of the individual and visionary, fantastic, or imagery. Romantic literature emphasized the individual self and the value of the individual's experience. Feeling and emotion were viewed as superior to logic and analysis. For the romantics, poetry was believed to be the highest form of literature, and novels were regarded as a lower form, often as sensationalistic and titillating, even by those most addicted to reading them. Most novels of the time were written by women and were therefore widely regarded as a threat to serious, intellectual culture. Despite this, some of the most famous British novelists wrote during this period, including Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, and Sir Walter Scott. In addition, this period saw the flowering of some of the greatest poets in the English language: the first generation of William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth, followed by the second generation of Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats.²

Romantic Poetry

An interesting aspect of the romantic period was the emphasis on poetry. Most of the great romantic writers were poets instead of novelists, as novels were widely regarded as inherently inferior to poetry. Critics have offered various reasons for this prejudice. Some suggest it arose from the fact that most novelists were female, and because women were devalued during the romantic period, their work was discounted. Others note that many novels were of poor quality, giving the entire genre a bad reputation. In addition, as Bradford K. Mudge notes

in his foreword in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, the poets themselves, notably Wordsworth and Coleridge, campaigned against the spread of popular fiction, claiming it would lower the tastes of the reading public and lead them away from poetry. According to Mudge, Wordsworth wrote that newspapers, novels, plays, and even some poetry, would “encourage mental lethargy” and reduce readers to “a savage, uncivilized state.”

In keeping with their glorification of the unlimited freedom and potential of the individual, the romantics rejected **old poetic conventions**, such as the heroic couplet used by Alexander Pope, and **asserted the value of the language spoken by ordinary people**. They believed that **the form of a verse should be shaped by the subject matter**, in contrast to the neoclassicists before them, who used rigid forms and shaped their material to fit them.

Sources

1. <https://sites.udel.edu/britlitwiki/the-romantics/>
2. Milne, I. M., & Gale Group. (2009). *Literary movements for students: presenting analysis, context, and criticism on literary movements* / Ira Mark Milne, project editor. (2nd ed.). Gale.