

ROMANTICISM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE: MAJOR THEMES AND INNOVATIONS

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ABSTRACT: Romanticism, which emerged in the late 18th century, marked a radical break from the rationality and order of the Enlightenment and introduced new aesthetic, philosophical, and literary perspectives. This article examines the core themes and innovations of English Romanticism, focusing on the works of major poets such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy B. Shelley, and John Keats. The study highlights Romanticism's emphasis on individuality, imagination, nature, emotion, and the sublime. Additionally, it explores the movement's formal experiments, including new poetic diction, the rise of lyrical poetry, and the reconstruction of the poet's role in society. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how Romantic writers transformed English literature and shaped modern literary thought.

Keywords: Romanticism, English literature, imagination, nature, emotion, sublime, Lyrical Ballads, Romantic poets.

INTRODUCTION

The late 18th and early 19th centuries marked one of the most transformative periods in English literary history. Romanticism emerged as a response to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the socio-economic changes brought by the Industrial Revolution. As M.H. Abrams notes, Romanticism represented a “shift from outer to inner, from the

objective to the subjective, and from reason to imagination" (Abrams, 1973). English Romantic poets rejected classical rules and instead promoted creativity, emotional depth, and spiritual connection with nature.

Historically, Romanticism developed alongside political events such as the American Revolution (1776) and the French Revolution (1789), which sparked widespread debates about freedom, individuality, and human rights. These ideals strongly influenced English writers, who sought new artistic forms that could express personal experience and the complexity of human emotion.

This article analyses the major themes and literary innovations of English Romanticism by reviewing the works and contributions of its central figures. It also examines the movement's lasting influence on modern literature.

METHODS

This research employs a **qualitative, literary-analytical approach** grounded in the following methods:

A survey of classical scholarly works, including those by M.H. Abrams, Harold Bloom, and Stuart Curran, was conducted to outline the theoretical foundations of Romantic literature.

Primary texts such as Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and Keats's odes were analysed to identify recurring themes and stylistic innovations.

Romantic works were examined within the political, social, and philosophical environment of the 18th–19th centuries to understand the motivations behind new literary forms. These methods provide a comprehensive picture of Romanticism and its contributions to English literary tradition. The study reveals that English Romantic literature is characterized by several dominant themes and key innovations that collectively redefine poetry and literary expression.

One of Romanticism's strongest themes is the sanctity of nature. Wordsworth describes nature as “the anchor of my purest thoughts” (*Prelude*, Book I). Romantic poets portray nature not merely as scenery but as a source of wisdom, healing, and moral insight.

Coleridge emphasized imagination as the supreme creative faculty, defining it as “the living power and prime agent of all human perception” (*Biographia Literaria*, 1817). Romantic imagination allowed poets to transcend reality and explore the supernatural, the dreamlike, and the mysterious.

Romantic literature celebrated emotional intensity. Keats’s famous line - “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”—illustrates the Romantic belief in feeling as a source of knowledge and artistic expression.

Influenced by Edmund Burke, Romantic poets often explored the sublime—experiences of awe, terror, and vastness that transcend rational understanding. Mountains, storms, and the sea appear frequently as symbols of overwhelming natural power.

Romanticism elevated personal freedom and rejected societal constraints. Byron’s “Byronic hero”—a rebellious, passionate, and solitary figure—became a new literary archetype influencing future generations.

Romantic poets introduced:

- **New poetic diction** (Wordsworth rejected artificial neoclassical vocabulary)
- **Lyrical poetry** focusing on personal experience
- **Blending of genres**, such as narrative poems with philosophical reflection
- **Emphasis on musicality**, imagery, and symbolism

These innovations modernized English poetry and expanded its expressive possibilities.

DISCUSSION

The Romantic movement fundamentally reshaped English literary culture by challenging the mechanical rationalism of the Enlightenment. Its emphasis on imagination and subjectivity helped shift literature towards explorations of psychological depth. According to Bloom (1971), Romantic poets “redefined the nature of poetic originality” by centering creative expression on individuality.

Romantic themes also reflected broader cultural changes. The industrialization of Britain led poets to criticize mechanization and urban life, seeking spiritual refuge in the natural world. Romanticism also fostered early forms of environmental consciousness. Furthermore, the movement inspired later literary developments:

- **Victorian poetry** inherited Romantic emotionality but added moral complexity.
- **Modernism** reacted against Romantic sentimentality yet adopted its focus on personal consciousness.
- **Contemporary eco-literature** draws heavily on Romantic views of nature.

Thus, Romanticism is not a closed historical phase but a foundation on which much of modern literature stands.

CONCLUSION

Romanticism in English literature represents a significant transition from classical restraint to emotional and imaginative freedom. Its major themes—nature, emotion, imagination, individuality, and the sublime—introduced profound philosophical and artistic innovations. Through their rejection of rigid conventions, Romantic poets transformed poetic language and inspired future movements across the literary world. The Romantic tradition continues to influence literature, culture, and environmental thought, proving the enduring relevance of its artistic vision.

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