

Romanticism: Overview, Texts and Resources

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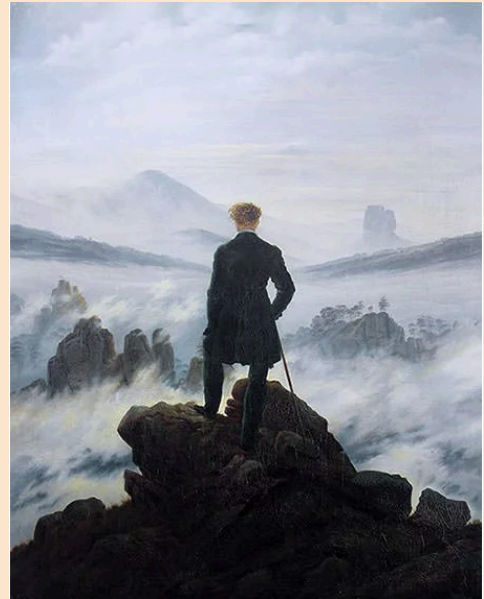
[Presentation slides](#)

Romanticism names a period in European history dating from the late 18th century (the 1770s or so) until about 1850. The beginnings of Romanticism coincide with the American Revolution (1776) and the French Revolution (1789). Both Revolutions exemplify Enlightenment and Romantic ideals.

1. Romanticism as Reaction

“The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know.” -- Blaise Pascal

Romanticism was a conscious reaction against the rationalism of the Enlightenment: it emphasized feeling over reason; the individual over society; and imagination and intuition over logical methods and systems. (The German *Sturm und Drang*, “Storm and Stress” movement typified the prioritization of emotion over reason, and Goethe’s novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, epitomized that movement. See this [two-paragraph introduction](#) to it and this [brief excerpt from the novel](#).)



Romanticism was also a very conscious counter trend to industrialization and urban civilization, emphasizing nature and sympathy for the common man in contrast to polluted cities and dehumanizing factory work. (See the poem and image, “[The Cyclops: Addressed to the Birmingham Artisans](#)”)

2. Feeling and Imagination

“The Artist’s feeling is his law.” -- Caspar David Friedrich

Feeling was elevated above reason as a primary faculty, something at once more primal and more transcendent than logic. Feeling was tied to the imagination with strong spiritual overtones, connecting the individual with the divine through the power of creativity. Imagination could also synthesize and reconcile contradictions. See, for example, how Pascal articulates the paradoxically combined values of reason and feeling in this [Thoughts](#). Feeling was also tied to a strong sense of sympathy, especially for the poor, the disenfranchised, women, and children. (The Cyclops poem in the last section exemplifies an effort to sympathize with common laborers.)

3. Individualism

Romantics championed individual thought, genius, and originality (in contrast to

conformity to social expectations). The “Romantic Hero” dared to go boldly beyond the known or accepted, to strive for the unattainable, especially when inspired by one’s own feelings or personal vision. (Read the intro and synopsis of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem, [The Rime of the Ancient Mariner](#) to get a sense of the way a Romantic hero was depicted.) Individualism also manifested itself as a preference for solitude and opposition to cities or societies with all their constraints. The doctor in Mary Shelley’s famous novel, *Frankenstein*, exemplifies Romantic individualism by daring to go beyond the norms of traditional science and morality by reanimating the dead (read this [dramatic excerpt from Frankenstein](#)). Nationalism is an extension of the idea of individualism and Romanticism greatly contributed to its development.

4. Nature

“The first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature. “ -- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Nature was considered to be a refuge from the oppression of urban life, pollution, and industrialization. It was considered to be a source of fundamental human joy and connection with the divine. Nature was idealized by poets like Wordsworth. Read "[I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud](#)." [[alternate link](#)]. Wordsworth called poetic creativity "emotion recollected in tranquility" and this seems often to be associated with taking inspiration from nature. Edmund Burke’s concept of [the “sublime”](#) would connect nature to psychological and artistic pleasures and terrors.

5. The Arts and the Artist

With its focus on the individual, originality, and imagination, Romanticism was tightly tied to the arts and to elevating the importance of artists as heroes, geniuses, and creators (not just technicians). Much of Romanticism is best represented through music (such as [Beethoven's](#) dramatic work); through the visual arts (like [William Turner's moody paintings](#)); and by literature (see Wordsworth's "[Tintern Abbey](#)") .

6. The Faraway and Fantastic

Romantics looked far away in time, transcending the present period and idealizing the past (and sometimes the future with utopian plans). Unlike in the Renaissance or the Enlightenment, the past more idealized in the Romantic period was medieval times, especially stories of King Arthur's court. [See this painting](#) and read the very short poetical excerpt from Tennyson that goes along with it. The painting, "The Lady of Shalott" depicts a romanticized scene from an Arthurian story. Another example of this attraction to the faraway and fantastic is exemplified in Coleridge's "[Kubla Khan](#)." Read the first 10 lines or so to get a taste. One can also see an example of romantic poetry looking into the past with Shelley's "[Ozymandias](#)."

7. The Gothic

This is the dark side of Romanticism and is tied to our love/fear of the unknown, the extreme, and the dark sides of our nature. It was manifest in the love for ancient ruins and their mysteriousness, and in the psychological extremes of love and violence. It

also showed up in our fears about the powers of science, as in Mary Shelley's, *Frankenstein* ([excerpt](#)). Romanticism was fascinated with things that inspired terror, with dystopias, with the occult, or whatever transgressed social norms in the name of daring individuality. Romantics tapped into the primal parts of the human psyche and into dark powers and extreme, dangerous emotion. This was evident in Gothic novels like Bram Stoker's *Dracula* ([read this excerpt from *Dracula*](#)) and in the genre of horror fiction and film that continues to this day.