

Objectives

- identify the characteristics of Romantic writing
- compare the values of Romantic writers with those of neoclassical writers
- understand the history of Romanticism in Germany, England, and France, and identify major Romantic writers in these countries

Revolt Against Neoclassicism

Explain to students that neoclassical writers modeled their works on those of ancient Greece and Rome, which they believed contained universal truths and rules of form important in writing. Neoclassicists stressed balance, order, logic, sophisticated wit, and emotional restraint, focusing on society and the human intellect and avoiding personal feelings. Some of the major neoclassical writers included Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Johnson, and Voltaire.

Romanticism

Have you ever been surprised by the power of emotions expressed in a literary work? Maybe you've tried to convey your own feelings in a poem or story. Writing that emphasizes the expression of intense emotion is called **Romantic**. Romantic writing is also marked by an intense interest in nature, individual experience, and the imagination.

Romanticism was an artistic and intellectual movement that began in Europe in the late 18th century and continued well into the mid-19th century. The movement revolutionized ideas regarding artistic creation and forms of expression in Germany, England, and France. In fact, many of the intensely emotional and imaginative qualities of Romantic writing are evident in literature today.



Romanticism often emphasized the individual's experience with nature. *The Wanderer Above the Sea of Clouds*. (1818). Caspar David Friedrich. Hamburg Kunsthalle, Germany. The Bridgeman Art Library.

Revolt Against Neoclassicism

Romantic writers rebelled against the neoclassical ideals of the 18th century. While the neoclassicists valued reason, form, and order, the Romantics celebrated spontaneous feeling and freedom from rules and conventions. While the neoclassicists wrote tightly controlled poetry in the classical mold and witty satiric essays, the Romantics wrote serious lyric poems about their own experiences. The chart below identifies some of the differences between neoclassical and Romantic writers.

Neoclassical Writers

- ▶ Stressed reason and intellect
- ▶ Wrote about objective issues that concerned society as a whole, such as politics and religion
- ▶ Respected the man-made institutions of church and state
- ▶ Believed in order in all things
- ▶ Maintained traditional standards
- ▶ Focused on adult concerns, primarily those of the ruling class
- ▶ Controlled emotion, which was often expressed in the form of wit
- ▶ Followed formal rules and diction in poetry

Romantic Writers

- ▶ Stressed emotions and imagination
- ▶ Wrote about subjective experiences of the individual, such as desires, hopes, and dreams
- ▶ Appreciated nature in all its creative and destructive forces
- ▶ Believed in spontaneity in thought and action
- ▶ Believed in experimentation
- ▶ Reflected on the experiences of childhood, unsophisticated societies, and common people
- ▶ Celebrated intense passion and vision
- ▶ Sought a more natural poetic form and diction

Romantic Movements Across Europe

German Romanticism Romanticism in Germany developed as a series of separate movements. Some of the defining characteristics of German Romanticism first appeared in the late-18th-century movement called *Sturm und Drang* (‘storm and stress’). Among the leading figures in this movement, which glorified nature, emotion, and individuality, was the writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The handsome, brooding main character in Goethe’s popular first novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), came to represent the ideal young Romantic hero. Later movements in German Romanticism emphasized an interest in nature and an exploration of the supernatural.

YOUR TURN Why do you think many Romantics were drawn to the supernatural?

English Romanticism Critics often mark the beginning of the English Romantic age with the publication of the poetry collection *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1798. In his famous preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth defined Romantic poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.”

In addition to Wordsworth and Coleridge, poets William Blake, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats dominated the English Romantic movement. These poets deliberately chose language and subjects taken from common life instead of upper-class life. They also turned to nature to stimulate their own thinking and reflect on the relationship between the real and the ideal.

YOUR TURN Why do you think the Romantics found such strong inspiration in the natural world?

French Romanticism The Romantic movement did not emerge in France until 1820. Profoundly influenced by the events and ideas of the French Revolution, the French people called for “a new society, a new literature.” They found a literary leader in Victor Hugo, whose highly personal and emotional poetry, novels, and dramas reflected Romanticism’s independence from the rules of neoclassicism. Among his best-known works are *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831) and *Les Misérables* (1862), both of which reveal Hugo’s interest in the suffering of common people. Other major French Romantics were the novelists George Sand and Stendhal.

Strategies for Reading: Romantic Literature

1. Notice how the Romantic writers freely embraced such subjects as life, death, love, and nature.
2. Read each poem aloud several times and identify its sound devices. Think about what mood these devices help create.
3. Pay attention to the extensive use of imagery and figurative language and try to visualize the images and comparisons being made.

4. Watch for elements of the exotic and supernatural and think about what these might represent.
5. **Monitor** your reading strategies and modify them when your understanding breaks down. Remember to use your strategies for Active Reading: **predict, visualize, connect, question, clarify, and evaluate.**

Romantic Movements Across Europe

German Romanticism You may want to further explain the concept of the Romantic hero. Tell students that Romantic heroes are rebellious, moody figures of great passion and strong will. In Goethe’s novel, *Werther* is hopelessly in love and ultimately destroyed by his great passion.

YOUR TURN

Possible Response: The supernatural allowed Romantic writers to freely use their imaginations.

English Romanticism Tell students that the poems in *Lyrical Ballads*, with their simple language and subject matter drawn largely from nature and common life, represented a sharp departure from the more formally crafted poetry of the day. Though now considered a cornerstone of England’s Romantic movement, *Lyrical Ballads* was praised by only a handful of critics when it was first published in 1798.

YOUR TURN

Possible Response: The natural world brought the Romantics closer to God and the ideal.

French Romanticism Tell students that Victor Hugo felt that a poet should lead the people, and his writing became overtly political toward the end of his life.

Strategies for Reading

Tell students that although Romantic poetry may seem old-fashioned, Romanticism emphasized the expression of individual thoughts and feelings, a trend that continues to dominate contemporary poetry, fiction, art, and song lyrics. As students read the selections in this part, ask them to compare the topics and themes they encounter with those found in contemporary culture.