
ROMANTICISM

Romanticism refers generally to a movement or style that developed among European and American thinkers and writers during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when both societies were experiencing industrialization, urbanization, and revolution. The term is broad (and vague) enough that its legitimacy was challenged by literary scholars as early as the 1920s. Nevertheless, the term can still be useful. Below are a number of characteristics associated with literary texts that have often been deemed romantic, but not all romantic texts share all of these elements. It is important to note that *Romanticism*, like other such labels, provides scholars with an intellectual shortcut for identifying a broad cultural movement—it is an abstraction with no agency of its own. Note also that the term is used very differently from our everyday usage of the word *romantic*.

1. Dissatisfaction with the Enlightenment’s reverence for reason. Romantic texts tend to question the assumptions of the 18th-century intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment, especially its assumptions regarding the orderly nature of the world and the ability of human reason to understand and master both the internal world of the human self and the external world of nature and circumstance. Romantic authors generally denied that rationality is a sufficient source for a happy and meaningful life; they thus emphasized the importance of emotional and spiritual experiences.
2. Preoccupation with the self. Romantic authors tended to think of literary works as, first and foremost, a means of imaginative self-expression. Likewise, they often glorified individual freedom and creativity through their characters (leading to the idea of the “romantic hero”). Their emphasis on the self often reinforced the importance of emotion (as opposed to reason), which was portrayed as an upwelling of the individual self or soul.
3. Preoccupation with nature. Romantic poetry and fiction often glorify the beauty and wildness of nature. While admiring nature for its own beauty, romantic authors often used depictions of nature as metaphors or symbols of human experiences. Nature’s wildness, for instance, was used to represent the powers of human emotion. Twisting this possibility, the gothic variety of romanticism (see below) shifted attention away from beauty towards the wild, dangerous, and unknown aspects of nature—a strategy that challenged the Enlightenment vision of nature as orderly, knowable, and subject to human control.
4. Emphasis on darkness. Many romantic texts, especially those that are associated with the gothic genre, dwell on the dark side of human nature. Gothic texts explore human evil, often rejecting the Enlightenment notion that human nature is essentially good. Gothic texts also focus on the dark side of human experience, emphasizing the unpredictable, tragic, and ironic aspects of human life and sometimes undermining notions of human freedom with a emphasis on the mysterious power of fate.



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