



Included in this workshop:
READING 2C Relate the characters, setting, and theme of a literary work to the historical, social, and economic ideas of its time. **3** Evaluate the changes in sound, form, figurative language, and graphics in poetry across literary time periods.

Romanticism

“There was a mighty ferment in the heads of statesmen and poets, kings, and people. . . . It was a time of promise, a renewal of the world,” wrote essayist William Hazlitt in 1825 to describe the age of revolution that occurred at the turn of the 19th century. Born from this ferment was the literary movement known as romanticism.

Revolt Against Neoclassicism

In the British literary tradition, **romanticism** refers to a period dominated by William Wordsworth and four other poets: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats. The movement in England is considered to have begun in 1798 with the publication of the poetry collection *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge.

In his famous preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth declared the poems “experiments” in poetic language and subject matter. He deliberately chose language and subjects taken from common life instead of upper-class life. The second generation of romantic poets—Byron, Shelley, and Keats—added their unique voices and visions to Wordsworth’s foundation, taking their poetry in slightly different directions. Despite their differences, the English romantics were united in rebellion against their Enlightenment forebears—John Dryden, Alexander Pope, and Samuel Johnson. In breaking from neoclassical conventions, the romantics expressed a new sensibility of freedom and self-expression. Where the neoclassical writers—also called the Augustans—admired and imitated classical forms, the romantics looked to nature for inspiration. Where the Augustans prized reason, the romantics celebrated strong emotions. Where the Augustans wrote witty satires ridiculing others, the romantics wrote serious lyric poems about their own experiences.



On the Minnow Stream, Dorking, Surrey, Charles Collins.

Romantic Poetry’s Defining Features

Wordsworth essentially defined five features of English romanticism in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.

A New Concept in Poetry Wordsworth’s emphasis on personal experience and the glorification of the individual are very different from earlier poets’ emphasis on the greater world of human behavior. To some degree, all romantic poets wrote about the intricate workings of their own minds and emotions.

A New Spontaneity and Freedom Wordsworth described poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” Critical of the artificiality they saw in much neoclassical literature, the romantics placed a high value on expressing strong emotion and the free play of imagination: “I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!” imparts Shelley in “Ode to the West Wind” (page 864).

Love of Nature Romantic poetry is often dubbed “nature poetry” because romantic poems often focus on aspects of the natural world. However, romantic poets did not simply describe natural settings and images; they used them as a catalyst to explore their own thoughts and feelings. For instance, “a beauteous evening” for Wordsworth is an occasion for spiritual contemplation.

The Importance of the Commonplace Wordsworth wanted to enlarge the province of poetry to include “incidents and situations from common life.” Romantics often chose humble subjects, such as rustic life, and celebrated ordinary things, such as an early morning stroll or a field of daffodils.

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o’er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;

—William Wordsworth, “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”

Close Read

Which characteristics of romantic poetry does this passage contain? Explain.

Fascination with the Supernatural and the Exotic While Wordsworth concentrated mostly on ordinary life, Coleridge introduced mystery and magic into English romantic poetry. From the wonderfully strange journey in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (page 814) to the “stately pleasure dome” of “Kubla Khan” (page 841), Coleridge opened up to poetry the realm of the supernatural and the exotic.

The following chart lists the main differences between neoclassical and romantic writers.

NEOCLASSICAL WRITERS	ROMANTIC WRITERS
stressed reason and common sense	stressed emotion and imagination
wrote about objective issues that concerned society as a whole	wrote about subjective experiences of the individual
respected human institutions of church and state	exalted nature in all its creative and destructive forces
exercised controlled wit and urbanity	celebrated intense passion and vision
maintained traditional standards and believed in order	believed in experimentation and spontaneity of thought