



The foundations of English romanticism: The literary contributions of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge

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Abstract

English Romanticism emerged during the late eighteenth century as a reaction against the rationalism, artificiality, and strict literary conventions of the Neoclassical Age. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge played a decisive role in establishing this literary movement through the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), a work that transformed English poetry by emphasizing ordinary life, nature, imagination, emotion, and individual experience. While *Lyrical Ballads* marked the beginning of Romanticism, both poets continued to shape English literature through their later works and literary theories. Wordsworth's emphasis on nature, memory, and the common man, together with Coleridge's exploration of imagination, the supernatural, and philosophical criticism, laid the intellectual and artistic foundations of Romantic literature. Their influence extended beyond their own generation, inspiring poets such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, Lord Byron, Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Matthew Arnold, Thomas Hardy, W. B. Yeats, and even modern writers. This article examines their contributions, major works, literary characteristics, and enduring influence on English literature.

Keywords: English Romanticism, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, nature, imagination, romantic poetry

Introduction

The Romantic Movement began in England during the closing years of the eighteenth century. It emerged as a reaction against the emphasis on reason, order, and classical rules that dominated eighteenth-century literature. Romantic writers believed that poetry should express genuine emotions, celebrate imagination, and portray the beauty of nature. The publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 is widely regarded as the formal beginning of English Romanticism. Written jointly by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the collection challenged existing poetic conventions by presenting ordinary subjects in simple language while also exploring the mysterious and supernatural. Their collaboration revolutionized English poetry and introduced themes that continue to influence literature today.

Although *Lyrical Ballads* served as the foundation of Romanticism, the literary achievements of Wordsworth and Coleridge extend far beyond this collection. Through their poetry, criticism, and philosophical writings, they redefined the purpose of literature and expanded the possibilities of poetic expression.

Historical Background of English Romanticism

Several historical events contributed to the rise of Romanticism. The Industrial Revolution transformed society through rapid urbanization, leading many writers to lament the loss of rural life and humanity's connection with nature. Similarly, the French Revolution initially inspired hopes for liberty, equality, and social justice, though its later violence complicated these ideals. Against this background, Romantic writers emphasized personal freedom, imagination, emotional authenticity, and the dignity of ordinary individuals. Wordsworth and Coleridge emerged as the leading voices of this new literary movement.

Lyrical Ballads and the Birth of Romanticism

The publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 is considered one of the most important events in the history of English literature because it marked the beginning of the Romantic Age. Before this collection appeared, eighteenth-century poetry was largely influenced by Neoclassical ideals, which emphasized reason, order, balance, classical rules, and sophisticated poetic language. Poets of the earlier period often wrote about society, politics, and moral lessons using a highly polished and artificial style. In contrast, *Lyrical Ballads* challenged these traditions by focusing on ordinary people, common experiences, emotions, and the beauty of nature. It introduced a new understanding of poetry in which imagination, feeling, and personal experience became central.

One of the major contributions of *Lyrical Ballads* was its use of simple and natural language. William Wordsworth believed that poetry should not be separated from everyday life. He argued that the language of poetry should be close to the language used by ordinary people, especially those living in rural areas, because their emotions were genuine and their connection with nature was deeper. Instead of writing about kings, heroes, and grand historical events, Wordsworth focused on common people such as children, villagers, and farmers. Through these simple subjects, he explored universal human feelings like love, loss, innocence, memory, and hope.

Wordsworth's poems in the collection reflect his belief that nature is a powerful teacher and a source of spiritual growth. In *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth describes how his return to the landscape near Tintern Abbey awakens memories and provides emotional comfort. Nature is not presented merely as a beautiful physical scene; it becomes a living force that shapes human thoughts, moral values, and imagination. Wordsworth

suggests that the natural world can heal the mind, inspire reflection, and create a deeper understanding of life.

In *We Are Seven*, Wordsworth explores the innocence and imagination of childhood. The poem presents a conversation between the speaker and a young girl who insists that her deceased siblings are still part of her family. Through the child's simple belief, Wordsworth highlights the purity of childhood perception and contrasts it with the limited understanding of adults. The poem shows his interest in ordinary people and his belief that deep truths can be found in simple human experiences.

Similarly, *The Tables Turned* expresses Wordsworth's idea that nature provides knowledge that cannot always be gained through books alone. He argues that direct experience of the natural world can educate the mind and develop wisdom. The poem criticizes excessive intellectual study and suggests that observing nature can reveal important truths about humanity and existence.

While Wordsworth focused mainly on nature, rural life, and human emotions, Samuel Taylor Coleridge contributed a different dimension to *Lyrical Ballads* by exploring the supernatural and mysterious aspects of human experience. His famous poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* contains supernatural events such as curses, strange creatures, and ghostly experiences. However, Coleridge made these elements convincing by connecting them with realistic human emotions, psychological struggles, guilt, fear, and moral responsibility. The supernatural events do not appear as meaningless fantasy; instead, they represent deeper questions about human actions and their consequences.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner also reflects Romantic ideas about the relationship between humanity and nature. The Mariner's suffering begins when he kills the albatross, a creature associated with nature and innocence. His punishment teaches him the importance of respecting all forms of life. Through this moral journey, Coleridge suggests that humans are connected to the natural world and must recognize their responsibility toward it.

The success and influence of *Lyrical Ballads* increased with the publication of its second edition in 1800, which included Wordsworth's famous "Preface." This Preface became one of the most important statements of Romantic literary theory and is often called the manifesto of English Romanticism. In it, Wordsworth explained his ideas about the purpose and nature of poetry. He famously described poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" that originates from emotions and is later "recollected in tranquility." This means that poetry begins with a strong emotional experience, but the poet creates the poem through calm reflection and thoughtful memory.

In the Preface, Wordsworth also rejected the artificial poetic style of the eighteenth century. He argued that poetry should use the real language of ordinary people, especially the language of rural communities, because genuine emotions are expressed more naturally through simple speech. He believed that the poet is not a distant figure but a person who possesses greater sensitivity and imagination, allowing him or her to understand and express common human experiences more deeply.

Overall, *Lyrical Ballads* transformed English poetry by shifting attention from reason and formal rules to emotion, imagination, nature, and individual experience. Wordsworth's focus on ordinary life and nature, combined with Coleridge's exploration of the supernatural and human

psychology, created the foundation of Romantic literature. The collection encouraged poets to explore personal feelings, the beauty of the natural world, and the power of the human imagination, making it one of the most influential works in literary history.

William Wordsworth's Contribution to English Literature

William Wordsworth transformed English poetry by making ordinary life worthy of poetic treatment. Unlike earlier poets who celebrated kings, heroes, and mythology, Wordsworth focused on shepherds, farmers, children, beggars, and rural communities. He believed that ordinary people possessed deeper emotional wisdom because they lived closer to nature.

Nature occupies the central position in Wordsworth's poetry. For him, nature is not merely scenery but a living spiritual force that teaches morality, peace, and self-understanding. In poems such as *Tintern Abbey*, *The Prelude*, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*, *The Solitary Reaper*, *Lucy Gray*, *Michael*, and *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*, Wordsworth presents nature as both a source of comfort and a guide for personal growth.

Another important contribution is his psychological understanding of memory. In *The Prelude*, often considered the first great autobiographical poem in English, Wordsworth demonstrates how childhood experiences shape adult identity. His exploration of memory influenced later psychological and autobiographical writing. Wordsworth also democratized poetry by rejecting elevated language and adopting ordinary speech. This innovation broadened the audience for poetry and permanently changed English poetic style.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Contribution to English Literature

Samuel Taylor Coleridge complemented Wordsworth's realism by expanding poetry into the realms of imagination, mystery, and philosophy. He believed that imagination was the highest creative power capable of revealing profound truths beyond ordinary perception.

His masterpiece, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, combines supernatural events with moral and psychological depth. The poem explores themes of guilt, redemption, and humanity's relationship with nature. *Kubla Khan* demonstrates the extraordinary creative power of imagination through vivid dream imagery, while *Christabel* helped develop the Gothic tradition with its atmosphere of mystery and psychological complexity.

Coleridge's prose criticism also transformed English literary studies. In *Biographia Literaria* (1817), he developed theories of imagination and introduced distinctions between "primary imagination," "secondary imagination," and "fancy." These ideas influenced literary criticism throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His philosophical writings established the foundation for modern literary theory by treating literature as an intellectual discipline rather than merely a source of entertainment.

Characteristics of Wordsworth and Coleridge that Enriched English Literature

The contributions of Wordsworth and Coleridge can be understood through several defining characteristics. First, they replaced reason with emotion as the central concern of

poetry. They believed authentic feelings reveal deeper truths than logic alone. Second, they elevated nature from a decorative background to a spiritual presence that shapes moral and emotional development. Third, they celebrated imagination as an essential creative force. Wordsworth employed imagination to transform everyday experience, whereas Coleridge used it to create convincing supernatural worlds. Fourth, they introduced ordinary people as legitimate poetic subjects. Their poems dignified common life and emphasized universal human emotions. Fifth, they rejected artificial poetic diction and promoted simplicity of language. Their accessible style expanded poetry's readership. Finally, both poets emphasized individuality and introspection. Their works explore personal consciousness, memory, childhood, dreams, and spiritual growth, themes that continue to dominate modern literature

William Wordsworth's Major Works

After *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth continued to develop Romantic poetry by focusing on nature, human emotions, memory, and the spiritual growth of the individual. His works helped establish Romanticism as a movement that valued imagination and personal experience over classical rules. *The Prelude* is Wordsworth's greatest autobiographical poem. It describes the development of the poet's mind from childhood to adulthood. Through his experiences with nature, education, and personal struggles, Wordsworth shows how the human mind grows through contact with the natural world. *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* explores the idea that children possess a special spiritual vision that fades as they grow older. The poem reflects on childhood innocence, memory, and the connection between human beings and a higher spiritual reality. *The Excursion* is a long philosophical poem that discusses human life, suffering, morality, and the relationship between people and nature. Through conversations between characters, Wordsworth presents his ideas about faith, society, and the healing power of nature. Wordsworth's shorter poems also became important examples of Romantic poetry. *The Solitary Reaper* celebrates the beauty of simple rural life and the emotional power of music. *Resolution and Independence* explore courage and inner strength through the figure of an old leech-gatherer. *Michael* presents a tragic story of a simple shepherd and highlights family bonds and rural values. *Lucy Gray* combines imagination and emotion in a mysterious story about a young girl's disappearance. *The World Is Too Much with Us* criticizes modern society's materialism and its loss of connection with nature. *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* also known as "Daffodils" expresses the joy and lasting memory created by an encounter with nature.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Major Works

Samuel Taylor Coleridge expanded Romantic literature by exploring imagination, mystery, supernatural elements, and the workings of the human mind. His poetry often combines the ordinary world with the power of imagination. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is one of the greatest narrative poems in English literature. It tells the story of an old sailor who suffers after killing an albatross. The poem explores themes of guilt, punishment, redemption, and the spiritual connection between humans and nature.

Kubla Khan is a famous poem about imagination and artistic creation. Through dream-like images of a magical

landscape, Coleridge presents the poet as a creative force capable of transforming reality through imagination. *Christabel* contributed greatly to Gothic literature. It uses supernatural elements, mystery, and suspense to explore themes of innocence, evil, and psychological fear. *Biographia Literaria* established Coleridge as one of England's greatest literary critics. In this work, he discusses imagination, poetry, and the relationship between art and human creativity. His ideas strongly influenced modern literary criticism.

Coleridge's shorter poems also reveal deep psychological and philosophical concerns. *Dejection: An Ode* examines sadness, imagination, and the loss of creative inspiration. *Frost at Midnight* reflects on childhood, memory, and the relationship between humans and nature. *This Lime Tree Bower My Prison* explores isolation, friendship, and the ability of imagination to create emotional freedom. Together, Wordsworth and Coleridge transformed English poetry by emphasizing nature, imagination, emotion, individual experience, and the inner life of the human mind, making them two of the central figures of the Romantic movement.

Influence of Wordsworth and Coleridge on Later Writers

The Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge greatly influenced later generations of writers. Their ideas about imagination, emotion, nature, individual freedom, symbolism, and the inner life of human beings continued to shape English literature from the Romantic age to modern times. Wordsworth emphasized the spiritual power of nature and ordinary life, while Coleridge focused on imagination, mystery, symbolism, and the relationship between the human mind and the supernatural. Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) was one of the major Romantic poets who inherited Wordsworth and Coleridge's belief in the power of imagination and emotional freedom. Like Wordsworth, Shelley saw nature as a source of inspiration and spiritual energy. Like Coleridge, he valued imagination as a force that could transform human life and society.

Prometheus Unbound is a lyrical drama based on the Greek myth of Prometheus, who challenges the authority of Jupiter and suffers for giving knowledge and freedom to humanity. Shelley uses Prometheus as a symbol of human courage, creativity, and resistance against oppression. The work reflects the Romantic belief in imagination, liberty, and the triumph of human spirit. *Adonais* is an elegy written after the death of poet John Keats. Shelley mourns Keats while expressing the idea that the human spirit and artistic creativity survive after death. The poem shows Shelley's Romantic belief in immortality, nature, and the connection between beauty and imagination. *Ode to the West Wind* is a famous ode, where Shelley addresses the West Wind as a powerful force of nature. The wind represents change, revolution, and renewal. Shelley wishes that his poetic ideas could spread across the world like the wind. The poem reflects Wordsworth's love of nature but gives nature a more revolutionary and energetic meaning. In *To a Skylark*, Shelley praises the skylark as a symbol of pure joy, freedom, and artistic inspiration. The bird represents an ideal state beyond human suffering. Through this poem, Shelley explores the Romantic idea that imagination can reach higher levels of beauty and happiness.

John Keats (1795–1821) continued the Romantic tradition through his celebration of beauty, nature, imagination, and emotional experience. He believed that beauty had deep spiritual value. His poetry shows the influence of Wordsworth's appreciation of nature and Coleridge's imaginative vision. In the poem *Ode to a Nightingale*, Keats listens to the song of a nightingale and escapes from the pain and suffering of human life through imagination. The bird becomes a symbol of timeless beauty and artistic creation. The poem explores themes of mortality, imagination, and the desire for a perfect world. In *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Keats reflects on an ancient Greek urn decorated with scenes of beauty and love. The figures on the urn remain forever young and beautiful, unlike humans who experience change and death. The poem explores the relationship between art, beauty, and permanence. *To Autumn* celebrates the beauty and richness of the autumn season. Keats describes nature's processes with great detail and harmony. Like Wordsworth, he presents nature as meaningful and inspiring, showing the connection between humans and the natural world. *Hyperion* is an unfinished epic poem based on Greek mythology. It describes the fall of the old gods and the rise of a new generation. The poem reflects Romantic ideas of imagination, struggle, and transformation. *The Eve of St. Agnes*, a narrative poem that combines romance, medieval atmosphere, and rich imagery. Keats creates a dream-like world where imagination and beauty dominate. It shows his interest in emotional experience and artistic beauty.

Lord Byron (1788–1824) ^[1] developed the Romantic idea of the individual hero who challenges society and follows personal desires. His works express strong emotions, rebellion, freedom, and intense individualism. *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is a long narrative poem describes the travels and reflections of Childe Harold, a young man disappointed with society. The hero represents the Romantic "outsider" who searches for meaning and freedom. The poem combines personal emotion with descriptions of nature and foreign landscapes. *Don Juan* is a satirical epic poem that challenges social customs and hypocrisy. Byron presents Don Juan as a complex character who experiences love, adventure, and human weakness. The poem reflects Byron's criticism of society and his belief in individual experience. *Manfred*, a dramatic poem presents Manfred, a mysterious and isolated character suffering from guilt and emotional conflict. Like many Romantic heroes, Manfred struggles against society and supernatural forces. The work reflects Romantic interest in psychology, mystery, and individual freedom.

Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809–1892) inherited Wordsworth's reflective approach to nature and his interest in human emotions. His poetry often combines natural imagery with philosophical questions about life, death, faith, and human progress. *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, a long elegy was written after the death of Tennyson's friend Arthur Hallam. The poem explores grief, faith, science, and the search for meaning after loss. Like Wordsworth, Tennyson uses nature as a source of reflection and spiritual understanding. *The Lady of Shalott* tells the story of a lady who has a cursed to live in isolation while creating art through a mirror. When she leaves her isolated world to see reality directly, she dies. The poem explores themes of imagination, art, isolation, and the conflict between creativity and real life. *Ulysses* is a dramatic monologue where Ulysses expresses his desire for

continued adventure and knowledge despite old age. The poem celebrates human ambition, courage, and the desire to explore beyond limitations.

Robert Browning (1812–1889) developed the Romantic interest in the human mind and emotions through his psychological portraits. His dramatic monologues explore the thoughts, motives, and hidden desires of individuals. *Men and Women*, this collection of dramatic monologues presents different characters revealing their emotions and beliefs. Browning explores human psychology and moral complexity. *The Ring and the Book*, a long poem is based on a real Italian murder case. Browning presents the event from different viewpoints, showing that truth can be understood in different ways. The poem reflects his interest in human psychology and individual perspectives. *My Last Duchess* a famous dramatic monologue presents a powerful duke describing his former wife's portrait. Through his speech, the reader discovers his jealousy, pride, and controlling nature. The poem shows Browning's skill in revealing hidden personalities.

Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) continued the Romantic tradition of reflection on nature, human emotions, and culture. However, his poetry also expresses concern about modern society and the loss of spiritual values. In the poem *Dover Beach* Arnold describes the sea as a symbol of changing human faith. The peaceful natural scene contrasts with his sadness about the decline of religious certainty in modern life. The poem reflects Romantic emotional depth and meditation on nature. *The Scholar-Gipsy* poem tells the story of a scholar who leaves ordinary society to search for knowledge and truth. Arnold contrasts the peaceful life of the past with the anxiety and uncertainty of modern existence.

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) inherited Wordsworth's concern for rural life and the relationship between humans and nature. His novels and poetry often portray the struggles of ordinary people living in the countryside. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* novel tells the tragic story of Tess, a poor country girl whose life is shaped by social injustice and fate. Hardy presents nature as beautiful but also indifferent to human suffering. *Far from the Madding Crowd* novel explores rural communities, love, and human relationships. Hardy describes countryside life with deep sympathy and realistic detail, continuing Wordsworth's interest in ordinary people.

Hardy's poems often focus on memory, loss, time, and human suffering. Like Wordsworth, he uses natural settings to express emotions and ideas about life.

W. B. Yeats (1865–1939) combined Romantic imagination with Coleridge's interest in symbolism, mystery, and the supernatural. His poetry uses symbols to explore personal, historical, and spiritual questions. *The Tower*, a collection that reflects Yeats's thoughts on aging, creativity, history, and personal identity. The tower becomes a symbol of artistic strength and spiritual exploration. *The Wind Among the Reeds*, this collection contains mystical poems filled with symbols from Irish mythology. Yeats uses imagination and symbolism to explore love, dreams, and spiritual experiences. *The Second Coming* is famous modern poem describes a world filled with chaos and uncertainty. Yeats uses powerful symbols to suggest the collapse of an old age and the beginning of a new one. The poem reflects Coleridge's influence through its mysterious and symbolic style.

Influence on Modern Environmental Writers

Wordsworth's deep appreciation of nature influenced many modern environmental writers. He viewed nature not simply as a physical landscape but as a living presence with spiritual and moral importance. Modern ecological writers continue Wordsworth's ideas by exploring the relationship between humans and the natural world, the importance of protecting the environment, the emotional and spiritual value of nature. Wordsworth's poetry helped establish the idea that nature deserves respect and that human beings are deeply connected with the natural world. The influence of Wordsworth and Coleridge spread far beyond the Romantic period. Shelley and Keats continued their celebration of imagination and beauty, Byron developed Romantic individualism, Tennyson and Arnold explored nature and human reflection, Browning examined inner psychology, Hardy portrayed rural life, and Yeats transformed Romantic imagination into modern symbolism. Their ideas remain important in literature because they changed the way writers understood nature, emotion, imagination, and the human experience.

Wordsworth and Coleridge fundamentally transformed English literature by challenging Neoclassical conventions and redefining poetry's purpose. Wordsworth emphasized emotional authenticity, nature, and the common individual, while Coleridge demonstrated the artistic possibilities of imagination, symbolism, and philosophical reflection. Together they broadened the scope of poetry to include ordinary life, psychological experience, and supernatural mystery. Their innovations continue to shape literary criticism, environmental literature, autobiographical writing, psychological fiction, and modern poetry. The Romantic ideals they established remain relevant in discussions of creativity, ecology, individual identity, and artistic freedom.

Conclusion

The publication of *Lyrical Ballads* marked the beginning of English Romanticism and permanently altered the direction of English literature. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge established new poetic principles centered on imagination, emotion, nature, and ordinary human experience. Their individual works expanded these principles through innovative themes, philosophical inquiry, and literary experimentation. Their influence reached later Romantic poets, Victorian writers, Modernists, and contemporary literature. Their enduring legacy lies in demonstrating that poetry is not merely an artistic form but a profound expression of human experience and imagination.

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