

## Romantic Period Authors (1790-1837)

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*The Romantic period in English literature spans from approximately 1790 to 1837, coinciding with revolutionary changes in Europe and America. This era was characterized by an emphasis on emotion, individualism, and the glorification of nature and the past. Romantic writers rejected the rationalism and order of the Neoclassical period, instead valuing imagination, spontaneity, and personal expression. The period produced some of the most celebrated poets in English literary history and saw significant developments in the novel form.*

### William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

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#### Life

William Wordsworth was born in Cockermouth, Cumberland, in the Lake District. His father was a legal representative of James Lowther, 1st Earl of Lonsdale. Wordsworth's mother died when he was eight, and his father died when he was thirteen, leaving him and his four siblings orphans. He was educated at Hawkshead Grammar School and St. John's College, Cambridge. In 1790, he toured revolutionary France and became an enthusiastic supporter of the French Revolution. He had a daughter, Caroline, with Annette Vallon in France, but returned to England alone due to the political tensions between the countries. His most productive creative period began after he settled in the Lake District with his sister Dorothy, who was a significant influence on his work. In 1802, he married Mary Hutchinson, a childhood friend, and they had five children. Wordsworth was appointed Poet Laureate in 1843 and held the position until his death in 1850.

## Works

- **Lyrical Ballads** (with Samuel Taylor Coleridge): A groundbreaking collection that helped launch the Romantic movement
- **The Prelude**: His autobiographical masterpiece exploring the growth of a poet's mind
- **"Tintern Abbey"**: A meditation on nature, memory, and personal growth
- **"I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"** (also known as "Daffodils"): One of his most famous poems
- **"Ode: Intimations of Immortality"**: A reflection on childhood, memory, and loss
- **"The Solitary Reaper"**: A poem inspired by a Highland girl singing in a field
- **The Excursion**: A philosophical poem in nine books

## Contribution to English Literature

- Revolutionized poetic language by advocating for "the real language of men"
- Established nature as a central theme in English poetry
- Developed the concept of the sublime in relation to natural landscapes
- Explored the importance of childhood experiences in shaping adult consciousness
- Emphasized emotion and personal experience as sources of poetic inspiration
- Pioneered autobiographical poetry as serious literary expression
- Influenced generations of poets with his vision of nature as a moral and spiritual force

# Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

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## Life

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born in Ottery St. Mary, Devon, the youngest of ten children of a vicar. After his father's death, he was sent to Christ's Hospital school in London. He attended Jesus College, Cambridge, but never completed his degree. In 1795, he met William Wordsworth, beginning one of the most important literary friendships in English history. Together they published "Lyrical Ballads" in 1798. Coleridge struggled with opium addiction for much of his adult life, which began as treatment for physical ailments but developed into dependency. His marriage to Sara Fricker was unhappy, and he fell in love with Sara Hutchinson (the sister-in-law of Wordsworth), though this love remained unrequited. In his later years, Coleridge lived with the physician James Gillman and his wife in Highgate, London, where he wrote most of his prose works and became a renowned conversationalist and lecturer. He died in 1834 from heart failure compounded by his opium use.

## Works

- **"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"**: A narrative poem about a sailor who brings misfortune by killing an albatross
- **"Kubla Khan"**: A fragment of a vision composed during an opium-induced dream
- **"Christabel"**: An unfinished supernatural poem
- **"Frost at Midnight"**: A conversation poem reflecting on his childhood and hopes for his son
- **"Dejection: An Ode"**: A personal poem about creative drought and emotional suffering
- **Biographia Literaria**: Literary autobiography and criticism
- **Lectures on Shakespeare**: Influential literary criticism

## Contribution to English Literature

- Pioneered supernatural poetry with psychological depth
- Developed the conversation poem as a reflective, meditative form
- Advanced literary criticism with psychological insights
- Introduced German Idealist philosophy to English thought
- Explored the creative imagination and the unconscious mind
- Influenced the development of symbolic imagery in poetry
- Established the concept of "willing suspension of disbelief" in literary theory

## Lord Byron (George Gordon Byron, 1788-1824)

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### Life

George Gordon Byron was born in London to Captain John "Mad Jack" Byron and Catherine Gordon. His father squandered his mother's fortune and died when Byron was three. Born with a club foot, Byron was sensitive about his lameness throughout his life. He inherited his title and the family estate, Newstead Abbey, at age ten. Educated at Harrow and Trinity College, Cambridge, he published his first collection of poems in 1807. The publication of "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" in 1812 made him instantly famous. Byron's personal life was scandalous by the standards of his time—he had numerous affairs with both men and women, including a rumored relationship with his half-sister Augusta Leigh. His brief marriage to Annabella Milbanke produced a daughter, Ada Lovelace (who became a mathematics pioneer), but ended in separation amid rumors of Byron's misconduct. Ostracized from English society, Byron left England in 1816, never to return. He traveled extensively in Europe, became involved in Italian revolutionary politics, and later joined the Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire. He died of fever at Missolonghi, Greece, in 1824, becoming a national hero in Greece.

## Works

- **Childe Harold's Pilgrimage**: A narrative poem following the travels of a disillusioned young man
- **Don Juan**: His masterpiece, an epic satirical poem left unfinished at his death
- **"She Walks in Beauty"**: A lyric poem celebrating female beauty
- **"The Prisoner of Chillon"**: A narrative poem about political imprisonment
- **Manfred**: A dramatic poem about a Faustian noble living in the Alps
- **"Darkness"**: An apocalyptic poem envisioning the end of the world
- **The Giaour, The Corsair, and Lara**: "Oriental tales" set in exotic locations

## Contribution to English Literature

- Created the "Byronic hero"—brooding, rebellious, passionate, and often self-destructive
- Pioneered the poetic expression of alienation and world-weariness
- Developed satirical verse narrative with unprecedented range and flexibility
- Combined personal experience with political commentary in poetry
- Influenced European Romanticism with his life and work
- Established the romantic image of the poet as a tragic, rebellious figure
- Demonstrated how poetry could challenge social and political conventions

## Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

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### Life

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born to a wealthy family in Field Place, Sussex. He was educated at Eton College, where he was bullied for his unconventional views and

refusal to participate in fagging (the system where younger boys served older ones). He attended University College, Oxford, but was expelled after publishing a pamphlet titled "The Necessity of Atheism." This led to a break with his father. At nineteen, he eloped with sixteen-year-old Harriet Westbrook, but later left her for Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (later Mary Shelley), daughter of political philosopher William Godwin and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. After Harriet's suicide, Percy and Mary married. Facing social ostracism and financial difficulties, they left England for Italy in 1818. Shelley never achieved significant recognition during his lifetime. He drowned in a sudden storm while sailing in the Gulf of Spezia in Italy at the age of 29. His body was cremated on the beach where it washed ashore, with Lord Byron in attendance.

## Works

- **"Ozymandias"**: A sonnet about the transience of power and glory
- **"Ode to the West Wind"**: A poem using the wind as a metaphor for inspiration and revolution
- **Prometheus Unbound**: A lyrical drama reimagining the Greek myth as a story of liberation
- **"To a Skylark"**: A poem celebrating the transcendent quality of the skylark's song
- **"Adonais"**: An elegy written after the death of John Keats
- **The Mask of Anarchy**: A political poem written after the Peterloo Massacre
- **A Defence of Poetry**: An essay arguing for poetry's moral and social importance

## Contribution to English Literature

- Developed lyric poetry of extraordinary technical skill and emotional intensity
- Used poetry as a vehicle for radical political and social ideas
- Created powerful natural imagery as a metaphor for human experience and political change
- Advanced the concept of poets as "unacknowledged legislators of the world"

- Explored the relationship between beauty, truth, and social justice
- Influenced later poets with his musicality and visionary quality
- Demonstrated how poetry could express philosophical and political idealism

## John Keats (1795-1821)

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### Life

John Keats was born in London, the son of a stable manager. Orphaned at an early age (his father died when he was eight, his mother when he was fourteen), he was apprenticed to a surgeon-apothecary. He abandoned this career to pursue poetry, publishing his first volume in 1817. Despite harsh criticism from conservative reviewers, Keats produced an astonishing body of work in just over three years. He fell in love with Fanny Brawne, but their relationship was complicated by his deteriorating health and financial situation. In 1820, showing signs of tuberculosis (the disease that had killed his mother and brother), Keats traveled to Italy hoping the climate would improve his health. He died in Rome in February 1821, aged only 25. His tombstone, which he designed himself, bears the epitaph: "Here lies One whose Name was writ in Water."

### Works

- **"Ode to a Nightingale"**: A meditation on mortality, nature, and transcendence
- **"Ode on a Grecian Urn"**: A reflection on art, beauty, and truth
- **"To Autumn"**: A sensuous celebration of the season
- **"La Belle Dame sans Merci"**: A ballad about a knight seduced by a mysterious fairy
- **"The Eve of St. Agnes"**: A narrative poem about young lovers
- **Endymion**: A poetic romance based on the Greek myth

- **Hyperion** and **The Fall of Hyperion**: Unfinished epic poems about the fall of the Titans

## Contribution to English Literature

- Mastered the sensuous, concrete imagery that brings experience vividly to life
- Developed the concept of "negative capability"—the ability to remain in uncertainties without irritably reaching after fact and reason
- Created some of the greatest odes in the English language
- Explored the relationship between beauty, truth, and imagination
- Demonstrated extraordinary artistic development in a brief career
- Influenced later poets with his rich language and emotional depth
- Exemplified the Romantic ideal of the poet as a sensitive, tragic figure

## Mary Shelley (1797-1851)

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### Life

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was born in London to political philosopher William Godwin and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, who died shortly after her birth. She was educated at home, with access to her father's extensive library and the intellectual conversations of the radical thinkers who visited their home. At sixteen, she began a relationship with the married poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. They married in 1816 after the suicide of Percy's first wife. That same year, during a stay near Lake Geneva with Percy, Lord Byron, and others, Mary conceived the idea for "Frankenstein" after a nightmare. Of her four children with Percy, only one survived to adulthood. After Percy's death by drowning in 1822, Mary returned to England and supported herself and her son through her writing. Despite financial difficulties and ill health, she established herself as a respected author and edited



Percy's poems for posthumous publication. She died in 1851 from what was probably a brain tumor.

## Works

- **Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus:** Her masterpiece, exploring the dangers of unchecked scientific ambition
- **The Last Man:** A post-apocalyptic science fiction novel set in the 21st century
- **Valperga:** A historical novel set in 14th-century Italy
- **Mathilda:** A novella with autobiographical elements, published posthumously
- **Lodore** and **Falkner:** Novels exploring social and family relationships
- **History of a Six Weeks' Tour:** A travel narrative co-written with Percy Shelley
- **Lives of the Most Eminent Literary and Scientific Men of Italy, Spain, and Portugal:** Biographical essays

## Contribution to English Literature

- Pioneered science fiction with philosophical and ethical dimensions
- Created one of literature's most enduring myths in Frankenstein
- Explored the moral responsibilities of creation and parenthood
- Developed the Gothic novel beyond mere sensation to address profound human concerns
- Combined Romantic sensibility with skeptical rationalism
- Advanced women's writing in male-dominated genres
- Demonstrated how fiction could engage with scientific and ethical questions

## Jane Austen (1775-1817)

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### Life

Jane Austen was born in Steventon, Hampshire, the seventh of eight children of a clergyman. She was educated mainly at home, where she had access to her father's library and the encouragement of her family. Austen began writing as a teenager, creating parodies and stories to amuse her family. In 1801, when her father retired, the family moved to Bath, a change Austen reportedly found difficult. After her father's death in 1805, Jane, her mother, and sister Cassandra faced financial insecurity until her brother Edward, who had been adopted by wealthy relatives, provided them with a cottage on his estate in Chawton, Hampshire. It was here that Austen revised her early manuscripts and wrote her later novels. She never married, though she once accepted a proposal of marriage from a wealthy neighbor, only to withdraw her acceptance the next day. Austen died in Winchester in 1817 at age 41, probably from Addison's disease or a form of lymphoma.

### Works

- **Pride and Prejudice:** Her most popular novel, examining how pride and prejudice keep two people apart
- **Sense and Sensibility:** A novel contrasting two approaches to life and love
- **Emma:** A novel about a well-intentioned but misguided matchmaker
- **Mansfield Park:** A novel exploring moral education and the contrast between appearance and reality
- **Persuasion:** A novel about second chances in love, published posthumously
- **Northanger Abbey:** A parody of Gothic novels, published posthumously
- **Lady Susan:** An epistolary novella about a manipulative widow

### Contribution to English Literature

- Perfected the novel of manners, examining social behavior with wit and psychological insight

- Developed free indirect discourse, allowing narrative to move between objective description and character's thoughts
- Created complex, realistic characters who evolve through self-recognition
- Used irony and satire to expose social pretensions and moral failings
- Demonstrated how the domestic sphere could be the setting for profound human drama
- Explored women's limited options in a patriarchal society
- Established a model for the realist novel that influenced generations of writers