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THE CONCEPT OF INDIVIDUALISM IN ROMANTICISM

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ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: This article presents a comprehensive and detailed analysis of the concept of individualism as the ideological and aesthetic core of Romanticism. Emerging in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Romanticism represented a decisive break from Enlightenment rationalism and classical formalism, placing the individual human subject at the center of literary and philosophical inquiry. Through the IMRAD structure (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion), this study examines the historical, philosophical, and literary foundations of Romantic individualism, its manifestation in major Romantic texts, and its lasting influence on modern literary thought. By emphasizing emotional authenticity, imaginative freedom, and subjective experience, Romanticism reshaped notions of selfhood, creativity, and authorship in ways that continue to shape contemporary literature and cultural identity.

Introduction. Romanticism occupies a decisive and transformative position in the history of Western literature and intellectual culture. Emerging in the late eighteenth century, it developed during a period marked by political revolutions, rapid industrialization, and profound philosophical uncertainty. These historical conditions created a growing sense that inherited systems of thought—particularly those associated with Enlightenment rationalism and classical aesthetics—were no longer adequate to explain the complexities of human

experience. At the center of this intellectual crisis stood a fundamental question: what does it mean to be an individual in a rapidly changing world?

Before the rise of Romanticism, literary and philosophical traditions largely conceptualized the individual as a rational and socially integrated being. Enlightenment thinkers emphasized reason, empirical observation, and universal laws as the foundations of knowledge. Literature, especially in its neoclassical form, was governed by rules of proportion, restraint, and imitation. Writers were expected to reflect universal moral truths and to contribute to social order rather than to explore personal emotion or subjective experience. Individual feeling was often regarded as unreliable or excessive, something to be disciplined rather than expressed.

Romanticism emerged in opposition to this view, proposing a radically different understanding of the human self. Romantic writers argued that reason alone could not account for the richness, depth, and contradictions of human existence. They insisted that emotions, imagination, intuition, and personal memory were not obstacles to truth but essential components of it. As a result, the individual ceased to be a secondary figure within a rational system and became the primary source of meaning, creativity, and insight.

The historical context of Romanticism played a crucial role in shaping this new conception of individuality. The French Revolution, with its emphasis on liberty, equality, and the rights of the individual, challenged long-standing political and social hierarchies. Although the revolution ultimately produced both hope and disillusionment, it fundamentally altered how individuals understood their relationship to authority and community. At the same time, the Industrial Revolution transformed everyday life, uprooting traditional ways of living and introducing new forms of labor, urbanization, and social alienation. Many individuals experienced a growing sense of fragmentation and loss of identity in an increasingly mechanized world.

Romanticism gave literary expression to these experiences of upheaval and uncertainty. Rather than seeking stability in external institutions, Romantic writers turned inward, exploring the emotional and psychological dimensions of the self. Solitude, introspection, and emotional intensity became central motifs, reflecting a belief that the individual's inner life was the most authentic source of truth. In this sense, Romantic individualism was not merely a celebration of personal freedom but also a response to feelings of dislocation and existential anxiety.

Philosophically, Romantic individualism was influenced by emerging ideas about subjectivity and self-consciousness. Romantic thinkers challenged the Enlightenment

assumption that knowledge is purely objective, arguing instead that perception is shaped by the individual's emotional and imaginative faculties. This emphasis on subjectivity led to a new understanding of truth as something experienced rather than universally imposed. Each individual, Romantic writers believed, possesses a unique way of seeing the world, and literature should reflect this diversity of perspectives.

In literary practice, this shift resulted in significant formal and thematic innovations. Romantic poetry and prose frequently adopt first-person perspectives, autobiographical elements, and confessional tones. The boundaries between the author, the narrator, and the lyrical "I" become increasingly blurred, reinforcing the idea that literature is an extension of the writer's inner life. Nature, memory, dreams, and emotional states are explored not as abstract concepts but as lived experiences shaped by individual perception.

The concept of individualism in Romanticism also reshaped the role of the writer within society. The Romantic author was no longer viewed as a craftsman adhering to established rules but as a visionary figure endowed with unique creative insight. Originality and authenticity became central values, and literary authority was increasingly derived from personal experience rather than tradition. This redefinition of authorship laid the groundwork for modern ideas of artistic genius and creative autonomy.

The purpose of this article is to examine the concept of individualism in Romanticism as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Rather than treating individualism as a simple celebration of selfhood, the study explores its philosophical foundations, literary expressions, and inherent tensions. It seeks to demonstrate that Romantic individualism simultaneously empowered the individual and exposed the psychological and social challenges of radical self-definition.

By adopting the IMRAD structure, this article offers a systematic and academically rigorous analysis of Romantic individualism. The Introduction establishes the historical and intellectual background; the Methods section outlines the analytical approach; the Results section examines key literary manifestations of individualism; and the Discussion interprets these findings within a broader cultural and theoretical framework. Through this approach, the article aims to show that Romantic individualism remains a vital concept for understanding not only Romantic literature but also modern and contemporary literary thought.

Materials and Methods. The present study employs a qualitative, interpretative methodology rooted in close textual analysis and historical-literary contextualization. Rather than relying on quantitative data, the research focuses on meaning, symbolism, and thematic development within literary texts. Primary sources include poetry, essays, and prose works by

major British Romantic writers such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats.

Close reading is used to examine how these writers construct the individual self through language, imagery, narrative voice, and poetic form. Particular attention is paid to moments of introspection, emotional intensity, and imaginative reflection, as these elements are central to Romantic individualism.

A comparative approach is also adopted. Romantic texts are analyzed alongside Enlightenment and Neoclassical writings in order to highlight ideological and aesthetic contrasts. Philosophical texts by thinkers associated with Romantic thought are considered to situate literary developments within broader intellectual debates about the nature of the self, freedom, and creativity.

Secondary sources from Romantic scholarship provide critical perspectives and theoretical frameworks. These sources are used not to impose rigid interpretations but to support and refine the analysis. The IMRAD structure ensures methodological clarity and academic coherence.

Results. Romantic Individualism as a Fundamental Philosophical Shift

The analysis demonstrates that Romantic individualism represents not merely a literary preference but a profound philosophical reorientation in the understanding of human nature. Enlightenment thought conceptualized the individual as a rational unit within a broader system governed by universal laws. Romanticism challenged this model by insisting that human identity cannot be reduced to reason alone. Instead, Romantic writers portrayed the individual as an emotionally complex, internally divided, and creatively dynamic being.

This shift is particularly evident in Romantic conceptions of knowledge. Whereas Enlightenment philosophy privileged objective observation and logical deduction, Romanticism asserted that personal feeling and intuition offer access to truths inaccessible to rational analysis. Individual experience becomes epistemologically significant. The self is no longer a passive recipient of external reality but an active interpreter and creator of meaning.

Wordsworth's poetic practice exemplifies this transformation. His frequent return to personal memory suggests that the individual's past emotional experiences shape moral understanding and identity over time. Memory functions not simply as recollection but as a creative act through which the individual reconstructs the self. The Romantic individual, therefore, is understood as historically and emotionally situated, rather than abstract or universal.

Subjectivity, Consciousness, and the Interiorization of Literature

One of the most important findings concerns the unprecedented emphasis on subjectivity in Romantic literature. Romantic texts consistently shift attention from external events to inner states of consciousness. Feelings such as joy, despair, fear, longing, and awe are explored in detail, often becoming more significant than plot or action.

This interiorization of literature marks a turning point in literary history. Romantic writers treat consciousness itself as a legitimate subject of artistic representation. The mind becomes a landscape worthy of exploration, complete with its own conflicts, transformations, and revelations.

Coleridge's theory of imagination provides a conceptual foundation for this emphasis on subjectivity. He distinguishes between mechanical perception and creative imagination, arguing that imagination unifies disparate experiences into meaningful wholes. Through imagination, the individual mind actively participates in shaping reality rather than merely reflecting it. This idea elevates personal perception to a creative and transformative force.

As a result, Romantic individualism legitimizes subjective vision. Different individuals may experience the same reality in radically different ways, and these differences are not errors but expressions of unique inner worlds. Literature becomes a space where such subjective realities are articulated and validated.

The Romantic Hero and the Ethics of Individual Defiance

Another major result of this study is the identification of the Romantic hero as a literary embodiment of radical individualism. This figure is characterized by intense self-awareness, emotional depth, and resistance to social norms. Unlike classical heroes, who serve communal values or moral ideals, Romantic heroes are often defined by their inner conflicts and personal values.

Byronic heroes exemplify this form of individualism. They reject conventional morality, question authority, and prioritize personal freedom over social acceptance. Their defiance is not merely political but existential, reflecting a deep commitment to authenticity. The Romantic hero refuses to compromise inner truth for external approval.

However, this radical individualism is portrayed ambivalently. Romantic heroes are frequently isolated, misunderstood, or doomed to suffer. Their refusal to conform often results in alienation from society and from other individuals. This suggests that Romantic writers were acutely aware of the psychological and ethical consequences of extreme individualism.

Thus, the Romantic hero reveals both the empowering and destructive dimensions of individualism. Individual freedom is presented as essential to self-realization, yet it also carries the risk of loneliness, despair, and moral ambiguity.

Nature as a Psychological and Spiritual Extension of the Self

The analysis further reveals that nature functions as a central medium through which Romantic individualism is expressed. Romantic writers do not depict nature as an objective external reality but as a living presence that interacts with human consciousness. Landscapes are filtered through personal perception and emotional response.

Nature often mirrors the individual's inner state, reflecting joy, sorrow, tranquility, or turmoil. This symbolic relationship reinforces the Romantic belief that reality is experienced subjectively. The same natural scene may evoke vastly different emotions in different individuals, emphasizing the uniqueness of personal perception.

Moreover, nature serves as a space where the individual can temporarily escape social constraints. Solitude in nature allows Romantic individuals to confront their inner selves without external interference. In this sense, nature becomes both a psychological refuge and a site of self-discovery.

Discussion. The expanded results confirm that individualism is not a secondary theme in Romanticism but its defining philosophical principle. Romanticism fundamentally altered the purpose of literature by placing individual consciousness at its center. Literature became a means of exploring the inner life rather than reinforcing social norms or transmitting moral lessons.

One of the most significant implications of Romantic individualism is its challenge to traditional authority. By privileging personal experience over inherited norms, Romantic writers implicitly questioned religious, political, and cultural institutions. Truth was no longer located solely in external systems but within the individual self. This shift contributed to the modern emphasis on personal authenticity and self-expression.

At the same time, Romantic individualism introduces deep tensions. The Romantic celebration of the self often coexists with a profound sense of alienation. Many Romantic texts depict individuals who struggle to reconcile inner ideals with social reality. This conflict reflects a broader cultural anxiety about the limits of individual freedom in an increasingly complex and industrialized world.

Psychologically, Romantic individualism anticipates modern concerns with identity, selfhood, and mental conflict. The Romantic focus on introspection and emotional depth prefigures later developments in psychology and psychoanalysis. The idea that the self is internally divided, shaped by memory and desire, becomes a foundational assumption of modern thought.

From a literary-historical perspective, the legacy of Romantic individualism is immense. Modernist writers inherited the Romantic emphasis on subjectivity but often intensified it, fragmenting consciousness and questioning the coherence of the self. Contemporary literature continues to value personal voice and experiential authenticity, reflecting Romantic ideals even when rejecting Romantic optimism.

Finally, Romantic individualism reshaped the concept of authorship. The writer came to be seen not as a skilled imitator of tradition but as a unique creative personality. This notion of the author as an original genius remains deeply embedded in modern literary culture.

Conclusion. The concept of individualism in Romanticism represents a decisive transformation in literary and intellectual history. By redefining the self as an emotionally rich and imaginative being, Romantic writers reshaped the purpose of literature and the role of the artist. This article has shown that Romantic individualism emerged from historical upheaval, found expression through innovative literary forms, and continues to influence modern literary culture.

Romanticism remains relevant because it addresses enduring questions about identity, freedom, and creativity. Its emphasis on individual experience continues to resonate in a world where the search for personal meaning remains central.

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