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characteristics of romanticism represented by woman's dress Tony Marturano / iStock Images Understanding the characteristics of Romanticism in literature can help you become a better reader, and it can give you a leg up on literary essays and discussions. This period in literary history is fascinating and dramatic, and once you know the telltale signs, you'll be able to identify work that typifies it. Popular in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Romanticism was a literary movement that emphasized nature and the importance of emotion and artistic freedom. In many ways, writers of this era were rebelling against the attempt to explain the world and human nature through science and the lens of the Industrial Revolution. In Romanticism, emotion is much more powerful than rational thought. Although literary Romanticism occurred from about 1790 through 1850, not all writers of this period worked in this style. There are certain characteristics that make a piece of literature part of the Romantic movement. You won't find every characteristic present in every piece of Romantic literature; however, you will usually find that writing from this period has several of the key characteristics. Nature, in all its unbound glory, plays a huge role in Romantic literature. Nature, sometimes seen as the opposite of the rational, is a powerful symbol in work from this era. Romantic poets and writers give personal, deep descriptions of nature and its wild and powerful qualities. Natural elements also work as symbols for the unfettered emotions of the poet or writer, as in the final stanza of "To Autumn" by John Keats. Keats was aware that he was dying of consumption throughout much of his short life and career, and his poems reflect this. "The wind is from the west, / And the white clouds are from the east, / And the light wind lives or dies; / And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn; / Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft / The red-breast whistles from a garden-crook; / And gathering swallows twitter in the skies. A focus on emotion is a key characteristic of nearly all writing from the Romantic period. When you read work of this period, you'll see feelings described in all forms, including romantic and filial love, fear, sorrow, loneliness, and more. This focus on emotion offered a counterpoint to the rational, and it also made Romantic poetry and prose extremely readable and relatable. Mary Shelley's Frankenstein offers a perfect example of this characteristic of Romanticism. Here, Frankenstein's monster shows great self-awareness of his feelings and offers a vivid emotional description full of anger and sadness. I continued for the remainder of the day in a state of utter and stupid despair. My protectors had departed and had broken the only link that held me to the world. For the first time the feelings of revenge and hatred filled my bosom, and I did not strive to control them, but allowing myself to be borne away by the stream, I bent my mind towards injury and death. When I thought of my friends, of the mild voice of De Lacey, the gentle eyes of Agatha, and the exquisite beauty of the Arabian, these thoughts vanished and a gush of tears somewhat soothed me. But again when I reflected that they had spurned and deserted me, anger returned, a rage of anger, and unable to injure any living human, I turned my fury towards inanimate objects. As night advanced I placed a variety of combustibles around the cottage, and after having destroyed every vestige of cultivation in the garden, I waited with forced impatience until the moon had sunk to commence my operations. In contrast to the previous generations' focus on reason, writers of the Romantic movement emphasized the importance of imagination and the creative impulse. Romantic poets and prose writers celebrated the power of imagination and the creative process, as well as the artistic viewpoint. They often wrote about the creative process itself, as in "The Poet" by William Wordsworth. "The Poet is a man whose eye is like a mirror, / And his heart is like a furnace, / And his soul is like a fire, / And his mind is like a sea, / And his life is like a dream, / And his death is like a sleep, / And his resurrection is like a new birth, / And his glory is like a crown, / And his power is like a scepter, / And his wisdom is like a star, / And his love is like a flower, / And his hope is like a bird, / And his faith is like a rock, / And his charity is like a light, / And his peace is like a dove, / And his joy is like a song, / And his life is like a journey, / And his death is like a home, / And his resurrection is like a new world, / And his glory is like a kingdom, / And his power is like a throne, / And his wisdom is like a crown, / And his love is like a flower, / And his hope is like a bird, / And his faith is like a rock, / And his charity is like a light, / And his peace is like a dove, / And his joy is like a song, / And his life is like a journey, / And his 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In Something's Gotta Give, Erica and Harry chat online even though they're in the same house. This continues even after Harry goes back to the city. They also have a kind of secret language with the white and black rocks. In Twilight, Bella and Edward are both very curious about each other and ask a lot of questions (which they both try to avoid answering). In a way, they have their own private language because once Bella knows Edward is a vampire, they can talk openly about vampires and werewolves with each other. It's not something Bella can talk to her school friends or her family about. #9. Internal Change The next convention you'll want to include in your romance novel is some kind of internal change within one or both of your main characters. So, usually, there's something inside the protagonist that makes them believe that either true love isn't quite possible or that it doesn't exist or that they aren't deserving of it. This is kind of what we talked about earlier with that internal conflict, but we're taking it a step further. So, in order to open up and receive true love, the protagonist has to go through a period of self-reflection and change -- they have to ask themselves who they want to be, the person who cowers in the face of their fears? Or the person who pushes past those fears or whatever's holding them back and becomes a better version of themselves? In most cases, this change occurs because the protagonist has met and/or interacted with the other character. So, character A inspired character B to be a better person or they helped them believe in themselves or get over some kind of moral failing that was holding them back from being their best self. Case Studies: In Pride and Prejudice, Mr. Darcy overcomes his pride, and Elizabeth overcomes her prejudice. As a result, they are both rewarded with true love and happiness. In Something's Gotta Give, Erica overcomes her limiting self-concept that tells her she's past the relationship age and that she's no longer appealing to the opposite sex by entering a relationship with Harry and then Dr. Mercer. Harry overcomes his limiting self-concept that tells him he's a carefree bachelor who doesn't need love in his life when he realizes that he loves Erica. In Twilight, Edward overcomes his vampiric nature and his outdated belief that says doesn't deserve the love of a human. Bella (temporarily) overcomes her desire to become a vampire (and give up her soul), and is thus rewarded with a relationship with Edward (and a new family in the Cullens). #10. A Happily Ever After Ending The final convention of the romance genre is the "Happily Ever After" ending. And this may be the most important one -- in fact, I've heard it said that if you don't have a happily ever after ending, then you're not really writing a romance. And I think that's true -- that's what readers want to see in this genre. But anyway, this is that awesome emotional payoff at the end of the story that answers the "will they get together or not" question raised at the very beginning. It's the final moment to let readers sink into that wonderful feeling that love has won yet again. Case Studies: In Pride and Prejudice, we get to see Mr. Darcy ask for Elizabeth's hand in marriage again and this time she says yes. The final scene in the movie shows Mr. and Mrs. Darcy wonderfully happy and in love. In Something's Gotta Give, after confessing their feelings for each other in Paris, Harry and Erica enter into a committed relationship. In the last scene, we get to see them as a happy family unit meeting Marin, her husband, and their baby for dinner. In Twilight, after defeating James, Bella and Edward are reunited in the hospital. Because of the sacrifices they've just made for each other, their love has grown even deeper. Final Thoughts You might think that including these things in a romance novel sounds obvious, but you'd be surprised how many drafts I see that are missing these conventions or that don't include these conventions in a meaningful way. So, long story short, don't skip over these conventions or leave them out of your story. Instead, use them to help you flesh out and construct your story and then figure out a way to deliver these conventions in new and unexpected ways. If you do that, you'll not only write a story that works, but you'll probably gain fans for life, too -- and that's the dream, right? Let's discuss in the comments: Do you have these ten conventions in your romance novel? If not, how can you add in what's missing? Can you identify these conventions in your favorite romance books or movies?