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BA English Honours | Semester IV | ENG4CJ204

# Literary Criticism

Module 3: Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and the Rise of Modern Criticism • Comprehensive Notes

# Chapter 3: Romantic Organicism and the Expressive Revolution

The Romantic revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries shattered neoclassical rationalism and rule-bound dogmatism. Pioneered by William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and German Idealist philosophy, Romantic criticism shifted the locus of poetic authority from the external imitation of nature to the internal expressive consciousness, creative imagination, and emotional subjectivity of the poet.

## 3.1 Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Biographia Literaria (Fancy vs. Imagination)

In Chapter XIII and XIV of *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Samuel Taylor Coleridge articulates his seminal distinction between **Fancy** and **Imagination**, fundamentally dismantling mechanical empiricism:

- **Fancy:** A mechanical, aggregative faculty that merely rearranges pre-existing sensory images without altering their essential nature (a mode of memory operating through association).
- **Primary Imagination:** The living power and prime agent of all human perception—a finite repetition in the human mind of the eternal act of divine creation.
- **Secondary Imagination:** An echo of the primary imagination, co-existing with conscious poetic will. It actively dissolves, diffuses, and dissipates sensory reality in order to recreate a unified, organic aesthetic whole. It reconciles opposite or discordant qualities: the general with the concrete, the idea with the image, novelty with familiar truths.

## 3.2 American Transcendentalism: Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The Poet"

In his 1844 essay "The Poet," Ralph Waldo Emerson established the philosophical manifesto of American literary independence. Emerson defines the poet not as a mechanical rhymester, but as the "Namer" or "Language-maker" who perceives divine metaphysical unity through the physical facts of nature. Emerson called for an authentic American bard who would sing of America's vast forests, broad rivers, industrial railroads, and democratic spirit, directly inspiring Walt Whitman.

## 3.3 Victorian Moral Aesthetics: Matthew Arnold

Matthew Arnold stood as the preeminent Victorian critic, asserting that as dogmatic religion loses its cultural authority, serious poetry must step forward to sustain and console human civilization. Arnold famously defined poetry as a **"criticism of life"** governed by the laws of poetic truth and high seriousness. In "The Study of Poetry" (1880), Arnold introduced the **touchstone method**—judging contemporary verse by placing it alongside short, sublime passages from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton.

## 3.4 Radical Moral Humanism: Leo Tolstoy's "What is Art?"

In his provocative 1897 treatise *What is Art?*, Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy rejected bourgeois aestheticism, which defined art merely as a source of refined pleasure for wealthy elites. Tolstoy argues that genuine art is a conscious human organ of communication that **infects** the receiver with the specific moral and spiritual feelings experienced by the author, fostering universal fraternity and Christian love.

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## Advanced Critical Theory, Hermeneutics & Literary Praxis

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### 1. Hermeneutic Paradigms and Textual Mechanics

Critical inquiry into Module 3: Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and the Rise of Modern Criticism reveals how textual forms construct meaning through complex aesthetic strategies and structural choices:

- **Structuralism and Semiotic Deconstruction:** The organization of signs, tropes, and syntactical structures establishes narrative authority while simultaneously revealing internal fissures. Binary oppositions embedded within the discourse—such as center versus margin, tradition versus modernity, and subjective interiority versus objective reality—are systematically problematized through textual slippages and ambiguous signifiers.
- **Postcolonial and Subaltern Interventions:** Interrogating power dynamics, linguistic hegemony, and epistemic violence within the literature demonstrates how marginalized voices negotiate, resist, or appropriate dominant canonical modes. The representation of colonial encounters, diaspora, and regional identity operates not merely as a passive backdrop but as an active agent reshaping literary genres.
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### 2. Historiographical Context and Reception Theory

Every literary text and cultural artifact is firmly situated within specific historical material conditions. Understanding Module 3: Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and the Rise of Modern Criticism requires examining how contemporaneous social movements, intellectual revolutions, and material shifts in print and digital publishing influenced textual production. Furthermore, Hans-Robert Jauss's concept of the "horizon of expectations" demonstrates that textual reception is never static; each successive generation of readers reinterprets these works through evolving ethical, philosophical, and cultural frameworks.

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