

A Berlin ABC of German Romanticism, 1795-1848

Winter Semester 2026/27: 12 October 2026 – 12 February 2027

CATEGORY

Literature

COURSE STRUCTURE

2 contact hours à 45 min per week (winter semester: 16 weeks)

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Time

Thursday, 16:15-17:45h

Place

Hausvogteiplatz 5-7, room 0323-26

COURSE LANGUAGE

English

Language requirements (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages)

English: B2

German: A2

Instruction language is English. Written assignments may be submitted in English, German, or French.

TARGET GROUP

International exchange students of all subjects with a strong interest in the course topic. Berlin Perspectives courses are designed for undergraduate students. Master students may participate if their home university agrees. Regular degree-seeking students can select the course within the elective part of their study program (überfachlicher Wahlpflichtbereich üWP).

Students interested in literary studies, aesthetic theory, philosophy, cultural studies, and in the intersection of these fields are encouraged to take this course. Text Verdana 10,5

CREDITS = 5 ECTS

The Berlin Perspectives courses are offered by the Career Center as part of the elective program üWP. Registration takes place via Humboldt-Universität's course catalogue *Agnes*. All courses are accredited according to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

COURSE DESCRIPTION

From the 1790s to the 1840s, a Berlin-based network of writers, artists, and intellectuals developed novel ways of writing, thinking, feeling, and living under the conceptual banner of the 'Romantic.' Drawing on key texts by Ludwig Tieck, Friedrich and Dorothea Schlegel, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Henriette Herz, Novalis, Rahel Levin Varnhagen, Bettina and Achim von Arnim, Clemens Brentano, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, and Germaine de Staël, we will explore the central areas and practices of their romantic discourse of radical aesthetic, philosophical, political, and sociocultural modernity. We will critically examine how the romantics manifested and confronted the defining conflicts of their political and cultural present as these crystallized in Berlin, the capital of Prussia, 19th century Germany's emerging hegemonic power. We will also survey influential contemporary critiques of the romantic movement (Goethe, Hegel, Heine) and follow its legacies in the 20th century.

COURSE OBJECTIVES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

Knowledge:

- understand key 'romantic' concepts and practices across literature, aesthetic theory, philosophy, and other discourses in themselves, in their interrelation, and in their evolution
- critically reflect on the ways in which the emergence and presence of romantic modernity in Berlin was conditioned by the political and sociocultural realities of Prussia's capital and of Germany during the first half of the 19th century
- critically explore the cultural trajectories of the discourse of romanticism for the 20th century and the present
- confidently engage with a paradigmatic range of 'romantic' modes of writing and thinking across the discourses of literature, philosophy, and history

Academic/Transferable Skills:

- critically assess 'romantic' modes of thinking and writing in relation to their historical contexts and conceptual afterlives
- assess the significance of the discourse of 'romanticism' for the sociopolitical and cultural present
- communicate 'romantic' concepts effectively and characterize 'romantic' modes of writing and artistic creation in detail
- develop theses and arguments based on the study of literary and theoretical texts and their contexts in other discourses

Competencies:

- contextualize literary and theoretical texts with each other and with other discourses
- establish connections between modes of thinking/writing/artistic creation, and their sociocultural and political contexts

ASSIGNMENT INFO

Workload and assignments

In order to be granted 5 ECTS, participants will be asked to

- actively attend all sessions (a minimum of 75% attendance is required for classroom and online sessions)
- prepare and revise all sessions
- hand in the following **assignments**:
 - o one written reaction to assigned readings (400–500 words, or 2,500–3,200 characters – 15% of the final grade)
 - o group presentation of 15-20 mins (35% of the final grade)
 - o final critical essay of 2,000-2,500 words (approx. 14,400-18,000 characters – 50% of the final grade)

Failure to fulfil one of the mentioned components results in failure of the class.

Assessment Components

The final grade will be composed of the above-mentioned assignments.

YOUR INSTRUCTOR

Dr. Christian A. Wollin is an independent lecturer and writer. He received his doctorate in modern German literature from Freie Universität Berlin. From October 2019 to January 2024, he researched and taught at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel, as a fellow of the Martin Buber Society of Fellows in the Humanities and Social Sciences. His research focuses on the German early romantics and Hölderlin, modernism, German literature after 1945, the genre of poetry, literary theory, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault. He has written critical pieces, essays, and essayistic fiction about Milo de Angelis, Arendt, Benjamin, Carl Einstein, Rahel Levin Varnhagen, Valzyhna Mort, and Catherine Pozzi.

COURSE SCHEDULE

2 hours à 45 min per week (16 weeks)

Christmas Break: 19 December 2026 – 3 January 2027

Week 1: Introduction: Romanticism in the European Age of Revolution – German Romanticism in Berlin, Capital of the Kingdom of Prussia

Week 2: What is 'Romantic'? The Definitory Drift of Romanticism, I

Is 'romantic' an inherent quality of things or a state of mind? A mode of thinking or a way of doing? The core of individual artistic practice or a communal way of living? Something transhistorical or something possible only in the contemporary?

- Friedrich Schlegel, excerpt from letter to A. W. Schlegel, ca. December 1st, 1797, and fragment no. 116 from *Athenäum* (1798)
- Novalis, fragment no. 105 from *Prolegomena* (1798)

Week 3: What is 'Romantic'? The Definitory Drift of Romanticism, II

- Ludwig Tieck, excerpt from *Introduction to Phantastus* (1812)
- Clemens Brentano, excerpt from *Godwi, or the Stone-Image of the Mother* (1801)
- Germaine de Staël, *On Germany* (excerpt – 1810/1813)

Week 4: The Interiority of the Romantic Self

Which 'romantic' modes of subjectivity did the German Romantics develop in(-between) their lives and texts?

- Novalis, fragments (1790s)
- Ludwig Tieck, *Forest Solitude* (1797)
- Rahel Levin Varnhagen, letter to Friedrich von Gentz, December 27-28, 1827 (excerpts)
- Bettina von Arnim, excerpt from *Goethe's Correspondence with a Child* (1835)

Week 5: Temporal Horizons of Romanticism

Which experiences and emerging philosophical concepts of historical time shaped the ways in which the Romantics responded to an epoch defined by the event of the 1789 French Revolution and its long aftermath?

- Friedrich Schlegel, fragments from *Athenäum* (1798) and *Philosophical Apprenticeship* (1799)
- Novalis, *Christendom or Europe* (1799 – excerpt)
- Achim von Arnim, *What Should Happen in this Happiness* (ca. 1806/07)

Week 6: Romantic Politics

What political positions did the Romantics articulate in an age in which Prussia and the other German states were the sites of enduring conflict between monarchic and aristocratic restoration, the rise of the bourgeoisie, and the birth of the proletariat?

- Novalis, fragments from *Faith and Love or The King and the Queen* (1798)
- Bettina von Arnim, excerpt from *This Book Belongs to the King* (1843)
- Jacob Grimm, motion for the Frankfurt National Assembly deliberations on the German People's Basic Rights (1848)

Week 7: Intersectional Spaces and Social Media of Berlin Romanticism

Which precarious spaces of intersectional sociability/discourse were decisive for making Romanticism happen in Berlin, and which other social media supplemented them?

- [Friederike Helene Unger,] *On Berlin. From the Letters of a Travelling Lady to her Brother in H.* (excerpt – 1798)
- Friedrich Schleiermacher, excerpt from letter to Charlotte Schleiermacher, July 25-August 4, 1798
- Rahel Levin Varnhagen, excerpt from *Rahel. A Book of Remembrance for her Friends* (1834/March 1799)
- Henriette Herz, excerpt from *Memoirs* (1818-1829)

Week 8: Gendering Romanticism

What concepts of gender did the Romantics develop, and how did these concepts inform their social practices and their understanding of authorship and intellectual production?

- Friedrich Schleiermacher, fragment no. 364 from *Athenäum* (1798) and excerpt from letter to Charlotte Schleiermacher, February 12, 1801
- Rahel Levin Varnhagen, letter to David Veit, Berlin, 1795, March 21-22 (excerpt)
- Dorothea Schlegel (Brendel Mendelssohn Veit), excerpts from *Diary* (1800s)
- Jacob Grimm, *Review of German 19th Century Female Writers by Carl von Schindel* (1822)

Week 9: Excursion: Berlin's Romantic Past in the Present

We will explore present sites of Berlin's romantic past. Possible destinations include the Alte Nationalgalerie with its signature collections of romantic artists, the Staatsbibliothek with its prominent holdings of romantic authors' manuscripts, and cemeteries with the resting places of Henriette Herz, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and others.

Week 10: Against Philistine Finitude, I:

The Twin Discovery of the Romantic Infinite and Romantic Irony

What happens to the social practices of art and living and to their relationship once they are restructured around the twin binaries of 'infinite/finite' and 'romantic/philistine'? How do the notions of the Romantic infinite and Romantic irony relate to hard sociocultural facts?

- Novalis, fragments from *Pollen* (1798)
- Friedrich Schlegel, fragments from *Lyceum* (1797) and *Athenäum* (1798)
- Friedrich Tieck, *Puss in Boots* (1797 – excerpt)

Week 11: Against Philistine Finitude, II:

The Romantic Absolute and the Language(s) of Art

How did the Romantic discovery of the infinite impact the established divisions of the arts, of literary genres, and between discourses? What kind of discourse/medium did the romantics deem most suited for the task of infinitizing the finite (and vice versa)?

- Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck, excerpt from *Innermost Outpourings of an Art-Loving Monk* (1797)
- Achim von Arnim, Clemens Brentano, and Heinrich von Kleist, *Different Sensations before a Seascape by [Caspar David] Friedrich, on which a Capucine Monk [is depicted]* (1810)
- E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Beethoven's Instrumental Music* from *Kreisleriana* (1814/15)

Week 12: Altered States of Mind and Meaning:

E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman* as Romantic Self-Critique

What comes to the fore when Romantic authors probe the interiority of the Romantic subject and the powers of the imagination beyond the limits of social and religious control?

- E. T. A. Hoffmann, *The Sandman* (1816)

Week 13: The Poetry of Volk: Always-already artful or only natural?

What kind of beginning, origin, or essence did the Romantics strive to access through the practice of collecting and editing folk tales and folk songs in the German language?

- Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano, excerpts from *The Boy's Magic Horn* (1805-1808)
- Achim von Arnim, *About Folk Songs* (1805 - excerpts)
- Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, first version of *Sleeping Beauty* (1810)
- Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Preface from Fairy Tales for Children and the Home* (1812)

Week 14: The Present Tradition of Romanticism: Christian Petzold's *Undine* (Germany/France, 90mins, 2020) – Film Screening

Week 15: Contemporary Critiques of Romanticism: Goethe, Hegel, Heine

What did Romanticism look like in the critical mirrors of Germany's preeminent literary instance of much of the 19th century, of the Prussian state philosopher of speculative idealism and the World Spirit, and of the day's foremost German Jewish literary champion of political emancipation?

- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, excerpt from *Maxims and Reflections* (1833/1840)
- Johann Peter Eckermann, excerpt from *Conversations with Goethe in the Final Years of his Life, 1823-1832* (1836/1848)
- Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, excerpt from *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1835-1842)
- Heinrich Heine, excerpt from *The Romantic School* (1835)

Week 16: Romantic Legacies

How and why did the discourse of (German) Romanticism re-enter the fields of literature and aesthetic theory long after the end of its movement?

- Guillaume Apollinaire, *The Loreley* from *Alcohols* (1913)
- Thomas Mann, *Germany and the Germans* (1945 – excerpts)
- Christa Wolf, *No Place On Earth* (excerpt – 1979)

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

- Registration on Moodle (HU's e-learning platform)

in case of online sessions

- Fully functional device (laptop, tablet, PC)
- Stable internet connection
- Software: Zoom (video/audio)
- *Recommended* hardware: external headset for better sound quality

EXPECTATIONS & POLICIES

Preparation for lively discussions: be on time, have at least the required readings completed, and have points in mind for discussion or clarification.

Assignments: complete all assignments according to the specified requirements on the schedule including handing them over to the lecturer.

Commitment: pay particular attention to the lecturer and respect differences of opinion in this international classroom.

Academic guidelines: Comply with academic integrity policies. **Plagiarism** in even a small assignment will result in failing the entire course. See **ZSP-HU** (Fächerübergreifende Satzung zur Regelung von Zulassung, Studium und Prüfung der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), **§ 111** (Täuschung).

Attendance policy: Your attendance is essential to the success of this interactive seminar. It fosters discussion and exchange of perspectives within this international and interdisciplinary group. Please let your lecturer know if you are unable to attend a class. It is your responsibility to catch up on any class material you have missed.

The course and its syllabus are subject to change. Last update: 05/08/2026