# Spanish-American literature: The Nineteenth Century: Nationalism and Romanticism

The colonial period in Spanish-American history and letters came to an end with the wars for independence in the early 19th cent. Prose writers and poets, imbued with the ideals of revolution and the nationalism of independence, expressed their thoughts in fiery prose and heroic verse. Simón Bolívar, the Liberator is known for his analyses of the political scene as well as for his military exploits.

The Mexican José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi became famous as an ardent propagandist and pamphleteer. Basically, a journalist, he is remembered as the author of the first Spanish-American novel, *The Itching Parrot* (1816; tr. 1942), a work in the picaresque genre. José Joaquín [Olmedo](https://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/arts/world-lit/latin-bios/olmedo-jose-joaquin) celebrated the victories of Bolívar in a heroic poem in the classical style entitled *La victoria de Junín: Canto a Bolívar* (1825). Andrés [Bello](https://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/social-science/education/bios/bello-andres) , the Venezuelan humanist, educator, and poet also sang of America in his serene *A Georgic of the Tropics* (1826; tr. 1954).

With political independence from Spain achieved, except in the island countries of the Caribbean, cultural independence swept the region, aided by the romantic tenets of freedom, emotional intensity, and individualism. For a while, classic forms coexisted with [romanticism](https://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/arts/language/lit-terms/romanticism) as in the poetry of José María [Heredia](https://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/arts/world-lit/latin-bios/heredia-jose-maria) of Cuba. His *En el teocalli de Cholula* [in the temple-pyramid of Cholula] (1820) is the first Spanish-American romantic poem.

Among the early romanticists were the young intellectuals who fled from the tyranny of Juan Manuel de Rosas in Argentina. Esteban Echeverría expressed himself in the poetic narrative *La cautiva* [the captive] (1827). Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, also of Argentina, was not only the leading exponent of romanticism but also a prolific writer and educator. His *Life in the Argentine Republic in the Days of the Tyrants* (1845; tr. 1960), a study of personalism in politics, is among the classics of Spanish-American letters.

The emphasis on the national scene, so characteristic of romanticism, gave rise to the *gaucho* literature of Argentina and Uruguay, an indigenous literary genre. The [gaucho](https://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/history/latin-america/general/gaucho) , long the hero of popular tales and ballads, became the subject of some of the most original verse of the century in the poetry of Rafael Obligado, Estanislao del Campo, and in the classic *Martín Fierro* (1872–79; tr. 1948) of José Hernández. The romanticist's interest in the search for his native roots can be seen in the epic poem *Tabaré* (1886; tr. 1956) of Juan Zorrilla de San Martín, and in the historical anecdotes and sketches, the *Knights of the Cape and 37 Other Selections from Tradiciones peruanas* (1872–1910; tr. 1945), of Ricardo Palma.

Several novels of the period reflect the various trends in letters. *Amalia* (1851–55; tr. 1919), by José Mármol, deals with life in Argentina under Juan Manuel de Rosas; *Martín Rivas* (1862; tr. 1918), by Alberto Blest Gana of Chile, depicts the life and customs of Chile; *María* (1867; tr. 1890) is the tragic idyll of Jorge Isaacs of Colombia; and *Cumandá* (1871), by Ecuador's Juan León Mera, is a romantic portrayal of native life.

This same period produced some of Spanish America's most notable essayists. Juan Montalvo of Ecuador wielded his pen against the tyranny of García Moreno; Eugenio María de Hostos of Puerto Rico championed the cause of the independence and union of the islands of the Antilles; and Manuel González Prada of Peru attacked the entire social and economic system of his country and spoke out in defense of the indigenous peoples.

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