Literature in the Romantic Age

Poetic visions

Poetry again becomes one of the most vital forms of literary expression.

The main characteristics of Romanticism are intensity and imagination.

In the Romantic works recurrent themes are innocence and experience, youth and age, countryside and urban towns, man and nature, language and expression.
We must remember

Romantic poetry signalled a profound change in sensibility.

The Romantic movement was characterized by a violent reaction to the spirit of Enlightenment.
Precursors of Romanticism

• **Thomas Gray (1716-1771):** the main exponent of the so-called Graveyard School (*interest in melancholy, the desolate – graveyards and ruins – and a search for the picturesque and grandiose in nature*). He was one of the greatest scholars in Europe, and his interests included Norse and Welsh poetry and the Ossian poems.

  His most famous poem is *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* that was completed in 1750.
Relevant aspects in his poem

- The form used is the **elegy**.
- The subject is not an individual person but **the lives of different generations of an entire rural community** who represent mankind and life in general.
- The poem begins in a **descriptive mode**, but we can see that in the first three stanzas the reader does not exactly know where the poet is; from the end of the third stanza the church tower and the graveyard are introduced. This is a device used by the poet so that the reader is gradually led into the scene.
- The mood described by the poet is characterized by growing darkness and melancholy solitude. The main theme is the poet’s meditation on the forgotten lives of the villagers who lie buried in the churchyard.
- The poem ends with the poet imagining his own death evoked as a simple absence and the awareness that he will share a place in that churchyard. *(See a biographical reference: Gray wrote the poem after one of his best friends’ death).*
**Precursors of Romanticism**

- **William Blake (1757-1827):** his personality and poetry really mark the beginning of the Romantic age. He reacted violently against all traditional forms. At the same time he cannot strictly be called a Romantic poet, because his work stands outside any movement: Blake invented his own symbolic system that will influenced the Modernist poetry. He is called a visionary poet.

  His poetry falls into two categories: the deceptively simple *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, and the much more complex «prophetic» books.
William Blake

- Blake’s Romantic dualism: he rebelled, in his art and his life, against an aristocratic and elitist concept of art, but at the same time his marked individualism, and his refusal to rely on traditions, often make his poems difficult to read.

- Blake’s mythology: he elaborated a complete view of the world in a complex mythology. This is fully expressed in his main «prophetic» books, such as *The French Revolution, America, Milton, and Jerusalem*. (They became formless and obscure with time.

- Imagination for Blake: he believed in faith and intuition as the only true knowledge and he denied the truth of sensorial experience.
William Blake

A philosophy of contrasts: «Contraries» apparently states of mind, were essential to Blake's thought, because the possibility of progress – of achieving knowledge of what we really are – is located in the tension between contraries, not in their resolution by one gaining supremacy over another.

Instinct is as necessary as reason, emotion is as important as logic.
Blake’s style

**Blake’s poetry** is difficult because of his use of a **complex symbology**. The use of **symbols** came naturally to Blake, who believed that the physical world could be read as the book of God.

To him, a lamb or tiger, a chimney-sweeper or a London street were symbols of a **supra-natural reality**; they were never to be taken at their face value.
Blake’s style

- On the other hand, **his language and syntax** are **fairly simple**. He often adopts an apparently **naive style**, using a plain **Anglo-Saxon vocabulary**, as well as **repetitions, refrains** and **regular stress patterns** which are typical of ballads and children’s songs and hymns.
The First Generation of Romantic Poets
William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

The Lyrical Ballads: (3 editions)

• The first edition was published anonymously by Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1798.
• The second edition came out with Wordsworth’s name in 1800 and included his famous «Preface».
• The third edition was published in 1802 and was a further enlarged edition of the previous one.
Lyrical Ballads

• This volume of verse marked the appearance of modern poetry, the subjective poetry of the self.
• Before Lyrical Ballads, the poet chose a subject and used a style fit to it; after the volume’s publication, the subject of the poet was himself, he could choose any appropriate style.
The «Preface» to the *Lyrical Ballads*: a poetic manifesto

- The «Preface» was added to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* and is his artistic manifesto.
- Manifesto = a statement were his major ideas are described and explained.
- It contains:
  - A) his reaction to the public reception of the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* and an account of its production;
  - B) the choice of ordinary subjects and ordinary language as a way of creating a «democratic» kind of poetry accessible to all men;
  - C) a description and theory of the poet as «man speaking to men», an ordinary man who possesses more imagination than other men, who is more easily affected by what he experiences and is able to communicate his experiences to other men;
The «Preface» to the *Lyrical Ballads*

It contains:

- **D)** how poetry works in and on the human mind through pleasure (*the recollection of emotions and feelings*);
- **E)** how poetry is the «spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings» originating from «emotions recollected in tranquillity»;
- **F)** how all human activity is the subject of poetry (*art*).
Central theme: *Nature*

One of the central themes of Wordsworth’s poetry is *NATURE*.

- It is the expression of the ideal in the real, the mirror of divine absolute, the ultimate reality.
- For Wordsworth nature can mean:
  1) **Nature as the countryside**. Mountains, rivers, lakes, woods, and so on, are often opposed to the town, noise and confusion. The rural scene is usually silent and solitary but by no means desolate, it is a source of great pleasure for man. (Cfr. *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*)
2) **Nature as a source of inspiration.**

- Wordsworth’s revolutionary way of writing about nature, as opposed to neo-classical canons, does not depend on his description of places, sounds and colours, but on his trying to describe the relationship that joins man to nature. Nature is not a power external to man; we are part of it. In nature we can discover moral and spiritual values.
3) **Nature as a life-force.** The natural world that surrounds us has a life of its own, so, in a way, man can communicate with nature in a literal sense. This view, that God is present in nature and not separable from it, is often called **pantheistic.** In later life Wordsworth reacted against such an interpretation of his poems as it did not conform to standard Christian doctrine.