

## **The Romantic Era – 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

### **The Romantic View of Nature & The Romantic Hero**

#### **Developments of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

- Transformation of the West from an agricultural to an industrially based society.
- Application of science to practical invention sparked the Industrial Revolution (the mass production of material goods by machines) Industrialization involved a shift from the production of goods in homes and workshops to manufacture in factories, mills, and mines, stimulating growth in Europe's urban centers, and giving Europe dominion over the rest of the world.
- Population doubled in size.
- Nationalism – the exaltation of the state – involved the patriotic identification of individuals with a territory that embraced a common language and history. This gave rise to a pervasive militarism.

#### **Romanticism Defined**

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century is often called “the romantic era.” *Romanticism* describes a movement in the history of culture, an aesthetic style, and an attitude or spirit. As a movement, romanticism involved a revolt against convention and authority and a search for freedom in personal, political, and artistic life. The romantics reacted against the rationalism of Enlightenment culture and the impersonality of growing industrialism. They worked to revive their nations' history and to liberate the oppressed peoples of the earth.

- In art, romanticism was a reaction against the neoclassical quest for order and intellectual control in favor of free expression of the imagination and the liberation of the emotions.
- Subjective and spontaneous outpouring of feeling; emotions equally important as reason. Sentimentality, nostalgia, melancholy, longing were the attitudes of mind.
- Glorified the self by way of intuition and the senses.
- Heroes and visionaries, they freed themselves from the Church and state, and tended to pursue fiercely individualistic paths to creativity - paths that often alienated them from society and led to frustration, despair and even early death.

#### **The Romantic View of Nature**

- Estranged from traditional religious beliefs, the romantics looked upon nature as the dwelling place of God. God and the natural universe were one and the same.
- Perceived nature as a metaphor for the sublime: the power and mystery of forces that inspired awe, solace, and self-discovery.
- With Rousseau, the romantics held that humans were by nature good but were corrupted by society. “Natural man” was one who was close to nature and unspoiled by social institutions.
- Nature was the font of divine ecstasy and the medium of the mystical bond that united God with the human soul.

#### **The Romantic Hero**

As the romantics idealized nature and the natural, so they exalted the creative singularity of the individual in the person of the hero. Romantic heroes differed from traditional literary heroes in that they tended to challenge rather than champion the social and moral values of their time. The romantics saw themselves as heroes – the champions of a cult of the senses and of the heart. 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals celebrated the heroic personality, especially in its dedication to the causes of liberty and equality.

## William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

- “The infinite variety of natural appearances” – his principal source of inspiration and the primary subject of his poetry.
- Through the senses, one communed with elemental and divine universal forces.
- Nature could restore to human beings their untainted, childhood sense of wonder.
- Defined poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” – “emotion recollected in tranquility.”
- His rejection of the artificial diction of neoclassical verse anticipated a new, more natural voice in poetry – one informed by childhood memories and deeply felt experiences.
- Preferred **lyric poetry** – a style that has the form and musical quality of a song; a short poem that expresses personal feelings, which may or may not be set to music.
- In “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth established three of the key motifs of 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism: the redemptive power of nature, the idea of nature’s sympathy with humankind, and the view that one who is close to nature is close to God:
  - Line 49: Nature allows the poet to “see into the life of things.”
  - Line 91: Nature infuses him with “the still, sad music of humanity” and ultimately bringing him into the sublime presence of the divine spirit.
  - Lines 109-110: Nature is the “anchor” of his purest thoughts, the “nurse” and “guardian” of his heart and soul.

## Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

- Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* (1821), a manifesto of the writer’s function in society, hails poets as “the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” Poets take their authority from nature, the fountainhead of inspiration. The heart in each individual (which naturally knows goodness and beauty) must be stirred to love what is good, and to this end art is the great instrument.
- Shelley intuited an eternal reality beyond, separate from the mortal world in which we live where all we know is fleeting, unsubstantial, and illusory. (**Contrast w/Darwin’s Theory of Evolution/Natural Selection** – that nature and its operations were impersonal, continuous, and self-governing.)
- Poetry or art is created in or immediately after moments of visionary ascent to the eternal, and is an attempt to render such moments in words and images. Since language is limited in its expression of deep truth, words and images are only symbolic gestures pointing to something beyond; hence, success in conveying truth is never complete (which many have concluded led to Shelley’s volcanic personality, intense engagement in the natural world, and deep melancholy).
- In “Ode to the West Wind,” Shelley appeals to the wind, a symbol of creativity, to drive his visions throughout the universe. The wind drives leaves over the earth (stanza 1), clouds through the air (stanza 2), and waves on the seas (stanza 3).
- Final stanza – he compares the poet to a lyre, whose “mighty harmonies,” stirred by the wind of creativity, will awaken the world. By means of language that is itself musical, Shelley defends the notion of poetry as the music of the soul.
- In his “Essay on Christianity,” Shelley wrote: “We are not the arbiters of every motion of our own complicated nature; we are not the masters of our own imaginations and moods of mental being. There is a Power by which we are surrounded, like the atmosphere in which some motionless lyre is suspended, which visits with its breath our silent chords at will.”

## John Keats (1795-1821)

- Lamented the fleeting nature of pleasure, even as he contemplated the brevity of life.
- The threat of imminent death seemed to have heightened his awareness of the virtues of beauty, human love, and friendship. He perceived these phenomena as fleeting forms of a higher reality that might be made permanent only in art.
- “Ode on a Grecian Urn” – central ideas:
  - Art is the transmuted product of the imagination, a higher form of nature that triumphantly outreaches the mortal lifespan.
  - Keats contemplates a Greek vase whose delicately drawn figures immortalize life’s fleeting pleasures:
    - The boughs of trees pictured on such a vase will never shed their leaves.
    - The fair youths will never grow old.
    - The music of the pipes and timbrels will never cease to play
    - The lovers will never cease to love.
    - Unheard melodies are sweeter – what we imagine is always better than what is heard.
    - Objects cannot fade; the urn does not age or die, it is eternal.
- Keats describes the imaginary urn as a symbol of all great works of art, which, because of their unchanging beauty, remain eternally “true.” The poem concludes with the joyous pronouncement that beauty and truth are one.

## Nature and the Natural in Asian Literature

Although Asian poets anticipated the romantic engagement with nature, Eastern and Western styles of poetry differed considerably. Asian poets translated nature’s moods by way of only a few carefully chosen words, evoking the subtlest of analogies between the natural landscape and the human condition. The European romantics, on the other hand, generally built up a series of richly detailed pictorial images through which they might explore the redemptive or affective powers of nature. Whereas Chinese poets tried to record natural appearance with some immediacy, the English romantics felt bound to distill the experience of the senses by way of the intellect, to discover moral analogues, and to put personal feelings at the service of human instruction and improvement. But despite the differences, the nature poetry of both East and West addresses an enduring theme in the humanistic tradition: the value of nature in freeing human beings from the artificial confines of the material world. Such poetry suggests that humans and human life processes are extensions of the patterns and rhythms that govern the cosmos itself.

- Nature and the natural landscape had dominated the literature of the East for centuries.
- Perceived the natural landscape as symbolic of the oneness of man and nature.
- Embraced nature as a source of solitary joy and private meditation.
- Mountainous landscapes and changing seasons are metaphors for human moods and feelings.

## Shen Fu – *Six Chapters from a Floating Life*

- Reflective view of nature and a heightened sensitivity to its transient moods.
- All of nature is fragile and impermanent

## The Promethean Hero

- If Napoleon was 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe's favorite real-life hero, Prometheus was its favorite fictional hero.
- According to Greek mythology, Prometheus challenged Zeus by stealing from his home on Mount Olympus the sacred fire (source of divine wisdom and creative inspiration) and bestowing this great gift upon humankind. As punishment, Zeus chained him to a lonely rock, where an eagle fed daily on his liver, which was restored each night.
- Romantic poets embraced the figure of Prometheus as the suffering champion of humanity – a symbol of freedom and a deliverer whose noble ambitions had incurred the wrath of the gods.
- Percy Bysshe Shelley made Prometheus the savior-hero of his four-act play *Prometheus Unbound*. In this drama, Prometheus frees the universe from the tyranny of the gods. Shelley's purpose was to present "Idealisms" (ideal examples) of "Moral excellence" and thereby to excite the emotions of admiration and love that are the springs of moral regeneration.

## Mary Shelley ( 1797-1851)

- Mary Shelley explored another aspect of the Promethean legend in her novel *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*. The novel relates the tale of Victor Frankenstein, who, having discovered the secret of imparting life to inanimate matter, produces a monster endowed with supernatural strength.
- A modern Prometheus, Frankenstein suffers the punishment for his ambitious designs when the creature, excluded from the normal life of ordinary mortals, betrays its creator.
- Shelley's novel was the first literary work to question the human impact of scientific research.

## Lord Byron (1788-1824)

- Flamboyant, impassioned, idealist – fought for liberty and brotherhood – he established the prototype of the romantic hero, often called the Byronic hero.
- The heroes of Byron's poems were autobiographical: Childe Harold, the wanderer who, alienated from society, seeks companionship in nature; Don Juan, the libertine who cannot satiate his sexual desires; and Prometheus, the god who "stole from Heaven the flame, for which he fell."
- Makes the Promethean myth a parable for the romantic imagination; Prometheus preoccupied Byron as a symbol of triumphant individualism. For Byron, capturing the imagination in art or in life was comparable to stealing the sacred fire.
- In a number of poems, Byron compares the fallen Napoleon to the mythic Prometheus – symbol of heroic ambition and ungovernable passions.
- Byron's "**Prometheus:**"
  - In Byron's ode, the hero's "Godlike crime was to be kind."
  - Prometheus as "a symbol and a sign" to mortals, who, although "part divine," are doomed to "funereal destiny."
  - Like Prometheus, says Byron, we must strive to defy that destiny by pursuing the creative projects that will outlive us.
  - Byron's verses mingle defiance and hope with melancholy and despair.

## William Blake (1757-1827)

William Blake, a transitional figure in British literature, was the first romantic poet to focus on content instead of form. Highly affected by the greed of commerce and the cruelty toward the common worker during the Industrial Revolution, Blake compiled the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in the 1790s. The main theme of the poems in this work came from Blake's belief that children lost their "innocence" as they grew older and were influenced by the ways of the world. Blake believed that children were born innocent. They grew to become experienced as they were influenced by the beliefs and opinions of adults. When this happened, they could no longer be considered innocent. The poems from *Songs of Innocence* were written from an innocent child's perspective. *Songs of Experience* were written from the perspective of a more experienced person who had seen all of the evil in the world and had, in a way, become bitter towards it.

"The Lamb" from *Songs of Innocence* can symbolize innocence, serenity, a child, Jesus, or sacrifice. The poem gives credit to God for making such a beautiful being as the lamb. Its companion poem in *Songs of Experience*, "The Tyger," on the other hand, contains a different perspective of human life. The tyger could be compared to an "experienced" human. The tiger, although beautiful, is described as an animal that basically has to kill everyday in order to live. It is a being whose life is made by death. The age-old question is then asked, "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?"

<p>The Lamb - from <i>Songs of Innocence</i> (1789)</p> <p>Little Lamb, who made thee? Dost thou know who made thee? Gave thee life &amp; bid thee feed, By the stream &amp; o'er the mead; Gave thee clothing of delight, Softest clothing, wooly, bright; Gave thee such a tender voice, Making all the vales rejoice? Little Lamb, who made thee? Dost thou know who made thee?</p> <p>Little Lamb, I'll tell thee, Little Lamb, I'll tell thee: He is called by thy name, For he calls himself a Lamb. He is meek &amp; he is mild; He became a little child. I a child &amp; thou a lamb. We are called by his name. Little Lamb, God bless thee! Little Lamb, God bless thee!</p>	<p>The Tyger - from <i>Songs of Experience</i> (1794)</p> <p>Tyger Tyger, burning bright, In the forests of the night; What immortal hand or eye, Could frame thy fearful symmetry</p> <p>In what distant deeps or skies. Burnt the fire of thine eyes! On what wings dare he aspire? What the hand, dare sieze the fire!</p> <p>And what shoulder, &amp; what art. Could twist the sinews of thy heart? And when thy heart began to beat, What dread hand! &amp; what dread feet!</p> <p>What the hammer! what the chain, In what furnace was thy brain What the anvil, what dread grasp, Dare its deadly terrors clasp!</p> <p>When the stars threw down their spear And water'd heaven with their tears: Did he smile his work to see Did he who made the Lamb make thee!</p> <p>Tyger Tyger burning bright, In the forests of the night: What immortal hand or eye, Dare frame thy fearful symmetry!</p>
---	--

