

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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ENGLISH LITERATURE – 19th Century

Romanticism (1785-1830)

The imagination of many Romantic-period writers was preoccupied with revolution, and from that fact and idea, they derived the framework that enabled them to think of themselves as inhabiting a distinctive period in history (1369). The emphasis in this period on the spontaneous activity of the imagination is linked to a belief in the essential role of passion, whether in the province of art, philosophy, or morality (1373). According to Coleridge, “deep thinking is only to be obtained by a man of deep feeling; hence, a metaphysical solution that does not tell you something in the heart is grievously to be suspected as apocryphal.” (1371).

The Victorian Age

The Victorian Age represented a time of rapid expansion in British influence in the world, which was accompanied by a prodigious level of energy and output. Technological innovations and advances enabled much of the expansion, and the holdings of the British Empire allowed unprecedented growth, development, and anxiety. The literature of this time reflects the energy, optimism, expansiveness, and anxieties of the times.

William Blake (1757-1827) *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (B, 1406-1441)

William Blake was born in 1757 to a London tradesman. Blake’s only formal education was in art; he taught himself to read, write, and to write poetry. At twenty four, he married Catherine Boucher, who was, at the time, illiterate, but whom he taught to be his assistant. Blake earned a living producing engravings, setting type, and giving drawing/engraving lessons.

Songs of Innocence and of Experience (1794) are poems accompanied by engravings. They are meant to represent what Blake refers to as “two contrary states of the human soul.” (1407).

Question: What does Blake mean by Innocence and Experience ?

For Blake, who developed an elaborate poetic mythology to frame his poetic visions, the same single fallen world can be viewed either as a source of joy or of gloom and despair. To pick a simple example, Blake’s Tyger and his Lamb represent the two opposed perspectives. Do you see such a joy/gloom opposition playing out through the two kinds of song we read here? Do you in fact hear these pieces of language as songs, in any usual sense? *Do you begin to grasp the opposition and intimate inter-relation between Innocence and Experience?*

Question: Is this poetry congenial to a modern ear?

A second question seems in order. It moves into waters not typical for literary history. We ask whether this Blakean material is readable with delight and fascination today? Is this material in our present grain? Is it too simplistic? Or too allegorical—almost in the vein of *Piers Plowman*? Or is it so universal and central that it was already there in us when we encountered it on the page?

Comparative Literature:

1. Scholarship is a fine form of our effort to understand cultural products, and among the literary byproducts of a great writer, like Blake, count the scholarly works he/she has brought into existence. You might want to look at Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1968), a now classic work of criticism,

which contains copious and insightful references to Blake, while constructing a schema of literature which shares many traits with Blake's own distinctive mythology.

2. A few poets have created private mythologies, while many more have tapped into the mythological thinking of their own age. In English literature the two most original myth making poets have been Blake and the Irish poet, Yeats, whom we will read in our final Unit of this class. Both poets were concerned with contraries, the nature of history and its internal antinomies, the power of imagination to transform. You can pursue the rich mythological relation of these two poets—Yeats greatly admired Blake's thought—by reading the Selection of Blake's *The Book of Thel*, in your Norton Anthology (1425-1430), and then turning to Yeats' *A Vision* (1925), where he enshrines his poetic philosophy of history. Try to see the relation between Yeats' map of the world and that of Blake, with his mythical cosmology.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*(B, 1456-1483)

Mary Wollstonecraft fought her way to literary brilliance from a background of family conflict, domestic abuse, and a sequence of the lowly nanny type occupations which were among the few open to women in her time. In 1788 her novel, *Mary, A Fiction*, was published and caught attention—as Fanny Burney's fiction was contemporaneously drawing attention for its depiction of the “real life” of everyday women. Mary Wollstonecraft took up the cudgel, in a second book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Man*, 1791, which locked horns with Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Like the American Tom Paine, in his *Rights of Man*, Mary Wollstonecraft was a passionate supporter of the French Revolution. Her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792, followed shortly after, and has proven to be her most lasting contribution to our culture.

Question: What are the boundaries of the thing called Literature?

Olaudah Equiano, Mrs. Burney, now Mrs. Wollstonecraft; do these authors' texts belong in a course on literature? Are they literary texts or are they something else—social commentary, memoir, projections of intentions for the future? Common sense suggests we ignore this question, and delight in fascinating texts wherever we find them and can learn from them. But not everyone would agree that these fascinating texts are literature. For example Wordsworth and Coleridge were supporters of a view of imagination, which they considered the central and indispensable force in literary creation; they thought imagination transformative, able to take disparate pictures of our experience and fuse them into a unique whole, which was very different from the unfused catalogues common to writers of memoirs or commentaries. When you complete this Unit please reflect back onto the present question, which cuts to the heart of what literature really is. Would Wordsworth have accepted Equiano and Wollstonecraft as writers of *literature*? Would they have cared what Wordsworth thought?

Question: What is Skill in Natural Prose English?

Prose style, natural, captivating, human is one of the glories of English literature, but it is never easy to analyze. (Herbert Read's *English Prose Style*, 1928, is old fashioned, but a splendid guide to these mysteries.) Mary Wollstonecraft, for instance, is at her best in bringing insights out of simple narration. Take her comparison of two educations, that of women and that of military men (1466-1467). “The great misfortune is this, that they both acquire manners before morals, and a knowledge of life before they have, from reflection, any acquaintance with the grand ideal outline of human nature.” This sentence, and the surrounding context, are typical of Wollstonecraft's easy but startling analyses. What is the secret of her artistry?

Comparative Literature:

1. The discussion of Feminism, which we opened with Frances Burney, above, inevitably reverts to the classic issue; is there something “feminine” about women's writing, and something “masculine” about men's? The cutting argument of mid 20th century Feminism, in its classical phase of Betty Friedan and Kate Millet, minimized the differences between the abilities and skills of men and women. (Mary Wollstonecraft does the same, exception made for the question of physical strength.) Do you see some

sensibility, in the passages we have been reading from women authors, that distinguish them from “masculine style”?

2. Literature has often been viewed as a mirror of life, in which we see the realities of a time clearly reflected. (Mrs. Burney’s depiction of her mastectomy brings this to mind.) Does this seem a valuable way to view literature? Take a look at Escarpit, *The Sociology of Literature*, 1971, for insights into literature as a mirror of social life. Marxist theorists saw literature not only as a mirror but as a stage of social development. Cf. on this Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 1971.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) *Lyrical Ballads; Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Tintern Abbey; Prelude(B, 1484-1592)*

William Wordsworth was shaped by the Wye Valley and the Lake District of Northwest England. There he grew up freely in nature, comfortable enough in his family life and from early on sensitive to the still unspoiled peasant communities of his region. His relation to his sister Dorothy, and for a long time, during his most creative period, to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, were decisive foundations of his poetic genius. While he was in early life a passionate supporter of the French Revolution, like Mary Wollstonecraft, and while he was close to France for romantic and cultural reasons, Wordsworth grew more nearly mainline and conventional of philosophy, as he aged; one longs, in reading the older Wordsworth, for the simple genius of the *Lyrical Ballads*.

Question: What is the Genius Behind the Lyric Simplicity of Wordsworth’s Early Poems?

The question before us was asked by many, at the time of Wordsworth’s publication of *The Lyrical Ballads*, in 1800. The seemingly extreme simplicity of these poems appeared silly, unworthy of the great traditions of poetry. The fact is that Wordsworth and Coleridge were both in rebellion against the concept of the poem in the 18th century and earlier. (Think back to Dryden and Pope, for examples of that earlier poetry at its best. It is full of poetic diction, personified virtues with capital letters, a vocabulary level which belongs to educated speech, instead of to the voices of common people, as Wordsworth understood it.) The answer to our question seems to go in this direction: the lyric simplicity of Wordsworth—see “We are Seven”—is not simple at all. The complexity of this lyric balladry lies in the inner organic mystery of the poet’s feelings. (See how many different issues are involved in whether “we are seven.”) The description of the poet, in the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, (1502), is of a person of “comprehensive soul,” and of an imagination which makes wholes out of parts. Because he was this kind of person Wordsworth was able to write this kind of poetry.

Comparative Literature:

1. Wordsworth’s place in the shaping of literary history is decisive. His views of the common voice, of the power of imagination, of the omnipotence of memory, of the impending threats of industrialism and vulgarity, all fall into line with perceptions and cultural developments which dominate Wordsworth’s own time. From the Napoleonic Wars, to the French Revolution, to the mid-19th century growth of the middle class in Europe: all these events coincide with the powerful growth of Wordsworth’s sensibility. I suggest you take a look at Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (1944), for a broad survey of the cultural landscape in which Wordsworth lived. Geoffrey Hartman’s *Wordsworth’s Poetry* (1964) is a guide to the simple mysteries of Wordsworth’s early lyrics.

2. Wordsworth’s quality of imagination can suggest the work of Chuang-tsu, the 4th century B.C. Chinese poet, who worked in the philosophical vein of Lao-tsu. If you consult that quiet tweaker of language, you will see that, like Wordsworth, he leaves an after mood of puzzlement and learning, which is an intimate part of the power of his poetry. Compare him to Wordsworth. Then go back to Pope, and note how sharply *he* brings his poems to a point, a precise conclusion that says it all again.

S. T. Coleridge (1772-1834) *Poems; Biographia Literaria (B, 1609-1670)*

Coleridge, like Wordsworth, was educated at Cambridge, but proved a wayward student, too much the

scholar to fit comfortably with his classes, addicted to high living, and eventually to crippling debt. His only recourse was the military, in which he was even more a failure. Back at Cambridge, Coleridge paired up with the poet Robert Southey, and soon with William Wordsworth, who was to be the great intellectual mate of Coleridge throughout much of his life—though a bitter quarrel estranged them for some years—and for decades he shared with Wordsworth the distinction of being the leading British poet and thinker. It should be mentioned, because it sharply distinguished Coleridge from Wordsworth, that the former spent considerable time studying German philosophy of the day, and came away from that experience, at the University of Goettingen, far more the speculative thinker than Wordsworth.

Question: What is the 'supernatural' quality of Coleridge's poetry?

In his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge observes that in the *Lyrical Ballads*, which bear the author names of both himself and of Wordsworth, he (Coleridge) created poems of the supernatural, while Wordsworth, as he insisted, wrote poems bearing the real speech of real men in daily life. Do you find this distinction born out in the poems you have read, and if so what is the *supernatural* element in Coleridge's work? Take "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Christabel," and "The Eolian Harp." What is "supernatural" about those poems? Why would Coleridge have used that term about those works?

Comparative Literature:

1. Coleridge's definition of imagination, as given in the *Biographia Literaria* (Chapter 13; 1663), claims that that faculty is "the living power and prime agent of all human perception." Do some reading in the thought of those German contemporaries of Coleridge, from whom he drew the foundations of this radical new aesthetic. (Think how totally this aesthetic differs from that of Dryden and Pope, hardly a century earlier.) Good starting point (with a commentary): the German philosopher Schelling's contemporary *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), which gives the priority to the aesthetic, in the human construction of reality.

2. You will have gathered that nature becomes a key concept for both Enlightenment thinkers like Pope—remember the "Essay on Man"—and for Romantics like Coleridge and Wordsworth. Give some thought to the difference between the usages of "nature" in the work of those two groups of poets. Coleridge, you may want to consider first, writes of "the one life within us and abroad, which meets all motion and becomes its soul." ("The Aeolian Harp," ll. 26-7). Would Pope have resonated to this kind of "pantheistic" idea?

Lord Byron (1788-1824) *Poems, Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Don Juan (B, 1671-1730)*

Child of aristocracy on both sides, inheritor too of both extreme handsomeness and a club foot, Lord Byron represents the adventurer/dissolute, /genius in the fullest expression of what was to be the Romantic spirit. How appropriate that, after a life of erotic expenditure, passionate friendship—as with the poet Shelley and his wife-- ultimately Byron met his death fighting for Greek Independence in the War against the Turks. This cause, of real and symbolic power throughout Europe, was widely seen in the West as a Battle to release the imprisoned spirit of Ancient Hellenism. Byron was "heroic" to the end.

Question: What is the Secret of Byron's narrative skill?

We turn to a question of prosody, first of all. Byron took the *ottava rima* form of *Don Juan* from a strong tradition in Italian verse. (The scheme is *abababcc*; with an alternation of four and five stress syllables in the rhyming lines. One would say a bouncy, jocular and impish scheme, and so it is.) So what is the secret of Byron's placing a set of tales of romance into the rollicking onward advance of this meter? He never pauses, he presses forward without unnecessary commentary, he mocks himself regularly, he mocks Don Juan regularly, he keeps his own person flittingly intrusive throughout the tale; and above all, of course, he is a master of the erotic tease, as Chaucer had been. *Are we getting close to Byron's secret?*

Comparative Literature:

1. The long poem before you is both narratively enchanting (my opinion) and hard to duplicate in other literatures. I suggest you refresh yourself on the libretto of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, which was completed in 1788. In that opera, with a noted libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte, Don Giovanni comes off as a charming and obsessed sexual predator, attracted to an endless series of women, whom he loves to enumerate. By making this comparison between poetry and opera you will, among other things, double your awareness of Byron's passive Don Juan, to whom women just happen. You will also be asking yourself about the difference of music from narrative poetry, as a medium for constructing character. What difference do you see?

2. In your *Norton Anthology*, 1671, you see a provocative quotation from the French critic and early sociologist, Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893). In essence, Taine praises Byron's work lavishly, while rating the work of Coleridge, Wordsworth and Keats on a far lower level. You might ponder that passage, which reflects a view uncommon, even unimaginable, at our time. Taine's evaluation runs with the spirit of his own time, and counter to the evaluation most critics and historians would give today. All that is neither here or there, as far as Byron's "true value" goes, but it is an alarm bell indicator, that literary historical evaluations blow with the wind of their times. In 18th century France, people in the know typically scorned Shakespeare, for his vulgarity. Among earlier Christian writers ancient Greek literature was viewed as nothing more than a cesspool of bad moral examples. Times change. Is there lasting value in the productions of literature? Have you observed such taste changes in the literary development of your own time?

John Keats (1795-1821) *Poems and Letters (B, 1820-1884)*

The English Romantic poets seldom lived long, and Keats led them all in early death, at age 26. It is the belief of our Norton editors that had Keats lived a full life he would have excelled such as Chaucer and Shakespeare in achievement. Yet rather than mourn we may better suppose that the brevity of this life was the price of Keats' distinctive brilliance, intermixed as it is with the premonition of death. Trained as an apothecary-surgeon, Keats exercised his medical career for a brief period, then found his way into a lively circuit of London poets and before long had decided to devote himself to poetry. His brilliant activity as a poet was frenetic, dominated by his premonition of death, and in fact fate proved him right, for in 1820 he began to cough up blood, a result of tuberculosis, and a year later he was dead.

Question: What is Unique about Keats' poetry?

The question may sound like an excerpt from a parlor game. Surely answers will be as different as answerers. For this author, though, the answer is sure: that Keats' *aesthetic perspective* is uniquely pervasive, and finds exquisite expression in his work. It is not that Keats is "arty," or superficially caught up in the details of beautiful things, but that he finds truth, as he said, in beauty. That is not all he finds in beauty, either, for in the evanescent, shimmering will o the wisp of the aesthetic he finds his own deepest human environment, the proximity of sleep, narcosis, and that kind of loveable death toward which the Nightingale draws him.

Comparative Literature:

1. How is literature related to music? You might want to compare Keats to other poets whose work seems to border on the musical. (I think of Whitman in America, Paul Verlaine in France, Heine in Germany; you can supply other and better examples.) Does pure sound have significance by itself, in poetry, or must sound be allied to meaning in order to constitute poetry? You might apply this subtle question to a poem like the "Ode to a Nightingale," which is about the music of the bird's call, as it ultimately narcotizes rational (or perhaps any) meaning. Keats is forever working the borders between music, as topic and as part of his poetry, and music as thematic material *in* his poetry.

2. Sometimes the best commentary on an author's writings lies in other writings by the same person. Keats' *Letters*, of which you have examples in our anthology, are marked by the same fervor, sudden starts and stops, and brilliant flashes as his poetry. Can you think of other literary figures whose letters you know? (Tolstoy? Lawrence? T.S. Eliot?) if so, you may want to see whether letters give us a down to

earth appreciation of an author, and thus a special mode of access to the writer's major creations.

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1899) *Poems (B, 2158-2167)*

Although Gerard Manley Hopkins was to take his own special career path, he too, like many of the male authors requiring our attention in the preceding entries, took the educational path of Oxford/Cambridge, into the presence of certain eminent professors and literary figures. Matthew Arnold, poet and humanist, was among the "great figures," but the particular inspirations for Hopkins were two: Walter Pater, essayist and aesthete, a thinker for whom the artistic was always close to the moral; John Henry Newman, whose conversion to Roman Catholicism had much to do with Hopkins' own similar move. (Hopkins entered the Catholic Church in 1866, and ultimately became a Jesuit priest.) In 1884 Hopkins was appointed Professor of Classics at University College in Dublin, Ireland.

Question: What led to Hopkins' Conviction that Poetry and the Religious Vocation are Incompatible?

The present question is both simplistic and unanswerable, and yet goes right to the heart of Hopkins' position as a creator. You will have noticed that Hopkins—with his sprung rhythm and inscape and instress theories—puts heavy stress on the manipulation of the oral/sensuous presentational side of poetry. (In his youth, Hopkins wrote in the vein of Keats, and you can see the aestheticism of, say, "Sleep and Poetry," in Hopkins.) In addition, as you note in Norton (2159), Hopkins viewed the instress of inscape as a form of address to the created identity of the object of the poem, and thus a fairly direct access to Christ, the emblem and Lord of the created world for Hopkins. If you follow this issue of confrontation with Christ through its embodiment in a poem you will come on the source of conflict, for Hopkins, between his religious vocation and his artistic creativity. Inside himself he doubted that he should substitute an artistic simulation of the Christ encounter for the direct encounter in the Mass, the central act of his priesthood. In the latter part of his life, Hopkins abandoned poetry.

Comparative Literature:

1. To read Hopkins' lyrics—think of "God's Grandeur" or "As Kingfishers catch Fire"—is to pay close attention to the prosody that drives his thought, (Is Hopkins' prosody itself a kind of embodied thought?) The challenge of this Comparative Literature entry is to review in mind the variety of lyric/poetic styles we have touched on in this course. Spenser, Sidney, Donne, Pope, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, and now Hopkins. Does Hopkins ally with some particular voice in this group. Take "The Windhover." Notice the effect of sprung rhythm, as Hopkins called it, in which there is a regular number of stressed syllables, but a highly variable number of unstressed, and some consequent breathless linking of one line to another. Do you see this pattern creating a novelty in English lyric? Or is Hopkins simply varying familiar patterns with a slight tweak?

2. In your Norton Anthology (2159) you note that Hopkins drew on Duns Scotus for the thinking behind *inscape*. Involved here is Hopkins' belief about the kinds of disclosure poetry is capable of, as it allows the other it depicts to reveal its identity, and thereby to become, in its full createdness, the stamp of the Christ on it. From Plato (say in *The Ion*) to Martin Heidegger, in *Being and Time* in the past century (1962), poets and philosophers have long debated the knowledge poetry seeks and gives; and Hopkins belongs to this tradition of debate. It might be instructive to contrast Hopkins, in this regard, with Spenser, Donne, or Wordsworth, each of whom clearly believes that poetry is more than expression, that it is also inquiry and statement about the world we live in.

Essay Questions

1. You will notice that Pope and Swift died only a few years before the birth of William Blake, in 1757. In with the new! If you were to mix up the works of these three writers in a pile, with no author identification tags on them, would you be able to tell which of the works were by Blake, and which by the other two? How would you tell?

2. Review Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, and the *Preface* to them. Do you find in the early Wordsworth

lyrics that simplicity of diction, that general hostility to poetic high style, which will be profoundly different from the “ornate” language of such as Dryden and Pope? Are Wordsworth’s lyrics themselves “simple,” in language or thought?

3. When you look at the poetry of Byron (d. 1824), Keats (d. 1821), and Hopkins (d. 1899) can you see some unifying factor(s) which marks the group as “19th century?” Please take this question back into our earlier units, and consider whether centuries seem useful categories for literary history, or whether perhaps “generations” seem more useful benchmarks, for understanding groups of writers?