



**NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA**

**SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**COURSE CODE: ENG 423**

**COURSE TITLE: LITERATURE OF THE ROMANTIC  
PERIOD**

## COURSE GUIDE

**ENG 423**

### **LITERATURE OF THE ROMANTIC PERIOD**

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## **Introduction**

You are welcome to ENG 423: Literature of the Romantic Period. This course is available for students in the undergraduate English programme. This course will help you distinguish between Romanticism and the literary movements that preceded and followed it. It would also acquaint you with the knowledge of Romantic literature and Romantic writers including William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, George Gordon (Lord Byron), Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats. You would also be able to connect the works of the Romantics to the social and historical background of the era. This knowledge invariably is critical to a comprehensive understanding of English literary history and development.

This course guide is designed to help you benefit maximally from this course. It provides you with all the information about the course in terms of its content, the materials you would need to understand the course very well, as well as how to work your way through these materials. There are also Self-Assessment Exercises (SAEs) embedded in each unit to help you in your study; as well as a Tutor-Marked Assignment (TMA) at the end of each unit. You are advised to take your tutorial classes seriously; be regular and punctual too and interact freely with your course mates. These interactive sessions are quite rewarding! Your facilitator is always available at these tutorial classes to guide you effectively. Discuss any difficulty you may have with your tutor.

### **What You will Learn in this Course**

This course will give you an overview of the important writers and literary ideas of the English Romantic period. This will include a review of the historical, literary, and sociological reasons for the development of Romantic literature as well as exposure to the key writers of this period and the analysis of their works.

### **Course Aims**

This course is designed to expose you to the literature of the Romantic era. Its goals are to help you identify literary writers and works of the Romantic era and help you interpret and analyse such works.

### **Course Objectives**

It is expected that at the completion of this course, you should be able to:

- List the literary periods leading up to the Romantic period and after it;
- Define Romanticism;
- Identify its various themes and motifs;
- State and explain the characteristic features of Romanticism;
- Identify writers of the Romantic period;
- Analyse works of Romantic writers.

### **Working through the Course**

Certain things are fundamental for the completion of this course. Each unit has specific objectives; understudy them as they will help keep you focused on the expected learning outcomes for each unit. You should read the study units very well as well as any other materials that may be recommended by National Open University of Nigeria. You should also attempt all the Self-Assessment Exercises embedded in each unit. This will in turn help you in the Tutor-Marked Assignments that come at the end of each unit. Consult your course mates or/and your facilitator should you have any difficulty whatsoever in this course. The Tutor-Marked Assignments should be submitted to your facilitator on demand. You will take a final examination at the end of the course.

### **Course Materials**

The major components of the course are:

1. Course guide
2. Study units
3. Textbooks
4. Assignment file
5. Presentation schedule

### **Study Units**

This course is made up of fourteen study units. They are as follows:

<b>Module 1</b>	<b>Understanding Romanticism</b>
Unit 1	Periods in the History of English Literature
Unit 2	What is Romanticism?
Unit 3	Characteristics and Features of Romanticism
Unit 4	Themes of Romantic Literature

<b>Module 2</b>	<b>Romanticism and Thoughts about it</b>
Unit 1	Romantic Manifesto- ‘Preface to Lyrical Ballads’
Unit 2	Criticisms against Romanticism
<b>Module 3</b>	<b>The Works of Romantic Poets</b>
Unit 1	The Works of William Blake
Unit 2	The Works of William Wordsworth
Unit 3	The Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge
<b>Module 4</b>	<b>The Works of Romantic Poets</b>
Unit 1	The Works of John Keats
Unit 2	The Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley
Unit 3	The Works of Lord Byron
Unit 4	Comparative Analysis of some Romantic Poems
Unit 5	The Novel in the Romantic Period

The study units are divided into three modules. Module 1 helps you trace and identify the periods preceding and following the Romantic period. It also helps you understand what Romanticism is as well as its distinguishing features and characteristics, especially against the background of those of Neoclassicism. Modules 2 and 3 examine the works of the six renowned Romantic poets. Each of the fourteen study units has an introduction, a list of objectives, the main content, Self-Assessment Exercises (SAEs), conclusion, summary, and Tutor-Marked Assignments (TMAs) which will be submitted for marking, and a list of reference materials.

### **Textbooks and References**

Your course material is the main text for this course. However, you will find a list of relevant reference materials at the end of each unit. You may wish to consult them for further reading.

### **Presentation Schedule**

The presentation schedule gives you the important dates for the completion of your Tutor-Marked Assignments and when you will attend tutorials. Remember that you are required to submit your assignments according to the schedule.

### **Assignment File**

The file contains the details of all the assignments you must do and submit to your tutor for marking. The score you obtain from these assignments will form part of the final score you will obtain in this course.

## Assessment

There are two types of assessments in this course: the Self-Assessment Exercises (SAEs) and the Tutor-Marked Assignments (TMAs). The Self-Assessment Exercises (SAEs) are for personal study and the answers are not meant to be submitted. However, you must not neglect these exercises as they help you ascertain your understanding of the course content. The Tutor-Marked Assignments (TMAs) are to be answered and kept in your assignment file for submission on demand. The Tutor-Marked Assignments (TMAs) will count for 30% of your total score in this course.

## Tutor-Marked Assignment

You will find a Tutor-Marked Assignment at the end of each unit. That is to say that for this course, there are a total of fourteen Tutor-Marked Assignments. These are to be answered and kept in your assignment file to be submitted to your facilitator on demand and on time too. Ensure you complete all the Tutor-Marked Assignments.

## Final Examination and Grading

The final examination for ENG 423 will be for the duration of three hours and will carry 70% of the total course grade. The examination will reflect the Self-Assessment Exercises and the Tutor-Marked Assignments you have already worked on. You are advised to use the time between completing this course and the examination to revise the entire course. You will find revisiting your Self-Assessment Exercises and Tutor-Marked Assignments helpful at this period.

## Course Marking Scheme

The table below shows how actual marking scheme is broken down:

ASSESSMENTS	MARKS
Assignment	Best three marks of the assignments count as 30% of course mark.
Final examination	70% of overall course marks
Total	100% of course marks

## Course Overview

Units	Title	Week's	Assessment
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		<b>Activities</b>	(End of Unit
	<b>Course Guide</b>	<b>1</b>	
	<b>Module 1</b>		
<b>1</b>	Periods in the History of English Literature	<b>1</b>	
<b>2</b>	What is Romanticism?	<b>2</b>	
<b>3</b>	Characteristics and Features of Romanticism	<b>3</b>	
<b>4</b>	Themes of Romantic Literature	<b>4</b>	TMA 1
	<b>Module 2</b>		
<b>1</b>	Romantic Manifesto-- <i>Preface to Lyrical Ballads</i>	<b>5</b>	
<b>2</b>	Criticisms against Romanticism	<b>6</b>	
	<b>Module 3</b>		
<b>1</b>	The Works of William Blake	<b>7</b>	
<b>2</b>	The Works of William Wordsworth	<b>8</b>	TMA 2
<b>3</b>	The Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge	<b>9</b>	
	<b>Module 4</b>		
<b>1</b>	The Works of John Keats	<b>10</b>	
<b>2</b>	The Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley	<b>11</b>	TMA 3
<b>3</b>	The Works of Lord Byron	<b>12</b>	
<b>4</b>	Comparative Analysis of some Romantic Poems	<b>13</b>	
<b>5</b>	The Novel in the Romantic Period	<b>14</b>	TMA 4
	<b>Revision</b>	<b>15</b>	
	<b>Examination</b>	<b>16</b>	

### What you will need in this Course

It would be of tremendous help to you if you review what you studied in *Introduction to Literature* and *Literary Criticism*. This would help remind you of the tools you need for the appreciation of literary works as you would find in this course. You may also need to purchase one or two recommended texts for the mastery of the course. You need quality time in a study-friendly environment every week. You should also visit recommended websites. This presupposes that computer literacy is

important for this course. It is also important that you visit institutional and public libraries that are accessible to you.

### **Facilitators/ Tutors and Tutorials**

There are eight (8) hours of tutorials provided in support of this course. You will be notified of dates, times and locations of these tutorials together with the name, phone number and email address of your tutor as soon as you are allocated a tutorial group. Your tutorial facilitator will mark and comment on your assignments, keep close watch on your progress and on any difficulty you might encounter, as well as provide assistance to you during the course. Endeavour to send in your Tutor-Marked Assignments promptly, and feel free to contact your tutor in case of any difficulty with your Self-Assessment Exercises, the Tutor-Marked Assignments or the grading of an assignment. You are advised to attend the tutorials regularly and punctually. This will afford you the opportunity to have a face-to-face contact with your tutor and your course mates; and to ask questions which are answered instantly. It is advisable that you prepare a list of such questions before attending the tutorials. You will benefit a lot when you participate actively in class discussions.

### **Conclusion**

Upon completing this course, you will be equipped with the knowledge of the historical events that ushered in the Romantic period as well as those that followed it. You would also be able to explain Romanticism with its distinguishing characteristic features in literary works. You will be able to discuss Romantic writers as well interpret and analyse their works.

### **Summary**

This course guide has been designed to provide you with the information you need for a successful experience in this course. At the end of it all, how much you get from this course depends on how much you put in, in terms of time, effort and planning.

I wish you success and hope that you will find the course both interesting and useful.



**COURSE  
MATERIAL**

## **LITERATURE OF THE ROMANTIC PERIOD**

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## **MODULE 1 UNDERSTANDING ROMANTICISM**

Unit 1	Periods in the History of English Literature
Unit 2	What is Romanticism?
Unit 3	Characteristics and Features of Romanticism
Unit 4	Themes of Romantic Literature

## **UNIT 1 PERIODS OF ENGLISH LITERATURE**

## **CONTENT**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Pre – Romantic Period
  - 3.2 Romantic Period
  - 3.3 Post-Romantic Period
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

It is important that we start this unit by taking a historical overview of the different segments and times which English Literature has been divided into. These divisions by historians are what we refer to as Periods of English Literature. There has been much controversy about the periods of English Literature such that there are disagreements about exact dates and names of these periods. Nevertheless, we shall now see a generally accepted list of these periods in their chronological order as given by Abram (2005: 219 – 220):

450 – 1066	Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) Period
1066 – 1500	Middle English Period
1500 – 1660	The Renaissance (or Early Modern)
1660 – 1798	The New Classical Period
1798 – 1832	The Romantic Period
1832 – 1901	The Victorian Period
1901 – 1914	The Edwardian Period
1914 – 1945	The Modern Period
1945 –	Post Modern Period

For easy understanding of this unit however, we shall classify these periods into three major periods: Pre-Romantic Period, Romantic Period and Post-Romantic Period and treat accordingly.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- i Name/identify the four periods preceding and the four following the Romantic Period.
- ii Explain activities and literary works that characterise each of these periods.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

### **3.1 Pre-Romantic Periods**

Pre-Romantic periods are those periods preceding the Roman period. They are periods from the Old English period to the Neo classical period. We shall now briefly examine each of these periods to highlight their main features and the activities that marked them.

#### **3.1.1 The Old English/Anglo-Saxon Period (450 – 1066)**

This period starts from the time Celtic England was invaded by Germanic tribes of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes in the first half of the 5th Century to the time England was conquered in 1066 by the Norman French under the leadership of William the Conqueror. There was much influence of the Anglo-Saxon on the literature of this period. The Anglo Saxon literature had been oral until the Anglo Saxons were converted to Christianity in the seventh century. Poetry of this period is preserved in four manuscripts:

1. Beowulf – an epic poem
2. the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle – a record of early English
3. the Franks Casket – an early whale bone artifact
4. Caedmon's Hymn – a Christian religion poem

There was a number of prose works such as sermons and saints' lives, biblical translations of Latin works of the early church fathers, and legal documents such as Wills. Nearly all Anglo-Saxon authors are anonymous, with few exceptions such as Alfred the Great, Bede and Caedmon.

#### **3.1.2 Middle English (1066 – 1500)**

This period is also known as the medieval period. It extended approximately from the end of the fifth century when the control of the Roman Empire had ended, until the fifteen century. It was one of the most turbulent periods in English history starting with the Battle of Hastings and the Norman Conquest and ending in the emergence of the Renaissance Period. Much of the early literature of this period consisted of homilies and sermons prayers and lives of saints. Later, secular writings appeared. The figure of King Arthur, an ancient British hero, captured the attention of these early secular writers. Literary works of this period include the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer, Sir Gawain, the Warfield Master and William Langland. Others include Italian and French writers like Boccaccio, Petrarch, Dante and Christine de Bisen.

## Self Assessment Exercise 1

1. Mention any two remarkable incidents that happened during the Old English period and Middle English period.
2. Compare and contrast the Old English period and the Middle English period

### 3.1.3 The Renaissance Period (1500-1660)

This period lasted from the fifteenth century to the seventeenth century. Renaissance period is a period of rebirth, of awakening, of intellectual awareness, and suggests a sudden rebirth of learning and art after the pressured stagnation of the Middle Ages. Apart from the revival of learning and awakening of the mind, there was also a thirst for after new knowledge, new civilization and new culture. Intellectuals adopted a new line of thought known as Humanism in which mankind was believed to be capable of earthly perfection beyond prior imagination. There was a very high regard for the facts pertaining to the human race. Shallow ideas about human nature and man melted away and man was seen as a living, inspiring subject worthy of observation and study. It was also an age of scientific revolution. There were new discoveries and inventions. Johnnes Gutenberg perfected the printing press at this period. Before this period, the earth was seen as stationary around which the moon, other planets and fixed stars rotated. Copernican theory however, changed this idea and postulated that the sun is at the centre not the earth, and that the earth is not stationary; it is one of the many planets that revolve around the sun.

There was also a new religion, so to say; Martin Luther in his '95 Thesis' questioned the activities of the Roman Catholic Church. Martin Luther's Reformation was made possible by the printing press which mass-produced his ideas for public reading. The result was the Protestant Church. The effect of the printing press was also felt on reading and literature. Previously, one document was read aloud to people. Conversely, copies could be made available and this gave way to silent and individual reading.

The dominant features of the Renaissance period in terms of literature were the poem and drama. Predominant poetry includes lyric, the elegy, the tragedy and the pastoral. Writers of this period include:

Elizabeth I	(1533 – 1603)
Donne, John	(1572 – 1631)
Jonson, Ben	(1572 – 1637)
Shakespeare, William	(1564 – 1616)
Marlowe, Christopher	(1564 – 1593)
Milton, John	(1608 – 1674)

By the middle of the seventeenth century, the quest for human perfection gave way to decadence, cynicism and introversion, and to the emergence of Neoclassicism.

### **Self Assessment Exercise 2**

1. Why is the Renaissance period known as a period of rebirth?
2. Mention the major literary figures associated with this period.

#### **3.1.4 Neoclassical Period (1660 – 1785)**

Neoclassicism started in the mid-seventeenth century. To a certain extent, Neoclassicism is a reaction against the Renaissance view of man as a being that is fundamentally good and capable of spiritual and intellectual growth. On the contrary, it saw man as being imperfect, limited and inherently sinful. Neoclassicism emphasized logic, order, reason, restraint, common sense and conservatism in religious, political, economic and philosophical affairs, and had disregard for superstition. For this reason, some historians call it the ‘Age of Enlightenment’ or the Age of Reason. Writers of this period include Daniel Defoe, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, Joseph Addison, Samuel Johnson, Edward Gibbon, Oliver Goldsmith, Edmund Burke and James Boswell.

### **Self Assessment Exercise 3**

Neoclassicism is said to be a reaction against the Renaissance period. Why?

#### **3.2 Romantic Period (1798 – 1830)**

This period is a reaction against Neoclassicism. It is marked with the emphasis on individualism. The individual consciousness and especially the individual imagination were emphasised as well as such emotions as apprehension, horror, awe; especially that which one experienced in confronting the sublimity of untamed nature and its picturesque qualities. Its primary vehicle of expression was in poetry. Notable Romantic poets include William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron.

#### **3.3 Post Romantic Period**



### **3.3.1 Victorian Period (1832 – 1901)**

This period dates from the ascension of Queen Victoria to the English throne to 1901, the year of her death. The common perception of the period is that Victorians are prudish and hypocritical. This is because many members of the middle class who were more in number aspired to join the ranks of the noble and the only way they could that was to act 'properly' according to the conventions and values of the time.

While poetry dominated the Romantic period, the novel dominated the Victorian period. Prose writers of this period include Charles Dickens, George Elliot, Samuel Butler, George Mendish, Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde, Rudyard Kipling, A.E Housman and Robert Louis Stevenson.

### **3.3.2 Modern Period (1914 – 1945)**

This period starts from the beginning of World War 1 in 1914. There have been many controversies on the features of the period. However, a prominent feature of this era is the phenomenon called the 'avante guard' (advance guard). These are small groups of authors and artists who deliberately wanted to make it new by violating accepted conventions and properties of art. The general consensus is that it marks a deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bases of Western art and culture. Modern period writers cared rather little for nature (which is one of the main pre-occupation of the Romantic Period); but are rather pre-occupied with the inner self and consciousness.

Great authors associated with this period are Karl Max and Sigmund Freud. Modern period writers include W.B Yeats, Seamus Heaney, Dylan Thomas, W.H Auden, Virginia Woolf, Wilfred Owen, Robert Frost, Flannery O'Connor and T. S Eliot.

### **3.3.3 Post – Modern Period (1945 Onward)**

This period began in the middle of the twentieth century after the World War II; this period follows the Modern period. It is the period we are in now and it is still playing out. Its main is that it shows a break away from Modern forms. It is a period of massive information and technological developments and secularism. Renowned post-Modern writers include Samuel Beckett, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Athol Fugard, and many others.

### **Self Assessment Exercise 4**

1. The Post- Romantic era is made up of three remarkable periods. What are they?
2. In which of these periods did people appeared hypocritical in their outlook and disposition?
3. Which of these periods is marked by massive developments in information technology?
4. In which of these periods are the writers pre-occupied with the inner self and consciousness?

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, you have been introduced to the periods in English literary history. From the discussion, you have seen the periods that precede the Romantic Period and those that follow it. You have also seen the distinct features and characteristics of each of them as well as some writers of the period. I hope you have not only followed the trend of activities of the periods, but took special interest in the literature and writers of each of the period.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

The periods of English literary history have been introduced to you in this unit. These periods in their chronological order include the Old English, the Middle English, the Renaissance, the Neoclassical, the Romantic, the Victorian, the Modern and the Post-Modern Periods. This I am sure, would help you situate the Romantic Period in the history of events.

#### **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

- 1a. What do you understand by the term, 'Periods in English literary history'?
- 1b. Mention the periods of English literary history in their chronological order.
- 2a. Give any two characteristics of each of the period mentioned above.
- 2b. Mention any two writers associated with each of the period.

#### **7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING**

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## **UNIT 2 UNDERSTANDING ROMANTICISM**

## **CONTENT**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Romanticism as a Movement
  - 3.2 Reasons for the Emergence of Romanticism
  - 3.3 Romantic Literature
  - 3.4 Romantic Writers/Poets
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor – Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In Unit 1, we tried to situate the Romantic era in the periods in English literary history. In this unit, we shall take a cursory view of the concept of Romanticism with a view to having a better understanding of it. As with most people, I guess you misconstrued the meaning of the term Romanticism on first contact with it, thinking it has something to do with romance or love-making. This is so because the word is rather deceptive. Its application to a period of English literature sounds somewhat esoteric. As you read through this unit, the meaning of Romanticism will be laid bare to you.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- i. Explain what Romanticism as a movement means
- ii. Identify reasons for the emergence of Romanticism
- iii. Explain what Romantic literature means

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 Romanticism as a Movement**

Contrary to your first impression about the meaning of Romanticism, the word, ‘romantic’ and ‘romantique’ were both common English and French adjectives of praise for natural phenomena such as views and sunsets, in a sense, close to modern English usage but without the implied sexual connotation. Romanticism was an artistic, literary, and intellectual movement that originated in Europe towards the end of the 18th century and in most areas was at its peak in the approximate period from 1800 to 1840.

Romanticism embodied a new and restless spirit, seeking violently to burst through old and cramping forms, a nervous preoccupation with perpetually changing inner states of consciousness, a longing for the unbounded and the indefinable, for perpetual movement and change, an effort to return to the forgotten sources of life, a passionate effort at self-assertion both individual and collective, a search after means of expressing an unappeasable yearning for unattainable goals.

Romanticism's essential spirit was one of revolt against an established order of things; against precise rules, laws, dogmas, and formulas that characterised Classicism in general and Neoclassicism in particular. It placed imagination over reason, emotions over logic, and intuition over science; making way for a vast body of literature of great sensibility and passion. In their choice of heroes, also, the Romantic writers replaced the static universal types of Classical 18th-century literature with more complex, idiosyncratic characters. They became preoccupied with the genius, the hero, and the exceptional figure in general, and a focus on his passions and inner struggles; and there was an emphasis on the examination of human personality and its moods and mental potentialities. The movement saw strong emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic experience, placing new emphasis on such emotions as apprehension, horror and terror, and awe -especially that which is experienced in confronting the sublimity of untamed nature and its picturesque qualities. It elevated folk art and ancient customs to something noble, made spontaneity a desirable characteristic and argued for a "natural" epistemology of human activities as conditioned by nature in the form of language and customary usage.

### **3.2 Reasons for the Emergence of Romanticism**

By the late 18th century in France and Germany, literary taste began to turn from Classical and Neoclassical conventions. The generation of revolution and wars, of stress and upheaval had produced doubts on the security of the age of reason. Doubts and pessimism now challenged the hope and optimism of the 18th century. People felt a deepened concern for the metaphysical problems of existence, death, and eternity. It was in this setting that Romanticism was born. Romanticism is partly a reaction to the Industrial Revolution; it was also a revolt against aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment and a reaction against the scientific rationalisation of Nature.

The emergence of Romanticism coincided with the outbreak of the French Revolution of 1789 or alternatively, with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 (M.H. Abrams). That it came off in 1789 or

almost a decade later is of utmost importance to scholars. This is because the Romantics welcomed the Revolution and saw it as not a political emancipation alone but as a socio-cultural emancipation. The most important figures of the English Romanticism had been radical thinkers, and they saw a big hope in the revolution; they saw a streak of optimism in it; for the society that had been man-made had been man-changed for better.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise 1**

Romanticism as a movement is a reaction against Neoclassicism. How true is this assertion?

### **3.3 Romantic Literature**

The application of the term 'Romanticism' or 'Romantic', as the case may be, was first applied to literature was in Germany, where the Schlegel brothers spoke of *romantische Poesie* ("romantic poetry") in the 1790s, contrasting it with "classic", but this was used in terms of spirit rather than merely dating as we had earlier noted. Friedrich Schlegel, in his *Dialogue on Poetry* (1800) wrote: "I seek and find the romantic among the older moderns, in Shakespeare, in Cervantes, in Italian poetry, in that age of chivalry, love and fable, from which the phenomenon and the word itself are derived".

<http://www.buzzle.com/articles/romanticism-in-literature.html>

Romantic literature designates a literary rebellion against the austere posture of Neo-classical authors that took place towards the end of the eighteenth century in Europe. Commenting on this rebellious movement, Martin Stephen, in his *English Literature: A Student's Guide* (2000), has it thus: "as often happens in literature, at the end of the eighteenth century the pendulum swung from one extreme to another, from reason to passion' (202).

Neo-classical authors had paid little attention to a person's inner feeling, that is, passion and emphasised decorum, that is, reason. This literary attitude was not unconnected with that of Classical authors (authors of ancient Greece and Rome) whom the Neo-classical authors emulated. As opposed to this lofty conception of the literary art, the Romantics professed to be people speaking to people, making use of the type of language that is accessible to both the high and the low. They saw the decorum and the ostensible denial of passion in Neo-classical literature as an inhibition of a sort, and considered imagination more important than knowledge. This is because imagination hinges on passion or

emotion and knowledge on reason and decorum. This is what Stephen brings to the fore when he says:

The Romantic outlook sees man's salvation as lying within himself. The Romantic believes in and trusts only himself, believing that society and civilization corrupt humanity's natural innocence and instinct for good. Romantic literature, particularly poetry, often sees man in communion with the natural world ...It trusts instincts, the emotion and the heart, rather than reason, intellect and the head (203).

The Romantics, it has to be stressed, saw the society as having a corrupting influence on people and inhibiting the real self of a person, which is but innocent. Decorum is a product of the society but passion comes from within.

The Romantics regarded Neo-classical authors as perpetuating the societal inhibition and offered to give poetry – literature – a form of expression and orientation, so to say, that is unsullied by learning and reason. The Neo-classical writers had witnessed the Age of Enlightenment; and enlightenment had bred reason; and reason had separated a person from the self. It was against this that the Romantics had rebelled. A remark in the *Oxford Anthology of English Literature Vol 11* illuminates this claim:

English Romanticism, whether rightly or not, saw itself as a renaissance of the English Renaissance, a return to Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton, and a repudiation of the literature of Enlightened England.  
(3)

It is this repudiation that is the rebellion that marked the swinging of the pendulum from one extreme to another.

It has been pointed out that Romantic poetry often connects with the natural world. But this does not presuppose that Romantic poets are nature poets, as some people are wont to call them. Certainly, the Romantics were much interested in Nature. Wordsworth, for instance, sings of "Nature's Holy Plan" in 'Lines Written in Early Spring'. But it is "a mistake", as Abrams has pointed out, to view the Romantic poets as "nature poets". For the Romantics did not actually detach themselves from the human society. They used their poetry to comment on the human society.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise 2**

Romantic literature has nothing to do with literature that has romance as its subject matter. How true is this statement?

### 3.4 Romantic Writers/Poets

William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge are renowned Romantic poets. They could be regarded as first generation Romantic poets. With the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798 and 1800), William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge presented and illustrated a liberating aesthetic: that poetry should express in genuine language, experience as filtered through personal emotion and imagination; that the truest experience was to be found in nature. The concept of the *Sublime* strengthened this turn to nature, because in wild country sides/rural settings, the power of the sublime could be felt most immediately. Wordsworth's romanticism is probably most fully realised in his great autobiographical poem, 'The Prelude' (1805–50). In search of sublime moments, Romantic poets wrote about the marvelous and supernatural, the exotic, and the medieval. But they also found beauty in the lives of simple rural people and aspects of the everyday world.

The second generation of Romantic poets included John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and George Gordon, Lord Byron. In Keats's great odes, intellectual and emotional sensibilities merge in language of great power and beauty. Shelley combined soaring lyricism with an apocalyptic political vision, sought more extreme effects and occasionally achieved them, as in his great drama, *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). Lord Byron, on his part, was the prototypical Romantic hero, the envy and scandal of the age.

Writers of the English Romantic Movement include:

- Shelley, Mary (1797-1851)
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe (1792-1822)
- Wordsworth, William (1770-1850)
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1772-1834)
- Blake, William (1757-1827)
- Lord Byron (1788-1824)
- Keats, John (1795-1821)
- Lowell, James Russell (1819-1891)

**Source: Kelly, Gary (1993)**

### 4.0 CONCLUSION

In this unit, you have seen Romanticism as a movement, and the reasons for its emergence. You have also seen that Romantic literature is not about romance literature or literature that has romance as its subject matter but rather one that emphasises passion and spontaneity against reason and logic. We also saw in this unit that poetry is the chief form of expression for the Romantic.



## 5.0 SUMMARY

In this unit, we have seen Romanticism as a reaction against Neoclassicism. It would suffice, as a way of summary, to highlight the differences between Romanticism and Neoclassicism for a better understanding of this unit.

Romanticism	Neoclassicism
Romantic writers gave prominence to emotions and self experience.	Neoclassic writers gave importance to thought and reason.
Poetry reflected personal feelings of the poet, as it is spontaneous and not the characters.	In Neoclassicism, poetry was the artful manipulation of real life happenings into a poetic composition portraying a fictional character.
Gave importance to poetic 'I', meaning the reader sees the poet in the protagonist.	Gave importance to poetic 'eye' where the reader sees the other person through the poet's eye.
Nature, individualism and egoistical sublime, to a great extent, became a persistent subject of poetry.	Human beings, as an integral part of the social organisation, were the primary subject of poetry.
Less importance was given to diction and more to the language of common man.	More importance was given to diction, focusing on vocabulary and grammar.

Source: <http://www.buzzle.com/articles/romanticism-in-literature.html>

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

1. What do you understand by Romanticism?
2. Explain at least any two factors that led to the emergence of Romanticism.
3. Highlight the major differences between Romanticism and Neoclassicism.

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

Abrams, M.H. (2005). A Glossary of Literary Terms. Boston: Thomson Higher Education.

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### **UNIT 3 CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF ROMANTICISM**

#### **CONTENT**

4.0 Introduction

5.0 Objectives

6.0 Main Content

3.1 Characteristics and Features of Romantic Literature

4.0 Conclusion

- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor – Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In the previous units, we introduced you to the periods in English literary history as well as acquainted you with what Romanticism is. In this unit, we shall dwell more of the characteristic features that mark out Romanticism. This will consolidate your understanding of what Romanticism is.

## **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- i. Discuss the characteristics of Romantic Literature
- ii. Outline the features of Romantic Literature

## **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

### **3.1 Characteristics and Features of Romanticism**

It is pertinent to remind you that every school of thought has a set of principles that has informed their approach to issues, so does every movement. Metaphysical poetry, for instance, has its characteristic features or principles upon which it operates. In literature, Romanticism was popularised by poets and authors such as John Keats, Shelley, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. These authors of believed in creative expression through pieces of prose and poetry, a movement that soon began to affect the world in terms of emotions and relationships. Romanticism is alive in literature to this date, and traces of this genre can be viewed in some pieces of writing. Romantic authors made an attempt to view the mundane in a very extraordinary manner. A good example is the poem, 'Daffodils' by William Wordsworth. An analysis of this poem clearly exhibits many characteristics of Romanticism, one of which has been mentioned above.

Another important characteristic of Romanticism is the view of life in its minor aspects and not as a whole. In his popular work, *Defence of Poetry*, Shelley argued that human beings must understand and learn to appreciate the little things that life has to offer, to make the pain and pleasure of another individual one's own, in order to truly comprehend

the meaning of life. The basic effort of the Romantic movement was to incorporate creative expression, transform the ordinary to the extraordinary, and experience emotions at a deeply intense level.

Yet another identifying feature of Romantic poetry is its medium of expression – its language. Believing that Neo-classical poets had perverted the time flow of poetic rendition, the Romantics set out to write in a form of language that would be accessible to all. Neo-classical poets had written in one form of language that was informed by learning, perhaps by the Enlightenment. But this form of expression did not come out spontaneously; it was a form of expression that was doctored by education, a form of expression that was regimented by decorum and reason. It did not reflect the innermost passion of man so the Romantics did away with the heroic couplets which characterised Neo-classicism. They maintained rhythm and rhyme in their poetry; but this does not interfere with the spontaneity so reflected in their poetry.

Of importance, as to the features of Romanticism, is its idealisation of nature. Romantics had seen nature as the reflection of the presence of God; and their attitude towards it could be best described as pantheistic. The pantheism of the Romantics is worthy of attention; for it was part of their rebellion against the society and the church which had paid so much attention on the written word at the expense of acknowledging the greatness of God as seen in the natural world. To the Romantics, nature is the teacher. Given that people wandered away from the teacher, the Romantics strove to bring them back to this teacher.

Romanticism is characterised by the egotism inherent in their works. Many a Romantic poem has the poet as the protagonist in the poem, that is, the poet is both the poet and the persona. And the events in the poems revolve around the poet-persona. Neo-classical poets barely wrote poems about their personal experiences. But the Romantics wrote virtually in the first person, involving the individual poet in each poem.

Moreover, Romanticism is noted for everyday subject matters that it portrays. These everyday subject matters have to do with ordinary people, the common folk. With Romanticism, attention was shifted from the aristocrats to commoners. Blake's 'Chimney Sweepers', Wordsworth's 'Solitary Reaper', 'Highland Lass' and the 'Idiot Boy' are good examples. The common folks are unsullied by civilization and learning: they have a degree of purity. Their way of life contrasts with the pretentiousness of the high-class people.

Romanticism is also characterised by its portrayal of rural life. Rural life is related to the common folks; and the Romantics celebrated the simplicity of rural life. To the Romantics, rural life is nearer to Nature;

and urban life is nearer to civilization. The latter lacks the serenity that the former has. Poet-persona in Romantic poetry are presented in rustic locals contemplating the serenity of the environment. And also, nature is best observed in a rural setting. All the nature poems of the Romantics are set in the country side.

The influence of Romanticism in literature reflected a profound attempt to experience life more passionately, be it the self or another, or be it an emotion or an object. Instead of focusing on a practical, logical or scientific approach, as popularised during the Enlightenment or the Industrial Revolution, Romanticism was directed towards focusing within oneself for solutions and newness, and encouraged people to trust themselves and their instincts. Romantics also made an attempt to focus on Nature, to give it importance above the scientific revolution that had overtaken the world. They believed this would change the way the world was perceived, and would help individuals understand themselves better.

Moreover, the Romantic Movement in literature also gave rise to a sub-genre, Dark Romanticism. While Romanticism in itself focused on beauty and an 'out of the world view' of life, Dark Romanticism focused mainly on tragedies and horror. Though a sub-genre of Romanticism, Dark Romanticism turned out to be almost an opposite of Romanticism in itself. This sub-genre was more of an extension of American Romanticism in literature, which later spread to other parts of the world. Some popular works of Dark Romanticism include those by William Blake and Edgar Allan Poe.

In all, it can be said that the Romantic Movement that influenced literature restored hope in the human race; hope for the fact that not everything could be mechanised and rendered lifeless. By coming a full circle, Romanticism taught people how to experience pleasure in the little things in life, to think out of the box, to dream, and to explore. In present day, Romanticism, the definition of which has been reduced to pure mush, will regain lost ground. Not everything can be looked at with a practical approach, not everything has to be logical. By returning to the beliefs of Romanticism, one may in effect, be able to bring back to life that little hope, that little desire to dream and believe, and make life a little more colourful, to say the least. (Puja Lalwani, 2011)

### **Self-Assessment Exercise 1**

- i. Identify any five characteristic features of Romantic literature.
- ii. How does the language of Romanticism differ from those of its predecessors?

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

The Romantics were not happy with the affairs of the world; they expressed this in their poetry. Most of the problems in the human society, to them, were man-made. The Romantics, at their best, were social critics who offered solutions to the various problems of the human race.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

This chapter has highlighted and explained the features of Romantic literature. We have seen that poetry was seen as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”; and that the essence of poetry was the mind, emotions, and imagination of the poet (not the outer world). First-person lyric poem was the major Romantic literary form, with “I” often referring directly to the poet.

#### **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

- 1a. Using Wordsworth’s poem, ‘Daffodils’, analyse the characteristics of Romantic literature.
- b. Explain in details three of the features of Romantic literature.

#### **7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING**

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## **UNIT 4 THEMES OF ROMANTIC LITERATURE**

### **CONTENT**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 Themes of Romantic Literature
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In the previous unit, we saw the characteristic features of Romantic literature. In this unit, we shall explain the themes/preoccupations of Romantic literature with a view to increasing your understanding of Romantic literature.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- i. List some of the themes explored in Romantic literature
- ii. Explain the thematic pre-occupations of Romantic literature.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 Themes of Romantic Literature**

Romantic literature addresses a number of issues in its poetry. The Romantics were poets who used their medium of poetry to address the social problems of the day. Among the themes seen in their poetry are rebellion, quest for liberty, natural piety, general dissatisfaction with the affairs of the world, and permanence. A detailed discussion of these themes would suffice at this juncture.

As you already know, Romanticism dates back to the period of the French Revolution; and its adherents rebelled against the poetry of their predecessors. You should bear in the mind however, that the rebelliousness of the Romantics was also directed at anything they did not identify with. The Romantics rebelled against tyranny, man's inhumanity to man, absolute monarchy, unbridled quest for material things, the church and/or organised religion, among others. These things, according to the Romantics, brought out the worst in people, entrenching a divide between people and the truth or beauty. Keats, for example, would like us to know that the two concepts are analogous to each other.

The Romantics greatly emphasised the importance of nature and the primal feelings of awe, apprehension and horror felt by a person on approaching the sublimity of it. This was mainly because of the industrial revolution, which had shifted life from the peaceful, serene countryside towards the chaotic cities, transforming people's natural order. Nature was not only appreciated for its visual beauty, but also revered for its ability to help the urban person find his true identity. The Romantics offered natural piety as a solution to the problems of the human race. This natural piety would be relished when people allow Nature to be their teacher; for the average person has wandered away from Nature, and his/her intellect "misshapes the beautiful forms of things". The veracity of this claim hinges on the fact that human civilization owes so much to the printed word; the greatest religions of the world have all stressed the importance of the printed word, as though the magic of writing could capture the sublimity of God. To the Romantics, this is only to be seen in things terrestrials, aquatic or even extraterrestrial. Modern day science would never cease to learn from nature - that is, Nature is the teacher of modern-day science. It won't be an overstatement to say that nature has suffered so much neglect from people for so long a time because of people's undue emphasis on the importance of the printed word. This was one of the things that the Romantics repudiated.

Unlike the age of Enlightenment, which focused on rationality and intellect, Romanticism placed human emotions, feelings, instinct and intuition above everything else. While the poets in the era of rationality adhered to the prevalent rules and regulations while selecting a subject and writing about it, the Romantic writers trusted their emotions and feelings to create poetry. This belief can be confirmed from the definition of poetry by William Wordsworth, where he says that *poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings*. The emphasis on emotions also spread to the music created in that period, and can be observed in the compositions made by musicians like Weber, Beethoven, Schumann, etc. Beethoven played an important role in the



transition of Western music from the Classical to the Romantic age.

As the Romantic period emphasised human emotions, the position of the artist or the poet also gained supremacy. In the earlier times, the artist was seen as a person who imitated the external world through his art. However, this definition was mooted in the Romantic era and the poet was seen as a creator of something which reflected his individuality and emotions. It was also the first time that the poems written in the first person were being accepted, as the poetic persona became one with the voice of the poet.

Human beings were seen as essentially noble and good (though corrupted by society), and as possessing great power and potential that had formerly been ascribed only to gods. There was a strong belief in democratic ideals, concern for human liberty, and a great outcry against various forms of tyranny. The human mind was seen as creating (at least in part) the world around it, and as having access to the infinite via the faculty of imagination. In refusing to accept limitations, human beings set infinite, inaccessible goals, thus making failure and imperfection inglorious accomplishments. This refusal to accept limitations found expression in bold poetic experimentation. Many writers deliberately isolated themselves from society to focus on their individual vision.

The Romantics borrowed heavily from the folklore and the popular local art. During the earlier eras, literature and art were considered to belong to the educated people, and the lower classes were not deemed fit to enjoy art. Also, the language used in these works was highly lyrical, which was totally different from what was spoken by people. However, Romantic artists were influenced by the folklore that had been created by the masses or the common people, and not by the literary works that were popular only among the higher echelons of the society. As the Romantics became interested and focused upon developing the folklore, culture, language, customs and traditions of their own country, they invariably developed a sense of nationalism, which reflected in their works.

Another subject matter for the Romantics is the belief in the supernatural. They were interested in the supernatural and included it in their works. Gothic fiction emerged as a branch of Romanticism after Horace Walpole's 1764 novel, *The Castle of Otranto*. This fascination for the mysterious and the unreal also led to the development of Gothic romance, which became popular during this period. Supernatural elements can also be seen in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan', 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise 1**

Mention the themes of Romanticism

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

The themes of Romantic poetry include rebellion, quest for liberty, natural piety, general dissatisfaction with the affairs of the world, the theme of permanence, amongst others. Romanticism placed human emotions, feelings, instinct and intuition above everything else. While the poets in the era of Neoclassicism adhered to the prevalent rules and regulations in the subjects they write about, the Romantic writers trusted their emotions and feelings to create poetry.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

This chapter has presented the thematic concerns of Romanticism. We have seen that the development of the self is a major topic of Romantic poetry. Poets often saw themselves as prophets in times of crises, revising the promise of divine redemption in terms of a “heaven” on earth. To the Romantic, poetic composition must arise from impulse; must be free from the rules inherited from the past; and must rely on spontaneity, that is, instinct, intuition, feeling etc. There was also the importance of accurate observation and description of wild Nature, and this serves as a stimulus to thinking and to the resolution of personal problems and crises. Landscape was often given human qualities and/or seen as a system of symbols revealing the nature of God. Closeness with Nature was seen as bringing out humanity’s innate goodness. Humble, rustic subject matter and plain style was the principal subject and medium of poetry. Romantic poets sought to refresh readers’ sense of wonder about the ordinary things of existence, to make the “old” world seem new. They explored the realm of mystery and magic; incorporated materials from folklore, superstition, etc; and were often set in distant or faraway places. There was also great interest in unusual modes of experience, such as visionary states of consciousness, hypnotism, dreams, drug-induced states, to mention a few.

#### **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

Discuss any five thematic pre-occupations of Romantic literature.

#### **7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING**

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## **MODULE 2 ROMANTICISM AND THOUGHTS ABOUT IT**

### **UNIT 1 The Romantic Manifesto – *Preface to Lyrical Ballads***

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

#### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

English Romanticism had its manifesto. The manifesto is a laid-down principle that guided its modus operandi. The Romantic manifesto was conceptualised by Wordsworth and Coleridge in England and is contained in an essay titled *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1800) written by Wordsworth himself. In this unit, efforts will be made to explicate the essence of the manifesto.

#### **2.0 OBJECTIVES:**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- i. Identify the guiding principles of English Romanticism
- ii. Give a synoptic account of the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 The Romantic Manifesto – *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*

One of the most important documents of English literature, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, is revolutionary in its ideological focus. It is basically a document that set out to redefine the concepts of literary practice, especially that of poetry. It is a ground-breaking essay by Wordsworth to point out the nuances that came to inform this movement called Romanticism. It is in *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* that Wordsworth indicates the type of language suitable for good poetry. This type of language is every day type of language, not lofty language or elevated language influenced by learning. It is a form of “language really spoken by men”, the language of prose. Wordsworth holds that the language of prose may be well adapted to poetry. This linguistic experimentation is novel and curious, considering that it is a marked departure from the status quo. But as practised by the revolutionary Romantics, this linguistic novelty was a huge success. The most celebrated poems of the Romantics were rendered in the pattern of prose-like speech; Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats all wrote in this medium. One would be stating the obvious if one says that this preference for linguistic simplicity was worthwhile.

The adaptation of the language of prose to poetry paid off in consideration of the fact that Romantics chose their subjects from the lowly and the commonplace. Wordsworth was by no means unaware of this when he wrote:

The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men (595).

It would have been utterly misplaced if the Romantics favoured the language of prose in their poetry and chose their subjects from the high and the mighty. It would be like putting a round peg in a square hole. The language of prose being the language of the common folk, it served well for the Romantics to select their subjects from the common folk. It is to be discerned why the Romantics did away with elevated speech bordering on the sublime.

*Preface to Lyrical Ballads* is noteworthy as a Romantic manifesto because it contains Wordsworth's famed comment about what good poetry should be – 'a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility' (596). This process of the making of poetry advances the persuasion that the poet would be possessed by a poem before the poem is created, and the poem should come to the poet 'as naturally as leaves come to a tree' (596). Anything short of this is mere pretentiousness. 'My Heart Leaps Up' and 'Ode to a Nightingale' most certainly could have come to their authors quite spontaneously. Another poem written through "possession" or spontaneous overflow is Byron's 'She Walks in Beauty'. The idea of poetry coming through spontaneous overflow, as Wordsworth has shown, underscores the Romantic favouring of passion over reason; the one is part of the natural man, and the other part of the civilised man. Thus, poetry coming spontaneously is the poet expressing his natural self, uninhibited by decorum and reason. It is an instance of the poet expressing what he has personally felt as opposed to what is socially valuable (Carstairs 1983:7). The Romantics laid so much emphasis on the individual in contradistinction to the society. So, based on this spontaneous rendition of poetry, it follows that the individual dictates the poem and not the society; and the poem is nothing but the self-expression of the poet.

Besides, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* offers a mimetic approach to literary criticism. Though the poem comes from the individual – the poet – and it is expressive of his passion, it depicts the world surrounding him. Hence, we have Wordsworth say "Poetry is the image of man and nature" (605). It follows that the Romantics set out to use their poetry to pass comments on people and the environment. This was part of their mission and objectives; part of their manifesto. When Blake or Shelley talks about the state of affairs in 'London' or 'England 1819' as Wordsworth does in 'London: 1802', he presents the image of man and nature. So does Keats in 'Ode to a Nightingale'.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise 1**

1. What are the highlights of the Romantic manifesto?
2. How, according to Wordsworth, should language of poetry be and why?

### **3.2 *Preface to Lyrical Ballads: A Brief Analysis***

In the beginning of Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, he addresses his predecessors and talks about poetry before his time as follows:

They who have been accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will no doubt, frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness (Stanza 4).

Wordsworth thus claims that his predecessors will take issues with his poetry based on simplicity and the language that he maintains throughout his poems. He also refers to the gaudiness of his predecessor's poetry, in terms of intricate vocabulary and innate literary themes and techniques. Unlike his predecessors, he rebels against their form of poetry by presenting a different form. His ideas were straight to the point. In fact, he substantiates his ideas with natural and rustic themes. He chooses humble and rustic life because "in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain maturity; and are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language. In that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity" (Stanza 5).

In turn, Wordsworth claims that in order to maintain directness and simplicity in poetry, one should use nature to reveal his or her thoughts and ideas. Not only is nature relevant in everyone's life, but it also fosters a sense of maturity when related to human emotions and poetry.

In general, Wordsworth makes two valuable points: that poetry should be simple and direct, as well as that it should be linked to aspects of nature and beauty. He maintains,

for all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: and though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply (Stanza 6).

Wordsworth claims that poetry is something that comes naturally by feelings that have been deeply fostered and thought out. He also believes that poetry can be on multiple topics and not restricted to one subject. This is absolutely true. Poetry has multiple topics and must not necessarily be linked to the natural aspects that Wordsworth prescribes.

On the other hand, Wordsworth criticises some of his contemporaries and his predecessors' style and diction assuring us that,

The reader will find that personifications of abstract ideas rarely occur in these volumes; and utterly rejected as ordinary device to elevate style, and raise it above prose. My purpose was imitate, and, as far as possible to adopt the very language of men; and assuredly such personifications do not make any natural or regular part of that language (Stanza 9)

Wordsworth goes on to claim that intangible ideas and concepts will not be in his ballads; in fact, he claims that his writing will appeal to the ordinary folk and be written in a language that can be understood by all. Wordsworth also echoes the same sentiments about diction, claiming that he will not use any intangible or ambiguous diction because he wants to keep his writing and his poetry as clear and concise as possible, in language understood by everyone, with a common purpose.

f\From their rain in society and sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feeling and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions (Stanza 5).

As suggested above, Wordsworth believes that poets are classless beings uninfluenced by society's qualms, and express their feelings and notions simplistically and unequivocally without regret. Unlike other predecessors and contemporaries who used verbose and complex themes to express their thoughts, Wordsworth is simple, maintains a central point, and is natural in every aspect.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise 11**

What are Wordsworth's criticisms against his predecessors?

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, we have discussed the manifesto of Romantic poetry as enshrined in *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. We also took a synoptic view of the text for a better understanding of the Romantic manifesto.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

We have seen in this unit that Wordsworth in *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* stipulates that poetry should be in prose form and that the language ought to be everyday language, such as used by ordinary people. He also suggests that poetry should be a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility reflecting man and nature.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

1. 'Poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling'. How true is this assertion in the light of Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*?
2. Mention the highlights of the Romantic manifesto.
3. Give a brief analysis of *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*.

## 7.0 REFERENCE/FURTHER READING

Carstairs, Charlotte (1983). *York Notes on Selected Poems: John Keats*. Essex: Longman.

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*romanticlit-kjaya30.blogspot.com/.../prefact-to-lyrical-ballads-analysis.ht...<sup>†</sup>*

["http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Preface\\_to\\_the\\_Lyrical\\_Ballads&oldid=534036090"](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Preface_to_the_Lyrical_Ballads&oldid=534036090)

## UNIT 2 CRITICISM AGAINST ROMANTICISM

### CONTENT

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
- 4.0 Conclusion



- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

By now, you understand that Romanticism had come as a reaction against the literary posture of the Neo-classical authors; a revolt against reason and industrialism, as stressed and entrenched by the Age of Reason. The Romantics were reformers in the real sense of the word. Their honourable goals notwithstanding, a number of critical claims have been levelled against Romanticism as a literary movement. We shall now see some of these claims.

## **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- i. Identify claims against Romanticism
- ii. Critique these claims

## **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

### **3.1 Criticisms against Romanticism**

Every movement has its pros and cons; so does Romanticism. No system of thought, in practical life, is completely error free. So among the arguments against Romanticism is its subjective portrayal of Nature, its idealisation of Nature, as though Nature itself is a bed of roses without thorns. Nature in this sense has reference to both forces that rule or influence existence and natural phenomena. To the Romantics, there is something infinitely propitious about Nature. Wordsworth terms it “Nature’s holy plan” in his poem ‘Lines Written in Early Spring’. But some critical minds have risen against this notion of “Nature’s holy plan”.

Thomas Hardy is one of such minds. The concept of “Nature’s holy plan”, to say the least, is an aberration, and an anathema to him. In his prose and poetry, he advances the conviction that man, being not in control of his destiny, is a mere pawn in the hands of some “Immanent Will”. In other words, the problems in the lives of people are not basically of man’s own making; the sinking of the Titanic in his ‘The Convergence of the Twain’, for instance, was not caused by people but by “the Immanent Will” which had predestined the coming together of the vessel and the iceberg. And in *Tess of the d’ Urbervilles*, he puts it thus:

Some people would like to know whence the poet whose philosophy is in these days deemed as profound and trustworthy as his song is breezy and pure, gets his authority for speaking of “Nature’s holy plan”. (16)

Hardy obviously admired Wordsworth and his breezy and pure song, but disagrees with the idea of “Nature’s holy plan”; for there are many reasons in Nature why one, or some people, as Hardy has put it, should doubt this idea – earthquake, volcano, flooding, wildfire, elemental extremes, jungle justice and countless other phenomena that actually threaten life itself. But the Romantics were oblivious of these things.

Shelley, a Romantic, celebrates the wind in his ‘Ode to the West Wind’, as if the wind can never wreck havoc on the living; and Blake sings of the symmetry of the tiger in his ‘Tyger’ as though the subject of the poem is one gentle and peaceful creature, not minding that the tiger is a big threat to the smaller animals within its environment. Ultimately, if there is holy plan in Nature, as the Romantics would like us to believe, there would be no life-threatening events in life; for if Nature is perfect, it would not self-destruct. In a word, the Romantics were too sentimental, if not mawkish, in their attitude towards Nature. Nature is admirable, grand and sublime, it must be admitted, but to view it as perfect is pure sentimentality.

Romanticism has also been criticised for the extremism of some of its leading writers. Romantics like Blake, Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley were all eccentrics both in lifestyle and in approach to the established society. Coleridge, for instance, was dependent on opium. He could not finish his ‘Kubla Khan’ because, being under the influence of opium while composing the poem, its composition was interrupted by a visitor, and when he returned to continue with his writing, the visitor having gone, his inspiration and memory of the lines in his head had vanished (Stephen 2000). Again, both Byron and Shelley were reviled in England because of their unorthodox views. Shelley was so notorious in England of his day that an obituary announced: “Shelley the Atheist is dead. Now he knows whether there is a hell or not.”(The Oxford Anthology of English Literature Vol II: 399) Anyway, the commonest defamation of the revolutionary in most societies borders on religion. But the point is that some of the Romantics were really extreme in their views; and extremism of any sort may be irrational.

Again, the language of the Romantics in some cases is not as every day as they claimed it to be. Blake, for instance, is notorious for his esoteric symbolism. Understanding his symbolism would pose a serious problem to the fledgling reader. And commenting on Wordsworth, Stephen

(2000) has it that his language is not so simple, as his declared intentions would have us believe. This is so considering that in some cases, the language of Wordsworth is replete with allusions to classical mythology as is the case in the last two lines of 'The World is Too Much with Us'. And turns of expression, like the 'famed paradox' in 'My Heart Leaps Up', could be a big challenge (in terms of their comprehension) to the new learner.

Moreover, the Romantics have been accused of escapism. Some Romantic poems search for ways of avoiding reality at the expense of addressing the problems in the human society. Keats' 'Ode to Nightingale' is a good example of escapist Romantic poetry. The ways of avoiding reality that the poem presents include the use of poison, drugs, wine, loss of memory, imagination and even death. These are by no means ways of addressing the problems of life. Also, in the poem the persona prefers the world of the nightingale to that of people. A better way of escaping reality has never been projected! This type of accusation could also be levelled against Wordsworth, especially in such poems as 'Lines written in Early Spring' and 'My Heart Leaps Up'. In the former, the persona has escaped into the wood – though he is concerned with people's problems and shows signs of sloughing off his humanity. Many Romantic poems are moulded in this mode.

### **3.2 Some Truths about Romanticism**

As a revolutionary movement that had to address some issues in the society, Romanticism had many redeeming and edifying truths behind it one of which is opposition to basic human failings such as man's inhumanity to man, tyranny, materialism, pretentiousness, among others. As reformers, the Romantics contributed their quota towards addressing these problems in their society. The society of the day had been that of inequality, poverty, strife, and slavery. So the Romantics were like social critics determined to reshape the sordid contours of their society.

Before the emergence of Romanticism, people had paid little or no attention to Nature/God. The reason was man's undue emphasis on the written word – as the leading religion of the day, especially in Western Europe and the America was a scripture-based religion. But the Romantics (Wordsworth was *primus inter pares* in this regard) championed an unprecedented revival of interest in Nature to the extent that some people have mistakenly termed them Nature poets. Wordsworth's 'Let Nature be your Teacher' was something of a clarion call. And since then, people have benefited a lot from the exploration of Nature.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise**

Examine the criticisms levelled against the Romantics.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, we have discussed some of the criticisms that have been levelled against the Romantics. And this goes to show that however noble their ideologies are, that they are far from being perfect; that there are a lot of contradictions in both their ideas and way of life.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

The Romantics have portrayed Nature as being perfect and ideal; but this is far from the truth. Although there are numerous things about Nature that are good and beautiful, this does not mean that it is perfect. A lot of things in nature serve both good and bad. Think about the sun, fire, water, wind, etc. Nature by no means is 'holy' in its plans as Wordsworth would have us believe. Another area of contradiction is the claim that poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. We have demonstrated in this unit that the truth in that statement is not absolute.

## **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

1. What reasons have been advanced against the Romantics' idealisation of Nature?
2. Romantics are hypocrites. How true is this assertion?
3. Contrary to their manifesto, the language of the Romantic is not an everyday type. Comment on this.
4. Extremism and escapism are part of the criticisms against the Romantics. Discuss.

## **7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING**

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## **MODULE 3 THE WORKS OF ROMANTIC POETS**

Unit 1: The Works of William Blake

Unit 2: The Works of William Wordsworth

Unit 3: The Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge

### **UNIT 1: THE WORKS OF WILLIAM BLAKE**

#### **CONTENT**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main content
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

#### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

William Blake (1757-1827) is a cornerstone of English Romanticism. He had written most of his poems before the publication of *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, but that notwithstanding, he is classified as a Romantic, the reason being that Romantic features could be observed in his poetry, and he lived through the period. Blake held anti-clerical views, disregarding the institution of organised religion. The reason was that the church of his day could not mitigate the plight of the masses. Blake is particularly noted for his comment on Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). He says in his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, that Milton in *Paradise Lost* is part of Satan's train without knowing it. This type of view has been typical of Blake who would see things from unorthodox perspectives.

Blake was not just a poet. He was also an engraver; and his paintings earned him fame just like his poetry.

We shall now examine some of his poems. It is important that you seek out and pay attention to the spirit of Romanticism present in his poetry.

#### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to do the following:

- i. Identify the themes in Blake's poetry
- ii. Identify what makes Blake a Romantic
- iii. Comment on Blake as a social critic
- iv. Comment on the peculiarities in Blake's poetry.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 The Works of William Blake

In his poetry, Blake is noted for his use of symbols. And these do not always have the same referents wherever they are seen. Among these are animals used as symbols- the lamb, tiger, and the eagle. Mysticism comes to bear in Blake's poetry too. He looks at things as being mystical. The Bible informs his brand of mysticism. Very importantly, Blake is seen as a prophet in his poetry.

Blake has a number of volumes of poetry. The poems discussed here are from *Songs of Innocence* (1789), *Songs of Experience* (1794), and *Poetical Sketches* (1783).

#### 3.1 The Lamb

'The Lamb' offers a poetic rendition that marks Blake out as a mystic. The poem is supposedly a song rendered by a country boy in the state of innocence. The person in the poem addresses the symbolic lamb.

10 Little lamb who made thee  
Dost thou know who made thee  
Gave thee life & bid thee feed.  
By the stream & 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

Little Lamb I' II tell thee  
Little Lamb I II tell thee!  
He is called by thy name,  
For he calls himself a lamb;  
He is meek & he is mild,  
He became a little child:  
I am a child & thou a lamb,  
We are called by his name.  
Little lamb God bless thee.

Little lamb God bless thee.

In the first stanza of the poem, the addressee is asked a number of questions as though it would respond; and in the second stanza, the addresser provides the answers to the questions. It is in the answers of the second stanza that the subject matter of the poem is played out. For the persona explores the transcendental so as to supply the answer required in the first stanza of the poem. Behind this lies the mysticism in the poem. In Christian mythology, Christ is depicted as a lamb, meek and mild. It is this mythology that Blake explores so as to unravel the identity as well as the creator of the lamb. The lamb shares the state of childhood with the addresser in the poem through the person of Christ:

For he calls himself a lamb;  
He is meek and he is mild,  
He became a little child:  
I am a child & thou a lamb,  
We are called by his name.

The lamb and the child share the state of innocence with Christ.

It is important to point out that the lamb, mystic as its symbol appears, depicts elemental nature also. Its idealization is reflected in the first stanza of the poem. It has clothing of delight; it has a tender voice; and it performs the function of making the vales rejoice. The images conveyed by words such as “wooly bright” “tender voice” among others reflect the chastity of the lamb, which is a phenomenon in its pristine nature unsullied by man and his civilization. It suffices to state that the handwork of the creator of the lamb is beautiful, worthy of admiration; and from the mystic perspective, the lamb is analogous to its creator.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise**

Comment on Blake’s use of the Christian mythology in ‘The Lamb’

### **3.2 The Tyger**

‘The Tyger’ is another of Blake’s poem that is centred on faunal symbolism. It belongs to the same collection with ‘The Lamb’. The persona in the poem, who is obviously not Blake, regards the tiger with reverence and wonder – there is something mysterious about this phenomenon. This is definitely why there are questions in the poem; and perhaps if answers were given to these questions, the mystery would not have been resolved. The tiger is not a creature of chance or accidental design, for its frame is of “fearful symmetry”; it is a thing

well made for a purpose. It is this symmetry that brings about the awe in the poem. The tiger is carefully contrasted with the lamb; the one is a creature that induces fear, and the other admiration. It is in contemplating the grandeur of the tiger that the reader would realise the majesty of its maker. The height of the wonderment in the poem is played out in line 20 where the persona queries, 'Did he who made the lamb make thee?' The answer to this question would point out that the maker of the tiger made everything that breathes, from the humble to the fearful. It is this puzzling concept of the maker of the tiger that lends the atmosphere of mystery to the poem. This is so considering that the tiger is at another extreme from the lamb.

The tiger in this poem could be seen as a metaphor. Whatever it stands for, it reflects the not too commonplace -it reflects the sublime and the awesome.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise 1**

Bring out the contrast between 'The Lamb' and 'The Tyger' as used in Blake's symbolism.

### **3.3 London**

In 'London', Blake is seen as a keen social critic. The social anomalies in the city are quite nightmarish; they are a source of worry and concern to the poet who could be seen as the persona in the poem. The society depicted in the poem is decadent and degenerate- the classical example of the type of society that the Romantics revolted against and the poet's attitude towards this degeneracy is that of disillusionment:

I wander thro' each charter' d street,  
Near where the charter' d Thames does flow.  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,  
In every infant's cry of fear,  
In every voice: in every ban,  
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry  
Every blackning church appalls,  
And the hapless Soldier's sigh,  
Runs in blood down Palace walls

But most thro' midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful harlot's curse



Blasts the new-born infants tear  
And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.

Each of the streets depicted in the poem is “charter’d”, that is, it is under the political and economic control of the state: there is hardly any freedom. A landmark of the city, River Thames, is not free from this condition; the control is a thoroughgoing affair. Because of this the masses suffer tremendous hardship. This is reflected in the last line of the first stanza of the poem. Ultimately, the human mind is the cause of the inhibition in the society depicted in the poem. This is reflected in the expression, “the mind-forg’d manacles”. Manacles are instruments of inhibition. And they are from the minds of people, perhaps the ruling class who are in charge of the chartering in the society. This brings to the fore the issue of man’s inhumanity to man. A certain class of people suffers this inhumanity. They are the common people – chimney sweepers and hapless soldiers. They are the dregs of the society.

The height of the decadence in the society is seen in the last stanza of the poem. This is by way of sexual indiscretion. This indiscretion weakens the nucleus of the society. The “harlots” in this last stanza could be seen as having a generic reference. It is symbolic of the dirty elements in the society; it is a product of the society too. This is a society that is sick. It could hardly yield what is whole.

Those in authority as presented in this poem could be seen as being irresponsible. They are the church and the palace, as seen in the third stanza of the poem. The cry of the chimney sweepers blackens the church and diminishes its reputation while the blood of the unfortunate soldiers floods the palace walls. There is no conscious effort on the part of those in authority to address these sufferings. The persona in the poem is an avid observer, a critical and independent thinker who observes the anomalies in the society. And he is disillusioned.

## **Self-Assessment Exercise 2**

‘London’ is a criticism against the social system. Discuss.

### **3.4 Human Abstract**

The symbolism in Blake is also manifest in his ‘Human Abstract’. This is a poem that challenges the Christian concepts of pity and mercy basically. For the two concepts would not be needed if there are equality and fairness in the human world:

Pity would be no more,  
If we did not make somebody poor:  
If all were as happy as we

The thought advanced in the poem is to the effect that people are responsible for the suffering in the society. This runs through the whole stanzas of the poem. Cruelty is personified and, as symbolic as it appears, is inherent in man, who is part of the human nature. The “Holy Fears” of cruelty could be seen as having religious significance. Much has been said of Blake’s disenchantment with organised religion. Thus, the product of this cruelty is deceitful while humility is wrongly placed. The argument is that humility would not be if cruelty does not hold sway with care, with “holy fears” if cruelty does not exist at all. The fruit of deceit produced by cruelty attracts the bird raven which makes its nest in the tree. This image of the raven is that of death; and it is the product of cruelty. It is in the human mind that the tree grows. Blake is indicting mankind for human problems. The title of the poem ‘Human Abstract’ is thus to be viewed literally in relation to the indictment in the poem. People perpetuate inhumanity in different guises, thereby making the concepts of pity, mercy, humility necessary.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise 3**

Man is the architect of his own problem. How true is this assertion in line with Blake’s ‘Human Abstract’?

#### **3.5 ‘The Sick Rose’**

‘The Sick Rose’ is a short poem of Blake’s that defies consensus of interpretation, the reason being that Blake’s symbolism in the poem could be obscure. Short as the poem is, its message, if well interpreted and understood, would illustrate the interface between chastity and vice:

O Rose thou art sick.  
The invisible worm  
That flies in the night  
In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson Joy:  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy

For a better assessment of the poem, you should bear in mind that almost all the words in the poem have references or a set of references beyond themselves as used in the poem. Thus, the rose could be taken to symbolize a beautiful woman or even love itself. At the outset, the rose is sick. This sickness is caused by the nocturnal activities of the invisible worm. Without the activities of the invisible worm, the rose would be healthy. The invisible worm compels a phallic image. By

extension, it symbolises a man whose love for the rose, the woman, is undesirable. This phallic love is both dark and secret; and because of this, it destroys the essence of the rose. The rose has a good measure of culpability considering that its bed is of crimson joy; the phrase is suggestive of lustful experience. As such, the rose is not totally innocent prior to the nocturnal activities of the worm.

#### **Self-Assessment Exercise 4**

Nature is never perfect. Justify this statement against the backdrop of Blake's 'The Sick Rose.'

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

Blake is a troubled thinker whose concerns about the society are depicted in his poetry. His poetry is representative of the Romantic intellectual orientation. He set out to use his poetry to address the problems of the society of his day. He is particularly not happy with the church and the palace – that is, the ruling class. These institutions to him have failed woefully in eradicating the ills in the society.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

We have examined the poetry of Blake in this unit and have made some points about the poet and his poetry. Blake is a mystic who looks at issues from an esoteric angle. He would not mind to be unorthodox provided that he has a point to make. His use of symbols has also been pointed out. This could be a source of perplexity to the unschooled reader. The symbols in his poetry make his poems have different levels of significance; understanding the symbols is a key to understanding his poetry.

#### **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

1. Examine the use of symbolism in Blake, using illustrations from two of his poems.
2. Blake's poetry is largely poetry of disillusionment. Discuss.
3. Blake's poetry is the poetry of its place and time. Discuss.

#### **7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING**

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## **UNIT 2 THE WORKS OF WILLIAM WORDSWORTH**

### **CONTENT**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main content
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

It is very safe for one to say that William Wordsworth (1770-1850) is one of the greatest poets England has ever produced. His personality is at the core of the emergence of English Romanticism. In fact, the publication of *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* (1798), which he had co-authored with S.T Coleridge, marked the inception of English Romantic poetry.

As a poet, Wordsworth is a genius who believed that the medium of poetry should not be deliberately distanced from the everyday usage. He is noted for his famed definition of poetry in *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* as the ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility.’ To him, poetry has to come from within; it is expressive of passions of the poet. He served as the poet laureate of the United Kingdom, a post he held until his death in 1850.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- i. Identify themes in the poetry of Wordsworth;
- ii. Identify how nature is presented in the poems;
- iii. Comment on what makes Wordsworth a revolutionary;
- iv. Examine the presentation of rustic life in Wordsworth’s poetry.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **3.1 The Poetry of Wordsworth**

Wordsworth has many collections of poetry. They include the following: *Lyrical Ballads* (1798 and 1800), *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807), *The Excursion* (1814) and *The Prelude* (1850). We shall now consider some of his poems.

### 3.1 *Lines Written in Early Spring*

Quite a number of the lyric poems of Wordsworth deal with the idealization of nature. ‘Lines Written in Early Spring’ is one of such poems. It is a poem in which the persona contemplates the beauty and harmony of natural phenomena in contradistinction to the dissonance in the world. In the first stanza, the persona introduces the human situation of the poem: the persona is reclining in the wood that offers beautiful scenery and pleasant thoughts; and this brings him bitter-sweet mood. “A thousand blended notes” of the first line of the poem compels the image of harmony in nature, and the wood itself is a good (if not the best) place to observe this harmony. While observing this natural harmony, the mind of the persona goes to the human society; the contrast between the two is brought to the fore-what he perceives is what man has made of man. It suffices to say that but for man’s inhumanity to his fellow man, this harmony in the natural world would have been obtainable in the human world. It should be stated here that Wordsworth’s England, especially when this poem was written, was the England that engaged in the infamous Slave Trade that had millions of Africans sold into slavery in America and Europe. One would then imagine if there is another type of man’s inhumanity to man worse than this racial abuse. It should also be pointed out that Wordsworth wrote against the lucrative trade.

It is not only harmony that one can find in the environment of the musing pantheist. In this place, life is seen as pleasurable and awesome. This is the consideration of stanzas two, three, four and five. In the last stanza of the poem, the persona advances the conviction that the harmony in the natural world is a divinely predestined affair, but man’s inhumanity to his fellow man thwarts this divine intention; this is a source of lamentation to the persona:

If this belief from heaven be sent,  
If such be nature’s holy plan,  
Have I not reason to lament  
What man has made of man?

You should note from the poem that an ideal world and the real world of people are not juxtaposed. Besides, the persona in the poem stresses the

hand of the Almighty in the harmony of the natural phenomena. This brings to the mind the concept of pantheism in the poetry of Wordsworth.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise 1**

Explicate how Wordsworth idealised Nature in sharp contrast to the human society in ‘Lines Written in Early Spring.’

### **3.2 The Tables Turned**

The idealization of Nature in ‘Lines Written in Early Spring’ is further displayed in ‘The Tables Turned’. In this poem, Wordsworth juxtaposes the human world and the world of Nature: the one is replete with strife; the other with sweet lore. The persona in ‘The Tables Turned’ is involved in a discourse with the addressee; but it is only the speech of the persona that is heard and this constitutes the poem. The poem clearly reads like a dramatic monologue in that two persons are involved in the discourse, but only one person is heard. From the speech of the speaker, the reader draws clues about the disposition of the speaker and the presence of an interlocutor.

The addressee in the poem is a studious character at the table, reading. His own civilization or learnedness is derived only from the printed word; he is specifically a man of letters or a man of learning who has turned his back to Nature. It should be recalled that the human civilization of man has stressed the importance of the written word to the detriment of Nature for a long time. The reason is not unconnected with the fact that the two most widespread religions the world has ever known are scripture-based. ‘The Tables turned’ could be seen as a rebellion against the emphasis people lay on the written material. For there are so many things people stand to gain if they turn to Nature as a guide.

Up! up! my friend, and quit your books;  
Or surely you'll grow double:  
Up! Up! My friend, and clear your looks;  
Why all this toil and trouble?

The sun, above the mountain's head,  
A freshening luster mellow  
Through all the long green fields has spread,  
His first sweet evening yellow.

Books! 't is a dull and endless strife:  
Come, hear the woodland linnet,  
How sweet his music on my life,  
There's more of wisdom in it.

And hark! How blithe the throstle sings!  
He, too, is no mean preacher:  
Come forth into the light of things,  
Let nature be your teacher.

She has a world of ready wealth,  
Our minds and hearts to bless  
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,  
Truth breathed by cheerfulness.

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;  
Our meddling intellect  
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things;  
We murder to dissect.

Enough of science and Art;  
Close up those barren leaves;  
Come forth, and bring with you a heart  
That watches and receives.

The chasm between the two worlds presented in the poem is a function of people's negligence and neglect of Nature. Nature has a shoal of precious things for the human race, but humanity is too engrossed in the written word to avail itself of the things Nature has in store for it. It suffices to deduce from the poem that the sublimity of the Almighty is not only contained in the printed word, it is also contained in physical and tangible things.

The poem preaches total abandonment of books and advocates a responsible exploration of Nature. This may sound disconcerting, but it has its own form of validity and veracity. Apart from its revolutionary undertone, it reminds us that we have wandered quite far away from the truth.

The sphere of the printed material is that of monotonous experience, that of “a dull and endless strife”; and it is devoid of “the light of things”. Conversely, the sphere of Nature is that of wisdom, cheerfulness, sweet music, among others. It is to be noted that the poem is set on the basis of contrast.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise II**

How has Wordsworth proved that the sublimity of the Almighty is not only contained in the printed word in ‘The Tables Turned’ ?

### **3.3 The World Is Too Much with Us**

‘The World is Too Much with Us’ is another poem of Wordsworth that is modelled on the basis of contrast between the humanity and the world of Nature. Revolutionary as the poem is, it is a poem that brings people’s absurd living in terms of materialism to question. It essentially attacks the degree of materialism in the human world, contrasting it with the sublimity of the natural world:

The world is too much with us, late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!  
The sea that bares her bosom to the moon;  
The Winds that will be howling at all hours  
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;  
For this, for everything we are out of tune;  
It moves us not. Great God! I’ d rather be  
A pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
Have sight of proteus rising from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

The poem presents a classic example of the Romantic revolutionary spirit. The speaker in the poem has identified what is wrong with the society he lives in, realises the panacea and threatens to rebel against the norms of that society instead of being part of the bandwagon. The poem may seem brief and modest in terms of content, but its brevity notwithstanding, it offers a range of thought a lengthy prose work may not present. Wordsworth is seen, in the poem, contemplating the frivolities of a sick society.

The poem may be interpreted from two angles – both denotatively and connotatively. Looking at its meaning literally, it would be read as an attack on the capitalistic materialism of the West reflected in the phrase



‘getting and spending’; this materialism is placed against the responsible exploration of the flora and the fauna. And because of it, the “boon” of Nature turns “sordid”. For people depicted in the poem have faced the wrong direction, giving their hearts away, like Dr. Faustus who has sold his soul to the devil; material things have gripped the souls of these people (out of their own volition) in a self-destructive manner. This is so because people are helplessly engrossed in corporeal affairs. If one takes one’s mind to the state of the contemporary society, one would appreciate the place of the poignancy of the poem. The speaker in the poem observes people’s obsession with material things, to their own peril.

Lines 9 and 10 of the poem are particularly important, given that the rebelliousness of the persona starts from these two lines; also the two lines tell the reader that the society in question is a Christian society – a society that is adrift despite its ostensible zeal for the afterlife. The word “pagan” in line 10 is the height of revolutionary inclinations in the poem; and its antithesis has no redeeming features at all. If being heathen would help to restore the lost values in the society, the poet persona would not mind.

On another plane, the poem is a critique of a society that has lost its bearing in matters of spirituality or religion, and intellectual well-being. However, the poem is assessed – whether denotatively or connotatively – its thinly veiled rebelliousness should never be overlooked; for it is a rebelliousness that is a product of its time and place.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise**

‘The World is Too Much with Us’ is a rebellion against the hustle and bustle of life. How true is this assertion?

### **3.4 The Solitary Reaper**

The major English Romantic poets celebrate the commonplace in their poetry. Wordsworth is one of such Romantics. Most of his poems celebrate the common people, the ordinary folk of society. ‘The Solitary Reaper’ is representative of such poems. The driving force in the poem is the great passion of admiration which the persona has for the highland lass. This admiration brings to the mind Blake’s maxim in ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’ which says that the exuberant is beauty. For without this tone of admiration in the poem, the beauty of the solitary reaper would not be fully realised.

The beauty of the situation of the reaper is also accented by the succession of exaggerations that adorns the poem. These exaggerations titivate the extraordinary nature of the “ordinary” highland lass, making her assume a superlative position in the mind of the reader. The charm of the reaper’s music for instance, is presented as transcending that of

the nightingale and even that of the cuckoo; and the music itself fills up the profound vale of the reaping.

The comparisons of the reaper to natural phenomena help to register the sublimity of her situation. In *Tess of the d' Urbervilles*, Hardy notes: “a fieldman is a personality afield; a fieldwoman is a portion of the field” (75). The veracity of this claim is brought to life in this poem ‘The Solitary Reaper’, and this hinges on the parallel drawn between the reaper and the environment of her reaping – she is a portion of the “vale profound”.

One thing is striking about the music of the reaper: the speaking voice in the poem does not understand a syllable of the music; what attracts him to the singing is the mellifluousness of the rhythm, and not the theme. This highlights the admirable quality of a good melody that is quite appealing. And this quality is never ephemeral; it outlives the actual performance and lives on in the mind of the listener. The portraiture made of the music is that of an enduring and compelling work of art which outlives the circumstance that has led to its composition.

It should not be overlooked that the reaper is a symbolic representation of rustic charm. It is her rusticity that Wordsworth celebrates; for there is something between it and the natural world.

### **3.5 She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways.**

Closely related to ‘The Solitary Reaper’ in terms of content is “She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways’. This is a poem that celebrates the life of the common folks, just like ‘The Solitary Reaper’. In the poem, Lucy represents the common folk, the rustic characters whose folkways are “the untrodden ways”. Lucy has lived her life in obscurity, in a rustic locale, with no one to take note of her and a few to praise her. Wordsworth is one of those who recognise the extraordinary aspect of the life of this rustic Lucy; and he cannot help but sing it in eternal lines:

She dwelt among the untrodden ways  
Beside the springs of Dove  
A maid whom there were none to praise  
And very few to love:  
A violet by a mossy stone  
Half hidden from the eye!  
- Fair as a star when only one  
Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know  
When Lucy ceased to be;

But she is in her grave, and, oh,  
The difference to me!

There is something sublime about the life of Lucy; this sublimity is reinforced in the poem in the second stanza through the analogy drawn between the subject and natural phenomena. A better analogy could not have been made; and there is no other way in which Wordsworth could have illustrated the extraordinariness of rustic living.

In the poetry of Wordsworth, superlative points are made by drawing an analogy between a subject and natural phenomena. It is Wordsworth's masterstroke as a poet. This is the type of parallel drawn in "London:1802" where Wordsworth draws an analogy between Milton (the most learned English poet) and natural phenomena.

Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart:  
Thou hadst a voice whose bound was like the sea:  
Pure as the naked heavens...

Sublimity is in Nature, and if Wordsworth would paint a picture of sublimity in a subject, he would draw his parallels or analogies from natural phenomena. It is through this poetic assessment that one would appreciate the extraordinary aspect of rural dwelling as depicted in the second stanza of 'She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways'. Lucy's life, though uneventful and common place, is thus idealized.

There is an emotional connection between the poet-persona and his subject. This runs through the three stanzas of the poem but is more played out in the last. The persona could be seen as Lucy's admirer or, at best, her lover who is deeply grieved at her passing away. This exceedingly beautiful Lucy has ceased to be; the issue of death in the poem adds an elegiac undertone to it; for the very last line of the poem underscores the pains of her loss. The loss is quite painful, given that Lucy died "untrodden"- unaccessed, unexplored and unsung. Her charms are only celebrated in the eternal lines of this emotion- ridden poem.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise**

'The Solitary Reaper' and 'She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways' are poems that celebrate the common folks. Discuss.

### **3.6 There Was a Boy**

'There Was a Boy' is a poem that presents the interrelationship between man and Nature. It is a poem in which Wordsworth projects the congruent relationship between man and nature. The hooting boy in the

poem could be seen as symbolizing man; and the silent owls, Nature. The hooting from the boy and the responsive shouts from the owls are the points of connection between the two; the result of this is a jocund din. The environment of this interaction is of no mean significance. It is a natural setting – “beneath the trees or by the glimmering lake”. It is a serene environment where the pure essence of things are realised, where Nature would be one’s teacher.

Similar to ‘She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways’, there is the tone of mourning in ‘There Was a Boy’, for the boy died before he was twelve; and the poet-persona mourns him in the last stanza of the poem.

A long half hour together I have stood  
Mute, looking at the grave in which he lies!

The subject of the poem has died young, but he had lived a life worthy of admiration. Even if nobody took note of him, Wordsworth would not mind singing of him in his poetry. The hallmark of the poem is that it celebrates the charms of the rustic life as does ‘She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways’ among other poems of Wordsworth.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

The spirit of Romanticism is the revolutionary spirit. The poetry of Wordsworth is the poetry of angst and revolution; Wordsworth being disgusted with the anomalies of his society. At his best, he uses his poetry to offer some solutions to these societal problems.

Also, the poetry of Wordsworth speaks to humanity at large, addressed to our poetic consciousness, challenging our convictions. It is the validity of the thoughts advanced in his poetry that make it have a universal appeal.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

A number of issues have been raised about the poetry of Wordsworth. These include idealization of nature, pantheism, rebelliousness, disillusionment with the human society, celebration of rustic dwelling, among others. It is your duty to identify how these issues are treated by Wordsworth in his poetry.

#### **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

1. What is pantheism?
2. Write an informed essay on Wordsworth as a pantheist, drawing appropriate illustrations from his poetry.

3. To a marked extent, Wordsworth's poetry celebrates rural life. Discuss.
4. Write an essay on any four themes in the poetry of Wordsworth.
5. Some poems of Wordsworth are written on the basis of contrast between the world of man and the world of Nature. Discuss.

## **7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING**

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## **UNIT 3 THE WORKS OF SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor – Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772 – 1834), alongside Wordsworth, championed the emergence of English Romanticism. The two of them were good friends, and their friendship paid off quite remarkably: It produced a corpus of literature that has come to stay in English literature.

Coleridge was not just a poet. He was also a philosopher and critic whose compelling legacies have defied prejudice. As a great poet, he introduced some expressions that have come to stay in the English Language: the concepts of an albatross hanging around one's neck, "water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink" and suspension of disbelief all emanated from the work of Coleridge. His genius was by no means controvertible; and this is to be observed in his critical and philosophical works.

### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you would be able to:

- i. Comment on what makes Coleridge typical or untypical of his day;
- ii. Identify themes in the works of Coleridge;
- iii. Examine Coleridge as a pantheist.

### **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

#### **The Poetry of Coleridge**

Coleridge has many collections of poetry: *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796), *Poems* (1803), *Dejection: An Ode* (1802) among others. We shall now analyse some of his individual poems.

### 3.1 The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

One of the famous, if not the most famous, of the poems of Coleridge is 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. Originally published in 1798 as part of *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, the poem is a ballad that narrates the experiences of a mariner, the narration itself being a 'sort of penance' for the mariner's having killed an albatross on a voyage to the Antarctica. The tale of the poem may seem simple and modest, but it offers a narrative that illustrates the relationship between the natural realm and the supernatural realm.

'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' tells the story of the sailor who killed an albatross. At the beginning of the poem, the mariner or sailor stops a wedding guest en route a wedding. The wedding guest initially hesitates but is later captivated by the sailor's "glittering eye". He sits down and listens to the story told by the ancient mariner.

The mariner's tale has it that he was one of the mariners that embarked on a voyage. At the onset of the journey their ship sailed southward under good weather. The elements were propitious. But after a while, there was a storm which drove the mariners and their ship southward towards Antarctica. The new environment looked strange and unbearable:

The ice was here, the ice was there,  
The ice was all around:  
It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,  
Like noises in a swound.

At length, a great seabird, an albatross, appeared in the sky, circling the ship. The bird, being a bird of good omen, led the crew out of the ice, and "a good south wind sprung up behind". The crew was hopeful, happy with the great seabird, the albatross whose coming changed the elements. But this was short-lived, as the ancient mariner inhospitably killed the albatross for no good reason. The crew got annoyed with the mariner for having killed the bird, as the elements changed for the worse after the killing of the bird. But when the elements improved, the crew were happy and justified the killing of the albatross, thereby making themselves complicit in the crime. The killing of the albatross and the justification of the action by the crewmen marked a turning point in the

course of the voyage. Suddenly, the fair weather changed and the ship was stalled,

As idle as a painted ship  
Upon a painted ocean.

At this point, the forces that ruled the icy world began to take vengeance on the shipmates for the death of the albatross:

Water, water, everywhere,  
And all the boards did shrink;  
Water, water everywhere,  
Nor any drop to drink.

The crew got exceedingly thirsty and could not drink the water of the ocean, because of its brackishness. The ancient mariner was once again blamed by his shipmates who hung the dead albatross round his neck as a way of dissociating themselves from the crime. But it was already too late. The deed had been done, and their complicity had been established.

The ancient mariner with the albatross round his neck saw the figure of a ship coming towards them. This gave a glimmer of hope to the crew at large. But as the ship got closer, it turned out to be a ghostly spectacle, a skeleton-ship with *Death* and *Life-in-Death* as its crew. The vengeance had just begun. These two dined for the crew of the ship carrying the ancient mariner and his shipmates; *Life-in-Death* won the ancient mariner with the rest of the crew going to *Death*. Following this, the rest of the crew, two hundred of them, fell down one by one, dead. Each had an accusing glance on his face, though dead, and cast the accusing glance on the mariner. The mariner suffered the reproachful look but did not die, the albatross about its neck. He wanted to pray, but could not, his heart “as dry as dust”.

The mariner saw some water snakes, disgusting and slimy as they were, and blessed them in his heart. In that instant, he found out he could pray, and he prayed. At once, the albatross fell off his neck. The dead bodies of the mariner’s mates got inspired and they steered the ship homeward. When they got to a whirlpool, the ship sank with the crew except the ancient mariner. A hermit and a pilot came to the rescue of the mariner.

The mariner passed “like night, from land to land” telling people the tale of his experience with the albatross he had shot dead. At the moment, he bids the weddingguest farewell, reminding him the crux of the tale.

He prayeth well who loveth well  
Both man and bird and beast

He prayeth best, who loveth best



All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us  
He made and loveth all

Afterwards, the wedding guest turns from the bridegroom's door, going home like one stunned. He wakes up the following morning sadder and wiser.

'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' captures the spirit of Romanticism in so many ways. The setting of the tale for instance, is an exotic locale, just like the setting of some Romantic poems. The setting is devoid of the hustle and bustle of city dwelling. It is like the untrodden ways in the poetry of Wordsworth.

The characters too are not aristocratic and highborn. They are mostly everyday characters. Exceptions are *Death* and *Life-in-Death* who are the personifications of the supernatural. The wedding guest himself is by no means aristocratic. He belongs to the ordinary folk whom the Romantics would like to celebrate in their poetry.

Most importantly, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' is a poem that celebrates Nature. The albatross in the poem is symbolic of the sublimity of Nature. It is of good omen. Its being has never been detrimental to the mariners. But man must "murder to dissect" and the mariner shoots it dead, thus violating the forces that control the elements. Many lives are lost because of this singular senseless act. The killing of the albatross could be seen as a metaphor for violating a benefactor, considering that the bird has been of good omen to the sailors. The complicity of the rest of the crew worsens the situation. They could be seen as lacking strength of character, for their opinions would change in line with the atmosphere of a given situation. They do not see beyond the surface. They are similar to most people in real life who would very easily jump to conclusion or join the bandwagon in any given situation. They die because of their lack of strength of character.

The slimy creatures and sea-snakes are also symbolic of the sublimity of Nature. There is something sublime about them; it is this that the mariner realises. He blesses them in his heart and the albatross falls off his neck. Sublimity does not only exist in the albatross; it also exists in the slimy nature of these crawling creatures. There is nothing "unclean" about them. They reflect the supremacy of the Divine Being, just like the albatross. This concept makes manifest the notion of pantheism in the poem. It suffices to state that everything God created is beautiful and He is present in everything He created; as such, every creature deserves to be respected, both man and animals. But one has to have strength of character to see beauty in slimy creatures.

Many themes are present in the poem. They include the themes of vengeance, repentance, forgiveness, providence, among others. At this point, I am sure you should be in the position to comment on how these themes are manifested in the poem.

On the whole, “‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ is a great poem by Coleridge that raises many questions about existence generally. It is a poem that challenges our understanding of the interface between the natural and the supernatural.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise**

Give a brief account/ story line of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’

## **3.2 To Nature**

Coleridge’s pantheism is also made manifest in one of his poems, a sonnet titled ‘To Nature’. The poem strives to find harmony and balance in the flora and fauna of a given locale. The Romantic pantheist would always strike a parallel between the Supreme Being and the things He has created, seeking to identify Him or His images in the natural world. This is precisely the sort of quest in ‘To Nature’, where the persona conjures and connects images of religious worshipping on the altar of natural harmony:

It may indeed be phantasy, when I  
Essay to draw from all created things  
Deep, heartfelt, inward joy that closely clings;  
And trace in leaves and flowers that round me lie  
Lessons of love and earnest piety.  
So let it be; and if the wide world rings  
In mock of this belief, it brings  
No fear, nor grief, nor vain perplexity.  
So will I build my altar in the fields,  
And the blue sky my fretted dome shall be,  
And the sweet fragrance that the wild flower yields  
Shall be the incense I will yield to thee  
Thee only God! and thou shalt not despise  
Even me, the priest of this poor sacrifice.

This is a poem that powerfully evokes images of a priest before his deity, the images drawn from external nature – the landscape together with its flora and fauna. Reading the poem closely (for it deserved some thoughtfulness on the part of the reader), you would note the passion, or better still, the frenzy behind the quest to identify poetry in everything created by the Supreme Being. It is this frenzy, this unalloyed eagerness that propels the pantheism in the poem.

One remarkable thing about the essence of the eternal lines of this poem is that the persona addresses the deity in a familiar tone; this is reflected in the last two lines of the poem. And very importantly, the persona does not need a mediator between him and the Deity, choosing to speak to Him directly, like Donne would in 'Batter My Heart', for there is something of bond between them.

The deity in the poem is God of Nature – not a scriptural God, so the title of the poem 'To Nature' could be seen as having a reference to the Creator. In the poem, Nature and God are depicted as analogues. The poem is titled 'Nature' and it ends up addressing God. There lies the analogy.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise**

How has Coleridge depicted the Supreme Being in his poem, 'To Nature?'

### **3.3 Work without Hope**

'Work without Hope' is Coleridge's poem that addresses the splendour of Nature. Like Wordsworth's 'Lines Written in Early Spring' and 'The Tables Turned', 'Work Without Hope' is based on contrast, that between people and Nature, the speaking voice in the poem representing people.

There is productivity in Nature; all the natural phenomena portrayed in the poem (symbolizing Nature as they are) have something positively beautiful and propitious about them. The slugs, for instance, "leave their lair". This means of course, that they are out doing something, notwithstanding their sluggishness. Etymologically, the epithet, "sluggish", derived from the creature, slug; and slugs are known for their inactivity and dull nature. But they are depicted in this poem as being positively engaged, their sliminess notwithstanding. Also, the bees, famed for their productivity, "are stirring". Even the winter weather, which is known for its inclemency, has something propitious about it – on its smiling face lies "a dream of Spring", a period of plenty. These natural phenomena are contrasted with the character of the persona in the poem.

And I, the while, the sole unbusy thing,  
Nor honey make, nor pair, nor build, nor sing.

This contrast is meant to illustrate or emphasise the dearth of connectedness between the world of human beings and the world of Nature. This is underscored by the conjunction "and", as seen in the lines above. This absence of connectedness is fully explored in the

second stanza of the poem. The persona is presented as knowing the good things which Nature has in stock for humanity, but is too desolate or engrossed in other things to be connected. He is a character that has given his heart away, just like what the persona in ‘The World is Too Much with Us’ represents. This situation is made worse because of the “unbrightened” lips and “wreathless brow” of the persona who has lost touch with Nature. ‘Work without Hope’ essentially highlights the chasm between the way of people, and Nature. Humanity has derailed from the course that leads to real bliss.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise**

What similarities are there in Wordsworth’s ‘The World is Too Much with Us’ and Coleridge’s ‘Work without Hope?’

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

Coleridge’s poetry is a corpus of literature that is rich in its presentation of issues, marked by its exotica, pantheism and linguistic accessibility. It is the poetry of a great thinker determined to pass across some messages which would have otherwise been unnoticed.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ is one poem of Coleridge’s that has compelled admiration for ages now, remarkable in its composition and thematic considerations. It is one of the beads that have come to adorn the English language because of many unique expressions inherent in it. Its literariness hinges on its language. ‘To Nature’ and ‘Work without Hope’ are also typical of the movement called Romanticism. Through them, the author registers his Romantic ideas.

## **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

1. Comment on any three themes in Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’.
2. Write an informed essay on Coleridge as a pantheist.
3. Trace the features of Romanticism present in the poetry of Coleridge.
4. Write an essay on ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ as typical of the spirit of Romanticism.

## **7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING**

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## **MODULE 3 THE WORKS OF ROMANTIC POETS**

Unit 1 The Works of John Keats

Unit 2 The Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley

Unit 3 The Works of Lord Byron

Unit 4 A Comparative Analyses of Some Romantic Poets

Unit 5 Romantic Fiction/ Novels

### **Unit 1: THE WORKS OF JOHN KEATS**

#### **CONTENT**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/ Further Reading

#### **1.0 INTRODUCTION:**

John Keats was born on October 31, 1795, in London. His life was a life of pathetic brevity – he lived for only a space of twenty-five years and four months, having died in Rome on February 23, 1821. His family suffered deaths in different ways, especially untimely deaths, being a tubercular family. His father had died in a riding accident when he was eight; and his mother died of tuberculosis when he was fourteen. His younger brother Tom was to die in 1818 of the family consumptive inheritance. But despite the brevity of his life, Keats was able to leave behind a body poetry that registered his fame as a poet. In fact, it was a thoroughgoing miracle that Keats could produce so edifying body of poetry in so short a time. This miracle is comparable to Achebe's writing of *Things Fall Apart* at the age of twenty eight in 1958, a time when African literature was in its developing stage.

Keats produced three volumes of poetry, though his early attempts were not successful. They are the following: *Poems* (1817); *Endymion* (1818); *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems* (1820). The opening of *Endymion*, a common reference, reads:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:  
Its loveliness increases; it will never  
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep

A bower quiet for us, and a sleep  
Full of sweet dreams, and health,  
and quiet breathing.

We shall now in this unit analyse some of the poems of Keats.

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- i. Identify the themes in the poetry of Keats; and,
- ii. Identify what makes Keats typical of the movement called Romanticism

## 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

Keats once referred to Wordsworth as the “egotistical sublime”, meaning, according to Stephen, that Wordsworth was forever searching for a moment of transcendental insight and perception and wrote poetry primarily based on his own personal experience and observation of life. If this claim is true of Wordsworth, it is also true of Keats himself for sublime egoism defined the movement known as Romanticism. Most of the poems of Keats were based on his experience and observation of life. One of such poems is ‘Ode to a Nightingale’.

### 3.1 Ode to a Nightingale

Keats’ brief life was that of continual sorrow and losses. His experiences are brought to bear in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’. The poem records Keats’ encounter with a songbird, a nightingale, in May 1819. Charlotte Carstairs in *York Notes on Selected Poems: John Keats* (1983), has it that the poem, at a first reading, appears to be a perfect example of Wordsworth’s definition of poetry as the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. This is valid because the poem is Keats’ spontaneous reaction to the encounter he had had with the bird – after listening to the music of the bird while seated under a plum tree, he went indoors and wrote the poem (Carstairs 1983).

In the first stanza of the poem, the persona declares his drowsy insensitivity, which seems to stem from an intake of a poisonous herb (hemlock) or a sleep-inducing drug (opiate). The poem being an ode – a lyric poem addressed to something non-human or someone patently absent – the poet addresses the nightingale with “an air of spontaneity and dramatic immediacy”. The speaker states that his numbness is not out of his being envious of the bird but by being too happy in the presence of the bird whose singing reminds the persona of the propitious summer – like the music of the addressee in Milton’s ‘O Nightingale’.

Subsequently, the persona expresses his desire for “a draught of vintage”, vintage being a kind of high quality wine; this would enable him to escape into the world of the nightingale, “the forest din”. This desire to escape reality is further highlighted in the third stanza:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,  
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin and dies;  
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leaden-eyed despairs,  
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
Or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow.

The third stanza of the poem really portrays the angst surrounding human living. It has its reference to Keats’ own experience– his brother Tom died of tuberculosis in 1819, and his love for Fanny Brown was largely unrequited because of privation; and to the life of man generally, reminding one of the gloominess and sombreness of Hardy’s ‘Hap’ and ‘The Darkling Thrush’ among other poems of his that graphically bemoan the plight of the human race.

Keats’ medium of escape from reality is not wine, represented by the reference to Bacchus and his leopards, but poetry itself. This is the crux of the fourth stanza of the poem. This escape is emphasised by the fact that the world of the bird is the ideal world, where the night is tender, everything is in its proper place. The bird, thus, could be seen as a metaphor for Nature, and contrast is employed to depict the dissonance between the world of Nature and the human world. The human world is dotted with woes but Nature is idealised; it is the norm, the model of ecstasy and perfection. Escaping into it through whatever medium – may be through the medium of poetry as Keats has put it – is a panacea of a sort.

Presumably, the fifth stanza delineates the setting of the poem. The persona is in a thicket addressing the bird. And at this juncture, the persona cannot see what flowers there are at his feet. He could barely view his surrounding to see whatever that is there. He only knows the flowers and their scents by intuition. He is a character in communion with Nature, whether he could see his environment or not. He has the inward eyes to appreciate Nature. In short, the fifth stanza of the poem is an idealization of the floral environment of the speaker, and this is the setting of the poem.



The theme of escaping from reality is central to the fabrics of the poem. It is further highlighted in its sixth stanza where the persona presents death itself in a positive light. In D.H Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1999), one of the major characters, Ursula, thinks death a great consummation, a consummating experience, a development from life (165). Perhaps, this is the type of attitude Keats has towards death in 'Ode to a Nightingale' in the sixth stanza. Death would help him to achieve the egotistical sublime, a form of transcendental experience. He is now ripe to die, having had an encounter with the bird:

Now more than ever seems it rich to die.

The theme of immortality sits side by side with the theme of death in the poem; the former is illustrated in the seventh stanza. The bird is idealistically portrayed as a deathless phenomenon. The problem with this very stanza is reading it literally. But if one views it metaphorically – that is, by viewing the bird as a metaphor for natural sublimity – one would apprehend Keats' claim that the bird is an immortal entity; there lies the validity of the claim. Going by the deathlessness of the bird as seen in stanza seven, the concept of eschatology is done away with. For the music of the bird is timeless, having been heard by the great and the good as well as the lowly.

The bird flies away in the last stanza as the word "forlorn" brings the speaker back to himself, back to reality. The persona sounds confused; he does not know whether the encounter he has just had is a vision or a waking dream.

The Ode offers Keats an ample opportunity to express some pent-up emotions, perhaps recollected in tranquility. He uses the opportunity of the poem to comment on the issues of death, immortality, sickness, old age, disillusionment, among others. The shades of thought in the poem are arranged on the basis of contrast, that between man and Nature.

Escapism is central to the presentations in the poem. Keats presents this concept so dramatically in the poem as though it were a panacea in itself. But if one reads the poem faithfully enough, one would note that escapism in the poem is a way of realising the egotistical sublime.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise**

1. The theme of escapism and immortality are central to Keats' 'Ode to a Grecian Urn' Discuss.
2. What other themes can you deduce from the poem?

### 3.2 Ode to a Grecian Urn

The concept of immortality advanced in 'Ode to a Nightingale' is further accented in another important ode of Keats' – 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. The Ode, as is evident in the title, is addressed to a Greek urn; an urn is a vase-like container for storing something, especially the ashes of the dead. This particular urn is so beautiful as to inspire Keats to compose this poem. It is so beautifully decorated with paintings as to arouse a spontaneous reaction from a sensuous mind. Its body is in segments, and each segment has something artistically carved or painted on it. The urn, thus, becomes a personification of artistic beauty which will never fade away.

The words "never", "ever", "forever", "still" reinforce the idea of timelessness in the poem. So long as the urn lives, so long will the art works on it live. These art works have acquired a life of their own by virtue of their being engraved on the urn; the urn thus gives life to them permanently.

The poem being an ode, is addressed to the urn. The urn is addressed in metaphorical terms – "bride of quietness", "foster-child of silence", "sylvan historian". Each of these phrases portrays a picture of the urn.

One might be provoked to ask why unheard melodies are sweeter than heard melodies, as expressed in the second stanza. But the answer remains that heard melodies pass away with time; they are transient, ephemeral subject to time, like anything animate in the physical world – they are merely natural. Unheard melodies have perpetual existence. They are in the world but not of the world; existing in the microcosm of the urn, for the urn is a microcosm in a macrocosm. It has its own existence, self-sufficient as it were. And most importantly, the world of the art work on the body of the urn is aesthetic. So the urn has two qualities of permanence and beauty; and these are the most compelling themes in the poem at large. There is a kind of continuity of life in a static form in the microcosm of the urn. This is the great paradox of the poem, but this would be resolved if one recalls that the poem itself gives life to the urn, and the urn gives life to the art works on its shape. Thus, if the poem lives, the urn lives; and if the urn lives those pictures on the urn would live. The life of the urn has been made permanent in the poem.

The last stanza of the poem addressed to the urn is most edifying in its profundity. It captures the spirit of the poem most, as embedded in the last five lines:

When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty', - that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

The speaker recognises the transient nature of human life and contrasts it with that of the urn; and the urn has a message to man, to the effect that beauty and truth are but analogous.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise**

Discuss the themes of permanence and aestheticism in Keats' 'Ode to a Grecian Urn.'

### **3.3 When I Have Fears**

The thought of mortality and immortality runs through most of the poems of Keats. Keats knew he would die young; he was a tubercular patient; death had taken and conquered many a member of his family. The thought of his own mortality was palpable to him, and nowhere is this made more poignant than in 'When I Have Fears'.

If you read through the poem religiously enough, you would see the influence of Shakespeare and Milton on Keats. Shakespeare's 'When I Do Count the Clock' readily comes to mind; and Milton's 'When I Consider How My Light Is Spent' is brought to bear on the poem. Like Milton – the most accomplished of English poets – Keats knew he was a great poet for posterity; he was not unsure of himself as a great poet. But he had his fears. Milton knew his blindness could be a barrier to achieving his literary dreams and serving his Maker. Then he strove to prove that there is ability in disability. Keats knew his imminent death could cut short his literary dreams; and he expressed his fears in 'When I Have Fears':

When I have fears that I may cease to be  
Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,  
Before high-piled books, in charactery,  
Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;  
When I behold, upon the night's starred face,  
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,  
And think that I may never live to trace  
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;  
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,  
That I shall never look upon thee more,  
Never have relish in the fiery power  
Of unreflecting love; - then on the shore  
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think

Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

The penultimate line of this stanza readily brings to mind Milton's "dark world and wide" in 'When I Consider How My Light Is Spent'. Essentially, the poem is a philosophical construct, presenting the speaker's preoccupations about life, death, love, fame and realization of one's dreams. It has been described as a poet's poem because it is concerned with the poet's contemplations about his literary life in the face of his mortality. The mortality of the poet strips everything of its significance, bringing literary dreams, love and fame to question. The literary dreams are reflected in lines 2 and 3. His pen in line 2 is a symbol of his literary productivity; his teeming brain is his Miltonic talent; high-piled books represent learning; and characterly refers to writing. The first word of the second line underscores the poignancy of the whole situation – that dream may not be realised.

Keats' unrequited love for Fanny is graphically brought to bear on this poem. It is paralleled by the phrase "unreflecting love"; she is the fair creature of an hour. The poem bemoans the absurdity of human hopes and aspiration and reduces everything to nothing, given that life is but transient.

Reading through the poem carefully, you will discover that its strength is its cosmic relevance. If you look at it as strictly referring to the poet and the poet alone, you may be misreading the poem. Thus, the poem could be seen as a sad commentary on life generally.

The themes of fear, unrequited love, vanity and brevity of human life run through the poem. Students are expected to be able to comment on any of these as manifested in the poem.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise**

Discuss the themes of fear, unrequited love, vanity and brevity of human life in Keats' 'When I have Fears'

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

The brevity of Keats' life notwithstanding, he was able to make much imprint on the Romantic Movement. His is essentially poetry of angst. He used his works to illuminate the human condition in life on earth, "where men sit and hear each other groan". His poetry searches for the transcendental too; and this is found in works of art and in Nature.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale' and 'Ode to a Grecian Urn' are poems that record his feelings about his environment, a type of spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings as is characteristic of Romantic poetry; while 'When I Have Fears' particularly is concerned with the poet's contemplations about his literary life in the face of his mortality.

#### **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

1. Keats' poetry is essentially that of feeling of angst. Discuss.
2. Examine the use of contrast in the poetry of Keats.
3. The term, "egotistical sublime", defines Keats' poetry. Discuss.
4. Write an informed essay on any four themes in the poem of Keats.

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## **UNIT 2 THE WORKS OF PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY**

## CONTENT

- 1.0. Introduction
- 2.0. Objectives
- 3.0. Main Content
- 4.0. Conclusion
- 5.0. Summary
- 6.0. Tutor – Marked Assignment
- 7.0. References/ Further Reading

### 1.0. INTRODUCTION

It has been asserted that the Romantic Movement was a revolutionary movement. The poets that wrote during this period were all revolutionary in their outlook. One of the most revolutionary, if not the most revolutionary, of these poets was Percy Bysshe Shelley. A radical, nonconformist, rebel, Shelley was cut out for challenging the status quo; he believed that the “society, institutions, and conventional morality destroyed and corrupted mankind” and he sought for ways of emancipating man from the inhibitions of the established institutions. As is seen in his ‘*A Defence of Poetry*’, Shelley sees poets as legislators. To him, they are “the institutions of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life” (1727)

Born into an aristocratic family (his grandfather was a wealthy landowner; and his father was a parliamentarian) in 1792, Shelley started off as a revolutionary quite early in life. Because of his aristocratic background, he was sent to the best schools available in his day (Eton College and Oxford) with the hope that he would be an aristocrat later in life; but because of his mould of person, he turned out against the very system that nurtured him (like Old Major in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* who sowed the seed of revolution against the tyranny of Mr. Jones and his men, notwithstanding that the system actually favoured him).

Like Blake, Shelley loathed the tyranny of the state and the established religion – this was because these two institutions were very powerful before, during and after the Romantic period in England; they were two sides of a coin – and Shelley in ‘*Queen Ma*’ notes: “Power, like a desolating pestilence, pollutes whatever it touches”. Power has a corrupting influence.

While at Oxford University, Shelley co-authored ‘*The Necessity of Atheism*’ with Thomas Jefferson Hogg and sent autographed copies to all heads of Oxford Colleges at the University. The book was a source of shock and embarrassment to the British mind at the time of its

publication (1811), and consequently, Shelley and his friend were rusticated from Oxford.

Shelley's first publication was a Gothic novel, *Zastrozzi* (1810). Others, some published posthumously, include *Original Poetry* (1810), *Queen Mab* (1813), *Alastor* (1816), *Posthumous Poems* (1824), *Hellas* (1822), *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) and *Adonais* (1821), an elegy on the death of Keats.

Shelley died before his thirtieth birthday when his schooner was hit by a storm in 1822. We are going to examine some of his poems in this unit.

## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- i. Examine Shelley as a typical Romantic revolutionary;
- ii. Comment on the themes in the poetry of Shelley.

## 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

### The Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley

#### 3.1 *England 1819*

As a Romantic, Shelley wrote poetry that depicts the temper of the movement he was an integral part of. One of the Romantic marks prevalent in his poetry is the revolutionary spirit which characterized the movement at large. And one of the poems that reveal this revolutionary tendency is 'England 1819'. The poem is a depiction of the state of affairs in England in the year 1819; and Shelley's attitude towards this state is that of revulsion and scorn:

An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king, –  
Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow  
Through public scorn – mud from a muddy spring, –  
Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,  
But leech-like to their fainting country cling,  
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow, –  
A people starved and stabbed in the untilled field, –  
An army, which liberticide and prey  
Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield, –  
Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;  
Religion Christless, Godless – a book sealed;  
A Senate, – Time's worst statute unrepealed, –  
Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom may  
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.

It would take an individual made of sterner stuff to put up a piece of uncompromising thought as this by way of poetry. Such an individual must have the revolutionary blood flowing in his veins; he must be intrepid and bold, seeking for the truth in all situations against all odds.

When this poem was written in 1819 in England, criticism against the state and the Established Church risked austere reactions from the state. It would take only a venturesome Romantic to call the Church Christless. It would take a brave Blake or a bold Shelley to write such a poem. Blake's 'The Garden of Love is no less remarkable:

I went to the Garden of Love,  
And saw what I never had seen:  
A Chapel was built in the midst,  
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,  
And Thou shalt not, writ over the door;  
So I turned to the Garden of Love,  
That so many sweet flowers bore.

And I saw it was filled with graves,  
And tomb-stones where flowers should be:  
And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,  
And binding with briars, my joys & desires.

The English society of 1819, as depicted in Shelley's 'England 1819' was not an egalitarian society – it was a society of inequality, oppression, moral degeneracy and ruthlessness; it was a society in dire need of fixing. It should be recalled that Wordsworth has expressed the need for the fixing of the English society in 'London: 1802, invoking grand Milton, trying to "resurrect" him so that he would restore the lost values the society needed badly.

The monarch of 'England 1819;' was King George III (1738 – 1820). He had lost public favour as of the time the poem was written. It was said that he was actually insane, as Shelley claims in the first line of the poem; and he was senile too. King George III was to die the following year. The poem stopped short of being his obituary.

Shelley delineates the evils of monarchy in 'England 1819' – monarchs are insensitive and parasitic to the state, living off public fund, immiserating the average person common man because of this parasitism. The orthodox belief is that it is the will of the Almighty that monarchs rule over their subjects; that monarchy is divine. This is even



scriptural. But Shelley, being a thoroughgoing revolutionary, would not be persuaded of the validity of such beliefs. After all, the founding fathers of the contiguous states of America held that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. It was this very British monarch – this very King George III – that the Americans defeated in their war of independence before framing their famed Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776. So it should be borne in mind that a struggle against monarchy is a struggle for liberty.

Shelley's attack of the established Church was by no means uncalled for. Milton has done that in his 'Lycidas' (1637) where he calls Anglican priests "blind mouths" because of their unbridled greed. The priests of Shelley's England were none the better, day. Stephen's remark in relation to the Church in Victorian England would help us to comprehend where Shelley is coming from:

The Church appears in Hardy's work as a physical and a social presence, not as something with anything of spiritual significance to say. The grand buildings, the sonority of the liturgies and the social status remain: the real meaning of the Church has withered and died. It is as if the Church is a great beast with a shell or carapace. The shell – what one actually sees – remains, whilst all the living flesh inside it is dead.... We might now see the Church as a symbol for all Victorian society – outwardly impressive and massive, inwardly rotting from within and torn by doubt. (259)

Victorian period only succeeded Romantic period, and what intrepid Hardy bemoans in his novels (and poetry) did not start with Victorianism. It had been there even in Chaucer's period, let alone that of Shelley. So it is no wonder that Shelley terms the Church 'Christless and Godless.'

There was a peaceful demonstration, where a population of about sixty thousand people had gathered, in St. Peter's Field, Manchester in England. This took place on the 16th of August, 1819. The demonstrators were demanding for the reform of parliamentary representation. Soldiers on horsebacks who had come to disperse the demonstrators ended up killing many of the unarmed protesters. This massacre has come to be termed Peterloo Massacre. It is this massacre that Shelley is denouncing in lines 9 - 10 of 'England 1819'. Thus, he could be seen as a social critic responsive to the topical issues in his day.

Notwithstanding the palpable asperity in the poem, it ends with a note of optimism, maintaining that wrongs in the society are something of a springboard from which something better would emanate.

### 3.2 Ode to the West Wind

In 'Ode to the West Wind', Shelley further displays his Romantic temper. As an ode, the persona in the poem addresses the west wind, personifying it. The poem has five cantos or sections, written in *terza rima* – that is, each rhyme is interlinked thus *aba, bcb, cdc, ded, efe*, and so on.

In the first canto of the poem, the persona invokes the “wild West Wind” of autumn, depicting its functions. The west wind is described as the breath of autumn, autumn itself is personified. The presence of the wind is unseen; the dead leaves are “driven” from its presence. And the wind could be seen as a form of immanent presence, supernatural and all powerful. The wind has another duty of scattering “winged seeds” to their “wintry bed”, that is inside the earth, until the coming of the season of moisture, spring. This wind, personified as a wild spirit, is portrayed as both destroyer and preserver, and is beckoned to listen to the persona. It is both destroyer and preserver because it announces the imminence of winter – a season of dryness and coldness – and preserves the seeds that would blossom in spring.

The depictions begun in canto 1 are further expanded through the subsequent cantos. The image created in canto 2 is that of a canopy of clouds, or a canopy of locks of cloud, compared to the locks of a Maenad, a disciple of the Greek god of the vine, Dionysus. A Maenad had a sort of shaggy hairstyle, hence the allusion. In short, canto 2 portrays the influence of the wind on the sky. And in canto 3, the poem delineates the influence of the wind on the sea – it wakens the blue Mediterranean sea from its summer dreams; it influences the Atlantic Ocean too. Even the sea-blooms and oozy woods below the sea – that is, life in the seabed – are influenced by the wind – they “grow grey with fear”. Cantos 1 through 3 describe the effects of the wind on the land, sky and sea respectively. The wind is thus presented as a powerful agent of Nature or Nature itself. Its influence is everywhere.

This powerful natural influence is invoked in canto 4 of the poem to come and move the persona. The persona asks the wind to uplift him spiritually; for he has known much travail in life:

As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.  
Oh lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud  
I fall upon the thorns of life! bleed!

Since the wind has power over things terrestrial, supernatural, aquatic, or “skiey”, it can influence man too. Now in canto 5, particularly, the persona asks the wind to extend its influence to him, to make him its lyre – a lyre as a musical instrument produces sweet sounds as the wind passes through or across its strings. In this way, the persona asks the wind to make him its agent of artistic expression. But that is not all. The persona asks to be integrated into the wind so that the two of them would be one; he also asks the wind to drive his thoughts and scatter his words among mankind. Most importantly, he asks the powerful wind to be, through his lips, through his artistic expressions, through his poetry, the trumpet of a prophecy. This prophecy is a prophecy of something good to come following “the thorns of life”. The poem ends in an optimistic tone by asking the question:

O, Wind,  
If winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

The seasons in the last line of the poem are both symbolic, the one symbolising dryness, coldness or even death, and the other life. It follows that life comes after death as a matter of course.

Many themes are discernible in the poem. Among them are those of divine providence, symbolised by the wind itself; the immanence of the Almighty, symbolised by the activities of the wind; the travails of life, seen in the experiences of the persona before invoking the wind; the theme of death and life seen in the third and fourth stanzas of the first canto.

‘Ode to the West Wind’ is typical of the Romantic temper in many ways. First, it is egoistic in outlook. It records the persona’s experience with the wind. The persona is the only human entity in the poem. Many a Romantic poem revolves around the experiences of the poet; that is what Shelley does in this ode. The persona presents himself as a channel through which the effects of the wind would get to humanity. This is evident mostly in the final canto of the poem.

Also, ‘Ode to the West Wind’ reeks of pantheism. There is something divine – godlike – and supernatural about the wind. The wind is presented as though it is identical with the Almighty. In fact, the wind symbolises God in the poem. The Romantics would identify the Almighty in his creation; in this very ode, an analogy is drawn between the Creator God and his creature, the wind. That the subject, the wind, is written with capital initial throughout the poem is a pointer to its divine symbolism.

Besides, idealisation of Nature as a feature of Romanticism is noticeable in the poem. The wind is portrayed subjectively, in an awesome way. The attitude of the persona towards the wind is purely that of admiration. But we know that wind in real life can wreck havoc on living things. But the persona is completely unaware of this.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise**

- i. Mention the themes of Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind.'
- ii. Explain any two you have mentioned.

### **3.3 Ozymandias**

Shelley's 'Ozymandias' is among his most well-known poems. It is one of the poems in which Shelley makes known his dislike of monarchy and its attendant evils-tyranny, corruption and inequality. 'Ozymandias' is a revolutionary poem which holds monarchy to scorn:

I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert... Near them on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things  
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

The title name of the poem is Greek for Pharaoh Ramses II. And Ramses II was a very powerful ruler of Egypt. His monarchy approximately lasted between 1290 – 1223 BC. In this poem, he is a metaphor for powerful monarchs whose monarchies have been overtaken by events. In his poem, 'In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz', W.B. Yeats writes:

The innocent and the beautiful  
Have no enemy but time.

This truism, when applied to the context of 'Ozymandias' would help to bring to the fore how time devours everything that lives, empires and

monarchies included. It is time that has brought the imposing sculpture of Ramses II – Ozymandias - to ruins; everything passes away.

‘Ozymandias’ tells the tale of the persona’s encounter with a traveller that has been to “an antique land”. The antique land in question is presumably Egypt. The traveller has told the persona of one of the sights he has seen in the antique land. It is the ruined statue of the once powerful Ramses II whom the Greeks called Ozymandias. What is left of the once towering statue is the ruins of “two vast and trunkless legs of stone”, “a shattered visage” and the lettering on the pedestal. Beside these, nothing else remains.

The poem is a grim declaration of the vanity of human ambitions. The subject of the sculpture, Ramses II, while he reigned supreme (the mythology of the epic of biblical Moses was set in his reign) was larger than life, something of a deity. His dynasty stretched as far as Ethiopia and parts of Arabia. But as of the time the poem was written what was left of his imposing statue was nothing short of dim vestiges of his imperial past.

Shelley seizes the opportunity of the poem to express some salient messages to the effect that empires grow and perish; that time conquers all; that human political escapades are vanities of sorts; and that classic art works endure the toughest of times. The theme of immortality of art is central to the fabric of the poem. At least, the art work – the sculpture – together with its passions and lettering has outlived the dynasty of the once powerful Ramses II.

Images of decay, death and deterioration adorn the poem, strengthening its thematic concerns. These images are conveyed in such words as “desert”, “half sunk”, “shattered” “nothing”, “decay” “wreck”, among others.

Emperor Constantine (some call him The Great) once reigned like Ramses II. He was so powerful that many myths were built around him; he even had a city named after himself. That city was Constantinople. But where is it today? It has gone the way of the “trunkless legs of stone”. That city today is called Istanbul. And there was once a colossal sculpture of the emperor, carved from white marble, about forty feet high. The once imposing sculpture today is in pieces, like the sculpture of Ramses II. In fact, the sculpture of Ramses II and his reign parallel those of Constantine’s in many ways. The fate of the two emperors is summed up in one word – vanity.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, we have examined three of the works of Shelley, with their thematic concerns reflecting those of other Romantic poems.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

Shelley portrays the revolutionary spirit of Romanticism and the idealization of nature in his works. In 'England 1819', he brings out the inequality, oppression and moral decadence of his England society. He did not spare the Established Church as he sees it as hypocritical and Christless. In 'Ode to the West Wind', we see the wind as an agent of Nature: a destroyer and preserver. Finally, in 'Ozymandias', Shelley brings out the vanity of human ambitions and how time conquers all, but for classic works of arts which endure the test of time.

## **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

1. Shelley is a revolutionary poet of his time. How true is this assertion in the light of any two of his poems.
2. Using any of Shelly's poems, bring out any three of his thematic concerns.

## **7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING**

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## **UNIT 3 THE WORKS OF GEORGE GORDON LORD BYRON CONTENT**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
- 4.0 Summary
- 5.0 Conclusion
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Lord Byron, Shelley and Keats belonged to the latter segment of the Romantic Movement, just before the Victorian Period. These three poets had something in common – they all died young. Keats had died at twenty-five, Shelley at twenty-nine and Byron at thirty-six. But before their deaths, they had produced enduring works of literature.

Byron was born in 1788 to Captain John Byron and Catherine Gordon of Gight Estate in the Parish of Fyvie, in the Formartine area of Aberdeenshire, Scotland. He became a Baron when his father died in 1798. His father was a rakehell and a spendthrift.

Byron attended the Harrow School and Cambridge University. He admired Alexander Pope, a neo-classical English poet, and Napoleon Bonaparte. He started writing poetry when he was just fourteen. And he has many publications. Among them include *Hours of Idleness* (1807), *Childe Harolds Pilgrimage* (1812), *The Corsair* (1814), and *Hebrew Melodies* (1815).

Byron was not just a literary artist; he was also a politician. He took his seat in the House of Lords in 1809 where he eloquently urged Catholic Emancipation and defended the “framebreakers”, workers that destroyed machines that had displaced them. He travelled to continental Europe severally where he later joined the Greeks’ fight for their independence from the Turks. He died of fever in February 1824 in Greece.

## **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- i. Identify themes in the works of Byron; and
- ii. Comment on what makes him typical of the movement known as Romanticism.

## **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

### **The Works of Byron**

#### **3.1 She Walks in Beauty**

Byron’s *Hebrew Melodies* of 1815 contains some of the most famous lyrical poems of his. One of these lyric poems is ‘She Walks in Beauty’. The poem is Byron’s spontaneous reaction to the beauty of a Mrs. Wilmot, a wife to his cousin, Robert Wilmot. The poem records the persona’s awe as he beheld the subject:

She walks in beauty, like the night  
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;

And all that's best of dark and bright  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:  
Thus mellow'd to that tender light  
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less  
Had half impair'd the nameless grace  
Which waves in every raven tress  
Or softly lightens o'er her face;  
Where thoughts serenely sweet express  
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

And on that cheek, and over that brow,  
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,  
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,  
But tell of days in goodness spent  
A mind at peace with all below,  
A heart whose love is innocent!

One striking feature of Mrs. Wilmot's beauty as observed in this poem is its combination of opposites. This is evident in the first stanza of the poem. It is a type of beauty that hinges on contrasting features – light and night, dark and bright. These features, contrasting as they are, help to balance the beauty of the subject, making it something exceptional, something extraordinary.

The second stanza of the poem points out the fact that the beauty of the subject is in the right proportion. This is the point made in lines 7-8. Any beauty that is not in the right proportion is no beauty at all. A very short woman with dazzling features, for instance, cannot be said to be beautiful. In the context of the beauty of the subject of this poem, the fabric of her beauty is intact, nothing to be removed and nothing to be added. If this is done, her beauty will be impaired. 'The nameless grace' of the eighth line refers to a quality/set of qualities inherent in her hair and face. She is of nameless grace given that her beauty is that of perfection, extraordinary. Though, her beauty, as presented by the Lord Byron himself, reminds one of that of the most beautiful woman in western civilization, Helen of Troy, who had caused the legendary Trojan War. What manner of woman could this be?

The rest of the second stanza is devoted to the delineation of the features of the beauty of the subject. These features are further pointed out in the final stanza. The beauty of the woman in question is not only a physical type of beauty; it is a type of beauty that runs deep – the woman is inwardly beautiful too; she is a virtuous woman. This is the subject of the last three lines of the last stanza. This type of beauty is but a rarity.



Such virtue and such beauty hardly sit side by side. Helen, because of her devastating beauty, had caused the burning of the topless towers of Ilium, for instance; her beauty was dazzling, but it was destructive. Such was the beauty of Yeats' Maud Gonne, the subject of his 'No Second Troy'.

The language of 'She Walks in Beauty' reflects Wordsworth's claim in *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* that a large portion of the language of every good poem can in no respect differ from that of good prose, meaning of course, that the language of poetry should be simple, a type of language really spoken by people. The Romantics had stressed the simplicity of the language of poetry because it reflects natural human language. This tenet is central to the form of 'She Walks in Beauty'. Also of note is the attitude of the speaker towards the subject. It brings to mind that of the persona in 'The Solitary Reaper' towards the Highland lass. There is something subjective about it, bespeaking admiration and powerful feelings. If not for the feelings Lord Byron had for Mrs. Wilmot, he might not have been able to compose this poem.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise**

Nature is perfect. How true is this statement in the light of Byron's 'She Walks in Beauty'?

### **3.2 Prometheus**

It has been observed that the idea of rebellion and revolutionary zeal characterised the Romantic temper. Byron was by no means an exception. He and Shelley had been close friends and shared the same revolutionary attitude. It is this revolutionary tendency that Byron brought to bear on his legendary 'Prometheus'; Shelley, of course, did so in his closet drama *Prometheus Unbound* (1819). 'Prometheus' is based on the Greek myth of Prometheus, a titan, who stole the magic of fire from the gods and gave it to man. This magic of fire was to help man advance in technology. The god of the gods, Zeus, was so much annoyed with Prometheus for this theft that he ordered him chained to a rock; a vulture or an eagle was to devour Prometheus' liver in the day time, and the liver would grow back in the night time. Another divinity, Hercules, slew the vulture or eagle and unbound Prometheus from the rock of his punishment. The story is mythological but it has some allegorical imports; especially as applied by Byron in the poem.

In the poem, 'Prometheus', the hero, Prometheus, is the liberator of the masses. He is a divinity himself, but he identifies with the popular cause. Thus, he is seen as a revolutionary hero who suffers because of his popular act of benevolence. The god, Zeus, symbolises the constituted authority or the Church. He also symbolises constituted tyranny. He would not like man (symbolizing the masses) to be free

from intellectual and technological benightedness; for this would make them to aspire for greater heights. Because of this, he punishes Prometheus. The punishment meted out to Prometheus could be seen as an overreaction; the hero of mankind does not deserve such treatment.

'Prometheus' depicts Prometheus as suffering heroically. The poem celebrates this suffering because of its revolutionary import. This is so because Prometheus has the opportunity to surrender for punishment but refuses to do so stoically. He is praised in the poem for liberating man from darkness. His gift of magic (symbolizing knowledge and technological advancement, as it were) parallels the forbidden fruit in Genesis of which Satan lures Eve into eating. Prometheus, in a way, is a metaphor for Romantic Satanism – the forbidden fruit in the myth of the Fall in Genesis is of the knowledge of good and evil; eating of it would make one be like God. In the myth of Prometheus, the magic of fire he gave man would make man advance and one day be like the divinities. But Zeus would not like to hear of it; and he punished the giver of light.

Prometheus also could be seen as a metaphor for liberty. By giving man the gift of fire, he has invited man to have the liberty to be like gods, aggrandizement for man as liberty enlightens the world:

Thy Godlike crime was to be kind,  
To render with thy precepts less  
The sum of human wretchedness,  
And strengthen Man with his own mind...

The sole desire of Prometheus is to set man free from intellectual darkness and blindness. This makes him a heroic character in the eyes of man. His "crime" is the revolution which the Romantics, especially Shelley and Byron, celebrate in their poetry.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, we have examined two of Byron's poems 'She Walks in Beauty' and 'Prometheus'. We have also seen that the thematic concerns of the two poems are not at variance with those of the Romantic.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

Byron's 'She Walks in Beauty' is an idealisation of Nature personified in Mrs. Wilmot. Her beauty is perfect and transcends the physical to an inward behaviour, the subject being a virtuous woman. In extolling her beauties and virtues, Byron invariably idealises Nature.

In 'Prometheus', we see a revolutionary hero committed to salvaging the situation of man and equipping him for mental emancipation and economic advancement. Unfortunately, the ruling class which Zeus

represents would have none of it; but would rather have him punished severely for daring such redemptive act.

## **6.0 TUTOR – MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

1. Comment on any three themes in the poetry of Byron.
2. Discuss ‘Prometheus’ as a poem that captures the spirit of Romanticism.
3. ‘Prometheus’ is an allegory. Discuss

## **7.0 REFERENCES/ FURTHER READING**

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## **UNIT 4 A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SOME ROMANTIC POEMS**

### **CONTENT**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
- 4.0 Summary
- 5.0 Conclusion
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Romantic poetry addresses many issues, ranging from personal emotions to revolutionary statements. The Romantics gloried in denouncing anything they saw as perverting the innocence and simplicity of the human life, stressing the primacy of passion over reason.

In this unit, we shall carry out a comparative analysis of some Romantic poems. Do well to pay attention to the strings of thought that run through the poems produced during the literary movement.

## **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

- i. At the end of this unit, you should be able to: Examine the shades of thought in Romantic poetry;
- ii. Trace the areas of divergence between Romantic poets; and discuss the staple themes of Romanticism.

## **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

### **3.1 A Comparative Analysis of Some Romantic Poems**

Blake's poetry, like the poetry of most Romantics, is poetry of disenchantment. Behind its vexation is the quest to correct the anomalies in the society. For, as Davies (1975: xiii) has put it, "society is man-made; it can be man-changed." In addressing the societal irregularities, Blake and Shelley share some affinity. The two have been widely known for their being critical of the tyranny of the monarchy and that of organised religion. Blake's 'London' and Shelley's 'England 1819' would yield a fine pairing.

The titles of the two poems would readily inform the discerning mind that the two poems are sociological in outlook; they examine the fabric of the society. London of Blake is the microcosm of Shelley's England; and the latter is the macrocosm of the former. So the two are parallel; after all, London is the capital of England and of the UK. The two poems scoff at the two sides of the English society, the state and the church.

The speaker in 'London' is an avid observer, a social critic, examining facets of the London life; and what he sees on the faces of the city dwellers are marks of weakness and marks of woe wrought by the manacles of the mind. The question then would be, whose mind? As one goes through the poem, one would see pointers to the sources of the weakness and woe in the society. These sources are laid bare in the third stanza of the poem:

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry  
Every blackening Church appalls,  
And the hapless Soldier's sigh  
Runs in blood down Palace walls

This stanza is the nucleus of the poem. It is like its climax; everything that comes after it is the falling action, and everything that comes before

it is the rising action. The chimney sweeper, symbolic as it is, has reference to the short changed and immiserated masses; so is the soldier. The sweeper is yoked to the church; and the soldier to the palace. The church and the palace are thus depicted as not helping in solving the problem of the common man; rather they compound the problem. This is a direct and fearless indictment of the two sides of the English coin, the church and the monarch. This type of indictment belonged to the brave Blake and Shelley, among others.

What Blake does in 'London' is what Shelley does in 'England 1819'. Shelley does not muffle his scorn of monarchy in the poem; as Marc Anthony in *Julius Caesar* puts it, he speaks right on, without prevarication. He points out the evils of monarchy as a system of government. The monarchs in this poem parallel the palace walls in Blake's 'London'. In 'England 1819', the delineation of the shortcomings of the monarchy is more pictorial, more acute. This is to be seen in the first six lines of the poem. Shelley portrays the royal personages of England in 1819 as insensitive parasites that drain the economy of the state, to the detriment of the average person. The people starved and stabbed in the poem are analogous to the chimney sweepers of 'London'. The army is seen as a two-edged sword, reminding one of the hapless soldier in 'London'. And most importantly, the Church is the object of serious slur; something is fundamentally wrong about it – it is Christless and Godless. If it is not Christless and Godless in the real sense, it would not have children as chimney sweepers, as Blake has shown. In fact, Blake's 'London' and Shelley's 'England 1819' complement each other to a large extent. The two authors would not spare any institutionalism that belabours the masses.

Wordsworth was radical in his views of social reform. But he could not hold a candle to Blake or Shelley when it mattered most. He could not be as uncompromisingly scathing as the two. A Wordsworth could never write a 'Garden of Love' or an 'England 1819'. Perhaps such a pose would have denied him the office of poet laureate given to him in 1847. Blake and Shelley's uncompromising stance would only come from men who do not think of what they would gain from the state, comparable to Achebe's bold rejection of national honours in the midst of dust and dearth. It would only come from hardliners or men of strong principles. For in a way, Blake and Shelley were extremists. Or, better yet, they were quite ahead of their time, just like Hardy, seeing things only available to an intellectual coterie.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise**

Give an account of Blake's 'London' and Shelley's 'England 1819'

### 3.2 Wordsworth and Keats

Wordsworth and Keats share many things in common, though the one lived longer than the other. At least, they were bound together in that they were of the Romantic brand of intellectual consciousness. And Carstairs (1983) has been resourceful by remarking that Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale' is a perfect example of Wordsworth's definition of poetry as a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. 'Ode to a Nightingale' is Keats' poetic reaction to his encounter with the nightingale, just as 'The Solitary Reaper' is Wordsworth's spontaneous reaction to his having observed a rustic girl harvesting and singing all alone in the Highlands. In the two poems, the poets show a good measure of subjectivity towards the subjects that are both elements of external nature existing in a rustic locale. These two different elements of Nature as depicted in the poems are seen as living in a world different from the world of the immediate society: their world is that of purity, joyous and gay, and not that of "natural sorrow, loss or pain" or that of "leaden-eyed despairs". It is a world of the pacific and the gleeful. This is reinforced by the tone of idealization in the two poems.

Also important is the concept of egoism in the two poems. Many a Romantic poet had written poetry based on their personal life experiences. This idea binds the two poems together. In 'The Solitary Reaper', the poet – persona is the sole being aside from the rustic reaper. He observed and reports his observation, the poem ultimately rotating around the persona; and in 'Ode to a Nightingale' the poet – persona is the only human person, the entire human population of the landscape of the poem. This is highlighted in the use of the first person pronoun singular in the poem. Many other poems of Wordsworth are modeled on the concept of egoism. Examples of such poems include 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' and 'Lines Written in Early Spring'. Consider his pantheistic 'My Heart Leaps Up':

My heart leaps up when I behold  
A rainbow in the sky:  
So was it when my life began;  
So is it now I am a man;  
So be it when I shall grow old,  
Or let me die!  
The Child is father of the Man;  
And I could wish my days to be  
Bound each to each by natural piety.

The propelling stimulus that fans the passion behind the statements above is the persona's inner sense of awareness and desire for transcendentalism. Small wonder that Keats calls him "egotistical sublime". But the epithet is applicable to Keats himself too.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise**

In what ways does Keats' 'Ode to the Nightingale' resemble Wordsworth's 'The Solitary Reaper'?

### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

We have in this unit compared the works of Blake and Shelley; as well as those of Wordsworth and Keats. We have, in so doing, brought out the striking similarities in their works, both in the form of poetic composition and the content/theme.

### **5.0 SUMMARY**

Blake's 'London' and Shelley's 'England 1819' are poems of the Romantic extraction that turn the searchlight on the evils and decadence in western society especially as is depicted by government and the Church. The system of government, monarchy, was parasitic and insensitive to the plight of the citizenry. The two poems manifest the spirit of rebellion typical of the Romantic.

Wordsworth and Keats in their poems, 'The Solitary Reaper' and 'Ode to the West Wind' idealised Nature and portray poetry as a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.

### **6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

1. In what areas do the poetry of Blake and Shelley converge? (An essay is required).
2. Wordsworth and Keats share a degree of Romantic consciousness. Discuss.
3. Blake's 'London' and Shelley's 'England 1819' complement each other. Discuss.

### **7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING**

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## **UNIT 5 ROMANTIC FICTION/NOVEL**

### **CONTENT**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main content
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Reading

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Romanticism has come to be identified mainly on readings of the poetry of the period. However, some significant novels of this period are considered 'Romantic' in a similar way to much of its poetry because they embody the canon which the Romantic age comprises. These novels are grouped thematically, for instance, as:

- regional novels, such as those by Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson, which are set in Ireland, and those by Walter Scott, set in Scotland;
- fiction by women writers like Austen, Frances Burney, Edgeworth, Mary Shelley and others;



- novelists who engage with some of the political upheavals of the 1790s, such as William Godwin, Elizabeth Hamilton, Mary Hays, Thomas Holcroft and Mary Wollstonecraft.

The majority of novels written during this era share some thematic preoccupations, such as sensibility, nationalism, the Gothic, and the sublime, to an extent that is unique to the period. In this unit, we shall examine some of the Romantic writers and their thematic concerns.

## **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Identify novelists of the Romantic period as well as some of their works;
- Discuss the thematic concerns of Romantic fiction; and,
- Compare and contrast Romantic poets and authors in terms of their thematic preoccupations.

## **3.0 MAIN CONTENT**

In his comprehensive study, *English Fiction of the Romantic Period*, Gary Kelly (1989) attempts to characterise the Romantic novel in his description of Jane Austen as the ‘representative Romantic novelist’ as follows:

she deals superbly with the central thematic and formal issues of the novel of the period – the gentrification of the professional classes and the professionalization of the gentry, the place of women in a professionalized culture that denies them any significant role in public or professional life, the establishment of a ‘national’ culture of distinction and discrimination in the face of fashion and commercialised culture, the re-siting of the authentic self in an inward moral and intellectual being so cultivated as to be able to negotiate successfully the varieties of social experience and cultural discriminations, the establishment of a standard speech based on writing, and resolution of the relationship of authoritative narration and

detailed representation of subjective experience (19).

However, while this description fits many novels of the Romantic age, at least to some extent, the characteristics he lists contrast sharply with what he later refers to as “the central characteristics and achievements of Romantic poetry ... ‘intense, transcendent and reflexive subjectivity, supernatural naturalism and discursive self-consciousness’”(197). In a subsequent essay discussing ‘Romantic Fiction’, Kelly concludes by comparing these two versions of Romanticism, that of poetry and that of fiction, to imply that the predominant aims of the literature of the period were those of its novelists, whom he considers to have achieved as much or more than its poets in exploring domestic affections, local life, and national culture.

Many of the most influential and widely read fiction writers of the period include Austen, Burney, Edgeworth, Radcliffe, Scott, and Mary Shelley. These writers implicitly or overtly support the changes in British society stressing the importance of family life and rational judgement, and condemning the perceived ‘Romantic’ personality cultivated by many Romantic poets.

Relating the Romantic novel to a Romantic agenda set by poetry is somewhat difficult because during the period, especially in the 1780s and 1790s, the novel was not seen as high art in the way that poetry was, a perception that has lingered on in recent literary criticism. Coleridge, a regular reviewer of fiction for the *Critical Review*, satirised both fiction readers and fiction reading, wittily articulating a prevalent view of the novel as an adverse, if transient, mental and moral influence, and moreover a pointless waste of the reader’s time; he averred:

For as to the devotees of the circulating libraries, I dare not compliment their passtime, or rather killtime, with the name of reading. Call it rather a sort of beggarly day-dreaming, during which the mind of the dreamer furnishes for itself nothing but laziness and a little mawkish sensibility; ... this genus comprizes as its species, gaming, swinging, or swaying on a chair or gate; spitting over a bridge; smoking; snuff-taking ...(48).

While Coleridge’s attitude is fairly light-hearted, many other more conservative critics contemporary to him expressed serious moral criticism of the genre as a whole.**3.2 ROMANTIC FICTION AND REALISM**

Realism was, according to Margaret Anne Doody in *The True Story of the Novel*, 'new in the eighteenth century and dominant in the nineteenth' (294). She refers to it as 'prescriptive realism', suggesting that this constrained novelists to write only about what seems plausible or probable in everyday life. Yet sub-genres of fiction that resisted such realism abounded in the Romantic period: the Oriental tale, the Gothic novel, the 'historical romance', and science fiction. These works were, however, censured by contemporary critics both for their lack of realism and for their detrimental moral influence on the reader. A lack of realism, in the perception of some cultural arbiters, who included many literary reviewers and educational reformers as well as some novelists, could exacerbate an immoral influence on the readers of a particular work; and a novel's artistry was at that time assessed on the basis of its moral tendency as well as its formal and stylistic qualities. Any work that deviated from this consideration is condemned. The journal, *The British Critic* (which was funded by a Conservative government), for instance, condemned Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) in terms that linked its immorality and its unrealism:

Lust, murder, incest, and every atrocity that can disgrace human nature, brought together, without the apology of probability, or even possibility, for their introduction....(677)

Coleridge's negative assessment of Ann Radcliffe's novels in *The Critical Review* indicates that realism or plausibility in fiction had become an automatic expectation, although in his own poems he clearly does not aim to confine himself to what can be observed in real life.

It seems significant that Coleridge chose from among eighteenth-century novelists two of those whose works least resemble his own Romantic poetry, in order to imply that non-realism and the novel are best not mixed.

### 3.2 ROMANTIC NOVEL AND THE GOTHIC

Ann Radcliffe's Gothic novels have much in common with some Romantic poetry, such as Wordsworth's, especially in terms of the significance given to nature, the language of the picturesque and the sublime used to describe it, and the quasi-religious association attached to the beautiful and the terrifying in Nature. Radcliffe was a source of inspiration to several Romantic poets, including Keats, who referred to her as 'Mother Radcliffe' in a letter to George Keats (14 February 1819). In another letter to Reynolds (14 March 1818), he promises that

I am going among scenery whence I intend to tip you the Damosel Radcliffe – I'll cavern you, and

grotto you, and waterfall you, and wood you, and  
water you, and immense rock you, and tremendous  
sound you, and solitude you.

The second quoted letter suggests Radcliffe's status as a signifier for a whole set of generic conventions and motifs. Her fiction also influenced many novelists, including Jane Austen, who in *Northanger Abbey* satirises Radcliffe's hyperbolic language while also weaving elements of Radcliffe's plots into her own.

In Radcliffe's novels, a Romantic appreciation of Nature and a volatile emotional sensibility serve as a kind of moral index among her characters: heroines such as Adeline (*The Romance of the Forest*, 1791) and Emily St Aubert (*The Mysteries of Udolpho*, 1794), and idealised, benevolent paternal figures (M. St. Aubert and La Luc), share an almost debilitating emotional susceptibility to Nature, an appreciation which extends to its more threatening or terrifying manifestations, such as thunderstorms, as well as its beauties. Radcliffe's villains, evil aristocratic figures like Montoni and the Marquis de Montalt, are impervious to natural beauty; and the responses to Nature from her lower-class characters, servants or peasants, are limited to a caricatured patriotism, expressed in conventional and often erroneous terms (for instance, Adeline's servant, Peter, mistakes mountains for 'hills').

In Radcliffe's second novel, *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), a sublime landscape produces an enjoyable melancholy in Mme de Menon, which reciprocally enhances her perception of the landscape to an almost hallucinatory degree:

Fancy caught the thrilling sensation, and at her  
touch the towering steeps became shaded with  
unreal glooms; the caverns more darkly frowned –  
the projecting cliffs assumed a more terrific aspect,  
and the wild overhanging shrubs waved to the gale  
in deeper murmurs. The scene inspired Madame  
with reverential awe... (104)

In this passage, as elsewhere in Radcliffe's novels, Nature is implicitly represented as an earthly manifestation of the divine. Like Radcliffe, poets who make a similar use of Nature, such as Wordsworth or Keats, advocate an anti-rationalist, intuitive emotional response to Nature in order to grasp deeper truths about the world.

In Radcliffe's novels moreover, compassionate empathy with other human beings, as well as an appreciation for Nature, is an aesthetic experience as well as a virtue, in a way that is comparable to Wordsworth's poem 'The Wanderer', which aestheticizes an emotional

response to the hardship or sadness suffered by others. In Wordsworth's poetry, this heightened responsiveness to nature and to compassion is the preserve of certain privileged individuals, such as the Wanderer or the poet-narrator. Significantly, Radcliffe's sensitive heroines are also themselves poets, whose impromptu verses, interpolated into the novels, seem curiously unreflective of the heroines' predicaments, usually focusing instead on the landscape or on mythical situations – like Wordsworth's Wanderer and the poem's narrator, their poetic sensibility seems to preclude pragmatic action.

The Romantic qualities of Radcliffe's novels are inevitably suppressed at their conclusions, when Gothic and supernatural elements are dispelled, the villains justly punished, and the heroines sequestered in happy bourgeois marriages with tidy inherited fortunes to secure their futures. Radcliffe was, moreover, notorious among her contemporaries as a rationalizer of the supernatural in her novels, to a degree that some reviewers such as Coleridge found yet more implausible than the supernatural events themselves. In Radcliffe's novels, the presence of the supernatural is never altogether expelled, since it remains inscribed in the potential offered by nature for human contact with the divine.

Radcliffe's luminous descriptions of landscape were influenced by the paintings of the Italian artist Salvator Rosa (1615–73), whose works later came to epitomise the Romantic conception of the 'picturesque' as wild, rugged and asymmetrical, and Radcliffe refers the reader unironically to Salvator to emphasise particularly picturesque scenes in several of her novels.

### **3.4 THE ROMANTIC NOVEL AND THE SUBLIME**

Radcliffe also explicitly associates the highest forms of aesthetic pleasure with terror and horror, following Edmund Burke's concept of 'the sublime', as he influentially defined it in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756):

fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant with terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime (36).

In Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) for instance, the heroine, Adeline, wishes to experience the 'dreadful sublimity' of a thunderstorm in the mountains, albeit from a place of safety. The contemplation of a picturesque or sublime spectacle is often associated in Radcliffe's novels both with melancholic reverie and with a pleasure akin to religious ecstasy, in a way that is typical of many other popular

and influential works of this era, including Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) and Wordsworth's *Prelude* (composed 1798?-1850, first published 1850). In Goethe's fiction, as in Radcliffe's, susceptibility to Nature and to melancholy are presented as virtues. In *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Werther's acute enjoyment of walking in the mountains at the start of the novel is one of his most endearing characteristics, while his growing nihilism later on corresponds to his increasing inability to respond to Nature.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise**

Discuss the themes of realism, the Gothic and the sublime as portrayed by Romantic novelists

## **3.5.0 SOME ROMANTIC NOVELISTS AND THEIR THEMATIC PREOCCUPATIONS**

### **3.5.1 Mary Wollstonecraft**

Many novels, as well as poems of the Romantic period, especially those written during the 1790s, manifest the conflict between conservative and radical politics in Britain that escalated following the French Revolution in 1789. The two intellectual standpoints were in many ways epitomised by the sentimental conservatism of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), on the one hand, and the rationalism and political radicalism (or 'Jacobinism') of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* and Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* on the other. Even novels without an overt political agenda participate in this debate – for instance, although Radcliffe makes use of Burke's earlier ideas on the sublime, she questions and subverts the chivalric code and the location of authority within the aristocracy that Burke defends in his *Reflections*. The latter work contained a warm advocacy of a society that is based not on a rationally devised constitution guaranteeing equal rights, but rather on uncritical respect for monarchical power and an unspoken chivalric code. Burke re-appropriates the term 'prejudice' and gives it a positive gloss, and conversely denigrates 'reason' and 'enlightenment' (183).

One of the first published ripostes to Burke's polemic was Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), in which she directly attacked Burke's privileging of sensibility and sentiment over reason. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) she criticized this at greater length, particularly emphasizing the detrimental effects for women of his advocacy of chivalry and sentiment, an issue against which she had already protested in her first fictional work, *Mary*

(1788). In the first chapter of this novel, she parodies the kind of sentimental novels that encourage sensibility in their female readers:

If my readers would excuse the sportiveness of fancy and give me credit for genius, I would go on and tell them such tales as would force the sweet tears of sensibility to flow in copious showers down beautiful cheeks, to the discomposure of rouge etc. etc. (4).

A special kind of sensibility is, however, championed as a virtue in her eponymous heroine of *Mary*:

sensibility is the most exquisite feeling of which the human soul is susceptible: when it pervades us, we feel happy; and could it last unmixed, we might form some conjecture of the bliss of those paradisiacal days, when the obedient passions were under the dominion of reason, and the impulse of the heart did not need correction (6).

Wollstonecraft here links sensibility with reason and well-disciplined emotions, as opposed to ‘passions’, so that her seeming ambivalence towards sensibility is nonetheless self-consistent, and, in *Mary* as well as in her non-fiction, she makes a distinction between feelings that are ‘artless’ and ‘unaffected’, as opposed to those that are artificially cultivated. In Wollstonecraft’s unfinished second novel, *The Wrongs of Woman, or, Maria* (published posthumously in 1798), the heroine’s sensibility is portrayed as both a virtue and a liability in its excess, which is fostered in middle class women by the limitations of their education. In this novel, Wollstonecraft re-appropriates a familiar Gothic motif, which opens with her heroine confined in a madhouse by a scheming villain, but reverses generic expectations with the revelation that the villain is Maria’s husband, and that this horror takes place in middle-class England. Even more subversively, Wollstonecraft defends the right of a woman thus occasioned by circumstance to look outside of her marriage for love. In both of her novels, she condemns a society in which, as she saw it, intelligent, sensitive women could be freely abused by men and were prevented from seeking fulfilment through other channels.

### 3.5.2 William Godwin

William Godwin’s philosophical treatise, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), was one of the most significant polemics to be written following the French Revolution and in reaction against Burke’s *Reflections*. The brand of rationalist idealism advocated in *Political*

*Justice* influenced Wordsworth and Coleridge as well as overt radicals such as Wollstonecraft in the 1790s, and also inspired a later generation of writers, including Mary and Percy Shelley, the daughter and son-in-law of Godwin and Wollstonecraft. In his first novel, *Things as they Are, or the Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794), Godwin sought to express his critique of society, outlined in *Political Justice*, through the powerful medium of fiction, through which he hoped to reach a wider readership than he had with his political treatise, since novels were rapidly gaining a mass readership and could be rented cheaply from circulating libraries. In his 1794 preface to the novel, Godwin stated its potentially inflammatory purpose:

It is now known to philosophers, that the spirit and character of the government intrudes itself into every rank of society. But this is a truth highly worthy to be communicated to persons whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach. Accordingly it was proposed, in the invention of the following work, to comprehend ... a general review of the modes of domestic and unrecorded despotism by which man becomes the destroyer of man (3).

Almost 40 years later, in his preface to the 1832 edition, Godwin focused instead, on the psychological genesis of the novel, and de-emphasised the political message set out in the 1794 preface. By 1832, Godwin perhaps realised that his novel was dominated by its suspenseful plot, and this made the novel seem too sensational to be read as a realistic portrayal of 'domestic despotism'.

In order to serve as an exposé of 'things as they are', or at least to explore the ramifications of an extreme abuse of existing social institutions and power structures, Godwin's characters and situations need to seem 'socially typical, the consequence of systemic injustice' (Kelly, 1989). But Godwin closes off the possibility of perceiving either the narrator, Caleb, or the aristocratic anti-hero, Falkland, as representatives of their respective social classes, since the atypical characteristics and abilities of both men are emphasised throughout the novel. Both men are obsessive, Caleb with satisfying his 'curiosity', Falkland with his 'reputation', and both, ultimately, with each other. Falkland is a talented poet and conversationalist, the perfect cultivated patrician, while Caleb has seemingly inexhaustible talents, acting over the course of the novel as secretary, librarian, journalist, teacher of Geography and Mathematics, carpenter and watchmaker, and disguising himself variously as a tramp, an Irishman and a Jew. The ending of the novel seems strangely ambivalent, if the novel is to be interpreted as a



social critique; Falkland's tyrannous abuse of power does not prevail, but this is because Caleb confronts him and he confesses to his previous crimes – in other words, his unjust persecution of Caleb comes to an end because of personal individual acts, rather than because of the workings of social justice.

Godwin's portrayal of Falkland's obsession with honour and reputation as the originating cause of the evils of despotism in the novel can nevertheless be read as a critique of Burke's idea that English society is best as it is, based on a foundation of supposedly traditional chivalry and 'prejudice'. Caleb criticises Falkland's hypocritical adherence to a notion of chivalry that has motivated him to kill and lie, against his other principles, in order to preserve his 'honour' – an honour that consists more in reputation, or the preservation of his 'good name', than in genuine virtue. Yet Caleb, too, is concerned to protect his own 'good name' and reputation, although he never admits this to be common ground between himself and Falkland. Caleb's self-analysis seems inconsistent in another revealing way, since, although he insists on the 'innocence' of the curiosity that leads him to 'spy on' his master Falkland, he seems to extract a sadistic pleasure from the power he wields over him. And, while Caleb announces himself at the start of the novel as the victim of persecution, for the first volume he appears to be the persecutor and Falkland the victim, although these roles are reversed for most of the latter two volumes. Godwin at several points describes the pleasure Caleb takes in the sensation of fear combined with illicit power which he experiences while spying on Falkland, in a way that corresponds to the Burkean sublime, as a tingling sensation which fills him with extraordinary energy.

In *Caleb Williams*, Godwin reprises a number of conventional Gothic motifs and settings: dark secrets, despotic tyrants, imprisonment, and pursuit in gloomy ancestral estates, dark dungeons and wild landscapes – and, like many Gothic novels, *Caleb Williams* explores 'the nature of power, the source of its authority in the oppressive past' (Robertson, 1999). However, the way in which these Gothic tropes are deployed is often atypical of Gothic novels, since they are *not* located in a Roman Catholic or continental past, but in contemporary England, and this reversal of Gothic convention can make for trenchant social criticism. The description of Caleb's 'dungeon' is based upon Godwin's observation of prisons he had actually visited, since several of his friends had been arrested while he was writing the novel, and many others were imprisoned in cells resembling Caleb's dungeon:

Our dungeons were cells, 7/4 feet by 6/4, below the surface of the ground, damp, without window, light or air, except from a few holes worked for that

purpose in the door. In some of these miserable receptacles three persons were put to sleep together (187-8).

This reverses a number of Gothic conventions: first, Godwin is very precise in describing the cell, including its dimensions to the nearest six inches, a specificity which resists the Gothic tendency to describe in terms such as ‘indescribable’; second, the language is the reverse of Gothic hyperbole, and most of the salient details are given by negatives (‘without window, light or air’); and third, whereas Gothic novels usually locate their dungeons in the safely remote world of medieval continental Europe, Godwin is describing the uncomfortable reality of such horrors in modern England, leading to the disconcerting likening of English prisons. At times, Godwin achieves an Austen type of understatement quite unlike the excessive emotional language typical of Gothic fiction:

When Caleb has just escaped his prison, and is forced to spend a day standing concealed in a shallow cavern to evade detection by his erstwhile guards, the perilous situation and his state of hunger and exhaustion are described as productive of no very agreeable sensations (216)

However, the hyperbolic language of Caleb’s paranoia – for instance, he eventually starts to believe that Falkland is omniscient – became Godwin’s most lasting contribution to Gothic fiction, influencing writers such as his daughter, Mary Shelley, and the American Gothic novelist, Charles Brockden Brown.

### **3.5.3 Mary Edgeworth, Sydney Owenson and Walter Scott**

Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* (1800), Sydney Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale* (1806), and many of Scott’s novels (1814 onwards) are all usually linked under the banner of the ‘regional novel’, as all three share an interest in representing and valourizing recent or passing cultures that were perceived to be ‘other’ than English within the newly united Britain. (The Act of Union between England and Scotland was passed in 1707, and that between Britain and Ireland in 1800.) All three novelists differ from one another in the degree to which they realistically specify the society and individualise the inhabitants of the regions they describe. Owenson’s novel is overtly pro-Irish, and romanticizes the landscape and the people, whereas Edgeworth satirically exposes both a decaying Irish feudal system in *Castle Rackrent* and also the abuses of the Irish by their English landlords and their corrupt bailiffs in *The Absentee*. Scott treads a kind

of middle ground in his Scottish novels, where the past is alternatively a site of nostalgia or social criticism. However, the three novelists ultimately seem to advocate a conciliatory approach to the divisions and differences between England and the 'regions' of Scotland and Ireland: Owenson concludes his novel with a symbolic Anglo-Irish union, in the marriage between the dispossessed Irish princess, Glorvina, and the narrator, who is the English heir to her family's former lands. Scott similarly ends *Waverley* with a marriage between the English hero, Edward Waverley, and Rose Bradwardine, the daughter of the old-style Scottish laird. Edgeworth, in her 'Irish' novels, tends to idealize by contrast, a course of action similar to that taken by her own Anglo-Irish landowning family, who lived on and managed their property, and were accepted and even liked by their Irish tenants.

In both *The Wild Irish Girl* and *Waverley*, Ireland and Scotland are portrayed as seen for the first time by young, aristocratic Englishmen, who fall in love with beautiful, musical, patriotic native heroines, as well as with the country itself. In both novels, a central feature of the novel's landscape is the Gothic convention of the ancient castle, in surroundings described in highly wrought language, and in terms of the picturesque and the sublime – and these other worldly settings contribute to the 'otherness' of the scene for both English hero and English readers. Owenson heightens the hero's first glimpse of the heroine, the Irish princess Glorvina, by linking it with his awe at the sublimity of the landscape:

To the hero, 'all still seemed the vision of awakened imagination – surrounded by a scenery, grand even to the boldest majesty of nature, and wild even to desolation'. His newly awakened sentimental appreciation for landscape is contrasted with his former life of cynical leisure in England, which he learns, through Glorvina and Ireland, to perceive as consisting of 'hackneyed modes', 'vicious pursuits' and 'unimportant avocations'(156-7).

Scott describes Waverley, coming across Flora as she gazes on a waterfall, in a way that similarly links the hero's appreciation of the natural sublime with his appreciation of Flora's beauty, and thus, associates his love with the element of danger or pain present in the landscape:

At a short turning, the path, which had for some furlongs lost sight of the brook, suddenly placed Waverley in front of a romantic water-fall. ... After

a broken cataract of about twenty feet, the stream was received in a large natural basin. ... Eddying round this reservoir, the brook found its way as if over a broken part of the ledge, and formed a second fall, which seemed to seek the very abyss ... (123).

However, whereas *The Wild Irish Girl* is, as a whole, enthusiastically and even naively romantic, about both Ireland and love, in *Waverley* Scott deconstructs the hero's patriotic and romantic idealism. The hero of *The Wild Irish Girl*, Horatio, begins the novel as a cynical louche jaded by society, and experiences an emotional reawakening through his encounter with both the heroine and the landscape. In *Waverley*, on the other hand, Edward Waverley is full of romantic illusions at the outset of the novel, but through his encounter with Flora McIvor and her brother, and his involvement in their political and military campaign, he loses some of this idealism, and by the end of the novel he is sequestered in happy bourgeois marriage to the less glamorous second heroine Rose Bradwardine. His idealistic aspirations and romantic illusions are treated ironically throughout the novel. Following Waverley's encounter with Flora at the waterfall, Scott describes, in terms of approbation, Flora's pragmatic and rather un-romantic reaction to Waverley's evident admiration:

Flora, like every beautiful woman, was conscious of her own power, and pleased with its effects, which she could easily discern from the respectful, yet confused address of the young soldier. But as she possessed excellent sense, she gave the romance of the scene, and other accidental circumstances, full weight in appreciating the feelings with which Waverley seemed obviously to be impressed (105-6).

Scott's later novel, *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818), a hybrid of historical realism and romantic fable, is yet more deconstructive of the Romantic personality. Whereas Waverley's romantic leanings signify merely his immaturity, in *The Heart of Midlothian*, the anti-hero George Staunton's quasi-Byronic 'Romantic temperament' is signalled by his volatility, melancholia, and self-dramatizing language and gestures, and is a cause of disruption and danger to other characters. The heroine, Jeanie Deans, distrusts Staunton, and her character could be described as the opposite of his – placid, honest, self-disciplined, and religious.

#### **3.5.4 Frances Burney and Jane Austen**

Austen, like Scott, frequently ironizes and undercuts Romantic sensibilities and character traits in her fiction, and in novels such as *Sense and Sensibility*, (1811) *Mansfield Park*, (1814) and *Persuasion* (1819) she vindicates characters who practise self-control and adhere to social codes. However, although the ‘excessive’ (and partly self-cultivated) emotionalism of Marianne Dashwood is suspect, heroines such as Fanny and Anne, and even Marianne’s counterpoint Elinor, are in their own way equally sensitive. In Austen’s fiction, a lot of value is accorded to authentic subjective feeling, while artificiality, sentimentalism, or pursuit of emotional desire, to the exclusion of concern for others, are represented as being both risible and harmful.

The representation of the ‘authentic’ inner self and the emphasis on its value are central concerns in much fiction and poetry of the Romantic era, and in many novels the ‘action’ and plot are determined by the portrayal of the inner life and subjectivity of the central character, usually a heroine, as women were seen as being especially sensitive, and were, moreover, restricted to a largely ‘private’ life by societal constraints. Thus, the field of action for many heroines of this era lies in their power to make correct choices in a moral or emotional sphere. Frances Burney’s novelistic career spans a large part of the period under discussion: her first novel, *Evelina*, was published in 1788, and her last, *The Wanderer*, in 1814. Like Austen (on whom she was a significant influence), she portrays the inner or ‘moral’ life of her heroines as the gauge of their merit, in resistance to superficial or meretricious standards of female worth imposed by their social peers, such as beauty, wealth, or ‘accomplishments’. The heroine’s ‘true’ worth is, in these novels, a way of ultimately triumphing over the judgements and restrictions imposed on them by their immediate society, in order to win the love (and sometimes also the money) of the hero. This can be seen as a manifestation of one major strand of Romantic idealism, the privileging of the ‘true’ inner self over the ‘social’ persona that interacts in society.

This plot structure, however, had been an important strand in a novelistic tradition since Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), in which the intrinsic merit and idealism of a servant girl, who resists several violent attempts to corrupt her ‘virtue’, eventually triumphs over worldly pressure and wins marriage to her would-be rapist, as well as access to his wealth. Burney’s first novel, *Evelina*, which charts the progress of its naive but intelligent and beautiful heroine from her uncertain ‘Entrance into the World’ (the novel’s sub-title) to marriage, wealth, and legitimacy, is further associated with this tradition by its epistolary form, which facilitates the direct expression of the heroine’s private thoughts. Burney’s second novel, *Cecilia* (1782), follows a roughly similar plot trajectory, except that the heroine’s trials are greater, and,

instead of gaining a fortune by marriage, she begins the novel an heiress but loses her fortune by the end of the novel. In this novel, Burney leaves the epistolary form, but nonetheless maintains the reader's intimacy with the heroine's inner life through what has come to be termed 'free indirect discourse', that is, the reporting of a character's thoughts in the language that we associate with their character rather than in the narrator's voice.

As Kelly (1985) points out, 'the use of 'free indirect discourse' by novelists from Burney onwards invited readers to identify strongly with the hero or heroine, as well as, briefly, with other characters' (102). This method of revealing a character's mental processes usually gives the reader an even greater sense of psychological authenticity, since thoughts are reported 'directly' and are not filtered through a character's self-conscious story-telling persona, as would be the case with a first-person narrative.

Austen is known to have been an admirer of Burney's novels. Austen's name appears on the list of subscribers to *Camilla* (1796), and she cites both *Cecilia* (1782) and *Camilla* in *Northanger Abbey* as great works of fiction. Burney's final novel, *The Wanderer* (1814), was published in the same year as Austen's *Mansfield Park*. These later novels by Austen and Burney are less comic than their earlier works, and their respective later heroines are more Romantically idealistic and appreciative of Nature. As Margaret Ann Doody (1988) points out in *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works*, the title of Burney's *The Wanderer* (1814) refers to 'the truly Romantic figure', along side Wordsworth's 'Wanderer', Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner', and Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). Doody analyses Burney's description of Juliet wandering on Salisbury Plain, where she meditates on her life, and contrasts the 'sophisticated civilization represented by Wilton', the town where Juliet has been staying, and the 'grand, strange and primitive', represented by Stonehenge, in a way that trivializes the former in comparison with the latter. Juliet's loneliness is emphasised in this situation, which adequately reflects the alienation she experiences in daily life, because she is happier here than she is in most human company. However, the novel's co-heroine manqué, Elinor, seems almost a parody of the Romantic pursuit of self-realisation, personal happiness, and radical political ideals. Although she is not self-satisfied or uncharitable, as are most of the novel's other characters, the kindness she shows Juliet is generated more by egotism than altruism.

Burney, however, is pragmatically realistic in her concentration on hours, pay and conditions for working women, and she extends the social criticism in *Cecilia* (1782) – in which the heroine befriends a builder's wife, Mrs Hill – by making Juliet of *The Wanderer* earn her

own living out of necessity, first by teaching music and then as a seamstress. Both types of employment gave Burney the opportunity to represent the many ways in which the rich are complacent, insensitive and cruel to the poor and dependent, as well as revealing the relentless drudgery of normal working conditions for working women.

Austen's two most obviously 'serious' novels, *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Persuasion* (1818), describe sensitive, introspective heroines, the characterisation of whom could be seen as somewhat akin to constructions of selfhood in Romantic poetry. Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* displays, at times, a Wordsworthian appreciation of Nature and solitary contemplation, and meditates aloud on the wonders of Nature and memory to an unappreciative Mary Crawford. In many other ways, however, Austen appears not to endorse such poetically 'Romantic' states of mind. In *Mansfield Park*, the concept of 'propriety' is given a strong positive emphasis, and both this word and its antonym, 'impropriety', are used frequently and significantly – an emphasis that suggests the importance of self-control and conformity in one's outward behaviour to societal norms. This form of discipline is antithetical to the Romantic 'cult of the self' which privileges individual desire. The novel thus, presents a conflict for the heroine as well as other characters between the benefits of expressing or acting on one's feelings and opinions and the benefits of controlling them, a conflict that is also played out in Austen's earlier novel, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). Austen ultimately resolves this conflict by placing Fanny in a position where it is acceptable for her to express herself – as Edmund's wife and equal and also as the moral superior to the figure of male authority who remains at Mansfield, Sir Thomas. However, she has been able to achieve this position not only simply because her superiority has at last been recognised but also because of her self-control during most of the novel – indeed, her self-control and self-abnegation are necessary to her superiority.

The relevance to Romantic poetry of Austen's portrayal of the conflict between self-expression and self-control is made explicit in *Persuasion*, during a scene in which the heroine, Anne Elliott, recommends that Captain Benwick, who has recently been bereaved of his fiancée, read instructive essays rather than Romantic poetry in order not to exacerbate his grief:

He repeated, with such deep feeling, the various lines which imaged a broken heart, or a mind destroyed by wretchedness, and looked so entirely as if he meant to be understood, that she ventured to hope he did not always read only poetry; and to say, that she thought it was the misfortune of

poetry, to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely; and that the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly, were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly. ... she ventured to recommend ... such works of our best moralists, such collections of the finest letters, such memoirs of characters of worth and suffering, as occurred to her at the moment as calculated to rouse and fortify the mind by the highest precepts, and the strongest examples of moral and religious endurances (121-2).

Ironically, later in the novel, Benwick comes to epitomize male inconstancy, and is cited as an example of this in a later conversation between Anne and Captain Harville (whose sister had been Benwick's fiancée) after Benwick rapidly recovers his broken heart and gets engaged to the shallow Louisa Musgrove. Austen's negative characterisation of Benwick's emotional volatility reflects her attitude to his reading matter, Romantic poetry, which, it is implied, encourages him to prolong a grief that is more pleasurable than sincere.

Austen's earlier fiction is also in many ways a satirical antidote to the preoccupations of Romantic literature. Beginning in her juvenilia in the 1790s, Austen mercilessly parodies novelistic portrayals of sensibility, and then goes on in *Northanger Abbey* to target the un-realism and sensationalism of Gothic fiction, although, as many recent critics have pointed out, Catherine's intuitive perception of General Tilney as a Gothic villain is to some extent justified by the cruelty of his subsequent behaviour towards her. Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) is Austen's most Romantic heroine, with a propensity for violent emotion and a desire for emotional expression and fulfilment at all costs, yet she is taught that such behaviour can be self-destructive and also have negative consequences for those around her. However, Austen's satire of Marianne is directed toward the manner in which Marianne seeks emotional fulfilment, and does not denigrate this as an aim in itself. Her characterisation of Elinor represents an alternative and more pragmatic possibility for realizing this goal, rather than a championing of 'sense' as a kind of cold reason that precludes intense feeling.

### 3.5.5 Mary Shelley

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) also engages with the central conflict present in Austen's novels, between the relative value of restraining or pursuing individual desire. In spite of its fantastic story and poetic prose, in *Frankenstein* Shelley seems to advocate a vision of rational domestic harmony similar to that which triumphs at the end of



Austen's novels, and constructs this vision as oppositional to the Romantic ambitions that lead to the creation of the monster.

Like many Romantic novels and poems, *Frankenstein* contains intense, lyrical descriptions of sublime landscapes and sensations, such as that of Frankenstein's walk to the summit of Montanvert:

It is a scene terrifically desolate. In a thousand spots the traces of the winter avalanche may be perceived, where trees lie broken and strewed on the ground; some entirely destroyed, others bent, leaning upon the jutting rocks of the mountain, or transversely upon other trees.... The sea, or rather the vast river of ice, wound among its dependent mountains, whose aerial summits hung over its recesses. Their icy and glittering peaks shone in the sunlight over the clouds. My heart, which was before sorrowful, now swelled with something like joy (64-5).

However, this description and others like it, jar with the natural sublimity represented in many other Romantic works: this is a vision of destruction and barrenness, yet paradoxically it fills Frankenstein with 'something like joy', reflecting his estrangement from more natural sources of pleasure. Later, when Frankenstein is on the Rhine with Henry Clerval, he is unable to enjoy the lush scenery that delights his companion. The omnipresence of ice here is a re-echoing of the desolate arctic scenes at the start and end of the novel, with which the monster is strongly associated.

Mary Shelley also, in this scene, suggests the transience of an emotion inspired by the merely visual, since Frankenstein is immediately cast back into despair by an encounter with his monster. The monster usually reappears in overtly sublime landscapes; indeed he says that he can live happily among the glaciers, although humans cannot. This link between the natural sublime and the monster implies a connection between the celebration of Nature and sublimity by the Romantic poets and the inhumanity of the monster.

Frankenstein's hubristic act of creation can be read as a critique of the egotism of poetic creation. While obsessively engaged in his work of building the monster and giving it life, Frankenstein cuts himself off from his family and from all other kinds of human affection. In the retrospective frame narrative of the opening chapters, Frankenstein reflects with hindsight that:

A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquility. I do not think the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule. If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections, and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind (32).

‘Unlawful’ and ‘not befitting the human mind’ are very strong terms, effectively imposing a taboo upon knowledge or desire beyond the confines of ‘simple pleasures’ and domestic affections.

Mary Shelley sub-titled the novel, *The Modern Prometheus*, inviting a reading of her novel as a critique of her husband’s Romantic self-image. According to Anne K. Mellor (1988), Prometheus was ‘an often invoked self-image among the Romantic poets’ – in ‘Prometheus Unbound’ by Percy Bysshe Shelley, as well as in poems by Blake, Coleridge, and Byron. In one version of the myth, Prometheus shaped the first man, and later the first woman, out of clay. Mellor also points out that in choosing the name, ‘Victor’, Mary Shelley was referring readers who were familiar with her husband’s work to Percy Shelley himself – Victor was an early pseudonym of his, and in his poetry, Shelley frequently uses the words ‘victor’ and ‘victory’. Mellor goes on to draw attention to numerous other similarities between Frankenstein and the actual Percy Shelley.

Like Victor Frankenstein, the Romantic poets invoked in their writing the potential for immortality through the use of their intellect and imagination, although for Frankenstein the product of his mind is to be an entire race and not just art. Far from achieving for Victor the immortality he craves, the creature destroys his peace of mind and eventually his family. This destruction results, more or less directly, from Victor’s abandonment of his creation at the moment of ‘birth’; the creature claims to have been born ‘benevolent and good’ and that he was only made a ‘fiend’ by lack of affection. In demonstrating how this corruption came about, Mary Shelley echoes Rousseau’s idea that humans are innately good but can be corrupted by society and bad education, and thus, suggests that reason and imagination, without appropriate guidance, are insufficient to create happiness or moral good.

While Mary Shelley condemns Frankenstein’s egotistical acts of solitary creation, she conversely advocates bourgeois family life and ‘the domestic affections’ as the means of achieving happiness and futurity,

through the conventional and legitimate method of conjugal procreation. The character of Clerval, Frankenstein's friend and alter ego, is an idealization of the cultivated middle-class man, and he is also remarkably self-sacrificing: for instance, he nurses Frankenstein through a long illness even though this deprives him of benefiting from his stay at the university. In contrast with Clerval, Frankenstein pursues his thirst for knowledge and greatness at the expense of his family and friends, forgetting them for months at a time while pursuing his overriding obsession into 'charnel houses' and graves for body parts. Before his monster has been created, Frankenstein himself has come to seem monstrous.

The dialectic Mary Shelley sets up between bourgeois family values and Romantic idealism is central to many novels of the Romantic era; and in most fiction, the advocacy of domesticity over free pursuit of desire seems to mark a key difference between the agendas of novelists and poets. As suggested at the beginning of this unit, Gary Kelly's re-defined characterisation of the 'Romantic' novel, which he sees as emphasising the worth of everyday, middle-class family life, is oppositional to the kind of Romantic poetry that seeks to put into words the transcendence of the self over everyday matters.

### **Self-Assessment Exercise**

- i. Mention any four Romantic novelists you know.
- ii. Mention any two works associated with each of the novelists mentioned above.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

In this unit, we have tried to bring out the spirit of Romanticism that runs through some Romantic fiction/novel. These novels as we have seen, are grouped thematically, as those set in a particular region, such as written by Edgeworth, Owenson and Scott; those written by women writers such as Austen, Frances, Shelley, Edgeworth, etc; and those that focus on the political upheavals of 1790s such as Wollstonecraft. We have shown that the majority of these novels have such thematic preoccupation such as sensibility, nationalism, the Gothic and the sublime.

## **5.0 SUMMARY**

The Gothic elements that are prevalent in much of the fiction of the Romantic period, and the outright fantastic number of Gothic novels, seem something of an aberration from the 'realism' that is generally said to characterise much of mid-eighteenth-century and Victorian fiction, and Gothic characteristics do seem to denote a kinship with

similar features in the poetry of the period. On the other hand, many novels that contain elements of Gothic fantasy nevertheless, conclude with happy marriages that seem to valorise bourgeois society and domesticity. The exceptional Romantic-era novels that do not end in this way, such as Beckford's *Vathek*, Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, Lewis's *The Monk*, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, and Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, are usually dominated by a male hero or anti-hero who overreaches himself and tends to collapse into self-destruction or eternal damnation, which in a sense also valorises marriage and domesticity by way of contrast. Wollstonecraft posed two radical alternatives to this pattern. Her first heroine, in *Mary*, is left at the end of the novel trapped in an unconsummated marriage to an absent and inadequate husband. Wollstonecraft's second novel, *Maria*, was left unfinished at her death, but her draft endings show that she had contemplated concluding with either the heroine's suicide or the establishment of an all-female family consisting of Maria, her daughter, and Jemima, the working-class woman who befriends Maria while she is confined in a madhouse.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

3. Discuss any three thematic preoccupations of Romantic novelists.
4. What are the contributions of the following to the spirit of Romanticism:
  - a. Walter Scott
  - b. Jane Austen
  - c. Mary Shelley
  - d. William Godwin

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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