

LECTURE 12

Theme: The Romantic Movement

Plan: The Lake Poets (Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey).
George Gordon Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Their creative activity.
Walter Scott. His life and work.

Romanticism is the name given to a dominant movement in literature and the other arts – particularly music and painting – in the the period from the 1770s to the mid-nineteenth century:

- it is regarded as having transformed artistic styles and practices
- like many other terms applied to movements in the arts, the word covers a wide and varied range of artists and practices
- it is a retrospective term, applied by later literary, art and musical historians. None of the artists we refer to as Romantics would have so described themselves
- it was a European phenomenon, particularly powerful in Britain, France and Germany, but also affecting countries such as Italy, Spain and Poland. There was also, to some extent, an American version of the movement.

Reaction to earlier age

Like many other literary movements, it developed in reaction to the dominant style of the preceding period:

- the eighteenth century is often described by literary historians as the Augustan Age because it sought to emulate the culture of the reign of the Roman Emperor Augustus (27 BCE – 14CE)
- classical standards of order, harmony, proportion and objectivity were preferred – the period saw a revival of interest in classical architecture, for instance
- in literature, Greek and Roman authors were taken as models and many eighteenth writers either translated or produced imitations of poetry in classical forms
- in its early years, Romanticism was associated with radical and revolutionary political ideologies, again in reaction against the generally conservative mood of European society.

Central features of Romanticism include:

- an emphasis on emotional and imaginative spontaneity
- the importance of self-expression and individual feeling
- an almost religious response to nature
- a capacity for wonder and consequently a reverence for the freshness and innocence of the vision of childhood
- emphasis on the imagination as a positive and creative faculty
- an interest in 'primitive' forms of art– for instance in the work of early poets (bards), in ancient ballads and folksongs

- an interest in and concern for the outcasts of society: tramps, beggars, obsessive characters and the poor and disregarded are especially evident in Romantic poetry
- an idea of the poet as a visionary figure, with an important role to play as prophet (in both political and religious terms).

Who were the Romantics?

- some authors have been regarded as pre-Romantic
 - William Blake (1757-1827) a visionary poet who was also an artist and engraver, with a particular interest in childhood and a strong hatred of mechanical reason and industrialisation;
 - Robert Burns (1759-1796) who worked as a ploughman and farm labourer but who had received a good education and was interested in early Scots ballads and folk-song;
 - Walter Scott (1771-1832), another Scot, who developed his interest in old tales of the Border and early European poetry into a career as poet and novelist.
- the first generation of Romantics is also known as the Lake Poets because of their attachment to the Lake District in the north-west of England:
 - William Wordsworth (1770-1850) who came from the Lake District and was the leading poet of the group, whose work was especially associated with the centrality of the self and the love of nature;
 - Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) was Wordsworth's closest colleague and collaborator, a powerful intellectual whose work is often influenced by contemporary ideas about science and philosophy;
 - Robert Southey (1774-1843), a prolific writer of poetry and prose who settled in the Lake District and became Poet Laureate in 1813; his work was later mocked by Byron;
 - Charles Lamb (1775-1834) was a poet but is best-known for his essays and literary criticism; a Londoner, he was especially close to Coleridge;
 - Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859) the youngest member of the group, best known as an essayist and critic, who wrote a series of memories of the Lake Poets.

Links with Mary Shelley

- Mary Shelley met some of these figures – notably Coleridge, Lamb and de Quincey – as a child and young woman in her father's house. She was, however, most closely associated with the second generation of Romantic poets:
 - George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) are dealt with elsewhere in this guide
 - John Keats (1795-1821) was a London poet, especially known for his odes and sonnets and for his letters, which contain many reflections on poetry and the work of the imagination.

- the poets named so far are those who for many years dominated the Romantic canon – that group of writers whose works were most commonly republished, read, anthologised, written about and taught in schools, colleges and universities
- more recently, however, a revised Romantic canon has begun to emerge, which lays more emphasis on women, working-class and politically radical writers of the period:
 - work by these writers can be found in two anthologies, both with useful introductions discussing the justification for extending the canon in this way:
 - Duncan Wu. *Romanticism: an Anthology*. 3rd edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005;
 - Jerome J. McGann. *The New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

George Gordon Byron

Life

- George Gordon Byron is an unconventional aristocrat and to many of his contemporaries, Byron's poetry and life embodied the romantic spirit.
- Though rich and handsome, he had a handicap that consisted in a deformed foot and because of this he lacked a happy childhood. However, as a student at Cambridge University, he not only drank, gambled and made brilliant conversations but he forces himself to become skilled at physical sports.
- In 1807 he published *Hours of Idleness*, a small volume of lyric poems which was attacked in the pages of the *Edinburgh Review*; Byron replied with *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, where he showed his taste for satire.
- In 1809 he set out on his Grand Tour, visiting Portugal, Spain, Malta, Albania, Greece and the Middle East, where he gathered the experiences that inspired the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, which he published after his return to England in 1812. The cantos were so successful that he became a literary and social celebrity, even because of his extravagant, fascinating, dissolute, unconventional, nonconformist, brilliant and original personality. He had a great reputation because of his works dealing with exotic settings and foreign customs.
- In 1815 Byron married Annabella Milbanke but it lasted one year due to Byron's incestuous relationship given that he believed in free love.
- Because of this public scandal and because of his debts he decided to self-exile, even because he saw England as a limitation. He then travelled among Europe and strongly believed in nationalistic changes and supported nations for their independence. He first moved to Geneva, where he became close friend of Percy Bysshe Shelley and wrote the third canto of *Childe Harold*. He then moved to Venice, where he produced the tragedy *Manfred*, the fourth and last canto of *Childe Harold*, the heroic poem *Beppo* and his epic masterpiece *Don Juan*. In 1819 he moved to Milan where he participated to patriotic plots against Austrian rule; eventually he moved to Pisa to join Shelley.

After Shelley's death he decided to commit himself to Greek struggle of independence from Turkey. He organised an expedition and devoted himself to training troops in Missolonghi, where he died in 1824 due to a severe fever.

- Byron firmly believed in individual liberty and wanted to be himself anywhere and at any time; he also wished all men to be free and so went to fight against tyrants. The general foreground of his works is an isolated man whose feelings are reflected by and identified with exotic and wild natural landscapes.
- Byron criticised both Wordsworth and Coleridge because they were narrow-minded and ignored the progress being made during that period in Europe. Though Byron deals with Romantic themes, he makes use of neoclassical style such as archaisms, cantos, conventional rhyme scheme and so on.

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage

- The poem is structured in four independent parts called cantos. Unity is given by the protagonist who is Harold, called Childe (medieval term) because he is a nobleman awaiting knighthood who travels. Harold's boredom and disillusionment with life lead him to leave England.
- The first two cantos evoke a glorious past, the famous monuments and landscape of Spain, Portugal, Albania and Greece.
- In the third canto Byron experiments his own ability to become completely absorbed in imaginative creativity and the attraction to the nature world, which both provide a new vitality. Structurally the canto follows Byron's journey, after he left England in 1816.
- In the fourth canto, which is set in Italy, contains several descriptions of nature, especially of the sea, depicted as the image of the sublime and eternity. Thus, nature reflects the poet's mood and feelings.
- Childe Harold can be identified with the Byronic hero because of his mysteriousness, that men cannot understand for he is isolated and is at ease among wild nature.

Harold's Journey

Harold's Journey is a part of the third canto. In the second stanza there is a first person narrator because Byron wants to talk directly to his readers about the moment he left England and his daughter. He is excited for what is new and wonderful about to come. Harold's journey is described as a pilgrimage because he does not know where he is going, he doesn't have a set destination.

In the other stanza here it appears again the third person narration. Harold is pictured as an outcast and, though in youth he tried to hide his original and quirky nature, he then ignores the others' opinion and becomes proud to be special despite being isolated. In the thirteenth stanza Byron uses several personifications to implicitly say that nature is a living being and that it speaks a mutual language with him and the protagonist, and this language is clearer than his mother tongue.

In the fifteenth stanza Byron describes Harold's suffering when he is among people and civilisation; he introduces the condition of the poet. Harold has to be in contact with other human beings in order to survive, but when this happens he feels as if he is just a

little thing, he is bored and annoyed. He feels like a bird in cage, and as so Harold fights and struggles to do what he wants but finds an obstacle and thus harms himself (such as the bird bleeds on his plumage) and suffers in his soul. In this paragraph the poet's message is that his ideas, his personality and his values are suppressed by society.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

- Percy Bisshe Shelley was born in 1792 and he was the eldest son of a wealthy and conservative family. He rebelled early against his conventional background and in 1811 he was expelled from Oxford University because he wrote a pamphlet against their religion set and in which he denied the existence of God.

- At the age of 19 Percy married a 16 year-old girl and then travelled with her and their two children so that he could express his ideas and make a propaganda against the British government, especially in Ireland.

- In that period there was a nationalistic wave in almost all European countries. Shelley, therefore, lived in a time of conservatism which was hostile to any radical ideas and to political moderation. He rebelled against existing religions, laws and customs. He became a Republican, a vegetarian and a supporter of peace, freedom and free love; for this reason he had many relationships with both women and men outside marriage. His complaint for traditional forms of religion was identified by an interest of his in the occult sciences, scientific experiments and alchemy.

- Once he came back to England he separated from his wife and married Mary Godwin who was the daughter of the radical philosopher William Godwin; the couple eloped in Villa Diodati in Switzerland. Though their love at first sight, he was cruel to her and had a lot of affairs but despite this she kept being faithful to him.

- In 1818 the couple went to live in Italy, in voluntary exile, during which much of Percy's best work was composed, including the Ode to the West wind, written in 1819, and the Defence of Poetry (1821), which is an uncompleted essay concerning the importance of poetry. Italy was the right place to rebel against the government and there were secret rebellious groups, but also beautiful landscapes.

- In 1822 the poet drowned during a storm while sailing near Livorno. Shelley's grave is in the Protestant cemetery in Rome.

Shelley's Concepts

- Poetry: Shelley's essay "A Defence of Poetry" is where his belief in nature and the function of poetry is expressed most fully. It presents a lively defence of poetry as the expression of imagination which should be understood as revolutionary creativity, capable of changing the reality of an increasingly material world.

- Poets' Duty: Shelley's task, as for the other poets, is thus to make people achieve an ideal world (full of love, freedom and peace). In his view, the poet is both a prophet and a titan at the same time, the latter challenging the universe and which is in charge of helping people reaching a perfect world. Shelley has therefore hope for a better place of living, but he also has a positive view of life and has faith in humanity.

- Nature: Shelley believed that Nature could express crucial concepts and that it had many strong symbols (wind = freedom). Nature is a veil that hides the eternal truth of divine spirit, but also a shelter where to hide from the disappointment and injustice of the ordinary world and it frees from the boundaries of society and civilisation.
- Values: Shelley firmly stated that love and freedom were the remedies to the faults and evils of society, thus through love men could overcome any political, mortal and social conventions.

England in 1819

England in 1819 is a political sonnet with a bitter and harsh tone, written as a response to the brutal Peterloo massacre in August 1819. Usually sonnets are positive, so this one is unconventional. It is divided in two part: one addressing the King and the princes, the second attacking the institutions. The poem attacks England, as the poet sees it, decadent and ruled by a king, George III, who is dying, old, blind, insane, and despised. His sons, the “leech-like” princes, are objects of public scorn and his ministers run the country for their own selfish interests. The people are hungry, oppressed and hopeless. Meanwhile, the army (two-edged sword: it should be defending people, but instead it is harming them) is corrupted: it is used to destroy liberty and freedom and to collect booty. The laws (that tempt and slay) are harsh and useless because they are manipulated to protect the rich and enchain the poor. Religion (which is Godless) is in a state of apathy and Parliament denies Roman Catholics their civil rights. But out of this unhappy state of affairs, the last two lines express the hope that a “glorious Phantom (ghost, wind)”, a revolution, may spring from this decay and “illumine our tempestuous day” by destroying all wrongs.

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