Introduction to British Romanticism, 1798-1850

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Brief History of the Period
In order to understand Romanticism, we need to take a look at the eras and movements that precede it. As with any movement in the arts or in literature, the dates we use are rough, since there were always artists who continued to write or compose in that mode before and after new modes were being practiced.

Let’s begin a bit back in time with Charles I
England has just undergone the deposition of Charles I (1600-1649)
- He ruled from 1625 to 1649
- He ruled without a Parliament from 1629 to 1640 – this was called The Eleven Years Tyranny
- He thought he ruled by the Divine Right of Kings - caused lots of friction between himself and his Parliament
- He was also in trouble because his wife was Catholic - keep in mind that it had only been about 100 years since Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church to marry Anne Boleyn
- He was controversial for imposing Anglican (the Church of England) worship on Puritans and Presbyterians – they felt this was tantamount to Roman Catholicism
- He was also considered as an irresponsible violator of the security and rights of the people
- He was condemned as a tyrant and traitor and was eventually beheaded (on 27 January 1649) for waging war on both his country and on Parliament

All of this led to a Civil War and the birth of the Commonwealth
- Ruled by Oliver Cromwell from 1649-1660
- Is the first and only time since the beginnings of the British monarchy that a monarch did not rule England (just so you know, the first English king was Egbert, who ruled from 829-839)
The Restoration
Charles II, Charles I’s son, was in hiding in France during the Commonwealth. He takes over in 1660 and begins the “Restoration” of the British monarchy

- He passes the Act of Oblivion – officially “forgot” misdeeds of proponents of rebellion against his father (like John Milton—his most famous work, “Paradise Lost” is, in part, an allegory for the monarch’s loss of power and the Puritans rise to power)
- He was raised in France – therefore, brought French influence with him
- He re-established the Anglican Church (also called the Church of England) as the official religion of England, thus ending concern that Catholics were going to overtake England—this concern has existed since Henry VIII’s break with the Catholic church
- Bubonic plague reappears in London in 1665
- Great Fire of London (Sept. 2-5, 1666) - destroyed 4/5 of the city - however, fewer than a dozen people died

18th Century Literature
The novel is THE literary invention of the age – remember, “novel” also means “new”

- Incorporates all these genres (travelogues, epistolary, memoirs, picaresque, news items, etc.) - there were lots of guides to manners written during this time
- Includes novels and newspapers, which are also new forms of literature at the time—The London Times was first published in 1785
- Uses social mobility as its most popular plot element
- Focuses on the aristocracy or the middle class both as subject matter and as readers - artists and writers eventually began to shift their focus from the aristocracy to the middle class
- Emergence of professional writers
- Rise of literacy and the improved financial status of the middle class meant more people had more leisure time
- Emergence of travel books (popular because it was expensive and dangerous to travel --not many people could do it) were written in the form of letters – this evolved into the epistolary genre pioneered by Aphra Behn – this is a novel presented in the form of letters written by one or more characters
- Focuses on delighting and instructing the reader – using reason and rationality instead of emotion is paramount
- Tries to rival poetry for literary prestige
- Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719) is generally considered the first modern novel in English
Satire
One of the most popular forms of writing during this period
- Satire is a literary or rhetorical device that exposes human or institutional vices
- Satire as a corrective is either implied or directly imposed

Juvenalian Satire
- Biting, morally indignant exposé of evil and corruption
- Example is Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* (1729) - in it, he suggests that one way to solve hunger among the Irish is to feed them their surplus population
- Swift said satire is "a glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own"

Horation Satire
- Gently humorous satire that aims to correct through laughter (like Voltaire)
- Dialogue is witty and polished – like *Sex and the City* or *Frasier*
- It also includes the comedy of manners, like Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) or *Sense and Sensibility* (1811)
  - It makes fun of common conventions for "proper" behavior
  - It is concerned with the conventions and manners of a sophisticated and artificial society
  - It is often aimed against aberrant social behavior
  - Its plot frequently involves illicit lovers
  - Its characters are more often “types” than individuals

Enlightenment Thought
Writers, philosophers and thinkers during this time had a faith in the ability of empirical science, philosophy and rationalism to resolve the problems of human society Their thinking became dominated by skepticism and scientific rationalism—
- They thought humans could use rational investigation and empirical observation to discover the natural laws that governed the world – this would make the world a better place, free of tyranny, violence and instability
- This lead to the idea of progress, which
- Lead to increasing emphasis on separation of Church and State, which
- Lead to increase in demand for political justice and civil liberty and increased desire for personal freedoms
Our own society is the product of this:
- We subscribe to the idea that government should be by consent of the governed
- Most of us see independence as one of the highest goals in life and education as one of the chief ways to get that independence
- We support religious tolerance and a separation of Church and State
- We rely on science and scientific method to inform us about the world, to identify problems, and above all, to deal with them

Enlightenment thinkers also redefined God’s relationship to the world and human beings –

**Deism**
- More of a philosophy than an organized religion
- Based on reason as opposed to revelation
- Based on idea that God was like a watchmaker who made a great clock, then left it to run on its own
- Many deists dismissed Christianity as “irrational fiction” – they thought the intricate design of nature was proof of a wise creator’s existence – we already know everything about the world that we need to know
- However, they thought that science tended to enhance, rather than destroy, faith
- Franklin, Jefferson and Voltaire believed this

**The Regency**
George III of England is the first Hanoverian king born in Britain. The Hanoverian kings originally came from Germany.
- His reign (from 1760-1820) was full of trouble
- He was the object of Romantics' contempt
- He was the king during American Revolution
- He had a disease called porphyria that made him appear mad
- His son, Prince George, was appointed his regent in 1810 because of the king's "mad" episodes

**Prince George**
- He essentially ruled England as his father’s "regent" from 1811-1820 – the period is named after his "regency"
- He was a profligate - in 1815, £150 provided a comfortable living for most people - he was £339,000 in debt
- He had illegally married his Catholic mistress

The Regency was a time of unprecedented debauchery – time of "lavish display and moral laxity" (Norton Anthology, page 4) for the aristocracy – building of Brighton Pavilion evidence of this
The novels of Jane Austen (1775-1817) are representative of this age.

Reactions Against Enlightenment Thinking: The Development of Sturm and Drang
Eventually, some artists and philosophers began to rebel against the ideals of the Enlightenment. One of the first notable instances of this was the development of the idea of Sturm and Drang. This term
- Means “storm and urge” in English
- Was first used in a play by Friedrich Maximilian Klinger, published in 1776, about the beginnings of the American Revolution
- Was a reaction against the failure of the Enlightenment to fully capture the totality of human experience with all of its emotional extremes
- Includes characters that are driven to extreme, often violent action by revenge or greed
- Elevates all things that are humble, natural, or intensely real
- Includes Göethe’s unfinished Prometheus

Wolfgang Göethe
His The Sorrows of Young Werther (1774) was viewed as a manifesto of Romantic rebellion - it's about
- a young man who retreats to the country to brood on his alienation
- he falls in love
- the girl marries someone else
- Werther commits suicide
- this is seen as the triumph of emotion over reason, a very different idea from Enlightenment thought!

There were thought to be lots of copycat suicides, although there is no hard evidence to prove this - also, men adopted his mode of dress - cult of Werther - melancholy was very popular as a physical state and as a poetic theme

Jean Jacques Rousseau was a major influence on the growing Romantic movement.
- He said, "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains"
- He’s often credited with being the Father of the French Revolution
- His work, The Confessions, aimed at focusing on the individual (in this case, Rousseau himself) – in the opening lines, he claims, "If I am not better, at least I am different" – this is one of the first instances of an author talking about
  1. the restorative quality of nature
  2. the importance of children as unique personalities, and
  3. the importance of the memory
Romantics:
- Rebelled against convention
- Wanted to be introspective
- Thought introspection would lead to greater self-understanding and a deeper connection with our fellow human beings
- Thought all humans were unique
- Spurned society
- Saw Prometheus as a major hero (he stole fire from the gods and brought it to humans - he was punished for this!)

Romantic Literature (1798-1850)
- This was a turning point in English literature because it marks a radical shift in thinking and in the way poetry was composed and interpreted
- Romantic era can be roughly marked as beginning in 1798 with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* (we’ll talk more about it in a minute) and ending in 1850 with the death of poet laureate William Wordsworth – there is some dispute on these dates – Some people mark the Romantic period as 1785-1830
- Romanticism as a term—by the end of the 18th century, the word “romantic” was commonly used to mean natural phenomenon like sunsets, views of the landscape, or rainbows—the term didn’t have the connotation of romantic love that we associate with it
- Romanticism was a reaction against the rationalism of Neo-Classical/Enlightenment literature
- Romanticism used freer lyric language that emulated natural speech
- Romanticism focused on the personal reactions and reflections of the writer rather than focusing on delighting and instructing the reader – this paved the way for Realism
- Romanticism focuses on individual variations in perception, and the mind’s independence from physical realities -instead of clinging to Enlightenment insistence on objective, verifiable truth and the common basis of our experience in a world of concrete, measurable physical realities - in many ways, Romanticism is an escape from the Enlightenment
- Romantics saw the mind as not just a recorder or mirror of reality - rather, it’s an active, dynamic, even visionary instinct
- Romanticism is heavily influenced by the French Revolution (1789-1799) – idea of revolution and rebellion very popular – The French Revolution was different than the revolution that led up to the Commonwealth and to the American Revolution "because it presented something new – the mob turning its pent up violent hostility against king, noble, landowner, churchman and brutally
overthrowing all the old ways" (Johnston 2) – this inspired tremendous fear for about 75 years after it happened – if the common people could stage this type of revolt, what was to stop others from doing it too?

- Romanticism is also influenced by Napoleon Bonaparte – "he was an unknown from an obscure family in Corsica, bent on shaping the map of Europe to fit his vision" – eventually, once he made himself emperor, and most people soured on him as a hero
- Idea of new beginnings
- Writers of this era did not think of themselves as "Romantic" – term first applied to their writing almost a half century later
- Romanticism is focused on an audience of those who would become the middle class – shift of balance between landed gentry and farmers/workers – constant concern about the "place" of the mercantile class
- Romantic poetry/literature has virtually nothing to do with romantic love!!!!

**Romantic Writers**

- Embraced the lyric, which had been considered as a minor kind of poetry, as one of their major forms
- Celebrated nature - preferred country life and untamed nature - many of the Romantics moved to the Lake District in northern England - in America, Thoreau went to live in the woods by Walden Pond - they saw nature as a teacher and moral guide
- Equated the word "natural" with a spontaneous, unaffected, emotional person - emotion is natural, reason is learned
- Revered childhood, because children are not yet cut off from nature - they haven't been taught to suppress their natural impulses - thought children could teach adults forgotten spiritual truths
- Revered peasants because they were natural and unaffected by urbanity
- Revered mountains because their height causes your eye to go upwards, towards the sublime, which refers to anything elevated, lofty, or impressively grand or awe-inspiring
- Liked unplanned gardens rather than the formal gardens of the Enlightenment – some people even went so far as to build "ruins" and to hire people to pose as "hermits," "peasants," and "shepherds"
- Renewed interest in the Middle Ages as a "simpler" time, which led to a renewed interest in Gothic architecture, particularly in Gothic cathedrals – Horace Walpole "invented" this type of writing with his novel The Castle of Otranto – he also made his own home,
Strawberry Hill (located in Twickenham, right outside of London), into a "Gothic" castle of sorts – it’s still a big tourist attraction

- Idealized hermits, monks, nuns, or anyone who led a life of solitude and contemplation
- Interested in folklore - Sir Walter Scott (Ivanhoe and the Waverly Novels) - Brothers Grimm
- Interested in "common" language, like that used by Robert Burns – he wrote the lines "The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Man, / Gang aft agley" – this is where John Steinbeck got the title for his novel Of Mice and Men (1937)
- Thought art was highly personal instead of being on a lofty or classical theme
- Distrusted science and anything not generated by the imagination
- Believed in the Imagination with a capital "I" - Coleridge called it "the prime agent of all human perception" - it is the human equivalent of the creative power of the universe - it is thus creative, unifying, and essentially vital, a function that is capable of shaping a new form or perception of reality - Hamlet is the product of the creative imagination - the Houyhnhnms of Gulliver's Travels are fancy (not realistic)

Lyrical Ballads

- First important publication of Romantic poetry in English literature
- Is considered as one of the landmarks of literature because it marks a significant shift in the composition and understanding of poetry
- Was published in 1798 by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge
- Combines lyric (a high cultural form, which merely means it’s difficult to compose) with ballad (a low cultural form, which means it’s easy to compose) – this was considered very daring!
- Elevated words like "common," "ordinary," "everyday," and "humble" as being appropriate for use in poetry
- Wordsworth and Coleridge wanted to "choose incidents and situations from common life"
- Was published anonymously because, as Coleridge told the publisher, 'Wordsworth's name is nothing – to a large number of persons mine stinks" (Norton Anthology, page 1)
- Wordsworth’s contributions were poems of country scenes and people, written in plain language and style - includes "Tintern Abbey"
- Coleridge’s contribution was the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner"
- The second edition (Lyrical Ballads sold well) contains a preface by Wordsworth - in it, he says poetry should be drawn from the
everyday speech of men - "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity" - this is seen as the Romantic manifesto
Handouts

- Characteristics of Literary Romanticism
- Characteristics of Gothic Literature
Characteristics of Literary Romanticism

Romanticism is a strong, pervasive reaction against Neo-Classicism and Enlightenment ideals. As a literary movement, it is always spelled with a capital "R;" however, it has virtually nothing to do with romantic love. Literary Romanticism has the following qualities:

- Emphasis on imagination and emotion over reason and logic – emotional displays are a mark of independence and superiority – feelings are seen as a guide to truth and conduct
- Emphasis on individual experiences as center of life and art – solitude is much sought after
- Emphasis on anticipation and remembrance of an event rather than on the event itself (Romantics were not "living in the moment")
- Emphasis on nonconformity, which is highly prized
- Emphasis on a personal God (a reaction against Deism)
- Glorification of children and childhood – children seen as "wise" in their inexperience, which makes them closer to God
- Emphasis on the sublime, which is often symbolized by mountains
- Glorification of primitive, external nature, uncorrupted by humankind (like mountains, lakes, wind, trees, and so on)
- Glorification of the commonplace
- Nature and "natural" equated with spontaneity, purity, connection with God – unplanned gardens are the best
- Nature is seen as teacher/moral guide
- Nature inspires a sense of awe and wonder of the universe
- Interest in the past and the exotic, along with a renewed interest in the Middle Ages and in folklore
- Interest in Gothic cathedrals and castles, especially ruins
- Interest in supernatural subjects
- Interest in monasteries, convents, monks, nuns, pilgrims and hermits as solitary seekers of truth
- Interest in the search for beauty
- Interest in sympathy for the downtrodden
- Hatred of war, but tendency towards rebellion
- Hatred of hypocrisy
- Belief in the brotherhood of all
- Belief that poetry is spontaneous and free, and that it should be written in common, concrete language everyone can understand

The Romantic Hero

- The Romantic Hero is a unique character type
- The Romantic Hero combines individualism and sensibility
- The Romantic Hero is a hero not so much because he accomplishes much, but rather because he refuses to accept his limitations
- The Romantic Hero fights greater odds, feels more deeply, reaches higher, and refuses to be beaten
- The Romantic Hero is usually outside of society and its traditional laws and customs
Characteristics of Gothic Literature

- **The Artist**
  Concept of the Artist as the ultimate outsider, often haunted by his own creation

- **The Outsider**
  A preoccupation with the outsider, whether the outsider is a stationary figure who tries to hide his difference, or a wandering figure who seeks some kind of salvation – can also be an individual who for whatever reason moves outside of traditional “norms”

- **The Sublime**
  A landscape that stimulates spiritual awareness, especially a landscape subject to nature’s volubility - landscapes are alienating, desolate, isolated, full of menace – mountains are often associated with the sublime, because they make your eye go up

- **Decay and/or Ruin**
  Architectural ruins, moral ruin, physical ruin, hereditary ruin, emotional ruin, ethical ruin, process of decay – reminder of the futility of human achievement

- **Excess**
  Lots of excess emotion, spectacle, “over-the-top” elements

- **Fairy Tale Elements**
  Includes things (rather than people) that rise up and acquire power over people who gradually lose or give up control over themselves

- **Fragmentation**
  Tortuous, fragmented, incomplete narratives relating mysterious incidents, horrible images, & life-threatening pursuits – fear of imprisonment, entrapment, rape, personal violation, triumph of evil over good & chaos over order

- **Inversion**
  Inversion, or turning "upside down" of "normal" circumstances (the swooning hero – the strong woman) – inversion of perceived “normal” relationships

- **Melancholy**
  A result of dwelling on the futility of human achievement

- **Power**
  Man’s power over nature – nature’s power over man – power of the supernatural – also includes themes of dominance & submission

- **Sensibility Shift**
  Textual focus on the to the villain whose capacity for feeling is dormant, perverted, or depleted rather than on the often passive, self-regarding hero

- **Sexual Fantasy**
  Primarily masculine, wherein a dominating & insensitive male villain holds a helpless, innocent, & fearful virgin captive

- **Supernatural Elements**
  Specters, monsters, demons, corpses, bleeding ghosts, skeletons, evil aristocrats, monks & nuns, bandits, fainting heroines, mad scientists, fathers, husbands, madmen, criminals, & the monstrous double – embody themes such as false inheritance, blood guilt, retribution, mistaken identity and incest

- **Theatricality**
  Shocks, emotional thrills, manipulation of characters, mechanistic plots

- **Transgression**
  Particularly idea of sexual transgression