

LESSON 4.

ROMANTICISM AND VICTORIANISM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Lake Poets and Lyrical Ballads: Wordsworth & Coleridge's creative collaboration

AIM OF THIS UNIT:

The unit offers an introduction to the first literary landmark of the English Romantic Movement, the volume of poetry titled *Lyrical Ballads* co-authored by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The discussion of the *ars poetica* outlined in the Preface is followed by brief analyses of the volume's most important poems.

KEY AUTHORS:

William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge

COMPULSORY READINGS:

Wordsworth:

- "We are Seven,"
- "Resolution and Independence,"
- "Immortality Ode," "Lines composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,"
- "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud, or the Daffodils"
- "Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*" (extracts),
- "The Prelude, or Growth of Poet's Mind" (extract),

Coleridge:

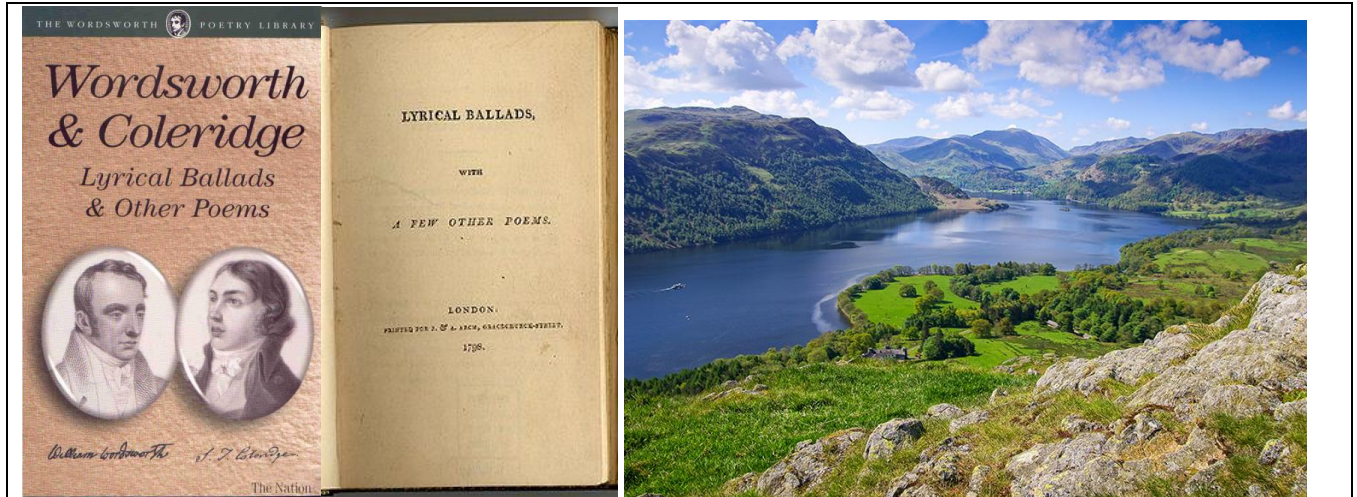
- "Kubla Khan or a Vision in a Dream. A Fragment,"
- "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,"
- "Christabel,"
- extracts from *Biographia Literaria*

KEY WORDS & TOPICS:

The Lake Poets, the Mirror vs the Lamp, landscape poem, dramatic monologue, egotistic sublime, pantheistic thought, a cult of Nature, the idealization of childish imagination, the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, emotion recollected in tranquillity, sea story, the Wedding Guest as implied reader, hubris, the Wandering Jew, metapoem, anti-poem, the Abyssinian Maid, the deep romantic chasm, the person from Porlock, a willing suspension of disbelief, imagination as a synthetic and magical power, primary vs secondary imagination. fancy vs imagination, the two generations of Romantic poets

KEY QUOTATIONS:

- "The child is the Father of Man."
- "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity"
- "It was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith"



1. LYRICAL BALLADS: THE FIRST LITERARY LANDMARK OF THE ENGLISH ROMANTIC MOVEMENT

Lyrical Ballads, perhaps the most well-known collection of Romantic poetry in English, is a joint volume co-authored by **William Wordsworth (1770-1850)** and **Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)**. As the title of the collection suggests, the poems aimed to conjoin the lyricism of ancient rustic bards and the balladistic oral storytelling mode of folkloric tradition, the simple narrative songs of common country folk, recording “the organic relationship between human beings and the natural world” (Thompson 87). This corpus of new poetry based on a new concept of poeticity was fuelled by the literary collaboration and friendship of the two most outstanding creative geniuses of the era, whose families lived as neighbours in the small village of Holford, Somerset, that provided a safe rural retreat for the young revolutionary spirits with unorthodox opinions.

This picturesque region in North West England, famed for its mountains, forests, and lakes, called the **Lake District** inspired the imagination of the poets dwelling there – among them William Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy, S.T. Coleridge, Robert Southey, Charles Lamb, and Thomas de Quincey. The group came to be referred to as **Lake Poets** or **the Bards of the Lake** although they were far from a homogeneous, cohesive school. Ironically, the poems composed in the region eventually attracted so many tourists to the lakes that the masses of visitors ruined the natural, ‘uncivilised’ lure of the landscape which enchanted the artists visiting there in the first place.



READ

EXERCISE

To understand the reasons why these two revolutionary minds’ retreated into the non-metropolitan countryside read Jonathan Kerr’s social-historical contextualization of the era at the *Dove Cottage and Wordsworth Museum Website* @ www.wordsworth.org.uk
Extract below. [Click here for full text.](#)

The 1790s was an immensely difficult period for most people throughout Europe. Through this decade, Britain sustained major economic recession, and crop failures further threatened the economic and political stability of the country. By 1798, Ireland was in the throes of large-scale rebellion. And following the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, England entered into a long and costly war with the new renegade French republic. To make

matters worse, the British state had to contend with the legions of reformers within its own borders, those who sympathized with France and wanted to import its republican and democratic model... [Even the artistic] commitment to "common" life and language could be (and often was) taken as a sign of [condemnable] solidarity with [the dangerously egalitarian ideals of] Republican France... Many Christians believed that these tumultuous times meant that the apocalypse was near, and some even suggested that the anti-Christ was no less than England's Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger. Not since the English Revolution had the country faced such alarming upheaval and discord within its borders.

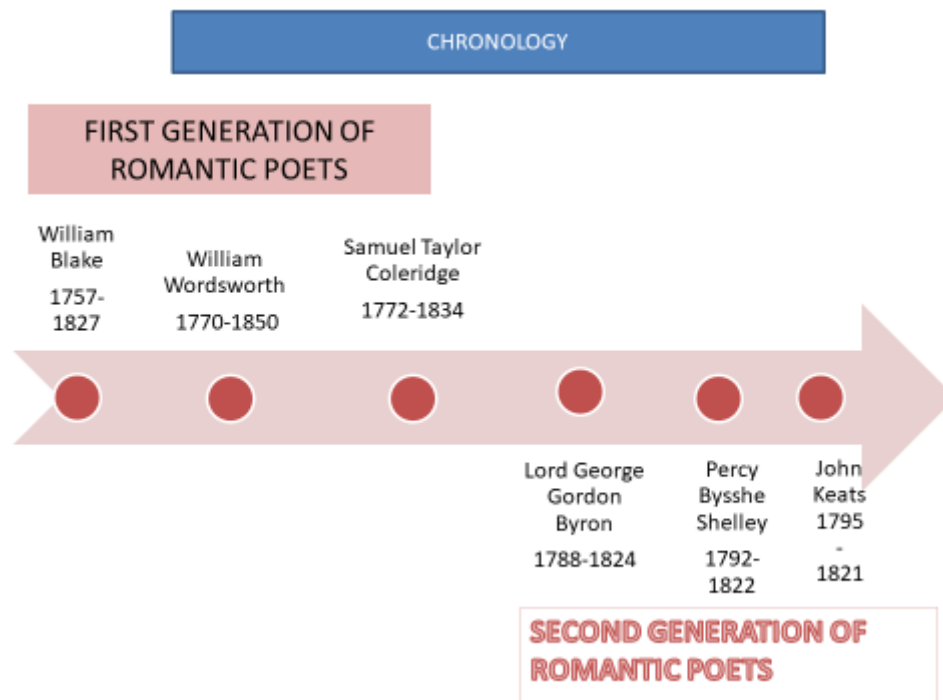
Lyrical Ballads, a collection including twenty-three "**experimental poems**," beginning with Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and ending with Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, first appeared as a **joint anonymous publication** in 1798. Its second, two-volume edition in 1800 featured on the title page only the name of Wordsworth. Although Coleridge added an extra poem to his initial four contributions, it was Wordsworth who most significantly enhanced the original manuscript by complementing the revised version with an entire second volume of poems, as well as a *Preface* which outlined in a manifesto-like manner their literary critical, theoretical views on the agenda of English romantic lyricism. Wordsworth elaborated on his ideas in *Poetic Diction*, an appendix added to the 1802 edition. A final, fourth edition followed in 1805.

THE PREFACE

Wordsworth's pioneering suggestions formulated in the *Preface* were met by his contemporaries' critical miscomprehension. (It was much later, in between the period of 1843 and 1850 that Wordsworth became canonically acclaimed as a Poet Laureate.) He opined that the principal subject of poetry should be "**incidents and situations from common life**" described in "**a language really used by men**," not highbrow topics described in sophisticated, lofty, formulaic style, but rather down-to-earth, rustic themes, the thoughts of simple folk, and the course of "**ordinary things**" coloured by the poet's creative imagination. In his wording, "**poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity**." The successful composition of an artwork is grounded in a combination of rational thought and emotional labour; the self-conscious mind is dwelling in a passionate "state of enjoyment". Accordingly, the Poet fulfils at once a democratic and a messianistic mission: "he is **a man speaking to men**: a man [...] endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm, and tenderness, who has greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul...who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply." His goal is to argue, in spite of our differences, for a shared humanity in need of solidarious bonds. Because of their common interest in the freedom of thought, the equality of humankind, and the spontaneous pantheism of uneducated labourers Wordsworth and Coleridge risked being labelled French-sympathizer socialists, enemies risking the British national status quo from within.

As MH Abrams famously pointed out, before Romanticism literature was understood as a **mirror** meant to reflect the world via a mimetic mode of representation, whereas Romantic artists thought of writing as a **lamp**, whereby the light of the writer's inner soul spilled out to illuminate the world, creating a vision weaved of a delicate interplay of lights and shadows. Critics agree that the powerful effect of *Lyrical Ballads* results of its authors' styles and themes mutually complementing one another. Wordsworth dealt with "**the extraordinary in the ordinary**," the deeply moving, cathartic feelings aroused by apparently superficial commonplace phenomena, like a mother's joy in watching her *Idiot Boy*, or a sister's

relentless affection for her deceased siblings (“**We are Seven**”). On the contrary, Coleridge was more interested in exploring “**the ordinary in the extraordinary**,” and mapped the deranged states of (un)consciousness haunted by nightmarish visions and supernatural forces under extraordinary circumstances (like a guilt-ridden psyche on a ghost ship in “**The Rime of the Ancient Mariner**,” or a drug-induced fever dream of forbidden delights in “**Kubla Khan**”). Hence, the collection could alternately embrace bucolic idyllic, melancholic contemplative, philosophical, horrendous supernatural, and fantastic adventurous tones.



AN IDEALISED VIEW OF NATURE

The poetic visions of *Lyrical Ballads* gained inspiration from an idealised view of **Nature uncorrupted by the flaws of civilisation**, and the **ancient wisdom of simple country folk living in harmony with their surroundings**. Major point-of-view characters/ focaliser lyrical voices in the volume included the female vagrant, the old huntsman, the little shepherd boy, the leech gatherer, and the old Cumberland beggar. The sentimental ideas echoed the Enlightenment French philosopher **Rousseau**’s celebration of **the Noble Savage**, the indigenous primitive coined “nature’s gentleman,” whose innate goodness has not been spoilt by the ideological manipulations and moral decay concomitant with socialisation’s disciplinary cultural indoctrination. The quest for a pure state of mind and existence could only take place outside of the metropolitan sphere, away from the progressive technological innovations. Romantic poets believed that the **Industrial Revolution** turned farmers – who migrated in the city to become factory workers – into miserable machines, and alienated people from their natural humaneness. Genuine freedom and poetic liberty could only be regained by returning to the cradle of **Mother Nature** which simultaneously offered **a spiritual and a political experience**: becoming overwhelmed by the sublime beauty of the landscape throughout a solitary walk, for example, signified a fundamentally democratic experience of blurring into the community of living things. It was assumed that the love of Nature leads to the love of Man, too.



WATCH

EXERCISE

Watch the [BBC documentary on Romantic poets' relation to Nature](#) & Read the extracts below and discuss what they reveal about how Wordsworth and Coleridge relate to Nature.

"Come forth into the light of things, let nature be your teacher."

„A poet ought not to pick nature's pocket. Let him borrow, and so borrow as to repay by the very act of borrowing. Examine nature accurately, but write from recollection, and trust more to the imagination than the memory."

THE CULT OF CHILDHOOD

Nature was commonly reinvested with meanings projected on it by the poet's **creative imagination**. Even semi-autobiographical implications infiltrated this vision which very often referred back to youthful memories of the child's awareness of the immortal presence of the divine in Nature. This **nostalgia** was often tinged with a **melancholic longing**, since




Thomas GAINSBOROUGH. *GIRL WITH PIGS*, 1782. Wikimedia Commons.

the naïve freshness and the **spontaneous pantheistic relationality** to the lifeworld characterising the child's worldview was necessarily lost with the poet's coming of age, and his integration within the superficial, biased cultural value-system of the hierarchically organised social structure. The iconic figure of **the innocent country child** gifted with infinite untainted imaginative potentials offered a particularly privileged role-model for the Romantic poet.

Wordsworth is often credited as a founder of the **Romantic cult of childhood** that prevailed in the Victorian period and beyond.

His poetry traces an ahistorical, apolitical, idealistic image of the child – very different from Blake's more contextualized, social-critically self-conscious lyrical representations. The Wordsworthian Child is a **child of Nature** living in a perfectly harmonious cohabitation with his natural surroundings, flora, fauna, and landscape. Nature acts as the best possible guardian figure, a teacher who gently educates the youngster by an effortless inspiration of his imagination, sensations, and psychic experiences, to establish the emotional foundation for adulthood. In "My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold" Wordsworth downright claims that **"The Child is the Father of Man,"** suggesting that youth is richer in wisdom and insight than old age. Much like in later Freudian psychoanalysis, for Wordsworth, childhood emerges as the single most decisive period of human life, that adults struggle to recall but can never fully regain. Hence this ideal image of the Child (much like that of Nature) is a product of the disillusioned adult's nostalgia.

Wordsworth's "**Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood**" (1807) records the profits and losses of growing up by combining the traditions of the **conversation poem**, the **elegy**, the Biblical sentiment of a religious **prayer**, and the **apocalyptic tradition**. It laments that the youthful period of wisdom and true insight is necessarily replaced by the sober vision of the grown man. With the passing of time and of human life the visionary power of youth becomes lost and nature no longer appears to the poet as it did before in his early days. Aging means a growing apathy and misanthropy, a gradual disconnection from the direct contact with natural reality, and a resulting fading of poetic imagination. The adult lyrical voice bemoans his estrangement from the world, and the **loss of immediacy**, crying out "The things which I have seen I now can see no more.", "Whither is fled the visionary gleam? Where is it now, the glory and the dream?" Even if fleeting visions of a "Child of Joy" allow the poet to momentarily revive what he has lost, his childhood union with Nature remains fundamentally unreachable for the speaker. Yet the shared human destiny to lose sight of the divine with aging and memories of the divine allow us to sympathise with our fellow human beings. Hence childhood offers a genuine pretext for the poet to comment on his major experiences in exploring **the workings of imagination, memory, the immediacy and unspeakability of lived experience, the immortality present within Nature, and the fallibility of humanity**.

 COMPARE	EXTRACURRICULAR EXERCISE: Revisit your earlier chapter on William Blake's poetry and explore how the child image outlined in his Songs of Innocence relates to Wordsworth's celebration of infantile innocence.

2. WILLIAM WORDSWORTH'S POETRY

PRELUDE, OR GROWTH OF A POET'S MIND (1805-1850)

In "**Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind**" – a unique **autobiographical poem** in **blank verse** Wordsworth completed in 1805 but continued to revise throughout his entire life and published only posthumously in 1850 – the **growth of the poet's consciousness is mapped through his interactions with Nature beginning in childhood**. *Prelude* was inspired by **Rousseau's *Emile*** that emphasized the educational significance of children's early intimacy with Nature. On the other hand, it was Coleridge who urged his friend to write a poem for readers disillusioned in the failure of the **French Revolution**, for those who gave up hope on the possible amelioration of mankind, and who questioned the efficiency of visionary philosophies. (Wordsworth never gave a title to the poem, but simply referred to it as "the Poem to Coleridge," and his letter to his sister described it as "the poem on the growth of my mind.") *The Prelude* was intended as an introduction to "The Recluse," a philosophical poem on Man, Nature, and Society, with the sensations and opinions of the poet living in retirement in its focus, a project that remained unfulfilled.

In "The Prelude", this 14-books-long semi-autobiographical account of his personal psychic, spiritual, and artistic development, Wordsworth maps the events of life (including childhood, school, time at Cambridge, residence in London, visit to revolutionary France). The various episodes demonstrate how his interactions with his environment were formative of his personality, morality, and art. The first two books on childhood include accounts of juvenile self-inspection and self-discovery the significance of which is realized only in adulthood.

A **sublime episode** described in Book XIII is also noteworthy: Wordsworth describes a memorable experience that took place at a walking tour in North Wales, when he set out with some friends to **climb Snowdon by moonlight**. At first the mountain was covered in darkness and a thick fog but as at last they moved on their way upwards and burst through the mist into brilliant moonlight that illuminated a sea of mist below them. The conquest of the mountain top becomes a powerful metaphor of the ascent of the poetic consciousness into a new peak of imaginative vision. As he looks down on the landscape of clouds beneath his feet the lyrical voice contends: “it appeared to me, the **perfect image of the mighty mind**.” The **landscape poem** outlines a model of the human psyche. The small illuminated region on the mountaintop stands for conscious, rational, self-reflective thought that is surrounded by “huge sea of mist” concealing what Wordsworth called “an **underpresence**” and what 20th century Freudian psychoanalysis came to refer to as the unconscious. In the subconscious realm disturbing, traumatic or taboo psychic contents are repressed, relating to sexual instincts, aggressive or self-destructive impulses, intuitions, fantasies, dreams which are not available to the conscious mind yet serve as fundamental engines of artistic creativity. Just like moonlight has the power to transform the view from Snowdon, the imagination can similarly impose order (or disorder) upon the external world. The “higher mind” of the imaginative poet can peep into the hidden life of things, he gains simulation from the sensorial world to look beyond tangible, material reality. The poet’s creative imagination is endowed with a divine quality, as it re-creates reality. His imagination interacts with the external world, **transfigures** it, and enables us to perceived invisible realities, to experience the power palpitating beneath Nature’s visible forms.



CS Friedrich. *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*, 1818

TINTERN ABBEY (1798)

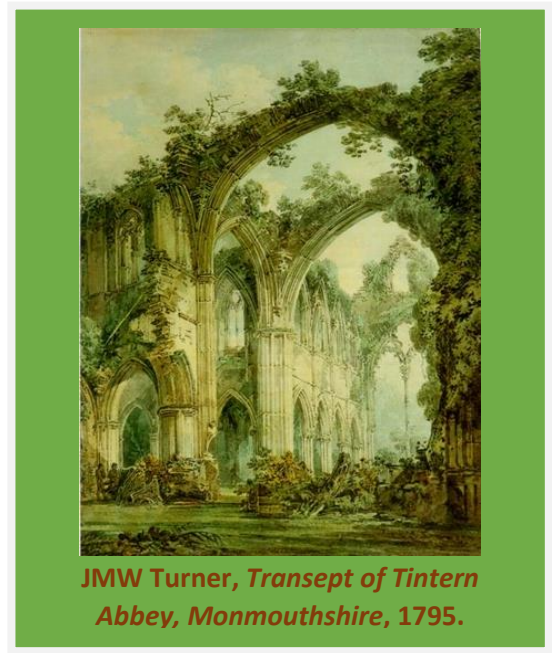
The poem is an exciting combination of the following lyrical subgenres:

- As a **landscape poem** or a piece of **topographical poetry**, it focuses on the description of a geographical location, with a focus on the atmosphere of a setting, the feelings, thoughts, sense impressions aroused by that space in the human spectator.
- In the **conversation poem** the lyrical voice addresses someone very close “in an informal but serious manner of deliberation that expands from a particular setting” (Baldick 70). The genre in English practically emerges from the close cooperation of Wordsworth and Coleridge in *Lyrical Ballads*.
- An **ode** traditionally refers to a long lyrical poem, serious in subject, elevated in style, and elaborate in its stanzaic structure (Abrams 235). It is meant to glorify an idealized individual, a sublime object or natural phenomenon, a significant event, or an elevated abstract notion. The praise permeated by intense emotions, ceremonious devotion and pathos can address a wide variety of subjects ranging from God/divinities, Nature, Art, Love/Friendship, Nation/HomeCountry, Life/Death, etc.

The tripartite structure of a classic ode consists of the strophe, the antistrophe, and the epode.¹

- A **dramatic monologue** is a form of poetry, in which a single person presents a lengthy speech in a critical situation to a fictitious auditor/audience who remains silent and invisible. The words uttered reveal the fictitious speaker's personality and temperament to the auditor/audience. This poetic role-play has been perfected by Robert Browning. Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" shares some features of the genre: the monologue is performed at a significant moment of the speaker's life, is addressed to an important, silent listener, his sister –yet the lyrical self's autofictional ego-construction portrays the author figure whose evolving memories, observations, and "thoughts towards the resolution of an emotional problem" constitute the major subject matter of the piece. (Abrams 85-86)

The full title "**Lines Written (or Composed) a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798**" reveals that the poem is grounded in an autobiographical episode. A **walking tour** Wordsworth made with his sister in the Welsh countryside allows him to outline his **philosophical views on the worship of nature, the functioning of memory/imagination, and the dynamics of artistic creativity**. In fact, not one, but two memories are presented and interfaced in the text, as the artist returns to a region he has previously visited as a troubled twenty-three-year-old youngster. The renewed encounter with the same old landscape allows a pretext to reflect on his psychic, artistic maturation, and aesthetic agenda.




In Wordsworth's **pantheistic** worldview, nature has a spiritual dimension, worthy of a deeper zeal of holier love. Mental images of Nature can engender mystical intuition of the divine. (Nature is "The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,/ The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul/ Of all my moral being.") Yet, just like a literary work of art, a landscape would be meaningless without the **beholder's interpretive consciousness**. Hence the fascinating-frightening magnitude, the sublime powers of the natural or the built environment are called into being the creative artist's imagination that revitalizes reality and inoculates it with philosophical, spiritual, aesthetic meaning. The building of the abbey itself never actually appears on the poem, it only emerges as a memory trace transforming in the mind of the poet, who is more interested in his own personal development from "dizzy raptures" and "wild ecstasies" to "elevated thoughts" and "sober pleasures" than the actual growth or decay of nature itself. This writerly perspective is called **egotistical sublime**. (The term was first used by second generation Romantic poet Keats who criticized Wordsworth's self-

¹ Famous odes in English literature include: Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode," Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode", Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn", "To a Skylark," Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind."

absorbed/narcissistic projection of his seer-prophet-poet persona on the Nature he adulates, by means of an anthropocentric anthropomorphization of Nature.)

Wordsworth reflects on the significant role nature plays in his poetry, on how nature was formative of his identity, and how his relationship with nature has changed since boyhood. His **boyish thoughtless passion** for and forgetful fusion with the natural environment became replaced by an adult, manly “sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling is in the light of setting suns,” a “**tranquil restoration**” of an internalised image of abbey, an intellectual-imaginative feat that **relieves the burdens of fleeting doubts in the existence of God**. Moreover, as the last stanza addressed to the tourist companion, the “dear friend,” “dear sister” reveals, the **enchantment by nature is a passion that unites the people** sharing this worship of “these steep woods and lofty cliffs, / And this green pastoral landscape.”


 TEST	EXERCISE	
	Read carefully Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” and collect the terms he associates with his first, 1793 visit and his 1798 return.	
	1 st visit to Abbey: 1793	2 nd visit to Abbey: 1798
	solitary walk	walking tour with sister Dorothy
	boyish days	manly return
	coarser pleasures	joy of elevated thoughts
	glad animal movements	a sense sublime
	an appetite, a feeling and a love	...
	aching joys, dizzy raptures	...



THE DAFFODILS, OR I WANDERED LONELY AS A CLOUD (1807)


The poem has a simple topic and plot. During an outdoor walk, the sight of a “crowd” of “golden daffodils” “dancing in the breeze” ravishes the poet who is left speechless by the beauty of the spectacle. It is only later, in the solitary confinement of his study room, when in a “pensive mood” the “**inward eye**” of his imagination recalls the visionary apparition that he manages to realize and to formulate in matchingly delightful words the sublimity of the experience. (At first, he simply gazes blankly at the flora and it is only the retrospective thought, “emotion recollected in tranquillity,” that realizes the magnitude of the encounter.)

The **sonnet** pays homage to the beauty of Nature left intact by humanity and urges the reconciliation of civilized man with his environment. The huge mass of fragile little plants embodies a sense of physical immediacy and provokes a simple yet cathartic emotional pleasure by contrasting the pain of loneliness and the transitoriness of human life with the lasting permanence of the memory of the daffodils, and the infinite unity of the universe. (The waves of the yellow flowers evoke the endless ocean, life-giving sunrays, stars in outer space – and hence reinforce the sense of the sublime). Via the **egotistical sublime**, the daffodils earn their true magnitude from the **poet’s reminiscence/memory**; the vision of nature etched on his psyche and spirit to be cherished forever. His imagination allows him to relive the unrepeatable experience: when depressed, lonesome, or dull, he thinks of the daffodils, and can rejoice again.

Feminists critics highlight that although the poem's lyrical self is a solitary walker but Wordsworth spotted the daffodils together with **his sister, Dorothy**, whose diary includes a detailed description of the sight inspiring the brother's poem. The last lines – “and my heart with pleasure fills, and dances with the daffodils” – are attributed to the poet's wife, Mary.

	EXERCISE
READ	Compare Dorothy's journal's entry with William's poem.
<p><i>When we were in the woods beyond Gowbarrow park we saw a few daffodils close to the water side, we fancied that the lake had floated the seed ashore and that the little colony had so sprung up – But as we went along there were more and yet more and at last under the boughs of the trees, we saw that there was a long belt of them along the shore, about the breadth of a country turnpike road. I never saw daffodils so beautiful they grew among the mossy stones about and about them, some rested their heads upon these stones as on a pillow for weariness and the rest tossed and reeled and danced and seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind that blew upon them over the Lake, they looked so gay ever glancing ever changing. This wind blew directly over the lake to them. There was here and there a little knot and a few stragglers a few yards higher up but they were so few as not to disturb the simplicity and unity and life of that one busy highway – We rested again and again. The Bays were stormy and we heard the waves at different distances and in the middle of the water like the Sea.</i></p> <p>— Dorothy Wordsworth, <i>The Grasmere Journal</i> Thursday, 15 April 1802</p>	

	Click below and listen to the Audiofile recording of Wordsworth's "Daffodils" as read by Jeremy Irons
LISTEN	(Public domain, fair use for academic purposes)
 Daffodils_read_by_Jeremy_Irons.mp3	

	EXERCISE
THINK	Look for poetic tropes and figures in Wordsworth's "Daffodils". Give examples for: alliteration, personification, simile, repetition, rhyme, paradox

3. COLERIDGE'S POETRY

BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA (1817)

Coleridge's summarizes his philosophical views and poetic agenda best in his literary autobiography *Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (shortly referred to a *Biographia Literaria*) published in 1817. He comments on the different stylistic/thematic approaches he and Wordsworth embraced in *Lyrical Ballads*. Although the co-authors agreed on several points, such as the need to “awaken the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom” and to arouse enthusiasm for the surprising complexity of being, Coleridge was

more interested in the “persons and characters supernatural or at least romantic” and otherworldly wonders than the everyday ordinary things’ charm which Wordsworth aimed to strategically illuminate. Coleridge used the famous poetic term “*the willing suspension of disbelief*” to describe how he expects his readers to get rid of their logical reasoning and expectations of realism for the sake of their total, joyful immersion within the fantastic fictional realm called into being by the creative artist.

In Coleridge’s wording, the poet “**brings the whole soul of a man into activity**,” “he diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that **synthetic and magical power**, to which we have exclusively appropriated **the name of imagination**.” His aim is to reveal “**the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities**: of sameness, with difference; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement...” Coleridge attributed to imagination a so called **esemplastic power** that had a capacity to shape disparate things into a unified whole, and hence convey a new sense to the images, words, feelings derived from different human experience, endeavours, thoughts he brings together in one single creative artwork. “To Coleridge the affinity of this **synthesis** with the organic function of assimilating nutriment declares itself: imaginative unity is not a mechanical juxtaposition of unproductive particles. Imaginative unity is an organic unity: a self-evolved system, constituted by a living interdependence of parts, whose identity cannot survive their removal from the whole.” (Abrams 175)

For Coleridge the mind is not a *tabula rasa* upon which external impressions are carved. Imagination has a transformative potential to revitalize the world, it is “**the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation**,” via in the infinite I AM. He divides the mind into two distinct faculties: primary and secondary imagination.

- **Fancy**= a lesser mode of passive, mechanical fantasy, an accumulation of data in the memory, a documentation of what is seen, a logical way of organizing sensory material without really synthesizing
- Imagination= a spontaneous and original act of creation
 - **Primary imagination**= The living power and prime agent of all human perception. Allows all people to unconsciously grasp the structure of the world. Already perception is active and creative. Automatically balances and fuses innate capacities and powers of the mind with the external presence of the objective world that the mind receives through the senses. Represents man’s ability to learn from Nature.
 - **Secondary imagination**= The echo of the primary imagination. A superior faculty, associated with the artistic genius who can consciously shape new worlds in addition to the given reality he perceives. Coexists with the conscious will. Only different in degree, but holds the same agency. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate. It struggles to idealise and unify, it rewrites the world of the self, and of nature. It calls the whole soul of man into activity of the highest degree.

KUBLA KHAN (1816)

The origin story of this poem composed in 1797 (published in 1816) is legendary. Coleridge claimed that he composed the poem one night after he experienced an opium-induced dream

that abounded in strange visions of the Tartar King Kubla Khan's exotic world he read about earlier. When he woke up he immediately started to write down what he saw in his dream, but he was interrupted by an expected visitor, a person from Porlock whose knocking on the door interrupted his reverie and made him forget his dream. The "**person from Porlock**" came to represent the obligations of the mundane, ordinary reality crashing down on the fragile fantasy fragments of the creative genius. The poem was subtitled "**Or, a vision in Dream. A Fragment**" and its enigmatic lure was enhanced by its remaining incomplete. Coleridge's contemporaries were dissatisfied with the blurry, chaotic account of disordered memory fragments which left readers more confused than enlightened; and criticized the text for being an **anti-poem**.

The poem easily lends itself to be interpreted as a **metapoem**: it reflects on the turbulent process of artistic creation. Its highly stylised language, full of elaborate sound devices (eg. alliteration, assonance), is very far from the natural language spoken by simple folk that Wordsworth propagated as the major instrument of poetry. Kubla Khan's enchanted pleasure dome by the sacred river, where the song of an Abyssian maid enraptures the visitor, is an exotic equivalent of the poet's ivory tower, where artistic creation takes place in a sphere isolated from the daily toils of the common world. The "**deep romantic chasm**" by the side of the palace stands for the dark side of the human soul, the **unconscious region of the mind** where desires fuelling poetry spring from. The mighty fountain represents artistic/life energy that necessarily culminates in death. The fusion of opposites ("sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice") symbolizes the **dynamics of creativity**, the oscillation between pain and pleasure, between unconscious energy and conscious control.

The tragedy of the poet lies in the **fleeting nature of the vision**, the realization that forgetting is a part of remembering, the ungraspable nature of present perfection, the inadequacy of language in representing the fantastic visions, and the succeeding residue of the tip-of-the-tongue experience. The pleasure dome of Kubla Khan in Xanadu is man-made, hence finite, whereas the Nature surrounding it is an infinite, both savage and holy, enchanted place. The ancestral voices prophecy war as a penalty for seeking infinite pleasure. The poet's imaginative longing for a **fabulous elsewhere** is both a blessing and a curse. The poet can move from the world of conventional meaning and normal understanding to the world of imagination but he must return from there, back to our ordinary reality where he will struggle to share his vision with his incredulous audience reluctant to believe his strange dream.



Gustave Doré's illustrations to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER (1798)


The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (1797-8) revisits the popular **Romantic Gothic** theme of the **sea voyage** that describes a geographical journey into the uncharted, mysterious territories of Earth but also represents a **psychic journey** into the depths of the human mind's unconscious regions. The sublime seascape is seen through the dark superstitious visions of sailors whose life is dependent on the unpredictable forces of Nature. The central theme is **crime, punishment, and possibility or impossibility of redemption** –with a metafictional focus on the curative, **ritualistic powers of storytelling**. The poem stages a unique narrative situation: the title character is giving an account of his past fatal adventure to a Wedding Guest who is an ordinary, sedentary figure, with a limited experience whose reactions to the story (ranging from fascination to impatience, fear, and pity) represent the **implied reader's** responses to the mesmerizing **ballad**.

The Mariner recalls how he committed an act that Greek tragedies refer to as *hubris*, a deed motivated by foolish and arrogant pride that defies human moral standards and upsets the Gods who then duly punish the perpetrator. In a blind fit of thoughtless passion or out of mere spite the sailor shot a magnificent albatross bird who seemed to guide the ship on its way and brought bad luck on the crew. His crime aroused the wrath of the spirits that led them to still, uncharted, deadly waters where horrendous creatures emerged out of the sea joined by a ghostly vessel with Life-in-Death on its deck playing dice for the soul of the sailors. Everyone dies on the board except the Mariner who wears the dead albatross in his neck like a cross. The poem fully transitions from the natural to the supernatural sphere, the Mariner's solitary agony has a spiritual aspect, evoking **Biblical themes** of sin, sacrifice, atonement, and forgiveness. The first stage of recovery and redemption comes when the Mariner learns to love the "thousand slimy things" wriggling around him in the dark waters. He blesses the water snakes and realizes the beauty of all creatures of Nature, and his kinship with even the lowliest lifeforms. Hence his cursed isolation is over. By virtue of the redeeming power of prayer, empathy, and pantheism, his external punishment ends (the Albatross falls off his neck), yet he remains a **haunted/ haunting figure**. He is never freed from the neurotic compulsion to confess his crime, to retell his story over and over again to anyone who is willing to listen. (His remorse and penance prevails eternally through the collective cultural memorial gesture of storytelling: "Till my ghastly tale is told/ This heart within me burns")

COLERIDGE GAINED INSPIRATION FOR THE POEM FROM A VARIETY OF SOURCES. These include:

1. travel narratives, accounts of sea voyages (such as James Cook's expedition to the South Seas, Pacific Ocean or Thomas James' voyage into the Arctic)
2. the legend of the Wandering Jew (or the Flying Dutchman) doomed to wander Earth until Judgment Day for tempting Jesus on the cross
3. the Romantic grotesque: the idea of human being as a puppet in the hands of capricious, blind transcendental powers (see image of Death playing dice)
4. Orientalism's exotic lure: the figure of Scheherazade from *Arabian Nights*
5. Gothic horror
6. Pantheism: consolatory powers of Nature in a world governed by (religious, existential) uncertainty
7. Christian allegory on the salvation of/by Christ

6+7 → continuity between pagan superstitions and Christian theology: crisis& significance of faith, belief/imagination & incredulity
8. autobiographical self-portrait on poet's supernatural visions, struggle with language ("no tongue/ their beauty might declare"), isolation, loneliness
9. his own poetic agenda described in Biographia Litteraria: supernatural incidents, dramatic truth of emotions, appeal to readers' affections, shadows if imagination, turmoil of human psyche, willing suspension of disbelief constituting poetic faith
10. Opium induced visions

 <p>THINK</p>	<p>EXERCISE Read Coleridge's poem, <i>Christabel</i> (1797-1800), a mock-medieval Gothic romance in poetic form in which the innocent title character gradually succumbs to the evil lure of the demonic enchantress, vampire-like Christabel.</p>
	<p>ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are some common themes within "Kubla Khan" and "The Ancient Mariner"? (transgression, corruption, the supernatural, etc) 2. How does the Gothic theme of the double emerge in the text? 3. Can you read the "symptomatically," in the light of Coleridge's life-long bipolar disorder and opium addiction? 4. Why does Coleridge use a storyteller who seems be unsure of what is going on? (see notion of unreliable narrator, mad focaliser) 5. How can you interpret the enigmatic line: "Behold! Her bosom and half her side – a sight to dream of, not to tell!" What is the significance of the exclamation, the unspoken, and the ambiguous here?

EXTERNAL LINKS

- [Lyrical Ballads 1798](#) at Project Gutenberg
- [Lyrical Ballads 1800 vol. 1](#) at Project Gutenberg
- [Lyrical Ballads 1800 vol. 2](#) at Project Gutenberg
- [Preface to Lyrical Ballads 1802](#) at English UPenn
- [Biographia Literaria](#) at Project Gutenberg

 <p>TEST</p>	<p>TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE WITH A QUIZ BY CLICKING HERE</p> <p>https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1w3KkY0LbJ0HZSn70mmleuLKYBAdq8pyKQooAYGbMMZQ/prefill</p>
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