

LESSON 5.

ROMANTICISM AND VICTORIANISM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

The second generation of Romantic poetry: Revolution and Imagination in Byron's, Shelley's, Keats' oeuvre

AIM OF THIS UNIT:

The unit offers an introduction to the second generation of English Romantic poetry, focusing on the arts of Lord Gordon Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats.

KEY AUTHORS:

Lord Gordon Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats

COMPULSORY READINGS:

Byron: "Beppo, a Venetian Story," extract from "Childe Harold"

PB Shelley: "To a Skylark," "Ode to the West Wind," "Mont Blanc, Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni"

John Keats: "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode to Autumn"

KEY WORDS & TOPICS:

a poetry of conflicts (socio-political, philosophical, psychic personal), didactic/ allegorical/ symbolical poetry, Byronic villain hero, spleen, oriental tales, picaresque, ottava rima, digression, colloquial satire, closet drama, Don Juan, Childe Harold's pilgrimage, Manfred, Cain, Darkness,

the necessity of atheism, flood of rapture divine, a trumpet of prophecy, Prometheus Unbound, the Mask of Anarchy, Song to the Men of England, The Defence of Poetry, ode, invocation,

negative capability, synesthesia, ekphrasis, the mind as a mansion of many apartments, Hyperion, Lamia, the fall of Endymion, Isabella, or the Pot of Basil, the Eve of St Agnes

KEY QUOTATIONS:

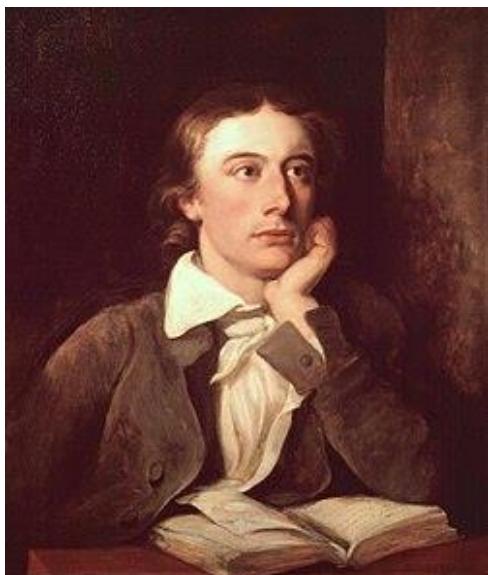
- "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"
- "the great Mountain has a voice, not understood by all"
- "Truth is beauty, beauty is truth."
- "A thing of beauty is a joy forever."
- "O What can ail thee, knight-at-arms, Alone and palely loitering? The sedge has wither'd from the lake, And no birds sing."
- "There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,/ There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society, where none intrudes,/ By the deep Sea, and music in its roar:
I love not Man the less, but Nature more,/ From these our interviews, in which I steal
From all I may be, or have been before,/ To mingle with the Universe, and feel
What I can ne'er express, yet cannot all conceal."



BYRON (1788-1824)



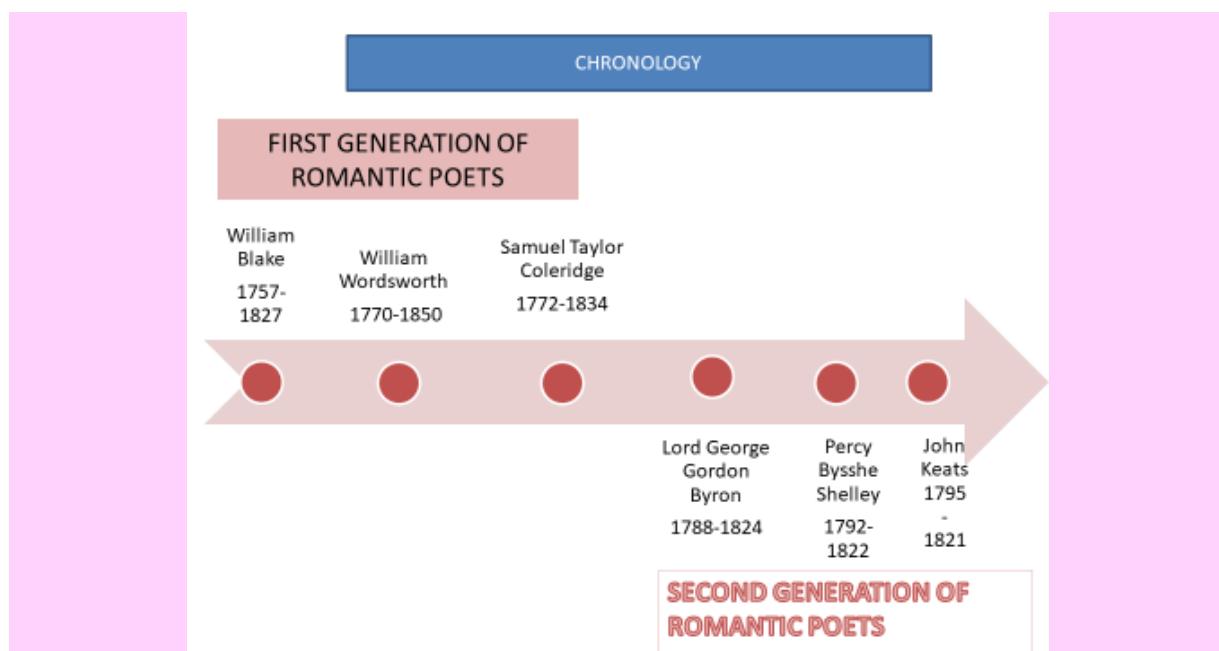
SHELLEY (1792-1822)



KEATS (1795-1821)

1. INTRODUCTION: THE TWO GENERATIONS OF ROMANTIC POETS

The beginning of English Romantic poetry is most often presumed to coincide with the publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* or Blake's *Songs of Innocence*. The end of this influential literary period is marked by Queen Victoria's ascension to the throne in 1837 and the advent of a new social structure and cultural conventions concomitant with the Victorianism succeeding to Romanticism. Canonically, Romantic poetry in English has been divided into two periods distinguished by two generations of poets. Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey belonging to the first; Byron, Shelley, and Keats to the second generation of Romantic poets. There is certainly a continuity between the aesthetics and politics of the two generations.



SIMILARITIES:

Their art is equally characterised by a **pantheistic love of Nature as an organic living whole, an active force of social criticism and philosophical self-reflection, and an exaltation of sensations.**

DIFFERENCES:

1st GENERATION	2nd GENERATION
Wordsworth's simple language	complex language, elaborate versification, elegant diction is an expression of philosophy
embrace conservative life in old age in Lake district	die young, far from home
the poet prophet addresses universal existential themes of human destiny	the poet prophet is involved in a historically located fight for social change, against tyranny
Coleridge's hope in salvation even in dark poems as <i>Rime of the Ancient Mariner</i>	general disillusionment, clash/unbridgeable gap between real and ideal (Byron, Keats)
belief in continuity memories and Nature live on (in <i>Tintern Abbey</i> , <i>We are Seven</i>)	continuity is impossible (eternity is still, dead, art is separated from life in <i>Grecian Urn</i>)
feelings are innocent and eternal (<i>We are Seven</i>)	feelings are fatal, deceptive, ephemeral (<i>La Belle Dame sans Merci</i>)

2. LORD GORDON BYRON'S POETRY

The works by the second generation Romantic lyricists are often labelled a **poetry of conflicts.**

This conflictual nature is best exemplified by the antagonistic thoughts and feelings manifested in Lord George Gordon Byron's life and art, permeated by a strange combination of gaiety, extravagance, idealism, and disillusioned melancholy.

CONFLICTS IN BYRON'S ART AND LIFE

- He gained reputation for his aristocratic excesses, his glamorous lifestyle, including notorious sexual escapades (promiscuity, bisexuality, disastrous marriage, incestuous relation with his half-sister), and eccentricism (a private menagerie, taste for the Gothic macabre). He was famed for his atheist radicalist proclamations, scandalous duels, gambling, and support for revolutionary causes. ↪ He was a troubled person, humiliated and traumatised in his childhood because of his congenital disorder, his lame club foot. He identified more and more with the fictional figure of the Byronic villain hero he created.
- He loved Liberty, died for it in Greece. ↪ He despised common people.
- He hated England. ↪ He resented exile. (In 1816 he left England to never return, lived in Switzerland for a while (met the Shelleys), then settled in Italy.)

- He despised warfare. ↔ He was attracted to war. (He supported the Greek revolutionaries against the Turkish oppression, and the Italian *carbonari*, a secret militant nationalist association against the Hapsburg rule.)
- He was a libertine. ↔ He longed for a settled life as an English peer.
- He was a skeptic who questioned rebellion. ↔ He believed in his own beliefs.
- He was the genuine embodiment of a Romantic hero. ↔ He attacked Wordsworth and Coleridge, and praised Pope.

These conflicts were projected on the suffering ego of the poet Byron, however there is a development in his oeuvre from personal egotism reflected in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* to the social, communal solidarity. His interests became increasingly outward and his conflicts were resolved in satire, eg. in *Beppo*.

THE STAGES OF BYRON'S POETIC DEVELOPMENT:

1. Early Period (1807-1815)

NARCISSISTIC INTROSPECTION

- more concerned with himself than society
- the conflicts are there but unrealised
- the invention of the Byronic villain hero (a fusion of the real and the poetic self)
- *Weltschmerz*, spleen
- Orientalism
- *The Bride of Abydos, The Giaour, the Corsair, Lara*

2. Middle Period (1815-1818)

NIHILISM

- Conflicts are recognised and produce tension
- scepticism about solutions
- individual and collective conflicts coexist:
- tyranny, corruption in society ≈ the troubled mind of the divided self
- heroes on the defensive: poetry penetrates to the dark depth of personality
- *Darkness, The Dream, Manfred, Cain*

3. Last Period (1818-1824)

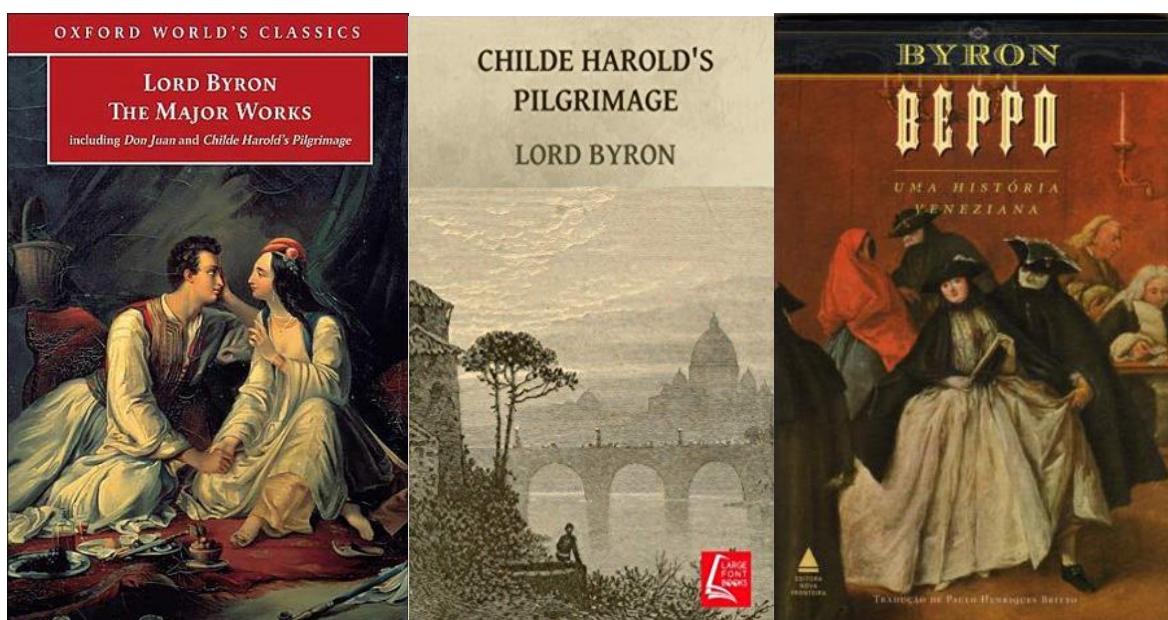
SATIRE

- the Byronic villain hero blames society for the discrepancy between what he seemed to be and what he actually was
- attacks the same discrepancy of society via the dark humour of satire
- vices are ridiculed: social criticism and psychologisation
- colloquial satire of a disillusioned idealist
- ottava rima, digression
- *Beppo, Don Juan*

When Byron's first volume of poetry *Hours of Idleness* (1807) received a negative critical response, he revenged himself with a scornful, satirical attack on the critics and on the established culture of his times in *English Bards and Scottish Reviewers* (1809).

Byron spent the following years with travelling, and his journeys to Spain, Malta, Albania, and Greece in between 1809 and 1811 proved to be formative of his personality and poetic career. His trips provided him with abundant inspiration for his trademark character: the sensitive, high-minded wanderer exiled from the society that he despised and rebelled against yet longed to belong to, a disillusioned artist tired of his hedonist existence and seeking consolation in foreign landscapes. The **Byronic villain hero** – an enigmatic figure grounded in the poet's fictional self-portrait – was characterised by a melancholic spleen, self-pity, pride, but also an extreme sensitivity and a generous mind. Glamorous, beautiful, restless, misanthropic, and mysterious, he was haunted by the guilt of crimes he sought to forget in violent, dangerous adventures, while “gloomily absorbed in memories of his past sins and the injustices done to him by society” (Ousby 62).

The character first appeared in Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-1818) that became an immediate success after its publication and turned Byron into a real celebrity figure, and a fashion icon of the **Byron mania**. This long semi-autobiographical poem mixed the description of the places Byron visited with moral, political, historical reflections, combining melancholic laments with rhapsodic appeal to degenerate nations to arise and recover their lost glory. In the fourth canto Byron actually drops the mask and writes in the first person, fully blurring life and art, as the artist seems to fully identify with the villain-hero figure he created. The character re-emerges in Byron's Cain, Manfred, and Don Juan, and is revived later on characters like *Wuthering Heights*'s Heathcliff, *Jane Eyre*'s Mr Rochester, or *Twilight*'s Edward Cullen.



Byron's **oriental verse tales** – “**The Giaour**” (1813), “**The Corsair**” (1814), and “**Lara**” (1814) – thematise mysterious, violent heroism, turbulent passions, and individual defiance which usually culminate in death or misery, and serve as exotic counterpoints to the ordinary, down-to-earth stillness of British life. They are perfect examples for the Romantic **Orientalism** craze, Western cultures' vivid fantasizing about strange “elsewhere” of a largely mystified, fictionalized East (Asia, North Africa, the Middle East), where the terrifying and tempting “exotic other” dwells. Postcolonialist scholars, like Edward Said, have criticised from the 1970s the patronising, stereotypical Western representations which reduce Eastern cultures to otherness, utopia, metaphor, source of land, labour, and material goods.



READ [The Norton Anthology of English Literature](#)'s examples for Romantic Orientalism

- Blake's tiger;
- dream of "an Arab of the Bedouin Tribes" in book 5 of Wordsworth's *Prelude*;
- the founder of the Mongol dynasty in China as well as an Abyssinian "damsel with a dulcimer" in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan";
- Eastern plots, characters, and themes in Byron's "Oriental tales," and *Don Juan*
- a poet's journey into the innermost reaches of the Caucasus (the legendary boundary between Europe and Asia) in Percy Shelley's *Alastor*;
- a tempting affair with an Indian maiden in Keats's "Endymion"
- a feast of "dainties" from Fez, Samarcand, Lebanon in Keats' "The Eve of St. Agnes";
- an Arab maiden, Safie, as the most liberated character in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Manfred: A dramatic poem (1816-17), a **closet drama** – a play not intended to be performed onstage, but read by a solitary reader or out loud in a small group – features the typical Byronian hero, a guilt-ridden, restless, solitary wanderer, tormented by an unspecified sorrow. The work was inspired by **Goethe's Faust** and written only a few months after the ghost-story writing competition with the Shelleys that gave impetus for *Frankenstein*. It is set in the sublime region of the Alps, abounds in **supernatural elements** and **metaphysical philosophical** reflections. The outcast hero struggles with the remorse he feels because the death of his sister caused by some obscure, destructive, unspecified relationship with her. He conjures the Spirits of Earth and Air, the Witch of the Alps, the Destinies and Nemesis to seek forgiveness in vain, but eventually his soul is saved by the spirit of beloved sister. Critics assume it is a **semi-autobiographical, confessional** text on Byron's incestuous relationship with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh that provoked on immense scandal and terminated his marriage just before the poem's composition.



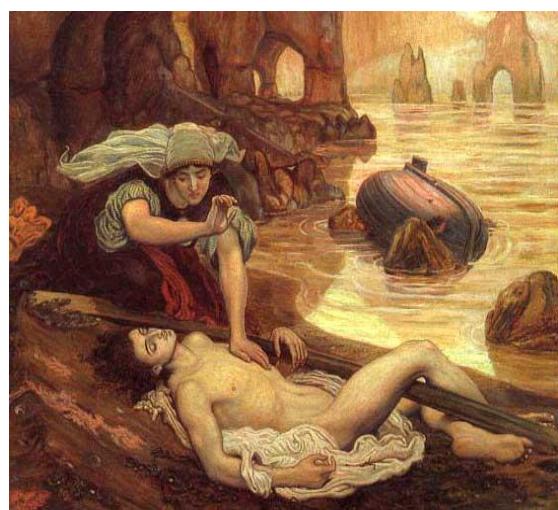
Manfred was adapted musically by Robert Schumann in 1852 and Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky in 1885 Click on the hyperlinks and listen to [Schumann's Overture](#) and [Tchaikovsky's Symphony](#)

The closet drama on *Cain* (1821) gives a blasphemous, perverse twist to the Biblical story by transforming Cain, the first murderer into a focaliser (we see the events from his perspective). Cain is a rebel hero dissatisfied with the post-lapsarian life of toil, and curious to learn from Lucifer more than God will reveal to him.

Beppo: A Venetian Story (1817) is a long poem Byron wrote in Venice presumably inspired by an autobiographical experience, an exciting yet uncomfortable episode of being a *cavalier servente*, a tolerated lover of the wife of an elderly Italian nobleman. This specimen of **discursive narrative poetry** – a precursor to *Don Juan* – offers an ironic commentary on public issues of contemporary social life and manners. (It mocks London smoke, weather, chilly women, and bourgeois hypocrisy), while satirising both English and Italian life and himself (his prejudices, vices, fate). According to the plot, a long lost soldier Giuseppe (Beppo in short) returns to Venice to find out, masked in the Carnival disguise of a Turkish merchant, that his wife has consoled herself with a gallant lover. Byron recycles the stock characters of the *commedia dell'arte* tradition, but he also creates a Romantic version of the **urban wit** he admired so much in Pope.

This is Byron's first attempt at using *ottava rima*, an eight-line, ten-syllable verse form, the metre of Italian burlesque poetry. This verse form allows for a variety of both expression and mood, for satire and sentiment, and gives disciplined freedom to his verse in loose stanzas. The narrative structure is peculiar. Less than half of the 99 stanzas are directed to telling the story, so that the poem is predominated by digression that deviates from the storyline extensively to mockingly comment on a variety of mundane topics in a **colloquial satire**. This **digressive structure** is possibly a metaphor for Byron's own life experience, suggesting that life is a digression between birth and death, that linear sequential storytelling's chronology is inevitably fractured in art and life alike. Ironically, there is even a digression on the nature of digression, coupled by tongue-in-cheek self-reflective commentaries like "I find digression is a sin." This **unplotted poem** seems to say that no story can account for the variability of life.

Don Juan (1819-) is Byron's most well-known work, a long, unfinished poem, in 16 cantos, a satirical epic in *ottava rima*, a novel in verse that immediately gained an immense popularity. He creates a negligent version of the Spanish **picaresque** genre, that traditionally tracks how the roguish young hero of low birth makes his adventurous way in a corrupt society via his cunning and courage. Byron boldly mingles his attitudes as ironist and idealist, jester and critic, observer and sufferer, conjoining historical and fictional events and personages.



FORD MADOX BROWN: *THE FINDING OF DON JUAN BY HAIDÉE* (1869-1870)

Although the poem was criticized for immorality, this Don Juan is not a heartless womanizer but an innocent, passive, young man who learns from a variety of international amorous adventures. On a Greek island he has a love affair with Haidée a pirate's daughter, in Constantinople the sultana tries to seduce him, in Russia he becomes a favourite of Catherine the Great. He is a questionable hero because he is “**more acted upon than acting**,” he remains at the mercy of external forces and the caprices of women; hence, his search for identity is never fully accomplished.

The adventures (shipwreck, cannibalism, diplomatic mission) give an opportunity to formulate satirical and philosophical commentaries on the workings of English society, human hypocrisy, to debunk conventionally accepted myths and morals (the supposed glory in war, fidelity in love, benevolence of nature, kindness of men). The narrator is a sophisticated, sharp sighted observer, with cynical amusement and warm sympathy for the poor, weak, and victimized. He reveals that pity, humour, and compassionate acceptance are the only way to face our chaotic and uncontrollable world.

 THINK	EXERCISE:
	How does Wordsworth's solitary wanderer differ from Byron's?
	What makes Byron's Don Juan a hero and what makes him an anti-hero?
	Why does Byron make so many digressions from the plot?

3. PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY' POETRY

The dominant conflict of Shelley's poetry was rooted in his simultaneous attraction to **revolutionary poetic radicalism** and **(neo)Platonic idealism**. He formulated best his *ars poetica* in the preface to his *Prometheus Unbound*: “I have a passion for reforming the world.” His political poetry – informed by pacifist, socialist, and even vegetarian ideologies; all advocating liberty, democratic ideals, and the moral responsibility to fight tyrannical oppression – can be divided into three distinct categories: didactic, allegorical, and symbolical abstract poetry.

1.Didactic poetry: “**Song to the Men of England, England 1819**” is a political sonnet (written in 1919 and published only in 1839) that described King George III as despised, dying, mad, old king, the nobility as leech-like princes who suck the blood of the nation, the Parliament as a relic, and the people as starved, hopeless, and Godless. Still the last two lines reflect a relentless belief in Romantic ideals of love and beauty, a hope that a glorious Phantom may spring forth from this decay. The Phantom refers to the French Revolution that placed the slogans Liberty, Equality, Fraternity on its banner, while acting as the ultimate apocalyptic *deus ex machina* to save the country.

2.Allegorical poetry: “**The Masque of Anarchy**” (1819) is a political poem inspired by the Peterloo Massacre where cavalry charged into a crowd gathered to demand the reform of

parliamentary representation. It advocates nonviolent resistance against unjust forms of authority (“God, and King, and Law”) and dreams of a democratic assembly “of the fearless, of the free.” The poem is grounded in the rhetorical device of the **allegory** that uses an extended metaphor and symbolic imagery to transmit a social critical message about real life problems. Here, members of the Lord Liverpool’s government appear as masks worn by Murder, Hypocrisy, and Fraud. Led by the skeletal king Anarchy they strive to take over England until they are stopped by maiden Hope who arises from the mist to save the people. Shelley’s thoughts inspired Gandhi’s passive resistance and Thoreau’s civil disobedience, too.

3. Symbolic abstraction Shelley defined his poetic agenda in the Preface to his *Prometheus Unbound* as “beautiful idealism of moral excellence,” arguing that cultivated imagination should promote the moral, intellectual revolution he believed to be a pre-requisite of lasting, democratising change in political institutions (Duffy 127). These thoughts emerge in *Ode to Liberty* (1820) that describes Europe’s ongoing political upheaval in terms of the brute force of systematic volcanic activity. *Prometheus Unbound* is a four-act lyrical closet drama (1820) that celebrates the revolutionary intents of the trickster Titan, Prometheus, a mythological figure who defied Gods, stole fire from the Olympus, and gave it to humans to improve mortals’ life. Unlike in the classical Greek myth, in Shelley’s lyrical drama inspired by Aeschylus’ tragedy, Prometheus’s fate is not eternal punishment and suffering. Tyrant Zeus, abandoned by his supportive elements, falls from power, and the philanthropic Titan is released.

NOTES:

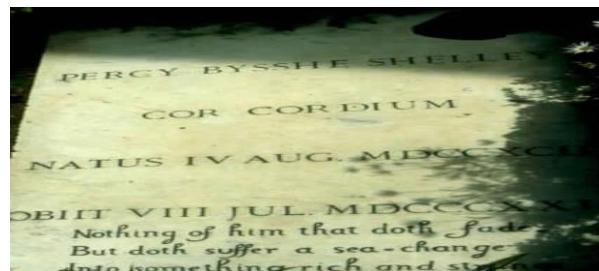
1. In the original myth, Prometheus is chained to a cliff, where each day an eagle, the emblem of Zeus, comes to feed on his liver, which grows back overnight to be ripped out again the next day.
2. Prometheus is a complex figure: his theft of fire enables human progress and civilization but it also unchains violence; flames can be used to gain warmth but they can also burn a house down or fry the meat of a prey. (Shelley as a vegetarian condemned meat eating.)
3. The modern Prometheus in the subtitle of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (written at Villa Diodati in 1816, published in 1818) represented the dangerous consequences of human quest for (scientific) knowledge, the risk of overreaching. – P.B. Shelley’s lengthy poem *Alastor or the Spirit of Solitude* (1816) has a slightly similar theme combining the gothic supernatural lure with cautionary warnings and metaimaginative self-reflections about artistic fantasising agency. An evil genius animates the Poet’s imagination that zealously pursues the most obscure part of Nature in search of "strange truths in undiscovered lands."

Mary was P.B. Shelley’s second wife. Percy abandoned his pregnant wife Harriet to elope with sixteen-years-old Mary Godwin. They travelled to France, Italy, and Switzerland, where she wrote *Frankenstein*, a story of failed, monstrous parenting, possibly recording within a science-fictional framework her traumatic experiences of miscarriages and Shelley’s negligent fathering. Their relationship was passionate, troubled, but mutually inspiring. They could eventually marry when Harriet committed suicide but they lost custody of Shelley’s children on grounds of his atheism, and their marriage was repeatedly put on trial by Percy’s affairs with other women, his financial troubles, and the premature death of four of their babies (only one son survived into adulthood).

Percy died in a truly Romantic fashion, shortly before his thirtieth birthday he drowned in the sea (with a volume of Keats' poems in his pocket) when his boat called Don Juan (in homage to Byron) sunk in the thunderstorm. He was cremated on a beach near Viareggio for health reasons, but, as legend has it, Mary snatched his heart from the funeral pyre, she kept it in a silken shroud and carried it with her nearly everywhere for years. After her death, Percy's heart was found in her desk wrapped in the pages of one of his last poems, *Adonais*, and was eventually buried in the family vault with their son in 1889. Moreover, the British Library's thick, red-leather-bound volume containing Mary Shelley's letter to Maria Gisbourne about Shelley's death presumably contains within an inlaid in the back cover some of Shelley's ashes and fragments of his skull.



Louis Édouard Fournier. *The Funeral of Shelley*, 1889.
from Wikimedia Commons.



WATCH

Click on the hyperlink and watch short biographical video on Percy Bysshe Shelley from [Literary Classics \(UK, 1999\)](#)

The root of Shelley's romantic conflict lies in his attraction to both atheism, political radicalism, and materialism (represented by Godwin's socialist thoughts) AND idealism (along the lines of Plato's philosophy). This conflict is experienced on several levels (see chart below). In Shelley's poetic oeuvre we can map a development from the simple belief in utopian revolution to a more symbolic view of how good/love/liberty will ultimately defeat evil/hate/tyranny. Gradually, his lyricism became less didactic and actual, and much more abstract, filled with mystery, ecstasy, and myth-making. His last unfinished poem "**The Triumph of Life**" (1822) can be interpreted as the reconciliation of materialism and idealism, an attempt at the fusion of the two opposing trends.

CONFLICTS IN SHELLEY'S ART

SOCIAL/POLITICAL CONFLICT

What IS in the world (*England 1819*) ↔ What MIGHT BE in the world (*Prometheus U*)

PERSONAL CONFLICT

BODY ↔ SPIRIT (*Ode to the West Wind, To a Skylark*)

PHILOSOPHICAL CONFLICT

NATURE AS NECESSITY (*The Cloud*) ↔ NATURE AS SPIRIT OF LOVE (*To a Skylark*)

“Mont Blanc, Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni” (1816) is an **ode to nature** in irregular rhyme that praises the mountain as the locus of “the secret Strength of things Which governs thought, and the infinite dome Of Heaven is as a law, Inhabits thee!” It is a **picturesque travel narrative in a lyrical form** with a poetic climax that personifies “the great Mountain [who] has a voice, not understood by all.” The poem testifies to the **co-dependent union of the human interpreter and the natural lifeworld**. The artist’s consciousness gains inspiration from nature, but nature has power only in relation to/by courtesy of the human mind. The poetic genius strives to invest it with meanings even if the sublime landscape might be too overwhelming to be captured by mundane thought. (“The immensity of these aerial summits excited when they suddenly burst upon the sight, a sentiment of ecstatic wonder, not unallied to madness”). Challenging Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s nature poetry, Shelley neither credits God for the sublime natural wonders nor does he cherish nature as fundamentally benevolent. In his view, the mountain’s spirit teaches us that Nature can be both a nurturing and destructive force depending on how we relate to it. In that sense, **the powers of**

Mont Blanc parallel the powers of imagination that holds a capacity to create and decompose, to comprehend truths and dwell in illusions, to prophetically capture the totality of universal being and to be dazed and confused by sensory perceptions. The poem builds on the Romantic trope of **the poet as seer**.

„Ode to the West Wind”’s idea of the poet-prophet-trumpet emerges in *The Defence of Poetry* (1819) where Shelley writes:

“Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”

“**Ode to the West Wind**” (1819) is perhaps one of Shelley’s most well-known poems written in Florence, Italy where the poet in a self-afflicted exile **mourned** the death of his infant son born to Mary Shelley and lamented that he cannot help English people from abroad. Yet the ode still carries an **optimistic** message. The wild west wind appears as an untamed element of nature that can freely spread the poet-prophet’s revolutionary, messianistic message, the lyrical voice ardently hopes that his words will find fertile ground in people’s minds, and will inspire social reforms. The wind, like the poet, is a **trumpet of prophecy** that can awaken all; it can both preserve and destroy, but always brings about change. The final line is a rhetorical question that resonates with an idealistic, nearly utopian promise, an optimistic vision of future. “**If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?**” implies that due to the cyclical rhythm of the lifeworld, decay is necessarily followed by rebirth and the **regeneration of Nature as a source of Truth and Beauty**. The trope of Spring stands for human consciousness, imagination, liberty, and morality – everything that Art hopes to bring to Mankind.

"To a Skylark" (1820) is a **nature ode** inspired by an evening walk with Mary in the countryside of Livorno, Italy. The Skylark is **more of a spirit than a bird**. Its song emanates from Heaven and stays behind even when the bird disappears. Unpremeditated art flows from its breast and heart, and floats like "unbodied joy" in the golden lightning of sun, as "flood of rapture divine." Any human hymn to love or victory pales by comparison. The poet is preoccupied with the question, what inspires the bird's song, whom does it address, what does it mean? He asks, "**What are the fountains of thy happy strain?**" and concludes that the skylark knows things more true than mortals can dream of because it lives **unaware of love's sad satiety**, its song is flawless because it is neither tormented by desire, nor troubled by the awareness of impending death. Perfect bliss is impossible for humans, since our existence is permeated by experiences of loss, pain, and insatiable yearning. The sweetest songs of mankind are melancholic accounts of the saddest thoughts. The lyrical I begs the bird for guidance on how to create **harmonious madness** (an oxymoron), and simple satiety in/via art, while he knows that his quest for ethereal, spiritual bliss must remain futile. "Teach me half the gladness That thy brain must know. Such harmonious madness From my lips would flow. The world should listen then, as I'm listening now." Paradoxically the simple, thoughtless beast offers more universal delights than any poet can. Yet this "**pining for what is not**" constitutes the very essence of human (and especially artistic) being.

4. JOHN KEATS'S POETRY

JOHN KEATS (1795-1821) was a major figure of the second generation of Romantic poets despite his short writing career (1816-1821) terminated by his premature death from tuberculosis at the age of 25. Keats's interest in social conditions was not as revolutionary as Shelley's, and not as satirical or sceptical as Byron's. His themes mainly dealt with personal conflicts in a poetry of sensations that held wider intellectual, philosophical implications concerning human existence, the longing for freedom, and the unattainability of beauty. His influence was immense on Victorian poetry and art.

CONFLICTS IN KEATS' ART
FACT↔ MAGIC
SUBJECTIVE IMAGINATION ↔ OBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE
BODY ↔ SPIRIT
MELANCHOLY ↔ JOY
SENSUOUS BEAUTY ↔ SPIRITUAL BEAUTY

Keats's earliest work "**Endymion**" (1818) is an escapist, idealist poem dedicated to the poet predecessor Chatterton. This dream-like tale recycles the Greek myth of the shepherd beloved by the Moon goddess Celeste, in a pastoral vision musing about the amorous interactions between the opposite spheres of Earth and Heaven, between mortal and immortal realms. The oft-quoted initial lines testify to a proto-aestheticist cult of beauty: "**A thing of beauty is a joy forever.** 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.” Similar to the shorter poems of the period 1817-18, “*Endymion*” is preoccupied with **Sensuous Beauty, Joy, and Magic**, without exploring in depth their contraries.

Keats’s poetry is distinguished by a sensuous richness, dense images, and **synaesthesia** whereby several sense impressions are experienced simultaneously. Perceptions blend and intensify one another, as acoustic stimuli may trigger tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and visual sensations which transgress the limits of consciousness. The mystery of creative power is originated from the union of sleep and awakening. Dreaming allows for a magical liberation from facts, however awakening is followed by disillusion, a sense of loss, and an existential anxiety concerning the impossibility to tell which is the real and which is the make believe world? In fact, instead of shying away from the feeling of incertitude, Keats turns into a cornerstone of his poetry. According to his famous definition, **negative capability** refers to a state of mind “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after faith and reason” The great poet refutes Enlightenment rationalism, and accepts that not everything can be explained/resolved, that reality is rich in a multiplicity of potentialities, that the truth=beauty found in imagination is the only real authority.

Keats wrote **strange lyrical tales of passion, death, and devotion** which inspired the era’s famous painters including William Holman Hunt, John William Waterhouse, John Everett Millais and Arthur Hughes among others. (*see images below*) “*Lamia*,” “*Isabella, or the Pot of Basil;*” and “*The Eve of St Agnes*” (1820) are narrative poems which tell the stories of a woman trapped within a serpent’s body, a maiden hiding her dead beloved’s head in a flower pot, and medieval superstitious ritual for foreseeing future husbands, respectively. Mysticism is preferred to rationality as a more favourable ground for fantasising, as the following quote attests: “Philosophy will clip an Angel’s wings/ Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,/ Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine-/ Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made/The tender person’d Lamia melt into a shade.”



La Belle Dame Sans Merci" (1819), a visionary ballad with a fairy-tale atmosphere and a faux-medieval setting, tackles one of Keats's favourite plotlines: **a dream coming true is followed by a disillusioned awakening to reality, and a reluctance to define what is real and what is make-believe**. A framed dream narrative, mirroring the initial rhetorical question in the final lines, is structured as follows: 1. A questioner ponders about a lonely, disturbed knight loitering apparently aimlessly in a desolate landscape; 2. An embedded narrative recounts the knight's forest encounter with a lady who fatally mesmerised him with her mysterious charms.; 3. The epilogue describes the consequences of the lady's disappearance, the irredeemable loss of the dream.



Frank Bernard Dicksee. *LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI*, 1901. Bristol Museum. Public domain.

Conforming to the Keatsian agenda of “negative capability,” the poem is full of **uncertainties, doubts, shadows**, a sense of inexplicable events going on, a paradoxical feel of forgotten revelations, an odd combination of bliss and terror, of enrichment and deprivation, eliciting psychic and physical disorientation. One can recognize the classic supernatural trope of “**fairy enthrallment**” but in a **metafictional** manner one can also wonder if the faerial figure is just a fictitious construct of the poet’s mind, Keats called “a mansion of many apartments.” It is unclear if the idyllic union of lovers was broken because of the lady’s treacherous ruthlessness, the knight’s inability to retain the vision, or the radical incompatibility of the two spheres of dream and reality. The poem lends itself to be read as a **tragic quest narrative** of the poet-knight but the lady is indubitably the pivotal character of the vision who intrigues our imagination. It is difficult to decide is she is a demon lover beldam, a serial seductress *femme fatale*, or an otherworldly, ethereal fairy. Her “**sweet moan**” that bewitches the knight can be just as much an expression of love, ecstasy, as sorrow, and pain. Similarly, her “**language strange**” might either transcend above or degenerate from human communication. Does she speak in bestial grunts or a pre-lapsarian angelic discourse? And is the encounter more like a domestic, bucolic idyll, an interspecies romance, a fatal accident, a plot of seduction, or a scene of harassment? And if the latter is the case, who seduces whom? These remain open-ended questions since the young man fails to answer the impatient inquiries: “O WHAT can ail thee, knight-at-arms, Alone and palely loitering? The sedge has wither’d from the lake, And no birds sing.” **A fading vision of perfection and a melancholic uncertainty permeate the entire text.**

Keats’ Odes are miniature dramas of the reconciliation of the ideal and the real. They are mature expressions of the **Keatsian conflict – between pleasure/pain, happiness/melancholy, imagination/reality, art/life – coming to a balanced complexity**. The poems celebrate the sensuous beauty of the material world that seems even more precious because of its **transience**, its

fragility, the ill poet's growing **awareness of vulnerability, decay, and impending death**. The generic framework of the **ode**, the intellectual and emotional glorification of natural or cultural objects, serves a pretext to reflect on **mutability, the quest for permanence, the limited therapeutic, compensatory potentials of visionary imagination**, the effects of the passage of time on beauty and human love, and the relentless permanence and insatiability of yearnings. They express an **aesthetic approach to life**, where the transitory life of **sensuous beauty** is contrasted with the permanent art of **spiritual beauty**. Keats was prolific throughout his short writing life, in 1819 he composed the odes entitled *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode to Psyche*, *Ode on Melancholy*, *Ode On Indolence*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. Some of these are so-called **companion pieces** that are in close relationship with another: *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is concerned with Art, while *To a Nightingale* reflects on Nature.

In “**Ode to a Nightingale**” 1819) the birdsong is a **symbol of timelessness**. It allows the listener to escape from the civilised human world of disillusion, transience, decay, corruption and change to an ideal natural realm ruled by liberty, warmth, music, perfection, permanence, and infinity. The poet's recognition of the immense happiness of the nightingale and the ultimate artistic perfection of its song provides such an intense experience, that his aesthetic delight borders on pain (“my heart aches”). It is even more so because he is aware that his **daydreaming** immersion into the immortal bliss of the bird will be necessarily followed by an **awakening** to the numb melancholy of mortal human existence (full of “the weariness, the fever, and the fret”). As the poet is moving into darkness, and listening to the fading song, he is willing to exchange visual sensations for auditory, acoustic ones, and considers closing his eyes forever. He contends that even dying would be a positive experience amidst the enjoyment of such beauty. (“Now more than ever seems it rich to die, To cease upon the midnight with no pain, While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad In such an ecstasy!”). Death could make time stand still and freeze-frame the perfect moment, so that the bird song would be a requiem for the poet who no longer feels mortal pains. However, dying would also disconnect him from the perfect artwork. Paradoxically, a beautiful ending would be the ending of the ability to respond to beauty, too. The poem suggests that in order to appreciate beauty you must be alive, you must learn to accept the ephemeral nature of pleasures, and learn to live with sorrows, suffering, mortality. As the bird flies away, the lyrical self asks himself with an uncertain rhetorical question “**Was it a vision or a waking dream? Fled is that music – Do I wake or sleep?**” The **nightingale transcends death**; as a songbird it seems capable of living through its song; it **symbolises immortal imagination**. This is a **metapoem**, rich in synesthetic imagery, reflecting on the limits and potentials of artistic creativity, and offering account of Keats's personal journey into the mind set of negative capability.

 LISTEN  ANSWER	EXERCISE:	
	Click and Listen to the Skylark's Song and the Nightingale's Song here: https://www.british-birdsongs.uk Then collect the similes and metaphors Shelley and Keats use to describe the birds's songs?	
	SKYLARK ('s SONG)	NIGHTINGALE ('s SONG)
	raindrops from rainbow clouds	summer in full-throated ease.....
	a high born maiden in a tower...	a light-winged Dryad of the trees

Ode on a Grecian Urn (1819) is an example of **ekphrastic poetry**: the poet-focaliser proves his imaginative and writerly skills by providing a verbal description of a visual artwork. Keats's account of the beauty of the people and events painted on an ancient vase concludes that though art has the capacity to escape the ravages of time and freeze-frame a perfect moment into infinity, but only at the expense of an eternal unfulfilment, the loss of dynamic liveliness. **Perpetual stasis** is sublime, suspenseful, both admirably and irritably silent. The bride on the urn remains forever between the wedding ceremony and the bridal bed; the consummation of desires is endlessly delayed. The “warmth of life” is captured in a “cold pastoral.” The urn itself is addressed personified as “**Thou still unravished bride of quietness,**” and the questions it provokes ask: How to create verbal images that live up to the decoration of the urn? (This rivalry between the linguistic and the visual modes of representation belongs to the *ut pictura poesis* tradition.) How to translate, via an intermedial shift, images into text? (The former is able to express spatiality, the latter temporality.) How to make words stand the test of time as the urn did? The final aphorism-like lines, “**Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.**” acknowledge the immortality of artistic beauty that stands in stark contrast with the ephemeral but lively passions of human existence’s lived reality. Keats’s metapoem comments on both the wonders and limitations of art.



“**Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.**”

 WATCH	
	<u>Click on the hyperlink and watch trailer for biopic period drama on Keats's art and life, Bright Star, directed by Jane Campion</u>

Ode to Autumn adopts an admirable nature imagery to express a transient moment in the flux of time, the bittersweet pleasure derived from the lack of permanence. Autumn is a season whose bounty represents both the intensification of life, ripeness, fertility and inevitable decay, a soft dying of the day. Although, the fleeting nature of beauty provokes heartache, we must learn to

appreciate that pain, and accept loss and the passing of time as a natural parts of life, so that we can live in harmony with Nature. The Goddess of Autumn appears as a careless girl, a burdened gleaner, a patient watcher, while the lyrical I is missing from the text. His presence is marked by his absence, perhaps a fading into Nature. The melodic and picturesque language of the poem stimulated a variety of senses. Even if Autumn is the season of passing, it makes us feel alive.



*SEASON of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.*

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