

**Institute of Distance and Open Learning  
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**MA in English  
Semester 2**

**Paper VIII  
Romantic Poetry**

**Block 1  
Early Romantics**



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## **Block Introduction:**

In this paper on Romantic poetry, the students are required and expected to study, understand and interpret the poetic worlds of some of the major English Romantic poets. Here, in this paper, we have taken up five of the great Romantic poets, leaving out Coleridge. You may, of course, ask why this has happened since we are often attuned to Coleridge's propositions on "Imagination" and the famous Lyrical Ballads (whose 'preface' rests as a 'manifesto' of Romanticism). We can offer no satisfactory answer except academic considerations of students' work-load, and some such mundane matters. However, we also presume and hope that you are already well acquainted with the critical ideas as well as some of the great poems by Coleridge.

Here, in this block, we come to the early Romantics. This block discusses William Blake and William Wordsworth, whom we have categorized as early Romantics. The following block in the same paper will take up three other major Romantic poets - Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats. This categorization as 'early' and 'later' is simply based on their arrival into the world of English romantic poetry. As you carry on your reading of the poets, you will find it interesting to notice how the 'later' Romantic poets were influenced, to varied extent, by their predecessors.

Within the restricted space of our course and prescribed texts, we have followed our usual method of helping you to voice some provocative questions. You must take care to keep beside you a copy of the poems as you read them with the help of this study material. Without this prior preparation you will miss out on all the references we make to the text itself. The poems prescribed for you are so well-known that you should have no difficulty in getting the copies to study.

As postgraduates, you should have no trouble at all with comprehension. What you are required to do here is to move beyond the mere meanings of words to the ideas that bring them together. For instance, with Blake's 'Tyger', you will have no difficulty with textual comprehension since the tiger is a familiar symbol of strength, power, force, and the like. Blake, you will find, is doing much more work here; the familiar symbol occurs within a special train of thought linked to Blake's overriding philosophy of human freedom, social oppression and mythology. Thus, reading 'Tyger' is not a

simple matter of 'understanding' the poem but reading it against the backdrop of the whole set of attitudes and qualities called 'Romanticism'. This alone should alert you to the question as to what are the defining traits of 'Romanticism'.

The questions we raise for you will help you to identify some of the more important concepts special to Romantic poetry. If you can, do follow up on some of the extra suggestions and information we bring to you. Your readings will be much richer than what we finally provide here.

**Unit 1** : Blake

**Unit 2** : Wordsworth

# Unit 1

## Blake

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### 1.1 OBJECTIVES

The aim of the unit is to introduce the Romantic poet, **William Blake**, to you. Blake is considered to be the forerunner of the Romantic movement and his romanticism becomes apparent in his radical sympathies and general dislike of human authority, his interest in legend and antiquity, and the yearning for freedom and spiritual vision. Taking into consideration the complexity of Blake's thinking the present unit aims to offer a reading of Blake, with its mixture of extremes in thought and work, the reception accorded to him through the century, and his place in the context of romantic poetry. We should take into consideration the fact that Blake eludes any final interpretation and the unit, in the same vein, also aims to encourage the spirit of new approaches to the study of Blake. By the end of your reading of this unit, you will

- *place* Blake in the English poetic tradition
- *explore* 'Romanticism' as a concept
- *uncover* new readings of Blake's poetry
- *evaluate* Blake's contribution to English poetry

## 1.2 INTRODUCING THE POET

William Blake was born in 1757. His father, James, was a successful London hosier and a Dissenter. Blake was educated by his mother, read widely in Shakespeare, Milton, Ben Jonson, the Bible but never got a formal education. At the age of fourteen he was apprenticed to James Basire, an engraver and stayed with him till he was twenty-one. His higher ambition landed him at the Royal Academy at Somerset House and in 1782, he married Catherine Boucher. In 1783 is to be seen the publication of his first volume *Poetical Sketches* while *Songs of Innocence* was published in 1789. Blake's distrust of human authority found expression in friendship with William Godwin and Tom Paine. Blake wrote two sets of prose aphorisms to illustrate his radical views. From 1793 he began to work on the 'prophetic books' and executed some of his most famous engravings including those for *The Book of Job and Night Thoughts* (Edward Young). *The Visions of Daughters Of Albion* (1793) introduced the figures of Blake's personal mythology and his other symbolic works followed. In 1800, Blake was taken up by the wealthy William Hayley to live at Felpham in Sussex (now West Sussex). These years in Felpham were soured by his arrest on trumped-up charges of sedition and Blake returned to London in 1803 to remain there for the rest of his life. At Felpham he worked on *Milton : A Poem in Two Books, To Justify the Ways of God to Men*. *Jerusalem* was written between 1804 and 1820 and *The Ghost of Abel* came in 1822. Some of the other works of Blake are difficult to place in the chronology of his career and some works remained unknown until his papers were examined after his death. Blake was really a one-man-industry, designing, engraving and producing his own works making him one of the most difficult artists to assess.

Blake's political stance is clearly evident from his writings and we can categorize him to be an instinctive radical completely at odds with the established tyrannical doctrines. Commonly labeled as a visionary, a rebel, Blake was certainly a man who lived through his time with radical beliefs and responded to social and political events like the French Revolution, or the repressive policy of the British Government (for fear of revolutionary activity at home), or rapid changes in social life as a consequence of developing industrialization. Excluding the social changes, Blake's literary career was also influenced by powerful minds like the German mystic Jakob Boehme, the Swedish missionary Swedenborg, Dante, Milton, Isaac Watts,

and Charles Wesley. The influences of Jewish cabbalistic ideas, and the Bible are noteworthy in this regard and Blake exploited these materials to form the world of his poetry.

### 1.3 HIS WORKS

Coming directly from factors which influenced Blake's writing, we can categorise his poetry easily. Blake's works mainly deal with themes like the contrary stages of innocence and experience, social oppression, and the question of knowledge. An understanding of the complex mythology, symbolism, and prophetic utterances of the Bible is necessary for a proper appreciation of Blake's eclectic and syncretic works. Some of his works are *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789-1794), *Poetical Sketches* (1769-78), *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-3), *America* (1793), *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), *The Book of Thel* (1789), *The French Revolution* (1791), *The Book of Urizen* (1794), *Tiriel* (1789), *The Four Zoas* (1795-1804).

*Poetical Sketches*, of 1769 - 78, is Blake's first work to be published. *The Book of Thel* (1789) illustrates his early mysticism and use of emblems and *Tiriel* (1789), written in rhetorical free verse, presents a vision of the universe and a Blakean doctrine of Man. *The French Revolution* (1791) shows Blake's response to contemporary events. In *The Book of Urizen* (1794), we find the figure of Urizen, the representative of a negative God, functioning as the prime oppressor. Blake has already introduced the figures of his personal mythology - Urizen, the grim symbol of restrictive morality and Orc, the arch-rebel in *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793). *The Book of Los* (1795) presents the rebellion against Urizen by the indignant Los and Orc, the embodiment of revolution. The theme of oppression and its thwarting dominates *America* (1793). In its sequel *Europe : A prophecy*, it is Orc's mother Enithorman who breeds revolution and also checks it. Perhaps *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is the most important work for an understanding of Blake's prophetic visions. The work voices his revolt against all accepted values and is prefaced by a poem 'The Argument' revealing the corruption of the path of truth by false religion. *The Four Zoas* presents the fully developed mythology concerning man and his destiny.

**SAQ**

What are the general features of Blake's life-history ? (30 words)

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What are the possible sources of the names of Blake's 'characters'?  
( 20 words)

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What were the grounds of Blake's opposition to social oppression ?  
(40 words)

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**1.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION**

Blake's writing was not well received during his life time, but his fame started to grow before his death and the nineteenth century witnessed a gradual rise in his fame. The Rossettis adopted his works, Swinburne wrote the first substantial critical essay on him, and Yeats with his colleague, E. J. Ellis, published the annotated edition of his work. During the twentieth century, Blake's reputation was highlighted by two major books - *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) by Northrop Frye and *Blake : Prophet against Empire* (1969) by David Erdman. Erdman focuses on the historical study of Blake's writing and Frye traces the complexities and symmetries of Blake's mythic system. Other scholars have conducted different studies on Blake including his political attitude and gender politics and we hope for more critical materials on Blake in the coming years.



## **Romanticism & Poetry**

How do we understand 'Romantic' writing ? We group together six English poets, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, and Keats; the German writers Friedrich Hölderlin, Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, Novalis, Ludwig Tieck, the brothers Schlegel, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, and bring in the French Chateaubriand, Mme de Stael, and Pierre-Simon Ballanche to identify a common thread, "Romanticism".

A.O. Lovejoy, the historian of ideas, argues for the use of "Romanticisms" to stress the diversity within the attitudes collectively named thus. René Wellek, the critic, argues for a holistic view of Romanticism. To sum up this discussion, we can observe that it is not a unified movement with a clear agenda but can be described as an attitude of intellectual orientation visible in music, literature, painting, criticism, and historiography in Western civilisation in the period 1780-1840.

As a movement liable to be described as the 'Counter-Enlightenment', Romanticism emphasised the subjective, the imaginative, the personal, the emotional, the spontaneous, the visionary, and the transcendental. Uninhibited self-expression was glorified as against the heritage of the Enlightenment which upheld the values of calmness, harmony, balance, order, rationality and idealization, all associated with neo-classical attitudes and the rationalism and physical materialism of the eighteenth century.

The word 'romantic' and its associations came to circulate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and referred to the poetic realm of medieval romance and that which was bizarre, picturesque and fantastic. The term, "gothic", identified these tendencies in English but 'romantic' became the stable term of reference only towards the end of the nineteenth century. The markers of Romanticism include an appreciation of the beauty of Nature, exaltation of emotion over reason, the senses over the intellect, the heightened examination of human personality, moods, mental capacities, a preoccupation with the idea of the self and genius, the idea of the hero and the hero's turmoils and struggles, the artist as supreme creator distinguished by a strong current of individualism and creative spirit.

In England, Romanticism found an early expression in the writing of William Blake whose personal mythology and symbolism dramatizing the interaction of different psychic components and of religious and socio-historical energies coupled with the castigation of established authority and principles of rationality and a prophetic voice paved the way for later poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge.

## 1.5 CONTEXT OF SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE

*Songs of Innocence and of Experience* was written between 1789 and 1794 and it shows the two contrary states of the human soul forming a kind of dialectic suggestive of the progress towards matured experience through an untarnished innocence. Blake here combines the nursery-rhyme rhythms, moral primness and hymn-like simplicity to show the transition from the state of Edenic innocence to the state of adult response to the world with a hope of future regain of the convivial joys of childhood. *Songs of Innocence* focuses on the challenges to and corruptions of the innocent state while *Songs of Experience* is more satirical, and even sarcastic in tone.

## 1.6 READING THE POEMS

### 1.6.1 Reading 'Holy Thursday'

With our previous knowledge about the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, it is easier to read this poem which is included in the *Songs of Innocence*. The poem exemplifies the state of innocent human desire and shows how the graceful state of innocence is challenged and destroyed by the force of experienced hostility. Unlike its counterpart (the poem 'Holy Thursday' in *Songs of Experience*) this poem dramatises the contrast between the children's spontaneity and the regimentation of their lives. Blake takes the annual Ascension Day procession of the children from the charity-schools to illustrate what he actually means by innocence. 'Holy Thursday' is the day when the poor, destitute children go to St. Paul's Cathedral to listen to sermons and sing hymns for their benefactors, who are enormously pleased to be thanked so ostentatiously in the presence of the Almighty.

### SAQ

What makes this poem 'a song' of 'innocence'? (50 words)

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.....  
.....

What are the qualities or attributes of 'innocence'? (40 words)

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.....  
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We can find out the regimentation of the children, their mechanical regularity from the first lines where the 'children' are 'walking two and two in red and blue and green' marshaled by the 'grey headed beadles' ready to freeze the youthful energy. The children are the 'flowers of London town'. Unlike the powerful 'Tyger', they are the 'multitudes of lambs,' where the lamb symbolizes the sacrificial victim. Here Blake equates the flow of Thames water with the movement of the children. Images of innocence abound in the poem and 'innocent faces', 'innocent hands', etc., evoke the picture of innocence corrupted by the matured understanding. Blake uses colours to highlight his point; let us take the colours related to the children. Red, blue, green, and of course, the colours of the flowers enrich the spectacle of the procession of the charity school children. But the beadles are 'grey headed' and their wands are 'as white as snow'. It seems that experience altogether lacks the colours innocence possesses. Blake's irony here is clear. We can ask, is snow here a symbol of purity or repressive pity? Are wands the instrument of authority and control or simply the instrument of discipline? Beadles are traditional figures of terror. Thus the poem sways between the states of innocence and experience. Duality is necessary for progression and Blake uses parallelism, repetition, nursery-rhyme to achieve the required effect.

**Check Your Progress**

1. Which features of a poem do we note while 'reading' it?  
(Hint: We note images, symbols, the use of words and other related features.)
2. How do we gain a sense of 'protest' or anger in 'Holy Thursday'?  
(Hint: The contrast of colours and figures, the comparisons suggest certain emotions, among other things.)

3. How important is irony in the poem?

(Hint: Learn about 'irony'. Through irony double-meanings are brought in.)

4. What does Blake want to convey through images like 'flowers of London town', 'mighty wind', 'Thames water' etc.?

(Hint: Do you think Blake is suggesting that 'innocence' is connected with 'nature'?)

Interestingly, the children are spiritually superior to their guardians and Blake makes this clear by placing them physically above in the galleries of the cathedral. Children possess angelic qualities as shown by the fact that their song of revolt reaches heaven transcending the world which fails to offer mercy, pity and compassion to them. Blake's anger forms an essential part of the poem.

'Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door'.

But Blake refuses to provide the ultimate answer to us. The poem ends on a note of insistent rejection of the idea of forced harmony.

### **Stop to Consider**

It is a point to be seriously considered that we do comprehend a 'tone' in poetry. How does this happen? In spoken speech, accompanying gestures can often act as explanatory signs of what is really being meant by the speaker. What happens in lines of poetry printed on a sheet of paper? Listen to what famous critics have to say: —

In *Understanding Poetry*, Brooks and Warren explain what is meant by 'tone' in poetry:

"The tone of a poem indicates the speaker's attitude toward his subject and toward his audience, and sometimes toward his audience. . . The simple phrase, "Yes, indeed," may mean, merely by shifts of tone, anything from enthusiastic, or respectful, agreement to insolent denial. In ordinary life, a great part of our meaning . . . is indicated by the tone. In a poem this is also true, but the poet must depend on the words on a page to take the place of his expressive human voice; . . .

Tone, in a poem, expresses attitudes. And this leads us back to what we have said before, that every poem, is, in one sense, a little drama. A poem is an

utterance. There is someone who utters. There is a provocation to utterance. There is an audience. This is clearly true of poems in which characters speak, but it is also true of the most lyrical piece. Even the song expresses a human response, and the response is provoked by something, and it implies a hearer—even if only the self."

Try to apply what is said by these critics to Blake---how do we perceive an attitude or a tone in Blake's poetry?

'Without contraries there is no progression.'

Do you think this statement is applicable in this poem? How does the poet indicate his stance?

From our reading we can draw the conclusion that 'Holy Thursday' is successful in registering a protest against confinement and imposed harmony. But the rounded rhythm of this poem differs from its counterpart in 'Songs of Experience' which is full of questions, exclamations, and shorter lines to express the intolerable fear, misery and poverty underlying the society. Contrasting images, physical posture, use of colours, in the poem we have read, enhance its complexities further and add to the vision of Blakean "innocence".

### 1.6.2 Reading 'London'

'London' illustrates the condemnation of the establishment which dehumanizes man, tyrannizes and terrorises the poor leading to a state of mental, spiritual and intellectual distortion. We can see the poem as a critique of the social system also. The sense of entrapment informs the poem and Blake describes the labyrinthine city where people must sacrifice their essential human nature to implement the policies of civilised society. As the speaker wanders through the crowd we find his ironic vision expressed in terms of his alienation. The poem's rhetoric also conveys the sense of physical and mental anguish. For example, we can mark the device of repetition of words like 'charter'd, 'mark', 'infant', 'every' and so on.

In the first stanza, the speaker walks through the charter'd streets and sees the marks of woe in the faces of the passers-by and in the second, he hears the 'mind -forg'd manacles' of ideological repression in the cries of man and infant. The third stanza evokes the suffering of the chimney sweepers and the 'hapless soldiers' emblematic of victims cut off from normal life and we

recognise the real faces behind their suffering - Priest and King. The fourth stanza highlights the mutual relation between prostitution and a loveless marriage. 'London' is interesting for the multiplicity of meaning each word conveys. Let's take the word 'Charter'd' for our interpretation. First of all, 'Charter'd streets and Charter'd Thames convey the sense of freedom which is ironically bound by constraints. We can see the degree of enslavement when streets need charters to exist. According to Jonathan Culler the act of seeing streets as charter'd is another kind of enslavement, i.e., enslavement to our fiction. We are trapped within our interpretations and again we can offer at least two meanings of the word 'mark'. The verb 'to mark' can mean both 'to notice' and 'to inscribe upon'. According to Harold Bloom, the word 'mark' also alludes to the Bible. London is replete with the echoes of its historical context. Blake himself has referred to 'liberty, the charter'd right of Englishmen' in the work- 'King Edward the Third'. Again E P. Thompson points out the endless examples of eighteenth century references to chartered rights, chartered liberties, Magna Carta, Tom Paine's *Rights of Man* which are other examples in this case. Liberty which is chartered is of course a denial of these liberties to other sections.

**SAQ**

From our reading, how can we explain the implications of the words repeated in 'London'? (30 words)

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.....  
.....

Who or what is the object of Blake's anger? (20 words)

.....  
.....  
.....

Structurally, the poem alternates between sight and sound - visual and auditory marking. The first and third stanzas refer to visual marking and the second and fourth refer to auditory marking. In terms of visual marking the poet-wanderer watches marks of woe in every face and the third stanza

records the terrible vision of churches replete with darkness and palaces soaked in the blood of the 'hapless' people. Similarly the second stanza witnesses the poet's helplessness when he hears the cries, voices, bans and the puzzling noises emanating from the city streets. During midnight the youthful harlot's curse challenges the so-called authenticity of the institution of marriage. The problem continues with the multiplicity of meanings. We are not sure whether Blake is referring to the emotional plague of the couples limited by the authority of marriage or the plagues of venereal disease. The phrase 'mind-forg'd manacles' offers another problem. One possible interpretation is that we are victimised by our own ideologies, the manacles are forged by ourselves. Again, it may mean that we reside in the prison-house constituted by ideologies conferred upon us. Blake touches upon the indictment of the lack of imaginative potential along with the protest against social injustice. Blake carefully traces the organic evolution of man through the rhythmic process of birth and death. We can see the second and fourth stanzas carefully.

London takes us into the dismal streets replete with the plagues of tyranny and oppressive terror. Blake generates the sense of harsh grating indignation when experience meets injustice as the poem celebrates wrath and energy only achieved with the coming of experience.

You can raise the question as to why London is being used as a symbol of 'experience' here. By the time of Blake's poetry the city had assumed its own distinctive character. Partly, this was a result of English history: from 1649 onwards. We can see the overriding importance of London behind the writings of Dryden and Pope. If we note the context of Blake's perceptions of his society, we can connect his preoccupations with the Industrial Revolution which was beginning to drive English society to a newer state of existence.

The biographical fact of Blake's own life in London, the place with which he remained associated all his life, is another point for us to keep in mind.

When Blake describes London he is using partly realistic details and then transforming these into symbolic objects of the new conditions of English life. Observe the manner in which 'experience' is fused with the contemporary ills of society.

Which influences are at work in Blake's perceptions ?

**Blake's mythology**

Blake wrote *The Visions of the Daughter of Albion* (1793), introducing the figures of his personal mythology: Urizen, the grim symbol of restrictive morality, and Orc, the arch-rebel. Urizen appears with all his depressing characteristics in *America : A Prophecy*.

The ideas of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and the personified symbol (1794), *The Book of Ahania*, *The Book of Los* (1795), in which Blake pursued his exposure of the errors of the moral code encountered in *The Vision of the Daughters of Albion* are developed in *Europe* and *The Book of Urizen*. Urizen has been expelled from the abode of the immortals and has taken possession of man; his agent, or archangel, is Enitharmon. Los is apparently the champion of light and the lord of time, but is held in bondage. Orc is the symbol of anarchy, opposed to Urizen. Some idea of Blake's personal mythology is necessary to understand the poems mentioned as the poet keeps on referring to these symbols.

**1.6.3 Reading ‘The Tyger’**

'The Tyger', exemplifying the awful and sublime mystery of the divine is one of the remarkable poems of English literature. 'The Lamb' and 'The Tyger' together show the two sides of God - the God visible to Innocence, and the other, the creator visible to Experience. In contrast to the lamb, the tyger is the other, the wrathful side of God, as seen in the kabbalistic and Behmenist traditions. Moreover, it depicts the sublime terror of Pre-Romantic and Romantic art and aesthetics expressing the celebration of wild energies in the painting of Stubbs. The poem can also be said to express the wrath and energy emblematic of the French Revolution.

**SAQ**

Read the poem 'The Lamb' (*Songs of Innocence*) and try to see the difference between the two stages - innocence and experience. Can we say that these are two completely distinct processes? (40 words)

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.....  
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.....



In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake says that the 'Tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction' and that 'the wrath of the lion is the wisdom of god.' The poem tries to explore the mystery of divine and artistic creation and focuses on the awesome might of the creator. The creation of the deadly beast is described in terms of a harsh manufacturing process. The third stanza contains the repetition of the word 'dread' which focuses on the intense power of the creator. The second stanza describes the natural elements which are transmuted by the creator. Blake here uses the word 'fire' interestingly. Note that the fire in the tyger's eyes is the essence of the beast. It is the natural fire which finds full expression through the process of creation.

The images in the poem allude to different kinds of making or creation and we find the violence and harshness of the manufacturer reflected in the creation. The creation of the tyger demands a kinship with it. The creator who possesses the fiery essence of the beast can only create the Tyger.

### **Stop to Consider**

'What the hand, dare seize the fire' - evokes the connection between art and rebellion referring to Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods for humanity.

You may try to grasp Blake's use of myth here, how it is filtered through a heightened imaginative reworking of the myth of Prometheus. The 'voice' that gives us this line is that of authority, thus entering here the heroism which characterises Prometheus' daring. Why does Blake, here, give us the 'voice' of authority ? How does the myth of Prometheus embody the social oppression of Blake's times ? What kind of symbolism do you find in "fire" ? As you read Blake, these questions should arouse your curiosity.

We can interpret that Blake is trying to suggest that Nature exists for humanity only when it is transformed, whether by labour or by imagination. Thus, seizing the fire, twisting the sinews, stoking the furnace, pounding the anvil, etc., bring to mind the craft of the blacksmith and welder and allude to the process of creation.

The poem can also be read as a comment on the Industrial Revolution through the symbol of the 'Tyger' which represents a natural energy and imaginable as also a product of a harsh mechanical process. So, we can

easily interpret 'The Tyger' as a symbol standing for the emerging industrial proletariat. The poem is ruled by symmetry except in the first and last stanzas. Where the word 'could' (stanza 1) changes into 'dare' (stanza 6), Blake uses the short tetrameter line in the poem and the rhythms of the poem succeed in conveying the multiple connotation, simultaneously suggesting the activity of creation and mysterious pulsation of the unique life force. The force and vigour of the 'Tyger' led Swinburne to read it as a piece of Romantic Satanism. Critics like Northrop Frye, Hazard Adams, Paul Miner, et al, see the Tyger as either ambiguous or ambivalent. In spite of the critical comments the ultimate interpretation rests on the individual readers' response to the poem.

Is the Tyger a manifestation of divine energy? Is it a comment on the mystery of creation. Blake leads us to the realm of contradictory interpretations by provoking our intelligence and here lies the success of the poem.

#### **'Innocence' and 'Experience' distinguished**

Finally, you have to consider Blake's choice of names for two states of existence. Why does he oppose 'experience' to 'innocence'? Are the two states naturally opposed? Or do you think Blake is making a distinction proposed by religion? Is 'experience' related to the original sin of knowledge which led to Adam and Eve's fall from Paradise?

### **1.7 SUMMING UP**

Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is an important work which contains some of Blake's most cherished ideas. The use of symbolism, language, syntactic structure helps to categorise Blake the romantic in a nutshell. The innocence of 'Holy Thursday', the pain of oppression of 'London' and the powerful vigour of 'The Tyger'-these are the issues that characterise the romanticism of Blake, one of the brilliant writers of the Romantic period. While ending at this juncture we can say that Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is a true manifestation of the ideas under whose influence he worked.

## 1.8 GLOSSARY

### A. 'Holy Thursday'

**Lamb:** Lamb is a typical Blakean symbol related to the joyous state of ignorant bliss of innocence. He has a poem called 'The Lamb' and lamb is the most innocent of God's creation. According to Blake the image of the lamb reflects a divine aura and he uses this image to ask questions about the whole of creation.

### B. 'London'

**1. Blood on palace walls:** According to David Erdman, Blake uses blood as an apocalyptic omen of mutiny and civil war involving regicide.

**2. Mind forg'd manacles:** To quote David Erdman: "The phrase 'mind-forg'd manacles' may mean that people are voluntarily forging manacles in their own minds."

### C. 'The Tyger'

**1. 'The forests of the night'** - The forests is an ancient Platonic symbol for material life.

**2. 'In what distant deeps of skies.'**

**Burnt the fire of thine eyes'** - One possible interpretation can be of Prometheus who stole fire for mankind. He is a symbol of revolution for the Romantics. He is also linked with Blake's Orc, the spirit of revolution.

**3. 'In what furnace was thy brain?'** - The furnaces are related to Los, the spirit of creation working in the furnaces to forge a new world.

**4. 'When the stars threw down their spears'** - Urizen (who created man) is associated with the mechanistic forces of the stars. In *The Four Zoas*, we see Urizen weeping over the anguish he has created-- 'the stars threw down their spears and fled naked away.' (*Vala or The Four Zoas*, K 311).

## 1.9 REFERENCES/SUGGESTED READINGS

(1) Ford, Boris (ed.). *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature* (Volume 5: From Blake to Byron). London, New York, Australia, Penguin Books, 1982.

(2) Ously, Ian (ed.). *The Wordsworth Companion to Literature in English*. London : Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1994.

(3) Sengupta, Debjani and Cama, Shernaz (ed.) *Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge*. Delhi : Worldview Publication, 2004.

(4) Sanders, Andrew. *The Short Oxford History of English literature* (second edition). New York : Oxford University Press, 2000.

Here are some URLs on the Internet which you may find useful:

- [www.gailgastfield.com/Blake.html](http://www.gailgastfield.com/Blake.html)
- <http://virtual.park.uga.edu/~wblake/home1.html>
- <http://www.upword.com/blake/>
- <http://www.mythosandlogos.com/Blake.html>

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## Unit 2 Wordsworth

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- 2.1 Objectives
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- 2.3 His Works
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### 2.1 OBJECTIVES

**William Wordsworth (1770-1850)** is one of the most admired poets of the Romantic era. For his brilliant ideas on various aspects of poetic creation and social life he is widely admired throughout the century. The unit will help in

- *reading* the poems in their proper contexts
- *understanding* the poet's ideas of Nature
- *celebrating* the simplicity found in his poetry as has been shown in the poems
- *focusing* on the basic philosophical and ideological issues of his time

### 2.2 INTRODUCING THE POET

Effective grasp of rural communal relationships, objections to over-stylised poetic diction, nostalgic yearning to represent the essence of Nature, radical desire to break with the artificial traditions and false sophistication, and

acute sensitivity towards the mutual interdependence of man and nature, are some of the characteristic features which distinguish William Wordsworth (1770-1850), the man who changed the concept of Romantic poetry. Poetry for him is the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' and the poet is a 'man speaking to man'. The rare emotional vitality of a poet unites the physicality of nature with the perception of mankind and the end-product is a unique blending of the two. Wordsworth is unique in the realm of English poetry for the sheer brilliance of his verse and his views on the nature of poetic creation, poetic diction, role of the poet, add to his reputation as literary critic.

William Wordsworth was born at Cockermouth, Cumberland, one of the five children of John and Ann Wordsworth. He was educated at primary schools in Cockermouth and Hawkshead and St. John's College Cambridge from where he got a B.A. degree. The death of his parents caused William to be separated from his beloved sister Dorothy.

The time spent by Wordsworth in France from 1790 till about 1793 had a profound impact on his poetic career. His friendship with Michel de Beaupuy, an aristocratic supporter of the Revolution inspired a passionate faith in revolutionary zeal. Meanwhile, his relationship with Annette Vallon and the birth of a daughter, Anne Caroline in December 1792 are events considered to have deeply affected him. Wordsworth's convictions with reference to the French Revolution underwent disillusionment as the regime changed to one of terror. His relationship was simultaneously disrupted by the hostilities which began in early 1793 and lasted until 1815.

The period 1793-95 was full of great personal unhappiness, uncertainty about professional future and moral and intellectual confusion. Despite his dismay at the drift of the Revolution into the realm of political terror, Wordsworth moved to higher realization especially with his association with William Godwin and his circle. He finally became disenchanted with France with her occupation of Switzerland in 1798.

Wordsworth's friendship with Coleridge began with the move to Dorset and then to Somerset in 1795. In the year 1798 came the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, to which were contributions both by Coleridge and Wordsworth.

Wordsworth, along with Dorothy, traveled to Germany in the autumn of 1799. Back in England after the bitterness and depression of the winter of 1799 which they passed in Germany and during which he began work on *The Prelude*, they settled in Dove Cottage in Grasmere close to his birthplace in the heart of his beloved Lake District with Robert Southey nearby. "Lake Poets" is the name given to the association between Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey. Dorothy's influence on her brother is considered to have diminished after 1802 when he married Mary Hutchinson.

Between 1798 and 1805 Wordsworth completed the first draft of his long autobiographical poem, *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind*. This version of the poem underwent many revisions yet it is considered to be different from the version published in 1850 after his death. The fact remains that the poem was not published during his life.

In 1813, Wordsworth was appointed to the sinecure of Distributor of Stamps for Westmorland and moved to Rydal Mount, Ambleside where he remained for the rest of his life. He was honoured by the Universities of Durham and Oxford and succeeded Southey as a Poet Laureate in 1843. Wordworth's old age was marked by loneliness and the decline of his poetic powers. He died on April 23, 1850.

The social and political consequences of the French Revolution, the eighteenth-century development of psychological views implicit in Locke's idea of knowledge and perception, humanitarian impulse of the Enlightenment, his walking tour in France and Switzerland, among other factors have influenced his poetry.

<p><b>SAQ</b></p> <p>What was the effect of the French Revolution on English society? (30 words)</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
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When did the Revolution begin and what happened subsequently ? (20 words)

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Which facts of Wordsworth's life should be considered to have profoundly influenced his poetry? Can you identify the references? (30 words)

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What kind of connections can we find between the French Revolution and his artistic beliefs? (40 words)

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### 2.3 HIS WORKS

The best known works of William Wordsworth include *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), *The Prelude* (1850), *The Excursion* (1814), and *The Ecclesiastical Sonnets* (1822-45). Poems like 'Michael', 'The old Cumberland Beggar', 'The Solitary Reaper', 'Tintern Abbey', and 'Resolution and Independence' are still read and admired widely. Elegance, purity and simple poetic expressions are the qualities of Wordsworth's poetry and some of his works contain autobiographical accounts of his own development.

Wordsworth's *Descriptive Sketches* contains the experience of a walking tour in France, Germany and Switzerland and should be seen in the tradition of the late eighteenth-century meditative poems about nature. *Lyrical Ballads* is one of the most important documents of English Romanticism



which asserts two roles of language, of conversation in the middle and lower stratas of society in creating poetic pleasure along with the changing motions of poetic decorum, and the nature of poetry and the role of the poet. The Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was occasioned by the republication of the revised and altered volume of 1798, remaining Wordsworth's most significant statement of the purposes of his poetic art.

Wordsworth's poetic themes are often to be seen in connection with the predominantly Romantic idea of the growth and change of the self. 'The Excursion' is a poem in nine books containing views of man, nature and society. Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is an autobiographical poem in blank verse which focuses on the growth of the poet's mind and a poetic reflection on poetry itself. *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807) contain poems like the *Ode to Duty*, *Miscellaneous Sonnets* and *Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty*. *Peter Bell: A Tale in Verse and The Waggoner* was published in 1819. 'The Borders' is a blank-verse tragedy written by him and most of his later works commemorate his travels. For example, *The River Duddon: A Series of Sonnets* (1820), *Memorials of a Tour On the Continent* (1822), *Yarrow Revisited and Other Poems* (1835). Wordsworth's prose works include *The Convention of Cintra* (1809), an essay criticizing the agreement of Britain and Portugal to allow the French army to return home during the Peninsular War. *A Description of the Scenery of Lakes in the North of England* (1810) and *Essay on Epitaphs* was published in Coleridge's Journal 'The Friend'.

## 2.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION

Wordsworth's works have been received differently by critics throughout the ages. The twentieth-century critic Northrop Frye draws a connection between Wordsworth's innovative descriptions and social and political critique. Harold Bloom says that Wordsworth has made the 'poet's own subjectivity' the prevalent subject of poetry while dramatising the argument of the individual consciousness. In his defence of his literary practice Wordsworth is akin to authors like Dryden, Henry James, or T. S. Eliot, but W. J. B. Owen notes that Wordsworth is less original as his ideas about figurative language, poetic diction, relationship between prose and poetry draw heavily on ideas of the 18th century. Wordsworth, in his active concern

about the pressures impinging on the lives of the inhabitants of industrial cities, looks forward to the opposition between high and mass cultures in the writings of modern critics like Raymond Williams. His opinions about the poet and his states, for instance, are also part of the the issues which are dealt with differently by different critics like Matthew Arnold, and I. A. Richards throughout the century.

### **Check Your Progress**

1. Compare the dates of Blake and Wordsworth. How long were they contemporaries?

(Hint: A straightforward answer is required!)

2. What is the 'Romanticism' shared alike by the two poets?

(Hint: Look at their similarities.)

3. Note the differences in the critical reception given to the two poets.

(Hint: Read the relevant sections.)

### **Nature in Romantic poetry**

In Romantic poetry Man and Nature are emblematic of each other. Contrastingly, the neo-classical view of nature was formed through the restrictive frame of 'perfection'. Thus for the eighteenth-century writer's aesthetic standards, art fulfills its role not by imitating nature irregular and ordinary, but as the embodiment of perfection. But this was also a confirmation of an Enlightenment conception of a mechanistic universe that nature must be idealised and taken in its perfection.

The Romantic ideal contested the eighteenth-century norm; as René Wellek remarks, "All Romantic poets conceived of nature as an organic whole, on the analogue of man rather than a concourse of atoms - a nature that is not divorced from aesthetic values, which are just as real (or rather more real) than the abstractions of science." If, for the neoclassical writer, the norm was to "Follow Nature!" , for the Romantic poet, the defining principle was the "return to nature". This return, however, was formulated differently by the different poets.

For Blake, nature appears differently from Wordsworth's sense of it as an animated divine force. In Blake's conception, nature and man seem destined for a sense of renewal challenging eighteenth century deism, cosmology and ideas of natural religion. Shelley's apprehension of nature consists of the sense of its vitality aligning it with man's progression towards self-consciousness.

Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime* proposes the idea of delightful horror in terms of the depiction of the natural world and its vastness and immensity. The 'Simplon Pass' passage in Book VI of his *Prelude* (1805) where the poet's memory of a daunting physical landscape is surpassed by his realization of imaginative potential also echoes the sense of sublime horror and grandeur of natural scenery. The dialectic of nature with memory and consciousness aiming towards a cosmic vision dominates the poetry of the period and helps to dramatize the idea of the self. Wordsworth's celebration of nature in 'Tintern Abbey':

"Therefore am I still/ A lover of the meadows and the woods,/ And mountains,  
and of all that we behold/ From this green earth; of all the mighty world/ Of eye,  
and ear, - both what they half create, / And what perceive; well pleased to  
recognize/ In nature and the language of the sense,/ The anchor of my purest  
thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my hearts, and soul / Of all my  
moral being"

shows that nature is as mutable an idea as the self and its holy redemptive power is found in the physical world.

Nature occupies Romantic horizons as a criterion, the cardinal standard of poetic value. In recent years, the new approach known as ecological literary criticism ponders over Romantic poetry addressing perennial questions concerning the relationship between humankind and the natural world.

## 2.5 CONTEXTS OF THE POEMS

**Composed upon Westminster Bridge:** The sonnet was composed between 31 July and 3 September, 1802 and first published in *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 1807. William Wordsworth and Dorothy Wordsworth had left London for Calais early on 31 July, 1802 to visit Annette Vallon and Catherine in France and they came back on 3 September. Early in the morning of 31 July they crossed Westminster Bridge and Dorothy's Journal describes London in words very similar to the sonnet: "The city, St. Paul's, with the river and a multitude of little boats made a most beautiful sight..... The houses were not overhung by their cloud of smoke, and they were spread out endlessly, yet the sun shone so brightly, with such a fierce light, that there was even something like the purity of one of nature's own grand spectacles."

**Ode on Intimations of Immortality:** This poem was composed during March 1802-1804 and first published in *Poems in Two Volumes* (1815). Dorothy's *Journal states*: 'William added a little to the ode he is writing' (17 June 1802). At least the first four stanzas were composed in March 1802, with further compositions during the year and it was finally completed by 6 March, 1804. The most important external evidence about the Ode's composition can be found in William Wordsworth's comments to Isabella Fenwick in 1843: "This was composed during my residence in Town-End, Grasmere: Two years at least passed between the writing of the first four stanzas and the remaining part."

## 2.6 READING THE POEMS

### 2.6.1 Reading 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge'

In 'Michael', the shepherd's son is corrupted by the 'dissolute city' and the act of remembering the serene beauty of the Wye Valley in 'Tintern Abbey' is a soothing relief from 'the din /of towns and cities. Abhorrence of the urban life which dehumanises man killing his innate potential is a recurrent theme in Wordsworth's poetry and this sonnet is also written in the same vein.

'Composed upon Westminster Bridge', Sept. 3, 1802, records the moment of vision in which Wordsworth achieves a satisfactory balance between his admiration for the rural life and the impulse to order the complexities of the city. Like Blake, Wordsworth also concentrates on the cityscape but he is helped by the serenity of morning devoid of the natural din and bustle. Moreover his admiration of the city is far from unqualified and London is seen at a particular moment of time which gives the reader time to ponder over its beauty.

#### SAQ

We have just read Blake's 'London'. So, in terms of the involvement of the poetic persona in the city landscape, how does 'London' differ from 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge'? (40 words)

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The opening lines conjure a picture of breath-taking beauty of the city -  
'Earth has not anything to show more fair:  
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
a sight so touching in its majesty :  
This city now doth, like a garment, wear  
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;'

The magnificent beauty of the city is hinted at and we can concentrate on words like 'majesty', 'splendour', 'mighty', to relate to the theme of the solemn dignity of London. The constructed artifices of the city like 'ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples' merge and mingle with the natural vigour of the surrounding countryside. Nature intrudes into the world of artificial construction 'and temples lie open unto the fields and to the sky'.

### **Stop to Consider**

We could attempt here to understand a paradox: what is the object, if any, of Wordsworth's admiration? As we attempt to answer that question we can see the difficulty or even the ambivalence with which the poet regards what he admires-- London, the city, is in harmony with nature. The city, as a 'mighty heart', is the kind of social organisation that is going to supplant an earlier form of existence, the set of agrarian relationships which had been the 'natural' village.

In order to explain this paradox or ambivalence we have to place Wordsworth in his time, the late eighteenth-century. If we look back at that earlier period before the Romantics, what is highlighted is the view of nature which prevailed then. For the eighteenth century, human civilization represented 'progress' and what existed in a natural state represented a lower order of existence. To that extent Wordsworth's poem appears to be in accordance with such a perspective.

However, clearly the poet, like Blake, stands against an exploitative relationship with nature which would allow the human to rape Nature of its divinity. The morning stands for the moment of harmony between the human and Nature. The poet invokes his inner self, the capacity to commune with nature: "Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!" The moment is one of almost religious feeling.

Romanticism had moved away from the earlier view of nature and the natural by holding that it is the 'inner voice' which provides us with the access to nature. So an artist should strive to paint not merely what he sees but what is within himself. This is echoed in Wordsworth's own remark: "I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature."

Nature helps to foreground the idea of individual consciousness by centering on the speaker's personality.

The poem is replete with visual details which distinguish the city from other places and Wordsworth uses the device of personification to represent the city as an organic being. The city dons the beauty of the morning like a garment and the 'smokeless air' enhances its beauty. The image of the garment points to the manufactured products of Industrial Revolution. The boundary between man and nature merges very often to offer a sense of harmonious existence and the poet responds with a sense of deep conviction to the calmness of the scene. The ships, towers, domes, etc. form the garment worn by the city as the organic being and this image again points towards the many appearances the city has. There is also a suggestion of the past history of the city and the lines :

'Dear God! the very houses seem asleep,  
And all that mighty heart is lying still'.

are a reminder of the image of the city as an organic being. The city is the centre of life of 'the mighty heart' and the collection of the individual families. Thus London is presented both as the heart of the nation and of its enduring life and also the abode of the citizens at a particular point of time. Wordsworth brilliantly unites the sense of the whole historical and geographical pattern and the strong sense of particular time and place. The last lines suggest the transience of the serenity of the atmosphere. Now we can conclude by asking ourselves the significance of the image of the city. .Can we say that the beauty of the city is deceptive and transitory?

## 2.6.2 Reading 'Ode On Intimations Of Immortality'

The first four stanzas of the 'Immortality Ode' were composed in 1802 and the rest in 1804. The poem deals with the universal experience of growing up from childhood to maturity and records the gains as well as losses in this process of attaining the experienced view of world. Themes like the power of memory, the philosophical compensation of maturity, immortality, time, eternity etc commingle to form the totality of the Ode. The earlier part of the poem mourns the sense of loss felt by the poet when as an adult he can no longer experience the deep harmony and perfect union of sense and feeling. The later stanzas try to explain the loss in terms of spiritual gains and resolve the crisis by asserting the consolations of maturity. The poem also combines the double vision of childhood while projecting a transition from the world of innocence to the realm of experience and Wordsworth's visions of the childhood we live through as children and the childhood which we carry within us in terms of memory enhance the meaning of the poem. The fading of youthful glory with the advance of age, the visionary power of childhood, are explored in this ode along with the idea of pre-existence, hope of immortality and the doctrine of innate knowledge.

### Stop to Consider

We have just read Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Do you find any similarity between these two poets in terms of their different attitudes towards different stages of human life?

The 'Child' of the epigraph dominates the poem. What does the 'child' symbolize?

A critic has remarked that "Like the other Romantic Poets, Wordsworth was concerned here primarily with the question of the reality of the self and its responses to experience rather than with the question of value and meaning in the universe outside the self". How far do you think this can be brought in to explain the lines of Stanza 9 in the poem (lines 130 -168) ? What is the significance of Nature in the poem ?

The opening stanzas reflect on the world which is replete with the "celestial light". Recording the primal joy of childhood, Wordsworth is intuitively aware of the life beyond Nature. Meadow, grove, stream, rainbow, rose etc are clothed in the celestial glory and 'every common sight' acquires the 'glory

and freshness of a dream'. The youthful vision is lost and the apparent desolation is clear in the monosyllabic directness of the line 'The Things which I have seen. I now can see no more.' The aesthetic appreciation of nature coupled with the affirmation of harmony with the natural world emphasizes the joyous mood but the sense of loss is evident throughout the poem. The joy of springtime, the unforced happiness of the shepherd's boy is the blessed elements and the poet is alienated from this world of natural piety and enduring happiness. Melancholy intrudes and the 'pansy', the 'field' and the 'tree' now lack the transcendent reality they possessed before.

**SAQ**

Find out the images taken from Nature related to the theme of loss and gain. Do you think the poem alternates between these two factors? (40 + 40 words)

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The next few stanzas discuss the reasons for the loss of the 'celestial light'. The myth of pre-existence helps the poet to organise his views of the erosion of the visionary power. According to Wordsworth the soul is exiled from its true home and the world is a prison-house. We came into the world with innate knowledge derived from God. The inland is closer to the eternal life 'heaven lies about us in our infancy' but with the coming of age this divine power decreases. The visionary power dies with adulthood and the 'light of the common day' takes its place. Earth offers the child various sensory pleasures and the child participates in the trivialities of everyday existence. It learns the language of business, love, and strife and this slowly diminishes its divine power, Wordsworth compares the child to an actor. He is the 'best philosopher' for his intuitive understanding of the mystery of existence. The child is paradoxically the bearer of the of the heavenly message of joy and at the same time the willing agent of it's own imprisonment.



The poem raises the question of the value of life itself and yearns for the lost paradise. The final stanzas record the poet's attempt to come to terms with the loss of the primal joy. He tries to resolve the conflict by assuring that memories of childhood still exercise an active influence on his perception. The youthful vitality has given way to spiritual delight and all is not lost. The firm conviction remains that the world can still be transformed by the matured understanding of experience. Innocence is not the only basis for joy, life emerges from the embers of lost happiness. Wordsworth compares human development to a journey away from the source of life.

Stanza 10 returns to the exuberant natural scene and Wordsworth's absolute joy is clear as the conflict is resolved. He knows that the spontaneous involvement in the life of nature is no longer possible but now he perceives the intellectual delight which the 'philosophic mind' brings. This stanza is replete with the assurances and the primal sympathy which continues to exist in our memory. Unlike the child the adult is conscious of the fact of death but still the poet hopes for the eternal life. The final stanza confirms the resolution of the problem and he rejoices for his new sensitivity to the suffering of the fellow human beings. This vein of tender sympathy underlies the closing lines:

"Thanks to the human heart by which we live,  
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,  
To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears'.

**SAQ**

Can we make a valid comparison of the poem with Shelley's "Ode To The West Wind" ? (30 words)

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## 2.7 SUMMING UP

The poems discussed above are poems that deal with Nature and self. Nature plays a dominant role in shaping the spirit of both the poems. In the first poem nature coexists with urban life to offer a sense of harmony and in the second the poet attains maturity in the context of nature's beauty. Sometimes nature appears to be mysteriously powerful. Both the poems testify to the omnipresence of nature in Wordsworth's poetry. As we have discussed earlier the two poems succeed in illustrating the basic tenets of Wordsworth's philosophy making it possible for us to trace the creative impulse of Wordsworth's writing within his poems.

### Check Your Progress

1. Comment on Wordsworth's formulation of a 'new' paradigm of nature in terms of its relationship with humanity with special reference to the 'Immortality Ode'.
2. To what extent does Wordsworth share in Enlightenment concerns as evident in the poems prescribed for your study?
3. Comment on childhood and memory as two overriding metaphors in Wordsworth's poetry.

## 2.8 GLOSSARY

Stanzas I & II: M. H. Abrams says that for most of the greater Romantic lyrics, the starting point is a fixed time and place, a locale and an occasion. Cf. 'Tintern Abbey' for example. The Ode does not follow this prescription. In the first two stanzas we are given nothing like the landscape of 'Tintern Abbey'; instead the lines appear to describe a general syndrome - it traces a loss which has not been assuaged, but objectively and rhetorically described.

Stanza III, line 30: 'Land and sea...': Cf. Sonnets to Liberty no. 3 which describes the French countryside in 1790 as 'Like the May / With festivals of new-born Liberty...'

Stanza IV, line 53: 'A single Field...': Cf. Carlyle's description of the Federation Feast, July 1792.

line 59 : 'Our birth is but a sleep...' : Cf. William Wordsworth's comment to Isabella Fenwick : 'I took hold the notion of pre-existence as having sufficient foundation in humanity for authorizing me to make for my purpose the best use of it I could as a poet.'

Stanza VIII, line 120-23: For Coleridge, these suggested 'the frightful notion of lying awake in the grave' (*Biographia*, 22) but for William Wordsworth and Dorothy Wordsworth the notion was an attractive one: '[W] thought that it would be as sweet thus to lie so in the grave, to hear the peaceful sound of the earth & just to know that our dear friends were near.'

Stanza X, line 164: 'Though inland ... sea': Cf. Sonnets to Liberty, no. 11: 'Inland, with a hollow vale, I stood / And I saw, while sea was calm and air was clear / The coast of France.'

Stanza XI, line 204: Cf. Thomas Gray, Ode on the Pleasure Arising from Vicissitude 1.45: 'The meanest floweret of the vale.' William Wordsworth's self-absorbed meditations on mortality and the power of the creative mind is compared by Anne k. Mellors (*Romanticism and Gender*, p. 105) to another Romantic poet, less well-known and a woman, who critiques William Wordsworth's idea of the sublime by stressing the simple pleasures of everyday nature: 'I love the simplest bud that blows,/ I love the meanest weed that grows:/ Symbols of nature- every form/ That speaks of her this heart can warm... ' (Helen Maria Williams, To James Forbes, Esq., on His bringing me flowers from Vacluse...)

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**Institute of Distance and Open Learning  
Gauhati University**

**MA in English  
Semester 2**

**Paper VIII  
Romantic Poetry**

**Block 2  
Later Romantics**



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**Unit 1 : Lord Byron**

**Unit 2 : Percy Bysshe Shelley**

**Unit 3 : John Keats**

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## **Block Introduction:**

In this second block of Paper VIII, the students are required to look into the poetic worlds of three of the greatest Romantic poets - Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats. The earlier block in the same paper discusses some selected poems of William Wordsworth and William Blake.

The students must keep this in mind that the categorization as 'early' and 'later' Romantic poets is simply a chronological division and has nothing to do with the themes, techniques and philosophy of the poets. Though it is true that the later poets have been influenced by the former poets to varied extents, it must also be acknowledged that each poet has his own voice and worldview. It will be a highly rewarding experience for the students to try to locate the distinctive tendencies of the individuals within the larger context of what we call as Romanticism. For this the students will have to go beyond the texts. Besides the conventional and obvious meanings, investigation must be done in the fields of social, political and cultural history of that time for newer references and meanings. This practice will help the students to understand the age as well as the literature produced in that age to a deeper extent.

This attempt to understand the individual tendencies of the poets will farther lead us to link up the influences and the spaces they share among themselves. This will help us not only to understand the specific age of English literature called as Romanticism but also to realise the fact that there is not just one Romanticism but many Romanticisms.

The poets included in this block have been rigorously reviewed by critics of later times. For example, the downgrading of Shelley was prominent in the works of critics like Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and others. For the modernist poets and critics, Shelley represents everything that modern poetry seeks to disagree with. They have severely critiqued him for his irresponsibility, arrogance, dreaminess, self-absorption, and confused symbolism. As such, our reading should aim at understanding not only the age that has produced the literature but also the age that has responded to it in a particular way. No literary or cultural movement exists in isolation from an earlier one and here you will have to pay attention to see how 'Romanticism' helps us retrospectively to outline the preceding movement, the Enlightenment. Not unless we see the

Enlightenment through the lens of the Romantic poets do we fully realise the strengths and weaknesses of neoclassical thought.

**Unit 1** : Lord Byron

**Unit 2** : Percy Bysshe Shelley

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# Unit 1

## Lord Byron

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- 1.2 Introducing the Poet
- 1.3 His Works
- 1.4 Critical Reception
- 1.5 Context of the Poem
- 1.6 Reading the Poem *Don Juan* (canto XI)
- 1.7 Summing Up
- 1.8 Glossary
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### 1.1 OBJECTIVES

Focusing chiefly on *Don Juan*, the unit attempts to deal with the various issues related to Byron and analyses Byron's status amongst other Romantic poets.

Our work in this unit will be to 'read' the Romantic poet, George Gordon, Lord Byron, and his work within our curricular programme of studying Romanticism. With this aim in view, the unit is organised like the other units you have so far progressed through, to help you

- to cover the important features of Byron's life
- to recover the context of his work
- to identify his chief preoccupations within this context
- to relate his work to the English poetic tradition
- to read his poetry with subtlety and critically

### 1.2 INTRODUCING THE POET

Categorising Lord Byron, who organizes the new feelings of romanticism into a series of contradictory impulses is perhaps the most difficult task. He is a true romantic with his quest for freedom, social and individual, scorn



for the systematic trend of social behaviour and anomalies of his own time coupled with the myth of individualism against an omnipotent tyrant. Again he is a master of colloquial vigour, and ironic commentary on contemporary society, a wry hedonist, a narcissist in possession of fascinating life-characteristics less frequently associated with the Romantic movement.

The mingling of tragic courage and emotional intensity, the aura of wickedness, the international reputation of the 'Byronic hero', the desire to influence and improve public taste through ironic rendering of experience, are the qualities to distinguish George Gordon, Lord Byron, from other Romantic poets of the second generation. Born in London in 1788, Byron is a model for the disenchanted youth with his capacity for self-contradiction and rebellion against established values. Controversies surround Byron and his work is interfused with his plea to view the world through a different spectacle.

George Gordon, Lord Byron, was born in London, the son of Captain 'Mad Jack' Byron and Catherine Gordon, a Scottish heiress descended from James I of Scotland. Scottish scenery and Scottish Calvinism left their marks on his character. Byron's father died when he was three and he was educated at home, Aberdeen Grammar School, Harrow, and in Trinity College, Cambridge. Byron was famous for his high-spirited and profligate behaviour and took his seat in the House of Lords after coming of age. In June 1809, he left on a tour of the Mediterranean with a friend, John Cam Hobhouse. Byron's letters from Spain, Portugal and the eastern Mediterranean are remarkably brilliant in nature.

Upon his return to England, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) made him a celebrity. In 1815 he married Annabella Milbanke but the marriage failed. Byron left England on 25 April 1816 and never returned. He joined Mary Shelley and Percy Shelley in Switzerland while his connection with Teresa, Countess Guicciolo began in Venice in 1819. Meanwhile, he kept in touch with England through his friends. Byron also became involved with the Carbonari, a militant nationalist movement and afterwards fled to Pisa in 1821. 1822 saw the literary quarrel with Southey. Greek liberation from centuries of Turkish oppression found a sympathetic response in England and a committee was organised for help. Byron started aiding the Greeks and armed a brig, 'The Hercules', and set sail from Leghorn on 24 July

1823. He worked energetically as the factional quarrels plaguing the Greek rebels dissolved. In April 1824, Byron caught a severe chill after being soaked to the skin in an open boat. At last he died on 19 April 1824. His body was buried in the family vault in the church of Hucknall Tarkard.

The liberal idealist Byron's life and work is influenced by the public life and historical developments during his time. Influences of British politics, French Revolution and the resultant state of feverish nationalism and Byron's own departure from England in 1809 for an extended tour etc are prominent throughout his works. Apart from the social and cultural influences, Byron's works also contain the powerful influences of Walter Scott, John Dryden, Alexander Pope and the Italian poets like Tasso, Aristo, and Pulci. Byron's reverence for Scott is evident when he says that 'Sir Walter Scott reigned before me'. Again, Byron's poetry is informed by satiric tradition formed in Pope and Dryden. Byron himself acknowledges the fact that it is better to commit mistakes with Pope than to establish his reputation in the company of contemporary writers. The influences of the Italian poets are also evident in Byron's use of 'ottava rima' in his works.

Byron is remembered as much for his poetry as for his unique career. He faced social opprobrium for his sexual conduct which far exceeded the norms acceptable to English society. In 1816, after the breakup of his marriage to Anne Isabella Milbanke, Byron left England never to return. Byron's travels abroad, including his earlier 'Grand Tour' which was almost customary for the English upper classes, took him all over Europe as well as to the 'Orient'. His involvement in Greek politics as well as all the other details of his life compose, by themselves, an unusual story. In fact, it is almost necessary to mention Byron's total personality and the sum of his actions when we survey his work.

Byron's life and career, therefore, are important ingredients of the idea of the 'Byronic hero' which pervades his works. The concept of the 'Byronic hero' occupies a significant part of the larger concept of Romanticism.

### **1.3 HIS WORKS**

Byron's works are famous for the evocation of multiplicity of contradictions. This status of an outsider, desire for role-playing, and self-exploration, underlie his works. Byron's first work is *Fugitive Pieces* (1806) and *Hours*

*of Idleness* (1807) is his first published collection of poetry. The noted works of Byron include *The Vision of Judgement* (1821), *Don Juan* (1819-24), *The Bride of Abydos* (1813), *Manfred* (1817), *Cain* (1821), *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809), *Beppo* (1818), *Mazeppa* (1819), *The Curse of Minerva* (1812), *The Giaour* (1813), *The Corsair* (1814), *Lara*, *The Siege of Cornith* (1816).

*The Vision of Judgement* is a satirical poem prompted by Southey's eulogy of George III, "A Vision of Judgement" and here Byron closely imitates Southey's poem for comic effect. *Don Juan* is Byron's masterpiece and offers a wide-ranging ironic comment on human passions, whims and shortcomings. *The Bride of Abydos* deals with the fate of Selim and Zuleika and *Manfred* focuses on the solitary life and desire for oblivion of Manfred. *Cain* is a play in three acts dealing with the rebellion of the hero and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* describes the wanderings of a young man disillusioned with the burden of existence. *Beppo* satirizes both English and Italian life, *Mazeppa* is based on a story told by Voltaire. *Sardanapalus* and *The Two Foscari* are the two dramatic poems written by him. *The Giaour* (1813) is the first of his series of melodramatic verse tales and the *Bride of Abydos*, the *Corsair* and *Lara* are the melodramatic stories of heroism and passion along with the projection of the 'Byronic' character. *The Siege of Cornith* (1816) is a violent story of love and Parisina tells a story of incest and revenge from Gibbon. *The Prisoner of Chillon* (1816) is a monologue where the hero recounts his terrible experience.

#### **1.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION**

Rightly called as a 'romantic paradox' Byron held an ambiguous position in English Romanticism. His works dealing with various moods : doom, ecstasy, indignation, pride, self-assumption pessimism are received differently by critics. Some critics still concentrate on the concept of Byronic hero and the sense of fatality attached and some regard him to be the true representation of the modern era. The list of critics is endless and Byron easily features in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as the favourite poet of the rebel hero, Stephen Dedalus. *Don Juan* is of course the most well-received work of Byron but during his life-time Southey published '*A Vision of Judgement*' and prefaced it with an ill-considered

attack on *'Don Juan'*. Southey described Byron as the founder of the 'Satanic School' characterised by a Satanic spirit of pride and audacious impiety. Goethe, on the other hand, opines that Byron can be regarded as the greatest genius of the century. But Goethe, at the same time, reflects on Byron's inability or unwillingness to adopt a permanent point of view; "Lord Byron is only great as a poet, as soon as he reflects, he is a child," Matthew Arnold also thinks Wordsworth and Byron to be 'a glorious pair among the English poets of this century', and George Bernard Shaw's dedicatory letter to *'Man and Superman'* (1903) equates Byron with Peter the Great.

So, Byron's reception has always been controversial to some extent. T.S. Eliot and Ralph Waldo Emerson are annoyed by Byron's 'triviality and rhetorical pose', Oscar Wilde and Albert Camus regarded Byron to be an early modern revolutionary. Eliot's essay on 'Byron' (1937) is an interesting piece of work and according to him, here Byron 'has the cardinal virtue of being never dull.' Praising his 'genius for digression' Eliot lauds Byron's 'reckless raffish honesty', and his works are the best representation of this sense of honesty. Perhaps Mario Praz's *The Romantic Agony* is the most interesting book about the whole tradition of Romanticism. The book argues that the center of Romanticism is deeply implicated with pathological psychological aberrations and Byron and the Marquis de Sade between them help to define the whole imagination range of Romanticism. Speaking about *Manfred*, Praz concentrates on the character of the 'fatal' heroes of Romantic literature. To quote him, "They diffuse all around them the curse which weighs upon their destiny, they blast, like the simoom, those who have the misfortune to meet with them (the image is from *Manfred*, III, I); they destroy themselves, and destroy the unlucky women who come within their orbit. Their relations with their mistresses are those of an incubus-devil with his victim" (*The Romantic Agony*). Eminent French critic Charles Du Bos finds the sense of existential urgency and profundity in Byron's life and work and W.H. Auden regards *Don Juan* to be the most original poem in English. Byron played a formative role in shaping the cause of English Romanticism and the critical views from different quarters indicate the possible ways to approach, the poetry of Byron along with the myth of Byronic hero. *Don Juan* is now regarded as the epic of modern life concentrating on the values of freedom and human adaptability. Albert Camus' description of the Byronic hero as someone "incapable of love, or

capable only of an impossible love, suffers endlessly. He is solitary, languid, his condition exhausts him. If he wants to feel alive, it must be in the terrible exaltation of a brief and destructive action" (The Rebel) brilliantly sums up the poet and Byron remains an enigma.

### **Check Your Progress**

1. What kind of connection do we find between Byron's personal details and his writing ?

(Hint: An important part would be the selection of themes.)

2. Which 'Romantic' dimension do we find in Byron ?

(Hint: Mainly, the revolutionary zeal.)

3. Which famous names do we find associated with Byron ?

(Hint: Read as much as possible about his life. Byron's name spills over into Greek political history.)

### **1.5 CONTEXT OF THE POEM**

*Don Juan* is Byron's unfinished 'epic satire' in 'ottava rima'. It was published in 16 cantos between 1819 and 1824. The first two cantos appeared in 1819, cantos 3-5 in 1821, 6-14 in 1823 and cantos 15 and 16 in 1824.

*Don Juan* is variously characterised as a metaphor of journey of the hero from innocence to experience, a picaresque romance, a mock-epic with a passive innocent hero who learns through the complexity of his experience. The poem opens with the 16 year old Juan being sent away from his native Seville by his mother as a result of an intrigue with Donna Julia. His ship is wrecked in a storm on the way from Cadiz and the crew and the passengers drift in the ship's longboat. Byron describes the scene of a stormy sea and the subsequent cannibalism brilliantly; *Don Juan* is famous for the power of Byron's descriptive verse. Juan eventually lands on a Greek island and meets Haidee, the daughter of a pirate. The amorous affair of the two is disrupted by the return of Haidee's father and Juan is sent away to be sold as a slave. Byron here stresses the innocence of this affair while Haidee dies of grief when Juan departs. Juan is sold into slavery.

In Constantinople the Sultana tries to seduce him. Escaping from these entanglements Juan joins the Russian siege of Ismail. Distinguishing himself in the Russian Army, Juan succeeds in winning a favour from Catherine the Great. Juan is eventually sent to a mission in England and here Byron projects a satiric portrait of contemporary British life and manners.

As Byron's masterpiece *Don Juan* is a work where he offers a wide-ranging ironic commentary on humour, passions and trends of behaviour, the varied tone loose structure and the adventurous note of this 'epic satire' brings the work in line with others like Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Voltaire's *Candide* and others.

The famous twentieth-century poet, W.H. Auden, wrote a 'Letter to Lord Byron'. This poem develops a line of 'Byronic' satire, in a style similar to that of 'Don Juan', worldly, sardonic, witty, personal and urbane. Auden's poem can be read as a kind of commentary on what Byron achieved in his own writing. For instance, Auden writes:

"So if ostensibly I write to you  
To chat about your poetry or mine,  
There're many other reasons; though it's true  
That I have, at the age of twenty-nine  
Just read Don Juan and I found it fine."  
Commenting on Byron's poetic status, Auden tells us:  
"You've had your packet from the critics, though:  
They grant you warmth of heart, but at your head  
Their moral and aesthetic brickbats throw.  
A 'vulgar genius' so George Eliot said,  
Which doesn't matter as George Eliot's dead,  
But T.S. Eliot, I am sad to find,  
Damns you with: 'an uninteresting mind'."  
Auden continues:  
"A statement which I must say I'm ashamed at;  
A poet must be judged by his intention,  
And serious thought you never said you aimed at.  
I think a serious critic ought to mention  
That one verse style was really your invention,  
A style whose meaning does not need a spanner,  
You are the master of the airy manner."

## 1.6 READING THE POEM DON JUAN (CANTO XI)

*Don Juan* is Byron's epic of modern life where he asserts the value of rebellion against authority, the existential angst of the characters and above all his skepticism regarding absolutes. The polarities of public and private, social and individual, nostalgia for and mockery of romantic love, obsessive yearning for freedom, readiness to experiment with the idioms of everyday speech dominate the world of *Don Juan*. Interestingly the persona of the poet contributes to the overall satiric effect achieved. The shift in voice and narrative persona is prominent here.

Byron seeks to depict the dilemma of man when faced with authorial intrusion. For example, the "I" of the persona continuously intrudes on the story he is telling, his problems, preferences, and attitudes create a simultaneous autobiography which overshadows Juan's adventures. This person wears a series of different masks. We can see him as a fussy bachelor in the opening cantos who informs the audience about his personal opinions. Sometimes he underscores his sophisticated outlook by his direct intrusion into the action with asides and deflationary parentheses. Throughout this poem we are aware of the narrator as a writer, endlessly engaged in the act of composition and a comic version of the Byronic hero is another mask used by the persona. Actually, the narrator achieves a comic sense of distance to heighten the effect of his satire. His digressions, self-reflexive commentary, all in a sense help to undercut the narrative and create a discrepancy between the ideas of the conventional epic and the basic realism portrayed in *Don Juan*.

### SAQ

How frequently does the narrator intrude into the narrative of Canto XI? (30 words)

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Is there any pattern behind these intrusions? Or are they just 'random'?

(40 words)

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.....  
.....

*Don Juan* records six major adventures of the hero and in Canto XI we find Juan making his way to London. His experience here in turn provides an ironic commentary on the social, political and cultural atmospheres of London. Allusions abound here thus adding to the meaning of this Canto. The first stanza opens with a discussion of Bishop Berkeley, Irish philosopher and subjective idealist. According to Berkeley things exist only insofar as they can be perceived. A general view of Berkeley's idea is that he denies the existence of all matter. Byron offers the existence of bodily functions to refute the ideas of Bishop Berkeley. The world for Juan is 'a glorious blunder' full of confusions and 'busy hum of cities'. But we can trace his great admiration for the nation which is so great. 'And here', he cried, 'is Freedom's chosen station'.

Juan's admiration melts away with the arrival of the highway robbers and the nation instantly falls from the height of reverence. Juan realises the loopholes in the system. Every highway is not clear, the traveler is interrupted by a knife and we find Juan's failure to understand the highway robbers due to linguistic barriers.

The latter stanzas contain a description of the confrontation with the robber along with a commentary on the English law and order system. The dilemma of the foreigner, Juan, in the English scenario is apparent when we read his expression 'all the ways seem one' (23). The 'enormous city's spreading spawn' spares no one and Juan constantly keeps commenting on the elegant manners of London life, the corruption of the civil servants, the dresses and customs, literature produced and discussed, the effect of the Napoleonic wars, polite society and the social gestures in a convincing manner. Details of contemporary life are present throughout this Canto,--Bedlam Billingsgate, the London fish-market, St. James Square, Carlton House, Bow Street, the river Thames, the gambling houses at the West End in Bury street, Pall Mall, etc., are used to illustrate the flavour of contemporary culture.



We can also see the effect of politics on society and Byron draws on his knowledge of many politicians like Henry Grattan, and Samuel Whitbred along with the rift between the Tories and the Whigs. Byron's awareness of his society in spite of his exilic condition is clear from this Canto. The notion of public and private confrontation is clear when Juan intrudes into the polite society of London and silently wears the mask of an ironic commentator. Nothing escapes Juan's searching eyes which always add meaning to whatever he says. For our convenience we can categorise this canto to be a foreigner's gaze on English society and its various aspects. But sometimes the gaze is also directed back at Juan himself. Byron draws the picture of Don Juan as a valiant rake with qualities that help him to present himself in the genteel society. Women admired Juan for his skills in music and dancing and Byron says:

"Daughters admired his dress,  
and pious mothers

Inquired his income, and if he had brothers."

Through Juan's eyes Byron offers various comments on women, their chastity, and commodification, the aspiration of the women writers, for instance, allowing a conscious reader to easily trace the influence of Pope in this Canto. From a feminist point of view Byron's treatment of women writers is far from satisfactory.

### **Stop to consider**

See the use of the word Drapery Misses in Stanza 49 which means "a pretty, a highborn, a fashionable young female well instructed by her friends and furnished by her milliner with a wardrobe upon credit to be repaid when married by her husband" [Byron]

The amorous affairs of high-class people along with the parties they throw appear frequently in the poem and in one section Byrons says:

"His afternoons he passed in visits, luncheons,  
Lounging, and boxing; and the twilight hour  
In riding round those vegetable puncheons.  
Called parks, where there is neither fruit not flower

Enough to gratify a bee's slight munchings.

But after all it is the only 'bower'

(In Moore's phrase), where the fashionable fair

Can form a slight acquaintance with fresh air."

Scientific discovery, power-politics, important contemporary figures and trends are present in the Canto we are dealing with. The plight of the writers along with the yearning for imaginative potential distinguish the narrative of Don Juan. In Canto XI Byron says, 'Sir Walter reigned before me'. Keats, Wordsworth, Moore, Campbell, Savage Landor, the gathering of ladies called 'The Blues' dominate the world of *Don Juan*. Byron frequently refers to the works of Shakespeare. The allusions to *The Tempest*, *Macbeth* are noteworthy in this regard. It sees that love, honour, education, religion, literature, patriotism, are presented only to be debunked.

**SAQ**

Women are constantly presented through Juan's gaze. How should we describe this 'gaze' and what does it tell us of the representation of women in the narrative? (60 words)

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Images of aristocratic society along with the political, cultural and intellectual affairs come frequently in this Canto. Rich in visual details, this Canto brilliantly describes the minute details of dresses, appearance, gestures, polite talk etc to enrich the spectacle. Seen through Juan's eyes, everything seems to achieve an ironic effect in the process of Juan's education. From Malthus to the 'unhappy queen's condition, nothing escapes Juan's satiric eye. But Juan's loneliness in the public gatherings is apparent and the readers can easily trace his uneasy status. No doubt he is clever enough to hide his feeling under the veil of scathing attacks. Our perception of Juan's state should always take into consideration his status as an outsider. Intrusion into a society demands a kinship with it but Juan keeps on maintaining an ironic distance.

When we come to the stylistic devices of the Canto, we find a long list of rhetorical figures used: Hyperbole, epithet, circumlocution, zeugma, understatement, condensation, which together add to the overall comic and satiric effect of *Don Juan*. In short, these figures are the means to expose the absurdity of human vices and follies. Byron exploits various generic possibilities within the poem and proudly asserts the departure from logic and coherence to achieve an effect of freedom. The formlessness of *Don Juan* in a sense anticipates the later writers like Joyce and Virginia Woolf who assert the value of individual freedom. Byron is conscious that we cannot escape from linguistic convention. So the only possible way is to explore all available genres and styles to establish his voice.

### **Stop to Consider**

We can see the mingling of various genres like satire, mock epic, picaresque romance, among others, in *Don Juan*. Is this mingling derived from Byron's desire for freedom or is there any other reason you can discern? What is the net effect of the attempt?

You can explore the idea of 'genre' on your own and make interesting discoveries. For instance, Philip Sidney, in the 1580s, mentioned this problem in his essay, "A Defence of Poesy". So did ancient classical critics like Horace, and even Aristotle. In our own day, Derrida has much to say. This should make you realise the importance of the problem.

## **1.7 SUMMING UP**

After reading *Don Juan* we can really understand the label 'romantic paradox' ascribed to Byron. Stressing on the value of rebellion, Byron explores the vision of man in the socio-political context and shares similarities with other romantic poets like Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth. But the unique attitude to life coupled with a satiric perspective and yearning for individual and ideological freedom relate Byron more to our era. *Don Juan* (Canto XI) helps Byron to achieve the desired effect and it is truly an epic of all times in spite of its loose structure and a passive hero's adventures.

## 1.8 GLOSSARY

**7.1.2 : Acropolis .....Attica :** an acropolis or a citadel here-- that of Athens, of Attica.

**7.4 : Timbuctoo :** town in Central Mali near the Niger river.

**7.6 : Nineveh :** Capital of ancient Assyria on the Tigris, opposite modern Mosul, in Northern Iraq.

**26.7-8:** Many were hanged on street lamp-posts (lantern) during the French Revolution (27.1-2). Byron's 'wicked man' may be Joseph Foulon, the French army commissioner who enraged his enemies by the taunt. "Well, if this riffraff does not have bread, it can eat grass." He was hanged from a lamp-post in 1789.

**27.3 : bonfires made of country seats :** These burnings occurred because of the unrest of the Industrial Revolution, and the social and political unrest after the Napoleonic wars.

**30.7 : Malthus:** In *Essay on the Principle Population* (1798) Malthus advocated fewer marriages, except among the well-to-do as means of checking the population.

**42.8 : Billingsgate :** The London fish-market and the coarse, abusive language, it was famous for.

**58.1-8:** This stanza on Henry Hart Melman (1791-1868) was in retaliation for what Byron construed as criticism in the *Quarterly*. He insulted Melman by calling him 'Dorus', a eunuch in Terence's *Eunuchus*; and 'Sporus' who was castrated by Nero. Pope satirized Lord Hervey under this name in his *Epistles to Dr. Arbuthnot*.

**60.1-8:** Byron shared this opinion with Shelley about the effect of the review on Keats. Both Shelley and Byron singled out the unfinished *Hyperion* for praise. The 'article' referred to was by John Watson Croker in the *Quarterly Review*.

**74.7 : toil and trouble :** Macbeth IV:10 "Double, double, toil and trouble".

**75.6 : "The Tyrants' and the tribunes' crew" :** refers to the Tories and Whigs.

**77.3-6:** Henry Grattan, Whig statesman and supporter of Irish interests in

Parliament died in 1820. John Philpot Curran, a colleague of Grattan's, in attempting to achieve parliamentary reform and catholic emancipation, died in 1817. R.B. Sheridan, dramatist, parliamentary orator and wit, died in 1816. Princess Charlotte, heiress to the throne died in childbirth in 1817; her mother queen Caroline, wife of George IV, in 1821.

**78.2 : Samuel Whitbread :** Whig politician and champion of the cause of Queen Caroline, had committed suicide in 1815; Sir Samuel Romilly in 1818.

**84.7-8 :** The revolts in Spain, Mexico and South America.

### **1.9 REFERENCES/SUGGESTED READING**

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## Unit 2

### Percy Bysshe Shelley

#### Contents:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introducing the Poet
- 2.3 His Works
- 2.4 Critical Reception
- 2.5 Context of the Poem
- 2.6 Reading the poem: *Ode to the West Wind*
- 2.7 Summing up
- 2.8 Glossary
- 2.9 References/Suggested Reading

#### 2.1 OBJECTIVES

Percy Bysshe Shelley is counted as one among the six great poets of English Romanticism. He displays a complexity in his poetry whose main themes run through several poems like 'Queen Mab', 'Alastor', 'Adonais', 'Mont Blanc', and 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty'. Your prescribed study of Shelley's writing is, however, limited to just a single poem, the famous 'Ode to the West Wind'. While no single poem can really represent the work and thoughts of a poet, a reading of this great poem is meant to stir your interest in other works of Shelley. So this unit aims to

- *highlight* the subtleties of the poet's intellectual framework
- *discover* the poet's technical strategies
- *read* the poem as a text of the Romantic movement
- *explore the meanings* available from your reading of the poem.

## 2.2 INTRODUCING THE POET

Born near Horsham, Sussex, in southern England, on August 4, 1792, Shelley showed his talents early in life. He was later educated in Eton until 1810 and then went up to Oxford that very year. Shelley began to develop increasingly radical opinions partly under the influence of *Political Justice* (1793) by William Godwin. Together with his close friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, Shelley brought out a pamphlet called 'The Necessity of Atheism' which ultimately led to their expulsion from Oxford in 1811. Soon thereafter, his involvement and his elopement with Harriet Westbrook in the month of August caused a permanent break with his family.

A life of financial difficulties followed subsequently resolved by negotiation and mediation by a friend and Whig leader, the Duke of Norfolk. The following year saw Shelley's undiminished radicalism take him to Ireland and Irish politics. An association with William Godwin began early in 1812 and Godwin remained Shelley's main correspondent during these years. Shelley's revolutionary rhetoric continued through the political pamphlets. *Queen Mab*, Shelley's long didactic poem of 1813, which incorporated 'The Necessity of Atheism', did not help Shelley's reputation as poet and reformer.

Meanwhile his personal life passed through difficulties as his marriage to Harriet deteriorated. Being on close relations with the Godwin household and finding her more to his temperament, Shelley married Mary Godwin, the daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, by eloping with her to Europe in 1814. Harriet's breakdown was inevitable and she drowned herself in 1816. Shelley lost custody of the children of his marriage to Harriet, despite his later relatively secure finances, through the Chancery proceedings instituted against him in the course of which his own arguments expressed in 'Queen Mab' were used against him.

Midway through 1816, Shelley traveled to Europe with his wife and thereupon embarked on an association with Byron which became a major part of his life. "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" dates from this period as does Mary's novel, *Frankenstein*. His return to England was marked by the association with the group surrounding Leigh Hunt, who edited then the radical newspaper *The Examiner*. The group had names like John Keats and William Hazlitt. Shelley's long poem, "The Revolt of Islam", dates from this period.

Shelley left England finally in 1818 and spent the rest of his life in Italy. *Prometheus Unbound* was partly written in Rome in 1819. Deep dejection was experienced in this period with the loss of two children. Between 1819 and 1820, the Shelleys were in Florence, where *Prometheus Unbound* was completed and "Ode to the West Wind" was written.

Byron moved to Pisa in 1821 at Shelley's recommendations and they formed the center of a circle loosely called, the Pisa Group. Leigh Hunt, who was to have joined them did not arrive so the association dispersed by the spring of 1822. In July 1822, Shelley was drowned in the Bay of Spezia, off Viareggio, together with his friend Edward Ellerker Williams, while sailing in his boat, the "Don Juan".

A true appraisal of Shelley is impossible without considering the political and philosophical aspects of his life. Influenced by his father-in-law Godwin, he produced *Queen Mab* (1812-13), a record of the corrupting influences of institution on man and Shelley explores the future possibilities of regeneration rather than simply opposing tyranny. He wrote many pamphlets in which radicalism is apparent. Shelley's atheism combined with an anxiety concerning the condition of post-Napoleonic Europe, and coloured by Platonic ideas, together with an influence drawn from the serenity of Greek civilisation and literature.

### 2.3 HIS WORKS

"The Necessity of Atheism" was Shelley's first diatribe against Christian morality, which led to his expulsion from Oxford. *Queen Mab : A philosophical Poem*, *The Mask of Anarchy* (1819), was inspired by the 'Peterloo massacre' while *The Revolt of Islam* (1818), *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), *Hellas* (1822), *Alastor* (1816), *The Cenci* (1819), *The Witch of Atlas* (1820), *Swellfoot the Tyrant* (1820), *The Triumph of Life* (1822), *Adonais* (1821), are some of the works by Shelley. While at Eton Shelley published an early Gothic novel, *Zastrozzi* (1810). *Queen Mab* (1813) is a visionary, philosophical and political poem in nine cantos and expresses Shelley's radical attitude. *Alastor* (1816) reflects Shelley's interest in the figure of the contemplative idealist and the *Revolt of Islam* (1818) written in Spenserian stanzas deals with Shelley's attitude towards the condition of contemporary England. *The Mask of Anarchy* (1819) is inspired by the 'Peterloo massacre' and is a statement of protest against authority.



*Prometheus Unbound* (1820) is a lyrical drama in four acts, influenced by Aeschylus dealing with the theme of liberation. *Hellas* (1822) is also inspired by the Greek rebellion against the Ottoman ruler and *Cenci* (1819) is a five-act tragedy based on the savage history of a 16th-century Roman family. *Swellfoot the Tyrant* (1820) is a satirical burlesque and *Adonais* is a famous elegy on Keats (1821). *The Triumph of Life* (1822) is his last major work and the *Defence of Poetry* (1821) is his most famous prose work which reveals the role of poetry as a force of social freedom and creative unity. Some of the famous poems of Shelley are : 'When the Lamp is shattered', 'Stanzas Written in Dejection', 'The Ode to the West Wind', 'To a Skylark', 'The Cloud', 'To the Moon'.

## 2.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION

The downgrading of Shelley was prominent in the works of critics like Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and others. For the modernist poets and critics, Shelley represents everything that modern poetry seeks to move beyond and they denigrate him for the weakness of his poetry and character. Irresponsibility, arrogance, dreaminess, self-absorption, and confused symbolism are all prominent in Shelley's works, according to these critics. Arnold slighted him during the nineteenth century by saying that the right sphere of Shelley's genius is music, not poetry. The essayist, Walter Bagehot, in 'Literary Studies' (1884) concludes that Shelley floats into an imaginary world of beauty and excellence but this world has nothing in common with the laws of the present world. Critics like Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, and Derrida have also focused on Shelley's writing. Raymond Williams points out the mixed implications of Shelley's language about poets and their high status: poets as the 'unacknowledged legislators of the world'. So their status both distinguishes and marginalizes them by separating them from the community to which they must contribute. Williams shows how the implications of Shelley's ideas carry a socio-political dimension. In spite of the criticism Shelley's prose works like 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821) still fascinate readers for conceptions of poetry, poets and their relation with the world.

## 2.5 CONTEXT OF THE POEM

'Ode to the West Wind' was first composed on October 19, 1819, inspired by a walk in a woodland near Florence. The poem was first published in August, 1920, along with *Prometheus Unbound*. Shelley was trying to recover from the traumatic incident of the death of his son, William, when the poem was written and we will try to see and relate the imagery of death in the context of personal conflicts and despondency. The completion of this ode was a fragmentary process as Shelley wrote the poem in several drafts.

## 2.6 READING THE POEM

The 'Ode to the West Wind' can be read as an invocation of the presence of a divine all-pervasive force that can be sensed in the physical world. The 'West Wind' is the metaphor of that great elusive life force which rejuvenates the world by generating change. Apart from these issues we can read the poem in the context of the romantic yearning for genius as it was natural during the Romantic era to associate genius with an attendant spirit or force. The artist was a vehicle through which genius flows. The metaphor of the west wind also expresses the attempt to understand the transcendent elements of the natural world along with the actualisation of the ideas of imaginative potential and art and beauty. Shelley's awareness of the apocalyptic destruction which in turn generates life and serenity is apparent when he assigns the role of a creator to the awesome west wind.

### Stop to Consider

We have just discussed the various roles assigned to the west wind.

Let us focus on the divine role assigned to the west wind. We can see the use of the word 'thou' frequently used in prayers and hymns. Again, heavenly images like 'winged seeds', 'azure sister', 'angels of rain and lightning' carrying ideas of ethereality, super-human omnipotence and heavenly presences are prominent throughout the poem to confirm the divine status of the west wind. The west wind is 'moving everywhere' and it is all-pervasive in nature. Interestingly the word 'azure' also refers to an unclouded vault of heaven. The phrase 'angels of rain and lightning', if explored for its biblical association, can be the messengers who bring messages from heaven to earth through rain and lightning.

Now, let us come to the actual text which can be divided into two points : the first three stanzas describe the wind's effect upon earth, air and ocean and also speak about the necessary qualities that the west wind possesses. The last two stanzas shift their emphasis to the speaker, who pleads for the awesome might of the west wind to spread his thoughts throughout the world.

**SAQ**

The first three stanzas contain the phrase 'oh, hear!' which visually installs an inter-relation between the stanzas. Who, would you accept, is the 'hearer' ? Is 'hearing' restricted to being merely a function of the personification of the West Wind ? Or, do you think, Shelley expresses a break in this illusion to remind the reader to listen or 'hear' ? (50 words)

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Shelley starts the first stanza by addressing the west wind which is a manifestation of the extraordinary power of nature. The images of death come quickly through the sinister elements like 'leaves dead', 'the corpse within the grave', 'ghosts' 'dark wintry bed'. Why does Shelley introduce these images of coldness and death-like situation?

Going back to the earlier sections we can relate the death of his son William to his attitude. Again see the 'seeds' are 'winged' i.e. ready to fly for freedom but ironically they are undernourished. The use of colours adds to the scene of death. We can view yellow to be the colour of the 'pestilence-stricken' skin and hectic red can be related to the death of multitudes. The wind is assigned dual roles of destroyer and preserver. The second stanza continues in the same vein of violence and destruction. To clarify this point let us take the phrase 'earth's decaying leaves' which refer back to the dead leaves in the first stanza. Visual details of the landscape are presented throughout: see how the line between the stormy sea and the sky becomes hazy when the area from the horizon to the zenith is replete with clouds.

'Thou on whose stream, 'mid the steep sky's commotion  
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,  
Shook from the tangled loughs of heaven and ocean.'

The sense of claustrophobia comes to the poem with the approaching storm. The night is also closing and the imaginative self cannot achieve the transcendence as the sky is a 'dome of a vast sepulchre'. But the 'dome' bursts like a volcano and brings 'black rain, and fire, and hail'. These two stanzas contain the images of hardship, violence, approaching winter, coldness etc unlike the latter stanzas. May be here Shelley is referring back to the intimate connection between good and evil.

### **Check Your Progress**

1. How can we interpret the ideas of imagination and creativity in the context of this poem which assigns cruel, awesome power to the west wind? Briefly discuss the values assigned to imagination and creativity in the Ode.
2. Discuss with reference to the text Shelley's conception of man's relation to nature.

Shelley returns to the theme of peace and serenity in the third stanza. How is this theme so dominant here? One obvious answer will be that it is through images like 'blue Mediterranean', 'summer dreams', 'oozy woods', 'azure moss and flowers', 'crystalline streams' and similar ones. The wind here plays the role of a creator by creating the illusion of a city on the surface of water and the idyllic picture of the sweetness of nature is, of course, a turning point. But the transition to a fearful state from the joyousness is apparent with the approach of the west wind which disturbs the innate harmony present in the world.

'Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,  
And tremble and despoil themselves :  
Oh, hear'

After reading the first three stanzas the fourth stanza offers a difference in terms of the focus. Note the shift from the wind to the speaker with the greater frequency of first -person pronouns. The focus here changes to the personality of the speaker and 'I', 'my', 'me' etc. can be useful illustrations to analyse the point mentioned.

**SAQ**

How many times does Shelley use a direct form of address in the fourth stanza? Comment on his shift of attitude with the help of this device. (50 words)

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The suppression of personality of the earlier stanzas yields to a more specific yearning of the narrator for liberation. The tone of confession underlies this stanza as the poet wishes for a total identification and fusion with the wind. The desire to 'pant beneath thy power and share the impulse of thy strength' is clear and the poet prays to the west wind to 'lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud'. The 'thorns of life' leads to the awareness of the claustrophobic existence and we clearly feel his existential angst here. Interestingly he is aware of the limitations he cannot transcend, but he still keeps on praying to the powerful wind. The last stanza contains Shelley's image of the wind playing upon the poet as an instrument. He elaborates the symbolic connection between the poet and the force of nature in terms of vehicle and agent.

'Make me thy lyre even as the forest is :  
What if my leaves are falling like its own.'

The passive yielding to the power of wind is apparent here and the attitude of the poet to the wind has changed. Now the wind has become an 'incantation,' in the first stanza it was an 'enchanter' with mysterious qualities.

### **Stop to Consider**

As we have seen the fourth stanza contains singular words like 'a leaf', 'a cloud', 'a wave' etc. Now let's come to the last stanza which is replete with plural forms like 'my leaves', 'my thoughts', 'my words', 'my lips', 'my leaves', 'thy mighty harmonies' etc. We can interpret this change in terms of the change in the poet's attitude. The fourth stanza is individualised to the extent of self-doubt, but the last stanza represents the evaporation of uncertainty and doubts. A sense of peace comes through the poet's identification with the wind as the leaves merge with the whole forest to create a sense of unified powers.

The myth of regeneration underlies the whole poem and the last stanza ends with the rhetorical question: 'If winter comes, can Spring be far behind?'

Shelley is here referring to the ideas of death and rebirth and for him true maturity is possible only when we are grown spiritually to respond to the working of the universe. Though the revolutionary ardour cannot be missed from the poem, Shelley here actually confirms his belief in an enlightened state of existence. The poet is the medium through which truth, meaning and divine inspiration will be transferred to the whole world and humanity will achieve the harmonious state of being, symbolised by the Spring.

### **Check Your Progress**

1. Relate Shelley's use of images in the poem to his conception of nature in terms of its various elements like air, water, earth, etc. Support your answer with textual references.
2. Comment on Shelley's integration of natural images into a vision of humanity and the universe in relation to the 'Ode to West Wind'.

## **2.7 SUMMING UP**

Reading a poet like Percy Bysshe Shelley is a process of discovering the hidden meanings his works evoke. In spite of the criticisms from various quarters Shelley still holds an important position where social and moral transformation is concerned. This unit aims to read Shelley by placing him in his context and also takes into consideration the approaches of the critics

to him. With the aim of instigating the urge for reading the unit basically focuses on the text mentioned and tries to familiarise the reader with the basic ideas of Shelley.

For Shelley, poetry is the source of pleasure which combines delight and wisdom to kindle imagination. But pleasure is not the only function of poetry. Poetry is also the clarion call of liberty and equality and this philosophy of liberty adds to the political as well as the social relevance of Shelley's work. Like the other Romantic poets, Shelley also proclaims the same ideas but it is the earnest desire to see mankind liberated from the deadening effect of authority which distinguishes him. 'The Ode to the West Wind' helps to enhance Shelley's reputation and the poem rightly clarifies the ideas Shelley incorporated in his works.

## 2.8 GLOSSARY

1. **"Maenad"** - a very frenzied woman in Greek mythology, a priestess of Bacchus, the God of Wine.
2. **"Pumice Isle"** - the name of an isle near Naples, Italy, which is formed by deposits of lava from Vesuvius, a volcano, nearby.
3. **"Baiae's bay"** - a favourite resort of the ancient Romans on the coast of Campania, at the western end of the Bay of Naples.
4. Shelley's ode is of the Horatian type with stanzas of uniform length and arrangement. It has a rhyme scheme of aba-bcb-cdc-ded-ee etc and Shelley used the Italian 'terza rima' here.

## 2.9 REFERENCES/SUGGESTED READINGS

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## Unit 3

### John Keats

#### Contents:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introducing the Poet
- 3.3 His Works
- 3.4 Critical Reception
- 3.5 Context
- 3.6 Reading the poem: *Ode To A Nightingale*
- 3.7 Summing up
- 3.8 Glossary
- 3.9 References/Suggested Readings

#### 3.1 OBJECTIVES

Though the sense of anxiety for the future reception of his poetry underlies his works, Keats' reputation is firmly established in the history of English literature. Within the span of his brief literary career John Keats produced works of enduring value and his works are replete with his opposition between the transience of human condition and transcendent moment, yearning for sensuousness and eternal truth and beauty to escape the impermanence of the mortal world. The unit aims to

- *highlight* the basic issues which characterize Keats' poetry,
- *place* Keats in the tradition of the Romantic poetry
- *analyse* and read Keats through the text prescribed
- *invite* new thoughts on Keats.
- *get* an overall impression on Keats, the Romantic

#### 3.2 INTRODUCING THE POET

The oldest of four children, John Keats was born at Moorfields, London. After the death of his father in 1804, Keats lived at Edmonton with his



mother who also died in 1810. In Clarke's School at Enfield, Keats started a translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*. At the end of 1810 he was apprenticed to a surgeon apothecary. Keats resumed his surgical studies in 1815 as a student at Guy's Hospital. In 1816 Keats became a Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries but soon abandoned all thought of pursuing his profession.

His first volume of poetry appeared in March 1817 and Keats spent his time at Shanklin, on the Isle of Wight and Margate with brother, Tom. It was at about this time that he first began writing his letters replete with the ideas of poetry, love, philosophy, his own personality and so on. The influence of Reynolds, Bailey, Charles Lamb, and Wordsworth stimulated his imagination. He was present at Haydon's 'immortal dinner' on 28 December 1817. Tom was seriously ill and Keats spent most of his time in nursing him. His visits to the Lakes of Scotland and Northern Ireland are recorded in *Hyperion*. Along with the pain of death of his loved ones, the attack on his poems weakened Keats and he thought of giving up poetry. The coming years saw his astonishing poetic development and most of his famous Odes were written during this period. In February 1820, Keats was seriously ill with tuberculosis and sailed for Italy with his friend in September to recovery and died in 1821 at Rome.

Keats witnessed an era of tumultuous changes like the rapid expansion of population, the introduction of new technologies, and the shift to a manufacturing economy from an agrarian one as the consequences of the Industrial Revolution and his attitude is transformed by such social upheavels. Like the other Romantic poets, Keats's political involvement is clear when his abhorrence of tyranny and social injustice is taken into consideration. Apart from the influences of society, powerful minds like Spenser, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and Dante also influenced Keats. The poet, Leigh Hunt, who was the editor of the journal *The Examiner* also had a strong influence on Keats and his contemporaries associated him with the Cockney school of poetry. For example, Keats' *Hyperion* clearly shows the influence of Milton and the 'Imitation of Spenser' (1814) exemplifies the influence of Spenser. But it is the example of Shakespeare he refers frequently to in his letters when he seeks to describe 'negative capability' and to distinguish between 'the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime' and the 'poetical character' that lives in gusto.

### 3.3 HIS WORKS

Many of Keats's works deal with the nature of poetic creation and the poet, implications of the theme of mortality, admiration for the pagan world of beauty and art, ideas of imagination and transcendence, knowledge and identity, and the influence of nature. The works of Keats' include *Poems* (1817), *Endymion* (1818), *Lamia*, *Isabella*, *The Eve of St. Agnes* and other *Poems* (1820), and *Otho the Great*. Keats' letters are also important for the exploration of his poetic ideals and his major correspondents are his brothers Tom and George, sister Fanny, Benjamin Bailey, Fanny Browne, amongst others.

Keats first poem "Lines in Imitation of Spenser" was written in 1814. *Otho the Great*, the tragedy in five acts and the uncompleted *King Stephen*, are the two dramatic works attempted by him. Keats wrote numerous poems like : "Bright Star", "Ode to Psyche", "Ode to a Nightingale", "Ode on Melancholy", "Lamia", "Ode on a Grecian Urn", "Isabella or the Pot or Basil", "The Fall of Hyperion", "The Eve of St. Agnes", "When I have Fears", "Ode on Indolence", "To Autumn". *Endymion : A Poetic Romance* is a poem in four books dedicated to Thomas Chatterton and deals with the Greek legend of Endymion, a Prince. *Hyperion* (two unfinished poems) tells the story of Hyperion from Greek mythology and invites comparison with *Paradise Lost*. "The Eve of St. Agnes" (1820) is a narrative poem in Spenserian stanzas and the setting is a night of dancing revelry in a medieval mansion. The poem is famous for its dramatic quality and sensuous appeal. "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is an enigmatic ballad which tells of a knight's fatal enchantment by a beautiful lady. "Lamia" deals with the central theme of tension between appearance and reality and "Isabella" is a poem in 'Ottava rima' based on a story from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Some of his important letters are the journal letter to George and Tom Keats of 21/27 December 1817, the letter written to Benjamin Bailey of 22 November 1817 etc.

### 3.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION

He is a true romantic in his sensuous luxuriance of imagery, yearning for the middle ages, his Hellenism, and his natural empathy. But he faced severe attacks from his contemporaries. The most damaging were John Wilson

Croker's review of *Endymion* in the Quarterly Review and John Gibson Lockhart's 1818 review of *Endymion and Poems* (1817) in Blackwood magazine. Keats's associates defended him and Shelley wrote the elegy *Adonais* which contained a counter-attack on Keats's reviewers. Keats's works underwent a change and the Pre-Raphaelites welcomed him for pictorial brilliance in his verse during the nineteenth century.

The twentieth century witnessed a change in the critical perception of Keats. Critics approached Keats in terms of his capacity to deal with the philosophical question of human existence, and his unworldliness. Paul de Man focuses on the formalist reading of Keats's work and the New Critics welcome Keats for a new influential reading. Again, historicist readings of Keats' poetry are possible as the humanists focus on his obsession with his masculinity. His disparagers find Keats' style and manner as effeminate but his admirers keep on defending his manliness. Susan Wolfson sees this in a broader context of social and literary culture and Anne K. Mellor projects Keats working within a feminine romantic aesthetic and also struggling against the influence.

### 3.5 CONTEXT

This poem was composed in 1819. The symbol of the nightingale is always associated with love and poetry. Coleridge wrote two poems 'To the Nightingale' and 'The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem'. Perhaps Keats is influenced by Coleridge's work and the myth of Philomela who is transformed into a nightingale after being tortured.

#### **The symbols of the natural world in Romanticism**

The Romantic writers advocated what we can broadly call "a return to nature". As you have so far discovered, this 'return' was not to the nature of the eighteenth century which tended to impose the ideal of perfection on Nature. A notable feature of Romantic writing is its insistence on the sense of sight as the metaphor for sense-perception.

We must turn here to what M.H. Abrams tells us in his discussion of "The Politics of Vision" in *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. To simplify Abrams's argument our account includes the fact that for many Romantic writers, including German writers like Friedrich von

Schiller and J.G. Fichte, a major theme running through their works is the relation of man and nature, the relations of mind and the natural world.

We have to understand here another idea which is visible in the writings of the Romantic writers : their consistent preoccupation with the concept of freedom. This preoccupation, however, is tied in with the terms common to Western traditional philosophy-terms like 'mastery', 'slave', 'submission', 'equality', 'freedom' and others of the same order expressing societal domination and ownership. Abrams observes that "Blake applies the concepts of liberty and servitude to all aspects of human experience, but especially to the domain of sight and vision. The primal division within the human mind leads at once to a sustained struggle for dominance among its component faculties." What this means is that even within the human psyche there is an inner struggle.

In Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, similarly, "the central myth represents a conflict within the mind between the tyrant-power and its victim, whose enslavement results in perception of distorting fantasies in place of reality". Abrams points to a similar instance in Coleridge's *France: An Ode* connecting it with Coleridge's concern to achieve genuine freedom by being free of "the despotism of the eye".

The last lines of the ode

"Yes, while I stood and gazed, my temples bare,  
And shot my being through earth, sea, and air,  
Possessing all things with intensest love,  
O Liberty! My spirit felt thee there."

Point to this concern with the enslavement of the mind through the tyranny of visual perception. In Wordsworth, too, there is a distinction made between nature as purely the sum of physical objects and nature as something much larger than what is finally filtered through the physical eye.

From all of the above what we learn is that with influences like the French Revolution which contested forms of ownership of land (in this sense, 'nature' as object of extraction and control), with the Romantic writers we are led to see nature as an embodiment of a relation of mind and natural world cast in a more benign mould.

### **3.6 READING THE POEM: ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE**

Contraries struggle and antitheses dominate the world of 'Ode to a Nightingale' to convey the complex nuances of its meaning. Temporal and eternal ideal and actual man and nature, art and life, freedom and bondage, permanence and mutability, pain and pleasure, dream and waking, remote

and commonplace are the issues highlighted in this poem. The opinion of the critics vary regarding this famous ode and the symbol of the nightingale itself. Intense pleasure is a necessary consequence of numbing pain and according to Douglas Bush Keats' Odes are not the hymns of triumph and joy as they celebrate the acme of melancholy. But for Richard H. Fogle, the Ode does express the very acme of joy. The Ode progresses through a series of opposed moods and ways of seeing. The nightingale is imaginatively transformed into a myth and critics argue whether Keats is referring to the actual bird or the species.

**SAQ**

What other associations does the symbol of the nightingale bring to your mind ? (30 words)

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Can we assert that Keats uses this symbol to resolve the contradictory impulses present in the Ode? (50 words)

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The Ode is also a comment on the power of the imagination. Is imagination sufficient to escape from this world of the 'weariness, the fever, and the fret' or is it only a 'waking dream' which deceives with its transient assurance? The yearning for the world of the nightingale replete with 'verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways' and bathed in moonlight is symbolic of the power of imagination which brings the poet closer to the ecstatic happiness of the 'easeful Death.' The world of actuality lags far behind and the first stanza opens with the picture of physical ache and 'a drowsy numbness', natural sequel of his sadness. The line between pain and pleasure is, of course,

very thin and sadness results when he is 'too happy in thy happiness.' Craving for an escape from the physicality of this world and a union with the immortal bird, the poet searches for the proper instrument. Wine is rejected and the 'viewless wings of poesy' provide the ultimate hope of renewal and supreme joy. The world of imagination offers the release from the suffering and pain and forgetfulness is bliss. Plenitude, repletion or fullness is the idea highlighted in the second stanza.

### **Stop to Consider**

See the use of the word 'full' here, find out its various implications. It would not be far-fetched for you to link words like "verdurous" and "mossy" to the idea of completeness associated with the nightingale's realm of existence. Keats is not merely giving precise, exact details of this world beyond the human, of nature, which is green and living. Just as a dream fulfills our desires, so does this natural world. But it is interesting to note that Keats knows how this natural world is not to be entered directly through reason or daily, common awareness but through poesy. Is he talking of a different form of knowledge? Perhaps so, if we connect this with his idea of the 'holiness' of the 'heart's affections' and the idea of 'Negative Capability'.

The third stanza contrastingly returns to the vein of melancholic yearning. From the mingling of pictorial and associational, concrete and compressed imagery of the second stanza, the third stanza focuses on the pain inherent in living while the fifth one is famous for its sensuous luxuriance. Keats returns to the culmination of his experience through the outpouring of the nightingale in the next stanzas, but the final stanza expresses the withdrawal from the climax of the imaginative experience. The world 'forlorn' with the multiple connotations tolls like a bell to bring the poet back from the world of magic casements and 'fairy lands'. Recognition of this isolation is a part of the totality of experience and the stanza ends with the question :

'Was it a vision or a walking dream?

Fled is that music - do I wake or sleep?'

Keats' world is enriched with intense details which convey the fullest sense of life. According to Cleanth Brooks and Robert Pen Warren this poem is about wholeness and alienation, fertility and growth. The imagery used here

help the poet to achieve the required effect when sensations are blended with the vitality of nature. 'Beaded bubbles', 'purple stained mouth', 'soft incense', 'musk rose', 'dewy wine', 'magic casement', 'country green', 'the warm south', are some of the examples highlighting the point mentioned above.

### **Check Your Progress**

1. Discuss the use of imagery in Keats' poetry. How do the images contribute to the sensuousness claimed by many readers to typify Keats's poetry ?
2. How does Keats use imagery as a means to overcome contradictions in his poetry ? Discuss the poetic strategies present in the 'Nightingale' ode.

Use of repetitions, parallelisms, anaphora, frequent use of synaesthesia, alliteration, etc., structures the Ode with a language highly exploratory and poignant. Basically structured around the contrasting themes of freedom and bondage, earthly beauty and the eternal happiness this Ode tries to unite the temporal and eternal in a harmonious relationship.

Describing a near-death experience the Ode springs from Keats's yearning for a timeless paradise where no pain reigns. Some readers trace the influence of Coleridge when they come to the opium-induced dream. But a careful reading shows the application of the ideas of 'negative capability' in this Ode. Here Keats joins the nightingale and the world of endless happiness by nullifying his innate self. Though the poet returns to the actuality of experience we can analyse the poem in this vein.

### **3.7 SUMMING UP**

A poet for Keats is the most unpoetical of anything in existence because he has no identity (from a letter written to Richard Woodhouse on 27 October, 1818). With his desire to live in uncertainties, a poet shifts from one identity to another and the power of imagination smoothens the path of transition from one state to another. In the same vein the 'The Ode to Nightingale'

asserts the power of imagination. The Ode can also be read as a serious meditation on the process of creative artistry. Moreover, the struggles between ideal and actual, life and death, permanence and mutability, also dominate the world of the Ode. Keats successfully unites the contradictory impulses present in the Ode making the poem a manifestation of his power.

### 3.8 GLOSSARY

1. Hemlock: a poisonous plant which produces death by paralysis.
2. Lethe: a river of the lower world from which the shades drank, and thus obtained forgetfulness of the past.
3. Dryad: a wood nymph.
4. Beechen: of the beech tree.
5. Draught: what can be swallowed in a single drink.
6. Flora: the goddess of flowers, here used for flowers themselves. Cf. Keats' letter to Fanny Keats ca. May 1, 1819 : " O there is nothing like fine weather... and, please heaven, a little claret-wine cool out of a cellar a mile deep - with a few or a good many ratafia cakes - a rocky basin to bathe in, a strawberry bed to say your prayers to Flora in" (*Letters*, II, 56)
7. Provençal song: In the early Middle Ages the poets of southern France, the troubadours of Provence, were particularly famous for their love lyrics.
8. Hippocrene: a fountain on Mount Helicon in Boeotia, sacred to the Muses.
9. Bacchus and his pards: the Roman god of wine, who traditionally is shown in a conveyance drawn by leopards.
10. Viewless: invisible. This phrase appears in half a dozen poems from 1765 to Mary Robinson's "The progress of liberty" in 1806 (II, 426).
11. Pastoral eglantine: Eglantine is properly the sweet-briar, though popularly applied to various varieties of the wild rose. "Pastoral" presumably because often referred to in pastoral poetry.
12. Darkling: in the dark; cf Milton, *Paradise Lost*, III, 38-40: "As the wakeful Bird/Sing darkling, and in shadiest Covert hid/Tune her nocturnal Note."
13. Alien corn: alien because Ruth was not an Israelite but a Moabite, gleaning in the barley fields of Judah (Ruth 2 : 1-2)



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