**The Romantic and Victorian Poetry**

When we hear the word romantic, we often think of love and relationships, but the word ‘Romanticism’ means something both broader and more specific. This term refers to developments in the arts, literature, music, and philosophy, from the late 18th until the early 19th centuries. The term ‘romanticism’ wasn’t used until the middle of the 19th century. During the Romantic period, British society was undergoing massive changes. Artists and scholars began to challenge the establishment--in England in particular, poets drove this movement. They sought greater freedoms and better treatment of the poor. The importance of the individual was the focus—the ideal that people should follow ethical principles rather than what seemed like illogical and unethical rules. They felt responsibility towards others. Most importantly, they felt it was their responsibility to use poetry to inform and inspire, and of course, to change society. When we talk about Romantic poetry, we often think of William Blake (1757-1827), William Wordsworth (1770-1850), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), Lord Byron (1788-1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792 1822) and John Keats (1795-1821).

The term “romanticism” describes a literary movement of the late 18th and early 19th centuries that emerged in several respects as a reaction against Augustan neoclassicism. While the Augustans had prioritized decorum and formal rules, romantic poets centered imagination and individualism in their work, seeking to capture authentic human experiences and emotion. A common focus of romantic poetry is man’s experience of the natural world. For example, the poet William Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” describes the beauty of a field of daffodils and the emotional impact that this experience has on the speaker, who thereafter thinks on daffodils as a form of private consolation. The emphasis on individual and solitary experience in nature and its role in steering the imagination is typical of much romantic poetry.

Romantic poets, like generations of poets before them, shared an interest in the epic form. William Wordsworth reimagined the epic in his long autobiographical poem, \*The Prelude\*, published posthumously in 1850. Spanning 14 books and over 8,000 lines in blank verse, the poem focuses not on heroic actions or historical events but on the poet’s inner journey from boyhood to manhood.

Romantic poetry often turned its gaze to the lower classes, as showcased in the seminal collaborative work of Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge, “Lyrical Ballads”, published in 1798. “Lyrical Ballads” sought to capture the everyday life, emotions and experiences of rural communities, emphasizing their dignity, humanity, and connection with nature. These poems also serve as a critique of emerging industrialism, which posed an increasing threat to traditional ways of life.

Wordsworth’s poem “The Solitary Reaper” portrays a young woman singing while working alone in a field, the beauty and depth of her song transcending the mundanity of her labor. Similarly, Coleridge’s “The Foster-Mother’s Tale” narrates the impact of kindness and love offered to an orphaned child within the rural social fabric. Throughout, Wordsworth and Coleridge use intentionally plain and accessible language, rejecting the ornate and elaborate phrasing often found in earlier poetry and allowing the poets to connect more intimately with their subjects and readers.

“Negative Capability” is a concept often considered central to romanticism, coined by the poet John Keats in a letter to his brothers, George and Thomas of 1817. In this letter, Keats described Negative Capability as the ability of a writer or artist to embrace uncertainty, mystery, and doubt without seeking resolution or definitive answers. Negative Capability allows the poet to remain open to the richness and complexity of human experience, rather than imposing rigid structures or explanations on their subject matter, rejecting the Enlightenment’s emphasis on reason, logic, and definitive knowledge.

Poets John Keats (1795-1821) and Percy Shelley (1792-1822) were deeply intrigued by history and decaying civilizations. Their works emphasized the enduring power of nature, in contrast to the transitory nature of human lives and achievements. In Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1819), he examines stories depicted on an ancient artifact, contemplating human transience and art’s immortality. The urn symbolizes a long-lost civilization, yet its artistic beauty remains, captivating the poet and providing insights into human experiences across centuries. Similarly, Shelley’s “Ozymandias” (1818) describes a traveler encountering a ruined statue in the desert, once a monument to a mighty ruler.

Romantic poets’ fondness for the “ballad” form – an oral tradition originating in northern europe – aligned with their interest in what is known as the “gothic”, a literary genre characterized by elements of horror, macabre, and the supernatural, often with a gloomy medieval setting – for example a ruined castle. One notable example is Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1798) – a ballad that tells the tale of a cursed sailor who suffers a cursed life after killing an albatross.

**Transition from Romantic to Victorian Ideals**

During the nineteenth century, poetry shifted from romanticism to embrace Victorian values, such as propriety, respectability, and duty, whilst also providing commentary on the rapidly transforming world due to industrialization and science. Victorian poetry refers to poetry written during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). Victorian poetry was similar in many ways to that of the Romantics. However, Victorian poetry often takes on science as a theme, especially in relationship to religion. Victorian poets are considered more humorous than the Romantics.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Poet Laureate during Queen Victoria’s reign (1837-1901), exemplifies this shift with his poem “Ulysses,” which explores themes of duty, perseverance, self-improvement, and the pursuit of knowledge. Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s works, such as her sonnet sequence \*Sonnets from the Portuguese,\* (1850) delve into the interplay between love, faith, and individual roles in society, and reflect Victorian notions of inner virtue. This morally didactic quality is also seen in the dramatic monologues of Elizabeth Barett’s husband, Robert Browning, such as “My Last Duchess” and “Porphyria’s Lover,” which provide psychological insights into his characters and expose darker aspects of human nature. These poems serve as cautionary tales, warning readers against unchecked ambition, jealousy, and obsession.

The Victorian period saw an increased fascination with childhood and literature for children, such as Lewis Carol’s \*Alice in Wonderland\* (1865). This interest combined with their attraction to morally didactic tales may also explain the popularity of fairy tale motifs in victorian poetry. This is showcased by the poetry of Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), sister of the renowned Pre-Raphaelite painter and poet, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Her poem “Goblin Market,” features a narrative that revolves around two sisters who encounter goblin merchants selling tantalizing fruits in a magical marketplace, exploring themes of temptation, redemption, and the commodification of women.

**Industrial Revolution**

Industrial Revolution was a period of global transition of human economy towards more widespread, efficient and stable manufacturing processes that succeeded the Agricultural Revolution. These technological changes introduced novel ways of working and living and fundamentally transformed society. This process began in Britain during the mid-18th century and early 19th century and from there spread to other parts of the world.

The main features involved in the Industrial Revolution were technological, socioeconomic, and cultural. The technological changes included the following: (1) the use of new basic materials, chiefly iron and steel, (2) the use of new energy sources, including both fuels and motive power, such as coal, the steam engine, electricity, petroleum, and the internal-combustion engine, (3) the invention of new machines, such as the spinning jenny and the power loom that permitted increased production with a smaller expenditure of human energy, (4) a new organization of work known as the factory system, which entailed increased division of labour and specialization of function, (5) important developments in transportation and communication, including the steam locomotive, steamship, automobile, airplane, telegraph, and radio, and (6) the increasing application of science to industry. These technological changes made possible a tremendously increased use of natural resources and the mass production of manufactured goods.

The technological and economic aspects of the Industrial Revolution brought about significant sociocultural changes. In its initial stages it seemed to deepen labourers’ poverty and misery. Their employment and subsistence became dependent on costly means of production that few people could afford to own. Job security was lacking: workers were frequently displaced by technological improvements and a large labour pool. Lack of worker protections and regulations meant long work hours for miserable wages, living in unsanitary tenements, and exploitation and abuse in the workplace. But even as problems arose, so too did new ideas that aimed to address them. These ideas pushed innovations and regulations that provided people with more material conveniences while also enabling them to produce more, travel faster, and communicate more rapidly.

The American Industrial Revolution, sometimes referred to as the Second Industrial Revolution, began during the Gilded Age in the 1870s and continued through World War II. The era saw the mechanization of agriculture and manufacturing and the introduction of new modes of transportation including steamships, the automobile, and airplanes.

Although the Industrial Revolution occurred approximately 200 years ago, it is a period that left a profound impact on how people lived and the way businesses operated. Arguably, the factory systems developed during the Industrial Revolution are responsible for creating capitalism and the modern cities of today.