

English Literature II – First semester

1. Historical View

Revolutions
around the
world and how
they affected
Britain

The end of 1700 and the beginning of 1800 is often called **the age of revolution** because of the revolutions all over Europe that changed the way people thought and looked at authorities. One of them was **American War of Independence**, where English colonies rebelled to their superiors to be represented in the English Parliament. Many pamphlets and books were written to discuss this mentality, and some minds started to move towards the right direction. **French revolution** did not affect Britain directly, but it was upsetting and shaking, as whole for whole of Europe, leaving people afraid of having such a slaughter in their own country. This fear brought to the suspension of habeas corpus, a very old and traditional right for Britain. Just after the French settled, the Irish population rebelled in 1798, unsuccessfully. At this time, trade unions and political association were strictly regulated by laws, to prevent people from uprising against the authorities.

A few years after there were the **Napoleonic Wars**, a devastating event for Europe, which again did not touch Britain but left the population shaken and afraid. Another really concerning happening was **Peterloo Massacre**, which took place in St. Peters Field and was called like this in remembrance of Waterloo. The Peterloo Massacre was a conflict between people who were protesting against Corn Laws (more later in the page) and the authorities.

Progressive
changes

Between all of these repressive measures, there were some **progressive changes** pushed by popular opinion, like the abolition of slave trade, possibilities for catholic families to attend university (Britain was not catholic), the Factory Act defending child labor, the **corn laws** (import/export laws to keep local grain at a low price and encourage buying inside the community) and the Reform Act.

The **reform act** concerned electoral changes and laws. With the movement of great masses of people from the countryside to the city, the parliament representation changed drastically, and some villages did not exist anymore despite having a place in parliament, while other were fully populated and had no representation. The reform was aimed to widen the range of people who could

vote and to adjust representation. Of course not everyone was pleased especially the ones who did not get the right to vote, who started a movement called Chartism, which aimed to universal male suffrage, secret ballot, living wage for MPs (to have low class representation) and equal representation for all cities and villages.

Technological
progress and
industrial
revolution

During romanticism there were a lot of technological progress. One of these was the steam engines and the rotative motion system, which led to the first locomotive and rail journey ever made. By 1825, in fact, people could ride trains for short paths. A crucial part of the industrial revolution was by the textile industry, especially concerning cotton production. Spinning and weaving was mechanized, and factories made bigger. Britain's first competitor was India, which was later colonized and de-commercialized.

People started thinking about the problem that industry could bring, creating awareness on ecology. Meanwhile, rural economy lost importance and people started to move to big cities, which grew. The food was, however, still produced in the countryside. People who decided to stay in this part of the world became richer because they were few who produced food for all the cities. This agrarian capitalism grew and smaller producers had to move to the town because they could not keep up with the richer ones, buying community lands and producing big amounts of food.

The new social group of entrepreneurs brought by this modernization created a movement, called **utilitarianism**.

Utilitarianism introduces the idea that happiness should not be for the few and criticized unequal laws or privileges. People started to question the superiority of aristocracy and their privileges being based solely on money of family background. They also questioned the exclusivity of the Church of England. An important topic were import taxes, encouraging buying inside the community and the utility of art and poetry.

2. Romantic Poetry

The two generations of romantic poets

There are two generations of romantic poets, the first being Wordsworth and Coleridge, and the second one composed by Shelley, Byron and Keats. Blake is often associated with the first generation. This generation felt the impact of French revolution directly and in various ways. They originally were enthusiasts about it and some of them went to France to see it with their own eyes. Their hope soon became disillusion.

William Wordsworth

Wordsworth's life

The prelude and the French revol.

Wordsworth was born in the Lake District and studied in Cambridge before moving to France to see the revolution. In 1805 he wrote "Prelude" to explain the enthusiasm he felt towards the French happenings. This piece of literature was published posthumously.

*But Europe at that time was thrilled with joy, France standing on the top of golden hours,
And human nature seeming born again.*

Bliss was in that dawn to be alive

But to be young was very heaven. (Prelude, 1805)

Napoleonic wars

When between France and Britain was declared war (Napoleonic Wars), he had to go back, leaving his French lover behind. He then met Coleridge, with the same political ideas, and moved together with his in Dorset. They started the collaboration which brought to us the Lyrical Ballads. Later in his life Wordsworth became a Poet Laureate.

Lyrical ballads

Lyrical ballads background

The lyrical ballads are extremely important, and they were born as an **experimental** work between Coleridge and Wordsworth, but mostly written by the latter. In the **preface** the author explains the reasons behind some poems, subjects, or the **humble context** which made their work very original and peculiar. As well as the context, the language too was simple and brought no unusual words. The language is the "language of men", he avoids personification and metaphors, as poetry should be for the many, not for the few. He chooses

rural settings, simple people and basic emotions, things everyone can relate to.

The language

In the preface he also explained what poetry should have been to him: “*a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings*”. He states that feelings are not expressed immediately and that humans need time to understand them so they can be articulated by thought.

They received a lot of critics as this kind of poem was unusual and perceived as “not proper poetry”.

Critics

Another crucial element of romanticism is the concept of poetry not as an imitation of the outside, but a powerful tool to express the poet’s feelings and ideas. The life of the poet is crucial, even if he doesn’t write about himself.

From the preface:

“For the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent

stimulants; and he must have a very faint perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know

this, and who does not further know, that one being is elevated above another, in proportion as he

Humanity and poetry

possesses this capability. It has therefore appeared to me, that to endeavour to produce or enlarge

this capability is one of the best services in which, at any period, a Writer can be engaged; but this

service, excellent at all times, is especially so at the present day. [...]

What the author is saying is that this kind of poetry helps people being more human, to pay attention to what is important to them, to be in touch with other people.

We are seven

———A simple Child,
That lightly draws its breath,
And feels its life in every limb,
What should it know of death?

I met a little cottage Girl:
She was eight years old, she said;
Her hair was thick with many a curl
That clustered round her head.

She had a rustic, woodland air,
And she was wildly clad¹
Her eyes were fair, and very fair;
—Her beauty made me glad.

“Sisters and brothers, little Maid,
How many may you be?”
“How many? Seven in all,” she said,
And wondering looked at me.

“And where are they? I pray you tell.”
She answered, “Seven are we;
And two of us at Conway dwell,
And two are gone to sea.

“Two of us in the church-yard lie,
My sister and my brother;
And, in the church-yard cottage, I
Dwell near them with my mother.”

“You say that two at Conway dwell,
And two are gone to sea,
Yet ye are seven! I pray you tell,
Sweet Maid, how this may be.”

Then did the little Maid reply,
“Seven boys and girls are we;
Two of us in the church-yard lie,
Beneath the church-yard tree.”

“You run about, my little Maid,
Your limbs they are alive;

If two are in the church-yard laid,
Then ye are only five.”

“Their graves are green, they may be
seen,”

The little Maid replied,
“Twelve steps or more from my
mother’s door,
And they are side by side.

“My stockings there I often knit,
My kerchief² there I hem;
And there upon the ground I sit,
And sing a song to them.

“And often after sun-set, Sir,
When it is light and fair,
I take my little porringer,
And eat my supper there.

“The first that died was sister Jane;
In bed she moaning lay,
Till God released her of her pain;
And then she went away.

“So in the church-yard she was laid;
And, when the grass was dry,
Together round her grave we played,
My brother John and I.

“And when the ground was white with
snow,
And I could run and slide,
My brother John was forced to go,
And he lies by her side.”

“How many are you, then,” said I,
“If they two are in heaven?”
Quick was the little Maid’s reply,
“O Master! we are seven.”

“But they are dead; those two are dead!
Their spirits are in heaven!”
’Twas throwing words away; for still
The little Maid would have her will,
And said, “Nay, we are seven!”

This poem is about a child who doesn’t understand death. The girl has a different approach to the death of her brother and feels like they are still with her.

It’s written in quatrains and follows the simple rhyme pattern, typical of ballad.

We are seven

¹ Clad = clothes

² Kerchief = tissue

Lines Written in Early Spring

I heard a thousand blended notes,
While in a grove³ I sate⁴ reclined,
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

To her fair works did nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man.

Through primrose tufts, in that sweet bower,
The periwinkle⁵ trailed its wreaths;
And 'tis my faith that every flower
Enjoys the air it breathes.

The birds around me hopped and played:
Their thoughts I cannot measure,
But the least motion which they made,
It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

The budding twigs⁶ spread out their fan,
To catch the breezy air;
And I must think, do all I can,
That there was pleasure there.

If this belief from heaven be sent,
If such be Nature's holy plan,

Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man?

Lines written
in early spring

This is a reflective poem, full of introspection. As other ballads, it follows alternate rhyme.

Poem of
nature

Wordsworth is known for being a poet of nature, which assumes a personality, takes life like an almost-divine spirit. Being close to nature is being close to God, in Wordsworth opinion.

Analysis

In the first quatrain, we see the divinity of nature (“A thousand blended notes”). In the second quatrain, we move away from nature to think of how men always hurt each other and then the poet states that nature is linked to humanity by the idea of soul (“To her fair works did nature link // The human soul that through me ran”). Nature and mankind are not so different in the depth of their soul, but this similarity was forgotten. This represents one of Wordsworth main philosophies: man is innately close to nature.

In the next quatrain nature is alive again as we see represented in the words “trailed” and “breathes” both movement verbs referred to flowers.

In the fourth quatrain, the presence of moment highlights the contrast with the immobile poem, since the poetic-I has no thought or personality whatsoever. The poet's world is completely subdued by the nature's world.

In the last two quatrains there is a call back to the initial problem, (“Have I not

³ Grove = wood, bosco

⁴ Sate = (to feed) to stay, to sit

⁵ Periwinkle = Pervinca, fiore

⁶ Budding twigs = rametti in fiore

reason to lament // What man has made of man?” vs. “And much it grieved my heart to think // What man has made of man”). We see an attempt from nature to heal the poet’s soul from the melancholy that possesses him. This attempt fails, negating the healing power that were claimed by the poet. The human soul and the nature one can’t go together anymore as one has to follow the misery of mankind, while the other is untouched by them.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Coleridge’s life

Coleridge was born in 1772 from the local vicar⁷. When he was 8 years old his family died, and he was transferred to London.

In 1795 he got married and met Wordsworth, they moved together in the countryside to let his children grow up next to nature. Between 1797 and 1798 he wrote his best poems, such as Rime of the Ancient Mariner and the first part of Christabel.

Relation with Wordsworth

He and Wordsworth published the Lyrical Ballads (including the first version of the Rime) and moved to Germany, where he studied German language and philosophy, including Locke. In 1800 they moved back to Lake District and later he travelled to Malta and Italy.

Opium addiction

He became an opium addict this led him to separate from his wife and to have a fight with Wordsworth. He then wrote his main prose work, Biographia Literaria before dying in 1816, alone with his physician in London, from a pulmonary disease.

From Biographia Literaria:

*“During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbors, our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination. The sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moon-light or sun-set diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. **These are the poetry of nature.** The thought suggested itself (to which of us I do not recollect) that **a series of poems might be composed of two sorts.** In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from*

Coleridge on poetry

⁷ Vicar = prete della religione anglicana, vicario

whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency. For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such, as will be found in every village and its vicinity, where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them, or to notice them, when they present themselves. In this idea originated the plan of the 'Lyrical Ballads'; in which it was agreed, that my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth on the other hand was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand."

Rime of The Ancient Mariner

His main contribution to poetry is the Rime⁸ of The Ancient Mariner, a long narrative poem. A very important characteristic of this piece is the original presence of fake archaic spell, later removed. Despite this, the language is the one people used at the time, but had a really complex peritextual structure, with a lot of marginal glosses, to pretend the Rime was an old traditional ballad, studied by a scholar.

Context

The poem is structured in seven parts, of varying length and varying number of stanzas. We will only analyze the first part. The rhyme scheme is A B C B and there an alternance of tetrapods and tripods⁹.

Since the poem is not completely straight forward, Coleridge wrote an "argument" at the beginning of every section.

Structure

⁸ Rime = a poem in rhymed verse

⁹ Tetrapody = four metrical feet
Tripody = three metrical feet

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

Argument: How a Ship having passed the Line¹⁰ was driven by storms to the cold Country towards the South Pole; and how from thence she made her course to the tropical Latitude of the Great Pacific Ocean; and of the strange things that befell; and in what manner the Ancyent Marinere came back to his own Country

It is an ancient Mariner,
And he stoppeth one of three.
'By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?

The bridegroom's doors are opened wide,
And I am next of kin;
The guests are met, the feast is set:
Mayst hear the merry din.'

He holds him with his skinny hand,
"There was a ship," quoth¹¹ he.
'Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!'
Eftsoons¹² his hand dropped he.

He holds him with his glittering eye -
The Wedding-Guest stood still,
And listens like a three years' child:
The Mariner hath his will.

The Wedding-Guest sat on a stone:
He cannot choose but hear;
And thus spake¹³ on that ancient man,
The bright-eyed Mariner.

"The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared,
Merrily did we drop

The Wedding -Guest he beat his breast,
Yet he cannot choose but hear;
And thus spake on that ancient man,
The bright -eyed Mariner.

"And now the storm -blast came, and he
Was tyrannous and strong:
He struck with his o'ertaking¹⁶ wings,
And chased us south along.

With sloping masts and dipping prow,
As who pursued with yell and blow
Still treads the shadow of his foe,
And forward bends his head,
The ship drove fast, loud roared the blast,
And southward aye we fled.

And now there came both mist and snow,
And it grew wondrous cold:
And ice, mast -high, came floating by,
As green as emerald.

And through the drifts the snowy clifts
Did send a dismal sheen:
Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken -
The ice was all between.

The ice was here, the ice was there,
The ice was all around:
It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,
Like noises in a swound!

At length did cross an Albatross,
Thorough the fog it came;
As it had been a Christian soul,
We hailed it in God's name.

¹⁰ Line = equator

¹¹ Quoth = to say, to quote

¹² Eftsoons = immediately

¹³ Spake = spoke

¹⁶ O'ertaking = overtaking, irresistibili

Below the kirk¹⁴, below the hill,
Below the lighthouse top.

The sun came up upon the left,
Out of the sea came he!
And he shone bright, and on the right
Went down into the sea.

Higher and higher every day,
Till over the mast at noon -"
The Wedding-Guest here beat his breast,
For he heard the loud bassoon.

The bride hath paced into the hall,
Red as a rose is she;
Nodding their heads before her goes
The merry minstrelsy¹⁵.

It ate the food it ne'er¹⁷ had eat,
And round and round it flew.
The ice did split with a thunder -fit;
The helmsman¹⁸ steered us through!

And a good south wind sprung up behind;
The Albatross did follow,
And every day, for food or play,
Came to the mariner's hollo¹⁹!

In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud,
It perched for vespers nine²⁰;
Whiles all the night, through fog-smoke white,
Glimmered the white moonshine."

`God save thee, ancient Mariner,
From the fiends that plague thee thus! -
Why look'st thou so?' -"With my crossbow
I shot the Albatross."

Themes

This poem is a retrospective narration of a sailor who went on an adventure and had to forgive himself for his sins. When he comes back, he is really changed by his experience and wants to tell the story to others so they can learn something. It's set in a wedding party and it's alternated between the description of said party and the narration of the story.

The albatross

The sailor claims he killed the albatross not because of luck but for fun. This highlights how humans are evil and sinful, which is part of the human nature. The reason he is telling this story is to make people aware not to behave like him. Coleridge is so pessimistic because of his delusion towards the French revolution. In the poem we find a strong relation between guilt and sin, as if in the Cain and Abel tale.

In the poem we find the difference between domestic and adventure life, a theme we will find again in Frankenstein. Another important theme is solitude and isolation, the sailor travels with the corpses of his dead companions.

¹⁴ Kirk = church

¹⁵ Minstrelsy = arte dei menestrelli

¹⁷ Ne'er = never

¹⁸ Helmsman = timoniere

¹⁹ Hollo = richiamo

²⁰ It perched for vespers nine = the albatross would appear during the evening service