Lecture 1: The Foundations of British Romanticism: Classical, Renaissance, and Enlightenment Influences

Duration: 1h30m

Introduction

British Romanticism (1780s–1830s) did not emerge in isolation; rather, it was shaped by a long intellectual and literary history that stretched from antiquity through the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Each of these periods provided philosophical frameworks, poetic forms, and thematic concerns that the Romantics both inherited and rebelled against. Romanticism's emphasis on emotion, nature, and individual expression arose partly as a response to the rationalist, mechanistic worldview of the Enlightenment, while still drawing on the aesthetic grandeur of classical epics and the spiritual introspection of Renaissance poetry.

This lesson explores the literary foundations that shaped British Romanticism, tracing key influences from Classical Antiquity, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. We will examine how Greek and Roman epics emphasized order and reason, how the Renaissance celebrated creativity and humanism, and how the Enlightenment prioritized rationality and progress. These movements laid the groundwork for Romanticism, which emerged in response to the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, and shifting views on nature, imagination, and the individual. Finally, we will analyze William Blake as a transitional figure whose poetry bridges Enlightenment thought and Romantic ideals.

Part 1: Literary Foundations of Romanticism

I- Classical Influences: Rational Thought, Balance, and Heroic Tradition

1. Literature as a Medium of Rational Thought and Order

The literary traditions of Ancient Greece and Rome established key intellectual and aesthetic principles that would influence European literature for centuries. Classical literature, particularly in the works of Homer, Virgil, Horace, and Aristotle, upheld the ideals of harmony, symmetry, and rational order, which became the foundation of later Neoclassical poetics in Britain (1660–1790).

In Aristotle's *Poetics*, literature was defined as mimesis (imitation of reality), emphasizing coherence, unity, and logical structure. This rationalist approach to storytelling became integral to neoclassical literature, which valued intellectual clarity, formal discipline, and moral instruction. The literary culture of Augustan Britain (late 17th–18th century) absorbed this

classical influence, producing didactic verse, satirical poetry, and polished heroic couplets, as seen in the works of Alexander Pope.

Example: Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (1711)

"True wit is nature to advantage dressed,
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed."

Here, Pope adheres to Horatian ideals, arguing that poetry should be both natural and refined, entertaining yet instructive. The Romantics, however, would reject this emphasis on decorum, wit, and polished artistry, instead championing spontaneity and untamed creativity.

2. The Heroic Epic: The Classical Model of Literature

The epic tradition, particularly the works of Homer and Virgil, provided a grand narrative structure and heroic ideals that influenced later British poets. The Romantic fascination with the individual hero, often alienated or rebellious, can be traced back to these classical origins.

- Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* → Shaped early British perceptions of heroic struggle, fate, and divine intervention.
- Virgil's *Aeneid* → Established the model of the national epic, later imitated by John Milton and William Blake.

Example: Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667)

"Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven."

Milton's portrayal of Satan as a tragic anti-hero demonstrates how epic conventions evolved over time. The Romantics, particularly Byron and Shelley, would later adopt and subvert this rebellious figure in their own works, creating the archetype of the Byronic hero.

3. The Neoclassical Tradition: From Classical Ideals to Romantic Revolt

Neoclassicism (1660–1790) was a revival of classical aesthetics in British literature, characterized by:

a-Formal precision (heroic couplets, structured poetry).
b-Moral didacticism (poetry as a tool for societal instruction).
c- Satirical wit (Pope, Dryden, Swift).

However, as Romanticism emerged in the late 18th century, poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge rejected this emphasis on rationality and order, instead embracing emotion, nature, and poetic spontaneity.

II. The Renaissance and Early Modern Poetry: The Age of Humanism and Poetic Innovation

1. Humanism and the Rediscovery of Individual Creativity

The Renaissance (16th–17th century) marked the revival of classical learning, but unlike Neoclassicism, it was not purely imitative. Renaissance poets synthesized classical ideals with personal introspection and artistic innovation, leading to:

- Exploration of individual subjectivity (self-expression, introspective poetry).
- Fusion of classical mythology with Christian themes (Milton, Spenser).
- Emphasis on the transformative power of language (Shakespeare, Donne).

Example: Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18*

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate."

This reflects Renaissance humanism, celebrating the permanence of artistic beauty in contrast to nature's transience; a theme later echoed in Keats' odes.

2. Poetic Innovation: Shakespeare and Milton

a-Shakespeare (1564–1616) → Revolutionized dramatic verse, blank verse, and the sonnet form.
b-Milton (1608–1674) → Created the Christian epic, blending Virgilian grandeur with Protestant theology.

Their works influenced Romantic poetic forms, especially Milton's use of the sublime and cosmic grandeur, which later inspired Blake, Wordsworth, and Shelley.

3. The Influence of Religion, Monarchy, and the Supernatural

Renaissance poetry often grappled with religious and political tensions, themes that Romantic poets would later revive and reshape.

Example: John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*

"Batter my heart, three-person'd God; for You
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend."

Donne's metaphysical poetry, with its intellectual conceits and spiritual struggles, foreshadows Romantic meditations on faith and existential doubt.

III. The Enlightenment (1680s–1780s): The Age of Reason and the Prelude to Romanticism

1. Emphasis on Rationality, Logic, and Scientific Progress

The Enlightenment was a period of intellectual revolution, prioritizing:

- Empiricism and scientific inquiry (Newton, Locke).
- Satire and social criticism (Swift, Voltaire).
- Moral rationalism in literature (Defoe, Johnson).

However, Romantic poets rejected the cold rationality of Enlightenment thought, restoring emotion and the imagination as primary artistic forces.

2. Literature as Moral and Didactic

Example: Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*

"I cannot but conclude the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin."

Swift's caustic satire criticizes human folly; an ironic contrast to Romanticism's idealization of human potential and nature.

3. The Reaction Against Rationalism: The Rise of Romanticism

Romanticism directly opposed the Enlightenment's:

a- Emphasis on logic → replaced with subjective experience.
b- Urbanization and industrialization → replaced with nature's sublimity (The Sublime).

Thus, the Romantic imagination was a response to the mechanization of life, seeking spiritual renewal, poetic transcendence, and an intimate connection with nature.

Part 2: The Emergence of Romanticism

Romanticism (1780s–1830s) emerged as a reactionary movement against the dominant intellectual paradigms of the Enlightenment and the socio-economic changes brought by the Industrial Revolution. While the Enlightenment emphasized reason, empiricism, and mechanistic order, Romanticism championed emotion, imagination, nature, and individualism. This shift was not merely a stylistic change in literature but a profound ideological rupture, reflecting new ways of perceiving humanity's place in the world.

Romanticism was also politically and socially engaged, drawing inspiration from revolutionary ideals, democratic aspirations, and critiques of industrialization. By reasserting the importance of the sublime, the supernatural, and the individual's inner world, Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats radically transformed British literature, forging a legacy that would shape modern literary sensibilities.

I. Key Catalysts for Romanticism (1780s–1830s)

Several historical, philosophical, and cultural factors contributed to the rise of Romanticism. Among the most influential were the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, and evolving aesthetic theories of the Sublime.

1. The Industrial Revolution: Alienation from Nature

The Industrial Revolution (1750s–1850s) brought about profound economic and social transformations in Britain, characterized by:

- The rise of mechanized factories, mass production, and urbanization.
- The displacement of rural populations, leading to widespread alienation.
- The decline of agrarian life, which had previously been idealized in pastoral literature.

Romantic poets saw industrialization as a dehumanizing force, eroding the spiritual connection between humanity and nature. William Blake's poetry, in particular, expressed a fierce critique of industrial society, portraying it as a force of oppression.

Example: Blake's "London" (1794)

"And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe."

Blake's poem describes the urban misery caused by mechanization and capitalism, contrasting sharply with the Romantic idealization of the natural world. Similarly, Wordsworth's *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* (1798) laments the loss of an unspoiled, organic connection to nature, positioning natural landscapes as a site of spiritual renewal.

2. The French Revolution (1789): Democratic Ideals and Radical Thought

The French Revolution (1789–1799) had an electrifying effect on Romantic thought, embodying the struggle for freedom, equality, and the overthrow of tyranny. Many Romantic poets, including Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, initially embraced revolutionary ideals, seeing them as a triumph of the individual over oppressive institutions.

Example: Wordsworth's Early Revolutionary Optimism

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth describes his youthful enthusiasm for the French Revolution:

"Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!"

However, the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815) and the Reign of Terror (1793–1794) led to disillusionment among British writers, who saw the Revolution's descent into violence as a betrayal of its original democratic ideals. This disenchantment later influenced Romanticism's

turn inward, focusing on personal experience and subjective truth rather than political utopianism.

3. The Sublime: Awe, Terror, and Emotional Intensity

One of Romanticism's defining aesthetic concepts was the Sublime, which evoked awe, grandeur, and sometimes terror in response to nature's overwhelming power. This idea was popularized by Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), where he argued that the Sublime arises from vastness, obscurity, and the infinite; qualities that inspire both fear and admiration.

Example: Shelley's *Mont Blanc* (1816)

"Power dwells apart in its tranquillity,
Remote, serene, and inaccessible."

Shelley's depiction of awe-inspiring natural landscapes illustrates the Romantic fascination with forces beyond human control, reinforcing nature's superiority over industrial civilization. Similarly, Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) employs the Sublime in supernatural horror, with the mariner's cursed voyage symbolizing humanity's fraught relationship with nature and fate.

II. Key Romantic Themes

The catalysts for Romanticism; industrial alienation, revolutionary ideals, and the Sublime, manifested in distinct literary themes and stylistic innovations.

1. Nature as a Source of Spiritual Truth

Unlike the Enlightenment's mechanistic view of nature as a system governed by scientific laws, Romanticism saw nature as:

a-A living, divine force (Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*).
b-A mirror for human emotions (Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*).
c-realm beyond rational comprehension (Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*).

Example: Wordsworth's *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* (1807)

"A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company."

Here, nature provides emotional uplift and transcendent joy, a stark contrast to the scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment.

2. Emotion and Imagination as Essential Forms of Knowledge

Romanticism rejected Enlightenment rationalism, asserting that emotion, intuition, and imagination were superior forms of understanding. Keats' concept of "Negative Capability"; the

ability to embrace mystery and uncertainty without seeking logical resolution,became a defining trait of Romantic literature.

Example: Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* (1819)

"Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music: Do I wake or sleep?"

Keats' dreamlike uncertainty embodies Romanticism's celebration of ambiguity, standing in contrast to Enlightenment insistence on clarity and definition.

3. The Individual, the Artist, and Personal Experience

The Romantics elevated the poet to the status of a visionary, capable of perceiving truths inaccessible to ordinary individuals. The Byronic hero, a rebellious, melancholic figure, embodied Romanticism's emphasis on individual defiance against societal norms.

Example: Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–1818)

"I have not loved the world, nor the world me."

Byron's alienated protagonist exemplifies the Romantic ideal of the introspective, brooding outsider, which would later influence modern existentialist literature.

III. Discussion: Is Romanticism Progressive or Regressive?

Romanticism presents an intellectual paradox:

a- Progressive → It championed radical politics, artistic innovation, and individual liberty.
b-Regressive → It often romanticized the past, idealized nature, and rejected scientific advancements.

This tension is evident in the works of Wordsworth and Coleridge, who initially embraced revolutionary thought but later withdrew into nostalgia and spiritual contemplation.

Romanticism was both progressive and regressive, serving as a bridge between Enlightenment rationalism and modernist subjectivity.

Part 3: William Blake As a Transitional Figure Bridging the Enlightenment and Romanticism

William Blake (1757–1827) occupies a unique position in British literary history as a transitional figure between the Enlightenment and Romanticism. While his work critiqued the Enlightenment's emphasis on rationality, empirical science, and mechanistic order, it also prefigured Romantic themes such as imagination, spirituality, and social rebellion. Blake's poetry and art rejected institutional authority, materialism, and industrialization, advocating instead for a

mystical vision of the world, where innocence and experience, good and evil, reason and imagination exist in a complex interplay.

His collection *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789, 1794) exemplifies this duality, illustrating his belief that true knowledge arises from the synthesis of opposing forces. His most famous paired poems; *"The Lamb"* and *"The Tyger"**, offer a striking contrast that raises fundamental questions about divine creation, morality, and the nature of existence.

Blake's works, largely dismissed during his lifetime, later became foundational to the Romantic movement and remain essential to understanding the evolution of British poetry and thought.

I. Blake's Key Themes

Blake's poetry engages with several key themes that reflect both his Enlightenment skepticism and his romantic visionary tendencies.

1. Mysticism and Spirituality

Unlike the Enlightenment's reliance on reason and empirical observation, Blake saw the world through a mystical, imaginative lens. He believed that true perception came not through science but through visionary experience. This belief was shaped by:

a-His rejection of deism (which depicted God as a distant, impersonal creator).
b-His insistence that the divine was immanent—present within individuals and nature.
c-His personal mystical experiences, which he described as visions of angels and spirits.

Example: "Auguries of Innocence" (1803)

"To see a World in a Grain of Sand,
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower."

Blake suggests that the infinite can be found in the smallest objects, demonstrating his Romantic fascination with mystery and transcendence.

2. Social and Political Radicalism

Blake was deeply **politically engaged**, critiquing the **social injustices** of his time, including:

1-Industrialization and child labor → Condemned in *Songs of Experience*.
2-The corruption of organized religion → Criticized in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790–93).
3-Monarchical oppression and class inequality → Influenced by the French and American Revolutions.

Example: "London" (1794) – A Critique of Industrialization

“And the hapless soldier’s sigh
Runs in blood down palace walls.”

Here, Blake connects war and oppression to the ruling classes, illustrating his belief that state and church institutions perpetuate suffering.

3. The Contrast Between Innocence and Experience

Blake’s most famous philosophical framework is the opposition of Innocence and Experience, symbolizing:

1-**Innocence** → Childhood, purity, joy, divine benevolence.
2-**Experience** → Suffering, corruption, loss of faith, societal oppression.

However, Blake does not simply present innocence as good and experience as bad. Instead, he argues that both are necessary for a full understanding of existence. This dialectic is best demonstrated in his paired poems, “The Lamb” (Songs of Innocence) and “The Tyger” (Songs of Experience).

II. Close Reading: “The Tyger” and “The Lamb”

Blake’s poems *“The Lamb”* and *“The Tyger”*, both from his collection *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, serve as a profound meditation on the dual nature of creation, highlighting the stark contrasts between innocence and experience, purity and corruption, gentleness and ferocity. By placing these two poems in opposition, Blake compels the reader to question the moral and theological implications of a universe that contains both profound beauty and overwhelming terror. His exploration of these themes not only critiques the rationalist optimism of the Enlightenment but also anticipates the Romantic fascination with the sublime, the mysterious, and the unknowable aspects of existence.

1. “The Lamb” (Songs of Innocence, 1789): A Vision of Divine Benevolence

In *“The Lamb”*, Blake crafts a poem that embodies pastoral simplicity and divine gentleness, evoking an atmosphere of warmth, security, and spiritual reassurance. The poem’s speaker, presumably a child, asks a series of questions directly addressing the lamb, inquiring:

“Little Lamb who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?”

This conversational and catechistic tone, characteristic of Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*, reflects a childlike wonder toward creation, reinforcing the idea that the world is imbued with divine kindness and careful design. The repetition of the question, rather than signaling doubt, serves as a rhetorical device to draw attention to the assumed answer: the creator is none other than a benevolent God, one who, like a shepherd, lovingly tends to his flock. The poem’s meter and rhyme scheme (trochaic rhythm with rhyming couplets) lend it the lilting quality of a nursery

rhyme, emphasizing its association with childhood innocence and the unquestioning faith of a young mind.

Blake's imagery is deeply pastoral and harmonious, invoking a world in which the lamb symbolizes purity, peace, and divine grace. The speaker answers his own question, stating:

"He is called by thy name,
For He calls Himself a Lamb:
He is meek & He is mild,
He became a little child."

Here, Blake explicitly links the lamb to Christ, drawing on Christian symbolism in which Christ is referred to as the "Lamb of God." The image of Christ as meek and mild reinforces the doctrine of divine mercy and sacrifice, aligning the natural world with a vision of spiritual innocence. In this context, the poem serves as an affirmation of faith and trust in the goodness of creation, presenting a world that is orderly, gentle, and reassuring.

However, this idealized vision of the world cannot stand in isolation. If there is a God who creates soft, innocent creatures like the lamb, what does this mean for more fearsome and violent beings? This question finds its unsettling answer in *"The Tyger"*, where Blake radically challenges the comforting theology presented in *"The Lamb"*.

2. "The Tyger" (Songs of Experience, 1794): The Dark Sublime and the Problem of Evil

In stark contrast to *"The Lamb"*, *"The Tyger"* is a poem filled with awe, dread, and ambiguity, presenting a world where creation is no longer gentle and comforting but terrifying and sublime. The poem opens with a powerful, almost incantatory address to the tiger:

"Tyger, Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?"

Unlike the soothing repetition of *"The Lamb"*, which reassures the reader of divine benevolence, the repetition in *"The Tyger"* serves to intensify the poem's hypnotic and ominous quality. The tiger's presence in the dark forest evokes the Romantic fascination with the sublime—a sense of overwhelming power that inspires both admiration and terror. The word "burning" suggests a creature forged in fire, evoking industrial and elemental imagery that distances this act of creation from the pastoral warmth of *"The Lamb"*.

Whereas the lamb is gently "made" by God, the tiger appears to be forged or wrought by some cosmic blacksmith:

"What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?

What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?”

The imagery of smithing and metallurgy reinforces the sense that the tiger is a creation of deliberate, intense craftsmanship, one that involves violence, destruction, and extreme force. The repetition of rhetorical questions suggests a profound uncertainty: How could the same God who created the gentle lamb also create something as fierce and fearsome as the tiger? The poem does not offer an answer, leaving the reader in a state of unresolved contemplation.

The final, chilling question; *"Did he who made the Lamb make thee?"*, explicitly links the two poems, forcing the reader to confront a theological paradox. If God is the creator of all things, then He is responsible not only for innocence and gentleness but also for destruction and terror. The God of *“The Tyger”* is not simply a loving shepherd but also a being capable of crafting beings of immense and terrifying power, thus challenging simplistic religious notions of divine goodness.

3. The Dialectic of Innocence and Experience: A Romantic Vision

Blake’s juxtaposition of *“The Lamb”* and *“The Tyger”* forms a dialectical exploration of the nature of existence, one that anticipates key Romantic concerns with the duality of human experience, the coexistence of good and evil, and the limits of human understanding. The poems are not merely oppositional; rather, they reveal two necessary stages of perception.

Innocence, as represented by *“The Lamb”*, embodies a childlike, unquestioning faith in the goodness of the world, but it is ultimately limited and naïve. Experience, as represented by *“The Tyger”*, acknowledges the harsh realities of suffering, power, and destruction, yet it offers no easy answers, only unsettling questions. Together, these poems illustrate a Romantic critique of Enlightenment rationalism, which sought to impose logic and reason onto a world that is often irrational, mysterious, and paradoxical.

Blake’s vision of creation is thus not a simple dichotomy between good and evil but rather a complex interplay of forces that resists easy categorization. His work suggests that true wisdom lies not in clinging to innocence nor in fully embracing experience, but in recognizing that both states are integral to the human condition. This concept aligns with the broader Romantic emphasis on emotion, mystery, and the sublime, positioning Blake as a pivotal figure who bridges the rational world of the Enlightenment and the imaginative world of Romanticism.

In conclusion, *“The Lamb”* and *“The Tyger”* function as two halves of a greater philosophical whole, embodying the dualities of existence that Romanticism sought to explore. The former presents an idealized, harmonious vision of the world, while the latter acknowledges its darker, more chaotic dimensions. By forcing the reader to confront these contradictions, Blake challenges us to reconsider our understanding of creation, morality, and divinity, making his poetry not just a literary achievement but a profound meditation on the nature of existence itself.

William Blake's unique poetic vision makes him a pivotal figure in British literary history. While his work critiques the Enlightenment's over-reliance on reason and empirical science, it also anticipates Romanticism's focus on imagination, emotion, and the sublime. Through *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Blake challenges readers to reconcile contradictions in human nature, society, and theology. His legacy remains foundational in both Romantic and modern poetic traditions, influencing later writers such as Yeats, Eliot, and the Beat poets of the 20th century.

In this lesson, we traced the major literary movements preceding Romanticism, explored the political and social forces that gave rise to the movement, and examined William Blake's poetry as a bridge between the Enlightenment and Romantic ideals. Through our discussion of *The Lamb* and *The Tyger*, we saw how Blake challenges readers to confront the complexities of innocence, experience, and the nature of creation, setting the stage for later Romantic poets.