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

Duration: 3h

Introduction

British Romanticism (c. 1780s–1830s) represents one of the most transformative movements in the history of literature, but it did not emerge in a vacuum. It was shaped by the interplay of earlier philosophical systems, poetic forms, and socio-political revolutions. The Enlightenment championed empirical reason, harmony, and classical imitation, while Romanticism opposed these with emotion, imagination, and subjective experience. Nevertheless, Romantic writers drew inspiration from classical and Renaissance traditions, integrating and challenging inherited aesthetics. The trajectory from Homeric epic to Blakean vision reveals a deep cultural shift from collective ideals to personal interiority.

This lecture traces the evolution of literary thought and form that culminated in British Romanticism, with a focus on William Blake as a transitional figure who exemplifies the movement's paradoxical relationship with Enlightenment reason and Romantic mysticism.

Part I. Literary Foundations of Romanticism
1.1 Literature as Rational Discourse: Classical Antiquity and Neoclassical Ideals

Classical Greek and Roman literature established core aesthetic values; order, decorum, unity, and rational thought. Aristotle's *Poetics* defined tragedy as a form governed by logical causality and mimesis, "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude" (Aristotle 6).

Neoclassical British literature revived these ideals in the 17th and 18th centuries. The heroic couplets of Alexander Pope exemplify this return to form and reason, "True wit is Nature to advantage dressed, / What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed" (Pope, *An Essay on Criticism* 297–98).

This didactic and disciplined poetics upheld Enlightenment values. Romantic poets, in contrast, viewed such restraint as an impediment to authentic expression.

1.2 The Epic Tradition and the Heroic Archetype

Epics like Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid* defined heroic action as duty-bound and fate-driven. These influences endured in English literature through works like Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where the Satanic hero defies divine authority, "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" (Milton 1.263). The rebellious grandeur of Milton's Satan foreshadowed Romantic archetypes such as Byron's Byronic hero. Romanticism reimagined the epic's heroic defiance through introspective and often morally ambiguous characters.

1.3 Neoclassicism to Romantic Revolt

Neoclassical literature (1660–1790) emphasized wit, order, and moral instruction. Dryden, Swift, and Pope used satire to critique society from a rationalist viewpoint. Romantic poets, however, rejected this Enlightenment worldview, seeking instead emotional depth, nature's spiritual power, and spontaneous creation. Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* asserts, "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" (Wordsworth 295).

Part II. Renaissance Humanism and the Poetics of Interior Life

1.4 The Rise of the Individual: Renaissance Creativity

The Renaissance revitalized classical thought but introduced a new emphasis on human potential and subjectivity. Poets like Shakespeare and Spenser celebrated artistic innovation and personal expression.

Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18* extols poetic immortality: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee" (Shakespeare 13–14). This confidence in poetry's eternal power would resonate in Keats' reflections on art's permanence.

1.4.1 Shakespeare and Milton: Innovators of Form

Shakespeare's dramatic and poetic flexibility expanded the emotional range of English verse. Milton's blank verse in *Paradise Lost* married classical form with theological content, paving the way for the sublime in Romantic poetry.

1.4.2 Religion, the Monarchy, and the Supernatural

Metaphysical poets like John Donne introduced philosophical and religious inquiry into poetic form, "Batter my heart, three-person'd God" (Donne, *Holy Sonnet XIV* 1). This blend of

intensity and spiritual struggle would reappear in Romantic poetry as existential meditation and visionary mysticism.

Part III. Enlightenment Rationalism and the Romantic Countercurrent

1.5 Literature as Reason and Progress

The Enlightenment foregrounded reason, empiricism, and progress. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* satirizes human vanity and societal corruption, "The most pernicious race of little odious vermin" (Swift 231). Such critique reflects Enlightenment disillusionment, but lacks the Romantic desire for emotional or spiritual transcendence.

1.6 Romanticism as Reaction

Romanticism arose in part as a rejection of Enlightenment ideals. The Romantics held that logic and science alone could not capture the depth of human experience. They championed imagination, emotion, intuition, and the sublime. This shift marked a fundamental reorientation of literature from external order to internal truth. Key Romantic reversals of Enlightenment values:

- Emphasis on logic: Replaced by imagination.
- Urban-industrial modernity: Replaced by nature's sublimity.
- Political realism: Replaced by revolutionary idealism and later, disillusionment.

Part IV. The Emergence of Romanticism

1.7 The Industrial Revolution

Romantic poets saw industrialization as spiritually destructive. Blake's *London* exposes this dehumanization, "And mark in every face I meet / Marks of weakness, marks of woe" (Blake, *Songs of Experience* 3–4). These aren't just poetic observations; they're a cry of empathy. Blake is not describing strangers, but fellow human beings who have been worn down by the weight of a system that values profit over people. The repetition of "marks" feels almost like bruises; emotional scars left by poverty, oppression, and disillusionment. For Blake and other Romantics, industrial progress wasn't true progress if it came at the cost of the human soul. Their poetry reminds us of the quiet dignity of individuals lost in the noise of a changing world.

1.8 The French Revolution

Romantic optimism about revolutionary liberty is seen in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven!" (Wordsworth 330–31). Yet the Revolution's descent into violence led many, like Coleridge, toward introspective retreat.

1.9 The Sublime and the Limits of Reason

Burke defined the Sublime as producing "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (Burke 36). Romantic poets used it to explore nature's terror and awe. Shelley's *Mont Blanc* evokes this sublime power, "Power dwells apart in its tranquillity, / Remote, serene, and inaccessible" (Shelley 96–97).

Part V. Romantic Themes and Innovations

1.10 Nature as a Moral and Mystical Force

Romantic poets saw nature not as a scientific system but a source of spiritual truth. Wordsworth's *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* reflects this belief, "A poet could not but be gay / In such a jocund company" (15–16).

1.11 Imagination and Negative Capability

Keats proposed "Negative Capability," the poet's ability to embrace uncertainty and mystery: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music: Do I wake or sleep?" (*Ode to a Nightingale* 79–80).

1.12 The Artist as Prophet

Romanticism elevated the poet as visionary. Byron's *Childe Harold* confesses, "I have not loved the world, nor the world me" (Byron IV.178).

Part VI. William Blake as a Transitional Figure

1.13 The Poet of Visionary Contraries

William Blake's poetic universe is built on paradox. In *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, he presents the dualities of human existence: innocence and experience, good and evil, divine love and worldly suffering. In "The Lamb," the speaker addresses a symbol of

innocence and divine creation: "He is meek & he is mild, / He became a little child." This peaceful imagery reflects Christian iconography, linking Christ with innocence and purity. By contrast, "The Tyger" explores the terrifying majesty of creation: "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" Here, Blake is not merely asking a theological question but challenging the Enlightenment's assumption of a rational, benevolent universe. The tiger's fearful symmetry suggests a world in which beauty and terror coexist. Blake's poetic form; rhythmic, incantatory, and deceptively simple, mirrors the tension between divine order and chaotic mystery.

1.14 Mysticism and Political Radicalism

Blake viewed the imagination as a divine faculty capable of perceiving eternal truths. In *Auguries of Innocence*, he writes: "To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower." This mystical vision redefines perception; reality is not fixed but shaped by spiritual insight.

Blake also challenged institutional power. In *London*, he describes a society imprisoned by economic and political systems: "And the hapless Soldier's sigh / Runs in blood down Palace walls." (lines 11-12) This line indicts the monarchy for its complicity in human suffering, illustrating how the Romantic imagination can function as both spiritual revelation and political resistance.

Conclusion

British Romanticism did not emerge abruptly; rather, it evolved through an ongoing dialogue with classical rationalism, Renaissance humanism, and Enlightenment empiricism. As this lecture has demonstrated, Romanticism positioned itself both as a continuation and a radical departure from these traditions. Its emphasis on emotional intensity, visionary imagination, and nature's spiritual force marked a profound transformation in literature and cultural consciousness. William Blake, as a transitional figure, helped lay the foundation for Romantic aesthetics by critiquing Enlightenment reason and institutional oppression while envisioning poetry as a gateway to higher spiritual truths. In doing so, Romanticism became a defining force in shaping modern thought, art, and identity.

In our next lecture, we will examine the First-Generation Romantic poets; William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Building on the themes introduced in this lecture, we will examine how these poets redefined poetry in their collaborative work *Lyrical Ballads*

(1798), explored the imagination as a moral and creative force, and introduced a poetics grounded in nature, introspection, and spiritual insight. We will also analyze how each poet responded differently to the philosophical and political upheavals of their time, and how their friendship both enriched and challenged the foundations of British Romanticism.

1.15 Critical Response Paper (800–1000 words): Choose one of the following questions

- Compare Wordsworth's and Coleridge's treatment of nature and imagination.

- Does *Tintern Abbey* reflect an idealized or realistic view of nature?

- How does Coleridge create a sense of horror and mystery in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*?

1.16 Works Cited

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