

Poets, Radicals, and Reactionaries: Romantic Poetry in Conversation

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Course Description:

This course provides an introduction to the major poets of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain—Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats—and to issues central to the study of Romanticism. These issues are inextricably formal, political, and social. We will concentrate on the relationships and conversations linking these six poets to one another and to other writers of the period. Our aim will be to understand how the particular challenges raised in this place and moment in history were addressed by a small group of profoundly talented writers. Key issues will include the relationships between nature, human society, and the poetic self; the desire to re-vivify and experiment with poetic forms; and the need to respond to the French Revolution and the social and economic change that mark the period.

Course Requirements:

Four (5-6 p.) papers (see assignment below); class participation. Each element is weighted equally, and is worth approximately 20% of your grade.

Foundational course option:

Students taking the course with this option will receive more extensive and detailed feedback on their work through more frequent writing assignments and individual meetings with the instructor. Foundational courses are intended to provide an additional level of guidance, support, and feedback to ensure that students cultivate the tools and skills necessary for graduate level research and writing.

Course Outline:

Sept. 14: Course introductions: Who, when, and what is “Romanticism”?

Blake introduction in Norton Anthology of English Literature (always read the author and text introductions)

Blake, “All Religions Are One,” (1788), “There is no Natural Religion” [a] and [b] (1788), and Songs of Innocence (1789). Read the whole volume and then re-read and focus on “Introduction,” “The Ecchoing Green,” “Laughing Song,” “The Lamb,” “The Divine Image,” and “On Anothers Sorrow”

Sept. 21: Blake, Songs of Experience (1794). Read the entire volume, then re-read and focus on “Introduction,” “The Chimney Sweeper,” “The Little Vagabond,” “Holy Thursday,” “London,” “The Tyger,” “My Pretty Rose Tree,” “Ah! Sun-Flower,” “The Lilly,” and “The Human Abstract”

Blake, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” (1790-1793), “A Song of Liberty” (1790), from “A Vision of the Last Judgment” (1810), and the letter to Trusler (1799)

DRAFT of essay one due for foundational course option

Sept. 28: Burns, "Tam O'Shanter" (1786).
Wordsworth introduction, "Simon Lee" (1798), "Resolution and Independence" (1807), "The Solitary Reaper" (1807), and [The Subject and Language of Poetry] from the 1802 "Preface" to Lyrical Ballads (1798, 1800, 1802)
Coleridge introduction, "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798, 1816), ch. 14 and from ch. 17 of the Biographia Literaria (1817)

Coleridge, "The Eolian Harp" (1795, 1834), "This Lime Tree Bower My Prison" (1797/1800), and "The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem" (1798) (moodle).

ESSAY ONE DUE

Oct. 5 Coleridge, "Frost at Midnight" (1798), "Dejection: An Ode" (1802).

Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" (1798), "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (1802-4/1807), and ["What Is a Poet?"] and ["Emotion Recollected in Tranquillity"] from the 1802 "Preface" to Lyrical Ballads.

Oct. 12: Wordsworth, from The Prelude (1805/1850): Book First, l. 1-141, 272-501, 571-end; Book Second, lines 145-202, 303-end. (Read the left-hand side of the page, i.e. 1805, consulting the 1850 text as you see fit. The 1805 line numbers are given on the right margin of the page; those in brackets on the left refer to the 1850 text.) [1850:I.1-131, 269-475, 544-end; II.138-197, 284-end]

The Prelude: Book Sixth, l. 426-572; Book Eleventh, l. 255-end.
[1850:VI.489-641; XII.208-end]

ESSAY two due for foundational course option

Oct. 19: The Prelude: Book Ninth, l. 40-125; Book Tenth, l. 1-439, 657-940.
[1850:IX.42-124; X.1-480; XI.74-368]
Coleridge, "To William Wordsworth"

The Prelude: Book Twelfth, l. 1-111, 278-312, 354-379; Book Thirteenth, l. 1-184, 211-287, 428-end.
[XIII.1-106, 279-312, 350-378; XIV.1-205, 232-320, 432-end]

ESSAY TWO DUE

Oct. 26 Wordsworth, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," "My heart leaps up," "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge," "It is a beauteous evening," "London, 1802," "The world is too much with us," (all 1802-4/1807), "Surprised by joy" (1815), "Mutability" (1822), "Steamboats, Viaducts, and Railways" (1835)
Dorothy Wordsworth, from Alfoxden Journal (written 1798) and Grasmere Journals (written 1802)

Coleridge, "Kubla Khan" (1797/1816), [Mechanic vs. Organic Form] from Lectures on Shakespeare (1812), [On Symbol and Allegory] from The Statesman's Manual (1816), and [On the Imagination] from Biographia Literaria, ch. 13.

Nov. 2: Byron, from Childe Harold's Pilgrimage Canto 1 (1812) and Canto 3 (1816).

Shelley, introduction, "To Wordsworth" (1816), "Mont Blanc," "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" (both 1817).

Essay three due for foundational course option

Nov. 9: Keats, “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” (1817), from “Sleep and Poetry” (1817), “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” (1817), from Endymion (1818), “On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again” (1818/1838), “When I Have Fears” (1818/1848), “To Homer” (1818/1848), and the following letters: to Benjamin Bailey (Nov. 22, 1817), to George and Thomas Keats (Dec. 21, 27?, 1817), to Reynolds (Feb. 3, 1818), to Reynolds (May 3, 1818), to Woodhouse (Oct. 27, 1818).

Byron, “Darkness” (1816), “Manfred” (1817)
Coleridge, [The Satanic Hero] from The Statesman’s Manual (1816)

ESSAY THREE DUE

Nov. 16: Keats, “Why did I laugh tonight?” (1819/1848), “Bright Star” (1819/1838), “La Belle Dame Sans Merci: A Ballad” (1819/1820), “Ode to Psyche” (1819/1820), “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1819), and the following letters: to Taylor (Feb. 27, 1818), To George and Georgiana Keats (Feb. 14-May 3, 1819), To Fanny Brawne (July 25, 1819), To Percy Shelley (Aug. 16, 1820)

Keats, “The Eve of St. Agnes” (1819/1820), “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819), “Sonnet to Sleep” (1819/1838).

Nov. 30: Keats, “Ode on Melancholy” (1819/1820), “Ode on Indolence” (1819/1848), “To Autumn” (1819/1820), and the letter to Charles Brown (Nov. 30, 1820).

Shelley, from “A Defence of Poetry” (1821/1840), “England in 1819” (1819/1839), “Ode to the West Wind” (1820), “To a Sky-Lark” (1820).

Essay four due for foundational course option

Dec. 7: Byron, from Don Juan Cantos I-II (1819), Cantos III-IV (1821)

ESSAY FOUR DUE

Essay Assignment

The topic of your essays is entirely up to you. The main text(s) you work with should be drawn from the most recent section of the syllabus. You will write four essays, at least **two** of which should be a “close reading” or textual analysis. I recommend writing one essay with a research component, one with a creative component, and two close readings.

A good essay—no matter what the format—will show me something new about the text(s) you have chosen. It will be grounded in a thorough and sustained engagement with the richness of the text. Above all, your essay should demonstrate your active reading of the poem(s) at hand—the best essays do so in ways that also demonstrate insight about broader issues of importance to the course as a whole—and your abilities as a reader and as a writer of analytical prose.

Each essay should be 5-6 pages long (in twelve-point font, with 1.25-inch margins, and double-spaced throughout—including quotations), stapled, and carefully proofread. I urge you to read or re-read *Elements of Style* and revise your essays based on its principles.

I. Essays with a Research Component

a. biographical essay

Consult a biography of one of our poets and write an essay about the immediate biographical context in which a poem was written. This can be an analytical essay in which you use the biographical material to set up a close reading, or it can be a work of creative non-fiction in which you present your analysis through story-telling.

b. initial reception

Consult the reviews of a particular volume of poems in *The Romantics Reviewed* (on reserve at Olin), and write an essay outlining its initial reception. How did your poet’s first readers understand what was significant, new, or interesting in his work? What elements of the literary scene do early reviews illuminate, and how did your poet try to negotiate them?

c. The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics

The NPEPP is every poetry scholar’s favorite reference tool, and you can find it in the Olin reference room at PN1021.P75 1993. Poke around in it, and use one of its entries to construct the critical apparatus for your essay. For example, you might use the entry on the ode to discuss Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, the entries on the stanza and *ottava rima* to analyze Byron’s *Don Juan*, or the entry on metaphor to examine Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.”

d. criticism

Using the MLA database and the library catalog locate 3 articles in academic journals and chapters in books (at least one of each) about a particular poem. You might also consult the list of recommended further reading at the back of the Norton Anthology. In your essay, your goal is not to summarize what each of the pieces say but to use their insights and information to inform your own analysis of the poem. Some of your articles may be available online through JSTOR or Project Muse, but you should read published academic writing, not Wikipedia or similar web sources.

e. textual essay

Consult your poet’s biography and other materials as needed to write an essay about the publication history of a particular poem. What changes were made between manuscript and first publication? Where was the text first published? If in a periodical, what other articles and advertisements appeared around it? Did the periodical have a political slant? If published in book form, who was the publisher? If we have a copy in Special Collections, look at it and try to get a feel for its intended audience, what other books appeared from the same press (are there ads in the back?), how much it would likely have cost, etc. What changes, if any, were made in subsequent editions? Your essay should present some of what you have learned in your research and explain what it illuminates about the poem.

- f. poems as part of a volume
Romantic poems did not originally appear in the *Norton Anthology*. Examine how one or two poems/passages relate to the volume in which they initially appeared, for example *Lyrical Ballads* and Keats's *Lamia, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*. Many facsimile reprints are available online and in the library, some in Special Collections.
- g. other poets of the period
Write an essay about any poet who published between 1780 and 1830. I especially recommend John Clare, Anna Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Robert Burns, Walter Scott, and Walter Savage Landor, but there are many others. An anthology of women writers is on reserve. You might draw connections between your author and one of the six major poets or focus entirely on a poem you like. This essay can adopt almost any format listed here, from biographical essay to close reading.
- h. poem + painting inspired by it
Write an essay about the conversation between words and images in a poem from the syllabus and a painting inspired by it. How does the poem "paint" the event, and how does the painting? What images and words does the poet use? What descriptive powers does the poet's language allow him? What thematic emphases are evident in each work? How do the poet and the painter bring out larger issues in the poem (i.e. beyond the particular scene depicted)? Use the painting to open up the poem's descriptive strategies, and vice versa. A short list of possible paintings: Ford Madox Ford's "The Finding of Don Juan by Haidee," William Holman Hunt's "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "Porphyro During the Drunkenness Attending the Revelry," John Millais's "The Eve of St. Agnes," Arthur Hughes's "The Eve of St. Agnes," Frank Dicksee's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"—these are all later nineteenth-century paintings inspired by Byron and Keats, and there were dozens more. You can find them by paging through books of Victorian painting, Pre-Raphaelite painting, or books highlighting the collections at the Tate Gallery or National Gallery in London.
- i. poem + Romantic natural history
Examine Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne* or *The Naturalist's Calendar* or Thomas Bewick's engravings of birds in *Figures of British Land Birds* or *History of British Birds*—we have several copies on the stacks, available electronically and, best of all, in Special Collections at Olin—and bring it into conversation with a poem on our syllabus.
- j. Other ideas and possibilities defined by you.

II. Essays with a Creative Component

- a. complete a poem
Propose and defend an ending for one of the fragmentary poems on the syllabus, i.e. "Kubla Khan". Your ending can be as long as you like. Your essay explaining why it is fitting should be at two-three pages long.
- b. imitate a poem
Any sort of poem by any poet on our syllabus. Explain how your poem engages with the themes and/or the forms in question in an essay two-three pages long.
- c. composite poem
Write your own poem consisting of words and phrases drawn from the work of one poet. As you are writing your poem, think about what words the poet uses and how he uses them singly and in combinations. Explain your engagement with his themes and language in an essay two-three pages long.

- d. imitation of Hazlitt
Write an essay on a specific poet or aspect of Romantic poetry in the style of Romantic prose, taking Hazlitt as your model.
- e. Byron's manifesto
We are reading some of Byron's letters, but no prose manifesto like the *Biographia Literaria* or the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (or even like Keats's letters). Had Byron written a "defense of poetry," what might it have looked like?
- f. Drawing, painting, sculpture, felted tapestry, song, puzzle—any work of art
Create something and explain how it engages with the themes and/or the forms in question in an essay at least three pages long.

III. Close Reading essays

I recommend beginning by selecting a passage that interests you, typing it into your computer, triple-spacing it, and printing it out. Then, go over it with a fine-toothed comb:

- Examine rhyme. How does rhyme (dis-)connect various words and ideas? How does rhythm echo or undermine meaning?
- Contemplate rhythm. Look for where emphasis falls in certain lines, and try to discover the pattern of emphasis over the course of your passage.
- Explore the relationship between the grammar of the sentence(s) and the progression and breaks in the lines. Look for interesting line breaks. Are line breaks building tension or speed? Are they cutting off ideas from one another or linking them? How do various punctuation marks affect line endings?
- Attend to particular words. What connotations and significance can you uncover? Are there puns or double-meanings hidden in words? Look interesting words up in the OED. Play with the sound of interesting words. What happens if you split a word up into its component sounds? Are there words embedded inside other words? How do sounds resonate or clash with one another?
- Look at images. Try to visualize particular images. Examine the vocabulary used to convey these images.
- Look at metaphor. What is being compared. . . to what? How is metaphor falling in the line, over a line break, etc.?
- Think about form. In what ways is your passage song-like, ballad-like, lyrical?

You may wish to use one text to illuminate another. For instance, you can examine the ways in which a prose text opens up a poem. How do the key terms of a "manifesto" text such as Wordsworth's "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* or Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry" translate into poetic technique? Or you might explore how poems react and respond to one another. How do poets respond to one another at the level of technique (i.e., in Coleridge's gift of blank verse to Wordsworth) or theme (in Shelley's debt to Wordsworth's poems about nature and cognition)?

Similarly, it can be helpful to consider poems that come in groups, whether defined by form or theme: "lyrical ballads," "conversation poems," sonnets, odes, poems about reflecting on the aesthetic experience of nature, poems about the French Revolution, etc. How does a particular poem exemplify, resist, or rebel against the conventions of its form or subject matter?