

Romantic Poetry

Course Code: Eng 2204

Course Instructor: Md. Bulbul Ahmed

Primary Texts:

William Blake	<i>Songs of Innocence and of Experience (Selections)</i> From Songs of Innocence: The Lamb, Introduction, The Chimney Sweeper (Innocence), Holy Thursday (Innocence), Infant Joy From Songs of Experience: The Tyger, The Chimney Sweeper (Experience), London, Holy Thursday (Experience), The Sick Rose
William Wordsworth	“Tintern Abbey” and “Ode: Intimations of Immortality”
Samuel Taylor Coleridge	“Kubla Khan,” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”
Jane Austen	<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>
Lord Byron:	<i>Don Juan</i> (Book1)
Percy Bysshe Shelley	“Ode to the West Wind, ” “To a Skylark,” and “To Night”
John Keats	“La Belle Dame sans Mercy, ” “Ode to a Nightingale, ” “Ode on Melancholy,” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

Secondary Texts:

M.H. Abrams	<i>The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition</i>
C. M. Bowra	<i>The Romantic Imagination,</i>
Graham Hough	<i>The Romantic Poets</i>
M.H. Abrams (ed).	<i>English Romantic Poets</i>
Harold Bloom	<i>The Visionary Company</i>
Northrop Frye	<i>Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake</i>
Nicholas Roe	<i>Romanticism: An Oxford Guide</i>
Harold Bloom	<i>Shelley’s Mythmaking</i>
Helen Vendler	<i>The Odes of John Keats</i>
Jonathan Bate	<i>Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition</i>
Marilyn Butler	<i>Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries</i>

Background of Romantic Movement:

The Romantic Movement, or Romanticism, emerged in late 18th-century Europe as a response to the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution. It represented a shift in cultural and artistic expression, prioritizing emotion over reason, nature over industry, and individualism over conformity. This movement spanned across literature, art, music, and philosophy.

Historical Context

a. Reaction to the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment emphasized **rationality, science, and order**. Romanticism arose as a **counter-movement**, asserting that human experience was not entirely governed by reason and that **emotion, intuition, and imagination** were equally important.

b. Industrial Revolution

The rapid urbanization and mechanization of society led to **alienation from nature** and traditional life. Romantics lamented this loss and idealized the **natural world** and the **rustic life**.

c. French Revolution (1789)

Initially inspiring many Romantics with ideals of **liberty, equality, and fraternity**, the French Revolution also demonstrated the dangers of radical change and violence. As a result, many Romantic writers expressed **disillusionment** while still advocating for **individual freedom** and **social justice**.

Key Features of Romanticism

- **Emotion and Passion over Reason:** Valued over logic.
- **Imagination as a Source of Truth:** Seen as a gateway to truth and spiritual insight.
- **Love and Reverence for Nature:** Viewed as a source of beauty, inspiration, and moral truth.
- **Celebration of the Individual and Subjectivity:** Emphasis on personal experience, inner life, and the misunderstood genius.
- **Fascination with the Supernatural, the Mysterious, and the Gothic:** Interest in dreams, myths, legends, and the mysterious.
- **Glorification of the Past and the Exotic:** Fascination with medieval history, folklore, and primitive cultures.

Poet	Themes & Traits
William Wordsworth	Nature, memory, simplicity, moral instruction
Samuel Taylor Coleridge	Supernatural, dreams, imagination, theology
Lord Byron	Individualism, rebellion, passion, Byronic hero
Percy Bysshe Shelley	Radical politics, beauty, transience
John Keats	Mortality, beauty, art, sensuous imagery
William Blake	Mysticism, vision, innocence vs experience

The official **birth of English Romanticism** is often dated to the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by **William Wordsworth** and **Samuel Taylor Coleridge**.

- Preface by Wordsworth laid out a **new theory of poetry**:
 - Ordinary language
 - Rural life and humble subjects
 - Emotion recollected in tranquility
- This marked a **radical departure** from Neoclassical ideals of decorum, elegance, and artificiality.

“Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings...” – Wordsworth

“I feel, therefore I am” – a Romantic answer to Descartes' “I think, therefore I am.”--- Rousseau

- As machines replaced manual labor and cities grew crowded and polluted, people felt **alienated** from nature and from each other.
- Romantics turned toward **untouched landscapes**, **rural life**, and the **emotional richness** that technology seemed to threaten.

Country	Early Romantic Figures	Contribution
Germany	Johann Wolfgang von Goethe	<i>The Sorrows of Young Werther</i> (1774) – emotional intensity and self-destruction
England	William Blake	Visionary poetry mixing religion, myth, and imagination
France	Jean-Jacques Rousseau	Philosophical groundwork for Romantic ideals
Italy	Giacomo Leopardi	Melancholy poetry reflecting existential Romanticism

William Blake (Poet • Painter • Printmaker • Visionary) (1757–1827)

William Blake was a **British poet, artist, and mystic**, often considered the **earliest and most original voice of Romanticism**. Though largely unrecognized in his lifetime, Blake is now seen as a **visionary genius** whose works defy conventional boundaries between poetry, visual art, and prophecy.

Unlike many Romantics who drew inspiration from nature, Blake's imagination was **inward, mythic, and spiritual**, filled with **angels, demons, and symbolic visions**. He saw the world not merely with physical eyes, but with the **"eyes of imagination."**

- **Born:** November 28, 1757, in London
- Came from a working-class family, educated at home.
- Trained as an **engraver**—a skill that enabled him to **illustrate his own poetry**.
- Claimed to have **visions from early childhood**—seeing angels in trees and God at his window.
- Married Catherine Boucher, who helped him with his illuminated books.
- Lived a **quiet, often poor life**, but remained **fiercely independent and spiritually radical**.

Blake believed **both innocence and experience were necessary** to understanding the full nature of human existence.

His major works: Songs of Innocence (1789), Songs of Experience (1794), The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790–93), America: A Prophecy, Jerusalem, Milton etc.

Blake **combined poetry with visual art** using a method called **illuminated printing**—engraving both text and image on copper plates, then hand-coloring the pages.

His artwork is **highly symbolic**, influenced by **medieval, biblical, and Renaissance** styles, but deeply personal in vision.

- Deeply **spiritual**, but rejected organized religion and moral dogma.
- Criticized the **Church, monarchy, and industrial society** for crushing imagination and joy.
- Believed in the **divine within each person**—what he called the **"Poetic Genius"**.
- Saw **imagination as the path to truth**, not reason or empirical science.

"If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is—infinite."

William Blake was **not just a Romantic poet**, but a **prophet of the imagination**—a figure who created his own world of symbols, fought against tyranny of the mind and spirit, and celebrated the divine potential of human creativity. His work urges us to see **with more than our eyes**, to awaken to the **infinite within**.

"I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's."

Now regarded as a **prophet of Romanticism**, a **revolutionary poet-artist**, and a **foundational figure in British literature and art**.

Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience

Full Title: *Songs of Innocence and of Experience: Shewing the Two Contrary States of the*

William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is a profound exploration of **human duality**. In combining **poetry, art, philosophy, and prophecy**, Blake created a **spiritual map** of human growth—from naïve joy to wise suffering. His work remains **startlingly modern** in its insights into power, freedom, and the nature of the human soul.

Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is a **two-part poetic collection** representing **two contrasting perspectives** on life, society, religion, and human nature:

- *Songs of Innocence* presents a **childlike, hopeful**, and often **idealized** view of the world.
- *Songs of Experience* provides a **darker, more realistic** and often **critical** view, shaped by **suffering, social injustice**, and **moral complexity**.

Together, they show the “**two contrary states of the human soul.**”

Poem (Innocence)	Poem (Experience)	Theme Contrast	Tone & Mood	Symbolism & Message
The Lamb	The Tyger	Creation as gentle vs. creation as terrifying	<i>The Lamb</i> : Gentle, trusting, joyful <i>The Tyger</i> : Fearful, awe-struck, questioning	<i>Lamb</i> : Christ, innocence, purity <i>Tyger</i> : Power, danger, divine mystery→ Blake asks if good and evil share the same origin
The Chimney Sweeper (Innocence)	The Chimney Sweeper (Experience)	Naïve hope vs. harsh reality of child labor	<i>Innocence</i> : Optimistic, dreamlike <i>Experience</i> : Bitter, accusatory	<i>Innocence</i> : Suffering soothed by heavenly dreams <i>Experience</i> : Condemns Church and society for hypocrisy and neglect
Holy Thursday (Innocence)	Holy Thursday (Experience)	Organized charity seen as sacred vs. seen as social cruelty	<i>Innocence</i> : Reverent, idealistic <i>Experience</i> : Angry, ironic	<i>Innocence</i> : Children = flowers of England <i>Experience</i> : Charity schools = masks for poverty and exploitation
Infant Joy	Infant Sorrow	Birth as a joyful welcome vs. a painful struggle	<i>Joy</i> : Delicate, soft, loving <i>Sorrow</i> : Harsh, confined, resistant	<i>Joy</i> : Innocent life begins in happiness <i>Sorrow</i> : Child is born into constraint, pain, and struggle
The Divine Image	A Divine Image	Humanity shaped by mercy vs. humanity shaped by cruelty	<i>Innocence</i> : Idealistic, reverent <i>Experience</i> : Dark, brutal	<i>Innocence</i> : God = mercy, peace, love <i>Experience</i> : Man = cruelty, jealousy, terror, secrecy

Poem (Innocence)	Poem (Experience)	Theme Contrast	Tone & Mood	Symbolism & Message
Nurse's Song (Innocence)	Nurse's Song (Experience)	Childhood freedom vs. adult repression	<i>Innocence:</i> Cheerful, encouraging <i>Experience:</i> Bitter, repressive	<i>Innocence:</i> Children play freely, joy is natural <i>Experience:</i> Childhood is silenced, joy seen as wasteful
Introduction (Innocence)	Introduction (Experience)	Joyful prophetic voice vs. fallen world's warning	<i>Innocence:</i> Uplifting, musical <i>Experience:</i> Grim, prophetic	<i>Innocence:</i> Poet as piper of joy <i>Experience:</i> Poet as prophet in a darkened world
The Echoing Green	The Garden of Love	Celebration of life vs. repression through religion	<i>Echoing Green:</i> Joyful, natural, communal <i>Garden of Love:</i> Repressive, mournful	<i>Echoing Green:</i> Nature and play = harmony <i>Garden of Love:</i> Organized religion = suppression of love and freedom

Patterns in Contrast

Aspect	Songs of Innocence	Songs of Experience
View of Childhood	Pure, joyful, close to God	Exploited, repressed, lost innocence
Tone	Gentle, hopeful, pastoral	Bitter, ironic, accusatory
Religious View	God as loving protector	Religion as tool of control and hypocrisy
Society's Role	Potential for harmony	Source of suffering and corruption
Imagery	Lambs, flowers, green fields	Tyger, chains, tombstones, blackness

Blake's paired poems create a **dialectical structure**—where **Innocence** and **Experience** are not simply good vs. bad, but **necessary opposites**. Together, they reveal Blake's **vision of the human soul's journey**, from naive joy through suffering, toward deeper wisdom and potential spiritual awakening.