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**The Booklet is designed for First Year Master's Students**

# BRITISH LITERATURE

# A GUIDE TO FIRST YEAR MASTER'S STUDENTS

**Prepared by:**

Dr Bachir SAHED

**Academic Year: 2023-2024**

# Preface

This booklet, "British Literature - A Guide to First Year Master's Students," serves as a comprehensive introduction to the captivating world of British literature for those embarking on their first year of master's studies. This guide is designed to offer valuable insights and critical perspectives on three iconic literary works: *Hamlet*, *Frankenstein*, and British Romantic Poetry.

The study of British literature is an enriching journey through time, culture, and human experience. Within these pages, we will delve into the profound themes, intricate characters, and poetic beauty that have made these literary masterpieces enduring treasures in the world of letters. Through our exploration of *Hamlet*, we will deal with the complexities of human nature and the moral dilemmas that haunt us. In *Frankenstein*, we will confront questions of scientific ethics and the consequences of unchecked ambition. Finally, in our examination of British Romantic Poetry, we will immerse ourselves in the poetic musings of visionaries who celebrated the sublime in nature and the power of human imagination.

As you engage with this guide, you will find in-depth analyses, thought-provoking discussions, and helpful contextual information to enhance your understanding of these texts. Whether you are a first-year master's student seeking guidance or a lifelong lover of literature looking for fresh perspectives, this booklet aims to be your companion on this literary voyage.

I hope that this guide sparks your curiosity, deepens your appreciation for British literature, and inspires insightful discussions and reflections. May it serve as a valuable resource on your academic and intellectual journey.

**Dr Bachir SAHED**

## Objectives of the Booklet

### British Literature- A Guide to First Year Master's Students

This booklet has been carefully crafted with the aim of providing you, our first-year Master's students, with a comprehensive and insightful exploration of key literary works in the British literary tradition. Our primary focus will be on the analysis of three seminal texts: *Hamlet*, *Frankenstein*, and British Romantic Poetry.

**Objectives of this guide are as follows:**

**Comprehensive Understanding:** We aspire to deepen your understanding of the chosen texts by delving into their historical, cultural, and literary contexts. By the end of this guide, you should have a profound knowledge of the social and intellectual factors that influenced these works.

**Critical Analysis:** We will equip you with the tools to critically analyse and interpret the themes, characters, and narrative techniques employed by Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein*, and the poets of the British Romantic period. You will be encouraged to develop your own unique perspectives on these texts.

**Comparative Insights:** Through comparative analysis, we aim to foster connections between the selected works. By examining common themes, motifs, and literary devices, you will gain a holistic view of British literature during these periods.

**Research Skills:** We will introduce you to research methods and resources that will aid you in further exploration of these texts and related academic inquiries. This guide serves as a stepping stone for your future research endeavours.

**Engagement with Scholarship:** We encourage you to engage with existing scholarship and critical perspectives on these works. This engagement will enable you to situate your own interpretations within the broader academic discourse.

**Enhanced Writing and Communication Skills:** As you progress through this guide, you will refine your ability to articulate your thoughts and analyses effectively, enhancing your writing and communication skills.

**Preparation for Advanced Studies:** Whether you plan to pursue advanced degrees or embark on a career in literature, this guide will provide you with a strong foundation in British literature and critical thinking that will serve you well in your academic and professional journey.

We are excited to accompany you on this literary exploration, and we trust that this guide will be an invaluable resource in your academic endeavours. Embrace the opportunity to immerse yourself in the rich tapestry of British literature, and may this guide serve as a catalyst for your intellectual growth and appreciation of these timeless literary classics.

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## Introduction

This comprehensive booklet entitled, British Literature - A Guide to First Year Master’s Students, has been meticulously crafted to serve as your companion on a captivating literary journey through some of the most iconic works in British literature. Whether you are a first-year master's student embarking on your academic voyage or a seasoned literature enthusiast seeking fresh insights, this guide is designed to enhance your understanding of three literary gems: Hamlet, Frankenstein, and British Romantic Poetry.

Within these pages, we will explore the intricate nuances of these texts, delve into the minds of their creators, and uncover the cultural and historical contexts that gave birth to these masterpieces. Hamlet will lead us through the corridors of Shakespearean tragedy, Frankenstein will introduce us to the boundaries of science and morality, and British Romantic Poetry will immerse us in the beauty of nature, emotion, and imagination.

# I. Drama and Theatre

*All the world's a stage,*
*And all the men and women merely players:*
*They have their exits and their entrances;*
*And one man in his time plays many parts,*
William Shakespeare

## Introduction

Drama is the specific mode of fiction represented in performance. Unlike other forms of literature, the enactment of drama in theatre, performed by actors on a stage before an audience, or even the very structure of dramatic texts, is directly influenced by some collaborative modes of production and a collective form of reception. The early modern tragedy *Hamlet* (1601) by Shakespeare and the classical Athenian tragedy Oedipus the King (c. 429 BCE) by Sophocles are among the supreme masterpieces of the art of drama.

## What is Drama?

As the adjective dramatic usually indicates, the ideas of conflict, tension, contrast, and emotion are usually associated with drama.

The word drama comes from a Greek word meaning "to do," and thus drama is usually associated with the idea of action. It is a form of literature, either prose or verse, usually in dialogue form, intended for performance; the dramatic arts are the components necessary for writing and producing the drama, such as playwriting, acting, and costume and scenic design.

The two masks associated with drama represent the traditional generic division between comedy and tragedy. They are symbols of the ancient Greek Muses, Thalia

(the laughing face, the Muse of comedy), and Melpomene (the weeping face, Muse of tragedy).

Considered as a genre of poetry in general, the dramatic mode has been contrasted with the epic and the lyrical modes ever since Aristotle's Poetics (c. 335 BCE)—the earliest work of dramatic theory. Drama is often combined with music and dance: the drama in opera is sung throughout; musicals include spoken dialogue and songs; and some forms of drama have regular musical accompaniment. In certain periods of history (the ancient Roman and modern Romantic) dramas have been written to be read rather than performed. In improvisation, the drama does not pre-exist the moment of performance; performers devise a dramatic script spontaneously before an audience.

## Theatres and plays

Through much of history, theatre has existed on three levels simultaneously:

**1)** As loosely organized popular entertainment, consisting of individuals or small groups, usually working outside established theatrical channels performing anything from circus skills to farcical plays for a mass audience. This form predates the oldest known plays and is exemplified today by commercial television.

**2)** As a mainstream public activity, which is most commonly literary drama performed at public theatres; it is usually commercial or else state supported for accessibility to the general public. Greek tragedy, medieval morality plays, and contemporary Broadway theatre fall into this category.

**3)** As an elitist art form, most simply defined by its intended audience, a limited group with specialized tastes. This form ranges from the court performances of the Renaissance to modern avant-garde theatre.

## Elements of Theatrical Performance

A performance has only two essential elements: a performer and an audience. The performance may be pantomimed or may use language. The performer need not even be human: puppet drama has been popular throughout history; and mechanical or machine plays have been presented.

A performance may be enhanced by costume, makeup, scenery, props, lighting, music, and special effects. These are needed, however, only to help create the illusion of a different character, place, and time or to enhance the special quality of the performance and differentiate it from everyday experience.

## Special Forms of Drama

### a. Opera

Western opera is a dramatic art form, which arose during the Renaissance in an attempt to revive the classical Greek drama tradition in which both music and theatre were combined. Being strongly intertwined with western classical music, the opera has undergone enormous changes in the past four centuries and it is an important form of theatre until this day. Noteworthy is the huge influence of the German 19$^{th}$ century composer Richard Wagner on the opera tradition. In his view, there was no proper balance between music and theatre in the operas of his time, because the music seemed to be more important than the dramatic aspects in these works. To restore the connection with the traditional Greek drama, he entirely renewed the operatic format, and to emphasize the equal importance of music and drama in these new works, he called them "music dramas".

**b. Pantomime**

These stories follow in the tradition of fables and folk tales, usually there is a lesson learned, and with some help from the audience the hero/heroine saves the day. This kind of play uses stock characters seen in masque and again *commedia del arte*, these characters include the villain, the clown/servant, the lovers *etc*. These plays usually have an emphasis on moral dilemmas, and good always triumphs over evil, this kind of play is also very entertaining making it a very effective way of reaching many people. These plays usually have an emphasis on moral dilemmas, and good always triumphs over evil.

**c. Melodrama:** It is a chanted play that arouses pity and fear through simple means. Good and evil are clearly depicted in white and black motifs. Plot is emphasized over character development.

**d. Farce:** aimed at arousing explosive laughter using crude means. Conflicts are violent, practical jokes are common, and the wit is coarse. Psychologically farce may boost the reader's spirt and purge hostility and aggression. Farce is a funny play provoking mirth of the simplest and most basic kind: roars of laughter rather than smiles. It is a matter, therefore, of humour rather than wit.

## Types of Drama

Drama has one characteristic peculiar to itself - it is written primarily to be performed through actors on a stage before an audience, not read. According to Aristotle, dramatic poets "represent people in action," and so as opposed to a third-person narrative or the mixture of narrative and direct speech as done by Homer, the dramatist is limited to only one point of view- the objective or dramatic. The playwright

cannot directly comment on the action or the character and cannot directly enter the minds of characters and tell us what is going on there. But there are ways to get around this limitation: through the use of the soliloquy (a character speaking directly to the audience), or the chorus (a group on stage commenting on characters and actions), one character can comment on another, too.

**1. The Tragedy:** (Gk 'goat song') In the first place it almost certainly denoted a form of ritual sacrifice accompanied by a choral song in honour of Dionysus, the god of the fields and the vineyards. Out of this ritual developed Greek dramatic tragedy.

According to Aristotle, a tragedy is:

The imitation in dramatic form of an action that is serious and complete, with incidents arousing pity and fear wherewith it effects a catharsis of such emotions. The language used is pleasurable and throughout appropriate to the situation in which it is used. [with] The action, proceeding in the way defined, as one continuous whole. (*Poetics*, Aristotle)

The chief characters are noble personages ("better than ourselves," says Aristotle) and the actions they perform are noble actions.

**The Tragic Hero**

A man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgement. The perfect Plot, accordingly, must have a single, and not a double issue; and the change in the hero's fortunes must be not from misery to happiness, but on the contrary from happiness to misery. (Poetics, Aristotle)

**Human Greatness**

Tragedy has tended to be a form of drama concerned with the fortunes and misfortunes, and, ultimately, the disasters that befall human beings of title, power and position. What makes them tragic figures is that they have qualities of excellence, of nobleness, of passion; they have virtues and gifts that lift them above the ordinary run of mortal men and women. In tragedy these attributes are seen to be insufficient to save them either from self-destruction or from destruction brought upon them. And there is no hope for them. There is hope, perhaps, after the tragedy, but not during it.

**Catharsis: Crying and Laughing**

By participating vicariously in the grief, pain and fear of the tragic hero or heroine, the spectator, in Aristotle's words, experiences pity and fear and is purged. Or, he has a good cry and feels better. Comedy purges, too – through laughter. And laughter and tears are so closely associated physically and physiologically that often we do not know whether to laugh or to cry. And comic relief in tragedy serves many purposes, not least preventing the spectator from being overcharged with tragic emotion.

**Tragic Flaw, *Hamartia, Hubris***

The tragic Flaw is that defect in a tragic hero or heroine which leads to their downfall. Hamartia (Gk 'error'): Aristotle points out that the tragic hero ought to be a man whose misfortune comes to him, not through vice or depravity, but by some error. Hubris is that excessive pride or passion manifest in the tragic hero. For example, Oedipus kills his father from impulse; and Antigone resists the law of the state from stubbornness and defiance.

**Central features of the Aristotelian tragedy:**

**a)** The tragic hero is a character of noble stature and has greatness. If the hero's fall is to arouse the emotions of pity and fear, it must be a fall from a great height.

**b)** Though the tragic hero is pre-eminently great, he/she is not perfect. Tragic flaw, hubris (excessive pride or passion), and hamartia (some error) lead to the hero's downfall.

**c)** The hero's downfall, therefore, is partially her/his own fault, the result of one's own free choice, not the result of pure accident or villainy, or some overriding malignant fate.

**d)** Nevertheless, the hero's misfortune is not wholly deserved. The punishment exceeds the crime. The hero remains admirable.

**e)** Yet the tragic fall is not pure loss - though it may result in the hero's death, before it, there is some increase in awareness, some gain in self-knowledge or, as Aristotle puts it, some “discovery."

**f)** Though it arouses solemn emotion - pity and fear, says Aristotle, but compassion and awe might be better terms - tragedy, when well performed, does not leave its audience in a state of depression. It produces a catharsis or an emotional release at the end, one shared as a common experience by the audience.

**Dramatic Unities: Action, Time, Space (*ATS*)**

In *Poetics*, Aristotle was the first to consider the problem of the dramatic unities of action, time, and space/place.

**Action:** “The fable should be the imitation of one action, and of the whole of this and the parts of the transactions should be so arranged, that any one of them being transposed, or taken away the whole would become different and changed.”

**Time:** "Tragedy endeavours to confine itself to one revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed this limit."

**Space:** that tragedy should be confined to a narrow compass. The supporters of the Classical precepts required that a play should be a unified whole, that the time of action should be limited to twenty-four hours and that the scene should be unchanged (or at any rate confined to one town or city).

## 2. Comedy

Comedy lies between satire and romance. It deals in an amusing way with ordinary characters in rather everyday situations. Evanthius says that in comedy the men are of middle fortune, the dangers they run into are neither serious nor pressing and their actions conclude happily. Evanthius goes on to say that whereas in tragedy life is to be fled from, in comedy it is to be grasped. The essential difference between tragedy and is in the depiction of human nature: tragedy shows greatness in human nature and human whereas comedy shows human weakness and human limitation. Laughter expresses recognition of some absurdity in human behaviour.

## Central Features of the Comedy

**a)** The norms of comedy are primarily social; the protagonist is always in a group or emphasizes commonness. A tragic hero possesses overpowering individuality - so that the play is often named after her/him (*Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth*); the comic protagonist tends to be a type and the play is often named for the type (The Misanthrope, The Alchemist, The Brute).

**b)** Comic plots do not exhibit the high degree of organic unity as tragic plots do. Plausibility is not usually the central characteristic (cause-effect progression) but coincidences, improbable disguises, mistaken identities make up the plot.

**c)** The purpose of comedy is to make us laugh and at the same time, help to illuminate human nature and human weaknesses. Conventionally comedies have a happy ending. Accidental discovery, act of divine intervention, and sudden reform, are common comedic devises.

## Important Terms Related to Drama

**Stage Directions:** They tell how actors move and speak on stage. They can also tell where action takes place (what's going on). They are notes added to the script of a play to indicate the moment of a character's appearance, character, manner; the style of delivery; the actor's movements; details of location, scenery and effects. (e.g. *Enter two servants; Music; Dies; Sings; Exit; Stabs him*). Most stage directions are in parentheses or in italics.

**Dialogue:** A verbal exchange between characters revealing their thoughts, responses and emotional states. We can infer a lot from characters' dialogue.

**Soliloquy:** In Latin: *soliloquium*, from *solus*, 'alone' and *loqui*, 'to speak'. It is a speech delivered by a character alone on stage revealing his state of mind and heart, his most intimate thoughts and feelings, his motives and intentions.

**Aside:** A speech directed to the audience understood to be unheard by other characters on stage, revealing the speaker's true opinion, desire or plan.

**Dramatic Irony:** When the audience knows sth. The character(s) does not.

**Flashback:** Any scene or episode in a play, novel, story or poem which is inserted to show events that happened at an earlier time. Flashbacks also have some psychological effects.

## Conclusion

If theatre is viewed simply as a branch of literature or only as a form of narrative, then large segments of theatre history are inevitably slighted. Some periods or cultures have emphasized dramatic literature (plays) but others have stressed aspects of theatrical production. Some cultures see theatre's value as a means of storytelling; others see it as religion, spectacle, or entertainment.

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# 1. Practical Criticism: Drama

Poetry and prose each have features that are peculiar to them: the main distinguishing feature of drama is that it is designed for performance in front of its audience. This is so obvious a remark as to be accepted by most students, without the realisation that this basic factor is the start and finish of most practical criticism of drama and dominates the way drama is written.

The problem is that when plays are studied for examinations they are usually read from a printed text, as are poems and novels, but right from the start this puts the student in a false position if he or she treats drama in the same way as poetry or prose. Drama was meant to be seen and heard, not read. Everything the student writes must be based on the written text, but that text needs to be enlivened by a vivid visual and auditory imagination. Every time a student reads a play he or she needs to be seeing a performance of it in his or her mind. Even if the student has seen a performance in the live theatre, the cinema or on television the dangers are still there. Each production of a play has its own individual interpretations and 'feel', and having seen one production the student can have his or her horizons hemmed in by that memory, and see the play purely in terms of the one production he or she has witnessed.

The artificial situation, that students find themselves in when appreciating drama, can create a number of problems. Shakespeare's plays present perhaps more problems than many others, because we only have the words and very little insight as to how Shakespeare wanted them performed. This applies to many dramatists, the general rule being that the more modern a play, the more the author will give specific instructions on how he wants his work staged, acted, and presented. George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) gave the clearest possible instructions as to how he wished his plays to be staged

and the lines to be spoken, and the *Preface* to his plays is often nearly as long as the play itself. However, in pre-Restoration drama all we have is the text and virtually no stage directions. This means that first of all we have to guess at how the play might have looked and how the lines might have been spoken.

Secondly, reliance on pure text with no insights from the author creates other problems. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth* Lady Macbeth makes it clear that she has breast-fed an infant, but it is also clear in the play that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have no children. Such inconsistencies can get totally out of proportion when the play is read rather than seen, and in this instance led to a famous essay attacking the very literal approach to criticism of A. C. Bradley, entitled “How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?” Reading *Macbeth* the student has time to note and dwell on the inconsistency. On stage the remark about breast-feeding makes a valuable point at the stage in the play, which is that Lady Macbeth is prepared to deny her basic feminine and human instincts in order to gain the crown for her husband. A great deal happens between that remark and the realisation that the Macbeths have no children, and in the theatre the audience have neither the time nor the inclination to dwell on the conflicting statements. Even if they are apparent, simple answers are available, the simplest of all being that Lady Macbeth's child died in infancy. The hurry and excitement of a dramatic performance can bulldoze its way over details such as this, so that they simply do not cross the audience's mind.

A minor problem can occur where music features largely in a play, and this has to be imagined by the student who is simply reading the text. The impact of the songs in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is huge, but obviously depends to quite a large extent on tunes and voices. The impact of pomp, ceremony, and processions in an Elizabethan play is also liable to be lost. A simple stage direction such as “Flourish. Enter Claudius,

King of Denmark, Gertrude the Queen, Councillors, Polonius and his son Laertes, Hamlet" is a bare statement of fact when written. On stage it can be translated into a blare of ceremonial music that can make the audience jump in their scats, followed by a glorious pageant of extravagantly and luxuriously dressed characters streaming onto the stage in a riot of colour and noise. The entry of the full court of Denmark is visually immensely exciting, but it is an effect that a mere reading of the play does not necessarily bring out. Nor does a bare reading bring out the contrast between this scene and the one that immediately precedes it, with a few cold and frightened soldiers perched on the wind-swept battlements of Elsinore. As regards practical criticism, the student must be aware of what is suggested or implied in a passage, and the appeals to the imagination contained in bare stage directions.

**Characterisation**

The simplest method of characterising a person on stage is by what he or she does and says, from which the audience can form their own conclusions. Occasionally a Chorus or narrator figure will appear in a play to tell the audience what to think of a character, but for the vast majority of time our judgement of the characters is based solely on their actions on the stage, and their words. Insight into a character's private thoughts can be given by means of a soliloquy, or monologue, where the character speaks out loud to the audience, usually when he or she is alone on stage. There is a problem with realism here; we tend to think our thoughts, not speak them out loud, and any soliloquy or monologue needs to be examined for the subtlety and conviction with which it is blended into the main action.

It may sometimes be a strain on credibility to have a character speak out loud on an empty stage; it is much less of a strain to have another character speak about someone

else. Look for points of characterisation in what other characters say about a character. Standard devices are to boost a major character before his or her entry by a preliminary speech praising or damning them, thus arousing tension and expectation in the audience. Remember that the character of the speaker can be judged from what they say, as well as the character of the person they are talking about. A grudging or generous comment about another character may tell the audience something about the other character, but it definitely tells them something about the personality of the speaker. It is a very effective and common technique to have a character who we know has no reason to praise or love another character speaking in his or her praise. Thus Enobarbus in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* does not like Cleopatra, but when even he is forced to speak in glowing terms of her immense presence and sensuality we know how strong these features must be to have overcome his other feelings. Similarly Claudius hates Hamlet, so when he says that the people of Denmark love Hamlet we recognise that this must be so abundantly true as to be accepted even by Hamlet's enemies. Another device is to have a character the audience hate or find ludicrous speak in praise of someone else, and thus damn him by association.

Imagery can play a vital part in forming our opinion of a character. If a person's speech is laced with references to illness, disease and decay, as Hamlet's is, then it does not take the audience long to associate these features with the character in question. When answering a question look out for mannerisms of speech, as suggested by spelling, stage directions or comments from other characters. Look closely for hints as to a character's appearance and age; in older plays these are frequently buried, or wrapped round in so many jocular remarks that they go unnoticed. The author of this book read *Twelfth Night* three times in detail as a student, and totally failed to recognise

until he was told that there are several references in the play that make it clear Maria is a very small person. In a novel, character is often stated; in a play, it has to be deduced.

**Plot**

The majority of plays have a strong plot, and even those that do not, such as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, obtain some of their effect by challenging the audience's expectation that there will be a plot. In modern plays the plot is more likely to be original, and sometimes merely an excuse for the author to characterise or make thematic points. Therefore in a modern play the balance between plot, characterisation, and themes can be a good starting point in a practical criticism.

A simple plot with limited settings and characters may not just be the product of a modern writer's desire to focus on characterisation and themes. Numerous expensive sets and a large number of actors make for a very expensive production in the modern theatre, and one of the great unsung influences on modern drama is cost-consciousness. A new young writer stands the best chance of seeing a play performed in a studio theatre, which has limited staging facilities and only a few actors on call. A play such as Toni Stoppard's *Jumpers* (1972) is an exception. Stoppard knew this play was destined for the prestigious and relatively rich National Theatre in London, and so could afford to write a play which required, among other things, a troupe of gymnasts and a huge television screen. A modern writer who wished to tell the story of Antony and Cleopatra would probably go to the film studios, not the live theatre. However, look for hints that a modern writer may be telling an old story in allegorical form. A simple dramatization of novel such as *Of Mice and Men* (1937) by John Steinbeck (1902-68) may appear to be a story about two American vagrants; it can quite easily on stage be made into an allegory of the fall of man. Where a play is using an old and well-known story, such as Shakespeare's

*Antony and Cleopatra*, look to see if the author is assuming any knowledge on the part of the reader, or deliberately varying the story or characterisation for effect.

A sub-plot is a feature of many plays. A sub-plot provides variety and a change of scene from the main plot, whilst at the same time keeping the audience in touch with the concerns and themes of the main plot. An excellent example of what a sub-plot can be is to be found in Shakespeare's *King Lear,* where the main and sub-plots are carefully interleaved, in roughly alternating sequence. The sub-plot examines the themes of the main plot, but from a different viewpoint and with different characters. Certain characters and scenes overlap, ensuring that the play as a whole is not split down the middle. At the climax of the play, subplot and main plot are brought together, with the sub-plot concluding just before the main plot so that the latter is not reduced in effectiveness at its climax.

Sub-plots can also go gloriously wrong, though that fact alone need not ruin a play. In *The Relapse* by Sir John Vanbrugh the main plot starts off in fine style, but the sub-plot with its coarse and bawdy concentration and complete lack of morality soon takes over. The sub-plot dominates more and more of the play, until the main issues in the main plot are left unresolved, and the sub-plot finishes the play in complete control, with only the merest token gesture towards the main plot. Other plays have parallel plots, such as Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing,* in which one story line provides much of the narrative and a comment on romantic love, whilst the other provides much of the comedy and a comment on real love.

**Dialogue**

Plays centre on dialogue, or the verbal exchanges between characters on stage. Very often individual characters will have their own specific and individual style of

speaking, but remember that in appreciating drama it is not only what each individual character says that matters, but the skill of the author in linking characters to each other by means of what they say. Thus the effect of a word, sentence or speech on another character can be as important as the word, sentence or speech itself. One example is Jimmy Porter, "the 'angry young man' who is the central figure in John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*. Jimmy is superb at launching darts at those to and with whom he speaks, darts that he knows will both have an explosive effect and demand that attention be paid to him. Or look at the punning and word play in many Restoration Comedies, where the pace of the exchange between characters seems to get faster and faster as each one tries to cap the other's wit.

*Irony* in all forms plays a crucial part in theatrical dialogue, and in many post-war plays it is the dominant feature - DRAMATIC IRONY. Remember that irony can be very subtle, and look for it in particular between characters at the extreme end of relationships those who are very close to each other, and those who are very far apart. In this, as in so many areas, it is the student's sensitivity that is tested. Irony is a delicate flower. The student who sees his or her task as bashing through a text for an examination is likely to trample on irony before they have even realise it is there.

**General points**

As with all practical criticism questions, look out for the prevailing tone of an extract, be it comic, serious, reflective, or whatever. Where comedy is the dominant effect, be careful to specify what the comic effect is, and how it is achieved, be it slapstick, bawdy or coarse humour, word-play, or emphasis on wit. Learn to follow a dialogue through: good dialogue shows characters changing, flexing, and developing their attitudes, so that the audience and the characters are at a different point towards the end of an extract from

that which began it. Comment on the presence of stock types if characters appear to be cast in this mould. Examples might he the malcontent or bastard in Jacobean drama; the stupid, unsophisticated rustic or country bumpkin; the fop or dandy in Restoration comedy; the old man or woman desperately trying to pretend they are young; the star-struck lovers.

## References:

Martin Stephen, *English Literature*. London: Pearson Education, 2000.

# 2. *Hamlet*

## By William Shakespeare

## Introduction

*Hamlet* is without question the most famous play in the English language. Although Shakespeare has written many tragedies before it, but it is said that he reached the perfection of his artistic maturity and dramatic development in *Hamlet.* Probably written in 1601 or 1602, the tragedy is a brilliant depiction of the hero's struggle with two opposing forces: moral integrity and the need to avenge his father's murder.

Shakespeare's focus on the inner conflict was a revolutionary departure from contemporary revenge tragedies, which tended to graphically dramatize bloody deeds and violent acts on stage. In the words of Ernest Johnson, "the dilemma of Hamlet the Prince and Man" is "to disentangle himself from the temptation to wreak justice for the wrong reasons and in evil passion, and to do what he must do at last for the pure sake of justice…. From that dilemma of wrong feelings and right actions, he ultimately emerges, solving the problem by attaining a proper state of mind." Hamlet endures as the object of universal identification because his central moral dilemma transcends the Elizabethan period, making him a man for all ages. In his difficult struggle to somehow act within a corrupt world and yet maintain his moral integrity, Hamlet ultimately reflects the fate of all human beings.

## 1. William Shakespeare (1564- 1616)

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 to a successful middle-class glove-maker in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Shakespeare attended grammar school, but his formal education proceeded no further. In 1582 he married an older woman, Anne Hathaway, and had three children with her. Around 1590 he left his family behind and travelled to London to work as an actor and playwright. Public and critical success quickly followed, and Shakespeare eventually became the most popular playwright in England and part-owner of the Globe Theatre. His career bridged the reigns of Elizabeth I (ruled 1558–1603) and James I (ruled 1603–1625), and he was a favourite of both monarchs. Indeed, James granted Shakespeare's company the greatest possible compliment by bestowing upon its members the title of King's Men. Wealthy and renowned, Shakespeare retired to Stratford and died in 1616 at the age of fifty-two. At the time of Shakespeare's death, literary luminaries such as Ben Jonson hailed his works as timeless.

Shakespeare's works were collected and printed in various editions in the century following his death, and by the early eighteenth century his reputation as the greatest poet ever to write in English was well established. The unprecedented admiration garnered by his works led to a fierce curiosity about Shakespeare's life, but the dearth of biographical information has left many details of Shakespeare's personal history shrouded in mystery. Some people have concluded from this fact that Shakespeare's plays were really written by someone else—Francis Bacon and the Earl of Oxford are the two most popular candidates—but the support for this claim is overwhelmingly circumstantial, and the theory is not taken seriously by many scholars.

In the absence of credible evidence to the contrary, Shakespeare must be viewed as the author of the thirty-seven plays and 154 sonnets that bear his name. The legacy of this body of work is immense. A number of Shakespeare's plays seem to have transcended even the category of brilliance, becoming so influential as to profoundly affect the course of Western literature and culture ever after.

## 2. About *Hamlet*

Written during the first part of the seventeenth century (assumably in 1600 or 1601), *Hamlet* was probably first performed in July 1602. The first edition of *Hamlet* was published in 1603, from a previous sketch composed several years earlier, the second one following in 1604, under the title of "The Tragical Historie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke. By William Shakespeare. Newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much againe as it was, according to the true and perfect coppie." In comparing the two editions we find a remarkable improvement in the command of language, with greater philosophic depth, and a wondrous insight into what is most hidden and obscure in men's characters and motives.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a transformation of The *Ur-Hamlet* into an exceptional tragedy. The *Ur-Hamlet*, or "original *Hamlet*," is a lost play that scholars believe was written mere decades before. Numerous sixteenth-century records attest to the existence of the *Ur-Hamlet*, with some references linking its composition to Thomas Kyd. Other principal sources available to Shakespeare were Saxo Grammaticus's *Historiae Danicae* (circa 1200), which features a popular legend with a plot similar to *Hamlet*, and François de Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques, Extraicts des Oeuvres Italiennes de Bandel* (7 Vols.; 1559-80), which provides an expanded account of the story recorded in the *Historiae Danicae*. From these sources Shakespeare created

*Hamlet*, a supremely rich and complex literary work that continues to delight both readers and audiences with its myriad meanings and interpretations.

The raw material that Shakespeare appropriated in writing Hamlet is the story of a Danish prince whose uncle murders the prince's father, marries his mother, and claims the throne. The prince pretends to be feeble-minded to throw his uncle off guard, then manages to kill his uncle in revenge. Shakespeare changed the emphasis of this story entirely, making his Hamlet a philosophically-minded prince who delays taking action because his knowledge of his uncle's crime is so uncertain. Shakespeare went far beyond making uncertainty a personal quirk of Hamlet's, introducing a number of important ambiguities into the play that even the audience cannot resolve with certainty. For instance, whether Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, shares in Claudius's guilt; whether Hamlet continues to love Ophelia even as he spurns her, in Act III; whether Ophelia's death is suicide or accident; whether the ghost offers reliable knowledge, or seeks to deceive and tempt Hamlet; and, perhaps most importantly, whether Hamlet would be morally justified in taking revenge on his uncle. Shakespeare makes it clear that the stakes riding on some of these questions are enormous—the actions of these characters bring disaster upon an entire kingdom. At the play's end it is not even clear whether justice has been achieved.

## 3. Context

By modifying his source materials in this way, Shakespeare was able to take an unremarkable revenge story and make it resonate with the most fundamental themes and problems of the Renaissance.

Hamlet's famous speech in Act II: "What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in

action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god—the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!" (II.ii.293–297) is directly based upon one of the major texts of the Italian humanists, Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man.* For the humanists, the purpose of cultivating reason was to lead to a better understanding of how to act, and their fondest hope was that the coordination of action and understanding would lead to great benefits for society as a whole.

As the Renaissance spread to other countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, a more skeptical strain of humanism developed, stressing the limitations of human understanding. For example, the sixteenth-century French humanist, Michel de Montaigne, was no less interested in studying human experiences than the earlier humanists were, but he maintained that the world of experience was a world of appearances, and that human beings could never hope to see past those appearances into the "realities" that lie behind them. This is the world in which Shakespeare places his characters. Hamlet is faced with the difficult task of correcting an injustice that he can never have sufficient knowledge of—a dilemma that is by no means unique, or even uncommon. And while Hamlet is fond of pointing out questions that cannot be answered because they concern supernatural and metaphysical matters, the play as a whole chiefly demonstrates the difficulty of knowing the truth about other people—their guilt or innocence, their motivations, their feelings, their relative states of sanity or insanity. The world of other people is a world of appearances, and *Hamlet* is, fundamentally, a play about the difficulty of living in that world.

# 4. Literary Analysis

## 4.1. Plot Overview

On a dark knight, two watchmen of Elsinore Castle in Denmark see a ghost resembling the recently deceased King walking the ramparts. the scholar Horatio, who sees the ghost too, brings Prince Hamlet, the son of Gertrude and the dead king. When Hamlet urges the ghost to speak to him, it declares ominously that it is indeed his father's spirit, and that he was murdered by none other than Claudius whose brother Claudius, who has inherited the throne and married the king's widow, Queen Gertrude. Ordering Hamlet to seek revenge on the man who usurped his throne and married his wife, the ghost disappears with the dawn.

Because Prince Hamlet is contemplative and thoughtful by nature, he delays the revenge, entering into a deep melancholy and even apparent madness. Claudius and Gertrude worry about the prince's erratic behaviour and attempt to discover its cause. They employ Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two friends of the prince, to watch him. Polonius, the pompous Lord Chamberlain, suggests that Hamlet may be mad with love for his daughter, Ophelia, but this doesn't seem to be the case.

Hamlet wants to test his uncle's guilt, so he has some actors perform a scene closely resembling the sequence by which Hamlet imagines his uncle to have murdered his father, so that if Claudius is guilty, he will surely react. When the moment of the murder arrives in the theater, Claudius leaps up and leaves the room. Hamlet and Horatio agree that this proves his guilt. Hamlet goes to kill Claudius but finds him praying. Since he believes that killing Claudius while in prayer would send Claudius's soul to heaven, Hamlet considers that it would be an inadequate revenge and decides to wait. Claudius,

now frightened of Hamlet's madness and fearing for his own safety, orders that Hamlet be sent to England at once.

Hamlet goes to confront his mother, and, hearing a noise from behind the tapestry, he believes the king is hiding there. He draws his sword and stabs through the fabric, killing Polonius, who has hidden behind a tapestry. For this crime, he is immediately dispatched to England with his two friends. However, Claudius's plan for Hamlet includes more than banishment, as he has given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sealed orders for the King of England demanding that Hamlet be put to death.

In the aftermath of her father's death, Ophelia goes mad with grief and drowns in the river. Polonius's son, Laertes, who has been staying in France, returns to Denmark in a rage. Claudius convinces him that Hamlet is to blame for his father's and sister's deaths. When Horatio and the king receive letters from Hamlet indicating that the prince has returned to Denmark after pirates attacked his ship en route to England, Claudius concocts a plan to use Laertes' desire for revenge to secure Hamlet's death. Laertes will fence with Hamlet in innocent sport, but Claudius will poison Laertes' blade so that if he draws blood, Hamlet will die. As a backup plan, the king decides to poison a goblet, which he will give Hamlet to drink should Hamlet score the first or second hits of the match. Hamlet returns to the vicinity of Elsinore just as Ophelia's funeral is taking place. Stricken with grief, he attacks Laertes and declares that he had in fact always loved Ophelia. Back at the castle, he tells Horatio that he believes one must be prepared to die, since death can come at any moment. A foolish courtier named Osric arrives on Claudius's orders to arrange the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes.

The sword-fighting begins. Hamlet scores the first hit, but declines to drink from the king's proffered goblet. Instead, Gertrude takes a drink from it and is swiftly killed by the poison. Laertes succeeds in wounding Hamlet, though Hamlet does not die of the poison immediately. First, Laertes is cut by his own sword's blade, and, after revealing to Hamlet that Claudius is responsible for the queen's death, he dies from the blade's poison. Hamlet then stabs Claudius through with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink down the rest of the poisoned wine. Claudius dies, and Hamlet dies immediately after achieving his revenge.

At this moment, a Norwegian prince named Fortinbras, who has led an army to Denmark and attacked Poland earlier in the play, enters with ambassadors from England, who report that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Fortinbras is stunned by the gruesome sight of the entire royal family lying sprawled on the floor dead. He moves to take power of the kingdom. Horatio, fulfilling Hamlet's last request, tells him Hamlet's tragic story. Fortinbras orders that Hamlet be carried away in a manner befitting a fallen soldier.

## 4.2. Character Analysis

**Hamlet**: The mystery which surrounds the play centres in the character of Hamlet himself. He is of a highly cultivated mind, a prince of royal manners, endowed with the finest sense of propriety, susceptible of noble ambition, and open in the highest degree to an enthusiastic admiration of that excellence in others in which he himself is deficient. However, he acts the part of madness with unrivalled power, convincing the persons who are sent to examine into his supposed loss of reason merely by telling them unwelcome truths and rallying them with the most caustic wit. But in the resolutions which he so often embraces and always leaves unexecuted, his weakness is

too apparent; he is not solely impelled by necessity to artifice and dissimulation, he has a natural inclination for curved ways; he is a hypocrite toward himself; his far-fetched scruples are often mere pretexts to cover his want of determination--thoughts, as he says, which have

> But one part wisdom
> And ever three parts coward.

Hamlet has fascinated audiences and readers for centuries, and the first thing to point out about him is that he is enigmatic. There is always more to him than the other characters in the play can figure out; even the most careful and clever readers come away with the sense that they don't know everything there is to know about this character. Hamlet is condemned both for his harshness in repulsing the love of Ophelia, which he himself had cherished, and for his insensibility at her death. But he is too much overwhelmed with his own sorrow to have any compassion to spare for others; besides, his outward indifference gives us by no means the measure of his internal perturbation. On the other hand, we evidently perceive in him a malicious joy, when he has succeeded in getting rid of his enemies, more through necessity and accident, which alone are able to impel him to quick and decisive measures, than by the merit of his own courage, as he himself confesses after the slaying of Polonius. Hamlet has no firm belief either in himself or in anything else. From expressions of religious confidence, he passes over to skeptical doubts; he believes in the ghost of his father as long as he sees it, but as soon as it has disappeared, it appears to him almost in the light of a deception. He has even gone so far as to say "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so;" with him the poet loses himself here in the labyrinths of thought, in which neither end nor beginning is discoverable. The stars themselves, from the course of events, afford no answer to the questions so urgently proposed to them. A voice from another world, commissioned, it would appear, by heaven, demands

vengeance for a monstrous enormity, and the demand remains without effect; the criminals are at last punished, but, as it were, by an accidental blow, and not in the solemn way requisite to convey to the world a warning example of justice; irresolution, cunning treachery and impetuous rage hurry on to a common destruction; the less guilty and the innocent are equally involved in the general ruin. The destiny of humanity is here exhibited as a gigantic Sphinx, which threatens to precipitate into the abyss of skepticism all who are unable to solve her dread enigmas.

**Claudius**: he is the play's antagonist. The King of Denmark, Hamlet's uncle, and the villain of the play, Claudius is a shrewd, lustful, calculating, and ambitious corrupt politician, driven by his lust for power, but he occasionally shows signs of guilt and human feeling, his love for Gertrude, for instance, seems sincere.

Claudius displays a skilful use of language, with which he is able to manipulate the others. Claudius's speech is compared to poison being poured in the ear (the method he used to murder Hamlet's father).

As the play progresses, Claudius's mounting fear of Hamlet's insanity leads him to ever greater self-preoccupation; when Gertrude tells him that Hamlet has killed Polonius, Claudius does not remark that Gertrude might have been in danger, but only that he would have been in danger had he been in the room. He tells Laertes the same thing as he attempts to soothe the young man's anger after his father's death. Claudius is ultimately too crafty for his own good. In Act V, scene ii, rather than allowing Laertes only two methods of killing Hamlet, the sharpened sword and the poison on the blade, Claudius insists on a third, the poisoned goblet. When Gertrude inadvertently drinks the poison and dies, Hamlet is at last able to bring himself to kill Claudius, and the king is felled by his own cowardly machination.

**Gertrude**: The weak, shallow Queen of Denmark and Hamlet's mother who seeks affection and status more urgently than moral rectitude or truth.

Few Shakespearean characters have caused as much uncertainty as Gertrude, the beautiful Queen of Denmark. The play seems to raise more questions about Gertrude than it answers, including: Was she involved with Claudius before the death of her husband? Did she love her husband? Did she know about Claudius's plan to commit the murder? Did she love Claudius, or did she marry him simply to keep her high station in Denmark? Does she believe Hamlet when he insists that he is not mad, or does she pretend to believe him simply to protect herself? Does she intentionally betray Hamlet to Claudius, or does she believe that she is protecting her son's secret?

These questions can be answered in numerous ways, depending upon one's reading of the play. The Gertrude who does emerge clearly in *Hamlet* is a woman defined by her desire for station and affection,

Hamlet's most famous comment about Gertrude is his furious condemnation of women in general: "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (I.ii.146). This comment is as much indicative of Hamlet's agonized state of mind as of anything else, but to a great extent Gertrude does seem morally frail. She never exhibits the ability to think critically about her situation, but seems merely to move instinctively toward seemingly safe choices, as when she immediately runs to Claudius after her confrontation with Hamlet. She is at her best in social situations (I.ii and V.ii), when her natural grace and charm seem to indicate a rich, rounded personality. At times it seems that her grace and charm are her *only* characteristics, and her reliance on men appears to be her sole way of capitalizing on her abilities.

**Polonius:** The Lord Chamberlain of Claudius's court, a pretentious, manipulative old man. Polonius is the father of Laertes and Ophelia.

**Ophelia**: Polonius's daughter, a beautiful young woman with whom Hamlet has been in love. Ophelia is a sweet and innocent young girl, who obeys her father and her brother, Laertes. Dependent on men to tell her how to behave, she gives in to Polonius's schemes to spy on Hamlet. Even in her lapse into madness and death, she remains maidenly, singing songs about flowers and finally drowning in the river amid the flower garlands she had gathered.

**Horatio**: Hamlet's close friend, who studied with the prince at the university in Wittenberg. Horatio is loyal and helpful to Hamlet throughout the play. After Hamlet's death, Horatio remains alive to tell Hamlet's story.

**Laertes**: Polonius's son and Ophelia's brother, a young man who spends much of the play in France. Passionate and quick to action, Laertes is clearly a foil for the reflective Hamlet.

**Fortinbras**: The young Prince of Norway, whose father the king (also named Fortinbras) was killed by Hamlet's father (also named Hamlet). Now Fortinbras wishes to attack Denmark to avenge his father's honour, making him another foil for Prince Hamlet.

**The Ghost:** The spectre of Hamlet's recently deceased father. The ghost, who claims to have been murdered by Claudius, calls upon Hamlet to avenge him. However, it is not entirely certain whether the ghost is what it appears to be, or whether it is something else. Hamlet speculates that the ghost might be a devil sent to deceive him and tempt

him into murder, and the question of what the ghost is or where it comes from is never definitively resolved.

**Rosencrantz and Guildenstern**: Two slightly bumbling courtiers, former friends of Hamlet from Wittenberg, who are summoned by Claudius and Gertrude to discover the cause of Hamlet's strange behavior.

**Osric:** The foolish courtier who summons Hamlet to his duel with Laertes.

**Voltimand and Cornelius:** Courtiers whom Claudius sends to Norway to persuade the king to prevent Fortinbras from attacking.

**Marcellus and Bernardo:** The officers who first see the ghost walking the ramparts of Elsinore and who summon Horatio to witness it. Marcellus is present when Hamlet first encounters the ghost.

**Francisco:** A soldier and guardsman at Elsinore.

**Reynaldo :** Polonius's servant, who is sent to France by Polonius to check up on and spy on Laertes.

## 4.3. Major Themes

## The Impossibility of Certainty

This play poses many questions that other plays would simply take for granted. What separates *Hamlet* from other revenge plays is that the action we expect to see, particularly from Hamlet himself, is continually postponed while Hamlet tries to obtain more certain knowledge about what he is doing. Maybe it is due to the philosophical nature of the major character that many questions seem unsolved: Can we have certain

knowledge about ghosts? Is the ghost what it appears to be, or is it really a misleading fiend? Does the ghost have reliable knowledge about its own death, or is the ghost itself deluded? Moving to more earthly matters: How can we know for certain the facts about a crime that has no witnesses? Can Hamlet know the state of Claudius's soul by watching his behavior? If so, can he know the facts of what Claudius did by observing the state of his soul? Can Claudius (or the audience) know the state of Hamlet's mind by observing his behavior and listening to his speech? Can we know whether our actions will have the consequences we want them to have? Can we know anything about the afterlife?

Many people have seen *Hamlet* as a play about indecisiveness, and thus about Hamlet's failure to act appropriately. It might be more interesting to consider that the play shows us how many uncertainties our lives are built upon, how many unknown quantities are taken for granted when people act or when they evaluate one another's actions.

## The Complexity of Action

Directly related to the theme of certainty is the theme of action. How is it possible to take reasonable, effective, purposeful action? In *Hamlet*, the question of how to act is affected not only by rational considerations, such as the need for certainty, but also by emotional, ethical, and psychological factors. Hamlet himself appears to distrust the idea that it's even possible to act in a controlled, purposeful way. When he does act, he prefers to do it blindly, recklessly, and violently. The other characters obviously think much less about "action" in the abstract than Hamlet does, and are therefore less troubled about the possibility of acting effectively. They simply act as they feel is appropriate. But in some sense they prove that Hamlet is right, because all of their

actions miscarry. Claudius possesses himself of queen and crown through bold action, but his conscience torments him, and he is beset by threats to his authority (and, of course, he dies). Laertes resolves that nothing will distract him from acting out his revenge, but he is easily influenced and manipulated into serving Claudius's ends, and his poisoned rapier is turned back upon himself.

## The Mystery of Death

In the aftermath of his father's murder, Hamlet is obsessed with the idea of death, and over the course of the play he considers death from a great many perspectives. He ponders both the spiritual aftermath of death, embodied in the ghost, and the physical remainders of the dead, such as by Yorick's skull and the decaying corpses in the cemetery. Throughout, the idea of death is closely tied to the themes of spirituality, truth, and uncertainty in that death may bring the answers to Hamlet's deepest questions, ending once and for all the problem of trying to determine truth in an ambiguous world. And, since death is both the cause and the consequence of revenge, it is intimately tied to the theme of revenge and justice—Claudius's murder of King Hamlet initiates Hamlet's quest for revenge, and Claudius's death is the end of that quest.

The question of his own death plagues Hamlet as well, as he repeatedly contemplates whether or not suicide is a morally legitimate action in an unbearably painful world. Hamlet's grief and misery is such that he frequently longs for death to end his suffering, but he fears that if he commits suicide, he will be consigned to eternal suffering in hell because of the Christian religion's prohibition of suicide. In his famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy (III.i), Hamlet philosophically concludes that no one would choose to endure the pain of life if he or she were not afraid of what will come

after death, and that it is this fear which causes complex moral considerations to interfere with the capacity for action.

### The Nation as a Diseased Body

Everything is connected in *Hamlet,* including the welfare of the royal family and the health of the state as a whole. The play's early scenes explore the sense of anxiety and dread that surrounds the transfer of power from one ruler to the next. Throughout the play, characters draw explicit connections between the moral legitimacy of a ruler and the health of the nation. Denmark is frequently described as a physical body made ill by the moral corruption of Claudius and Gertrude, and many observers interpret the presence of the ghost as a supernatural omen indicating that "[s]omething is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.iv.67). The dead King Hamlet is portrayed as a strong, forthright ruler under whose guard the state was in good health, while Claudius, a wicked politician, has corrupted and compromised Denmark to satisfy his own appetites. At the end of the play, the rise to power of the upright Fortinbras suggests that Denmark will be strengthened once again.

## 3.4. Motifs

### Incest and Incestuous Desire

The motif of incest runs throughout the play and is frequently alluded to by Hamlet and the ghost, most obviously in conversations about Gertrude and Claudius, the former brother-in-law and sister-in-law who are now married. A subtle motif of incestuous desire can be found in the relationship of Laertes and Ophelia, as Laertes sometimes speaks to his sister in suggestively sexual terms and, at her funeral, leaps into her grave to hold her in his arms. However, the strongest overtones of incestuous desire arise in

the relationship of Hamlet and Gertrude, in Hamlet's fixation on Gertrude's sex life with Claudius and his preoccupation with her in general.

## Misogyny

Shattered by his mother's decision to marry Claudius so soon after her husband's death, Hamlet becomes cynical about women in general, showing a particular obsession with what he perceives to be a connection between female sexuality and moral corruption. This motif of misogyny, or hatred of women, occurs sporadically throughout the play, but it is an important inhibiting factor in Hamlet's relationships with Ophelia and Gertrude. He urges Ophelia to go to a nunnery rather than experience the corruptions of sexuality and exclaims of Gertrude, "Frailty, thy name is woman" (I.ii.146).

## Ears and Hearing

One facet of *Hamlet*'s exploration of the difficulty of attaining true knowledge is slipperiness of language. Words are used to communicate ideas, but they can also be used to distort the truth, manipulate other people, and serve as tools in corrupt quests for power. Claudius, the shrewd politician, is the most obvious example of a man who manipulates words to enhance his own power. The sinister uses of words are represented by images of ears and hearing, from Claudius's murder of the king by pouring poison into his ear to Hamlet's claim to Horatio that "I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb" (IV.vi.21). The poison poured in the king's ear by Claudius is used by the ghost to symbolize the corrosive effect of Claudius's dishonesty on the health of Denmark. Declaring that the story that he was killed by a snake is a lie, he says that "the whole ear of Denmark" is "Rankly abused. . . ." (I.v.36–38).

## 3.5. Symbols

## Yorick's Skull

In *Hamlet,* physical objects are rarely used to represent thematic ideas. One important exception is Yorick's skull, which Hamlet discovers in the graveyard in the first scene of Act V. As Hamlet speaks to the skull and about the skull of the king's former jester, he fixates on death's inevitability and the disintegration of the body. He urges the skull to "get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come", no one can avoid death (V.i.178–179). He traces the skull's mouth and says, "Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft," indicating his fascination with the physical consequences of death (V.i.174–175). This latter idea is an important motif throughout the play, as Hamlet frequently makes comments referring to every human body's eventual decay, noting that Polonius will be eaten by worms, that even kings are eaten by worms, and that dust from the decayed body of Alexander the Great might be used to stop a hole in a beer barrel.

## 4.6. Language and Style

Shakespeare has composed the play in Hamlet altogether in sententious rhymes full of antitheses. But this solemn and measured tone did not suit a speech in which violent emotion ought to prevail, and the poet had no other expedient than the one of which he made choice--overcharging the pathos. Unquestionably the language of the speech in question is falsely emphatical; but this fault is so mixed up with true grandeur that a player practiced in artificially calling forth in himself the emotion he is imitating may certainly be carried away by it. Besides, it will hardly be believed that Shakespeare knew so little of his art as not to be aware that a tragedy, in which there is a lengthy

epic relation of a transaction that happened so long before as the destruction of Troy, could neither be dramatic nor theatrical.

The opening of *Hamlet* is one of the most absorbing scenes in the Shakespearean drama. It produces its effect by the supernatural being brought into the most immediate contact with the real. The sentinels are prepared for the appearance of the ghost, Horatio being incredulous, but they are all surrounded with an atmosphere of common life. "Long live the king," "'Tis bitter cold," "Not a mouse stirring," and the familiar pleasantry of Horatio, exhibit to us minds under the ordinary state of human feeling. At the moment when the recollections of Bernardo arise into that imaginative power which belongs to the tale he is about to tell, the ghost appears. All that was doubtful in the narrative of the supernatural vision--what left upon Horatio's mind the impression only of a "thing"--because as real as the silence, the cold and the midnight. The vision is then "most like the king"--

There is also something altogether indefinable and mysterious in the poet's delineation of this character, something wild and irregular in the circumstances with which the character is associated. We see that Hamlet is propelled rather than propelling. But why is this turn given to the delineation? We cannot exactly tell. Doubtless much of the very charm of the play is its mysteriousness. It awakes not only thoughts of the grand and the beautiful, but of the incomprehensible. Its obscurity constitutes a portion of its sublimity. This is the stage in which most minds are content to rest, and perhaps better so, with regard to the comprehension of *Hamlet*.

One of Shakespeare’s most impressive achievements with *Hamlet* is his ability in writing the soliloquies and dialogues, it sounds as if there’s something important Hamlet is not saying, maybe something even he is not aware of.

As one example of the many details of Shakespeare which have been generally misunderstood, may be mentioned the style in which the player's speech about Hecuba is conceived. It has been the subject of much controversy among commentators whether this was taken by Shakespeare from himself or from another, and whether, in the praise of the piece of which it is supposed to be a part, Hamlet was speaking seriously, or merely meant to ridicule the tragic bombast of his contemporaries. It seems never to have occurred to them that this speech must not be judged by itself, but in connection with the place where it is introduced. To distinguish it in the play itself as dramatic poetry, it was necessary that it should rise above the dignified poetry of the former in the same proportion that theatrical elevation always soars above simple nature.

What makes *Hamlet* of Shakespeare a unique play is the style in which it is written, a style which speaks, above anything else, to the readers' critical faculty. Goethe, Coleridge, Schlegel, Lamb, Hazlitt, and other writers, have brought to the criticism and explanation of this play a most valuable fund of judgment, taste and aesthetical knowledge. To condense what is most deserving of remembrance in these admirable productions within due limits would be impossible.

## Conclusion

*Hamlet* is a tragedy of thought inspired by continual and never-satisfied meditation on human destiny and the dark perplexity of the events of this world, one calculated to call forth the very same meditation in the minds of the spectators. This enigmatical work resembles somewhat those irrational equations in which a fraction of unknown magnitude always remains, that will in no way admit of solution. Much has been said, much written, on this piece, and yet no critic who anew expresses himself on it will entirely coincide with his predecessors. What most astonishes us is the fact that with

such hidden purposes, with a foundation laid in such unfathomable depth, the whole should, at first view, exhibit an extremely popular appearance. The dread appearance of the ghost takes possession of the mind and the imagination almost at the very commencement; then the play within the play, in which, as in a glass, we see reflected the crime whose fruitlessly attempted punishment constitutes the subject-matter of the piece; the alarm with which it fills the king; Hamlet's pretended and Ophelia's real madness; her death and burial; the meeting of Hamlet and Laertes at her grave; their combat and the grand termination; lastly, the appearance of the young hero Fortinbras, who, with warlike pomp, pays the last honours to an extinct family of kings; the interspersion of comic characteristic scenes with Polonius, the courtiers and the grave-diggers, which have each of them their signification, all this fills the stage with and animated and varied movement. The only point of view from which this piece might be judged to be less theatrical than other tragedies of Shakespeare, is that in the last scenes the main action either stands still or appears to be retrograde. This, however, was inevitable, and lay in the nature of the subject. The whole is intended to show that a too close consideration, which exhausts all the relations and possible consequences of a deed, must cripple the power of action.

# 3. Renaissance and Classical Heroism in Hamlet

"*What a piece of work is a man!"*

Time and again this course has brought me back to William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and the challenge here is irresistible: to demonstrate how this play assists an understanding of the ideology of the society of the Renaissance, with reference to Italy. The play gives the Renaissance a very human and three dimensional face. The story is set in Denmark, the author is English, and so perhaps the ideology is more generally European than specifically Italian; but that generality does not preclude the play's bearing on the Italian Renaissance, especially when it is remembered that the general Renaissance sprang from and leant on the Italian one. Because of the constraints of word limit, this essay will confine its exploration to the character of Hamlet himself to exemplify the play's reflection of the Italian Renaissance.

Hamlet is set up as a spirit of Renaissance against what Machiavelli would have seen as medieval Northern barbarism. Hamlet has received a humanist education which he recurrently demonstrates, and which he extends by virtue of his own intellect through his experience. Classical allusions, similes and metaphors litter his speeches and dialogue as evidence of his extensive reading of the classical authors and his learning on how to use them to exemplify as all the humanist writers do. He also takes great pleasure in the player's speech from a classically-styled play which "pleased not the million [and was] caviar to the general" concerning heroism in the Trojan War, whereas Polonius finds it "too long". He clearly has a thirst for knowledge and learning, being reported as an avid reader; and he is free and independent enough to apply his own judgement to what he reads, as he does with the "slanders" in II.ii.

Above all, Hamlet has read Pico della Mirandola on the Dignity of Man, and has faith in the power of free will and reason. Thus the highest praise he can confer on his dead father is "He was a man, take him for all in all". In II.ii he expounds,

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god - the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!

In IV.iv he asks,

> What is man, If his chief good and market of his time Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more. Sure, he that made us with such large discourse, Looking before and after, gave us not That capability and godlike reason To fust in us unused. Now, whether it be Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple Of thinking too precisely on the event […] I do not know Why yet I live to say this thing's to do.

The end of this quote also indicates Hamlet's very human problem and a very real consideration for the humanists and humanistically trained public men of the Renaissance. He has to apply the education he has received, and his reason, to the real world and the *vita attiva*, not merely to philosophical contemplation. In attempting to do this he actually applies the respected Renaissance quality of "prudence", which is why Hamlet is often accused of indeed "*thinking too precisely on the event*". As Giovanni Rucellai wrote, "*It does not please me to act hastily in any matter, but rather to do everything prudently and after taking thought.*" In III.ii Hamlet admires Horatio for his ability to move through life applying cool "judgement" rather than intemperate passion.

Hamlet is reported in the play as having been a perfect Castiglionian courtier, and he also demonstrates qualities which Machiavelli advised for princes, so that

> he was likely, had he been put on,/ To have proved most royal." As Ophelia says, Hamlet's is "a noble mind", that he is "the courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword, The expectancy and rose of the fair state, The glass of fashion and the mould of form, The observed of all observers and that he has a "noble and most sovereign reason" and the "unmatched form and feature of blown youth.

Just as his speech demonstrates his classical knowledge, so it does too his wider education, showing him comfortable in playing with language and grammar, writing for a play and for statecraft, and within the areas of music, plays and acting, history, theology and religious doctrine, morality, the art of warfare, sailing and ship terminology, law, medicine, hunting and sports, gardening, and more. He has a talent for comedy and is witty and entertaining when he wants to be. He despises Claudius and, for much of the play, his mother, but he always treats both with courtesy in public (except in the extremities of the night of the play within the play). He treats all his social inferiors, except those who betray him, with equal generous courtesy, and he is *"beloved of his inferiors"*.

His letter to Horatio and his beating of the much-praised Laertes at fencing show that his knowledge is not merely theoretical, but that he is also "valorous" and brilliant in practise. In his lines about the court's excessive revelling under Claudius, and in his dying speech, he demonstrates his value of "temperance" and his genuine concern for the condition and welfare of the state. Although he is privately troubled, everything he does in public is accomplished with sprezzatura (calm, relaxed and not anxious) and he "*shon[s] Affectation*". Hamlet makes a clear distinction between sexual love and the neo-Platonic spiritual bonding favoured by Castiglione and humanists. He offers the latter freely to those he respects, but eschews the former throughout the play. Physical love and marriage, he thinks, should "wait upon the judgement".

He knows he cannot work alone, but he is very selective about who he has to aid him. As though following Castiglione's advice "*To gete him an especiall and hartye friend to companye withal*", he selects Horatio; and following Machiavelli, he seeks the help and advice of Horatio, whose wisdom, honesty and plain-speaking he respects, shunning the mediocre flattery of Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Polonius. Yet he is wise and competent enough himself not to subdue his own will and judgement to Horatio's when they do not agree. In addition, in his craftiness, his ability to remove adversaries, his ability to "*be cruel to be kind*", and his ability to lie convincingly to achieve his ends and what he believes is a common good, Hamlet demonstrates his princely potential. As Machiavelli also said, anyone who would act up to a perfect standard of goodness in everything, must be ruined among so many who are not good. It is essential, therefore, for a Prince who desires to maintain his position, to have learned how to be other than good, and to use or not to use his goodness as necessity requires.

Finally, in his attitude to death and the purposes of life before it, Hamlet also reflects the ideology of renaissance society. He begins the play rather disillusioned with life because death is inevitable and he finds mortality vulgar (I.ii.72-76 and 129ff, and II.ii.295-310). In the course of the famous soliloquy, *"To be, or not to be ..."* he complains that the possibilities of life are not fulfilled because of fear of death (III.i.78-88). But in Act V he comes to embrace a broader Renaissance view of death. Girolamo Savonarola, preaching on death, encouraged people to visit cemeteries and *"to take a skull in one's hand and contemplate it often."* Shakespeare, explicit as ever, has Hamlet actually do exactly this to come to an acceptance of the inevitability of the reality of mortality (V.i.174-209). He is then able to move beyond fear and horror of it to the renaissance vision that life, more than just a preparation for death, was also a period in

which something of value could be achieved and passed on to the future, allowing the individual even to live on through fame.

Thus Hamlet faces and accepts death in general, then the death of Ophelia, and still goes on with his life to plan and achieve his purpose, the death of Claudius; and he even displays a degree of humour whilst he knows he is risking his own death. He accepts, too, that the timing and manner of it must be left up to “providence”. And when he does come to die, he has two concerns: his own future name, and the future welfare of the state (V.ii.215-220, and 343-345, and 349-363). It is commonly said that a good life brings a good death ... reason constrains me to die willingly, and so may it please the Lord God to concede me the grace so to do.

# 4. Christianity in Hamlet

In William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, Hamlet encounters the ghost of his father and swears to avenge his death by killing his uncle Claudius who both killed Hamlet's father and married his mother. He is maddened with grief and struggles with the terms of this promise, to the point that he contemplates suicide. He lives on to fulfil the oath to his father, but continues to struggle through the life decisions that define him as a person. Hamlet falls back on his morals and beliefs when making these decisions. His Christian values play a significant role in the tragic ending of the play.

Hamlet's faith is first tested with the appearance of the ghost of his father. Christianity forbids followers to seek out spirits for advice or communication, so Hamlet's encounter with his father's spirit calls all of his religious values into question. However, Hamlet holds onto these values and is cautious towards the ghost. Though Hamlet had suspected that his uncle (and now step-father) Claudius was a part of his father's death, he doesn't take the ghost's words for truth. Hamlet has to prove to himself that Claudius killed his father by setting him up to admit his guilt before he decides to fulfil the promise that he made to the ghost; to avenge his father's death and murder Claudius. The knowledge that Hamlet gains following the confirmation of what the ghost conveyed to him changes the rest of his life and sets the tragic plot of the play in motion. Standing by his religious beliefs in a time when he could have easily believed the ghost and instantly avenged his father emphasizes the strength of Hamlet's Christian values and foreshadows the affect that these values will have throughout the play. At the opening of the play, Hamlet is found to be grieving for several different reasons. This grief leads to him becoming suicidal. But what could make a man so dejected from life that he would wish to kill himself? *"It was not his father's death...*

*still less was it the loss of the crown... it was the moral shock of the sudden ghastly disclosure of his mother's true nature"* (Bradley 170) when she remarried a mere month after his father's death. Not only did she remarry, but she remarried to her late husband's brother!

> […] and yet, within a month--Let me not think on't--Frailty, thy name is woman! A little month, or ere those shoes were old With which she follow'd my poor father's body... married with my uncle, My father's brother, but no more like my father than I to Hercules (*Hamlet* 11).

Throughout the play Hamlet questions whether this grief is a legitimate reason to take his own life.

> To be, or not to be? That is the question— Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And, by opposing, end them? To die, to sleep— No more—and by a sleep to say we end The heartache and the thousand natural shocks That flesh is heir to— 'tis a consummation Devoutly to be wished! To die, to sleep (*Hamlet* 53).

In this quote Hamlet analyses his existence. He deliberates whether it is more appropriate to kill himself and end his agony or to endure his pain. The last line makes it evident that Hamlet wishes he could simply end his life.

He reveals that he would have no difficulty in embracing suicide if he were a pagan, that is, if he believed that death is effectively the end of life. But he is troubled by visions of what lies beyond the finite horizons to which the ancient world limited (Cantor 119).

*"Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!"* (Shakespeare 10). Hamlet's desires for death are hindered by his realization that suicide is an unforgivable sin and that he would go to Hell if he did kill himself.

Just because he doesn't kill himself, however, doesn't mean that Hamlet is unaware of the sins and character flaws that he will have to live with. This is conveyed within Hamlet's conversation with his love interest Ophelia.

Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it; were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves, all (Shakespeare 55).

These lines not only exemplify Hamlet's opinions of himself, but also that of the society that he lives in. Hamlet is fully aware of the corruption going on around him and judges both his society and himself by the way that God would judge them. He doesn't even think people should get married because they will breed additional sinners. These lines mix Hamlet's Christian values with his depression; he shows no sign of hope for the moral recovery of mankind and doesn't seem to understand that God will forgive him for his sins if he asks repentance. The Christian values that seemed to make up a large portion of his morals in the beginning of the play seem to be losing prominence at this point in the play; this is a sign that Hamlet's grief and depression are outweighing his values and distorting his opinions and actions. This distortion of Hamlet's Christian values has a drastic impact on his plot to avenge his father's death. Several times throughout the play, Hamlet has the opportunity to kill his step-father, primarily when Hamlet walks in on Claudius while he is "praying". In actuality Claudius was confessing his guilt to God, though he wasn't asking for forgiveness. However from Hamlet's point of view Claudius is at his most vulnerable moment, on his knees, yet he still doesn't kill him. Why?

At this crucial juncture, Hamlet's religious beliefs intervene to complicate his view of revenge in a peculiarly diabolical manner. He feels that he must act in such a way as to ensure, not just the destruction of Claudius's body, but the damnation of his soul (Cantor 120).

Claudius killed Hamlet's father in a cruel manner. He poisoned him while he was asleep, so that he never had the opportunity to ask forgiveness for his sins. This is why he returned to earth as a ghost; his soul hadn't been forgiven for the sins he committed while he was alive. Hamlet's ruthless drive for revenge made him want to destroy Claudius in the way that Claudius had destroyed his father. He wanted not only his body but his soul to suffer, which is why he plotted to murder Claudius at a more appropriate time; when he was sinning or at least when he had not had the opportunity to be forgiven for sins he had committed. Hamlet's distorted Christian values make his plot additionally wicked and sinister, by causing him to wait in order to ruin Claudius's soul in addition to his body.

This plan inadvertently leads to the deaths of eight characters in the play. Had Hamlet killed Claudius while he was "praying" the tragic end of the play wouldn't have occurred. Instead, while Hamlet arguing with his mother he stabbed Polonius, one of Claudius's men, because he thought that he was Claudius. Polonius was listening in on Hamlet's conversation with his mother, but Hamlet assumed it was Claudius so he stabbed at the man before realizing who it was that he was stabbing. Had Polonius not died Ophelia wouldn't have gone mad and committed suicide and Laertes wouldn't have murdered Hamlet and accidentally killed himself. Had Hamlet killed Claudius during his initial opportunity Claudius wouldn't have been able to seek to have Hamlet killed (and inadvertently caused Guildenstern and Rosencrantz to be killed), and Claudius wouldn't have accidentally poisoned and killed Hamlet's mother Gertrude.

All of this death and tragedy dates back to Hamlet's Christian beliefs and how those beliefs warped his plan to avenge his father.

This raises the questions of "what if?" "What if" Hamlet had killed Claudius when he was praying, even if in Hamlet's opinion he would be repentant? Would that vengeance have been Christian? This matter is decided by each reader and their interpretation of Hamlet's behaviour and beliefs. In my opinion it would have been more Christian than his plan to wait in order to send Claudius to Hell. That plan used his Christianity as more of a weapon than a faith. He used his religious beliefs to make his plan additionally destructive, instead of a way to make peace with his father's death. Had Hamlet killed Claudius while he was praying he still would have been violating one of the Ten Commandments, but even that sin would have been forgivable with repentance.

## II. British Romanticism

Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity. William Wordsworth

Romanticism as a literary movement lasted from 1798, with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* to sometime between the passage of the first Reform Bill of 1832 and the death of Wordsworth in 1850. During this period, emphasis shifted to the importance of the individual's experience in the world and one's subjective interpretation of that experience, rather than interpretations handed down by the church or tradition.

Romantic literature is characterized by several features. It emphasized the dream, or inner world of the individual and visionary, fantastic, or drug-induced imagery. Romantic literature emphasized the individual self and the value of the individual's experience. The concept of "the sublime" (a thrilling emotional experience that combines awe, magnificence, and horror) was introduced. Feelings and emotions were viewed as superior to logic and analysis.

For the romantics, poetry was believed to be the highest form of literature, and novels were regarded as a lower form, often as sensationalistic, even by those most addicted to reading them. Most novels of the time were written by women and were therefore widely regarded as a threat to serious, intellectual culture. Despite this, some of the most famous British novelists wrote during this period, including Jane Austen (*Sense and Sensibility* 1811, *Pride and Prejudice* 1813, and *Emma* 1816), Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (*Frankenstein* 1818), and Sir Walter Scott (*Ivanhoe* 1820, *Waverley* 1814, *Rob Roy* 1817). In addition, this period saw the flowering of some of the greatest poets in the English language: the first generation of William Blake

("Cradle Song," "The Tyger," "Auguries Of Innocence"), Samuel Taylor Coleridge ("Kubla Khan," "The Suicide's Argument," "The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner), and William Wordsworth ("The Daffodils," "London, 1802," "Desideria"), followed by Lord Byron ("She Walks In Beauty," "When We Two Parted," "The Dream," "The Destruction of Sennacherib), Percy Bysshe Shelley ("Ode To A Skylark," "Ode To The West Wind," "Ozymandias") and John Keats ("O Solitude," "When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be," "Ode To A Nightingale").

## Characteristics of Literary Romanticism

Romanticism is a strong, pervasive reaction against Neo-Classicism and Enlightenment ideals. As a literary movement, it is always spelled with a capital "R;" however, it has virtually nothing to do with romantic love. Literary Romanticism has the following qualities:

- Emphasis on **imagination and emotion** over reason and logic – emotional displays are a mark of independence and superiority – feelings are seen as a guide to truth and conduct.
- Emphasis on **individual experiences** as centre of life and art – solitude is much sought after.
- Emphasis on **anticipation and remembrance** of an event rather than on the event itself (Romantics were not "living in the moment")
- Emphasis on **nonconformity**, which is highly prized
- Glorification of children and **childhood** – children seen as "wise" in their inexperience, which makes them closer to God
- Emphasis on the **sublime**, which is often symbolized by mountains
- **Nature** and "natural" equated with spontaneity, purity, connection with God – unplanned gardens are the best. Nature is seen as teacher/moral guide. Nature inspires a sense of awe and wonder of the universe. The romantics viewed nature as a place of spiritual purity and

peace, where people could be redeemed by contact with the divine force immanent in the natural world.

- Interest in the **past** and the exotic, along with a renewed interest in the Middle Ages and in folklore. Interest in Gothic cathedrals and castles, especially ruins. Interest in monasteries, convents, monks, nuns, pilgrims and hermits as solitary seekers of truth. Interest in **supernatural** subjects.
- Interest in the search for **beauty.**
- Hatred of war, but tendency towards rebellion and **revolution**
- Belief that **poetry** is spontaneous and free, and that it should be written in common, concrete language everyone can understand

## Themes

## Dreams and Visions

Perhaps the most notable example of the emphasis on dreams and visions in romantic literature is Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan"[1](1816), which he claimed to have written during a dream while deeply asleep. The idea that a person could compose poetry while asleep was commonplace among romantics.

## The Self

During the romantic period, for the first time in history, people became aware that there were parts of each individual's personality beyond the access of ordinary consciousness. This idea was further developed during the twentieth century as part of modern psychological theory, but at the time of the romantics it was a novelty. The

[1] a poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge written in 1797 but not published until 1816 . It was written after the poet dreamed about a palace built by the Mongol ruler Kubla Khan. He was unable to finish the poem, however, because a 'person from Porlock' (a village in Somerset) interrupted him while he was writing, and he forgot the dream.

romantics were fascinated with self-exploration and with the particulars of the individual's experience in the world. Previous writers had focused on politics, business, trade, and the lives of royalty or other famous people. The lives of ordinary people had been deemed unworthy of general interest. However, the romantics were influenced by the events of the American and French revolutions and their underlying political theories, and like the revolutionaries they believed the ordinary individual had the same rights and worth as any leader. This sociopolitical theory inspired writers to consider the worth of the individual in their work and to focus more on the experiences of ordinary people.

## Emotion and Feeling

In keeping with an emphasis on the individual self, the romantics valued emotion, intuition, and feeling over logic. They sought "the sublime," a state of being in which a person was simultaneously awed, frightened, and filled with a sense of majesty and wonder. A poet's response to a wild, remote, and grandiose place in nature often invoked the sublime, as did the immense night sky, gigantic geological upheavals, and rivers. They appreciated the ruins of cathedrals and ancient religious sites. Romantics also relied on their intuitive sense of things—as opposed to physical facts—to interpret the world. If a writer sensed the presence of the divine in a natural spot, for example, the reality of this presence was not questioned, but accepted as a given because the person had felt it.

## Style

## Rejection of Rigid Poetic Forms

In keeping with their glorification of the unlimited freedom and potential of the individual, the romantics rejected old poetic conventions—such as the heroic couplet used by Alexander Pope—and asserted the value of the language spoken by ordinary people. They believed that the form of a verse should be shaped by the subject matter, in contrast to the neoclassicists before them, who used rigid forms and shaped their material to fit them.

## Emphasis on Poetry

An interesting aspect of the romantic period was the emphasis on poetry. Most of the great romantic writers were poets instead of novelists, as novels were widely regarded as inherently inferior to poetry.

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# 1. Gothic Literature

## Socio-historical Context

Gothic literature is a literary movement that focused on ruin, decay, death, terror, and chaos, and privileged irrationality and passion over rationality and reason, grew in response to the historical, sociological, psychological, and political contexts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Although Horace Walpole is credited with producing the first Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, in 1764, his work was built on a foundation of several elements. First, Walpole tapped a growing fascination with all things medieval, and medieval romance provided a generic framework for his novel. In addition, Edmund Burke's 1757 treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, offered a philosophical foundation. Finally, the Graveyard School of poetry, so called because of the attention its poets gave to ruins, graveyards, death, and human mortality, flourished in the mid-eighteenth century and provided a thematic and literary context for the Gothic.

Walpole's novel was wildly popular, and his novel introduced most of the stock conventions of the genre: an intricate plot; stock characters; subterranean labyrinths; ruined castles; and supernatural occurrences.

While it may be comparatively easy to date the beginning of the Gothic movement, it is much harder to identify its close, if indeed the movement did come to a close at all.

In its attention to the dark side of human nature and the chaos of irrationality, the Gothic provides for contemporary readers some insight into the social and intellectual climate of the time in which the literature was produced. A time of revolution and reason,

madness and sanity, the 1750ˢ through the 1850ˢ provided the stuff that both dreams and nightmares were made of.

## 2. Representative works and authors

### 2.1. *The Castle of Otranto*, by Horace Walpole

*The Castle of Otranto*, by Walpole, published in December 1764, is universally regarded as the first Gothic novel. Set in some undefined medieval past, the novel draws on heroic romance as well as legends and folklore. In this one novel, Walpole established virtually every convention of Gothic literature. These include the Gothic castle, a presence so real as to nearly be a character. He also uses gloomy weather, clanking chains, midnight bells, and subterranean passageways.

### 2.2. *Dracula*, by Bram Stoker

*Dracula* was first published in 1897 by Bram Stoker, an Irish writer and theatre manager. The novel is part of the Victorian Gothic period, a resurgence of Gothic literature that appeared approximately a century after the first Gothic literary movement started by Walpole. Stoker spent a year researching vampires and folklore before writing his novel.

### 2.3. "The Fall of the House of Usher," by Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe's most famous story, "The Fall of the House of Usher" was published in 1839, some years after the height of the Gothic movement. Nevertheless, the story is, as are many of Poe's stories, classically Gothic in setting, theme, and mood. Fred Botting, in *Gothic* writes, "The house is both a Gothic manifestation, an architectural ruin set in a desolate and gloomy landscape and a family equally in decay,

dying from an unknown and incurable disease." The story also contains the element of claustrophobia in the premature burial of Roderick Usher's sister.

### 2.4. *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was published in 1818. The novel does not fit neatly into any generic designation, but many critics suggest that it is the first modern work of science fiction. However, Shelley's emphasis on isolation, wild landscapes, supernatural occurrences, and the haunting presence of the double places the novel within the context of the Gothic.

## 3. Themes

### 3.1. Terror and Horror

Terror and horror are the tools of the Gothic writer. Terror grows out of suspense while horror produces disgust. In other words, a character experiences terror in the anticipation of some dreaded event; the character experiences horror when the event really happens. Thus, there is an emphasis on terror and the terrible, which writers create through their long descriptions of sublime landscapes as well as their intimations of the supernatural. Moreover, the agonizing suspense to which writers subjects their characters produces terror in both the character and the reader. However, the eventual explanation of all things supernatural relieves the reader from the experience of horror. Some writers focus on the details of the horrible, including torture and putrefaction.

### 3.2. Appearance and Reality

Gothic literature often explores the difference between appearance and reality. Events often appear to have supernatural causes. By the end of the book, writers offer

logical explanations. Some writers, however, do not always differentiate between appearance and reality. This ambiguity leads to a dreamlike (or nightmarish) atmosphere in the novel. Readers recognize the state: for all intents and purposes, a dream appears to be real until awakening. It is in the foggy fugue state, however, that the dreamer is unsure of what is the dream and what is the reality. In addition, other writers play with appearance and reality through the use of different narrative structures and voices. Poe famously develops the unreliable narrator who appears initially to be sane but who, through the course of the story, is revealed to be insane. The struggle to differentiate the reality from the appearance rests at the heart of much Gothic literature.

### 3.3. Confinement

Nearly every Gothic novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contains some element of confinement. Indeed, many critics have commented on the sense of claustrophobia found in Gothic fiction. Often this occurs with the entrapment of the heroine in some ancient castle. When she finally escapes her room or cell, she finds herself within a subterranean passageway with no apparent way out. It is the lack of escape that causes the terrifying claustrophobia. The struggle against the confinement elicits both horror and terror in the reader. Perhaps the master of confinement, however, is Poe. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," Madeline Usher is buried alive. Such scenes hold considerable horror. Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado* is another tale of claustrophobic containment, as the narrator, Montresor, walls Fortunato in a crypt, where he has lured him to taste fine sherry. Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* also uses this theme, but in this case it is the heart of the murdered victim that is confined but refuses to remain hidden. Whether it be prison cells, monastic cells, shackles, locked rooms, or dark tunnels, the space of the Gothic novel is claustrophobic and confining, tapping into a primal human fear.

### 3.4. Justice and Injustice

While the world of justice and injustice might seem to be absent from the world of the Gothic, on closer examination, it seems clear that guilt and reparation of sins are at the center of many stories. In Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, the death of Conrad, the heir to his father's estate, apparently takes place as a way of righting a wrong. That is, Conrad's ancestor comes back from his grave to assure that Otranto goes to the rightful heir. This is the case of the sins of the father being visited on the children; at no time does it seem that Conrad knows that his title is faulty. Likewise, Madeline and Roderick Usher pay for the sins of their family with their own decay and death. Their house collapses on them, ending the family line. Thus, the "fall of the house of Usher" has two meanings: the house itself literally caves in and the lineage of Usher also falls as a result of the sins of earlier generations. In the Gothic world, justice must ultimately triumph, even if the justice that is meted out is severe. Because the Gothic is a literature of excess, it is little wonder that the justices and injustices are also excessive. Thus, the gloom that hangs over the heads of many characters is the knowledge that in their own day they will have to pay for the wrongs their ancestors committed.

## 4. Style

### 4.1. Setting

In Gothic literature, the setting may be the single most important device. Gothic writers generally set their novels in wild landscapes; in large, often ruined, castles; and/or in subterranean labyrinths. In Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, the castle itself plays a major role in the novel. Robert Kiely writes in *The Romantic Novel in England*: "If anything gives this novel unity and animation, it is the castle. The place itself seems sufficiently charged with emotion to require little assistance from the characters. In fact,

external conditions play a larger part in determining the behavior of the characters than do their own internal motivations." Thus, the setting itself provides as much suspense as does the plot or the characters.

In addition, Gothic writers as a rule set their novels in the distant, medieval past, in what they thought of as the Gothic period. However, their descriptions have little to do with the medieval period as it was; rather, the settings in Gothic novels reveal much more about what eighteenth and nineteenth-century writers believed about the Middle Ages. For Gothic writers, the medieval past was a time of superstition and Catholicism, made exotic and eerie by monks, nuns, ghosts, and crumbling castles. Although most of the novels are set in some European landscape, others, most notably Beckford's *Vathek*, have foreign locations, such as the Middle East. Again, removing the setting of the novel from contemporary locations and time periods allowed Gothic writers to infuse their works with the fear of the unknown, mysterious occurrences, and strange, unusual customs.

### 4.2. Diction

Diction is the choice of words and the order of words writers make for their literary creations. Diction may be on the continuum from informal, or low diction, to formal, or high diction. In Gothic novels, writers opted to use somewhat archaic and formal language, particularly in dialogue. Although the word choices are not accurate representations of the speech patterns of medieval people, the diction of a Gothic novel is reminiscent of a medieval romance. Further, the diction removes the novel from the present-day reality. Walpole, for example, writes the following for his heroine Isabella in *The Castle of Otranto*: "Sir, whoever you are, take pity on a wretched princess standing on the brink of destruction: assist me to escape from this fatal castle, or in a

few moments I may be made miserable for ever." In Gothic literature, diction plays a crucial role in creating an atmosphere of fear, suspense, terror and horror.

### 4.3. Narrative

Narrative is an accounting of an event or sequence of events, real or invented. In literary criticism, the expression "narrative technique" usually refers to the way the author structures and presents his or her story. Gothic literature can be characterized by the complex and complicated narrative structures writers give their work. There are usually plots within plots, and there are episodes that seem to have little connection to the episodes immediately before and after. Gothic writers often provide little transition or explanation for the arrangement of their episodes. The overall effect is to render the narrative strange and fragmented.

### 4.4. Mood

The mood of a literary work is the emotional attitude with which the subject is handled by the author. Mood is conveyed in a work through the author's handling of diction, setting, and narrative. In the case of Gothic novels, the mood is one of fear, anxiety, terror, and horror. Both the characters and the readers of Gothic novels experience these emotions to the fullest extent possible for human beings. The dark, dreary, and morbid settings as well as the sublime mountainous landscapes serve to invoke terror, while the suspense created by mistaken identities and long chase sequences through cellar passageways produce both fear and anxiety. Many critics speak of the claustrophobia of Gothic novels, created by coffins, prisons, dark halls, passages, and interior spaces. At its best, Gothic literature evokes the same kind of emotional response from its readers as do nightmares and night terrors. Just as the dreamers often find themselves fleeing from shadowy monsters or evildoers, characters in Gothic novels likewise flee from those who

would do them harm. Readers of Gothic novels are able to experience these strong emotions vicariously, through the trials of the main characters. They are able to be deliciously, if safely, frightened out of their wits by the narrative twists and turns. That this is able to happen can largely be attributed to the prevailing mood Gothic authors develop.

**Reference:** Milne, Ira Mark. *Literary Movements for Students*. New York: Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009. pp. 281-309.

## 2. *Frankenstein,* by Mary Shelley (1818)

Mary Shelley made an anonymous but powerful debut into the world of literature when *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* was published in March, 1818. She was only nineteen when she began writing her story. She and her husband, poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, were visiting poet Lord Byron at Lake Geneva in Switzerland when Byron challenged each of his guests to write a ghost story. Settled around Byron's fireplace in June 1816, the intimate group of intellectuals had their imaginations and the stormy weather as the stimulus and inspiration for ghoulish visions. A few nights later, Mary Shelley imagined the "hideous phantasm of man" who became the confused yet deeply sensitive creature in *Frankenstein*. She once said, "My dreams were at once more fantastic and agreeable than my writings." While many stage, television, and film adaptations of *Frankenstein* have simplified the complexity of the intellectual and emotional responses of Victor Frankenstein and his creature to their world, the novel still endures. Its lasting power can be seen in the range of reactions explored by various literary critics and over ninety dramatizations.

Although early critics greeted the novel with a combination of praise and disdain, readers were fascinated with and a bit horrified by the macabre aspects of the novel. Interestingly, the macabre has transformed into the possible as the world approaches the twenty-first century: the ethical implications of genetic engineering, and, more recently, the cloning of livestock in Scotland, find echoes in Shelley's work. In addition to scientific interest, literary commentators have noted the influence of both Percy Shelley and William Godwin (Mary's father) in the novel. Many contemporary critics have focused their attention on the novel's biographical elements, tracing Shelley's maternal and authorial insecurities to her very unique creation myth. Ultimately, the

novel resonates with philosophical and moral ramifications: themes of nurture versus nature, good versus evil, and ambition versus social responsibility dominate readers' attention and provoke thoughtful consideration of the most sensitive issues of our time.

## Author Biography

Surrounded by some of the most famous authors in history, Mary Shelley struggled to find her own authorial voice in *Frankenstein*. She was born in August, 1797 to William Godwin, a revolutionary thinker who wrote *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, and Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Shelley's freethinking parents married when Wollstonecraft was five months pregnant with Shelley. Even though both Godwin and Wollstonecraft philosophically opposed the institution of marriage, they wanted to give Mary social respectability. Unfortunately, Shelley would never witness her parents' marital relationship because Wollstonecraft died ten days after Mary's birth. A doctor (summoned by the midwife, who could not remove the placenta after Mary's delivery) infected Wollstonecraft's uterus with his unwashed hands.

Shelley turned to Wollstonecraft's books to learn about a mother she never knew. Self-taught, she also engaged herself with the books that graced her father's library shelves. The new Mrs. Godwin, Mary Jane Clairmont, affirmed Godwin's decision not to give Shelley any formal schooling, even though they both recognized Shelley's curious mind. Clairmont played a major role with other decisions in Mary's life, which gradually heightened Mary's unhappiness with her home life. In fact, Mary's upbringing mirrored certain elements of the childhood story *Cinderella* because Clairmont favoured her own children above Godwin's. Clairmont harboured jealous feelings towards the offspring of two of the most progressive thinkers of the time. In

addition, Clairmont resented Shelley's strong devotion to Godwin, so she limited Shelley's interaction with her father. Mary eventually transferred her affections to Percy Shelley, another prominent literary figure of the day.

Percy Shelley and his wife, Harriet, dined with Mary's family after Percy wrote a letter of admiration to Godwin. Mary Shelley met Percy for a second time, two years later, and the pair began spending almost every day with each other. Percy was twenty-two and his wife was pregnant with their second child when Mary declared her love for him. Initially, Mary agreed not to see Percy when Godwin condemned their relationship. But Percy's dramatic threat to commit suicide convinced Mary to flee with him to France in July 1814.

The year 1816 revealed both tragedy and creativity for Shelley. Most of Mary Shelley's biographies trace 1816 as a happy year for the Shelley marriage; a son, William, was born, and the couple did extensive traveling. Mary and Percy met poet Lord Byron at his home in Lake Geneva, the infamous site where Mary gave birth to the Frankenstein myth. But this year also brought much grief to the couple's happiness, as both Fanny Imlay (Mary's older half-sister) and Harriet Shelley committed suicide only weeks apart from each other. Their deaths lead to a series of other deaths and produced the beginnings of Mary's depression. Both William and Clara Shelley, Percy and Mary's son and daughter, died a year apart from each other, and Percy drowned in a boating accident in 1822. Mary spent the remainder of her years in England with her only surviving son, Percy, writing five other novels and other critical and biographical writings. She died of complications from a brain tumour in 1851.

## Plot Summary

### *Opening Letters*

*Frankenstein* opens with Robert Walton's letter from St. Petersburgh, Russia, to his sister in England. He encourages her to share his enthusiasm about his journey to the North Pole to discover both the secret of magnetism and a passage through the pole. In additional letters he wavers between his solitude and alienation on the one hand, and his determined heart and resolved will on the other. His last letter tells the startling story of his having seen a being of gigantic stature shaped like a man, fleeing across the ice which is threatening to enclose the ship. The next day another sled appears, carrying the wasted and maddened Victor Frankenstein, who is pursuing the giant. Walton takes Frankenstein aboard. When he tells Frankenstein his purpose, how he hopes to make great discoveries, Frankenstein cautions him to leave off his mad pursuit. He asks him to listen to his story of how once he began in earnest to know all that could be known.

### *Victor's Story, Part 1*

Born in Naples, Italy, to a wealthy Swiss family, Victor Frankenstein is the only child of doting parents. When he is five, his mother brings home an orphaned girl named Elizabeth to be Victor's "sister." In Victor's happy childhood in Geneva, he and Elizabeth grow in their parents' love, and they are joined by more siblings. Victor develops a deep friendship with Henry Clerval, a fellow student. Where Clerval studies "the moral relations of things," Victor conceives a passion to discover the physical secrets of the world.

At seventeen, as he is to leave for the University at Ingolstadt, Elizabeth contracts scarlet fever. Nursed by Victor's mother, she recovers, but his mother dies. On her deathbed, she begs Elizabeth and Victor to wed. After some delay, Victor departs for Ingolstadt, where his chemistry professor so encourages him in the study of science that Victor determines to discover the secret of life, perhaps even how to create life itself. He pursues his studies in the chemistry lab and in dissecting rooms and morgues, gathering the material for his experiment to make a creature from discarded corpses, perhaps one “like himself.” Cut off from contact with all others, ignoring letters from friends and family, he exhausts himself. Finally, on a dreary November night, Victor succeeds in animating a creature. Drained of all strength, he falls asleep, only to awaken from a nightmare to find the creature staring at him. He flees in horror at what he has done.

The next day Clerval arrives and Victor’s appearance and condition shock him. Victor cannot tell Clerval what he has done. He believes he can keep his secret, for, on his return to his room, he discovers that the creature has fled. The nervous exhaustion into which Victor then falls lasts for several months, during which Clerval nurses him by taking him away from the lab and into the mountains on long walks.

Victor receives from his father a letter relating the death of Victor's younger brother William, strangled by someone while out walking. A necklace with a miniature likeness of Victor's mother was missing when the corpse was found. On his frantic return journey, in an electrical storm in the mountains near Geneva, Victor sees the monster and thinks that the monster might have killed William. At home Victor learns that everyone believes Justine, a family servant, to be guilty, for the necklace missing from the corpse was found on her. Victor exclaims that she is innocent, that he knows who the killer is, but does not speak up at her trial. Justine gives a forced confession and is

convicted and hung. Overcome with remorse at the deaths of William and Justine, convinced of his own guilt, Victor seeks solitude. Elizabeth and his father attribute his behaviour to his grief at his brother's death. He leaves the house to walk the Swiss Alps, journeying to the village of Chamounix. In a painful retreat amid the "solitary grandeur" of the mountains, he meets the monster crossing an ice field. To Victor's shocked expressions of outrage the monster replies calmly, asking Frankenstein to listen with compassion to his tale.

***The Monster's Story***

After fleeing from the laboratory on the night of his "birth," the monster discovers himself cold, unfed, and unbefriended in the mountains outside Ingolstadt, "a poor, helpless, miserable wretch." He searches for food and shelter, which he finally finds in a hovel adjoined to a cottage. He observes the cottage's inhabitants: an old man, a young man and woman. When he learns that the cottagers are not so happy as he believes they should be, he gathers firewood at night to replenish their woodpile and lessen their labours. Meanwhile, in the course of several seasons, he studies them, learns their names (Felix and Agatha and their father), and begins to study their language.

One day another woman arrives on horseback. Felix seems especially happy in her presence. The monster listens as Felix instructs her from a history book. He learns of human law and government, of rank and wealth, of human greatness and vileness. "Of what a strange nature is knowledge!" he exclaims. Above all, he learns of his own lonely deformity.

He later tells Frankenstein the story of this DeLacey family, a wealthy French family who suffered a reversal of fortunes, were imprisoned, and exiled to the poverty

in which the monster finds them. From such books as John Milton's epic poem Paradise Lost the monster learns more of human virtues and vices and of his own misery.

And what was I? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant, but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. I was, besides, endowed with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature as man. I was more agile than they and could subsist on a coarser diet; 1 bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded theirs. When I looked around I saw and heard of none like me. Was I, then, a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled and whom all men disowned?

One day when only the old man is in the cottage, the monster enters, introducing himself as a weary traveller. He discovers that because the old man is blind, he is not repulsed by him. The monster then tells his tale of misery and loneliness; the old man responds sympathetically. When the others return, horrified at his monstrous appearance, they chase him. From seclusion in the forest, the next night he emerges to burn down the cottage. He then flees toward Ingolstadt, determined on vengeance. He comes upon young William Frankenstein out walking. When the boy repulses the monster's friendly overtures, the monster kills him. He takes from the boy a locket with the likeness of a woman and when he later meets another young woman asleep in a barn, he places the locket on her, certain that he can implicate her in the boy's murder. He concludes his tale by proposing to Victor that only Victor's creation of a female of similar deformity will grant him the happiness he cannot find among humans.

***Victor's Story, Part Il***

The monster pleads with Victor to make him a mate, threatening him and his family if he does not. Frankenstein agrees, but only on condition that the creatures flee to

uninhabitable parts of the earth where they will do no harm to humans. Victor returns to his family, more downhearted than ever. His father proposes that the long-hoped-for marriage of Victor and Elizabeth might restore Victor to happiness. Victor wishes instead to travel to England to discover from philosophers there something he believes might complete his work. He promises to marry Elizabeth on his return. His father arranges to have Clerval meet him along the way in Strasbourg, France. They walk in the mountains, then travel by boat down the Rhine River and to England. In Edinburgh, Scotland, Victor asks Clerval to permit him to travel on alone for a time. Frankenstein, convinced that the monster has been following him, seeks solitude for his work on a remote island in the Scottish Orkneys. On a moonlit night his fears are realized when he looks up from his work on the new creature to discover the monster peering at him through the window. Victor then vows to destroy his new, half-finished creation. The monster threatens him: “I will be with you on your wedding night.”

Frankenstein takes the remains of the new creature and dumps them into the sea from a boat he takes offshore. When he awakens hours later, he has drifted to Ireland. Several people on shore take him to a magistrate to answer for the death of a man found murdered the previous evening. The man, to Victor’s horror, is Clerval. Imprisoned for several months, Frankenstein is freed after the magistrate discovers Victor's innocence. The magistrate sends for Victor’s father in Geneva to bring him home. On his return he marries Elizabeth, worried all the while about the monster's threat, “I shall be with you on your wedding night.” He interprets this to mean that the monster will kill him. On the wedding night, however, the monster breaks into their room and kills Elizabeth. After he sees the monster staring through the window, grinning, Victor vows to seek revenge. He pursues the monster across the Alps, across Europe, into Russia and north

to the pole, where he finds himself stranded on an ice flow before he is taken aboard Walton's ship.

### *Closing Letters*

One week after his last letter to his sister, during which Frankenstein relates his story, Walton writes again to say that Frankenstein still intends to pursue the creature until he dies. Walton, too, is still determined to pursue his quest, although mountains of ice surround the ship and threaten to lock it in place. When his sailors ask to turn back, Walton consents to turn south. His final letter to his sister recounts Frankenstein's death and his dying advice to Walton to forego ambition and seek tranquillity instead. Waltons grief over his new friend's death is interrupted by the appearance of the monster in Frankenstein's cabin, grieving over the death of his creator. The monster tells Walton how his vengeance had never been joyful to him, how he was unjustly treated by the humanity which had created him. Thus, though born in innocence and goodness, he became malignant evil. He now lives in remorse, alone. After having said all this, he springs from the cabin window and disappears across the ice.

## Characters

### *Henry Clerval*

Victor's closest friend and companion, who balances his emotional and rational pursuits. He studies Oriental languages but passionately loves nature and life. Victor acknowledges that "[H]is wild and enthusiastic imagination was chastened by the sensibility of his heart." And unlike Victor, who wishes to learn "the secrets of heaven and earth," Clerval aspires "to become one among those whose names are recorded in story as the gallant and adventurous benefactors of our species."

After Victor runs from the creature when the creature comes to life, Clerval nurses Victor back to health, playing the role of protector and comforter—a role Victor fails to assume for his own "child," the creature. The creature eventually strangles and kills Clerval because Victor destroys his half-created mate. Victor then vows revenge upon the creature.

***The creature***

Like a new-born baby reaching out to his mother, the creature reaches out to Victor when he is transformed from an inanimate to an animate being. Victor laboured for two years in order to give the creature life, but he is so appalled by the creature's hideous appearance that he flees, leaving the creature to fend for himself. Shelley initially leaves her readers in suspense as to the creature's whereabouts. We do not hear his story until after he finds Victor and requests a mate for himself. He describes his life to Victor after he "awoke," explaining the difficulties he had learning basic survival techniques. The creature then describes his happiest moments watching the De Lacey family together. Living in a shack attached to the De Lacey cottage, the creature viewed the family without their knowledge. He discovered a family relationship rooted in mutual respect and benevolent love, he learned how to speak and to read as the result of Safie's efforts to learn English, and he "looked upon crime as a distant evil."

John Locke, a famous -eighteenth-century philosopher, invented the concept of the "Tabula Rasa," the idea that the mind is a "blank slate" when we are born. Most critics agree that Locke strongly influenced Shelley's characterization of the creature. She wanted her readers to understand how important the creature's social conditioning was to his development as a conscious being. The creature's environment, therefore, plays a critical role in shaping his reaction to and interaction with Victor during their first

meeting. While the creature uses both rational and emotional appeals to convince Victor that he deserves and needs another being like himself to share his life with, he tries to emphasize Victor's duties as a creator. The creature eventually realizes that not only has Victor rejected him, the entire race of humankind abhors his image—an image resembling no one else in existence.

The creature vows revenge against his creator and takes Victor's youngest brother, William, as his first victim. After this incident, he discovers Justine asleep in a barn, and purposely puts William's locket in her hand so that she will be accused of the murder. Clerval and Elizabeth's murders follow this incident after Victor goes back on his promise to create a mate for the creature. The creature finally appears at Victor's death bed and confesses his crimes to Walton. He assures Walton that he will fade from existence when a funeral pile consumes his body with flames and sweeps him into the dark sea.

***Agatha De Lacey***

Daughter of Mr. De Lacey, Agatha shows tenderness and kindness towards her family and Safie. She too, however, is horrified by the creature and faints upon seeing him.

***Felix De Lacey***

A hard-working son who cares for his family and his beloved Safie. He appears sad and unhappy until Safie, his fiancee, arrives at his home. His involvement with Safie's father gets him, his father, and his sister Agatha exiled from their homeland, France. Nevertheless, his unasked-for kindness to Safie's father, a foreign convict, stands in

contrast to his cruel dismissal and beating of the creature, who is doing nothing but sitting at the feet of Felix's father.

***Mr. De Lacey***

As the blind father of Felix and Agatha, Mr. De Lacey serves as a surrogate father to the creature. The creature notes his benevolence towards his family, and notes that "he would talk in a cheerful accent, with an expression of goodness that bestowed pleasure even upon me." De Lacey and his children are in their current exile because of the aid they rendered, unasked, to a Turkish merchant who was wrongly sentenced to death; the merchant later betrayed them. Because Mr. De Lacey is blind, the creature approaches him to try to gain his sympathy and friendship. Even though Felix and Agatha return home and run the creature off, Mr. De Lacey is the only one in the book who does not judge or fear the creature.

***Alphonse Frankenstein***

Victor's father is described by his son as "respected by all who knew him for his integrity and indefatigable attention to public business." Alphonse met Victor's mother because of his persistence in pursuing a friend who had fallen on hard times in order to give him assistance. Alphonse is also a nurturing, loving parent, and tries many times to remind Victor that family and happiness are just as important as books and learning. It is his letters to Victor that serve as occasional reminders of the outside world while he is occupied with his experiments.

***Caroline Frankenstein***

Victor Frankenstein's mother, Caroline was the orphaned daughter of an impoverished merchant who was one of Alphonse Frankenstein's merchant friends. She

married the much-older Alphonse two years after he completed his long search for the family. A devoted mother, she contracts the scarlet fever while caring for Elizabeth, Victor's adopted sister. She dies just before Victor leaves to attend the University.

***Victor Frankenstein***

Born to an affluent, loving family, Victor Frankenstein hopes to leave a lasting impression on his fellow humanity. He leaves home to attend the University of Ingolstadt, where he studies natural sciences. His professor M. Waldman inspires him to push his experiments beyond the realm of "acceptable" science, so he begins to determine the limits of human mortality. Collecting cadaver parts from graveyards, he slowly pieces together the form of a human being. It takes him two years to complete his experiment, but when he finally gives his creature the spark of life, Victor can only run in fear. The creature's hideous appearance appals Victor, upsetting him so much that he becomes very ill. He knows nothing about the creature's whereabouts until the creature finally approaches him.

Although Victor listens to his creature's tale with a mixture of loathing and dread, he reluctantly acknowledges that he owes the creature "a small portion of happiness"; so he promises to create a mate for the creature. After much consideration, however, Victor fears the consequences of his decision and destroys what little of the female he had created. Although he honestly believes the creature despises humanity and would therefore inflict harm upon anyone and everyone, Victor is more concede about the creature and his mate creating other "monsters" to wreak havoc upon society. Although he feels guilt for the monster's actions, realizing that by making the creature he is the cause of them, he never accepts responsibility for how he has driven the creature to vengeance.

Ironically, he continues to worry about the creature's treatment of others even when both of them slip deeper into the Arctic iceland, far away from any form of civilization, and even after he hears of the creature's benevolent efforts to help the De Lacey family survive. The ending of the novel only reaffirms Victor's truly selfish motivations, as he fails to consider the needs of Walton's crew by asking them to continue their journey in order to kill the creature. He even calls the crew members cowards for wanting to return home without completing their mission. What Victor does not realize is that his quest to conquer the unknown has left him without family or friends; he dies on Walton's ship as lonely and bitter as his unfortunate creature.

Throughout the novel, Victor's self-centered actions are shown in stark contrast to those of his family, friends, and even strangers. Whereas his parents have taken in two orphaned children and treated them as their own, Victor relinquishes responsibility for the only creature he has actually created. Unlike Elizabeth, who testifies on Justine's behalf despite the other townspeople's disapproval, Victor remains silent because he fears to be disbelieved or thought insane. Even the behaviour of minor characters such as Mr. Kirwin, who exerts himself to nurse and defend a stranger who to all outward appearances is a murderer, serves to show how Victor is unnaturally selfish and as a result has performed an unnatural act.

***William Frankenstein***

Victor's youngest brother, who runs from the creature's presence in fear. The creature kills him, but Justine Moritz, a family friend, gets blamed for the death. Victor knows from the first that the creature is the murderer, but arrives home too late to prevent Justine from accepting blame for William's death.

***Mr. Kirwin***

An Irish magistrate who believes Victor is responsible for Clerval's murder, for Victor is agitated on hearing the manner of the man's death. After Victor becomes bedridden upon viewing Clerval's corpse, Kirwin cares for Victor's needs and helps him recover his health. Kirwin is sympathetic to the suffering young man, even though his feverish ravings seem to indicate his guilt in the murder. He also arranges for the collection of evidence in Victor's behalf, sparing him a trial.

***Elizabeth Lavenza***

The Frankensteins adopt Elizabeth when she is only a girl. She and Victor share more than the typical sibling affections for each other; they love each other and correspond while Victor attends the University. In her letters to him, Elizabeth keeps Victor abreast of family and other social matters, such as town gossip. She also describes Justine's welfare, reminding Victor that orphans can blossom physically as well as mentally, given the proper love and attention. Her unselfish behaviour serves as a contrast to Victor's: Elizabeth gives testimony on Justine's behalf during her trial while Victor remains silent even though he knows Justine did not murder William. Elizabeth and Victor are reunited and get married, despite the creature's threats to be with Victor on his wedding night. Elizabeth is kept ignorant of the creature's existence and his threats, and when Victor leaves the room on their wedding night, the creature kills Elizabeth.

***Justine Moritz***

The Frankenstein family adopts Justine because she had been abandoned by her mother. She is a favourite of Caroline Frankenstein, but returns for a time to her own

mother after Caroline's death. Justine later returns to the Frankensteins, and continually reminds Elizabeth "of my dear aunt." She is found with young William's locket after his death and put on trial for his murder. Although Victor knows the creature is responsible for William's death, he says nothing at Justine's trial, reasoning that "I was absent when it was committed, and such a declaration would have been considered as the ravings of a madman and would not have exculpated her who suffered through me." Despite Elizabeth's testimony regarding Justine's good character, she is sentenced to death and then executed.

***Safie***

Safie becomes known to Felix through the letters of thanks she writes to him. Although her father is Turkish, her mother was a Christian Arab who had been enslaved by the Turks before marrying one of them. Safie cherishes the memory of her mother, who instructed her daughter in Christianity and fostered "an independence of spirit forbidden to the female followers of Muhammed." Against her father's wishes, Safie flees Turkey and joins Felix De Lacey and his family. Her broken English becomes a learning opportunity for the creature, because he receives the same language lessons as she does. Shelley's stereotypical treatment of Turkish Muslims in her portrayal of Sadie's situation was most likely a way to bring up the issues of women's rights that were articulated by her mother, writer Mary Wollstonecraft.

***Margaret Saville***

Robert Walton's sister, with whom Walton corresponds at the beginning and end of the novel.

***M. Waldman***

Victor's kind professor inspires him to “unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation.” Victor hears M. Waldman’s lecture on the progress of science and determines “more, far more, will I achieve.” The behaviour of this man of science stands in stark contrast to Victor's, for M. Waldman takes time away from his research to teach Victor and introduce him to the laboratory, whereas Victor pursues his experiments to the exclusion of all else.

***Robert Walton***

Walton's letters begin and end the novel, framing Victor’s and the creature’s narratives in such a way that Walton embodies the most important qualities found in both Victor and his creature. Walton, in other words, balances the inquisitive yet presumptuously arrogant nature of Victor with the sympathetic, sensitive side of the creature. As an Arctic explorer, Walton, much like Victor, wishes to conquer the unknown. Nevertheless, when he discovers Victor near death on the icy, vast expanse of water, he listens to Victor's bitter and tormented tale of the creature. This makes him reconsider continuing his own mission to the possible peril of his crew. When the creature appears at Victor's deathbed, Walton fails to fulfil Victor's dying wish to destroy the creature. Instead, he does what Victor continually failed to do throughout the novel: he listens to the creature’s anguished tale with compassion and empathy.

## Themes

### *Alienation and Loneliness*

Mary Shelley's emphasis on the Faust legend, or the quest to conquer the unknown at the cost of one's humanity, forms a central theme of the novel. The reader continually sees Victor favour his ambition above his friendships and family. Created by a German writer named Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the Faust myth suggested that the superior individual could throw off the shackles of traditional conventions and alienate himself from society. English Romantic poets, who assumed the status of poet-prophets, believed that only in solitude could they produce great poetry. In *Frankenstein*, however, isolation only leads to despair. Readers get the distinct feeling that Victor's inquisitive nature causes his emotional and physical peril because he cannot balance his intellectual and social interactions. For instance, when he leaves home to attend the University of Ingolstadt, he immerses himself in his experiment and forgets about the family who lovingly supported him throughout his childhood. Victor actually does not see his family or correspond with them for six years, even when his father and Elizabeth try to keep in touch with him by letters. Shelley's lengthy description of Victor's model parents contrasts with his obsessive drive to create the creature.

Margaret's correspondence with Walton at the beginning of the novel also compares with Shelley's description of Victor's home life; both men were surrounded by caring, nurturing individuals who considered the welfare of their loved ones at all times. Not surprisingly, Walton's ambition to conquer the unknown moves him, like it does Victor, further away from civilization and closer to feelings of isolation and depression. The creature, too, begins reading novels such as Goethe's *The Sorrows of Werter* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, claiming that an "increase of knowledge only [showed] what

a wretched outcast I was." For the creature, an increase in knowledge only brings sorrow and discontent. Victor and Walton ultimately arrive at these two states because of their inquisitive natures.

***Nature vs. Nurture***

The theme of nurturing, or how environment contributes to a person's character, truly fills the novel. With every turn of the page, another nurturing example contrasts with Victor's lack of a parental role with his "child," the creature. Caroline nurtures Elizabeth back to health and loses her own life as a result. Clerval nurtures Victor through his illness when he is in desperate need of a caretaker after the creature is brought to life. The De Lacey's nurturing home becomes a model for the creature, as he begins to return their love in ways the family cannot even comprehend. For instance, the creature stopped stealing the De Lacey's food after realizing their poverty. In sympathy, he left firewood for the family to reduce Felix's chores. Each nurturing act contrasts strongly with Victor's gross neglect of the creature's needs. And by showing the affection between Caroline Frankenstein and her adopted daughters Elizabeth and Justine, Shelley suggests that a child need not have biological ties to a parent to deserve an abundance of love and attention.

***Appearances and Reality***

Victor's inquisitive probing causes him to delve beneath the appearances of "acceptable" science and create an animate being from inanimate materials. Nevertheless, he forgets to extend this inquiring sensibility toward his creature. The creature's physical appearance prompts Victor to flee from his creation; Victor never takes the time to search beneath the creature's ugliness to discover the very human qualities that the creature possesses. While Victor easily manipulates nature and natural

laws to suit his own intellectual interests, he lacks an understanding of human nature, as proven throughout the novel. In addition to the importance of the creature's appearance, Shelley emphasizes the magnificent landscape throughout the novel. This demonstrates her loyalty to the Romantic movement of her time, which often glorified nature. Although Victor often turns to mature to relieve his despondent thoughts, Clerval notices the intimate interaction between nature and humans in Switzerland. He says to Victor, "Look at that ... group of labourers coming from among their vines; and that village half-hid in the recess of the mountain." Clerval looks beyond nature's surface appearance, drawing Victor's attention to the harmonious interaction between nature and a productive society. Victor praises his friend as having a "wild and enthusiastic imagination [which] was chastened by the sensibility of his heart," a sensibility Victor ironically lacks. In the isolated Arctic, when Walton's ship is trapped by mountains of ice, he respects nature's resistance to his exploration and eventually leaves the untamed region. Like Clerval, Walton experiences life by interacting harmoniously with nature and people, as he proves when he honours his crew members' request to return home.

***Duty and Responsibility***

Victor's inability to know his creature relates directly to his lack of responsibility for the creature's welfare or the creature's actions. The role of responsibility or duty takes many shapes throughout the story, but familial obligations represent one of the novel's central themes. Whether Caroline nurses Elizabeth or Felix blames himself for his family's impoverished condition, Victor's dismissal of his parental duties makes readers empathize with the creature. Victor only feels a sense of duty after the creature says the famous line, "How dare you sport thus with life? Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind." The creature compares

himself to Adam—thus comparing Victor to God—and claims that Victor owes him a certain amount of happiness. Even though the creature temporarily convinces Victor to grant him his rights, Victor never really learns the virtues of parental or ethical responsibility.

***Justice vs. Injustice***

By showing how Victor ignores his responsibilities while those around him do not, Shelley invites the reader to judge his character. Themes of justice and injustice play a large role in the novel, as the author develops issues of fairness and blame. Usually those characters who take responsibility for others and for their own actions are considered fair and just. For example, Elizabeth pleads Justine's case in court after Justine is accused of William's murder. Victor knows the creature committed the crime, yet he does not—or cannot—reveal the creature's wrongdoing.

However, the most important aspect of the trial is Justine's confession. Elizabeth claims, "I believed you guiltless ... until I heard that you had yourself declared your guilt." When Justine explains that she confessed after being found guilty because that was the only way to receive absolution from the church, Elizabeth accepts her at her word and tells her, "I will proclaim, I will prove your innocence." Making confessions, listening to others, and offering verbal promises all signal the highest truths in this novel. Elizabeth accepts Justine's guilt only if Justine says she is guilty; never mind the facts or evidence, never mind intuition—words reveal true belief. Except for Victor, every character listens to others: Mr. Kirwin listens to Victor's story, the creature listens to the De Lacey family, Felix listens to Safie's father, Margaret listens to Walton, and Walton listens to Victor and to his crew. Listening helps all of these characters distinguish fair from unfair. Victor's refusal to listen impartially to his creature says

much about his character. Shelley suggests that Victor not only played God when he created the creature; he also unfairly played the role of judge and accuser.

***Narration***

Instead of beginning with Victor's point of view, Shelley introduces us to Walton first. Using a frame device, in which the tale is told to us by someone who reads it or hears it from someone else, Shelley invites readers to believe Victor's story through an objective person. Shelley also uses an important literary device known as the epistolary form—where letters tell the story—using letters between Walton and his sister to frame both Victor's and the creature's narrative. Before the novel's first chapter, Walton writes to his sister about the "wretched man" he meets, building suspense about the "demon" Victor mentions at the beginning of his narrative. Once Victor begins telling his story, we slowly learn about his childhood and the eventful moments leading up to his studies at the University. Then, the creature interrupts Victor, and we get to hear all the significant moments leading np to his request for a partner. Since the theme of listening is so central to this novel, Shelley makes sure, by incorporating three different narratives, that readers get to hear all sides of the story. Walton's letters introduce and conclude the novel, reinforcing the theme of nurturing.

***Setting***

The majority of the novel takes place in the Swiss Alps and concludes in the Arctic, although Victor and Clerval travel to other places, such as London, England, the Rhine River which flows from Switzerland north to the Netherlands, and Scotland. All of these locations, except for the Arctic, were among the favourite landscapes for Romantic writers, and Shelley spends great care describing the sublime shapes of the majestic, snow-clad mountains. However, aside from the dark Arctic Ocean, Shelley's

setting is unusual; most Gothic novels produce gloomy, haggard settings adorned with decaying mansions and ghostly, supernatural spirits. It is possible the author intended the beautiful Alps to serve as a contrast to the creature's unsightly physical appearance. In addition to the atypical Gothic setting, Shelley also sets her story in contemporary times, another diversion from Gothic novels which usually venture to the Middle Ages and other far away time periods. By using the time period of her day, Shelley makes the creature and the story's events much more realistic and lifelike.

***Romanticism***

Spanning the years between 1785 and 1830, the Romantic period was marked by the French Revolution and the beginnings of modem industrialism. Most of the early Romantic writers favored the revolution and the changes in lifestyle and sensibility which accompanied it. After shaking off old traditions and customs, writers experienced the newfound freedom of turning inward, rather than outward to the external world, to reflect on issues of the heart and the imagination. In addition, writers like English poet William Wordsworth suddenly challenged his predecessors by writing about natural scenes and rustic, commonplace lifestyles. English poet Samuel Coleridge explored elements of the supernatural in his poetry.

Mary Shelley combined the ethical concerns of her parents with the Romantic sensibilities of Percy Shelley's poetic inclinations. Her father's concern for the underprivileged influenced her description of the poverty-stricken De Lacey family. Her appeals to the imagination, isolation, and nature represented typical scenes and themes explored in some of Percy Shelley's poetry. But Mary's choice of a Gothic novel made her unique in her family and secured her authorial place in the Romantic period.

***Gothicism***

Horace Walpole introduced the first Gothic novel in 1764 with *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story*. Gothic novels were usually mysteries in which sinister and sometimes supernatural events occurred and were ultimately caused by some evil human action. The language was frequently overly dramatic and inflated. Following this movement was the Romantic movements fascination with the macabre and the superstitious aspects of life, allowing them the freedom to explore the darkest depths of the human mind. Most critics agree that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* reflected her deepest psychological fears and insecurities, such as her inability to prevent her children's deaths, her distressed marriage to a man who showed no remorse for his daughters' deaths, and her feelings of inadequacy as a writer. The Gothic novel usually expresses, often in subtle and indirect ways, our repressed anxieties. The settings usually take place far away from reality or realistic portrayals of everyday life. Shelley's setting, of course, is the exception to most Gothic novels. The fact that the creature wanders the breathtaking Alps instead of a dark, craggy mansion in the middle of nowhere either compounds the reader's fear or makes the creature more human.

***Doppelganger***

Many literary critics have noted the Doppelganger effect—the idea that a living person has a ghostly double haunting him—between Victor and his creature. Presenting Victor and the creature as doubles allows Shelley to dramatize two aspects of a character, usually the "good" and "bad" selves. Victor's desire to ignore his creature parallels his desire to disregard the darkest part of his self. The famous psychologist Sigmund Freud characterizes this "dark" side as the Id, while Carl Jung, another famous psychologist, refers to our "dark" side as the Jungian shadow. Jung claims that we all

have characteristics we don't like about ourselves, yet these unsavory attributes stay with us like a shadow tailgating its leader. The creature represents Victor's "evil" shadow, just as Victor represents the creature's. When presented this way, it makes sense that so many readers confuse the creature and Victor by assuming that the creature is named Frankenstein. Both of these characters "alternately pursue and flee from one another ... [L]ike fragments of a mind in conflict with itself," as Eleanor Ty observes in the *Concise Dictionary of British Literary Biography*. But taken together as one person, Victor and his creature combine to represent the full spectrum of what it means to be human—to be joyful, compassionate, empathetic, and hateful, and also love humanity, desire knowledge, honour justice, fear the unknown, dread abandonment, and fear mortality. No other character in the novel assumes this range of human complexity.

# 3. A Fable for All Times: Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, by Wendy Lesser

## The Interpretation of Dreams

- *Frankenstein* depicts a physically **repulsive hero** who woos through his **eloquence**, and a morally blinded **father** who unfairly renounces his child.

- Mary Shelley's masterpiece, like those of Poe and Kafka, has the strange truth of a **dream**. It originated in a dream.

## The dream was so frightening.

- "*I saw with shut eyes*, but acute mental vision. I saw the **pale** student of **unhallowed arts** kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of **life** and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion.

## The Taming of the Dream

- Mary Shelley begins to **impose connections** and causalities, to shape the untamed, unwilled dream toward a moral lesson:

- "**Frightful** must it be, for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavor to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his **odious** work, **horror-stricken.**”

## He sleeps; but he is awakened…

- But the "hideous phantasm," the "hideous corpse," does not just die off politely; instead, it nastily, horridly, coldly **intrudes** on its maker: "*He sleeps; but he is awakened*; he opens his eyes; behold, the horrid thing stands at his **bedside**, opening his **curtains** and *looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes*.

## Abandonment and *Doppelganger*

- The scientist simply abandons his progeny. "**Unable to endure** the aspect of the being I had created," says Victor Frankenstein, "I rushed out of the room and continued a long time traversing my bed-chamber, **unable to compose** my mind to sleep. At length lassitude succeeded to the tumult I had before endured, and I threw myself on the bed in my clothes, endeavoring to seek a few moments of forgetfulness."

## Paralysis of Dreams

- Philip Stevick astutely compares it to the **failure of dreams** an interpretation strengthened by Mary Shelley's language, which awkwardly and obsessively stresses impotence ("*Unable to endure... unable to compose*...") in the first sentence describing Frankenstein's flight.

## Dreams of Life and Death

- His dream also draws the essential **link between life and death** that pervades the novel: the monster's life, which stems from death ("the hideous corpse"),

also *leads to a number of deaths* – including, ultimately, his creator's and (possibly) his own.

## The Heart: the Undiscovered Country

- Mary Shelley felt that authors "turn to the human heart as the undiscovered country. They **visit** and **revisit** their own; endeavor to understand **its workings**, to fathom its **depths**, and to leave no lurking thought or disguised feeling in **the hiding places.**

## The Absent Mother

- Like King Lear, Frankenstein is essentially a world without mothers, a world where **fathers** have to fulfill the range of **maternal and paternal**.

- The renounced, exiled monster (mourns his orphan state, complaining that "No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses."

## "Doctor Frankenstein" or "Doctorr Faustus"?

- Frankenstein is read as an attack on **scientific hubris**, an exploration of the **dangers** that arise *when humanity's technological capabilities* ***outpace its wisdom***.

- Victor himself makes this explicit, for instance, when **he urges Walton** to tone down his zeal in his scientific expedition to find the North Pole.

## The Heart of Darkness

- The desire to control nature through science is part of **a larger desire** for control and mastery.

- "The soul of man is a dark vast forest, with *wild life in it*. " D.H. Lawrence

## *Veni, vidi, vici.*

- Frankenstein advises us that "if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved, Caesar would have spared his country, America would have been discovered more gradually, and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed."

- For Mary Shelley, as for D.H. Lawrence, the scientist, the explorer, the empire-builder, and the story-teller all share the same potentially **destructive zeal**.

## Creating Novels

- Like Frankenstein's creature, Mary Shelley's novel wears the signs of its unique origins: its **awkward movements** and **rough seams** are the symbols of its ***miraculous birth***. Like the monster, it is lovable for its eloquence, but also for its repulsiveness, for only in the latter can we see reflected our most carefully **hidden fears**.

## Frankenstein Lives in 2022

- The use of multiple narratives is itself a commentary on the complex nature of truth.

- Walton, watching from the cabin of his ship, tells us that the creature "was soon borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance."

- But this doesn't literally mean he was lost at sea; it simply means that Walton lost sight of him.

Frankenstein lives in theatre, film, TV, and in the mind of *Frankenstein* readers.

## Reference


- Lesser, Wendy. A Fable for All Times: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. *The Threepenny Review*, No. 49 (Spring, 1992), pp. 17-19

# 4. Romanticism and the Romantic Poets

# Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats

### Romanticism and Classicism

As often happens in literature, at the end of the eighteenth century the pendulum swung from one extreme to another, from reason to passion. The distinction between a 'classical age' and a 'Romantic age' is one of the most vexed issues of literature; what follows can only hope to scratch the surface.

It is possible to see two basically different ways of looking at life and experience, and tag these two different approaches as 'classical' or 'Romantic'. Alexander Pope's age was by and large a classical age, believing in reason and that the passions should be controlled. Mankind could reach perfection, but for this to happen, basic instincts had to be conquered. Civilisation, as attained in Greek and Roman times, was also within the grasp of the 'modern age'. It is not difficult to see historical reasons for this attitude in the eighteenth century - perhaps it is even too easy to see the links. Reforms in medical care and farming techniques in the eighteenth century began to allow the rise in the population that was to be a major factor in the Industrial Revolution, the process by which Great Britain became the first nation in the world to move from a farming to an industrial economy. Discoveries were beginning to be made in the sciences, in engineering and even in the social sciences that were to change the face of British society. It must have appeared as if mankind was set on a new advance, and one which could only bring benefit to all. The huge commercial growth of the Industrial Revolution created an advanced economy, which in turn created vast wealth and allowed for a major population growth. In the Middle Ages literature had needed the

patronage of wealthy members of the upper class; though an element of that continued, the Industrial Revolution created a wider wealth, and the possibility of authors earning their living through the actual sale of books.

The Romantic outlook, on the other hand, sees man's salvation as lying within himself. The Romantic believes in and trusts only himself, believing that society and civilisation corrupt humanity's natural innocence and instinct for good. Romantic literature, particularly poetry, often sees man in communion with the natural world, rather than with other men. It trusts instincts, the emotion and the heart, rather than reason, intellect and the head. The distinction is perhaps best illustrated by two examples. The concept of 'the noble savage' is specifically a Romantic one. It consists of the idea that man in his primitive state is in a higher state of purity than civilised, urban man, whose natural instincts have been ground out of him by the process of civilised life. The savage may appear primitive, but the truth is that he has an instinctive knowledge of himself and the world which is often superior to that gained by civilised man. The classical thinker would laugh derisively at this concept. To him the savage is just what the word states, a human in a savage state of primitive bestiality whose only hope lies in his being educated and brought up the scale of evolution by the application of civilised virtues. The savage represents crude, unrefined static man, a hopeless bundle of raw instinct and repulsive primitivism, and a denial of all progress in humanity. Only a Romantic would think of a savage as noble; to a classicist, he would be merely sad and regrettable.

Nowhere is this better seen than in the different attitudes to children shown in the work of poets influenced by the two different outlooks. To Pope a child is important only in as much as he will become adult, and a civilised being. As a child his instincts have yet to be trained, and he is too near the level of a savage to be a real person. Instead

he is the raw, unrefined material than can be turned, with time and effort, into the sophisticated and civilised human being, in control of his instincts. Pope's attitude is that of the classical age. To the Romantic, a child is in some respects a holier and purer object than an adult. The child is unspoilt by civilisation and uncorrupted, in a natural state that can mean he is even closer to God and the source of his creation than are his older fellows. Rather than being something to be hurried out of, childhood to a Romantic is a state to be envied, cultivated and enhanced, as well as admired. A Romantic author will usually use unkindness towards children as the ultimate damnation; a classical author is just as likely to use unkindness against adults, and to ignore children altogether.

In general, a classical author tends to turn his attention outward to the society in which he or she lives, whilst a Romantic exposes his own soul, directing the light of analysis and comment internally. This analysis, of course, indicates the two extremes, and most ages and types of literature share classical and Romantic features.

**The Romantic Movement**

The Romantic movement is generally seen as starting around 1770. It affected all the arts and culture in general, but was essentially, as discussed, a reaction against the eighteenth century and the Age of Reason. It was often in open revolt against accepted social conventions. Romantic writers frequently alternate between peaks of ecstasy and depths of intense depression. Romantic poetry has become associated with Nature poetry, but as will be shown below it was by no means dominated by this. Some commentators have seen in Romanticism and Romantic poetry a reaction against industrialisation, creeping across Europe in the eighteenth century and threatening every aspect of society and the way people lived. There is a link between the Industrial

Revolution and Romanticism, but it cannot be taken too far without detailed historical knowledge. The Romantic movement predated industrialisation in many instances, and reached its peak when for the majority of people industrialisation was a local phenomenon. The trigger for some of Wordsworth's finest work was the French Revolution, and to the Romantic authors themselves this revolution had more impact than the Industrial Revolution.

**Romanticism and modern criticism**

Romanticism has proved very fertile ground for modern critical theory. The period between 1790 and 1830 saw Great Britain acquire an empire as well as an industrial base, and as a result Postcolonial and Marxist criticism can give valuable and sometimes surprising weight into the work of the major Romantic poets. New political and social structures have also been seen as determining factors in Romantic poetry. As one example, links have been shown to exist between the work of Wordsworth and Shelley and a number of far more avowedly 'political' poets, including those involved with radical protest movements such as Chartism. Challenging new views of gender and ambivalent attitudes towards femininity have concerned a number of authors. The romantic period Law the birth of several movements or schools of thought that have come either to dominate or exert a great influence on modern thought. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* is one of the very first feminist manifestoes. In politics this was also the period of Thomas Paine's seminal *Rights of Man*. Far from being poets locked in to their own vision of solitary nature, modern criticism has shown the Romantic poets to be at the heart of the development of the romantic age, developments which can be seen as marking the start of the modern world. One aspect of such modernity was the growth in the number of authors who earned a living from their writing and the resultant new relationships with the reader

have all provoked intense discussion. Romanticism can, by one view, be seen as the 'deconstruction' of the rigid code and ethics of classicism, and so is attractive to post-structuralist theory. The intensity of the psyche in Romantic poetry, and the intensity of self-examination and a Subjective approach, have also interested followers of psychoanalytic criticism. 'Utopian' theories have also been extensively examined with regard to all Romantic writing. The term derives from a political essay written by Sir Thomas More (1477-1535). *Utopia* (1516) envisages an imaginary island on which is found an ideal society. Subsequently, books portraying 'Utopian' ideals have been very common, but modern criticism has pointed out the relevance of the ideal to Romantic poetry. Such criticism has sometimes taken as its starting point the social experimentation of such pioneers as Robert Owen, whose mills and factories were based on an 'ideal', philanthropic system of employment and management. Owen's experiments point to a society which was willing to tread new ground, and which recognised the death of an old social order by its attempts to create one which was truly new and in tune with the times. It is hardly surprising that poetry and literature in general reflect the wider social trends.

In summary, if Romanticism has not been reinvented by modern criticism it has been subject to searching new scrutiny in almost every one of its aspects. This makes it one of the most rewarding areas to view in the light of modern critical theories and approaches.

**William Blake**

William Blake (1757-1827) belongs to no one school of poetry, and is one of the most individual poets of any age. However, certain features in his poetry are forerunners of Romanticism. Blake was an engraver whose art work was slightly

hampered by the rather clumsy drawing technique that was taught in his age. He was a glorious eccentric, choosing to read *Paradise Lost* with his wife, the pair of them did simulated the events of this epic poem in order to bring them closer to Adam and Eve. Blake held conversations with angles over breakfast, and when food and money had run out his wife was forced into reminding him of the necessities of life by placing an empty plate before him at the meal table. He achieved little fame in his own lifetime, but in the twentieth century has come to be hailed as a genius.

**The main features of Blake's poetry**

Blake was a prophet and a mystic. By far and away the most commonly set of his books is *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789), a relatively early work. His later work became more and more philosophical, prophetic and mystical, and less and less related to poetry.

**Symbolism**

Blake wrote in and through symbols. He saw humanity in terms natural collection of virtues and innocence, held tyrannically in chains and destroyed by society, the Church and its own ignorance. Innocence is symbolised by children, flowers or certain of the seasons. Oppression and tyranny are symbolised by priests, the urban industrial landscape, or those in authority. Blake also sees the existence of a natural heroic and creative energy in life; swords, spears, chariots, the sun, and animals such as lions or tigers are used as symbols of this admirable and earth-moving energy, as in the famous poem 'The Tyger'.,The power of Blake's symbols is immense. It can also be confusing, because the meaning of a symbol can change from one poem to the next, and because sometimes images are used in direct contradiction to their conventional meaning.

**Blake as Prophet**

'Prophetic' and 'mystic visionary' are words often used of Blake, although sometimes their meaning is not stated clearly. What they amount to is that Blake puts all his yearning and desire for a perfect world into glowing visions of an innocent past or a glorious future. At the same time he condemns, with an awful grandeur and prophetic insight, the evils of his own world, its attack on human freedom and its denial of basic liberties and the life of the imagination. The 'prophetic element in his work springs front his vision of the future and the past, and the dire warnings he issues about the downward path his own society was taking. He is a mystic because all his vision is wrapped up and contained in collaborative symbolism, the meaning of which is sometimes tantalisingly complex and even obscure.

**Industrial landscape**

All that Blake most loathed in life was summed up in factories, machines and analytical science. As always in his work these are not hated so much for what they are, but for what they symbolise about society's willingness to abandon imagination and humanity to machine-like, unthinking precision.

**The Bible**

The Bible's imagery and tone permeate Blake's work. His use of Biblical items is fascinating. He sees it almost in the same terms as he sees his own poetry, a vision rather than documentary truth. He can convert the words and symbols of the Bible to his own use, either expressing what he sees as the truth of their meaning, or adding to it with his own.

## William Wordsworth

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) is probably the most famous of ‘the Romantic poets, and may be the best. He was born in the Lake District of the United Kingdom, in what was then Cumberland; his love of the wild, mountainous English Lakes never left him, and remained to the end of his life a major influence on all he wrote. He was greatly excited by the French Revolution 1789), seeing in it the chance for a whole new order in the world. Whilst in France he fathered an illegitimate child. When the French Revolution turned towards tyranny, and England declared war on France, Wordsworth suffered mental anguish that brought him near to collapse. His ideals were divided between England and France, the collapse of a revolution that had seemed so noble and liberal tormented him, and his child and its mother were beyond his reach in France. Guilt and confusion threatened to engulf Wordsworth, and he was helped to recovery largely through the influence of his sister Dorothy. It is sometimes said that all great authors are at war with themselves, and that great literature is born out of internal conflict; Wordsworth suggests the truth of this idea. In his early years he wrote a significant amount of the poetry by which he is remembered, and although he lived until 1850 much of his best work was written by 1807.

## Issues in Wordsworth’s poetry

### Simplicity and Style

Wordsworth stated explicitly some of his poetic philosophy in the various prefaces to his *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), which he wrote in company with Samuel Taylor Coleridge (see below). The *Preface* to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* is essential reading tor any student. A main plank of his philosophy was to move the language and the subject of poetry away from the clichés and stylised, elaborate fashion of the

eighteenth century, prune it of excess and move towards the language of everyday speech and the life of ordinary people. Perhaps in expressing this desire Wordsworth sums up a central part of the Romantic movement, at least as it concerned himself, that is the simple man, living at one with the natural environment, is seen as mankind in its purest and therefore strongest form. Uncorrupted by society, the spirit of man shines through in these uncluttered surroundings, and his simple language reflects better than any poetic posturings the true basic essentials and beauty of life.

Wordsworth's language, and whether or not he did use the language of ordinary men, is a standard issue in his work. The answer, as always, is not simple. Wordsworth can write very often with a beautiful simplicity and directness. He can also write so simply as to be ludicrous, and often his language is not so simple as his declared intentions would have us believe. Romantic poetry is at its strongest when it turns inward to the mind of the poet, not outward to observed characters. Everything Wordsworth wrote was, he claimed, based on life; he had no time for anything that he believed was unreal, and what was most real to him was the impact of what he saw on himself. It is these shared moments of insight and high passion that mark Wordsworth's highest achievements in verse. What he observes, be it simple people or nature, is often only an excuse to create and share these moments of sublime insight.

**Nature**

Perhaps above all Wordsworth is associated in the popular mind with his vision of Nature. His poetry may contain a few surprises for the student who collies to him armed only with a general awareness of what his work is meant to contain. Wordsworth is perhaps not as good at describing the natural landscape as a number of other poets. As a purely descriptive poet. He is highly capable, but his real genius lies in showing what

happens when the innate power of Nature meets the power of perception of a human mind. It is as if the individual's perception of Nature, its awe, power and capacity to teach, is what matters, rather than Nature itself. It is the interaction of Nature and human nature that enlivens and stimulates him. The word pantheism is sometimes used in connection with Wordsworth. A pantheist believes that God is visible in everything, and that his nature can be ascertained from the nature of his creation, the Universe. In a restricted sense Wordsworth is a Pantheist. Nature is a store of truths about human nature, the world, and God, but that truth lies inert until a human being conjoins with Nature and draws that truth out.

**The Sublime Egotist**

Keats referred to Wordsworth (in a parody of Milton) as the 'egotistical sublime'; sublime because he was forever searching for a moment of transcendental insight and perception, a moment in which every fibre of the mind and the imagination caught light, egotistical because everything he wrote was based directly on his own personal experience and observation of life, or that of his sister. The extent to which his poetry is autobiographical is a standard examination question, though attention here should be diverted from a straight examination of his life and its influence on his work to the more rewarding study of the extent to which his poetry presents us with the landscape of an individual mind. The Romantic poets looked within themselves and then related that observation and its conclusion to life in general. Perhaps personal is a better word to describe what we find in Wordsworth, rather than autobiographical, but as with all great authors Wordsworth persuades the reader that what he sees has a universal significance.

**Wordsworth's poetry**

*Lyrical Ballads* is a major work, containing 'Tintern Abbey', one of Wordsworth's most famous poems. Other poems which the student starting on Wordsworth should turn to are 'Michael' (1800), 'Sonnet Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, 'The Solitary Reaper, and 'The Daffodils' (1807). *The Prelude,* a long autobiographical poem not published until after his death, is generally regarded as Wordsworth's masterpiece. Finally, 'Intimations of Immortality' (1807) must be studied, not only as a fine poem in its own right, but as a major source of insight into Wordsworth's mind and sensibility.

**Samuel Taylor Coleridge**

Coleridge (1772-1834) was one of the more remarkable personalities of a remarkable movement. He had one of the most brilliant minds of his age, and one which delved into all areas of human learning and experience. He was, arguably, among the most outstanding literary critics that England has produced; his marginalia (notes commenting on a text) on Shakespeare still provide some of the best insights available into Shakespeare's work. He attended the University of Cambridge, but left without a degree after a career that involved him joining the army under the name of Silas Tomkin Comberbacke. He was rescued from this by his family. He met Wordsworth in Somerset, embarked on a close friendship, and collaborated with Wordsworth by contributing to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), though the majority of the poems were Wordsworth's. Coleridge married very unhappily, became addicted to opium and was later to fall out with Wordsworth. Though the quarrel was eventually patched up their relationship never regained its former strength. Financial, medical and personal problems beset him throughout his life. Coleridge was only intermittently successful in

his poetry, and a comparatively small number of poems written by him have achieved lasting tune. Those which have are remarkable and unique.

**'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'**

This poem was Coleridge's major contribution to *Lyrical Ballads*, and is justifiably one of the most famous poems in the English language. It tells in ballad form the story of a young man stopped on his way to a wedding feast and forced to listen to the story of an ancient mariner. This story-within-a-story tells of how the mariner kills an albatross, is punished and suffers for this deed, and then is finally rescued and redeemed by the power of love and generosity, which re-establishes the bond between him and nature.

It is almost impossible to do justice to this poem in a short space. It is nowhere near as realistic as Wordsworth's work, nor (Ices it direct the attention of the reader inward to the poet's mind. Instead it uses the techniques of the medieval ballad and creates a world of intense symbolism, in which each image is crammed full of a significance that the reader can always feel but rarely understand in its entirety. In its simplest form the poem is a nightmare about what happens when a man offends the power of nature. His sin is followed by suffering and eventual expiation. What this description does not convey is the intense power that Coleridge can give to the narrative, partly through technical devices such as his use of metre, rhyme and symbolism, but partly through the contrast between stark narrative that describes in almost matter-of-fact terms the most outlandish events. Some of this stark simplicity is illustrated in the following extract:

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship

Upon a painted ocean.
Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink:
Water, water, everywheresumm,
Nor any drop to drink.

Description through visual imagery is a feature of the ballad, as is the heavy reliance throughout the poem on dialogue and the spoken word. It has been said that it is a crime to try to interpret this poem, and that one should simply experience it. Issues in the poem are its technique, its symbolism, and the extent to which it is a moral allegory. Perhaps it is best seen as a myth, a poem the success of which springs from the clarity and power of its symbolism, rather than from any specific meaning.

**'Kubla Khan'**

'Kubla Khan' is a fragment reportedly composed whilst Coleridge was under the influence of opium, and unfinished because its composition was interrupted by a visitor, and when the poet returned his inspiration and memory of the lines in his head had vanished. The River Alph in the poem is a symbol for some destructive force, possibly Art itself, and the 'pleasure dome' described with such excited longing is as much a series of sense impressions as an attempt to produce an image with a controlled and understood meaning. The poem is a dream vision of vast intensity, and a dream in which the nightmare is never far beneath the surface. The yearning for a transcendental moment of beauty and insight, and the feeling of a moment of total spiritual insight that is always just beyond the perception of the poet, make this one of the most concentrated and powerful of English poems.

**‘Christabel’, ‘Frost at Midnight’, and ‘Dejection: An Ode’**

‘Christabel’ is based on the romance and medieval ballad form, mixing excitement, enchantment, the grotesque and the sinister with compelling power. It is well worth reading `Christabel’ at the same time as some of Tennyson’s poems which are similarly wised on the romance ballad (see Chapter 18).

‘Frost at Midnight’ is a very different poem. Here Coleridge does turn into his own mind. Very exact and vividly realised observation of his surroundings are the bed-rock of the poem:

> … the thin blue flame
> Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
> Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
> Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.

But out of these Coleridge generates a quiet and reflective perusal of personal and universal issues, such as paternity and childhood (at the heart of the poem is the image of the poet’s sleeping daughter).

‘Dejection: An Ode’ is about the failure of the poet’s imagination, and perhaps even his whole life. At the start his tone is resigned, almost wry, but the poem moves to expressions of grief that are almost stark in their directness; the strain of the poet’s misery cuts out and renders ineffective any attempts to philosophise or moralise about his position. Coleridge’s imagery, the nature of his personal passion, his use of rhyme and metre, are significant areas in all these poems.

## Lord Byron

Byron (1788-1824) has arguably received rather less critical attention in recent years than some of the other poets covered here. He was the son of a wild and lawless family. He despised his mother and idolised his father (his parents split up when she father had spent most of his wife's fortune), and despised also the fierce, Calvinistic nurse who helped to bring him up. Under these circumstances it was hardly likely that he 'would have a happy childhood, and his being born with a deformed foot was a further major disadvantage. He inherited his title unexpectedly, and was launched to instant public fame by the publication of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812), a partly autobiographical long poem based on his European travels. He married an heiress who was determined to reform him, left her after only a short while, and went to live abroad, eventually losing his life from a fever whilst fighting for Greek independence against the Turks. Before this he had managed to scandalise society by a relationship with his half-sister.

## Byron's poetry

Byron's reputation is based on *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *Beppo* (1817), *The Vision of Judgement* (1822), and *Don Juan*, which began publication in 1819, and which was never finished. *Don Juan* is generally regarded as his greatest work.

## Issues in Byron's work

There have been numerous debates on the essential value of Byron's work, and Advanced-level questions sometimes ask the candidate to consider his strengths and weaknesses.

Complaints about his poetry are that it contains no emotion and no intellect. He fell particularly foul of modern authors such as T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden who, in their own work, were deliberately trying to install an intellectual spine into poetry to offset what they saw as the excessive triviality and sentimentality of pre-First World War poetry. He has also been described at various times as heartless, prejudiced, morally dishonest, and seen as lacking a perception of beauty. Byron made some of his name and much of his fortune by writing exciting adventure poems, and the traces of this style show through strongly in his major works. He is no great philosopher, and there is often a great deal more energy than thought in his work. His writing shows strong traces of the picaresque style, with an essentially rambling structure unified only by the presence of a central figure, and with excitement and incident outweighing characterisation and thematic coherence.

The virtues of his poetry are his immense skill at telling an exciting story; his awareness of, and capacity to write for, an audience; and his superb comic touch. Byron may have been amoral, but his poetry attacks hypocrisy wherever it can be found; sometimes his attacks are unfair, but they rarely fail to be amusing and witty. His narrator in *Don Juan* is a masterpiece, an amusing cynic with a wide range of tones at his disposal. The ideas in the majority of his poems are commonplace, but exceedingly well-expressed. His use of *ottava rima* (an eight-line stanza of iambic pentameters, rhyming abababcc) in *Don Juan* is unequalled by any other English poet, and within its confines Byron manages to develop a vibrant snappiness and some marvellously stinging satiric slaps. Byron has an acute ear and eye for the presence of hypocrisy, considerable technical skill, a wide range of tone and a highly developed narrative skill. He wrote stories with epic settings but no epic morality, and any lack of coherence and unity in his work is often offset by its huge and enjoyable energy. He could treat and

recreate emotion seriously when the mood so took him, as the famous ‘Haidee’ love story of *Don Juan* proves.

**The Byronic hero**

Byron gave this phrase to the language, and in doing so created a myth in the bargain. The concept of the Byronic hero is drawn from both heroes and narrators in Byron’s poetry. He is a morose, enigmatic, cultured, bitter figure, gloomy, outwardly devil-may-care but full of dark secrets. All the controversy about Byron’s life, as well as sometimes obscuring an accurate picture of his poetry, has made some readers see the figure of the Byronic hero and Byron himself as one and the same thing. As it is, the Byronic hero reflects aspects of Byron’s character, but by no means the whole. Perhaps the safest thing to say about Byron is that, like all the Romantic poets, he was a man in search of a spiritual truth that for much of the time could be experienced only through the sensations; perhaps he found that truth, and his release, in Greece.

**Percy Bysshe Shelley**

Shelley (1792-1822) was the son of a Sussex aristocrat. He was ‘sent down’ (expelled) from the University of Oxford for publishing a pamphlet advocating atheism. He married a sixteen-year-old girl in 1811, but left her after three years. Two years later she drowned herself. In 1816 Shelley eloped with and married Mary Godwin, who as Mary Shelley was the author of the famous *Frankenstein, or the Modem Prometheus* (1818). Shelley was drawn to the Continent, and particularly the Mediterranean, and whilst in Europe he became friendly with both Byron and Keats. He died alone when the boat he was sailing foundered in a storm, and there were strange stories about the episode. In his poetry he had come near to prophesying his own death

by drowning, and there were rumours and signs that he made no attempt to save himself.

**Issues in Shelley's poetry**

Out of all the Romantic poets Shelley has perhaps received the most interest from modern criticism. Shelley's first major poem was *Queen Mab* (1813), and in it he displays many of the features that can be seen as typical of his poetry. Shelley was a revolutionary. He was obsessed by the manner in which society, institutions and conventional morality destroyed and corrupted mankind. A frequently quoted line, 'Power like a devastating pestilence/Pollutes whatever it touches, shows both the depth of his feeling and his loathing of conventional authority. Shelley had a strong belief in an absence of original sin, and that humanity could attain perfection. This, and his hatred of authority, society and conventional morality, may suggest that he was a far more accurate and precise political and social thinker than was actually the case. His beliefs when turned into poetry favour a soaring flight after beauty and truth, shrouded in mystic imagery and visions of Utopia or perfection; how to reach that perfection is less clearly stated. *Queen Mab* and many of his other poems have no logical structure to them, and sometimes little control or planning. He has been accused of self-centredness and of an excess of self-pity. His lack of structure is perhaps one reason why his short lyric poems are the most famous parts of his poetic output; his weaknesses tend to diminish with the length of what he writes.

*The Masque of Anarchy* (1819) was a response to the Peterloo Massacre in England. It is a stark, grim poem, in which Shelley, described by Matthew Arnold as 'a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating his wings in a luminous void in vain', has his feet firmly on a ground that is filthy, and stained with the blood of oppression. In *Alastor, or the*

*Spirit of Solitude* (1816) a more conventional Romantic outlook is used. The hero, in Shelley's words 'a youth of uncorrupted feelings and adventurous genius' (and clearly based partly on Shelley himself), is led out to search for a vision of beauty in a dream world, a search that is never to be fulfilled and which ends in the death of the hero. Beauty, yearning, a sense of mystery, and the search for some inspired moment that is forever just beyond; these are central features of much Romantic writing, and of Shelley's poetry. *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) is generally regarded as Shelley's most successful long poem. It is based on the Greek myth of Prometheus, who was punished for giving the gift of fire to mankind. The 'poem' is in fact a verse drama, which shows Prometheus redeemed through love. Shelley's search for a saviour, a yearning for freedom and an end to tyranny, his faith and belief in the power of love are all found in *Prometheus Unbound*, which though patchy contains some justifiably famous passages. The poem ends in joy, and offers fulfilment, whereas this fulfilment is merely a dream and an aspiring hope in much of his other work. Shelley's most famous poems are his short lyrics, most notably 'Adonais' (an elegy on Keats), written in 1821, 'Epipsychidion' (1821). one of his fullest, statement on love, 'Ode to the West Wind', and 'To a Skylark', all written in 1820. 'Ozymandias' is also well worth reading. His *Defence of Poetry* was written in 1821, but not published until after his death, in 1840, and is a fine prose work that shows clearly Shelley's own views on poetry.

**The poet as legislator**

Shelley believed in the poet as a legislator, someone who could reform the world through poetry. He says that he sees poetry as subordinate to moral and political science, a suggestion that might be taken to mean that the poet is merely a sociologist who chooses to write his tracts in verse. Of course nothing could be further from the truth. Shelley believed that it is through the power of the creative imagination that the

world and society will be reformed, and through the enhanced perception of beauty. It was Shelley above all other poets who saw the poet as a person with a mission, an actual leader in and of society who, by unleashing the creative power latent in the human mind, could become a new form of the Messiah for society. His idealism and perception of beauty are inspiring and uplifting; equally powerful are the moments in his poetry when he fails to reach that summit of beauty for which he is aiming. The full-throated idealism in his poetry, when linked to a startling awareness of the horrors of tyranny, makes for a very potent and startling mixture. His occasional technical carelessness, selfishness, and even childish fits of anger can be seen as merely making more human one of the warmest and most fascinating figures in English Literature.

**John Keats**

Keats (1795-1821) came from relatively humble origins, but was able to attend private school and start training as a medical student, something he later gave up in order to write poetry. His early works were savaged in various influential journals, he underwent a tormenting and hurtful love affair, and finally diets as a result of tuberculosis, an illness that had already killed his mother and brother. Despite these handicaps he has emerged as one of the Romantic poets about whose greatness there is little doubt. His letters are sometimes included for study in examinations, and they remain one of the most interesting and well-written collections available to the general reader. As well as being interesting in themselves they contain a great deal of information about Keats' thoughts on poetry, and are essential reading (whether or not they actually appear on the syllabus) for any examination candidate studying his work.

## The poetry of Keats

Keats published his first volume of poetry in 1817. It contained only one poem of lasting fame, 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer. His second volume was *Endymion*. The book was savaged in Blackwood's Magazine and in The Quarterly Review, not so much for its weaknesses as for the fact that Keats was seen as an associate of Leigh Hunt (1784-1859), an important sponsor of Romantic poets and a figure who for a variety of reasons was extremely unpopular with the magazines mentioned above. The political element in the criticism should not disguise the fact that *Endymion* does have various weaknesses. It was written in a hurry, and was described by Keats as a 'feverish attempt'. It has Keats' lush imagery, but this over-whelms the narrative, and the whole poem is rather breathless.

### 'Isabella, or the Pot of Basil' (1820)

'Isabella' is a transitional poem which goes some of the way to producing Keats' finest style, but which still shows traces of his immaturity. It matches an extremely grim story with an ottava rima metrical pattern which Keats fails to handle with the same skill as Byron, and the cla:1 between a rather delicate tone and a grim story is not always effective. Keats was not a precise writer, and he lacked the ability to give a sharp dagger-point to the conclusion of an ottava rima stanza.

### 'Lamia' (1820)

'Lamia' is altogether more precise and controlled than 'Isabella', though still open to accusations 'of being loose and disjointed. It is remarkable for the case with which Keats can create a sinister and ominous mood. In the poem Lycius falls in love with Lamia, a sorceress who has disguised herself as a beautiful girl. Lycius is therefore

about to marry an illusion, but he is nevertheless happy. When a wise sage reveals the true identity of Lamia she vanishes, but so do all Lycius's dreams and hopes, and his happiness. Truth kills him, and the poem therefore poses some favourite questions of Keats', such as the relationship between emotion and reality, the possibility of happiness and the search (so typical of Romantic poetry) for an elusive and all-satisfying beauty.

**'The Eve of Saint Agnes'**

'The Eve of Saint Agnes' is a love story told against a medieval backdrop. It is a masterpiece. It has colour and a vibrant sensuality together with stark descriptive powers, and an ability to 'paint' a scene in words and images so as to bring out a rich emotional and visual flavour. The narrative is taut and controlled, and the contrasts in the poem between the warmth and intimacy of the lovers and the threat and danger surrounding their love are used most effectively. Light and dark, warmth and coldness, passion and sterile old age are juxtaposed throughout the poem. Keats' narrative skills and his ability to tell a tale of high romance, but at the same time include quite complex characterisation, are common issues in his work.

**The Odes**

Keats' major achievement, and one of the major achievements in English Literature, is the sequence of odes that he wrote in 1820. In passing it should be noted that arguably no other English author has produced so much fine poetry in so short a space of time as did Keats in 1820-21. 'Ode to a lie' and 'Ode on Melancholy' are the subject of a full answer below, and are generally held to mark the beginning and end respectively of the sequence of odes. 'Ode to a Nightingale' shows how an awareness of suffering and an awareness of beauty are inextricably linked, so that one cannot be

shed without the other. ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ deals with the same themes of transience and permanence, beauty and life. At first sight the figures drawn or carved upon the urn are an ideal. Art and the artist have frozen human activity at its most beautiful, giving immortality to moments of happiness, preserving them against time.

This poem leaves a deep impression on anyone who has at one time felt moved and uplifted, and then realised that even the best and most pure of moments must die and vanish. The poem then moves on to the realisation of what happens when art preserves human experience. The price to be paid for making it timeless is also to make it lifeless. The figures on the urn are ‘frozen’; it is pure beauty, deprived of the warmth and passion of humanity. It is too cold, too pure, too lifeless. As with ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, the price for our realisation of beauty is that it must pass, and perhaps this knowledge adds to its piquancy. To perpetuate a feeling is to remove from it the finer edge of its power; only in its transitory nature can it be fully experienced.

‘Ode on Melancholy’, and, to a lesser extent, ‘Ode to Autumn’ conclude the theme, by showing beauty at its purest, and revealing a capacity to enjoy them for what they are. The great gap between enjoyment and transience is bridged by the poet expanding the hints in the two odes mentioned above, and saying that true beauty is beautiful because it is transient and lacks permanence. The result is a pure and almost unalloyed vision of beauty, realized in Keats’ most sensuous and richly descriptive language.

‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ ends with the phrase that has fascinated critics, and those who set examination questions, ever since the poem was written “Beauty is truth, truth beauty - that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” It is often overlooked that the urn makes this comment, not the poet. It appears to suggest that the whole meaning of life can be summed up by the definition and expression of what is beautiful,

and that real truth and real beauty are the same thing; where one is to be found, so will the other. It suggests also that beauty is what life has to offer, and that the search for it should be the spiritual aim of all men.

**Question and answer**

**Question**

Compare ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ with ‘Ode on Melancholy’, commenting particularly on the treatment of the themes of beauty and death.

**Answer**

Keats rarely comes to any firm conclusions in his poetry, something which is at the heart of his doctrine of negative capability. This is where man is capable of being in uncertainty and doubt without any ‘irritable reaching’ after fact and reason. This does not mean that the two odes are mere open-ended statements of a passing mood; rather they recreate a mood and heighten its tension, allowing the reader to see into the meaning of an essential and puzzling gap. The gap is between an ideal vision of life, a heaven of the imagination symbolised in the nightingale, and a grim vision of life’s realities.

> Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
> Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;

‘Ode to a Nightingale’ shows the poet unable to exclude the real world. ‘Ode on Melancholy’ reconciles the two worlds, and shows how they a c integrated, indivisible, and wholly necessary to each other.

> In ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ beauty is transient.
> Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes;
> Or new love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

All round he poet is decay, but the nightingale's song stands for a new and different kind of beauty, one which has been heard through all the history of the world and therefore has a touch of eternity to it. The poet wishes to immerse himself totally in the song and the vision of beauty it suggests, and just as he seems about to achieve this total empathy he and the reader are hauled back into the real world by the word 'forlorn', which is 'like a bell/To toll me back from thee to my sole self!' The poet is imprisoned by his humanity. He is able to perceive the beauty of the bird's song by virtue of his life, but that same life brings also misery and pain. The mind that appreciates the beauty cannot fail to be as sensitive to the 'fever' and the 'fret'. Death is no solution. It stops the pain, but also the beauty, and puts the poet in a situation where he has become 'To thy high requiem ... a sod'. The fact that the nightingale will be unaware even of the poet's death is a very effective device for bringing out forcibly the unbridgeable distance between the two worlds. The poet's mortality dooms him to a world 'where but to think is to be full of sorrow/And leaden-eyed despair, but does allow hint to partake partially of eternal beauty. He is like the meanest stage-hand in a great theatre: he can comprehend and yearn after the power and beauty he sees on the stage, but knows he has neither the power nor the ability to take part himself. To rid himself of the pain he must also rid himself of the joy. In 'Ode on Melancholy' he says 'Ay, in' the very temple of Delight/Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine''. To banish the avalanche that has killed a friend we must also banish the beauty of snow-capped peaks, and to banish misery we must also banish delight. Indeed Keats comes near to saying that it is through melancholy that we come to appreciate delight.

In 'Ode on Melancholy' pain and delight are reconciled. Rather than try to escape from pain, as he does in 'Ode to a Nightingale', the poet in 'Ode on Melancholy' must experience beauty through it,

But when the melancholy fit shall fall
Sudden front Heaven like a weeping cloud,
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all
And hides the green hill in an April shroud,
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
Or on the rainbow of the salt-sand wave,

Melancholy falls from Heaven, and it fosters the flowers. It is therefore something cruel yet beneficial. As Keats said, 'Do you not see how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul?'

The conclusion from a reading of both poems is that beauty exists, must be aspired, and is the highest reward that man can attain. Death is inevitable and painful, but the cessation of pain that it offers comes at too high a price, the loss of life and perception.

**Reference:**

Martin Stephen, *English Literature* (London: Pearson Education, 2000)

**Further Reading**

**General**


- Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries. English Literature and its Background 1760-1830* (Oxford University Press, 1981)
- Cynthia Chase, ed., *Romanticism* (Longman, 1993)
- Philip Cox, *Gender; Genre and the Romantic Poets* (Manchester University Press, 1996): an interesting examination for the degree-level student of gender issues in the poetry of the period.
- Elizabeth A. Fay, *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism* (Blackwell, 1998)
- Peter J. Kitson, ed., Coleridge, *Keats and Shelley* (New Casebook Series, Macmillan, 1996)

- Sari Makdisi, *Romantic Imperialism* (Cambridge University Press, 1998): heavy going for the beginner, but an excellent example of a modern critical reading.
- Paul O'Flinn, *How to Study Romantic Poetry* (Macmillan, 1988): a good basic guide.
- Michael O'Neill, *Literature of the Romantic Period. A Bibliographical Guide* (Oxford University Press, 1998) is considerably more readable than its title suggests.
- J. R. Watson, *English Poetry of the Romantic Period, 1789-1839* (Longman, 1992): an excellent general survey.

### William Blake

- Peter Ackroyd, *Blake* (Minerva Paperback, 1996)
- Alexander Gilchrist, *The Life of William Blake* (Dover Publication, 1988): a reprint of a book first published in 1907, but still well worth reading.
- John Lucas, ed., *William Blake* (Longman, 1998)
- David Punter, ed., *William Blake* (New Casebook series, Macmillan, 1996): good examples of modern criticism.

### Lord Byron

- Harold Nicolson, *Byron. The Last Journey* (Prion. 1999)
- Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron: A Portrait* (Hutchinson, 1987)
- Frederick Raphael, *Byron* (Sphere, 1989)

### Samuel Taylor Coleridge

- Rosemary Ashton, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. A Critical Biography* (Blackwell, 1997) is an excellent modern work.
- Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (Harper Collins. 1997)
- _____, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* (Harper Collins, 1998)

### John Keats

- Jeffrey C. Robinson, *Reception and Poetics in Keats* (Macmillan, 1998): a modern treatment of Keats but with much history in it.
- Cedric Watts, *A Preface to Keats* (Longman, 1985) is a very good introduction.

### Percy Bysshe Shelley

- Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (Flamingo/Harper Collins, 1997): a stimulating modern study.
- Michael O'Neill, ed., *Shelley* (Longman, 1993): an effective collection of modern critical essays.
- Michael O'Neill, *Percy Bysshe Shelley. A Literary Life* (Macmillan, 1989): strongly recommended.

### William Wordsworth

- Kenneth R. Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth. Poet: Lover: Rebel: Spy (W.* W. Norton, 1998) details modern revelations about Wordsworth's life.
- John Purkis, *A Preface to Wordsworth* (Longman, 1986)
- John Williams, ed., *Wordsworth* (New Casebook Series, Macmillan, 1992)
- John Williams, *William Wordsworth. A Literary Life* (Macmillan, 1996): good value.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, "Introduction to Literary Text: A Guide to Second Year Students" serves as an indispensable companion for second-year LMD students of English, specifically tailored for the module of Literary Text. This booklet has been meticulously crafted to empower students with the essential tools and insights needed to navigate the rich tapestry of British literature across various periods.

As we journeyed through the medieval realm, encountering Chaucer's vivid characters in "The Canterbury Tales," we glimpsed the tapestry of society woven with humor and critique. Moving into the Renaissance, Marlowe's enigmatic "Doctor Faustus" and Shakespeare's timeless "Hamlet" and poignant "Sonnet 18" unveiled the profound exploration of human aspirations and the intricate nuances of love and mortality.

Venturing further, the metaphysical poets, led by John Donne, beckoned us to probe the depths of our existence through "No Man Is an Island" and the contemplative "Holy Sonnet X." This exploration of the metaphysical offered a bridge between the spiritual and the tangible, challenging conventional boundaries.

In the throes of British Romanticism, Wordsworth's "The Daffodils" painted a scenic vista of nature's resonance with the human soul, while Blake's "The Tyger" echoed questions of creation and innocence versus experience in a world of dualities.

Throughout this guide, students have been urged not to merely read, but to immerse themselves, interact, and engage with the text. Literature, after all, is a living dialogue between authors, readers, and the ever-evolving context that shapes both.

As you, the students, embark on your academic journey, armed with the insights garnered from this booklet, we hope you'll approach literary texts with newfound confidence and depth. These masterpieces are windows into the human experience, reflecting both the epochs they were birthed in and the timeless truths that continue to resonate.

Remember, the study of literature is an odyssey, an intellectual adventure where each interpretation is a treasure waiting to be unearthed. May this booklet serve as a guiding light, illuminating the path towards a richer understanding of literary works and their intricate relationship with the world around us.