Pre-Romanticism

When George III ascended the throne (1760-1820) England was one of the greatest powers in the World. It had a certain prosperity at home and vast possessions overseas. Unfortunately during George long reign American Colonies rebelled in the War of the Independence. Then in those years new scientific inventions brought England to be an industrial nation (use of steam power, ships were built). In agriculture and cattle farmers were obliged to leave the land and to move to the industrial centers. Large masses of people were living in unhealthy and miserable conditions. England found itself engaged in a series of wars: first against Revolutionary and then against Napoleonic France. England acquired new colonies in South Africa, Central America and Asia, but these long years of war left the country in debts, the working classes in starvation and the new industries enriched.

One of the most important poets of this period was William Blake who wrote: *Poetical Sketches, Songs of Innocence* (dedicated to childhood, they expressed through the mouths of little children the poet’s feeling for piety and joy), *Songs of Experience*.

Romantic Period

English Romanticism blossoms later than on the Continent. The main characteristics were: subjective rather than objective; interest in the immeasurable, the undetermined and the supernatural, importance to feelings and emotional reactions. Individuality is the main feature and does not consist in the triumph of the “self” but presents itself as the consequence of sensibility and imagination.

Until 1815 England concentrated its efforts to combat the France of Revolutionary and Imperial times. This caused a reinforcement and a fuller sense of the country’s own traditions while making it impervious to the revolutionary ideals.

The first generation of Romantic Poets were against the revolutionary ideals, they were Wordsworth and Coleridge with their masterpiece Lyrical Ballads (1798). They were also called the “Lake Poets”. They wrote in a simple style and their common theme is the importance of man as an individual with his feelings and emotions, his reactions to the nature surrounding him, and his relations to his fellows and to God.

In 1815 the situation changed. The war against France left England victorious but impoverished and with internal problems. The financial and agricultural crisis neutralized the effects of commercial prosperity and brings to a spirit of moral revolt. In a such atmosphere the second generation of Romantic poets develops. The new poets refused to recognize any prestige in tradition itself and criticized a present which was overruled by the fear of progress. They were influenced by revolutionary thoughts. In this moment feeling rose against the established order, sarcasm and aesthetic Romanticism became a literature of social protest and it reinforced the vital process of the soul against the interest and cold calculation.

The first generation of Romantic poets

William Wordsworth (1770-1850).

He studied in Cambridge and lived in France for few years, he sympathized with the French Revolution. But the reign of terror and the rise of Napoleon made him disappointed. He had two main important people around him: His sister Dorothy and his friend Coleridge. Wordsworth adopted a political philosophy turning to love of the natural world and he devoted his life to poetry. He believed that the influence of natural world depends upon us, so that we are not merely receivers but half creators of what we perceive.

Wordsworth and Coleridge published in collaboration *The Lyrical Ballads* (1798). They thought poetry should be written in “the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation”. They composed may poems on humble and rustic life. The Preface represents the Gospel of Romanticism.

While Coleridge was to choose the supernatural, Wordsworth was to deal with familiar realities in such an imaginative way.. Both writers tended toward the same end: The intimate fusion of the real with the ideal. Wordsworth’s most notable contributions are to be found in the *Preface, Lucy, The Solitary Reaper, Tintern Abbey*.

W.W. planned to write a great philosophical poem in blank verse but he only wrote few fragments in the *Prelude* where the poets described his childhood.

In some other works he included the belief that most men must depend upon God for guidance. In the last 20 years of his life he changed his mood: he seems to look with complacency upon the suffering contents with the promise that their earthly trials will have a future recompense in Heaven.

Anyway in the last years we could see in his poetry how his mistrust and fear of change grew and grew, but he continued writing until his death in 1850.
Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)
He lived for a certain period in America where he saw a community free from all prejudice and based on the principle that all man must be equal and that individual property should be abolished. In that period he wrote “The fall of Robespierre”
When he met W.Wordsworth they became close friends and they wrote together the Lyrical Ballads. The opening poem was The Rime of the Ancient Mariner that tells us the voyage and adventures of a mariner in the South Seas and how he brought a curse on his ship by shooting an albatross.
In his poems we can see the Romantic spirit of wonder and the realism of the details give a touch of credibility to the fantastic story.
He wrote other two poems of the same kind: Christabel and Kublic Khan.
Then he wrote: Frost at Midnight Dejection. an Ode.
In these years the poet’s life became more and more tormented and unhappy. His addiction to opium practically spoilt his genius and his life became a succession of half successes and half failures.
His main philosophy was between Fancy and Imagination that transcends the sensational world and brings the mind into direct contact with the ultimate reality.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

This long poem is divided into seven parts; each introduced by a short summary of the story so far. It was composed between 1797 and 1798 and was first published as the opening poem of the Lyrical Ballads in 1798. It tells the story of a mariner who commits the crime of killing an albatross and of his subsequent punishment.
The story is told by the mariner himself who, at the beginning of the poem, finds himself at a wedding feast and begins telling his sad story to one of the guests who “cannot chose but hear”. He tells how his ship was drawn towards the South Pole by a storm. At some point the ship is surrounded by ice and trapped. An albatross flies through the fog and the crew greet it with joy as the ice breaks and the albatross guides them to safety. But then, inexplicably, the mariner shoots the albatross dead with his crossbow. The crew are angry with the mariner for killing the bird, a bringer of good luck, and make him wear the albatross around his neck as a penance for his crime. A curse falls on the ship which is driven north to the equator and gets stuck for luck of wind under a burning sun. Horrible serpent-like creatures appear on the motionless sea. A phantom ship arrives, on which Life and Life-in-Death are playing dice for the mariner and his crew. The other members of the ship’s crew are also being punished, but while he survives, they all die for thirst. The mariner watches the beauty of water snakes in the moonlight and blesses them. As he does so the albatross falls from his neck and he is saved. However, the mariner’s survival does not mark the end of his punishment. He must bear the burden of guilt for the rest of his days. And so he travels around, telling his story to the people he meets, hoping in this way to teach them to respect and love all nature’s creatures.
One of the most interesting aspect of the poem is that the mariner’s motives for killing the albatross remain a mystery. The act is what in philosophical terms could be called “pure” act, an act without apparent motivation and through which there is nothing to gain.
The second generation of Romantic poets
Individualism is even stronger than in the first generation of Romantic Poets. They share the revolutionary thoughts and try to reconcile feeling and imagination with the respect for orthodoxy.

George Gordon Byron (1788-1824)
He was a handsome figure and had a passionate nature. He hated conventions and fought for the cause of individual freedom and liberty. He was in continuous revolt against traditions and orthodoxy. He was defiant and cynic, but sometimes combines delicate lyrical elements with his bitter satire. He wrote an autobiographical poem of travel, Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, where he shows his disillusionment and disappointment about life and love. He wrote Don Juan (long comic satire). He met Shelley and became great friends. He also wrote: the Corsair; Manfred; Beppo.

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)
His short life was in revolt against the traditions, the opinions, the morality and the customs. He had a rebellious spirit but he wasn’t cynic and defiant. He studied at Oxford, but soon he was expelled for his pamphlet “The necessity of Atheism”. He attempted to convert both Protestants and Catholics to atheism. When he realized that his wife didn’t understand and shared his revolutionary ideas he got tired and ran away with his friend’s daughter, Mary Godwin and stayed with her for the rest of his life. He tried to penetrate into the mystery of Nature. But this is not the voice of God as in Wordsworth, because the poet establishes the essential bonds between the individual and the whole. He wrote: Julian and Maddalo (philosophical conversation in verse between Shelley and Byron); Cenci (tragic realism); the Ode to the West Wind; The Revolt of Islam (to show French Revolution failure).

John Keats (1795-1832)
He spent his life seeking the Beautiful which was an ideal sufficient in itself. Keats didn’t share his friend’s revolutionary ideas and poetry was to be devoted to the search of beauty in nature and in man. He wrote poems which can be divided in two groups: those dealing with Greek mythology and those dealing with medieval themes. In all of them we can trace the same romantic precept, love of beauty for its own sake. His beauty is extremely sensuous. He wrote: Hyperion; Isabella (deals with a story taken from Boccaccio. It’s about the murder of Isabella’s lover by her two brothers); Ode to a Nightingale, Ode on a Grecian Urn.

The Novel
The most successful figure both as a poet and as a novelist we can find Walter Scott.

Walter Scott (1771-1832)
He was born in Edinburgh. From his early age he developed a passion for Scottish country side. So he listened ballads, songs, from the peasantry of this region. In 1826 he found himself involved in a financial collapse (a publishing house where he was a partner failed) so that he started writing hard but this difficult task killed him and he died without paying the rest of his debt. From Coleridge’s Christabel he borrowed the idea of using the ballad style for the narration of longer historical tales such as The Lay of the Last Minstrel (poem that painted life, customs and scenery of Scottish borders). He inaugurated the historical novel in works dealing with Scottish History (Waverley, Old Morality…) and dealing with English History (Ivanhoe) and works dealing with other countries (Talisman).

IVANHOE
The novel portrays the return of the Saxon Wilfred Ivanhoe from the Holy Land to his alienated ancestral estate. Sir Wilfred of Ivanhoe is out of favour with his father for his allegiance to the Norman king Richard the Lionheart. The story is set in 1194, after the failure of the Third Crusade, when many of the Crusaders were still returning to their homes in Europe. King Richard, who had been captured by Leopold of Austria on his return journey to England, was believed to still be in captivity.

Other major characters include Ivanhoe's intractable father, Cedric, one of the few remaining Saxon lords; various Knights Templar, a number of clergymen; the loyal serfs: Gurth.

The book was written and published during a period of increasing struggle for the emancipation of the Jews in England, and there are frequent references to injustices against them.
Jane Austen (1775-1817)

He lived in Hampshire, Bath and Southampton. She wasn’t touched by revolutionary ideas. She lived among country people, fulfilling her social obligations. She died young (she was 41)

She was realistic and anti romantic and her works she showed her personal observation of the small universe of country life with the attention to social duties and the interest in marriages. People around her are not affected by passion or emotions. She wrote her most famous novels Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Emma, Persuasion. The plots are simple with little action in her books. The style is simple, clear, with a little irony and with a keen sense of humour

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

It is a humorous story of love and life among English gentility during the Georgian era. Mr Bennet is an English gentleman living in Hartfordshire with his overbearing wife. The Bennets 5 daughters; the beautiful Jane, the clever Elizabeth, the bookish Mary, the immature Kitty and the wild Lydia. Unfortunately for the Bennets, if Mr Bennet dies their house will be inherited by a distant cousin whom they have never met, so the family's future happiness and security is dependent on the daughters making good marriages. Life is uneventful until the arrival in the neighbourhood of the rich gentleman Mr Bingley, who rents a large house so he can spend the summer in the country. Mr Bingley brings with him his sister and the dashing (and richer) but proud Mr Darcy. Love is soon in the air for one of the Bennet sisters, while another may have jumped to a hasty prejudgment. For the Bennet sisters many trials and tribulations stand between them and their happiness, including class, gossip and scandal.