

The Age of Sensibility

Second Half of the 18th century

Pre-Romanticism

Sensibility = the capacity to feel

- **Don't think** of literary movements or historical periods as **events in blocks**. Phenomena can **coexist**, in contrast with each other.
- While Pope is writing his neoclassical poetry - formally perfect, following classical rules, satirical and didactic - and believed in “man as the measure of all things”, other themes and interests emerged: the celebration of nature, a sombre view of the place of man in the world, meditation on death, on man's sad destiny.

Pre-Romantic Poetic Issues

- **James Thomson**: *The Seasons* (1726-30) celebrates the «pure pleasures of the rural life». Themes: beauty of the natural landscape, celebration of the simplicity and domesticity of country life and peasant labour (free from the corruption of urban life).
- **Edward Young** in *Night Thoughts* (1742) and **Robert Blair** in *The Grave* (1743): their aim is “to paint the gloomy horrors of the tomb”.
- **William Collins** (1746): *Ode to Evening*, lyrical mode, visionary idea of poetry.

“Grave poetry” or Graveyard School of Poetry

- **Thomas Gray**, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) = transitional poet.
- **Perfect in form**, elegy (a lament for one's death), elevated language, quatrains of iambic pentameters rhyming abab. What is new and Romantic?
- Deeply affected by Richard West's death (a friend). Elegy becomes **a vehicle of meditation on universal themes: man's destiny, equality, worldly ambition and humility**.
- The death in question is that of poor rural people, whose graves lack the ornaments of the tombs of the rich and powerful. **Description of/interest in rural people. Melancholic tone, meditative mood**, the poet is the speaking voice in the poem.

Primitivism and Folk Sources

- **James Macpherson** translated a fragment of Gaelic poetry (1759) “The Death of Oscur”. Then another translation of material collected in the Highlands *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760). Emboldened by his success, he published *Fingal, an Ancient Epic Poem*, declaring it to be a translation of an epic by Ossian about the legendary hero Fin. All over Europe Gaelic poetry came to be acclaimed, Ossian was considered as superior to Homer. But no manuscript was found: it was oral poetry re-invented by Macpherson.
- **Thomas Chatterton** claimed he had translated ancient poems too, but they were spurious → he committed suicide.

A New Model of Poetry

Neoclassical poetry (Pope)

- controlled language, rigorous metre
- poetic diction i.e. the finny race for “fish”
- models: the classics
- propriety of subject matters
- notion of “exemplary value”
- satirical and didactic

Romantic Poetry

- Spontaneous
- Free of sophisticated rhetorical artifice
- Bearer of emotion and overtones of irrationality
- Genuine expression of the far-off ancestors of the people of the British Isles (the Celts → the Welsh and the Scottish)

The Sublime

- Edmund Burke: *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756-9)
- **The Sublime**: a type of beauty that scares and is found in high or vast natural landscapes (a view of the Alps, a dark forest, a stormy sea) and in small dangerous things (spiders, snakes).
- **Ordinary beauty** :a park or a garden.
- The Sublime arouses strong feelings, reverence, terror,
- Awe = a feeling of great respect and admiration, often combined with fear (timore reverenziale) → root of opposite adjectives “awful” and “awesome”.

Edmund Burke

- Burke is **the theorist of the Sublime**, a form of taste which became increasingly widespread.
- He says that “**no passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear**. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror be endued with greatness of dimensions or not”.

The Gothic Novel

- Gray was a friend of Horace Walpole, son of the Prime Minister. He published Gray's poems and appreciated Gray as the poet of the Sublime, an aesthetic category he found particularly congenial.
- He published the novel *The Castle of Otranto*: a Gothic Story (1764) presenting it as the translation of an old Italian text → he created a new genre, that of the Gothic novel.

Features of Gothic Novels

- Taste for the picturesque and the Sublime
- Predilection of mystery and the irrational
- **Complicated** (even **improbable**) **plots**, **stereotyped characters**, happy ending.
- An innocent young woman, persecuted by a wicked villain but rescued by her young lover, has to face all sorts of dangers (including ghosts and **supernatural phenomena**).
- The reader is subjected to the “sublime” emotion of **terror** together with the heroine.

Why “Gothic”?

- Gothic novels pushed to its extremes the “new sensibility” and the taste for “grave poetry”. The boundary between death and life is no longer clear.
- Setting: **old castles** (with gloomy vaults, dungeons, statues that bleed) in Italy or Spain.
- Taste for the **exotic**, plus sense of **intrigue** connected to **Catholic** countries.
- Walpole claimed that his aim was **to fuse novel and romance**. He said “I gave rein to my **imagination; visions** and **passions** choked me”.
- For Walpole **Gothic** means **medieval**, which is not the case with all writers in the genre. **Gothic** = the architecture style of the Middle Ages

Other famous Gothic Novels

- William Beckford, *Vathek* (1782)
- Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) set in France and Italy. The idea of Sublime is used in the descriptions of landscapes (the Alps, the castle of Udolpho).
- Matthew G. Lewis, *The Monk* (1796), set in Spain. Rape and incest. The girl is killed. The monk is sentenced to be burnt by the Inquisition but he makes a pact with the devil and is dragged down to hell. No happy ending.

William Blake (1757-1827)

- Imagination or “Divine Vision” means to see more beyond material reality, to see deeper into the life of things.
- God, the child, and the poet are gifted with imagination.
- He was a visionary and a craftsman (an engraver).
- Complementary opposites: “Without contraries is no progression”, said Blake in his work *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790).

Why early Romantic?

- He rejected neoclassical literary style and themes, stressed the importance of imagination over reason and believed that ideal forms should be created from inner visions not from observations of nature.
- *Songs of Innocence* (1789) → “The Lamb”, written before the outbreak of the French Revolution, Blake’s enthusiasm for liberal ideas was high.
- *Songs of Experience* (1794) → “The Tyger”, written when the Terror in France was at its height. More pessimistic view of life.
- Paired poems comment on each other, offer two different views

Who has created the “Lamb” and the “Tyger”?

- God created both good and evil, the “lamb” and the “tyger”, innocence and experience. Complementary opposites are necessary. The possibility of progress lies in the tension between opposites. The two states coexist not only in the human being but also in the figure of the Creator, who can be the God of Love and innocence and the God of energy and violence at the same time.

Opposites

- Innocence
- Childhood
- Heaven
- Passivity
- Imagination
- Lamb
- Peace
- Tranquillity
- Beauty
- Love
- Attraction

- Experience
- Adulthood
- Hell
- Activity
- Reason
- Tiger
- Revolution
- Energy
- Sublime
- Hate
- Repulsion

Blake the Radical and the Prophet

- Blake was concerned with the social and political problems of his time: he supported the abolition of slavery and the egalitarian principles of the French Revolution. He was disappointed later.
- Blake sympathised with the victims of the Industrial Revolution (children, lower classes)
- His later works are more obscure, prophetic, based on a personal system of “myths”. Esoteric ambiguity.