

Click for a "pdf" print-friendly version of this file

## HUM 3306: History of Ideas--The Age of Enlightenment to the Age of Anxiety

LEARNING ENHANCEMENT SITES:  Here, at the top of some of the unit lectures, will be a variety of outside videos (some serious; some satiric). You are not responsible for them, but please click on the links, pictures, or icons for the perspectives the videos offer. This is an experimental feature of the course, to be integrated more thoroughly in future versions.
Johann Heinrich Fuseli: <u>The Nightmare (1781) Oil on canvas</u> . This painting, roughly contemporary with Shelley's <u>Frankenstein</u> , shows how one type of Romanticism captures turmoiled/conflicted emotions (here violence and sexual seduction).
<u>Chopin Biography &amp; Chopin Music Samples</u> ). Chopin's music parallels the meditative quality of Wordsworth and Keats. <b>DEAD LINKS</b> 9/25/12
<u>Berlioz Biography &amp; Berlioz Music Sample--click on the 1.2.3.4.5. selections midpage</u> ). Berlioz's music parallels the willful, embattled, self-glorifying, tragic and melodramatic Romantic selfhood found in Shelley's <u>Frankenstein</u> . <b>NOW...argh... PAY LINKS.</b> 9/25/12
<u>Decoding the past - In search of the real Frankenstein</u> 10 min A History Channel documentary (part 1-- <b>rather cheesy</b> )

### THE ROMANTIC REBELLION

First, let's get an overview of how the Romantic Era (1780-1830, roughly\*) differs from the Age of Enlightenment (the 18th Century).

\*Note: the Victorian Era, 1830-1900, begins when Queen Victoria becomes the British monarch.

The Romantic Era is often referred to as "the Romantic Rebellion." But don't be misled into thinking that everyone got up and revolted. The cultural and intellectual trajectory of the Enlightenment continues, even within this time period, to dominate the mainstream (and the force and effects of this trajectory extend into our own era): only a minority of free-thinking, enthused poets and writers and artists took issue with some of the negative consequences of the Enlightenment, "rebellious" against these consequences. And many of these poets, writers, and artists--Wordsworth, for example--were quite bourgeois or middle-class in their actual life habits.

AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT	ROMANTIC ERA
1) IN THE ENLIGHTENMENT, WE SEE THE TRIUMPH OF RATIONALITY AND A SCIENTIFIC ATTITUDE TOWARD NATURE	1) ROMANTICS FEAR THAT THIS DETACHED RATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC ATTITUDE SEPARATES US FROM NATURE

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1687: Newton's <u>Principia Mathematica</u> explains laws of physics. Nature can be understood rationally and controlled, casually, by natural laws.</li> <li>• Leads to Deism: religious philosophy that sees nature as a vast mechanism (the world is like a super-complex clock). "Design" in nature means that there is a creator. We may understand God best, not by reading Revelation (the Bible), but by looking at the marvelously ordered cosmos.</li> <li>• Also leads to use value of nature being emphasized (remember Locke's phrase "rationally and industriously" in respect to land use).</li> <li>• 1717 <u>Robinson Crusoe</u> published : "Lockean" man, ingeniously transforms island after being castaway on it. Does not see island life as picturesque.</li> <li>• There is a strong drive to understand nature as a system; and thus knowledge is accumulated and organized, as in these examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Linnaeus in his <u>System of Nature</u> (1735) catalogues plants: emphasis on order/classification.</li> <li>• Diderot and other scholars in France systematically organize knowledge into compendiums = the Encyclopediasts.</li> <li>• <u>Encyclopedia Britannica</u> first published in 1771.</li> <li>• Peale painting, "The Artist in His Museum".</li> <li>• Historical overall ramification: Science pragmatically applied = technological development = Industrial Revolution in the late 18th Century/1st 1/2 of 19th century.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), German "Idealist" philosopher: Basic philosophical premise is that we cannot absolutely know external "reality" because it is always shaped, a priori, by the mind's faculties.</li> <li>• Nature not just an extrinsic mechanism to be rationally understood/manipulated.</li> <li>• Rather, nature evokes emotion, and our emotion may shape and in effect create the landscape.</li> <li>• Landscape valued over land per se (does Locke or Equiano ever see landscape as beautiful?).</li> <li>• What is beauty? does it exist in the subject or the object; or in between?</li> <li>• Natural/organic process valued over technology or mechanical artifice.</li> <li>• Mary Shelly's <u>Frankenstein</u> (1818) demonstrates the failure of the artificial or mechanical to imitate nature.</li> <li>• John Keats, British Romantic poet, says in a letter: "poetry should come as naturally as leaves to a tree": that is, the act of creation should be spontaneous rather than an act of formal labor.</li> </ul>
--	--

<p>2) RISE OF MIDDLE-CLASS AND COMMERCIAL/MIDDLE-CLASS VALUES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Locke emphasizes the centrality of property (and governmental powers that secure property).</li> <li>• The individual increasingly is known in economic terms rather than spiritual terms (jokingly, I said Equiano = emergence of homo economicus).</li> <li>• Franklin: "a penny saved is a penny</li> </ul>	<p>2) ROMANTIC ARTIST TYPICALLY ALIENATED FROM MIDDLE-CLASS AND MIDDLE-CLASS VALUES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Romantic artists are alienated because poetry doesn't sell very well (no longer a patronage system: Locke had a patron).</li> <li>• The Romantic artist tends to be fascinated by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• his/her own psyche.</li> <li>• the exotic (the Orient, altered states of</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
---	--

earned" = Protestant work ethic.

- Adam Smith in The Wealth of Nations (1776) calls England an "island of shop-keepers."

consciousness) or the forbidden.

- the heroic (Napoleon).
- with visionary thinking/ with subconscious processes/dreams.
- The Romantic artist celebrates spontaneity over convention or the routine.
- Romantic artists are likely to value spiritual intuitions over dogmas of established religion.
- Romantic artists are likely to be radically egalitarian. But, again, keep in mind that all of society is not engaged in the "Romantic Rebellion". It is mostly an aesthetic/philosophical counter-culture, with much variation among writers/artists who were accepted/appreciated in their own age or not and in respect to the extent of revolt in their personal lives (The British Romantic poets Shelley and Byron wildly pushed beyond the edge, both sexually and politically; Wordsworth became the consummate Victorian gentleman in his later years, quite stodgy).

### 3) RATIONAL FREE-THINKING/SPECULATION ABOUT IMPROVING SOCIAL MECHANISM

- Laws of government, like Newtonian laws of nature, can be understood and rationally implemented. American Constitution adopted after rational discussion/public debate (Federalist/Anti-Federalist Papers).
- Locke's 1690 Essay Concerning Human Understanding: tabula rasa. Knowledge gained through sensory input; and hence environment/education is important. According to Locke, we are not born with innate ideas or innate corruption/sin. Locke's ideas puncture the Christian notion of inherited sin, derived from Adam & Eve's fall.
- Human nature can be perfected if we are in the right social environment.
- Proto-anthropology develops via sea-exploration. Captain Cook "discovers" Hawai'i; such provides evidence of the "progress" of societies from "savage" to "barbarian" to "civilized," and yet also makes some Europeans intellectuals (such as Jean Jacques-Rousseau, who inaugurates the

### 3) INDIVIDUAL (ENERGY/PERCEPTION/FREEDOM) MORE IMPORTANT THAN SOCIAL SELF OR SOCIAL STABILITY

- Subjective, unique experience celebrated over public or objective values (Rousseau prides himself on being "different").
- "Noble savage"/ rural or "primitive" cultures valued for simplicity and naturalness.
- Urban, commercial life deadens perception: walk in a field, not in a street (See Wordsworth's "The World is too Much With Us", to be read below in an e-text").
- Society corrupts: children and childlike innocence celebrated.
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau: "We are born free, but everywhere are in chains." Go to the e-text below to read Rousseau's diatribe against the illness of civilization:

E-text: Rousseau

"noble savage" idea) doubt the merits of civilization's complications. Rousseau is both part of the Enlightenment Era and the Romantic Era.

***DID YOU MISS THE E-TEXT ABOVE?***

**Romantic poets, novelists, and artists are all unique, but we can usefully categorize them into meditative, reflective brooders (Wordsworth & Keats) or more turbulent visionaries (Blake & Mary Shelley):**

---

## Blake

---

William Blake, one of the earliest British Romantic poets (he was also a painter), was revolutionary in virtually every way imaginable. He fiercely condemned slavery and the poverty of Industrial England, and to that extent was a social critic. And yet, paradoxically, he was most concerned about what he called the "mind forged manacles": the internalized ideologies or empirical philosophical or scientific habits that would keep us from realizing our God-like potential for unbounded imaginative energy. The first poem-- Blake's "And Did Those Feet"--in the e-text below at once rails against the blighting of England and calls for a revolution of the spirit.

E-text: W. Blake--Biography (just read the first several paragraphs)

E-text: Romantic Era Poems

---

## Wordsworth

---

Wordsworth rarely got as fiery as Blake and, although as a young man was committed to progressive politics (he sympathized at first with the egalitarian goals of the French Revolution), long before middle-age settled down to a middle-class lifestyle in one of the most beautifully bucolic locales in England. He did share with Blake, however, a dislike of the Enlightenment objectification or categorizing of nature, which if pursued obsessively he felt would lead to perceptual deadness. In the short poem "The Tables Turned," he says "we murder to dissect" when we see only with a scientific, rationalist eye.

Go to the second poem: [E-text: Romantic Era Poems](#)

Blake looked inwardly to find infinite realms of power; Wordsworth found sublimity in a fusion of the "ego" and "outside world," with each dissolving into each other. In his poem "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth expresses a sublime sense of "something far more deeply interfused"--intertwining self and nature and thereby overcoming the alienating rift between mind (subject/no dimensionality) and what is external to mind (objectified/3-D world--Wordsworth calls it the "unintelligibility" of the world). Wordsworth's fusion with nature, the absorption of his ego into the harmonious "beauteous forms," becomes an emotional/metaphysical form of rapture (however quietly expressed) and is, in effect, a substitute for bonding with God/a deity. I.e., the emotions expressed in the poem, ultimately, are spiritual/metaphysical ones. He seeks a "peak" experience, in which

selfhood is blanked out.

Reading tip: you need to read "Tintern Abbey" aloud (quietly) and slowly. Let the rhythms feel weighty and the language seduce you into a simulated "peak" experience (of course I'm exaggerating, but in reading the poem you should almost get to the sensation of fused ego/world or no ego/no world or pure "being" as an activity of cognition without all those trivial and dramatic narratives spinning in your brain about your schoolwork, your career, your family, the groceries you need to buy and so on and so forth!).

Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" is the third poem here: [E-text: Romantic Era Poems](#)

Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey"--with its somber rhythm and complex syntax/long meaning units--tries to lull us into an almost hypnotic state, in which there is no split between "subject" and "object," just sublime being or perceiving. Yet he also recognizes he is self-conscious and not euphorically at "one" with nature as in his carefree, thoughtless youth. Also, he hears the "Still sad music of humanity"—i.e. death.

---

## Keats

---

Romantics seek to inhabit realms of bliss and beauty, but they are typically vexed by alienation and mortality, which makes the bliss/out-of-time sensation (Keats' "Ode to the Nightingale" the last poem here: [E-text: Romantic Era Poems](#)) all the more poignant. Keats' poetry is full of flowery/Classical references, but once you "get" that he's addressing key psychological/metaphysical issues, the floweriness should not inhibit appreciation. Keats, in a profoundly raw existential way, is expressing the miracle that we all get to perceive beauty/be sentient and yet live within a world of undeniable finitude. It is the latter (death) that makes the former (beauty) all the more exquisite. Christian theology and many other theologies work to console their followers with the promise of resurrection, with the promise that life can emerge from death, or that grace can fill one's heart. The best Romantics were not so consoled. Keats, on his deathbed, did not think he would be ushered into a sweet eternity.

For Keats' sad biography go to this e-text: [E-text: J. Keats--biography \(read the "Life" part after opening paragraph\)](#)

Because what is being explored is metaphysical, about the autonomous soul/self relating to the totality of what is external to the self, social relations are not paramount in either Wordsworth's or Keats' poems. Wordsworth refers to the hermit/vagrant, but is not apparently concerned about socio-economic turmoil that would lead to vagrants miserably hanging out in the woods. Keats refers to men "hearing each other groan" but doesn't talk about, say, the economical cause of their agony.

---

## Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

---

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein attempts the impossible--to capture in novelistic form (a genre usually given to the "realistic" portrayal of life) outsized and unspeakable ambitions. Warning: the interpretation of Frankenstein in this "Prof's" lecture is intended to go far beyond the diluted understanding of the novel you sometimes get in highschool!

Keats's "Ode to Nightingale" and Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" are both relatively quiet, meditative works similar to Chopin's piano music (see enhancement sites at top). In Shelley's Frankenstein romantic selfhood is more willful and embattled, self-glorifying, and tragic or melodramatic--similar to H. Berlioz's symphonic music (see enhancement sites at top).

After you read the novel, check out the interpretive material in our edition that begins around page 300. The lecture notes below follow the themes there, but I've tweaked them to get at more disturbing/profound aspects of Romanticism and identity issues, most particularly the fundamental problem of being human--which is to have both a mind and a body.

## 1. MOTHERHOOD ANXIETIES/BOURGEOIS FAMILIES

- Enlightenment-thru-19th-century: property/inheritance secures the bourgeois family as the fundamental meaningful unit.
- But Romantic rebels tend to find little solace or meaning in the family (Wordsworth's and Keats's poems are about autonomous selves; Mary Shelley and her husband and their pal Lord Byron were very non-conventional, living in exile from England; William Blake, although married, did not want to put any constraints on expressive energy/desire).
- The structure of Frankenstein indicates that one's selfhood/sexuality/ambition/etc. are antithetical to the family unit:

1<sup>st</sup> third: Victor Frankenstein leaves family to create monster/follow his egotistic ambition and will.

2<sup>nd</sup> third: Monster recounts story of being only a voyeur upon the cottage family.

3<sup>rd</sup> third: Victor Frankenstein leaves family again to chase monster (monster destroys family).

- Romantic writers are obsessed with the self being subsumed into something larger than the self, which could mean a fascination with the power of titanic historical figures (Napoleon) or vast, turmoiled vistas (the Alps) or exotic travel (Victor chasing the monster) or quiet harmonious scenes of nature (Wordsworth & Keats).
- But to seek such peak experiences or grandiose bloatings of the self (or self-surrender to the natural scene) requires becoming detached from social relations ... forsaking the family.
- Anxiety about the value/meaning of the family is compounded, in Frankenstein, by anxiety about mothering: the monster as an ugly offspring, the tearing apart of the monster's mate which resembles an aborted fetus or miscarriage, the death of Victor's mother, etc.

## 2. MONSTROSITY/BODY PARTS: GOTHIC HORROR

- Extrapolate away from the monster's description at the beginning of Chapter 5. What makes him monstrous?

- When we are in the womb, presumably we are "at one" with our mother's body; we do not have a separate identity.
- Infants, although physically separate from mommy, do not yet have a sense of the totality/surface of their bodies (an infant doesn't know his/her arm belongs to himself/herself).
- The child grows, and gains a sense of autonomy, of selfhood, of identity largely defined by the integral physical contours of the body/skin.
- The body should be inviolable; we live, complacently, within the intact shell of our skin.
- In gothic/horror films, what repulses/fascinates is the revelation of the inside ... of blood spurting out/of bones protruding thru the flesh, or, perhaps, the internal viscera per se; shards of flesh, body parts. That is, any flesh not animated: which is to say death. Which is, if you think about it, the big anxiety in the novel (why is it that Victor keeps dreaming of his dead mother?).
- To demonstrate the latter point, open up this photo-shop image that reveals ... (warning: disturbing image).
- The monster's stitched together body, comprised of dead body parts, shows the body in fragments rather than being cohesive and integral. Most disturbing and ugly and taboo-breaking, as is also the case with all inside fluids when they inappropriately get outside in the form of spittle, blood, etc.!
- Bliss-out Romanticism (Keats and Wordsworth) involves some sort of harmonious non-body rapture, of oneness with the cosmos, of pure perceiving/being (no subject/object dichotomy).
- Gothic Romanticism (Shelley) focuses on disharmonious body parts and on turmoiled, contradictory emotions. See Fuseli painting in the enhancement site above.

### 3. SECRECY/INTERIORS/TURMOILED PSYCHES

- Romantic writers are almost always fascinated by secrets and interiors (a prime example, in U.S. literature, are E.A. Poe's stories of tormented psyches imprisoned in gothic spaces, e.g., "The Fall of the House of Usher").
- Victor seeks to discover the secrets of the flesh/nature in his experiments.
- But the entire narrative structure is also one that proceeds through a box within a box within a box sequence: Captain Walton's frame story . . . interrupted for Victor F's story, which is inside it . . . which is interrupted for monster's story, which is inside it.
- We don't linger mimetically (an art theory term for "realistic" art) on a stable exterior geography or bourgeois space or locale, but move rapidly thru one exotic locale after another. Shelley is not attempting to mirror reality, but rather is providing an imaginative vision unto "realities" that have nothing to do with day-to-day life, except that the family

is obsessively returned to and evaded, as if family/nurturance is at once desired and spurned.

- The monster continually manifests longing & hate, a desire to be embraced by his father-creator and a desire to destroy him. As for Victor: what if the point of Victor's creating the monster is not so much creating him, but the subconscious sadistic/aggressive pleasure of spurning him (and later tearing apart his mate)?
- Victor loves his wife Elizabeth; but rather than a night of libido, when he marries her, there is a night of murder. The story merges what Freud will call eros (sexual love) and the death instinct (a desire to destroy/be aggressive). See the parallel Fuseli painting below. What is being depicted: imaginative rape or seduction by dark demon forces; is this a nightmare or a dream of desire?

#### 4. TEXTS/LANGUAGE

- What do you think of the prose style? Notice how the description of the landscape or internal mental states is oftentimes given in absolute/catastrophic/extreme terms. Romantic/gothic literature, in contrast to prosaic Realistic novels, is always over-the-top, with the phrasing trying to express the inexpressible. Extreme states of terror, ecstasy, hate, and sublime peak experiences tend to be beyond our capacity to articulate them.

---

**We've covered a lot of intellectual/cultural territory in the last three or four weeks. Please read the summation below to help you get a sense of the *Big Picture: From Enlightenment Through Romanticism*.**

---

- ***From Locke to Equiano***: We studied the emergence of a “possessive selfhood,” a self defined in terms of the delights (and protection) of property and a self, which by objectifying the world, gains rationalist mastery over it.
- ***Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley's Frankenstein***: The Enlightenment bequeaths the Modern age (in the West) the emphasis on property/inheritance (Locke) and stable selfhood. We believe that the family should be entrepreneurially free to pursue its self-interest, free from the tyranny of kings or religious enthusiasts (who would prescribe a particular theology). Bourgeois spaces, however, are critiqued in the Romantic Rebellion Era for a more profound metaphysical need (Wordsworth's disgust with “getting and spending” and yearning for “something far more deeply interfused” or Keats's longing to be out-of-time in his garden with the bird) or in recognition of inward/turmoiled psychology, i.e., Victor's/the monster's mix of love and hate, anticipating Freud.
- ***Our next set of writers, after the Romantics, will add the new concept of evolutionary/geological “deep time” (Darwin) or a concept of social forces/relations changing over vast historical stretches of time (Marx) or layered-time/memories within (Freud)***. The Enlightenment thinkers believed in progress and perfectibility. Progress, however, was seen less in temporal evolutionary or dynamic terms than in the elimination of prejudice and partial perspectives, of tyrannies of the mind and

the social/political sphere (Paine's loathing of all authority and dogma).