The Second Generation of Romantic Poets

The poets of the second generation, George Gordon Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats, all had intense but short lives. They lived through the disillusionment of the post-revolutionary period, the savage violence of the terror and the threatening rise of the Napoleonic Empire.

George Gordon Byron was the prototype of the Romantic poet. He was heavily involved with contemporary social issues and like the hearers of his long narrative poems, Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage and Don Juan, was a melancholy and solitary figure whose action often defied social conventions. Like Shelley, he left England and live on the continent. He pursued adventure in Italy and Greece.

Percy Bysshe Shelley was the most revolutionary and non-conformist of the Romantic poets. He was an individualist and idealist who rejected the institutions of family, church, marriage, and the Christian faith and rebelled against all forms of tyranny. Shelley’s ideas were anarchic and he was considered dangerous by the conservative society of his time. Many of his poems address social and political issues.

John Keats had a really brief life. The main theme of his poetry is the conflict between the real world of suffering, death and decay and the ideal world of beauty, imagination and eternal youth.

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born in 1792 into a prosperous aristocratic family. He was educated at Oxford where his political and philosophical readings led him to co-write a dissertation, The Necessity of Atheism, for which the Oxford authorities expelled him. Shelley’s father demanded a public retraction of the pamphlet, but Shelley refused and instead eloped to Scotland with the sixteen-years-old daughter of a coffee house proprietor.

He returned to Wales, where he tried to set up a commune of “like spirits”. During this period he wrote pamphlets promoting “free love” and condemning royalty, meat-eating and religion.

In 1814 he moved to London, where he came under the influence of the philosopher William Godwin and fell in love with his daughter, Mary. The death of his grandfather solved Shelley’s financial problems and allowed him and Mary to elope abroad.

Having travelled around Europe, they settled in Geneva where, in Summer of 1816, they where joined by Lord Byron. Disillusioned with Britain, Shelley moved with his family to Italy.

In 1822 he moved his family to Lerici. In August 1822 he drowned in the bay of La Spezia. His body was cremated on the beach at Viareggio in the presence of Byron and other friends.

From Defence of Poetry

“Poetry is something divine. It is at once the centre and the, and that to which all science must be referred circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science.” It is “the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds.”

“A poet is the author to others of the highest wisdom, virtue, pleasure and glory.” “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”

John Keats (1795-1821)

John Keats was born in London. His early life was marked by a series of personal tragedies: his father was killed when he was eight years old, his mother died when he was fourteen and one of his younger brothers died in infancy.

He received relatively little formal education and at age sixteen he became an apprentice to an apothecary –surgeon.

In 1816 Keats obtained a licence to practise as an apothecary, but abandoned the profession for poetry.
He became friends with Shelley. He met several of the great literary figure of the day including Wordsworth, who exercised an important influence on his approach to writing poetry. Despite frequent and persistent periods of illness, Keats dedicate himself to writing, and in the Great Year (1819) he produced some of his finest works, including his five great odes: Ode on a Grecian Urn, Ode to Psyche, To Autumn, Ode on Melancholy, and Ode to Nightingale. In 1820 he settled in Rome, where he died in February.

Ode on a Grecian Urn

Keats became enchanted with Greek art after seeing an exposition of sculptures from the Parthenon, held at the British Museum. His poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" written in 1820, is dedicated to an urn that exist only in his mind. The ancient work of art embodies an ideal of absolute, perfect and eternal beauty. This is the only truth to which man can aspire. This ideal is expressed by the silent immobility of the dancers and the musicians painted on the urn.

The poem is about a marble Grecian urn. Various pastoral scenes, that are painted on the urn are described, as the poet reflects on the transient nature of human life. The Ode is ideally divided into two parts, describing two separate scenes on the two sides of the urn. In the first stanza, the poet considers the urn as a living creature; in fact he calls it bride, child and historian. He concludes that while everything is destined to decay, the beauty of art alone lives on forever.

George Gordon Byron (1788-1824)

George Gordon Byron (22 January 1788–19 April 1824), Lord Byron, was an English poet and a leading figure in Romanticism. Among Lord Byron's best-known works are the narrative poems Childe Harold's Pilgrimage and Don Juan... Lord Byron's fame rests not only on his writings but also on his life, which featured extravagant living, numerous love affairs, debts and separation.

Byron was born in London in 1788. On 21 May 1798, the death of his great-uncle made him the 6th Baron Byron, inheriting Newstead Abbey in England. He received his early formal education at Aberdeen Grammar School. In 1801 he was sent to Harrow, where he remained until 1805. After school he went on to Trinity College, Cambridge. Byron published many poems. From 1809 to 1811, Byron went on the Grand Tour then customary for a young nobleman. The Napoleonic Wars forced him to avoid most of Europe, and he instead turned to the Mediterranean. He travelled from England over Spain to Albania and spent time there and in Athens. On this tour, the first two cantos of his epic poem Childe Harold's Pilgrimage were written, though some of the more risqué passages, such as those touching on pederasty, were suppressed before publication. Some early verses which he had published in 1806 were suppressed. He followed those in 1807 with Hours of Idleness, which the Edinburgh Review, a Whig periodical, savagely attacked. In reply, Byron sent forth English Bards and Scotch Reviewers (1809). After his return from his travels, the first two cantos of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage were published in 1812, and were received with acclaim. Ultimately he was to live abroad to escape the censure of British society, where men could be forgiven for sexual misbehaviour only up to a point, one which Byron far surpassed. His private life was the source of much scandal.

In 1815 Byron tried to find stability in marriage, but his wife left him just before the birth of his daughter, Ada. He went to Geneva and became friends with the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Shelley's wife-to-be Mary Godwin. He was also joined by Mary's step-sister, Claire Clairmont, with whom he had a daughter, Allegra.
Byron went to Venice where he lived with nineteen-year-old Countess Teresa Guiccioli and her rich, aged husband. Through Teresa and her family he joined a branch of the Carbonari, a group of conspirators which was fighting against the Austrian oppressors. Byron's health was not good, but when he heard that the Greeks were preparing a revolt against the Turks he joined the insurgents at Missolonghi. In 1824 he died, he was only thirty-six years old. His remains were sent back to England, while his heart was buried at Missolonghi. Byron served as a regional leader of Italy's revolutionary organization in its struggle against Austria, and later travelled to fight against the Turks in the Greek War of Independence, for which the Greeks consider him a national hero. He died from a febrile illness in Missolonghi.

Don Jan
The poem, an unfinished work, is an epic satire in ottava rima, where Byron uses his wit to expose the hypocrisy of a rich society, social and sexual conventions, and sentimentalism. Byron's hero is a sort of energetic, boyish anti-hero. Byron indulges in repeated digressions, in which he speaks both of love, fame, politics, and of poetry in a conversational tone.
One of his most frequent targets are the Romantic poets of the first generation, whom he criticises not only for their poetic inclinations, but also for having turned away from the political ideals of their youth to support conservative views.
Although Byron falls chronologically into the period most commonly associated with Romantic poetry, much of his work looks back to the satiric tradition of Pope and Dryden. In Canto III of Don Juan, he expresses his detestation for poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Romantic fiction
By the beginning of the nineteenth the novel had became a major literary form. Three types of novel flourished in Romantic period: the historical novel, the gothic novel and the novel of manners.
Sir Walter Scott is generally regarded as the inventor of the historical novel. He used well-known historical figures, and gave a complete panorama of the political and social context in which they lived. The two major Romantic elements in Scott's work are the descriptions of nature and the lives of ordinary people.
The public taste for Gothic novels, which had first appeared in the second half of the eighteenth century, continued throughout the Romantic period. Gothic novels were based on tales of macabre, fantastic and supernatural settings. The greatest Gothic novel of the Romantic period is Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.
The novel of manners was another popular form of fiction during the Romantic period. Although little influenced by the Romantic trends of her period, Jane Austen stands out as one of the Romantic Age's greatest writers. Her works are basically classical in that every character must conform to social conversation. The setting are invariably rural and middle class and the concerns are property, decorum, money and marriage. Although Jane Austen was admired in her lifetime, she failed to achieve the high popularity of her contemporaries because she didn't indulge in fashionable Romantic trends.

Mary Shelley (1797-1851)
Mary Shelley was born in London in 1797 to well-known parents. Her father, William Godwin, was a radical writer and philosopher, while her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was a pioneer of women's liberation. She was surrounded by famous philosophers, writers and poets.
At the age of sixteen, she ran away with the twenty-one-years-old poet Percy Shelley. The poet was already married and their relationship shocked society, so she became a social outcast.
The idea to writing Frankenstein came to Mary when she was on holiday in Switzerland in 1816 with Lord Byron and Shelley. They moved to Italy, but their stay there was not a
happy one. Three of their four children died. When Mary was twenty-four years old her husband drowned near La Spezia. She returned to England, where she devoted herself to her son’s welfare and education and continued her career as a professional writer. She died in 1851.

**Frankenstein**

Victor Frankenstein is born and grows up in Geneva before going to university in Ingolstadt. He soon dedicates all his efforts to finding the secret of life. After many years of work, the creature he has been working on comes to life, but Victor is horrified when he sees how grotesque it is.

The monster escapes and lives alone and isolated in a forest for many years. A family live in a cottage nearby; he watches them secretly as they go about their daily business and gradually grows fond of them.

One day he finds a book written by Victor Frankenstein and realises how he has been created. He loses any faith in humanity and sets out to get revenge on his creator.

The scientist follows the monster to the Arctic and vows to destroy him, but dies in the attempt to find him while his monstrous creation wanders off into the icy wastes, never to be seen again.