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Choose: **Unit 1: Romantic and Victorian Poetry**

Week 4: Shelley's Poetry and Life--The Power of the Imagination
Schedule and Assignment (9/4-9/11)

John Murphy - jfmurphy@ua.edu <do-not-reply@blackboard.com> 2:27 PM (1 hour ago)

to

Hi Folks:

I hope all is going well during these challenging times. A few updates and thoughts as we head into the weekend:

--our next weekly materials (Week 4 word doc in romantic poetry folder and related discussion thread) are now up and running.

--this next week will focus on the poet Shelley (a slight adjustment from the projected schedule found in our syllabus) and the power of the imagination.

--I have extended the due date time for your weekly reply posts from Thursday noon to Thursday at midnight, giving you a little more time if needed.

--this week's material follow our usual format. One change to note: for the video component I am offering on the menu a single feature length film, *Haunted Summer*. Don't worry, when you read through the folder's weekly schedule and assignments doc you will see that you might possibly pass on this component if time is too pressing for you. There is flexibility. Anyway, I have included this film because it is a biopic (a biographical film) that may help you conjure up just what these romantic folks were like in person--how they lived, how they responded to nature, the supernatural, and one another. The film is a fictional recreation of a key episode (summer) in their lives; it tends to exaggerate things but it is still an interesting visualization and interpretation of the famous summer when Percy Shelley's wife Mary began composing a work we will read soon--*Frankenstein*.

--otherwise I will begin to read and respond to your Wordsworth/Nature posts in the next few days--if they are anything like the Blake posts they will definitely be enjoyable food for thought.

--And as we leave our Nature week with Wordsworth behind, I will share with you a song/video focused on what is cool about nature, Sting's 'Field of Dreams.' The song is perhaps a bit less philosophical than Wordsworth's meditative lyrics. But for that very reason it is a bouncy and fun--a good way to launch the weekend. And it definitely uses nature as a touchstone for changes over time in a relationship (very Wordsworthian in that regard):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swYdKF1MpWg>

[just copy this link/ google the song if you can't click on above--try to get the 'official video' version--it has the wacky animation--]

Have a good weekend and stay safe--Dr. Murphy

EN 206 Unit 1: Romantic and Victorian Poetry Week 4 (F 9/4—F9/11)
Introduction and Assignments

Week 4: Percy Shelley and the Power of the Imagination

What to Do This Week:

- 1) Read through my initial preliminary introduction to Shelley's poetry just below here in this document. (10-15 minutes)
 - 2) View select videos then listed next in this document. (80 minutes)
 - 3) Read then the assigned poems listed next in this document. (30 minutes)
 - 4) Compose a 'journal entry' in response to one of the journal prompts found in this document and submit it as an original post to the Blackboard Discussion Board Thread for Week 4 by 11:59 on Tuesday September 8. (45 minutes). Then compose and submit two 'reply' posts to our Week 2 Discussion Board Thread on Blackboard by the end (11: 59 pm) of Thursday September 10th.
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1) Introduction: Percy Shelley and the Power of the Imagination

- a) If you did view the Introduction to Romanticism powerpoint assigned at the beginning of the semester ago, you may recall that Shelley was one of the second generation English Romantic poets, writing much of his poetry between 1810 and 1820. And to reiterate a key for this entire unit, responding to the 18th century focus on reason (the Enlightenment), romantic poets such as Shelley wanted to stress the importance of the synthesizing imagination and modulated emotion in understanding the world and our place in it, particularly our relationship to nature.
- b) The Romantic Tradition:
 - a. As with the other romantic poets, Shelley valued the imagination as holistic way of understanding how all the things in the world might fit together in a meaningful organic way, something especially crucial at a time when *the Industrial Revolution was beginning to mechanize the world and the French Revolution had revealed how unfair traditional European societies could be in terms of human equality.*
 - b. As with the other romantics we have so far considered, he was especially keen on looking to nature for the inspiration it could provide.
 - c. And not surprisingly he also explores the purity of childhood (innocence) and the subsequent loss of it as we grow older.
 - d. The Romantic Plot: by now it should perhaps be clear that these key features valued by romantic poetry—childhood, nature, and the imagination—are often

intertwined with one another for these poets. Consider the following romantic 'plot:'

- i. A sensitive, artistic individual, often a poet, is dissatisfied with social conventions, daily routines, political oppression, religious tyranny, industrial alienation, or other limiting features of his or her world.
 - ii. This individual turns to the natural world, a world whose grandeur and tranquility provides an opportunity for reflection and perspective, and whose sublime power provides a catalyst and conduit for elevated consciousness, spiritual transcendence, and at times even hope for social renewal.
 - iii. In some cases this embrace of nature's beauty and power also may lead to a heightened appreciation of childhood innocence and intuition, or perhaps even an encounter with the supernatural lurking in and around nature, a world of the imagination that reveals its own unique truths about the human condition.
- c) The Imagination: In highlighting this week the role of the imagination in Shelley's poetry we might start by defining this key concept:
 - a. The imagination may typically be viewed as a mental faculty that allows us to create new ideas, or images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses. For the romantic poets it was not primarily or solely a means to fabricate fiction or fantasy. Instead, they viewed it as the crucial mental faculty for understanding and even creating the essential truths of our world. In their view, it allowed us to envision the world as intact and whole by synthesizing and fusing together things that we might otherwise not be able to connect.
 - b. And consider this: "The imagination was elevated to a position as the supreme faculty of the mind. This contrasted distinctly with the traditional arguments for the supremacy of reason. The Romantics tended to define and to present the imagination as our ultimate "shaping" or creative power, the approximate human equivalent of the creative powers of nature or even deity. It is dynamic, an active, rather than passive power, with many functions. Imagination is the primary faculty for creating all art. On a broader scale, it is also the faculty that helps humans to constitute reality, for (as Wordsworth suggested), we not only perceive the world around us, but also in part create it. Uniting both reason and feeling (Coleridge described it with the paradoxical phrase, "intellectual intuition"), imagination is extolled as the ultimate synthesizing faculty, enabling humans to reconcile differences and opposites in the world of appearance." (CUNY Humanities Program)
 - c. And finally here is the romantic poet Coleridge's famous definition of the concept, wherein he aligns our own ability to imagine—to synthesize and create—with that of God and his ultimate generative powers as the ultimate

creator: "The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM [God]. . . . The imagination] dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; . . . to idealise and unify."

- d) Nature as a Catalyst for the Imagination: So, while nature is in itself a powerful and singular force that provides both immediate pleasure and inspiration through its tranquil restoration, perhaps its key role is in stimulating the viewer/speaker's own imagination—allowing him or her to then connect to some shared human concern related to morality and/or spirituality.
- e) And in this quote that I have shared with you last week, the crucial reflection in the middle of this sequence is, according to the romantics, an act of imagination—thinking through and imagining what is not immediately present or visible (landscape description>meditation>return to landscape):

" . . . [t]he speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral [imaginative] process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation."

2) View the Video:

- *That Haunted Summer*: For this week's video component, I am going to offer a **different angle**—not a few shorter to mid-sized videos about the poems and key romantic concepts, but an actual feature length film (a biopic) that brings to life a famous episode in the lives of the second generation romantics, in particular Shelley, his wife Mary Shelley (who wrote *Frankenstein*), the poet Lord Byron, and their friend the doctor John Polidori.
- *That Haunted Summer* dates back to 1988. The second generation romantic poets, this group in particular, gained some notoriety for their anti-establishment, rebellious behavior, and this is evident in the lifestyle depicted in the film, particularly in terms of drugs and sex. To be honest, the film does exaggerate some of these features, as critics have noted, yet it definitely gives one a feel for how this group of creative souls lived their bohemian lives in their early 19th century.
- *Frankenstein*: While Shelley and Byron figure significantly in the film, which is set on Lake Geneva in Switzerland near the Alps, its greatest curiosity perhaps is the glimpse it gives into Shelley's wife Mary, particularly her composition of

Frankenstein (which we will be reading soon). The film definitely evokes the Gothic sensibility (dark stormy nights, supernatural occurrences) of the novel.

- **Do I have to view this long film (105 minutes) for our literature course?** Nope.
 - a. if the creative but self-indulgent lifestyle portrayed in the film (which includes drugs and sex) might possibly offend you, then do not watch it.
 - b. Or if you just don't have the hour and a half to watch it during the upcoming week, that is fine. Only one of the four journal entry post prompts deals with it, so you have no official accountability for it as long as you don't choose that one prompt option.
 - c. BUT: perhaps **consider giving it a shot, at least starting it** to get some visuals and ambiance about the world of this group of romantic writers and free-thinkers. And maybe watching it in smaller chunks during the week (as you don't have to write about it for Tuesday's journal) would make it more manageable. Your call.
 - d. *Accessibility*: it is not often the case that feature length films are simply available on the web but this one is old enough to be so. Let's hope there are no glitches: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RD9N5ELUYqw>

3) Read the assigned poems (3): Back to the actual poetry of Percy Shelley:

- a. "Ode to the West Wind:" this poem celebrates the cyclical power of nature. Consider how the speaker's own imagination plays a role here in the conjuring of this vision of renewal, especially in terms of how the imagination can lead to the spiritual powers evident in nature.
- b. "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty:" This poem is quite similar to Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality": a lament over what has been lost over time—something which the speaker is now trying to rediscover. How does this poem compare and contrast to Wordsworth's Immortality Ode in terms of recovering the glory of immortality (here termed 'intellectual beauty')? What role does the imagination play in this recovery?
- c. "Mt Blanc:" this poem is initially like Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey:" i
 - i. the speaker observes a beautiful and inspiring sublime scene from nature: the great Alpine mountain "Mt Blanc."
 - ii. From this initially outward observation and description he then meditates and reflects upon some large philosophical issue—here, imagining how we might see the human condition in relation to the deep sense of time that geological nature provides in a mountain setting.

- iii. Then he returns back to the outward scene with some heightened awareness or fresh insight into the workings of life, particularly our place within it.
- iv. One question: what does Shelley's imaginative speculation, spurred by his reverence for this sublime mountain, reveal? What do you think?

4) Compose a 'journal entry' that you submit as an original post to our Week 4 Discussion Board Thread. [upload via Turnitin a journal entry of 250-300 words by the end of the day on Tuesday September 8th (11:59 pm and then make two reply posts by the end of the day Thursday September 10th –11:59 pm)]. Choose one of the following four prompts for your 'journal entry'(original post):

- a) Write a mini film review of *Haunted Summer*: what worked in it, what didn't—rate it out of 5 stars.
- b) "Ode to the West Wind" celebrates the cyclical power of nature. Discuss how the speaker's own imagination plays a role here in the conjuring of this vision of renewal, especially in terms of how the imagination plays a role in revealing the spiritual powers evident in nature.
- c) "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" is quite similar to Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode": a lament over what has been lost over time, something which the adult speaker is now trying to rediscover. How does this poem compare and contrast this poem to Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" in terms of recovering the glory of immortality (here termed 'intellectual beauty')? What role might the imagination play in this recovery?
- d) In "Mt Blanc" what does Shelley's imaginative speculation, spurred by his reverence for this sublime mountain, reveal? What do you think Shelley learns from observing and thinking about this magnificent mountain?