The Romantic age: a new sensibility. The sublime

The sublime is a feeling associated with the strong emotion we feel in front of intense natural phenomena (storms, hurricanes, waterfalls). It generates fear but also attraction.

Origin: the term has Latin origins and refers to any literary or artistic form that expresses noble, elevated feelings.

Distinction between the beautiful and the sublime: first made by Addison and then by Burke (A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful). The beautiful refers to the qualities of the object (the work of art), while the sublime is the sensation felt by the perceiver.

Different effects of the sublime: minor effects: admiration, respect; major effects: terror, fear.
• **What causes the sublime:** fear of pain, vastness of the ocean, obscurity, powerful sources, the infinite, the unfinished, magnificence and colour (sad, dark colours)

• **Influence on late 18° century literature:** this feeling is central in the works of Romantic poets and Gothic novelists, and is linked to a passion for extreme sensations.

• **Influence on painting:** painters like Turner and Constable wanted to express the sublime in visual art. They were landscape painters and, although in different ways, they emphasized the strength of natural elements and studied the effects of different weather conditions on the landscape. For some aspects, they influenced the French impressionists.

• (See Turner on page 148-149 and Constable on page 172-173)
What view of the sublime do these pictures convey?
Describe the landscapes...
Find similarities and differences between different pictures...
The Romantic Age: historical background

The age of revolutions (historical, social, artistic)

- **American revolution**: American War of Independence (1775-83) and Declaration of Independence from British rule (1776).

- **French revolution** (1789): new ideas of freedom and social justice spread all over Europe.

- **Industrial revolution**: it brought about many social changes.

- **Ideological and artistic revolution**: revolt against classical rules, against authority. In favour of free expression of personal feelings.
The industrial revolution

• Britain moved from an agricultural to an industrial economy: cities expanded rapidly. Terrible living conditions of the new urban working-class, pollution.

• British society was soon divided into rich landowners and industrialists on one side and urban poors on the other.

• Industrial revolution connected to: new sources of power (coal, steam engine), improvements in transport and communication.

• Importance of the *Great Exhibition* of 1851, in London: a show of the new inventions of science and technology, which gave high prestige to Britain.
The French Revolution

At first, the new principles of freedom and equality had many supporters among the English intellectuals (in particular, the first generation of Romantic poets). Later, when the period of terror and violence began, intellectuals were disillusioned and no longer supported the revolution.

Napoleon seized power and began a conquest of Europe, but was defeated by Britain at Trafalgar in 1805 (by admiral Nelson) and finally at Waterloo in 1815 by the Duke of Wellington.

In Britain the principles of the French revolution didn’t generate violent insurrections but only protest movements. However, the Tory government was afraid that the radicals might start an insurrection, so they banned revolutionary writings, limited freedom of speech and association and public demonstrations were broken up by the army.
Important demonstrations in Britain:

• **The Luddite Riots** (1811-12): workers started to break machines in Nottingham, because they believed that the introduction of new machines would lead to unemployment. As a consequence, the destruction of machines became punishable by death.

• **The Peterloo Massacre** (1819): a crowd of 60,000 people were demonstrating in support of parliamentary reform in St. Peter field in Manchester. They were dispersed by the army and 11 people were killed).
First Reforms

• After a period of “Regency”, George IV became king in 1820: Trade Unions were made legal and the prison system was reformed.

• During the reign of William IV (1830 – 37) some important reforms were made:
  – *First Reform Act* (1832): it extended the right to vote to middle class men (however parliament was still largely controlled by the upper-class)
  – *1833: slavery became illegal*, also because of a number of slave revolts that exploded in some British colonies (the first was in the Caribbean). The news of slave massacres reached Britain and public opinion turned against slavery.
  – *1833: the factory Act*: employment of children under 9 was forbidden.
The Literary Background

Origins and use of the word “Romantic”

In England: it appeared in the middle of the 17° cent. And meant “typical of the old romances”.

In France: introduced in the 18° cent by Rousseau, it denoted a feeling (related to landscapes).

In Germany: at the end of the 18° cent it acquired a totally positive meaning and denoted a spiritual and aesthetic value.

Then it defined a literary and artistic movement which spread all over Europe and had as a common feature the rebellion against classicism.

In Germany it was anticipated by the “Sturm und Drang” movement (introduction of the notion of “Sensucht”, a feeling of desire for what is unattainable).

In France: M.me De Stael introduced Romantic ideas and ideals.

In England: Wordsworth wrote the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800, considered the Manifesto of English Romantic poetry, even if there was never a real “literary movement”.

In Italy: Berchet’s *Lettera Semiseria* (1816): the Manifesto of Italian Romanticism.
**Romantic poetry**

- Romanticism in England expressed itself especially in poetry. Novels were mainly of two kinds: realistic/ fantastic (the Gothic novels). No Drama.

- New ideas and new sensibility:
  - Reaction against Enlightenment
  - Influenced by the ideas of the French and American revolutions
  - Emphasis on individual experience (intensity, imagination)
  - Feeling of *The Sublime* (Burke)

<table>
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<th>Augustan</th>
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| • Reason and order  
  • Control of emotion and imagination  
  • Children are treated as little adults, they must be civilised  
  • Society more important than individual; poet expresses social order.  
  • Sophisticated, literary language  
  • References to Classical world | • Feeling and intuition  
  • Free play of imagination, desire to go beyond human limits.  
  • Children are sacred, close to God.  
  • Importance of the poet’s inner life; he is a rebel but also a prophet.  
  • Everyday language.  
  • Observation of nature and everyday situations; reference to the Middle-Ages. |
The first generation of Romantic Poets

- **William Blake**: a “pre-romantic”, he created his own symbolic system, based on his theory of complementary opposites. He was ahead of his time; sensitive to the social changes brought about by the Industrial revolution.

- **Wordsworth**: his poetry started from the direct observation of nature, of simple life. He wanted to show the high moral values present in the life of simple people. Use of common language.

- **Coleridge**: his poetry started inside his mind, great power of imagination. He created fantastic, dream-like worlds and described them as if they were real. He mixed the supernatural with the real.

**Common features**: they wrote some “theory” about poetry, they all at first supported the French Revolution. However, Wordsworth and Coleridge were later disappointed by it.
The second generation of Romantic poets

- **Lord Byron:** the heroes of his poems are usually handsome, solitary, young heroes who go against conventions.

- **Shelley:** a political radical, unconventional, rebel. He saw the poet as a prophet who could change society.

- **Keats:** he believed that the power of poetry lies mainly in its eternity, opposed to the transience of human life. Escape into a world of classical beauty.

They all died very young and away from home, in Mediterranean countries (Greece and Italy), and experienced political disillusionment. Individualism and escapism were stronger in this generation.