

Summary Unit I

English Literature II – 19th Century

SUMMARY UNIT I.

1. INTRODUCTION TO ROMANTICISM
2. JANE AUSTEN'S *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*
3. MARY SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN*

INTRODUCTION TO ROMANTICISM

- ◆ **Wordsworth:** Sensations have a moral value, and are often associated with simple and human objects.
- ◆ **Coleridge:** The stimulus leads to the dream territories of Xanadu. **Literary criticism** - he attempted to distinguish between UNDERSTANDING which gives us a knowledge of the ordinary world and REASON which guides us towards the ultimate spiritual truths. **Poetry** - The poet in C.'s works is no longer the arbitrator of life, but the controller of a dream territory, called out of subconscious.
- ◆ **Shelley:** he is with Blake, the nearest example of poet as prophet. Before he was a poet Shelley was a prophet and his poetry is largely the medium for his prophetic message. He refused to accept life as it is lived, and tried to persuade others of the absence of any necessity for so doing.
- ◆ **Byron:** the creative impulse arises from the exotic pursuit of some mood, or adventure, which man has seldom known before. More than any of the English Romantics he attached importance to his own personality. He felt, as Swift and Sterne had done, the cruel disparity between what life was and what it might be.
- ◆ **John Keats:** much in Keats's verse seems to imply that the life of the sensations, and the contemplation of beauty, are in themselves enough.
- ◆ By Romanticism I mean, very roughly, the writings of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, sharing a general historical situation but not necessarily held together by any essential or prescriptive characteristics (different limits in different countries).
- ◆ In order to find the variety of possible structurings for Romantic self-consciousness it helps to go back to the comprehensively historical explanation of periodization offered by the German Romantic philosophers themselves. For them Romanticism was the essential form of modernity, and modernity itself the result of the displacement of classical and pagan by Christian culture. Because this is a culture of election, of being chosen and choosing, Romanticism is the expression of a division between self and society, and often within the body (body and soul). **It imposes not the peace of being or understanding, but the anxiety of becoming and wondering.**
- ◆ **Romantic poetry.** Ages are marked by literary fashion as much as by their political settlements. We speak commonly Elizabethan drama or of Enlightenment prose. The 18th century has long been conceived as inseparable from his monumental achievement in prose, the French *Encyclopaedia*, Johnson's *Dictionary*, Richardson's *Clarissa*. What is it, then, that makes us commonly associate British Romanticism with poetry?. The Victorians started this conventional association almost as a way of distinguishing their epoch of robust narrative, form that softer emotional, more lyrical world that preceded theirs.
- ◆ Poetry mattered to this age in a way that it has never mattered since. Poetry mattered in a political and social realm. Poetry, though celebrated as surpassing national and even temporal boundaries in the encomium of Wordsworth and Shelley, could be characterized as a distinctly British Passion, or resource. Until the last decades of the 18th century Britain had liberally borrowed its artists as it did its musicians, from the rest of Europe. In poetry only did the country express its heart and soul, preserve a unique national heritage.
- ◆ Creation *ex nihilo* is an image of the purest poetic process, and at one point or another all the canonical British Romantics invoke such a notion of their art. Yet, each of them also conceives himself engaged in 'mental fight' on the side of the future. Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry*, goes so far as to equate the two, suggesting that the purest creativity, or even that entertained from reactionary motives, leads inevitably to future good because the exercise of the imagination is in its essence an ethical act of identification with what we admire.

JANE AUSTEN'S *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

- ◆ The moral outlook of Richardson left her unimpressed, sentimentalism left her equally unmoved. More than anyone since Fielding she regarded the novel as a form of art which required a close and exact discipline. Jane Austen's view of life is a totally realistic one. She has no sentimentality, no time for emotional excess. Though her subject is love and marriage, her books never produce a warm glow, never for a moment aspire to the poetic. She honours the Augustan virtues of moderation, dignity, disciplined emotions and common sense, and she used her ironic wit to deflect heartbreak.
- ◆ A heroine is necessarily central in Austen's novels as in **Richardson's**. The peculiarly artificial and allegorical aspect of a young girl in middle-class society is crucial in the fictions of both because the novel's great subject as both conceived it, was the play between consciousness and conventions.
- ◆ Setting the tone of such a world, Jane Austen's novels revise not only romance and Richardson but, repeatedly, themselves. Their ironic embrace of literary conventions is insistent. Austen began writing novels by satirising them, not because she was interested in literary criticism but because she recognised the haunting shape of romance as a shaper of consciousness, a metaphor for the biological and social limits that mould a girl's life.
- ◆ Jane Austen relies heavily on literary allusions as an artistic strategy: her novels consistently present their vision of life in relation to literature. Austen uses local allusions -verbal echoes of passages, phrases or terms likely to be known to her contemporary audience- frequently.
- ◆ From here we move to Austen's use of verbal allusion in the speech of her characters. Characters whom Austen wants to respect - such as Elizabeth and Darcy - may demonstrate intelligence and extensive reading by alluding to familiar 18th-century sources in ways that are appropriate and interesting. In contrast, characters whom Austen intends to ridicule may be made even more foolish by being struck with ponderous, inappropriate borrowings or with a tendency to drop allusions too often in their conversation (See Mary Bennet intervention on p.16. According to Kenneth Moler, the quotation is taken nearly *verbatim* from *Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments*).
- ◆ Austen's world, for all its considerable comforts, is too small: neither time nor space nor love nor goodness is abundant; the money is all carefully counted, and at balls there are never enough men. After a glimpse of Elizabeth's sewing in the bosom of her boring family we see her, in Chapter 3, being pointed out at a ball where there is, as there was in the Bennet's parlour "a scarcity of gentlemen" and a superfluity of ladies (cita p. 8).
- ◆ There is a plot, an economic one, running underneath the story in *Pride and Prejudice*, one that contemporaries understood automatically but that the years have made a mystery to us.
- ◆ Craven materialism in *Pride and Prejudice* becomes the mark of the fool. Austen's fictional world takes shape from her economic ideology. Austen has Elizabeth, Darcy, and the Gardiners show themselves as excellent domestic economists, in pointed contrast to the fecklessness of vulgar materialists.
- ◆ *Pride and Prejudice* furnishes a critique of the prevailing socio-economic basis of marriage and its inscription in the sentimental novel while ultimately advocating a reformed version of marriage through the courtship plot. Austen optimistically envisions Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage as a relationship fostering personal moral growth, self-discovery, and the mutual benefit of individuals, families, and the wider community.
- ◆ Charlotte Lucas is a critical character in the reading of the novel because she represents the limited options afforded a 19th-century woman who possesses intelligence and ambition, but who lacks beauty, money or social status. In a novel that celebrates its heroine's capacity for making a matrimonial choice informed by moral, psychological and social knowledge, Charlotte provides a troubling reminder that such choice is available only to the fortunate few.
- ◆ Readers discover early that action in Austen's novels is largely carried by speech, especially in *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth keeps her head above the pompous, the platitudinous, and the merely vague by using words precisely. Elizabeth is wary of language and conscious of the inadequacies, and also of how much it tells.
- ◆ The importance of the male-female duet in *Pride and Prejudice* is best seen as the hero and the heroine subvert the form by a systematic violation of the rules of talk. Duets dominate the narrative events in *Pride and Prejudice*, and they carry the moral purpose of the book: the establishment of a rational, unconstrained consensus between a woman and a man.

MARY W. SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN*

- ◆ *Frankenstein's* is one of those literary characters whose names have entered common parlance; everyone recognizes the name and everyone uses it. The popularity of this novel both as a literary classic and as a fuzzy set of ideas bears testimony to the remarkable vividness of Mary Shelley's vision, but it also reflects the protean quality of its central motifs, which can be interpreted from multiple perspectives so as to carry several different messages. *Frankenstein* also provides a useful entry point into some of the central preoccupations of English Romanticism and the question of the relation between the Romantic movement and the expansive rationalism of the Enlightenment.
- ◆ To understand better Mary Shelley's ideology we also have to consider her relationship to her parents. Both Godwin and Wollstonecraft actively advocated fundamental change in social authority, and Mary Shelley often reread their works. Godwin argued for an egalitarian state, free of laws and government, to be organized in small communities in which everyone laboured and studied daily and to be developed through a process of evolutionary, mass education. Wollstonecraft argued for republican ideals and gave particular voice to the concepts of female education and independence.
- ◆ *Frankenstein* contains an elaborate series of frames. Working from the outside in we start with an epistolary narrative, the letters of a Captain Walton to his sister Mrs. Saville. His letters announce the discovery and resume of a stranger -Victor Frankenstein- who tells his bizarre story to Walton (who then includes it in his letters home). Frankenstein's story contains yet another, the confessions of the monstrous creature he has created and abandoned; and the monster includes within his own narrative the story of the deLaceys, the family of exiles he tries pathetically and unsuccessfully to adopt as his own. On the whole, the novel fails to provide significant differences in tone diction and sentence structure (that alone can serve in a written text to represent individual human voices) and so blurs the distinction that it asks us to make between the voices of its characters.
- ◆ Through the twin narratives of Walton and Frankenstein Mary Shelley presents two models of scientific progress. Both men are obsessed by the urge to discover and both pursue that obsession, enticed by the possibility of "immortality and power" that success will bring. In the end the pursuit kills Frankenstein while Walton survives. What is the difference? The difference is the sailors on Walton's expedition ship. Frankenstein works alone but Walton works with a crew and it is the crew who force him to turn back when they realise that the drive through the polar ice will cost everyone's lives.
- ◆ The Elizabeth of Shelley's 1818 version of *Frankenstein* is a very different character from the one who appears in the 1831 version. As Mary Poovey and others have noted, the Elizabeth of 1818 is a more realistic and believable woman, while the Elizabeth of 1831 is an elevated and sentimentalized type.
- ◆ If we decide to explore Mary Shelley's specifically Romantic concerns in the novel, we can see how the Creature takes his place in a long line of Cain figures in English Romanticism, beginning with Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner' (to whom Walton refers in his second letter, "I am going to unexplored regions, to 'the land of mist and snow'; but I shall kill no albatross, therefore do not be alarmed for my safety", p. 10). Like his creator, Frankenstein, the Creature has much in common with the self-image of Romantic Artists. Isolated from ordinary humanity, the Creature is simultaneously cursed and blessed: cursed with an inability to participate in the normal joys of humanity but blessed with special insights into the human condition precisely as a result of its isolation. If we choose to break out from a conventional response to the Creature, we understand that its monstrousness is in part social construction. The Creature's tragedy is that, forced to see himself through the eyes of others, it ultimately accepts their view of it as monstrous.
- ◆ Proper education, according to Mary Shelley, opens the mind to the realization that love-domestic and universal-not power, makes life valuable. She works out this belief on many levels but primarily through the interaction of Frankenstein and his Creature. In a reversal of the Promethean myth, this new Prometheus fails to take responsibility for his creation. Ironically, Frankenstein's failure to care for the Creature locks them inextricably together. Indeed they are often studied as "self" and "other self", with personal boundaries broken as so many boundaries of the era were broken. Frankenstein' egocentric quest for power results in the creation of a new order he is incapable of accepting-he flees from the Creature. And the Creature, constructed of ill-assorted parts from the old order, cannot exist as Rousseau's noble savage in a world that values conformity and authoritarian power. *Frankenstein* can be understood as representing an ambivalent vision of this newly forming society, a society that will demand conscious and responsible choices or be condemned to its own self-destruction. The novel, in confronting an

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uncertain future in an atmosphere of increasing social and technological mobility and change, questions whether reliable values can exist in an era in which change is fundamental and respected.

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