THE SECOND GENERATION OF ROMANTIC POETS: BYRON, SHELLEY and KEATS

- they all left England, visited Italy and died young
- return to complex forms of versification and richer language
- interest in the world of ancient Greece
- more interest in Politics (especially Byron)
- different view of Nature (less idealistic)
George Gordon Byron

1. Life (1788 – 1824)

- In 1809 he set out on a tour of Spain, Portugal, Malta, Albania, Greece and the Middle East.
- After his return to England in 1812, he published the first ‘two cantos’ of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*.
- He became a literary and social celebrity, but then he left England in 1816, never to return.
- He lived in Geneva, where he became a friend of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley.
- He moved to Venice, where he began his masterpiece, the mock-epic *Don Juan*.
- In 1819 he moved to Milan where he became involved in the patriotic plots against Austrian rule.
- He committed himself to the Greek struggle of independence from Turkey.
- His heart is buried in Greece, his body is interred in England.
2. Main works

- *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812-1818).
- *Manfred*, a tragedy (1817).
- *Don Juan* (1819-24).

Jonny Lee Miller is Byron, in the BBC drama Byron.
George Gordon Byron

4. The Byronic hero

• A moody, restless and mysterious romantic rebel.
• Hides some sin or secret in his past.
• Characterised by proud individualism.
• Rejects the conventional moral rules of society.
• An outsider, isolated and attractive at the same time.
George Gordon Byron

4. The Byronic hero

- He is of noble birth, but wild and rough in his manners.
- His looks are hard, but handsome.
- Has a great sensibility to nature and beauty.
- Bored with the excesses of the world.
- Women cannot resist him, but he refuses their love.
George Gordon Byron

5. Byron’s individualism

- Byron firmly believed in individual liberty
- He hated any sort of constraint
- He wished to be himself without compromises
- He denounced the evils of society by using satire
- His mood and choice of themes were romantic
6. Byron’s view of nature

- **Nature** is not a source of consolation and joy.
- It does not embody any theory.
- It has no message to convey.

the **wildest** and most **exotic natural landscapes reflect** the poet’s **mood** and **feelings**
1. Life (1795 – 1821)

- **Born** in London in 1795.
- Well educated at a school in Enfield.
- Early **passion for reading poetry**.
- Family **plagued by death**.
- **Doomed love story** with Fanny Brawne owing to his poverty and bad health
- Own illness **tuberculosis**.
- **Died** in 1821 in Rome.
2. Main works

1818

- *Endymion*, a long, mythological poem
- *The Eve of St Agnes*, characterised by romantic features.
- *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, a ballad which displayed a taste for medieval themes and form.
- *The great Odes*.

1820

- *Hyperion*, begun in 1818 and published in 1820.
3. His poetry

- His **lyrical poems** are **not fragments of a spiritual autobiography**, like the lyrics of Shelley and Byron.

- A **personal experience is behind the odes** of 1818, it is not their substance.

- The pronoun ‘I’ stands for **a universal human being**.

- The common Romantic tendency to identify scenes and landscapes with subjective moods and emotions is rarely present in his poetry.
4. Keats and imagination

Keats’s belief in the supreme value of imagination made him a Romantic poet.

His imagination takes two main forms:
1. the world of his poetry imagined, artificial;
2. his poetry comes from imagination his work is a vision of what he would like human life to be like.
5. Keats’s beauty

Beauty

strikes his imagination.

is perceived by the senses; all the senses are involved in this process.

This ‘physical beauty’ is caught in all the forms nature acquires.

Physical beauty can also produce a much deeper experience of joy, which introduces a sort of ‘spiritual beauty’, that is the one of love, friendship, poetry.

These two kinds of beauty are closely interwoven, since the former, linked to life, enjoyment, decay and death, is the expression of the latter, related to eternity.
The poet has what he called ‘negative capability’:

refers to the capability the poet has to deny his certainties and personality in order to identify himself with the object of his inspiration.

When the poet can rely on this negative capability, he is able to seek sensation, which is the basis of knowledge since it leads to beauty and truth, and allows him to render it through poetry.

A new view of the poet’s task.
7. Imagery in Keats

- **Synaesthetic**: fusion of visual and tactile senses.
- **Concrete**: tangible material forms.
- **Pictorial**: visual often personified.
- **Compressed**: condensed images to highlight intensity.
1. Life (1792 –1822)

- **Born** in Sussex in 1792.
- **Studied** at Oxford University from which he **was expelled** because of a radical pamphlet, *The Necessity of Atheism*.
- **Married** to 16-year-old Harriet Westbrook. Some years later he **ran away with Mary Godwin**, daughter of William Godwin.
- In 1818 Shelley and Mary left England and settled in Italy.
- **Died** in 1822 while sailing in the Bay of Spezia, near Lerici.
2. Main works

- **1817**: *The Revolt of Islam*, a revolutionary poem about the power of love.
- **1819**: *Ode to the West Wind*.
- **1819**: *The Cenci*, a verse tragedy.
- **1820**: *Prometheus Unbound*, a lyrical drama dealing with the theme of intellectual rebellion.
- **1821**: *A Defence of Poetry*, an unfinished essay concerning the importance of poetry.
3. Themes

Shelley’s works reveal:

- his restless spirit;
- his refusal of social conventions and political oppression;
- his faith in a better future.

He believed in freedom and love the remedies for the faults and evils of society.

Through love man could overcome any political, moral and social conventions.
4. Shelley’s poetry

Poetry

- the expression of imagination
- understood as revolutionary creativity, seriously meant to change the reality of an increasingly material world
5. Shelley’s nature

Nature

Unlike Wordsworth, it is not the real world.

It is a beautiful veil that hides the eternal truth of the Divine Spirit.

It provides the poet with beautiful images, such as the wind.

The favourite refuge from the disappointment and injustice of the ordinary world.

The interlocutor of the poet’s melancholy dreams and of his hopes for a better future.
6. The poet’s task

The poet is

• a prophet;

• a Titan challenging the cosmos.

His task is to help mankind to reach an ideal world where freedom, love and beauty are delivered from tyranny, destruction and alienation.
7. *Ode to the West Wind*

The wild autumn wind — a living symbol of the spiritual forces able

• to regenerate the fading or decadent life of nations;

• to help heroic spirits;

• to scatter their burning words, ‘like ashes from an unextinguished hearth’, among mankind.

J. Turner, *Waves breaking against the wind*, 1835, London, Tate