

College of Education

Department of English

Third Stage (Morning)

Lecture 1



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The pre-romantic age

Between classicism and romanticism

The age of classicism is followed by a **transitional period** known as **the pre-romantic age** which comes from 1770 to 1798 about the last thirty years of the 18th century. In fact in this period, in the second half of the 18th century, we can observe a new sensibility in poetry and a new generation of poets was arising. These poets used subjective, autobiographical materials which marked a new trend towards the expression of a lyrical and personal experience of life. They were less intellectual and more emotional presenting a variety of emotional states of the soul.

The main themes of the pre-romantic literature may be:

- a) **a return to nature** expressed through an interest in the picturesque, the wild, the grandiose, the lonely, the desolate.

- b) **the cult of sensibility and melancholy** expressed by the love of ruins, the idealization of solitude, meditations on man's unhappy destiny.

- c) **a cult of the primitive life** with a difference of civilization and a longing for a last earthly paradise in which man lived in communication with nature: a typical expression of this is the myth of the "**noble savage**".

- d) **a love of the strange, the exotic, the sublime.**

- e) **an interest in the middle age** which is considered a mysterious and barbarous period.

- f) **an interest in gothic architecture** as a typical expression of the medieval spirit.
- g) **the claim of taste and imagination** against the reason (imagination must not be subordinated to the intellect).

We have some forerunners of this pre-romantic period: the most important of these is **James Thomson** (1700-1748) which is considered the most important “**nature poet**” of the **early romantic age** who represented the first remarkable break with the neo-classic view for his treatment of the nature. **Thomson** saw **nature** in its physical details rather than abstract details. Not static but in motion. He reflected on the character of primitive man who contrasted with civilized man. His masterpiece is “The seasons” a poem in four books dedicated to a different season of the year which shows his great interest of nature. Another poem by Thomson is “The castle of Indolence” in which the poet explains how the magician Indolence attracts pilgrims of the earth to its castle and how this Indolence reduces them to a state of brutishness.

THE TRANSITIONAL POETS

The transitional poetry marks the beginning of a reaction against the rational, intellectual, formal, artificial and unromantic poetry of the age of Pope and Johnson. It was marked by a strong reaction against stereotyped rules. The transitional poets derived inspiration from Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton. Unlike the Augustan poetry, it is poetry of countryside, of common and ordinary people, and not of the fashionable, aristocratic society and town life. Love of nature and human life characterise this poetry. The transitional poets revolted against the conventional poetic style and diction of the Augustan poetry. They aimed at achieving simplicity of expression. This poetry appealed to emotions and imagination. It is marked by the development of naturalism. Crabbe, Burns, Blake and many others are the pioneers of naturalism. The transitional poets are the forerunners of the splendid outburst of the romantic poetry of the nineteenth century. Let’s study briefly about these poets and their works.

I. James Thomson (1700-48) was the first to bring the new note in poetry both in his *Seasons* and *The Castle of Indolence*. *The Seasons* is a blank verse poem and consists of a long series of descriptive passages dealing with natural scenes. Though its style is clumsy, the treatment is refreshing, full of acute observation and acute joy

in nature. *The Castle of Indolence* is written in Spenserian Stanza and is remarkable for suggestiveness, dreamy melancholy and harmonious versification.

II. Oliver Goldsmith (1728-74) represents the poetic tradition of neo-classicism so far as the use of the heroic couplet is concerned. His treatment of nature and rural life, note of human sympathy and simplicity of expression are characteristics of the transitional poetry. His first poem, *The Traveller* is written in the heroic couplet and deals with his wanderings through Europe. He uses simple and polished language. He reveals human sympathy for the sufferings of the poor. In *The Deserted Village* Goldsmith described the memories of his youth.

III. Thomas Gray (1716-71) epitomizes the changes which were coming, over the literature of his age. He was —a born poet, fell upon an age of prose. His early poems *Hymn to Adversity* and the odes *To Spring* and *On a Distant Prospect of Eton College* strike the note of melancholy that characterizes the entire poetry of this period. Nature is described as a suitable background for the play of human emotions. His finest poem *The Elegy Written in A country Churchyard* has many new features in it. It is remarkable for the minute observation in the descriptions of nature, love and sympathy for the humble and the deprived, expression of the primary emotions of human life. His two odes, *The Progress of Poesy* and *The Bard* express the new conception of the poet as an inspired singer. The first shows Milton's influence as regards melody and variety of expression. *The Bard* is even more romantic and original. It breaks with the classical school and proclaims a literary declaration of independence. In *The Fatal Sisters* and *The Descent of Odin* he reveals interest in noise legends.

IV. William Collins (1721-59) wrote his first work *Oriental Eclogues* in prevailing mechanical couplets but it is romantic in spirit and feeling. His *Ode To Evening* is instinct with a sweet tenderness, a subdued pathos, love of nature and a magical enchantment of phrase. His *Ode To Popular Superstitions of the Highlands* introduced a new world of witches, fairies and medieval kings. So it strikes a new and interesting note in romantic revival.

V. William Cowper (1731-1800) is an immediate forerunner of the romantics. His first volume of poems, containing *The Progress of Error, Truth, Table Talk* etc. shows the influence of the neo-classical rules. *The Tasks* is Cowper's longest and finest poem. His descriptions of homely scenes of woods and brooks, of plowmen and teamsters and the letter carriers indicate the dawn of a new era in poetry. Cowper was a pioneer who preached the gospel —return to nature. He foreshadowed Wordsworth and Byron. In his love of nature, his emotional response to it and in his sympathetic handling of rural life he certainly anticipates Wordsworth. His minor poems *On the Receipt of My Mother's Picture* and *Alexander Selkirk* show the rise of romanticism in English poetry.

VI. George Crabbe (1754-1832) is a pioneer of the naturalistic reaction against the Augustan tradition. His main poetical works are written in the heroic couplet but thematically they deal with the life of simple country folk and show his sincerity, sympathy and acute observation of human life. His descriptions of nature are neither sentimental nor picturesque nor sentimental. They are characterized by sincerity and minute observation. As a pioneer of the naturalistic reaction against the Augustan tradition, Crabbe's place is certainly very high.

VII. Mark Akenside (1721-1770) began his poetic career with *Epistle to Curio* which is a brilliant satire in the Augustan tradition. His best known poem *The Pleasures of Imagination* is a long poem in Miltonic blank verse. It contains some fine descriptive passages on a nature.

VIII. Other poets of the transitional period are Christopher Smart, Bishop Percy, Thomas Chatterton and James Macpherson. Percy's *Reliques* revived the romance of the middle Ages. He also revived the ballad which was deftly used by Coleridge and Keats.

The Graveyard school of poetry(the poetry of melancholy)

Thomas Gray, (born Dec. 26, 1716, London—died July 30, 1771, [Cambridge](#), Cambridgeshire, Eng.), English poet whose “An Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard” is one of the best known of English lyric poems. Although his literary output was slight, he was the dominant poetic figure in the mid-18th century and a [precursor](#) of the [Romantic movement](#).

Born into a prosperous but unhappy home, Gray was the sole survivor of 12 children of a harsh and violent father and a long-suffering mother, who operated a millinery business to educate him. A delicate and studious boy, he was sent to Eton in 1725 at the age of eight. There he formed a “Quadruple Alliance” with three other boys who liked [poetry](#) and classics and disliked rowdy [sports](#) and the Hogarthian manners of the period. They were [Horace Walpole](#), the son of the prime minister; the [precocious](#) poet Richard West, who was closest to Gray; and Thomas Ashton. The style of life Gray developed at Eton, devoted to quiet study, the pleasures of the imagination, and a few understanding friends, was to persist for the rest of his years.

In 1734 he entered Peterhouse, Cambridge, where he began to write Latin verse of considerable merit. He left in 1738 without a degree and set out in 1739 with Walpole on a grand tour of France, Switzerland, and Italy at [Sir Robert Walpole’s](#) expense. At first all went well, but in 1741 they quarreled—possibly over Gray’s preferences for museums and scenery to Walpole’s interest in lighter social pursuits—and Gray returned to [England](#). They were [reconciled](#) in 1745 on Walpole’s [initiative](#) and remained somewhat cooler friends for the rest of their lives.

In 1742 Gray settled at Cambridge. That same year West died, an event that affected him profoundly. Gray had begun to write English poems, among which some of the best were “Ode on the Spring,” “Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West,” “Hymn to Adversity,” and “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College.” They revealed his maturity, ease and [felicity](#) of expression, [wistful melancholy](#), and the ability to phrase truisms in striking, quotable lines, such as “where ignorance is bliss, ’Tis folly to be wise.” The Eton ode was published in 1747 and again in 1748 along with “Ode on the Spring.” They attracted no attention.

A development in the direction of the [romanticism](#) took place toward **the middle of the century** with an influential group of poets know as “**the Graveyard**

school” because of their melancholy tone and the choice of cemeteries, tombs, ruins, desolate landscapes and stormy skies as the setting for their poems. The main representative poets of this school are Edward Young and Thomas Gray.