Introduction to Romantic, Gothic, and Victorian Literature
Literary Timeline

– The Enlightenment (~ 1685-1815, “The Age of Reason”)
  – An intellectual/philosophical movement that emphasized reason and science; traditional status quo called into question (e.g. religion, class divisions, etc.)
  – sometimes referred to as “the long 18th century”

– The Romantic Period (~1785-1830)
  – Somewhat of a rejection of/reaction to Enlightenment ideals.
  – Praises imagination over reason, emotions over logic, and intuition over science
  – Romantic writers replaced the static universal heroes of classical 18th-century literature with more complex, idiosyncratic characters. Shift in focus to the hero’s passions and inner struggles;
  – emphasis on the examination of human personality and its moods and mental potentialities
  – praise of nature

– The Victorian Period (1837-1901)
  – Named for the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901)
  – literature often focuses on class divisions and social concerns of the time
  – writing style is still heavily influenced by the Romantics
Genre: **Romanticism**

- ~ late 1700s – mid 1800s (dates may vary)
  - After the *Enlightenment Era* & before the *Victorian era*, but continues with both

**IN LITERATURE & ART:**

- **FEELINGS, EMOTION, IMAGINATION & INTUITION** take priority over logic & facts (the ideals at the heart of the earlier Enlightenment Period)
- Emphasis on *NATURE*… Nature is a source of beauty, truth, and the sublime
  - Nature imagery is used in to help convey emotion and/or mood
- Focus on the **INDIVIDUAL**/individualism
- Reflects the importance of **SOLITUDE**, personal **REFLECTION**, & **INTROSPECTION**
  - Many writers present a “solitary protagonist who is separated from society because he has rejected it, or because it has rejected him.”
- Interest in the **MYSTICAL** and **SUPERNATURAL**

*Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.*

*William Wordsworth*
**Genre:** *Gothic literature*

- Gothic novels evolved during the *Romantic Period*
  - *These novels often reflect the “dark, irrational side of human nature …beneath the controlled and ordered surfaces of the conscious mind.”*

- **SOME GOTHIC ELEMENTS:**
  - **Sullen landscape:**
    - *Barren countryside (think English moor), rugged mountains, dense forests, etc.*
  - **Ominous weather** – *storms, lightning, thunder, fog, etc.*
  - **Sinister setting:**
    - *Decaying mansions or castles with dark dungeons, secret passages, dark corridors, labyrinths, or winding stairs, spooky basements or attics, etc.*
  - **Supernatural elements:** *omens, beings, &/or phenomena*
  - **Characters:** *Damsel in distress, villain-hero, villain*
Genre: Gothic literature

- GOTHIC ELEMENTS CONT.:

  - Isolation
    - Characters are often portrayed in physical and/or psychological isolation due to the setting and/or society.

  - Madness
    - many Gothic stories place an emphasis on madness or a disordered state of mind

  - The Doppelganger (German for “double-goer” or “double-walker”)
    - a frequent motif in gothic fiction
    - the doppelganger or alter ego allows for an exploration of human duality. (e.g. Charles Darnay & Sydney Carton, Batman & Bruce Wayne)
    - figure explores the darkness that lurks in one’s psyche; haunting of a second self
    - often represents a figure of repression
    - “Doppelganger tales undermine the modern idea of the self as invulnerable and in control of its passions” (Alison Milbank)
Examples of 19th century Gothic literature...
Gothic Literature

https://youtu.be/gNohDegna0Q
The Byronic hero

Character type popularized during the Romantic period by the famous poet, Lord Byron; a.k.a the Romantic hero

- **Characteristics:**
  - An **anti-hero** – rebels against conventional modes of behavior/thought in some way; possesses character traits that are not traditionally heroic
  - Dark, handsome appearance
  - Wandering, searching, or brooding behavior
  - Brilliant, but cynical & self-destructive (a “broody babe magnet”)
  - Haunted by some secret sin or crime; sometimes hints of forbidden love
  - Heroic in the sense that he appeals to society by standing apart from society
  - Superior, but wounded or unrewarded
  - What other literary or film characters would fit this archetype?
Genre: *Victorian Literature*

− Reflects the major economic & social changes happening (e.g. the Industrial Revolution, challenges to religious faith, evolution of women’s roles, etc.),

→ Controversies that concerned Victorians (and are reflected in literature):
  1. Evolution – advances in science; conflict of science & religion
  2. Industrialism – emergence of industry, urbanization, etc.
  3. “The Woman Question” – women’s roles in society come into question & are challenged
  4. Great Britain’s identity as an imperial power

− Novels often contain a realistic portrayal of social life and/or an an idealized portraits of difficult lives in which hard work, perseverance, love and luck win out in the end. Virtue is rewarded; wrongdoers are punished
− novels often entail a moral lesson
− Victorians were very class conscious - class divisions are a common subject matter in the literature
Victorian Class Structure

- Industrial Revolution brings major changes to English social structure
  - Victorian Era sees the emergence of a middle class (previously only aristocrats & gentry)
- Victorians were obsessed with class and placing people in certain categories – there was great stratification between upper and lower classes
- Many elite believed that members of the lower class were deserving of their poverty because they failed to improve their situations
- Many writers of the period explore and/or criticize social stratification - e.g. Charles Dickens, the Brontes

Consider how class consciousness is evident in the literature we read; what is the author’s attitude toward the social status quo?
In 19th century England, men & women occupied separate “spheres” — men occupied the public (& political) sphere; women considered better suited to the domestic sphere.

Women had limited rights (e.g. education, career, voting, finances, owning property, etc.) — all belonged to men.

Middle class women were educated in accomplishments (playing piano, singing, drawing, etc.)

Being accomplished = better marriage material; advantageous marriage = financial security & social status.

Highly intellectual women were looked down upon & considered “unfeminine”.

Mostly, women were expected to be meek, virtuous, and self-abnegating… i.e. be pleasant, get married, have children.
"Wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her."
Victorian depiction of an idealized wife and mother.
Critical Theory Recap:
refer to your notes handout from the 1st nine weeks

- Formalist
- Marxist
- Gender
  - Feminist
- Psychological
  - Maslow, Kohlberg, Freud
- Historian*
- Biographical*