

Romantic Visions

Student Handbook — the poets of the Romantic era, c. 1785–1832. Keep this beside you for every lesson.

How to use this handbook

- **Before class:** skim the relevant poet profile and vocabulary so new names land on prepared ground.
- **In class:** annotate the full-text poem slides (projected or printed from the deck appendix) — this booklet is your reference layer, not a substitute for marginalia.
- **Before assessment:** work through the revision checklist (final page) and rehearse one thesis per comparative pairing.

The unit at a glance

Component	What you will do
Contexts	Explain how revolution, industry and new ideas about imagination shaped the poetry — and weave context into analysis rather than bolting it on.
Texts	Read closely: Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats — plus recovered voices beyond the canon.
Skills	Apply the five-step close read; name forms and techniques; build contestable theses; compare texts and evaluate rival readings.
Assessment	Comparative analytical essay · recorded close-reading oral · creative transformation + reflective commentary.

“Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very Heaven!”

William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), recalling the French Revolution’s early hope

Golden rule of ATAR Literature: every observation must answer *so what?* Name the technique → show its effect on meaning → connect it to your argument. Feature-spotting earns nothing; analysis of effect earns everything.

1 • Context Timeline

Year	Event & why it matters
1757–95	Births of the Big Six: Blake 1757 · Wordsworth 1770 · Coleridge 1772 · Byron 1788 · Shelley 1792 · Keats 1795.
1789	French Revolution begins; initial euphoria among British intellectuals — Wordsworth’s “very Heaven.”
1793–94	The Terror: hope curdles into disillusion — the emotional engine of first-generation poetry.
1798	Lyrical Ballads published anonymously (Wordsworth & Coleridge): conventional birth-date of English Romanticism.
1800–02	Wordsworth’s Preface : poetry as “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” in common speech.
1811–16	Luddite riots; enclosure and industrial distress intensify; war with France ends (1815).
1816	The Geneva summer: Byron, Shelley, Mary Godwin; the ghost-story contest conceives <i>Frankenstein</i> .
1819	Peterloo Massacre (→ Shelley’s <i>Mask of Anarchy</i>) AND Keats’s great-ode year.
1821–24	Second generation dies young abroad: Keats (25, Rome), Shelley (29, drowned off Italy), Byron (36, Greece).
1832 / 50	Reform Act closes the era; <i>The Prelude</i> appears posthumously (1850).

2 • Three Revolutions Behind the Poems

Political

Liberty → Terror → repression at home (treason trials, Peterloo). Poetry becomes the voice of liberty betrayed and deferred.

Industrial

Factories, smoke, child labour, enclosure. Nature becomes nostalgic refuge; the city becomes evidence of institutional failure.

Intellectual

Reaction against Enlightenment rationalism; imagination reclaimed as a way of knowing; Burke’s *Sublime* (1757) rewrites aesthetics.

3 • Enlightenment vs Romanticism

Value	Enlightenment (c.1650–1790)	Romanticism (c.1785–1832)
Authority	Reason, science, order	Imagination, feeling, intuition
Human being	Universal “rational man”	Unique individual — genius, outcast, child
Nature	A machine to measure and master	Living presence, moral teacher, sublime power
Art	Classical rules & decorum	Organic form; “spontaneous overflow”
Language	Polished, elevated diction	“Language really used by men”
Society	Gradual reform, civility	Revolutionary energy; suspicion of institutions

Exam instinct: treat these as a spectrum, not a wall. Strong essays complicate the binary — e.g., Romantic political hopes are themselves Enlightenment inheritances.

4 • What Makes a Poem “Romantic”?

Core values

- **Imagination** — supreme creative faculty; truth beyond reason
- **Emotion & sincerity** — authentic feeling over polish
- **Nature** — animate, sacred, instructive
- **The sublime** — awe + terror overwhelming the self
- **Individualism** — visionary voice; noble outsider

Recurring motifs

- **Childhood** innocence & vision lost
- **The supernatural** — mariners, spectres, enchanted dames
- **Wandering & exile** as inward quest
- **Revolution**, liberty, betrayal
- **Mortality & memory**; art’s struggle to preserve

5 • Critical Vocabulary You Must Own

Term	Meaning & source
The Sublime	Vastness fused with terror overwhelming comprehension — Burke (1757): mountains, storms, ocean night.
Negative capability	Keats (1817): being “in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”
Suspension of disbelief	Coleridge (<i>Biographia Literaria</i> , 1817): poetic faith granted to the supernatural.
Byronic hero	Brooding magnetic outsider marked by a guilty past (Childe Harold, Manfred); descends into Gothic fiction & modern antiheroes.
Organic form	Form growing from inner impulse rather than external rules.
Ekphrasis	Poem describing a visual artwork — “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”
Pathetic fallacy	Nature charged with human emotion (term coined later by Ruskin).
Apostrophe	Direct address to an absent thing — West Wind, Skylark, Urn, Star.
Contraries	Blake: necessary opposites — “Without Contraries is no progression.” Innocence ↔ Experience.
Spots of time	Wordsworth: memory-nuggets that nourish and repair the mind (<i>The Prelude</i>).

Misattribution alert: negative capability = KEATS · suspension of disbelief = COLERIDGE · pathetic fallacy = RUSKIN (later). Attribution errors cost credibility marks.

6 • Poet Profiles

FIRST GENERATION • 1757–1827

William Blake

London engraver-visionary; invented illuminated printing; self-published his mythologies; died poor, unmarked grave.

Know: Songs of Innocence & of Experience · “London” · “The Tyger” & “The Lamb”

Killer quote: “The mind-forg’d manacles I hear”

FIRST GENERATION • 1770–1850

William Wordsworth

Lake District walker; revolutionary turned establishment; theorist of memory and common speech; Laureate 1843.

Know: Lyrical Ballads Preface · Tintern Abbey · Westminster Bridge · daffodils

Killer quote: “emotion recollected in tranquillity”

FIRST GENERATION • 1772–1834

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Dreamer and opium addict; supernatural balladeer; became England’s greatest critic-sage at Highgate.

Know: Ancient Mariner · Kubla Khan · Frost at Midnight · Biographia Literaria

Killer quote: “A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!”

SECOND GENERATION • 1788–1824

Lord Byron

First modern celebrity: overnight fame, scandal, self-exile; died at 36 supporting Greek independence.

Know: Childe Harold · Don Juan · Manfred · She Walks in Beauty

Killer quote: “She walks in beauty, like the night / Of cloudless climes and starry skies”

SECOND GENERATION • 1792–1822

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Expelled from Oxford for atheism; radical idealist in exile; drowned at 29; ashes lie near Keats in Rome.

Know: Ozymandias · Ode to the West Wind · To a Skylark · Defence of Poetry

Killer quote: “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?”

SECOND GENERATION • 1795–1821

John Keats

No university — trained as apothecary; nursed Tom through TB; wrote the great odes at 24; died at 25.

Know: Nightingale · Grecian Urn · To Autumn · La Belle Dame · the Letters

Killer quote: “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’—that is all / Ye know on earth”

Beyond the Big Six — canon interrogation is an ATAR skill: Charlotte Smith revived the sonnet (Elegiac Sonnets, 1784) · Anna Laetitia Barbauld (“The Rights of Woman”) · Mary Robinson (“January, 1795”) · Felicia Hemans outsold them all · Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals seeded William’s daffodils poem · John Clare sang enclosure. Ask of each voice shelved by history: gender, class, genre, or Victorian taste?

7 • Form Toolkit — Name It to Claim It

Form	Signature features	Exemplars
Lyric	Short, musical, single consciousness; emotion over event	She Walks in Beauty; Skylark
Ode	Elevated address; stanzaic builds; problem → turn → resolution	Nightingale; Urn; West Wind
Literary ballad	Narrative quatrains ABCB; archaism; incremental repetition	Ancient Mariner; La Belle Dame
Sonnet	14 lines; Petrarchan or Shakespearean shape; locate the volta	Westminster Bridge; Ozymandias; Bright Star
Blank verse	Unrhymed iambic pentameter; meditative flow	Tintern Abbey; Frost at Midnight
Conversation poem	Blank verse addressed to a listener: scene → meditation → blessing	Frost at Midnight; Tintern Abbey
Terza / ottava rima	Interlocking aba bcb cdc / abababcc satiric bounce	West Wind / Don Juan

8 • Technique Toolkit — Three Families

Sound & rhythm

- Alliteration · assonance · sibilance
- Onomatopoeia
- Caesura — what does the pause interrupt?
- Enjambment vs end-stop: momentum vs control
- Refrain · anaphora

Image & figure

- Metaphor patterns tracked across the poem
- Personification · pathetic fallacy
- Apostrophe
- Symbols: albatross, urn, wind, tiger
- Allusion: Biblical · classical · mythic
- Paradox: “fearful symmetry”

Structure & voice

- Frame narrative: Mariner, Ozymandias
- The volta — find it; analyse its effect
- Repetition & escalation
- Unanswered rhetorical question = destabilising
- Irony: verbal, situational, structural

Kill this habit: “the poet uses alliteration and hyperbole.” Require effect-first sentences instead: “*the sibilance makes the whisper feel...*” Device + effect + meaning, or don’t mention it.

9 • The Five-Step Close Read

Step	What you do
1 Survey	Paratext first: title, subtitle, date, dedication, stanza shapes on the page.
2 First read	Aloud, uninterrupted. Record mood + one-sentence summary. Your response IS evidence.
3 Map structure	Stanza by stanza: where does thought turn? Volta, repetition, metrical/rhyme breaks, tense shifts.
4 Zoom in	Dominant imagery fields; word classes; sound devices; allusions; ambiguities.
5 Synthesise	What is the poem doing, to whom, how? Draft a contestable, technique-driven thesis.

Annotate ruthlessly: bracket stanzas · arrows for enjambment · box the volta · star your three strongest quotations.

10 • Essay Architecture

Thesis = **THROUGH** [technique / form] + text → reveals [contestable meaning] **WHILE** [complication]

Paragraph engine (PETAL)

- **Point** — one claim per paragraph
- **Embedded evidence** — quotes of 8 words or fewer, woven grammatically
- **Technique** named precisely
- **Analysis of EFFECT** on reader / meaning / context
- **Link back to thesis**

Sentence starters that earn marks

- “Through [x], [poet] invites the reader to...”
- “The shift from...to...enacts the speaker’s...”
- “Structurally, the volta at line [n] pivots...”
- “While a Romantic reading emphasises [x], an alternative reading suggests [y]”
- “Composed amid [context], the poem simultaneously...and...”

Mark-eating errors to avoid

- Retelling instead of analysing · feature-spotting without effect
- Context dumped into paragraphs instead of woven into argument
- Asserting ONE reading as obviously correct — evaluation lives in weighing alternatives
- Ignoring form entirely — sonnets and ballads mean differently *because* they are built differently
- In comparison essays: two mini-essays side by side rather than woven paragraphs

Worked micro-model: Ozymandias

Evidence	Effect-first analysis
“I met a traveller from an antique land”	The double frame distances us twice from the monument — power arrives second-hand, already dissolving in retelling.
“sneer of cold command”	The sculptor’s accuracy is ironic survival: art records the tyrant’s cruelty better than his boast.
“Look on my Works.../ Nothing beside remains”	Syntax enacts collapse: the imperial imperative is answered within one line by erasure.
“lone and level sands stretch far away”	Alliterative monotony performs nature’s blank indifference — the desert out-writes the inscription.

Model thesis: Through its fractured sonnet form and distancing frame, “Ozymandias” stages the collision between absolute power and time — yet the very survival of the sculptor’s mocking craft suggests that art, not empire, commands permanence.

11 • Quote Bank (learn six cold)

Quotation	Source & analytical use
“The mind-forg’d manacles I hear”	Blake, London — internalised oppression; institutional critique
“Did he who made the Lamb make thee?”	Blake, The Tyger — contraries; creation’s terror
“a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused”	Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey — nature as spiritual presence
“A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!”	Coleridge, Kubla Khan — reconciled opposites; inspired creation
“Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”	Shelley, Ozymandias — irony; power vs time

"I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!"	Shelley, West Wind — the suffering poet; plea for renewal
"If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"	Shelley, West Wind — hope encoded in natural cycle
"For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd...for ever young"	Keats, Grecian Urn — eternity's tease and cost
"Was it a vision, or a waking dream?"	Keats, Nightingale — unresolved boundary of imagination
"He prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both great and small"	Coleridge, Mariner — reverence for life; moral frame

12 • Comparative Pairings (rehearse one thesis each)

Pairing	Angle of tension
The Lamb + The Tyger	Contraries within one vision: creation's gentleness vs terror
London (Blake) + Westminster Bridge (Wordsworth)	Same city, opposite hours, opposite verdicts
Tintern Abbey + Frost at Midnight	Memory, place and inheritance in two conversation poems
Kubla Khan + La Belle Dame sans Merci	Enchanted spaces; dangerous desire; fragments of vision
Nightingale + To a Skylark	Bird-song as escape: earthbound mortality vs sky-bound aspiration
Ozymandias + Grecian Urn	Art against time: ironic ruin vs teasing permanence
The Tyger + Mont Blanc	Confronting the sublime: dread without answer vs philosophical awe

13 • Themes Matrix

Theme	Guiding question	Anchors
Nature	Refuge, teacher, or terrifying power?	Tintern Abbey; Frost at Midnight; To Autumn
Imagination & vision	What can the mind make true?	Kubla Khan; Nightingale
Childhood & innocence	Can innocence survive experience?	Songs pairings; Immortality Ode
Liberty & revolution	Hope, betrayal, or deferred spring?	London; Mask of Anarchy
Mortality & transience	What endures — and should it?	Ozymandias; Urn; Adonais
Outcast & exile	Curse, choice, or credential?	Childe Harold; Manfred; Mariner
The supernatural	Why does being haunted thrill us?	Mariner; Christabel; La Belle Dame

14 • Revision Checklist

- ☐ I can define: sublime, negative capability, suspension of disbelief, Byronic hero, ekphrasis, apostrophe — WITH attribution
- ☐ I can name all six poets with dates and one signature text each
- ☐ I can annotate London or Ozymandias in five minutes, aloud
- ☐ I can write the thesis formula from memory and apply it to any pairing
- ☐ I can locate a volta and say what it does
- ☐ I can quote six lines from the quote bank verbatim
- ☐ I can argue ONE alternative reading of any set poem and weigh it fairly
- ☐ I can explain why Smith, Barbauld, Hemans and Clare were shelved — and why that matters
- ☐ I can weave two texts inside one paragraph without writing mini-essays

15 • Resources

- **British Library:** Discovering Literature — Romantics & Victorians (free context essays)
- **William Blake Archive:** every illuminated plate in colour
- **Poetry Foundation:** annotated texts + poet bios
- **BBC In Our Time:** episodes on each poet & Romanticism
- **Film:** Bright Star (2009) • Pandaemonium (2000) • Mary Shelley (2017)
- **Anthology:** Norton Anthology of English Literature, vol. D

