The Romantic Period

- If one term can be used to describe the forces that have shaped the modern world, it is Romanticism.
- So potent has Romanticism been since the late 18th century that one author has called it “the profoundest cultural transformation in human history since the invention of the city.”
- There is a way in which Romanticism can be seen as a response to the French Revolution – both the good and the bad that came out of it.

I’m going to begin with a number of qualifications and disclaimers

- Romanticism was not a movement; it was a series of movements that had dynamic impacts on art, literature, science, religion, economics, politics, and the individual’s understanding of self.
- Not all streams of Romanticism were the same. Some, in fact, were almost completely the opposite in their results from others. Nor was the impact the same at all times. Romanticism progressed in stages, each of which had its own emphasis (France, England, U.S.)

One more disclaimer: none of these writers I’m going to talk about today thought of himself or herself as a “Romantic” – the word isn’t even used until half a century later, by English historians. Contemporary critics treated these writers as separate individuals.

Many of the major writers, however, did feel that there was something distinctive about their time – not a shared doctrine or literary quality, but a pervasive intellectual and imaginative climate, which some of them called “the spirit of the age”

**Attempting a Definition**

There is no single commonly accepted definition of Romanticism, but it has some features upon which there is general agreement.

**Characteristics/conventions of Romanticism**

1. Rejection of the Enlightenment
2. Importance of nature
3. Emphasis on the self
4. Spirituality outside of traditional Christian frameworks (personal, Eastern faiths, etc)
5. Longing to be an artist/writer
6. Escape from the city/idealization of countryside and peasant
7. awareness of not belonging to existing social order
8. anti-intellectualism
9. rejection of neoclassical aesthetic conventions/constraints
10. against tyranny
11. nationalism and reverence for “folk” culture

DATES
Romanticism did not erupt suddenly.

in England 1798-1832 (years often given, but important to note this refers to the European tradition of Romanticism, and even more specifically to Romanticism in England, since that what concerns us – at this point in the course, anyway. next up is Mary Shelley, who is an English writer)

what happens in 1798?
*Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge

and it’s not just the poetry that is contained in this volume that’s revolutionary, but both men went out of their way to explain what it was they were trying to do with their poetry – so they add a good deal of theory to their poetic practices.

Wordsworth adds a very famous “preface” to the volume of poetry which describes his theories of poetics

he actually claims the poetry “had its origin in the French Revolution….It was a time of promise, a renewal of the world – and of letters.”

He also set himself in direct opposition to the major lit figures of the 18th c, who, in his view, had imposed on poetry artificial conventions that distorted its free and natural development

18th c theorists regarded poetry as an imitation of human life – analogy often used: “mirror held up to nature”

Wordsworth, on the other hand, described good poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”

i.e. in other words, the source of a poem is not in the outside world, but in the poet himself
so the idea of a poem written in the first person, and which deals with the poet’s feelings was considered a minor and relatively unimportant genre, becomes the major form of poetry

look at Wordsworth poem – how do you see the poem exemplifying either the list of Romantic conventions or playing out his own theorizing?