

**Paper – British Romantic Literature Course – English Honours IV Semester**

**Teacher –Manjula Sholapurkar**

**Topic – Eighteenth Century Conceptions of Nature**

\* The Eighteenth century benefitted from the scientific advances of the sixteenth and Seventeenth century. There was a general endorsement of the spirit of scientific inquiry; it was no longer considered impious. The authority of science contributed immensely, not only towards dispelling of superstition; but more positively towards the establishment of reason as a legislator of thought and life.

\* According to Basil Willey, the New Philosophy had explained the working of the laws of Nature, physical sciences had led to a universal acceptability of 'Nature and Nature's laws. The laws of Nature are the laws of reason; they are always and everywhere the same, and like the axioms of mathematics they have only to be acknowledged as just and right by all men.' Quoting Alexander Pope: 'Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night:/ *God said, let Newton be!* and all was light!', Willey records the stellar contribution of Isaac Newton to the consolidation of the Enlightenment world view. (*The Eighteenth Century Background*, 1940)

\* The perfect working of the universe given the mechanistic analogy of the 'great machine' presupposed a 'supreme ordering intelligence' of the Divine Mechanic. This led to the popularity of Natural Theology and Deism. More importantly, science had revealed 'design, order and law' in Nature, and these were the ideals to be extrapolated to the affairs of mankind, the governance of civic life, especially after the religious controversies and political upheaval of the seventeenth century.

\* Literary criticism also, sought in the concept of Nature a validation of its redefined principles. If 'peace, concord, toleration and progress were the desired goals in the affairs of men; perspicuity, order, unity and proportion' (Basil Willey) were the desired requirements for literary composition.

\* This meant that writers of this period aimed at a high degree of formalism in expressing themselves. They were conscious of the public nature of their role, and adhered to the paradigm of, 'General Human Nature' in the choice of their subject matter. Samuel Johnson's oft quoted lines from his *Preface to Shakespeare*, 'Nothing can please many and please long, but just representation of general nature' (1765), became the axiomatic expression of the writer's/poet's duty for this age. The authors of ancient Greece and Rome; with their achieved perfection, were the enduring role models for the Neoclassical writers: 'Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem;/To copy nature is to copy them (Pope).

\* However, by the end of the eighteenth Century, in the words of Graham Hough, this concept of Nature became too constricting, 'a prison-house of emotions' ---- 'for those writers who felt an instinctive need for a stronger and more intimate response to experience'. Poets, like Goldsmith and Gray had accommodated their pensive musings within the conventions of traditional poetic forms, but the transition to an ethos of greater literary freedom, in matters of both content and style, came with the Romantic poets.

\* According to M.H. Abrams, 'What seemed to be the infinite social promise of the French Revolution', in the early 1790s, fostered a sense of visionary idealism in the Romantic writers of this period. This led to the foregrounding of the writer's/ poet's subjectivity; imagination, intuition, and an expressive mode that was no longer bound by the conventions of formalism. The democratic libertarian ideals of the time encouraged the expressive individualism of the Romantic poets.

\* The concept of Nature, that was for the Neoclassicists predicated upon scientific rationality and a generalised representational norm, transformed under the new political revolutionary idealism into the locus of individualised perception. Not only were the thoughts, feelings, emotions, the inner workings of the poet- protagonist's mind considered apt subjects for poetic medium; but even Nature – the external visible landscape, is irradiated by the poet's feelings. Not only are the descriptions of nature in these poets more 'accurate and sensuously nuanced' (Abrams), but there is a greater interiorization of the external landscape.

\* Nature is associated with simplicity of rustic life and the homely emotions nurtured there. It is also the ideal realm of the 'pristine,' 'the eternal' and in several poems of the period is exalted to a spiritual experience. For the Romantic poet it held the allure of the 'mysterious', and also the symbolism for visionary possibilities.

\* In terms of the representational qualities of the arts of painting and poetry, the aesthetic categories of the Beautiful, the Sublime and the Picturesque, allowed the artist/ poet to capture different aspects of Nature. The preference for the Sublime over the classical symmetry of the Beautiful, is another aspect of the new Romantic sensibility. For example the works of seventeenth century painters Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa did influence this trend. Appreciation of mountain scenery and rugged landscape was also encouraged by travel accounts to the Scottish Highlands and the Hebridean caves.

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