

Prof. Stephen Tabachnick
Patterson Hall, Room 447

British Literature from 1750-Present
English 3220
TR 9:40
Spring 2017

We will look closely at Romantic, Victorian, and Modern masterpieces of poetry, fiction, prose, and drama written from around 1790 through 1960. This material is incomparably rich and we will do our best, in the short time that we have, to mine it for its wisdom and artistry. At the conclusion of this course, students should be able to: 1) Analyze the works of the two major pre-Romantic poets, Robert Burns and William Blake. 2) Discuss the importance of the date 1798 and the events that initiated the Romantic period. 3) Identify the five major Romantic poets—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats—and summarize the essential themes in their poetry. 4) Identify the three major Victorian poets—Tennyson, Browning, and Matthew Arnold—and explain why each poet is important and how he relates to the Victorian themes of religious doubt and progress. 5) Explain the changes that occurred in 20th-century literature as reflected in the works of James Joyce, William Butler Yeats, and T. S. Eliot, among others. 6) Become a skilled interpreter of, and writer about, literature.

We will keep five basic principles in mind as we attempt to interpret the course material:

1. Great literature is the “secular scripture,” in the words of Canadian critic Northrop Frye. British literature represents the collective wisdom of the people of the United Kingdom gathered over a long period of time, and, like the Bible, the particular literature that we will be studying sets a standard not only for wisdom but for beautiful expression as well.
2. The interpretation of literature is a performance art. An excellent interpretation is characterized by precision and elegance. As you read and write about this work,

think of yourself as a pianist performing a great composer's work. Which notes will you emphasize, which themes will you bring out, and how will your interpretation hold together? Will your interpretation make an impact on the audience, or not?

3. Excellent interpretation is possible only after thorough, detailed reading and study of the works themselves, mastery of the requisite technical skills, and the application of deep thought and feeling. In short, an excellent interpretation is the product of very hard work and sensitivity. A pianist must think about and play over each work numerous times before a concert.

4. As Sir Arthur Conan Doyle once wrote, "mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself, but talent instantly recognizes genius." These works have served as models for generations of talented writers and thinkers, who have recognized their quality. They will also inspire and improve your own thoughts and writing.

5. The ultimate purpose of this course is to help you improve your intellect and sensibility for a lifetime of learning and enjoyment.

Text: *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ninth edition, vol. 2.