

The following lesson is to be considered as substituting the lecture of Thursday, October 7, 2010. You are therefore invited to read it carefully and eventually study it, since it is part of the introduction to many topics that will be touched upon during the course. In case you find any difficulty you can report to me through my email.

I expect to be in class next Monday for a regular lecture. Please carry your Norton Anthology with you since we shall start reading from Blake's works.

Third lesson October 7, 2010

One of the most outstanding results of an early industrial revolution in Great Britain was the growth of a middle class. This implied, among other phenomena, a more clear-cut distinction within **gender roles**: in the 19th century, very precise middle-class gender-specific values were expected, values, that is, different for male and female. What makes a “good” man or a “good woman” – according to the social values – was very plainly set up in all kinds of literature, both fictional and prescriptive, that is both in novels explicitly produced to “teach a social lesson” and in pamphlets or essays openly educational. European and American women in the 19th century lived in an age characterized by gender inequality. At the beginning of the century, women enjoyed few of the legal, social, or political rights that are now taken for granted in western countries. They could not vote, of course, could not sue or be sued, could not testify in court, had extremely limited control over personal property after marriage, were rarely granted legal custody of their children in cases of divorce, and were barred from institutions of higher education. Women were expected to remain **subservient to their fathers and husbands**. Their occupational choices were also extremely limited. Middle- and upper-class women generally remained home, caring for their children and running the household. Lower-class women often did work outside the home, but usually as poorly-paid domestic servants or laborers in factories and mills. The onset of industrialization, urbanization, as well as the growth of the market economy, of the middle class and of life expectancies transformed European and American societies and family life. For most of the 18th century through the first few decades of the 19th century, families worked together, dividing farm duties or work in small-scale family-owned businesses to support themselves. With the rapid mercantile growth, big business, and migration to larger cities after 1830, however, the family home as the center of economic production was gradually replaced with workers who earned their living outside the home. In most instances, **men were the primary “breadwinners” and women were expected to stay at home to raise children, to clean, to cook, and to provide a haven for returning husbands**. Most scholars agree that the Victorian Age was a time of escalating gender polarization (that is a time when differences between male and female became even more marked), as women were expected to adhere to a rigidly defined **sphere of domestic and moral duties**, restrictions that women increasingly resisted in the last two-thirds of the century.

In some cases, however, the private sphere of 19th century women had more positive images, defining woman as the more morally refined of the two sexes and therefore the guardian of morality and social cohesion. Women were able to use this more positive image as a means for demanding **access to public arenas** long denied them, by publicly emphasizing and asserting the need for and benefits of a more civilized and genteel influence in politics, art, and education. The same societal transformations that were largely responsible for the fact that women's status was defined in terms of domesticity and morality, also worked in the direction of provoking gender consciousness and reform, as the roles assigned women became increasingly at odds with social reality.

Women on both sides of the Atlantic, including Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell expressed and influenced the age's expectations for women. Through their novels, letters, essays, articles, pamphlets, and speeches, these and other 19th century women portrayed the often conflicting expectations imposed on them by society. These women, along with others, expressed

sentiments of countless women who were unable to speak, and brought attention and support to their concerns.

Chronology, cont.

A few more events are worth recording before the close of the century, namely:

1789 publication of **William Blake's** *Songs of Innocence*.

1790 publication of **Edmund Burke's** *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. The debate on the Revolution is opened: Burke believed that the French radicals who had begun the Revolution by releasing the enormous energies of the common people of France were interested first in the conquest of their own country and then in the conquest of Europe and of the rest of the world, which would be "liberated" whether it wished to be or not.

Publication of **Mary Wollstonecraft's** *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, the first answer to Burke.

1791 **Thomas Paine's** *Rights of Man* Part 1 is published as an other response to Burke's work. The debate between conservatives and radicals raged on for many years, and certainly influenced, directly or indirectly, the thought and the work of every major English author for the remainder of the century and beyond.

1792 **Mary Wollstonecraft's** *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is published.

First Republic begins in France

Riots in Paris provoke uprising in London as well: strictures (limitazioni) on individual liberty are passed by the British government.

1793 **Execution** of Louis XVI in France

France declares war on Britain

Louvre opens as public museum in Paris (the British Museum had opened in 1753)

1794 **William Blake's** *Songs of Experience* is published.

Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* is published

William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* is published

1796 Jenner vaccinates against smallpox

Matthew Lewis' The Monk is published

1798 **William Wordsworth** and **Samuel Taylor Coleridge's** *Lyrical Ballads* is published. The use of the Ballad name and form betrays a Medieval, antiquarian taste. In 1760-63 James Macpherson had published *Ossian's poems* pretending to have discovered medieval mythological manuscript poems; Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) also encouraged a taste for "medieval" lore.

Nelson wins Battle of the Nile

1799 Francisco Goya *Los Caprichos* exhibited, a striking denunciation of the decline of reason.

Fuseli's Milton Gallery opens in London. Between 1791 and 1799 Swiss painter Henry Fuseli turned Milton's *Paradise Lost* into a series of 40 pictures that were exhibited in London in 1799 and 1800. Thus the other father of English literature acquired pride of place among the Londoners.

The topics discussed in the previous lessons (the American, the French and the Industrial Revolution, aesthetics terms like “the picturesque”, the strengthening of national feeling with the great exhibitions of pictures inspired by national poets) and the few events recalled above, all point to momentous changes taking place within the British Isles and in the lives of the people.

In literature, change took the shape of **strong experimentalism** (Blake’s visionary poems, Wordsworth and Coleridge’s ballads, later on Byron’s ottava rima), or of the re-edition of old *genres* like long poems (epic or meditative), narrative verse romance, sonnet, fragments. New *genres* and new settings (in time and place) also attracted the readers’ attention: the philosophical novel produced by William Godwin, the new gothic novel produced by Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis, later on Scott’s historical novels, betraying a new interest in history.

In the years spanning this period, British intellectuals were keenly conscious of being part of an era of momentous changes (William Hazlitt’s *The spirit of the age* published in 1825 endeavours to catch the atmosphere). However, writers were not identified as exponents of a recognised literary movement, and none of them thought of themselves or their age as **Romantic** (see first lesson), no one spoke of Romanticism or Romantic poetry and no manifesto of Romantic poetics was published, even though we now tend to associate the publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* with the birth of British Romanticism. European debates on the topic were in fact detachedly dismissed.

There was agreement only on the fact that the momentous scenes on the world stage were as fantastic as the plot of a romance. Wordsworth thought of the French events in his *Prelude* (book IX) in terms of “an old Romance or tale of fairy”; on hearing news of Napoleon’s astonishing escape from Elba in 1815 the journalist Leigh Hunt observed “We want nothing now, to finish the romantic history of the present time, but a visit from the man in the moon”. To Wordsworth and Hunt the terms romantic and romance were synonymous and referred to the allegorical fictions and fabulous events of medieval and Elizabethan poetry, and this is the sense in which Coleridge used the term to describe his fantastic poems (*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel*, *Kubla Kan*). Nobody thought of himself or herself as a romantic artist, rather being classified in various schools such as the lake school (Lake district), the cockney school (Londoners), the Radcliffe school.

Blake, who is now appreciated as one of the greatest poets, was dismissed by many contemporaries as a harmless lunatic: except for Scott and Byron, and for women writers who made up to 30% of the poetry market, none of the Romantics sold well. The word Romantic did not become current until the mid-19th century, long after most of them were dead (French critic and historian Taine identified in his *Histoire de la littérature Anglaise* in 1863 a “romantic school” comprising Wordsworth and Coleridge). The leading Victorian critics, Arnold and Pater, may not have recognized a Romantic movement in Literature, but they certainly did discern a new spirit in writing dating from the end of the 18th century. Associated with this new spirit were a **new sympathy with man and nature that had also been the ideals of the French revolution**.

Since the late Victorian period, a further distinction has been made between first and second generation Romantic writers. But even within these sub-divisions there exist points of divergence. Let us consider the case of first generation Romantics Coleridge and Wordsworth, who enjoyed an intimate friendship and collaborated to produce the seminal Romantic work, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). In his *Biographia Literaria* (1817) Coleridge looked back on Wordsworth’s ‘Preface to the Lyrical Ballads’ (1800) with a very critical eye, and took issue with much of Wordsworth’s poetical theory, criticising many of his statements, as we shall see. Such discrepancies frustrate attempts to classify Romanticism as a monolithic movement and make establishing a workable set of key concerns problematic.

One point of contact and also of contrast was the **French Revolution** to which people reacted either opposing it strongly (Burke) or in enthusiastic terms. Enthusiast were people like Tom Paine, Mary

Wollstonecraft and Helen M. Williams, who both lived in Paris in the first years of the Revolution and wrote extensively about its outcome and consequences, William Wordsworth who visited France twice during the early years (1790 and 1791-2) and wrote about his sensations at the time in his later autobiographical *Prelude* 1805; Shelley, who said that the F.R. “may be called the master theme of the epoch”. Its influence of course continues to the present in ideas of democracy and human rights. We too think of ourselves as citizens of the world. But harsh reactions also spoke out, like Burke’s who denounced the revolution in France as ‘evil’ and predicted that it would lead to bloodshed. When war broke out three years later he seemed to have been proved right. The reaction of Burke and others was to draw back to an idealized past of nurturing customs and traditions, (the age of chivalry) while the fans of the revolution gazed into a glorious liberated future. **Thus this was an age as enthralled by memory as it was magnetized by the future, and its art grew from vital tensions between tradition and experiment.** It was an eventful period, catalyzed by one event, the revolution, that appeared as extraordinary, apocalyptic to the point that people looked at it for meaning and pattern (like the impact of September 11 on our Western society). People associated to it **millenarian** excitement connected to the turn of the century: a new age was to start, balances were about to be overthrown (an example in the famous poem by Laetitia Barbauld *1811*, predicting the downfall of Britain, the ruin of London, and the rise of America as an imperial power). In short an event capable of rising bitter argument according to politics, race and religion (just like September 11).

In spite of the strong drive towards experimentation, literature and culture of the Romantic period also display the persistence of neoclassical aesthetics, that is the taste and modes of literature that dominated the 18th century. Such a persistence is evident in poetry in the form of the romantic ode or meditative poems, while the novel derives clearly from the 18th century experimentation (Burney, Smith, Austen are obvious heirs to Richardson and Fielding). Ancient and exotic literatures are also exploited after their resurrection in the age of cosmopolitanism and enlightenment. Thus innovation/experimentation and tradition walked together.

The new century opens on an important novel:

1800 Irish writer Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* is published. With her satire on Anglo-Irish landlords in this novel Edgeworth pioneered the regional novel and inspired Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814). Politically risky, stylistically innovative, and wonderfully entertaining, the novel changes the focus of conflict in Ireland from religion to class, and boldly predicts the rise of the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie. It is often regarded as the first historical novel, the first regional novel in English, the first Anglo-Irish novel and the first saga novel.

It is also widely regarded as the first novel to use the device of a narrator who is both unreliable and an observer of, rather than a player in, the actions he chronicles. The term *rack rent* was a term used to denote an extortionate (esorbitante) rent, a plight faced by many in Ireland at this time who were being pinched (schiacciati) by their 'noble' landlords who needed funds to cover their own debts, or who used them as a means of driving tenants off the land. Within the course of this novel, Edgeworth exposes the problems faced by tenants of these large estates, ongoing political divisions in Ireland during this period, and the ongoing move to cement an Irish-Anglo alliance. She also touches upon various problems that continue to haunt Ireland to this day: conflicts between Protestants and Catholics, the rich and the poor, and ongoing distrust and shared destiny of the Irish and English. Shortly before the publication of the novel, an introduction, glossary of Irish terms, and footnotes, written in the voice of an English narrator, were added to the original text to blunt the negative impact the Edgeworths feared the book might have on English enthusiasm for the Act of Union (see below).

One of the reasons for the great impact of Edgeworth’s novel was the coincidence with **1801** Political union with Ireland **Act of Union**.