

History of English Language and Literature
Doctor Merin Simi Raj
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology Madras
Lecture 15 a
The Age of Wordsworth

Hello everyone. Let me welcome you to yet another session of the NPTEL course the history of English language and literature. Today's lecture is titled The Age of Wordsworth and we also know that this is part of the extended age of romanticism that we began looking at in the previous session. In the previous session we also noted that there were multiple influences that led to this emergence of a romanticism which also began to manifest itself from the end of the 18th century onwards.

In that sense the 18th century also gets figured and represented as the age of transition. If we try to recall the context and conditions that made possible the emergence of romanticism, the French Revolution is of supreme importance. We also notice that the romantic age gets designated as the Age of Revolutions and some of the details of this we have already taken a look at in the previous session. Apart from this there were also other major socio-political events which were influencing this foundational period of romanticism.

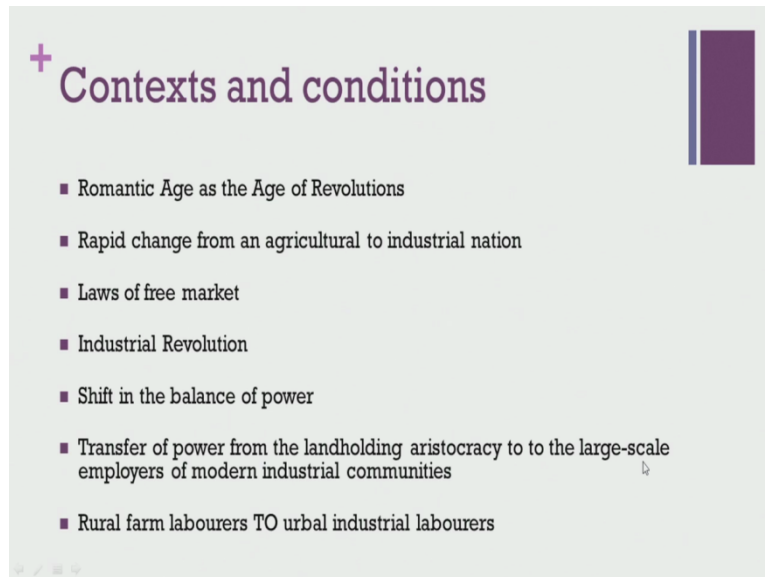
We notice that England was witnessing a rapid change in the form of industrialization as well. So we find the economy and the general temperament of the nation changing itself from that of an agricultural nation to that of an industrial nation. And this also began to reflect and manifest itself in other multiple ways within the economy.

We also find the dominance of the laws of free market and this also heavily influences the ways in which the economies shaped and also the ways in which the commercial and the trade relationships within the nation get redefined. Industrial Revolution was a major event that also began to shape the literature of the period especially from the late 19th century onwards. And as the forerunner of this impending change we find a very significant shift in the balance of power.

Accordingly we notice that there is a transfer of power from the landholding aristocracy to the large-scale employers of modern industrial communities. This emergence of the modern industrial communities was not free from the other kinds of socio-cultural repercussions and this also forms the basis and the major theme of most of the works of the late 19th century.

The other major repercussions or the consequence was the transition from rural farm labourers to urban industrial labourers.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:40)



So we also find that apart from this major fundamental transition from being the centre of a rural economy towards the centre of an urban economy. Beyond that there is a way in which it also affects the lifestyle of the people and also there is a way in which industries begin to dominate rather than the rustic agricultural setting. Continuing to look at the major contexts and conditions we also take a look at the major milestones at the beginning of the romantic age.

The most important event being the French Revolution of the 1789 and the same year also witness the publication of William Blake's Songs of Innocence. This work also is one of the foundational works of romantic era. 1792 is the year that also is of supreme political importance. We find a lot of restrictions being imposed on the freedom of press but on the other hand there are also a lot of positive things happening such as the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's Vindication of the Rights of Woman.

And this is the work that we also took a look at in detail in one of the previous sessions as it is also considered as an extended work from the age of Johnson. The year 1798 was also important in colonial history. It was the year in which the first major resistance to East India Company was faced from the Indian subcontinent and this was also the year in which Tipu Sultan got killed. And this incidently was also the year which inaugurated the moment of romanticism within British history with the publication of Lyrical Ballads.

(Refer Slide Time: 04:11)

+ Major milestones

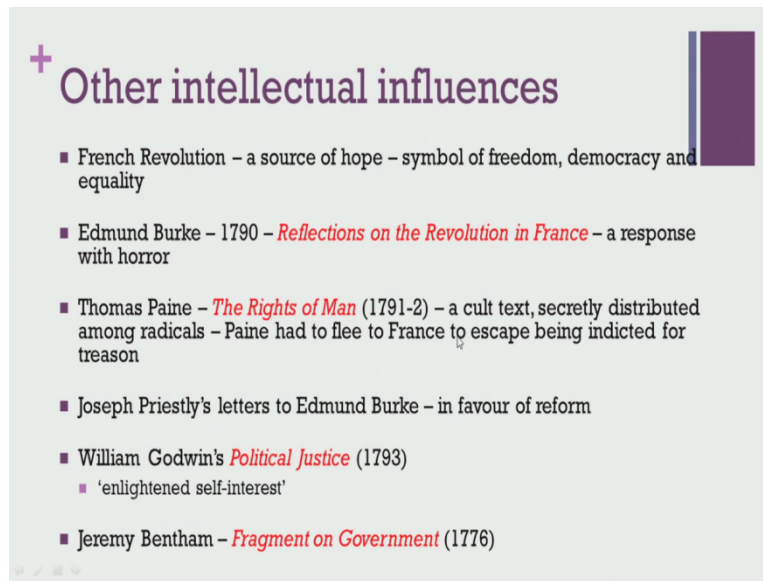
- 1789 – French Revolution
 - William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*
- 1792 – Restrictions on Freedom of Press
 - Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*
- 1798 – the First major resistance to East India Company; Tipu Sultan killed
 - the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*

The other major intellectual influences apart from the French Revolution could be seen in the many works that followed the French Revolution and also in and around the time of this age of revolution. French Revolution as we have noted, it was a source of hope not just for Britain but also for the rest of the Europe. It was the symbol of freedom, democracy and equality. This was also the event which triggered the publication of many events which celebrated as well as opposed these revolutionary tendencies within modern governmental systems.

In 1790 Edmund Burke wrote *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. This was a response to the French Revolution but it was not a work which really celebrated the qualities of the revolution but it was a work which lamented and also which despised the horrors which accompanied this revolution. On the other hand there was also works such as Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* published in 1791-92. This incidentally became a cult text not just in Britain but across Europe.

This work was secretly distributed among radicals within Britain and it was also huge source of inspiration as well as huge source of radical and evolutionary ideas in British history. And accordingly we also find that Paine was under a lot of supervision. He also had to flee to France in order to escape been indicted for treason.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:43)



The slide features a purple plus sign icon and a vertical purple bar on the right side. The title 'Other intellectual influences' is in a purple serif font. The list items are in a dark purple sans-serif font, with some titles in red.

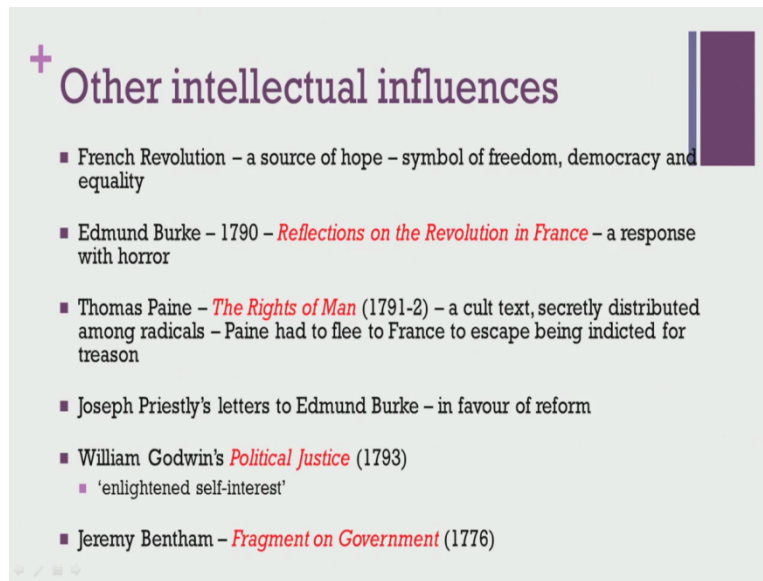
- French Revolution – a source of hope – symbol of freedom, democracy and equality
- Edmund Burke – 1790 – *Reflections on the Revolution in France* – a response with horror
- Thomas Paine – *The Rights of Man* (1791-2) – a cult text, secretly distributed among radicals – Paine had to flee to France to escape being indicted for treason
- Joseph Priestly's letters to Edmund Burke – in favour of reform
- William Godwin's *Political Justice* (1793)
 - 'enlightened self-interest'
- Jeremy Bentham – *Fragment on Government* (1776)

So Paine's influence was felt not just in the 18th century but it went on to the 19th century as well in shaping and reshaping the radical ideas which Britain was to uphold for a long time. Joseph Priestly was another important figure in this league. His letters to Edmund Burke in favour of the reform movements within Britain it was much celebrated during that time. It also became a foundational text of political understanding at a later time.

William Godwin's publication *Political Justice* in 1793 was of supreme importance. It also introduced the notion of enlightened self interest to the British citizens for the first time. It also became an influential and foundational philosophical text for the rest of Europe. In 1776 Jeremy Bentham's *Fragment of Government* was published.

But however we find a lasting influence of this only in the romantic period because it was the time when the British people in general were more prepared to accept the revolutionary theses which were proposed by Jeremy Bentham. Bentham also went on to become an influence not just in Britain but also across the various nations of Europe.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:44)



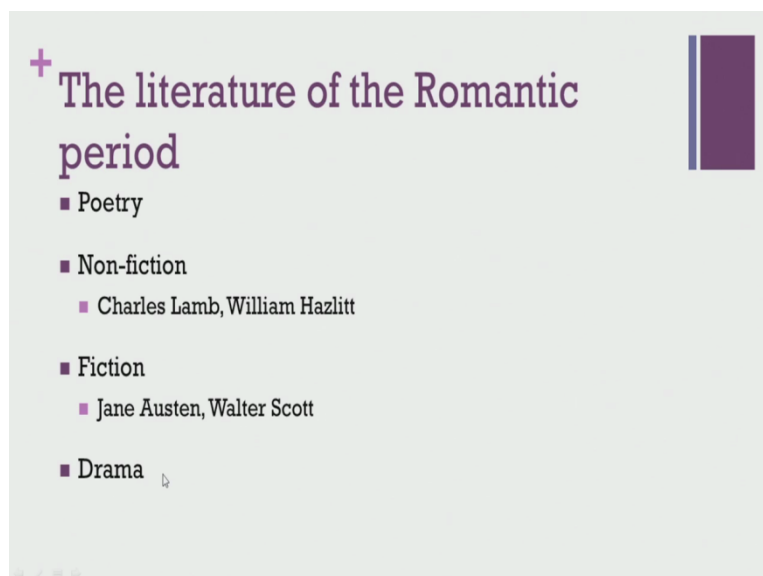
+ Other intellectual influences

- French Revolution – a source of hope – symbol of freedom, democracy and equality
- Edmund Burke – 1790 – *Reflections on the Revolution in France* – a response with horror
- Thomas Paine – *The Rights of Man* (1791-2) – a cult text, secretly distributed among radicals – Paine had to flee to France to escape being indicted for treason
- Joseph Priestly's letters to Edmund Burke – in favour of reform
- William Godwin's *Political Justice* (1793)
 - 'enlightened self-interest'
- Jeremy Bentham – *Fragment on Government* (1776)

If we come to look at the literature of the romantic period which also is the focus of our lecture, we notice that this period was dominated by four major genres namely poetry, non-fiction, fiction and drama. Poetry incidently is the most representative genre of this period and we also find romantic age majorly being connected with the British poetry of these times. There was also significant introduction in terms of non-fiction such as the essays of Lamb and Hazlitt which were hugely popular not just during those times but also in the later times.

And in terms of fiction this was the period which began to witness a macho kind of writing especially with the writings of Jane Austen and Walter Scott which were not just literary artefacts but were also hugely popular and read across Europe.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:35)



+ The literature of the Romantic period

- Poetry
- Non-fiction
 - Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt
- Fiction
 - Jane Austen, Walter Scott
- Drama

Drama was of not much significance in the romantic period but nevertheless we do notice that there were a few productions which ensured that the genre had not completely gone out of fashion. The focus of the first part of our discussions on the romantic age is obviously on poetry. And romantic poets, they continued to be the most anthologized and the studied poets in English literature. They are also considered as the most famous and the most read and the most quoted ones among all kinds of literature.

Wordsworth and Coleridge, they are considered as the founding figures of romanticism. At this point it is also useful to remember that Blake was also one of the earliest influencers but however for the purposes of convenience and also for more systematic kind of understanding of romanticism we shall be coming back to Blake only after our discussions on Wordsworth and Coleridge. But however some historians they, due to the chronological reasons, they also find it quite compelling to first talk about Blake and then move on to Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Most of romantic poets they were quite different from the predecessors because they were not really inventing a new form or a new subject to matter or for that matter they were not even trying to put forth new rules or new regulations or new kinds of rigidities for the composition of poetry. On the other hand their focus was on merely responding out of experiences to events and the situations around them.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:00)



+ The romantic poets

- The most anthologised and studied poets in English literature
- Wordsworth and Coleridge - the founding figures of Romanticism
- The poets were not 'inventing' concepts or ideas - but responding to events and situations around them

So in that sense there was a very definitive quality that made them distinct from their predecessors. As we noted at the end of the earlier session itself that imagination was the

most important quality that the romantic poets celebrated. That also made it quite significant for them to rely on their own individual capacities and on their own individual genius rather than any other external phenomena or an external set of rules that were to regulate their composition or regulate their choice of themes or their form of writing.

William Wordsworth is perhaps the most important representative figure of the romantic age and he is also the best known poet from this age. He lived from 1770 till 1850 and he was also quite delighted to live and to be young during the period of the French Revolution as he himself has written. His early life was influenced by the countryside and its pleasures and virtues.

In that sense from this point of time we also begin to see a set of writers who were not thoroughly born and brought upon bread in London but who were also quite significantly shaped by the countryside and also the rural sectors.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:34)



+ William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

- Early life – influenced by the countryside, its pleasures and virtues
- Educated at Lancashire and Cambridge
- Two visits to France – 1790 and 1791-92
- 1793 – *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*
 - Curiously reminiscent of Pope, Goldsmith and Crabbe
- Made financially independent by a legacy left by a friend – devotes himself to poetry

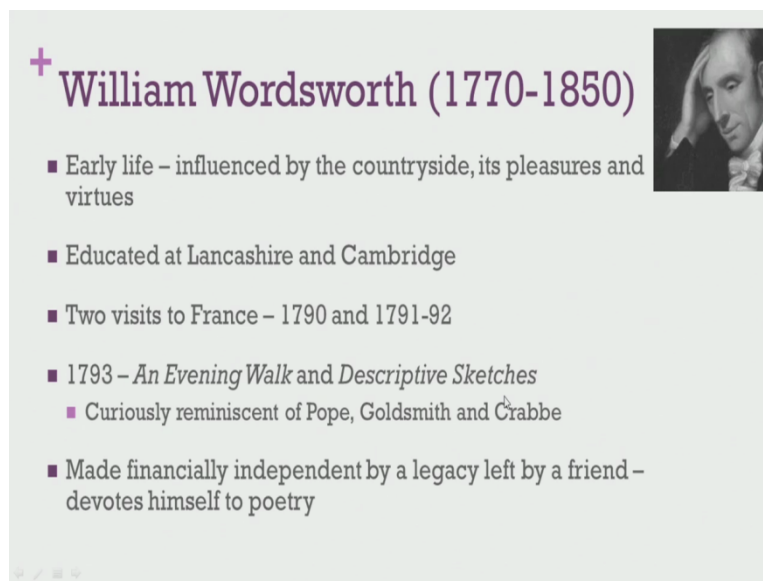
So in that sense there is a way in which the poetry markedly becomes different from that of the town poetry of the Augustan period. And also in all our discussions until this point of time we have noted that all of these writers they had some connection or the other during their growing up years with London and also that they all always had to talk more about London than the countryside. But from Wordsworth's time onwards we find a radical shift in this approach towards the rural and the urban.

He was educated initially at a college in Lancashire and then he goes to Cambridge to complete his education. But what entirely shaped his poetry and also changed his vision of

life were the two visits that he made to France in 1790 and in 1791 and 92. He was very young and immensely influenced by the events which were happening in France during this time. If you remember this was also the peak time of the French Revolution and also in that sense the perfect time for a young intellectual to visit France.

In 1793 we find him composing two major poems, *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*. And curiously these two works were quite heavily reminiscent of Pope, Goldsmith and Crabbe and all of the Augustan writers and all of the major prominence of the intellectual kind of poetry.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:57)



+ William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

- Early life – influenced by the countryside, its pleasures and virtues
- Educated at Lancashire and Cambridge
- Two visits to France – 1790 and 1791-92
- 1793 – *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*
 - Curiously reminiscent of Pope, Goldsmith and Crabbe
- Made financially independent by a legacy left by a friend – devotes himself to poetry

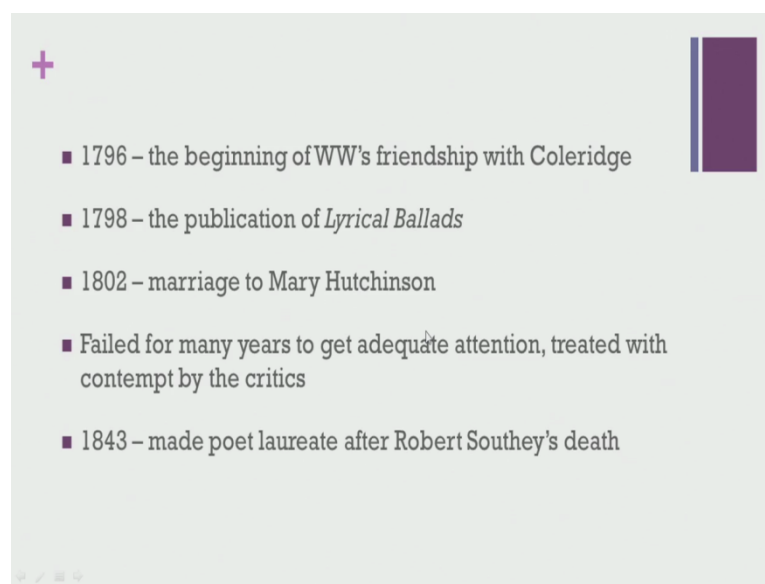
But we do see that Wordsworth transforms a lot from these earlier kinds of writings and these earlier kinds of influences. And he in fact eventually goes on to reshape the ways in which poetry has been understood or poetry has been received in literary history. It is said that Wordsworth's turn to the writing poems it was quite dramatic because he was made financially independent by a legacy left by a friend and he did not have to pursue any other kind of occupation just to stay in himself and we find him devoting himself completely to writing of poetry.

In 1796 he also begins a wonderful friendship with Coleridge which was also to change his poetic career in many different ways. In 1798 Coleridge and Wordsworth together they published *Lyrical Ballads* and epoch making text which was to revolutionize the writing of not just poetry but of literature itself. In 1802 Wordsworth gets married to Mary Hutchinson.

But however his literary career did not take off for many years during his young years when he had written much of his poetry.

He failed to get adequate public attention and we also find that he was treated with a lot of contempt by most of the contemporary critics. But it later point it is just another (())(13:19) of history that he also becomes identified as the most important literary figure of the romantic age and also significantly the prominent and the inauguration of the romantic form of poetry. It is only by 1843 that he receives enough official and public recognition when he becomes the poet laureate after Robert Southey's death.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:24)



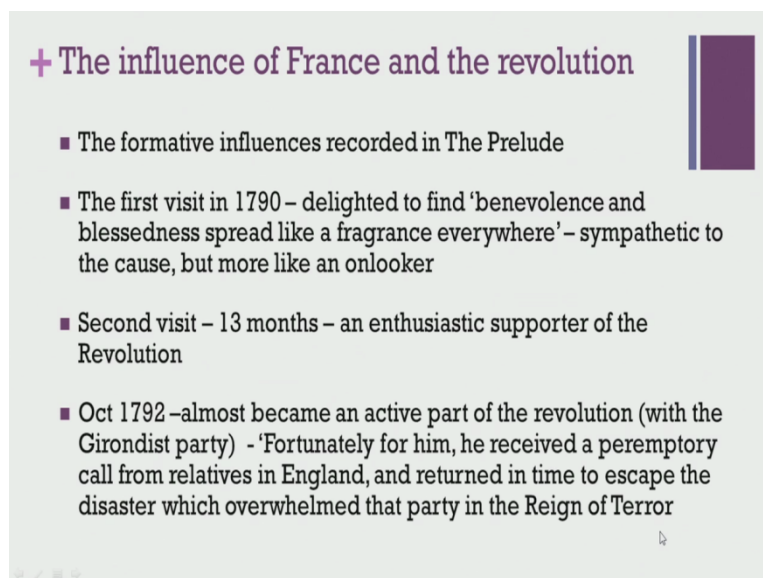
When we talk about Wordsworth and his poetic career it is almost impossible not to talk about France and the impact of the revolution on the shaping of the poetic genius of Wordsworth. The formative influence of his visits to France is recorded in detail in one of his earlier poems *The Prelude*. The first visit happened in 1790 and this was a time when he was really delighted to find benevolence and blessedness spread like a fragrance everywhere.

This incidently was the initial stage of revolution and Wordsworth was quite taken in by all of the things which were happening in France and the kind of influence that this revolution had in all of Europe. He was sympathetic to the cause but he was more like an onlooker at this point of time. He was not in act of participating he was just only an onlooker who was majorly delighted by these new turn of events. But the second visit which happens about a year later that was for a prolonged period.

He stayed in France for about 13 months and he also became enthusiastic supporter of the revolution. And this period was more active in terms of his participation. And in October 1792 it is said that he almost became an active part of the revolution and he joins the Girondist party as some of the later historians would put it. Fortunately for him he received a peremptory call from relatives in England and returned in time to escape the disaster which overwhelmed that party in the Reign of Terror.

Had he not come back, the history of English literature and the history of romantic poetry would have been totally different because we all know what kind of unfortunate turn of events followed the Reign of Terror in France.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:26)



+ The influence of France and the revolution

- The formative influences recorded in The Prelude
- The first visit in 1790 – delighted to find 'benevolence and blessedness spread like a fragrance everywhere' – sympathetic to the cause, but more like an onlooker
- Second visit – 13 months – an enthusiastic supporter of the Revolution
- Oct 1792 – almost became an active part of the revolution (with the Girondist party) - 'Fortunately for him, he received a peremptory call from relatives in England, and returned in time to escape the disaster which overwhelmed that party in the Reign of Terror'

In 1792 Wordsworth returns to England and he is quite surprised to know that the intellectual ambiance in London is dominated by conservative opinion against the revolution.

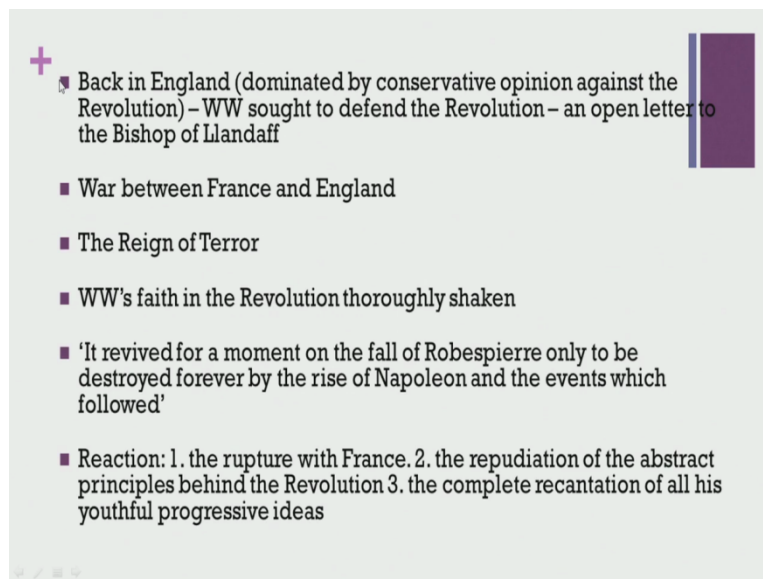
And in fact during this time he also thinks it is the onuses upon him to defend the revolution because he was an eyewitness, because he was almost a part of it when he was in France and he even writes an open letter of defence to the Bishop of Llandaff. And also thereby he becomes an open supporter of the revolution during this time and this support was quite genuine as well.

But however certain other events that followed it began to shake the enthusiasm and the faith that Wordsworth had on the success and the impact of the revolution. Initially the event was the war between France and England where he had to choose between his nationalist loyalties and also his enthusiasm with the revolution. But the (tain) the Reign of Terror ensured that he

had no sympathies left for the revolution anymore and his entire faith in this movement was thoroughly shaken.

In fact Wordsworth was not alone in being shaken by this unfortunate turn of events that French revolution was to take. There were many others who were quite disillusioned by the ways in which the revolution proved quite a failure by becoming bloody war for the clambering of power. Hudson talks about this transition that Wordsworth had want to go in a very interesting way.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:15)



- Back in England (dominated by conservative opinion against the Revolution) – WW sought to defend the Revolution – an open letter to the Bishop of Llandaff
- War between France and England
- The Reign of Terror
- WW's faith in the Revolution thoroughly shaken
- 'It revived for a moment on the fall of Robespierre only to be destroyed forever by the rise of Napoleon and the events which followed'
- Reaction: 1. the rupture with France. 2. the repudiation of the abstract principles behind the Revolution 3. the complete recantation of all his youthful progressive ideas

He notes, It revived for a moment on the fall of Robespierre only to be destroyed forever by the rise of Napoleon and events which followed. So this reaction to this disappointment with the revolution affected Wordsworth in many ways. And first of all it forced him to break away from France forever.

This rupture with France was to affect his poetic genius and also his personality in multiple ways because if you remember as a young person he had visited France and he was the one who wrote that it was quite a heaven to be young during that time. And we do not find him going back to France or sympathizing with the French cause anymore. And secondly this led to the repudiation of all the abstract principles behind revolution which in the first place had affected and influenced him in a major way.

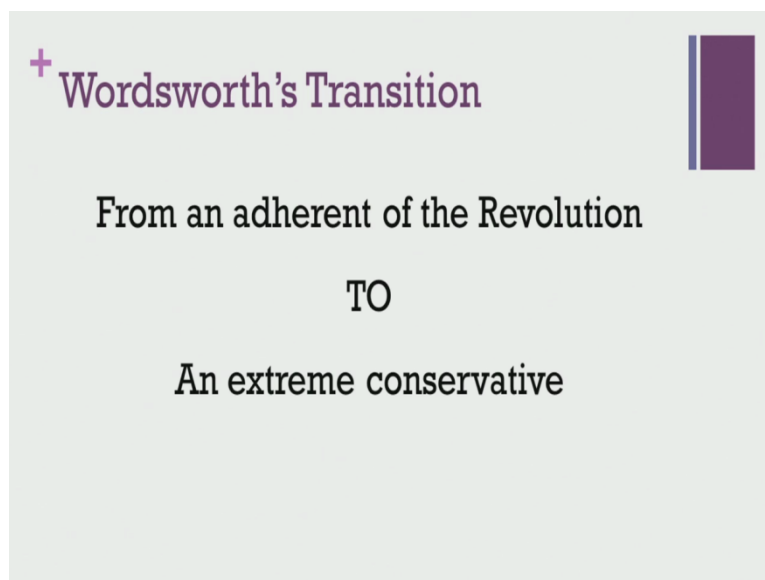
And thirdly we find a complete recantation of all of Wordsworth's youthful and progressive ideas. So in that sense we find this unfortunate turn of events of the revolution affecting the overall personality of Wordsworth and also we find him moving back from the

progressiveness that he professed through his poetry and through his personality in the beginning.

So at a later point we will also take a look at how many of the other supporters of the revolution and also the supporters and the ones who were inspired by Wordsworth were quite let down by this kind of backtracking that they thought Wordsworth had done. But Wordsworth did have his own kind of rationale for this backtracking.

He also felt that the revolution had betrayed him in many ways though he had immense faith in the revolution. So Wordsworth's transition from an adherent (revolu) of the revolution to an extreme conservative also marks his poetic career in a very distinctive way.

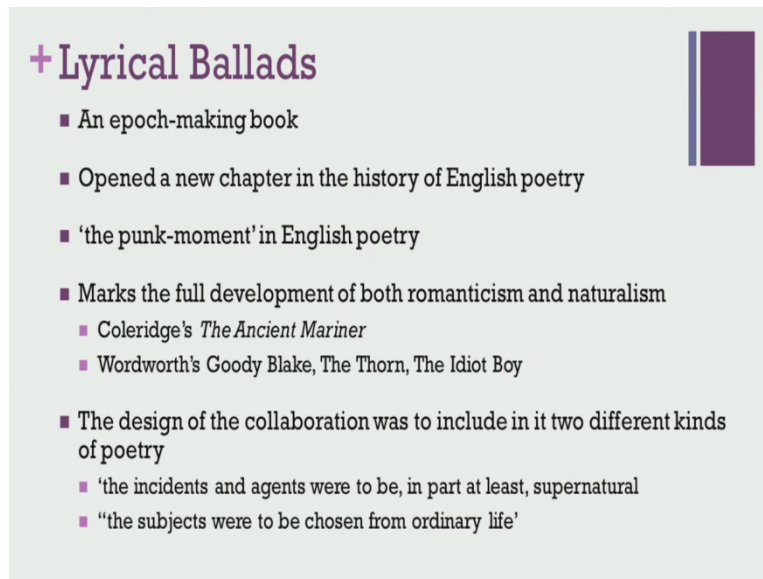
(Refer Slide Time: 19:08)



We find his poetry and his subject matter and the treatment of the themes changing in many different ways across his poetic career. But nevertheless though he seemed to be a supporter of the revolution in an overt way, the ideas which influenced him in the first (plac) place it remained with him forever so immense so that it was to shape the future of British poetry in a way that it was to stay forever.

And this influence found its supreme manifestation in the publication *The Lyrical Ballads* which as we have already noted was an epoch making book in the history of British literature. This work opened a new chapter in the history of English poetry and it is also in contemporary terms could be considered as the punk-moment in the English poetry.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:50)



+ Lyrical Ballads

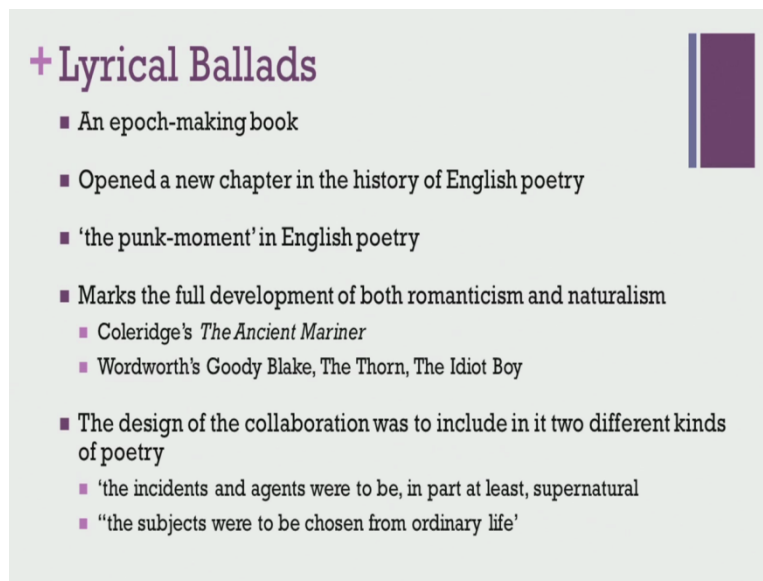
- An epoch-making book
- Opened a new chapter in the history of English poetry
- 'the punk-moment' in English poetry
- Marks the full development of both romanticism and naturalism
 - Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner*
 - Wordsworth's *Goody Blake, The Thorn, The Idiot Boy*
- The design of the collaboration was to include in it two different kinds of poetry
 - 'the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural
 - "the subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life"

This was the work which also marks the full development of both romanticism and naturalism, the tendencies of which the English poetry began to exhibit from the end of the 18th century onwards. *Lyrical Ballads* was a collection of a set of poems by Coleridge and Wordsworth, incidentally only Coleridge's one poem is part of this work which is the naturalist work *The Ancient Mariner*. And a number of Wordsworth's poems such as *Goody Blake, The Thorn, The Idiot Boy* are all part of this work *Lyrical Ballads*.

Lyrical Ballads was more than a collection of poems. It was more like a theory of poetry which was being put forward and design of this collaboration was to also to include two kinds of poetry into a single kind of book. Firstly this kind of poetry it focused on the incidents and agents who were, at least in a part, supernatural.

So in that sense there is an element of medieval interest coming in. There is a revival of the middle ages and also a certain sense of the magicality of the earlier times coming back into poetry and in literature.

(Refer Slide Time: 20:59)



+ Lyrical Ballads

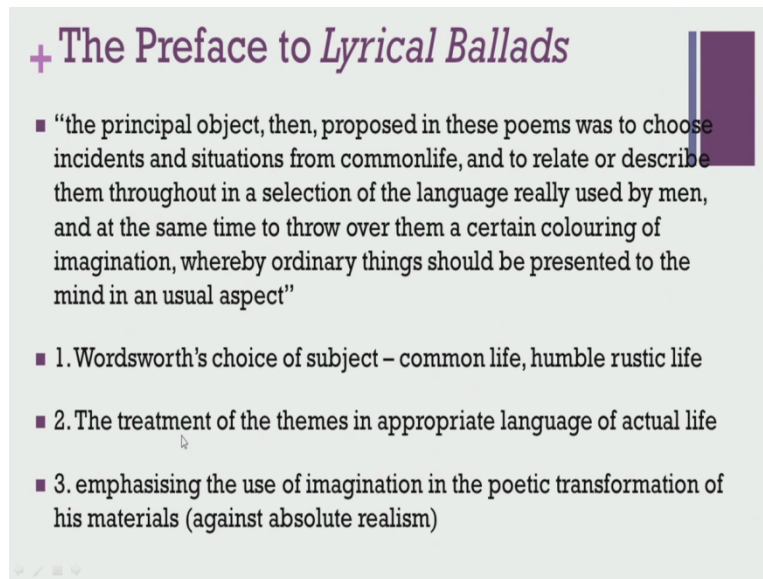
- An epoch-making book
- Opened a new chapter in the history of English poetry
- 'the punk-moment' in English poetry
- Marks the full development of both romanticism and naturalism
 - Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner*
 - Wordsworth's *Goody Blake, The Thorn, The Idiot Boy*
- The design of the collaboration was to include in it two different kinds of poetry
 - 'the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural
 - "the subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life"

And secondly the subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life and this was also a very significant transition and a new kind of tendency which was getting infused into the literature of the times. Because until then one had to always rely on either the great lives of the people who lived earlier or on something more larger than life. Something as commonplace as ordinary life or real life was never a major subject to matter of poetry.

So this work in that sense was quite revolutionary in the sense that it could bring in two kinds of things together. One is the supernatural and the magical elements of the past and secondly the subject matter which could also be part of the ordinary life. As the preface written to *Lyrical Ballads* is in fact one of the foundational texts of literary criticism as well. In that both of them they have also laid out such principles that they firmly believed in and also they thought which should become part of poetry and literature.

And it is useful to remember that it was also an extension of the revolutionary ideas and the radical principles that Wordsworth believed in. They together went on to writing the preface. The principal object then proposed in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life and to relate or describe them throughout in a selection of the language really used by men and at the same time to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination where by ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an usual aspect.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:50)



+ The Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*

- “the principal object, then, proposed in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them throughout in a selection of the language really used by men, and at the same time to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an usual aspect”
- 1. Wordsworth’s choice of subject – common life, humble rustic life
- 2. The treatment of the themes in appropriate language of actual life
- 3. emphasising the use of imagination in the poetic transformation of his materials (against absolute realism)

So here we find a few things being highlighted, the most important one being imagination and also we can identify three major strains of thoughts emerging from this. First of all Wordsworth’s choice of subject which he believed should be from common life and also from humble rustic life. Secondly he advocated the treatment of themes in an appropriate language which was closer to real life and the language as it is used by common people in real actual life.

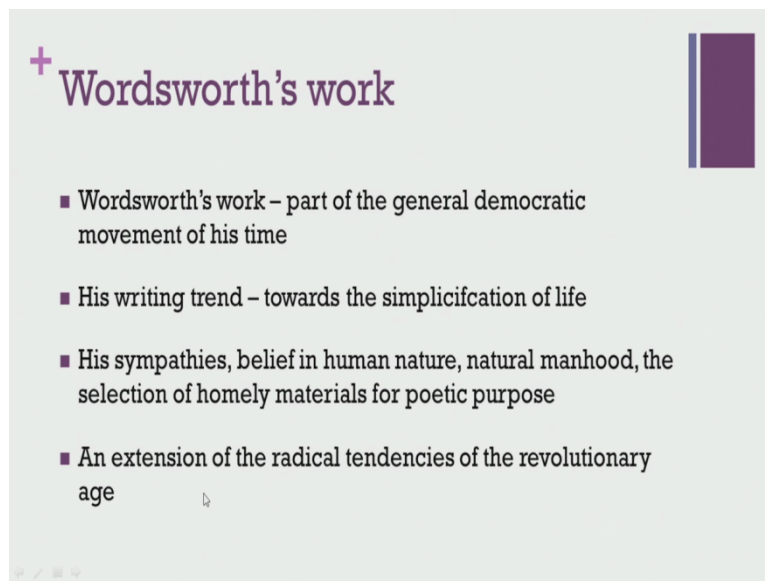
And thirdly Wordsworth emphasizes the use of imagination in the poetic transformation of his materials and this is also against a tendency to reflect any kind of writing in an absolutist realist form. Here we find that imagination becomes a kind of a catalyst which in many ways transforms the real material that the poet encounters and then transforms it into something more poetic, more visionary and something more creative and interesting.

So based on these three principles we find Wordsworth continues to write his poems but however how close his poetry was to real life, how close his poetic language to the language spoken by the common people that is again a matter of (demat) debate which we shall come back to at a later point of time. But nevertheless we find that Wordsworth work was quite integral to and also part of the general democratic movement of his time.

So in that sense despite the ways in which he had denounced the radical and the revolutionary ideas, we find all of those ideas coming back together with a lot of spirit and fervour into his poetical (())(24:21). His writing trend in (gen) general was towards the simplification of life which also became the more dominant form of expression in the coming decades.

And certain another general principles which influenced his kind of a writing was his sympathies, his belief in human nature, his assertion of natural manhood, the selection of homely materials for poetic purposes, etc. And overall we can find that his work was an extension of the radical tendencies of the revolutionary age that the 18th and the 19th century was.

(Refer Slide Time: 24:55)

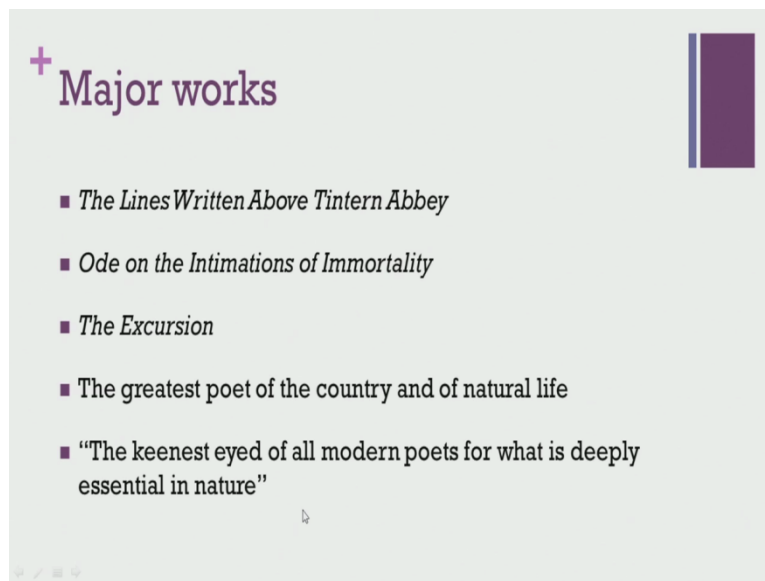


+ Wordsworth's work

- Wordsworth's work – part of the general democratic movement of his time
- His writing trend – towards the simplicifcation of life
- His sympathies, belief in human nature, natural manhood, the selection of homely materials for poetic purpose
- An extension of the radical tendencies of the revolutionary age

The major works of William Wordsworth include The Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey, the Ode on the Intimations of Immortality and The Excursion. He is generally considered as the greatest poet of the country and of natural life so much so that Henry Hudson remarks about him that he was, the keenest eyed of all modern poets for what is deeply essential in nature.

(Refer Slide Time: 25:20)



+ Major works

- *The Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey*
- *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality*
- *The Excursion*
- The greatest poet of the country and of natural life
- “The keenest eyed of all modern poets for what is deeply essential in nature”

As we begin to wrap up today's session let us also live in anticipation of the other poets who are to follow mainly Coleridge, Blake and the other minor poets of the romantic period. We should also be undertaking a comparison between the works of Wordsworth and also how it influenced the writings of the major poets of his time. So with this we come to the end of today's session. Thank you for listening and look forward to seeing you in the next session.