

English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832
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Backgrounds to the English Romantics, 1798-1832

Publishing, Literacy and Reading - I

In the first week's sessions, we will be looking at the contexts for the study of the English Romantics. The first lesson will be on publishing, literacy and reading. It will be in two parts: Session 1 and Session 2.

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The Romantic period saw a considerable shift in printing, literacy and therefore in reading habits. The major and minor writers had to contend with different publishing opportunities and tensions. For instance, the absence of copyright regulation and the creation of different reading publics.

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By the 1750s and 1760s, the publishing industry had more or less been well established for quite some time. The English reading public had grown considerably. Some of the publishers who set up their businesses during this period continued well into the 20th Century. Some of them are even now household names: John Murray, George Routledge and Thomas Longman. Statistics in book history tell us that 100 new titles per year were published up to about 1750. It rose to 600 by 1825, and to 6,000 in the next few decades.

Low priced books, popularly called "literature for millions", as Archibald Constable termed it, also began to appear as a result of cheaper print costs. The forerunner was the publisher John Bell's *The Poets of Great Britain*. It appeared just before the Romantic Period officially started, in 1777-83, in 109 volumes at six shillings each. You can imagine what this means. What it means is that readership changed. More books were available at lower costs so that even people of lower middle classes could buy and read them.

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With cheaper printing costs, many of the authors of the period became bestsellers. They sold thousands of copies of their works practically overnight. Walter Scott, the largest selling historical novelist of his time and perhaps, even to the present day, and George Gordon, Lord Byron were among such bestsellers. The growing sales figures also initiated a different kind of debate among publishers. For instance, the publishers and the authors were concerned with intellectual property rights and copyright issues.

The question was: how do you peg the monetary value of intellectual property? What does the value of a piece of poetry or prose mean? One periodical, the *Annual Register*, speculatively fixed intellectual property costs at 200,000 pounds, another at 100,000 pounds. Even today, debates about what the value of ideas, style, language or literary merit is continue. For such debates, these were the formative years.

The first debates over free books, what are now called the creative commons, and intellectual property rights emerged during this period. William St Clair's 2004 study, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, is an extraordinary survey of this particular debate around intellectual property, publishing, and the book trade. Of course, when the copyright and intellectual regulations are not in place, piracy increases. Piracy from Britain rose to enormous heights. The account of the publishers waiting at the dockside in the United States for new British books is now a legendary story.

What happened was that books printed in Britain were being put out as American editions, almost within a few hours of them having arrived at New York City ports. In the absence of international copyright agreements, the British author received nothing. What we are looking at here is, therefore, a key problem. The British author would publish something within England, would sell thousands of copies in the United States but would make no money from it. Primarily, because there was no international agreement over copyright and publishing rights, things that are the subject of considerable controversy and debate even now.

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The United States first enacted legislation on copyright in 1790, France in 1793 and Germany in 1839. Moves towards an international code began in 1828 in Denmark. These took the form of reciprocal treaty arrangements between individual countries, by which foreign authors received the same protection as did the native authors. So, if you were publishing something in Denmark and if your book or volume of poetry got reprinted in Germany, the Danish author would receive the same amount of protection as a German author in Germany. Britain joined this movement for copyright protection and regulation very late. It joined it in the Victorian Age, primarily between 1844 and 1886. It was a long drawn out process.

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I would recommend that you, as part of your first lesson, look at the British Library collections of the early Victorian book. The British Library's ["British Publishing 1800 to 1900"](#) documentation tells us that the communications industry, of which publishing and printing was a crucial component, accelerated the process of economic, social and cultural change. It increased the volume and speed by which information could be transmitted.

For instance, if as a politician, as a statesman, as a scientist or as a social thinker, you needed to put your ideas out to the public, you could print and circulate them via libraries and periodicals faster than you ever could have in the 200 years since print had appeared. The Victorian Period saw the emergence of the publisher as a dominant force. The *Publisher's Circular*, a trade journal, published new and some reprinted titles of the last 14 days every fortnight. You will find this information on the British Library's webpage on the early Victorian book. The journal listed the titles but not necessarily the numbers of copies sold. As the century progressed, certain titles would have been produced in very large numbers, such as school text books.

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Statistics from the *Bibliotheca Londinensis* which is the standard reference work from the period, 1814 to 1846, show you the kinds of publishing that were prevalent and the weightage for publications in various disciplines. The domain with the largest number of publications was, expectedly, religion. 20 percent of all titles appeared under the rubric of religion.

The domain of “Geography, Travel, History and Biography” (GTHB) was also of enormous importance: 17.3 percent of the total output. This was much larger than “Fiction and Juvenile” works though it shrunk over a period of time. “Poetry and Drama” was only 4.3 percent. But books were also being published on a much larger range of subjects which did not fit into the old classification system being used by trade journals.

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What this suggests is that publishers had an important role to play in the literature production of the period. Publishers like Joseph Johnson, as recent studies by Helen Brathwaite have shown, were extraordinarily influential. Johnson, for instance, is the person who is widely known for having published the big Romantic writers of the time: William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He also published Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Mary Wollstonecraft, Joseph Priestley and William Cowper. At some point, he was condemned and put on trial for being too radical. (Refer Slide Time: 7:43)

Continuing our exploration of the [British Library's collections of Victorian literature](#), we can go on to explore the printing technology of the early Victorian period, which overlaps of course with the English Romantics. It gives you a picture of the publishing industry of the period. It also helps you look at illustrations and the kinds of wood engraving that were prevalent at the time. But it also, more importantly for literary scholars not necessarily interested in book history, gives you the kinds of genres that were popular during this time: the novel, the yellowbacks, and the sensational novels also known as the penny dreadfuls, children's books and magazines.

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So, what do you think was the consequence of this widespread fashion of publications of all kinds, novels, poetry, drama, geography, religion, etc. that we have just looked at? The answer is fairly simple. It changed literacy. It changed literacy across various classes but primarily among the middle classes. One account tells us that literacy rose from 75 to 95 percent among the middle classes alone. This means that the middle classes demanded more reading matter.

The growing demand for more reading matter led to cheaper books being published. Periodicals thrived as a result. But the direct beneficiary of this change, the increase in literacy, was the genre

of the novel. Novels became the single most preferred genre. Religious tracts were always of course a favourite. They also multiplied. Poets and essayists such as Leigh Hunt and Samuel Coleridge also tried their hand at periodical publishing, though not always very successfully.

Pamphlets flourished. Radical political opinion made its way into the middle classes in the form of tracts of which two are absolutely crucial. Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, published in 1791-92, is often seen as instrumental in driving the debate on rights, revolution, and dissent. Reformist publishing, most notably by the radical writer, William Cobbett, who started *Political Register* and ran it for nearly 35 years, also appeared during this time. The other key text, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* appeared in 1792 as a response to Thomas Paine's work, *Rights of Man*. Hannah More, whose religious tracts were extremely popular, ensured a lively political climate and marked the slow building of a public sphere.

What are we looking at here? What we are looking at here is a wide variety of topics, subjects, issues, concerns, and ideas that were floating around in the form of printed matter. The middle classes started reading texts by Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft. It read accounts by William Cobbett on the question of industrialization and labour, something that the Victorian Age would build up as "the Condition of England" question.

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Such shifts in reading habits naturally influenced education. The Romantic emphasis on the child is not accidental. All of you are perhaps aware of the fact that William Wordsworth, for instance, in his famous Immortality Ode emphasized the child. The innocent child is a standard trope throughout Romantic literature. But this emphasis on the child is not accidental or entirely the product of the Romantic imagination. Studies such as Alan Richardson's classic work, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as a Social Practice, 1780 to 1832*, published in 1994, have shown that institutions and reading practices in such institutions made certain conceptions of childhood understandable.

Richardson shows that schools such as Enfield School popularized a particular social model of childhood among authors. In other words, what I am suggesting is that the Romantic idea of childhood popularized in Wordsworth and others was not entirely coming out of philosophical

speculation and imagination. It drew upon contemporary debates on the role of childhood, education, reading, and literacy, circulating within the domains of print but also in institutions like the public school.

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Let us now take a look at periodical cultures. Periodicals such as the *Quarterly Review* were key players in the making of print literacy during this period. Major new periodicals including the highly respected *Edinburgh Review*, *Quarterly Review*, *London Magazine*, *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register* (this has already been mentioned), *Gentlemen's Magazine* and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* appeared during this period.

Periodicals like the *Edinburgh Review*, founded in 1802 by Francis Jeffrey, Sydney Smith, Francis Horner and Henry Brougham, were influential in the Scottish Enlightenment. Specialized periodicals also emerged. For example, with Britain's involvement in the French revolutionary wars, periodicals devoted to military issues also began to appear. These included works like *Soldier's Pocket Magazine* (1798), *The British Military Library* (1799), the *Naval Chronicle* (1799-1818) and the *Monthly Military Companion* (1801 to 1802).

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Take a look at what the *Gentlemen's Magazine* which was launched in 1731 states as its aim and motto:

Monthly a View of all the pieces of Wit, Humour, or Intelligence, daily offer'd to the Publick in the News-papers, (which are of late so multiply'd as to render it impossible, unless a man makes it a business, to consult them all) and in the next place we shall join therewith some other matters of Use or Amusement that will be communicated to us.

The emphasis here is “matters of Use or Amusement”, “Wit, Humour and Intelligence”. This was the motto of the *Gentlemen's Magazine*. Three generations of the Nichols family were involved as editors of this particular magazine.

The periodical as a medium published essays. We know that several of the critics like Leigh Hunt and Samuel Taylor Coleridge first published in the form of essays in the periodicals. The essay form continued to influence the periodical publication. Critics such as the very distinguished Marilyn Butler have argued that by the Romantic Era, periodicals could even be understood as the very medium of culture. They played a crucial role in the shaping of public taste and opinion.

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Romantic Circles, a refereed scholarly website runs a [major project on the *Quarterly Review*](#), maintaining an archive of this particular journal and attempting to document the authors who were almost all the time anonymous. Take a look at this project.

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Recent studies such as the Daniel Roberts and Robert Morrison edited volume *Romanticism and Blackwood's Magazine* (2013) have shown that such periodicals played a crucial role in the building of British and Scottish nationalism. That is, these periodicals carried essays which informed public opinion about the nature of their country and the role this country played in the Empire overseas. Let us not forget that 1798 to 1832, the Romantic Age, is coterminous with the building of an Empire, about which more in the next class.

Periodicals gave rise to terror fiction, detective fiction, and pioneered the cult of celebrity authors. Tom Mole's work on Byron as literary celebrity shows very clearly the link between literary production and periodical culture. It carried pieces such as essays on the colonies. Its role has been recognized and subject to considerable critical work, such as the Roberts and Morrison edited volume which we have just mentioned. In this particular volume, Roberts and Morrison argue and demonstrate through a range of essays that they put together, how ideas that we straight away attach to the Romantics found preliminary and sustained expression in periodicals like the *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.

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In his *British Periodicals and Romantic Identity: "Literary Lower Empire"*, Mark Schoenfield argues that scientific, economic, literary, and artistic discourse appeared in these particular periodicals. For many people, such as Wordsworth, there was considerable anxiety that the public had to be influenced in ways that it has not been influenced before to read new kinds of poetry. That is, works like Mark Schoenfield's show that Wordsworth, Coleridge and the English Romantics were concerned that they had a new readership in place, thanks to print culture.

It required some fine-tuning in terms of what they wrote to make it more appealing. When we look at Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, we will pay some more attention to this question of readership, and why Wordsworth spends a lot of time talking about new forms of poetry. In many cases, as we shall see, it was expression of some amount of cultural anxiety about not having the readership for a new kind of poetry. Audiences were already tuned in to one particular kind of poetry and Wordsworth and Coleridge were producing in the *Lyrical Ballads* a new kind.

So, what have we learnt today? We have noted the expansion of print and the consequences in terms of a wide ranging literacy, greater demand for publishing of certain kinds of books, the rise of periodical culture and the role the essay played in the shaping of periodical culture and vice versa.

We have looked at the fact that the expansion of print culture had an enormous influence on the shaping of public taste and authors like Wordsworth were indeed concerned about their audience. We will have reasons to return to this in subsequent lessons. For now, we have outlined the role of print, literacy and reading in the shaping of the English Romantics.

Further/ Recommended Reading:

"Aspects of the Victorian Book". *British Library*.

<https://www.bl.uk/collections/early/victorian/intro.html>

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