

**English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832**  
**Professor Pramod K Nayar**  
**Department of English**  
**University of Hyderabad**  
**Fiction of the Romantic Period**

In the first lesson of the third week of Literature of the Romantic Age, 1798-1832, we will be looking at the fiction of the Romantic period.

The period is primarily known for its poetry: prominent names include Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, Southey and several others. However, it is also the age in which a certain kind of fiction develops, primarily the Gothic. We have a wide variety of genres from this period: the epistolary novel, the romance, the gothic, the historical novel, the didactic novel, etc. Most of these were informed by the idea of sensibility and sentimentalism.

If you recall what we have said about the backgrounds to the English Romantic period, sensibility and sentimentality were central to the imagining of other people, other worlds, other's lives. So, sensibility and sentimentalism remained the key modes of engaging with the human. A feeling for the other's suffering was seen as a standard of human distinction. This is informed by European Romanticism and theories of philosophers such as Adam Smith.

The psychology of individuals and the collective psyche or consciousness of society were both examined in many texts. They focused on locality and region: Ireland, Scotland, England were part of the settings. Then there is a kind of novel that emerges which is primarily interested in the darker side of the human: the darker anxieties, anger, incestuous temperament, murderous rage which constitute the bedrock of the gothic novel.

There was also the political novel influenced by radical and reformist movements of the age and the revolutions. These created pre-eminently political fiction.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:20)

Individual psychology, social critique, class, and rights were of concern to novelists like William Godwin. Comparable examples, with an emphasis on women's rights, and exploring issues around domesticity, marriage or social status, were produced in other genres, most notably in the political novel or the novel of sentiment by Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen and Fanny Burney.

Novels such as William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, which is a pioneering work, were heavily influenced by the Enlightenment, and foregrounded the primacy of Reason. It showcased the battles between liberal political and social thought and the radicals.

However, and that is the important thing, these novels were also interested in the psychology of the individual. One cannot easily say that they were merely social problem novels, or that they were interested only in questions of class and rationality and monarchic power, since they were also interested in individual psychologies.

William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote fiction heavily influenced by the political ideas and ideals of their time. Godwin had already established himself as a major author and social commentator with his *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. This text was also a key one in terms of exploring the link between law, justice and individual conscience.

Here is an extract from Godwin's famous novel *Caleb Williams*.

(Refer Slide Time: 03:38)

Strange that men, from age to age, should consent to hold their lives at the breath of another, merely that each in his turn may have a power of acting the tyrant according to the law! Oh God! Give me poverty! Shower upon me all the imaginary hardships of human life! I will receive them with thankfulness. Turn me a prey to the wild beasts of the desert, so I be never again the victim of man, dressed in the gore-dripping robes of authority! Suffer me at least to call life, the pursuits of life, my own!

Note the tone in which Godwin is writing this passage. Godwin is not only talking about social inequality and social injustice but is approaching it via how the individual perceives these. The document here is not only one of the social variety but it's also an exploration of the psychological state of the individual who is trapped in this kind of social injustice.

Godwin uses the distressing social order to speak about the individual strategies of coping. He is making the link between the social domain on the one hand: inequality, poor wages, poor working conditions, constant unemployment, and the individual strategies of coping which are psychological. *Caleb Williams* is one of the first novels to develop this link between the individual and the social order via a perception, our perception of the individual's mental states. Here is a second extract from *Caleb Williams*:

(Refer Slide Time: 05:10)

I had no power of withdrawing my person from a disgusting society, in the most cheerful and valuable part of the day; but I soon brought to perfection the art of withdrawing my thoughts, and saw and heard the people about me, for just as short a time, and as seldom, as I pleased. Such is man in himself considered; so simple his nature; so few his wants.

If you pay attention to the rhetoric of this passage from Caleb Williams, it is not about the social order alone. What Godwin is talking about or trying to depict is the individual's psychological condition in responding to the world. This is an early instance of the psychological novel where you don't just see a person, you see the person's mind working. *Caleb Williams* is an attempt to document the psychological workings and mechanisms of a particular character.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:09)

A parallel example from the women's point of view would appear in Mary Wollstonecraft's work, her novel *Mary* or her tract *The Wrongs of Women*. The texts here are an exploration of the possibility of emancipation, the social conditions under which women live, and patriarchy. In *The Wrongs of Women*, Mary Wollstonecraft would ask, "Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?", then she would say "Marriage had bastilled me for life". These questions, statements are radical. In both cases Mary Wollstonecraft is using the image and metaphor of a prison, Bastille of course, a reference to the famous French prison.

In *Mary* she would say "in moments of solitary sadness, a gleam of joy would dart across her mind - she thought she was hastening to that world where there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage."

These are political statements, political statements via the psychological conditions of the individual, specifically the individual woman. Critics have argued that "such political fiction published in the volatile 1790s, provides a comprehensive inquiry into the development of a theory of rights which has long been at the core of the relationship between the individual and the law." (Johnson 1994, 99)

Lynn Hunt, in her *Inventing Human Rights* makes the argument that the development of the sentimental novel and the psychological novel provided a foundation to a theory of the human.

Lynn Hunt suggests that the idea of human rights proceeds from an idea of the human and the idea of the human emerges in the 1780s and 90s because of a particular portrait of the human as the sentimental creature and an exploration of the psychology of the individual presence.

When you read the sentimental novel you are actually getting a picture of the entire human, so there is a social context and there is an individual and workings of the of the mind of the consciousness of the individual, the sentimental response of the individual to the world, actually give us a complete portrait of the human. In other words people like Lynne Hunt in *The Invention of Human Rights* speak about the sentimental novel as a key factor in the rise of the idea of the human itself.

Other critics such as Tillotama Rajan see such novels as embodying the impossible space between the political and moral, between the questions of justice and the questions of the ethical. These novels ask, according to Rajan, whether the legal and ethical are the same and when punishment is a form of justice.

It is also a novel about the problems and dilemmas of incarceration, the operations of the police outside the purview of the legal system, as Quentin Bailey has noted. But it is also about the figure of the criminalized victim: if you pay attention to the 18th century novel by Henry Fielding and others, the Vandal, the fugitive from justice and the criminal are key characters.

Caleb, the title character of *Caleb Williams* who runs away from Falkland's house is pursued by constables and driven by print media, the entire London populace is against him.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:42)

The novel is therefore about the word, that is the narrative, and the world. It is about the power of the narrative to do two things: talk about the world and talk about the consciousness of the individual. As you can see we are giving a huge amount of importance to the novels of the Romantic period for contributing to our history of human rights and to the history of the philosophical positions on the human. People like Emily Anderson have argued that when *Caleb Williams* ends, he has decided to revenge himself on the Tormentor but the revenge is carried out in a very interesting way.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:29)

This is a quote from Caleb Williams: "I will use no daggers! I will unfold a tale! I will tell a tale! With this little pen I defeat all his machinations."

(Refer Slide Time: 10:44)

“I will use no daggers! I will unfold a tale! I will tell a tale! with this little pen I defeat all his machinations.” What is William Godwin doing here? Godwin is emphasizing the power of the narrative to effect changes in the world, the power of the narrative to affect public opinions in the world.

### **The Woman’s Novel**

One such category of the novel that alters then, and alters now, our perceptions of social order of class, of rights, of persons and oppression is the woman’s novel, that is the genre to which I now turn.

Ian Watt as we all know famously located Jane Austen as the worthy, the true successor to Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, although there were other women novelists put before and around Jane Austen. Recent re-evaluations of the woman’s novel of this period however refused to see them as being concerned solely with women’s issues. As Nancy Armstrong has argued, to say that these novels are only about the home and the heart, about children and marriage which is the basic framework within which the woman is novelist is often read, is a rather limiting frame.

Jill Campbell, tracing the history of the re-evaluations of these novels, has argued that Jane Austen and the novelist were not apolitical. Far from it in fact, they were implicitly addressing, not explicitly but perhaps implicitly addressing the woman’s place in the home and thereby exploring the woman’s place in the revolution and national governance. Jill Campbell says:

“They adapt the novel form to explore questions of women’s superior rights and the powers and proper basis of human, social and political relations. They explore women’s issues such as sexuality and marriage but they also link these to questions of representation, communication and instruction.”

Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman* sought to link psychology with class and social order. A woman, Maria, is sent into the asylum by her husband, who wishes to lay his hands on her property. Wollstonecraft intended the novel to be read primarily as a novel about the oppression of women. Now it is unlikely that you can see this as solely a novel devoted to women’s issues. Why do we say this? We say this because women’s issues are not

born out of a simple question of marriage. These are born out of larger social prejudices, larger problems in the uneven nature of gender roles, and questions of labour.

It is important to see the rise of the women's novel less as devoted to the discussion of domesticity as much as a dedication to the exploration of the politics of domesticity. The minute we say a politics of domesticity we are speaking about the politics of gender and gender roles. Questions of marriage are actually questions of social conventions.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:33)

In *Mary* (1788), Mary Wollstonecraft would depict a character who sees marriage as confinement and death as release. I have already quoted for you the description of marriage as a Bastille, as a prison. Here, writers like Wollstonecraft are not talking women's issues as purely psychological, so it is awkward and inappropriate and severely limiting to say that the woman's novel is only concerned with the hysterical woman or the woman who is given to emotion and sentiments. They are political novels because they talk about gender roles, questions of age and the question of women's rights.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:14)

Fanny Burney wrote sentimental fiction and focused on manners and society. They were often moral and didactic tales, emphasizing virtue in women and such. In *Evelina* (1778), subtitled "a young girl's entrance into the world", Burney focused on marriage as the sole means of respectability. Caroline, the central protagonist of the novel, rejected by Sir John, gives birth to a daughter and dies. Eventually Evelina, the daughter of Caroline, is accepted by her father and attains social standing.

Questions of virtue, sexuality and moral codes merged with questions of luxury, class and social status. *Evelina* also chronicled the adventures of a young woman from the country in London, a city whose entertainment culture was full of danger to an "inncent" maid. The novel portrayed the rural gentry as eager to sample the pleasures of the city, and documents the various means of entertainment available (Bedlam, the asylum, was also at one point a tourist attraction).

The exploration of the woman's psychology, the exploration of the woman's condition is not restricted to a psychological or sentimental approach, it locates the psychology and the sentiment within larger social contexts such as like class, wealth and social standing.

Thus we do not wish any longer to see the woman's novel as a narrowly defined slim genre, in fact much of women's fiction from this time is devoted to the politics of gender. Questions of gender roles will also appear differently in the Gothic tales of Ann Radcliffe, Clara Reeve and others.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:43)

### **The Sentimental Novel**

We have now discussed two genres of novels, the psychological novel, the woman's novel and now we turn to the third, the Sentimental novel. Sensibility of the 18<sup>th</sup> century meant a capacity for refined and sensitive emotional response. Sentimental literature thus models "fine feeling," giving its characters opportunities to exhibit and valorize sympathetic and virtuous emotional expression. Scenes of suffering or strong emotion and the affective responses to them mark Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768) or Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771) while philosophical texts such as Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) explored the questions of sympathy and the response to suffering.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:25)

The first excerpt is from Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels.

Smith is arguing that our senses will never tell us how we feel, or how the other person feels. It is "by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations." Adam Smith is actually speaking about what in the 20th century will be known as the sympathetic imagination elaborated brilliantly by critics such as Martha Nussbaum and the

fiction of J M Coetzee, specifically *Elizabeth Costello*. Adam Smith wants one to be able to imagine the suffering of the other. To move beyond your person, into the other person's shoes, trying to explore the other person's sentiments requires a sympathetic imagination.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:42)

Adam Smith goes on to say,

As the person who is principally interested in any event is pleased with our sympathy, and hurt by the want of it, so we, too, seem to be pleased when we are able to sympathize with him, and to be hurt when we are unable to do so. We run not only to congratulate the successful, but to condole with the afflicted; and the pleasure which we find in the conversation of one whom in all the passions of his heart we can entirely sympathize with, seems to do more than compensate the painfulness of that sorrow with which the view of his situation affects us. On the contrary, it is always disagreeable to feel that we cannot sympathize with him, and instead of being pleased with this exemption from sympathetic pain, it hurts us to find that we cannot share his uneasiness. If we hear a person loudly lamenting his misfortunes, which, however, upon bringing the case home to ourselves, we feel, can produce no such violent effect upon us, we are shocked at his grief; and, because we cannot enter into it, call it pusillanimity and weakness. It gives us the spleen, on the other hand, to see another too happy or too much elevated, as we call it, with any little piece of good fortune. We are disobliged even with his joy; and, because we cannot go along with it, call it levity and folly. We are even put out of humour if our companion laughs louder or longer at a joke than we think it deserves; that is, than we feel that we ourselves could laugh at it.

This is moral sentimental defined – to be able to sympathize with the suffering other, to be able to sympathize with a person's suffering is to constitute ourselves as human and the other person as a human deserving of our attention. We are humans because we respond, we are humans because we respond in particular ways.

If we look at this passage in particular, we see several references to the idea of sympathetic response, sympathetic pain, and sympathetic joy. Our sense of the world is primarily constituted by subjectivity but Adam Smith is saying our subjectivity has to be inter-subjective: between us and the other. This is a radical departure from the traditional way of looking at the English Romantics. To recap briefly and quickly we have thought that the English Romantics were concerned only with themselves but as you can see from quotes like Adam Smith's here, our job is to also relate to the other. I am myself because I respond to the other. And as shown through abolitionist poetry, we have been called upon to respond to the suffering of the slaves.



(Refer Slide Time: 19:10)

The argument made by the abolitionists, Hannah More's poetry, Robert Southey's poetry and several others like William Wilberforce was, that we as English, have to respond to the slaves and from there will emerge the anti-slavery campaign. That is, a sentimental response to the slave is the foundation for seeing the slave as a human. Ana Wierda Rowland cites an instance from Ouladah Equiano's fascinating narrative, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* of 1789 that relied on sentimental structures to communicate suffering. This is Equiano's, shall we say call to the English:

(Refer Slide Time: 19:57)

O, ye nominal Christians! might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God, who says unto you, do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise sacrificed to your avarice? ... Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty, which, while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery.

This is Equiano the black man asking the white man should the slaves should sacrifice sentiment for their greed.

(Refer Slide Time: 20:35)

We see several such instances in Maria Edgeworth's "The Grateful Negro", where the black slave is characterized as a feeling human, and therefore close to the white man. Now the point to remember here is the sentimental novel, the woman's novel and the psychological novel are not watertight compartments but all of them are political.

To recap: rethink how we have traditionally read the English Romantic text. They are not texts devoted only to sentiment and psychology, but locate sentiment and psychology in larger social relations, questions of labour, questions of wage. This is a slightly left reading of the English Romantics, but none of these texts is explicitly apolitical. They may not be explicitly political but a careful reading of any of these texts will show us that for people like Mary Wollstonecraft, David William Godwin and others, these novels and their characters are actually critiquing social relations.

### **Additional/ Recommended Reading**

Emily Anderson, "I Will Unfold A Tale-!": Narrative, Epistemology, and *Caleb Williams*" *Eighteenth Century Fiction* 22.1 (2009): 99-114.

Quentin Baley, "Extraordinary and dangerous powers": Prisons, Police, and Literature in Godwin's *Caleb Williams*," *Eighteenth Century Fiction* 22.3 (2010): 525-548.

Tilottama Rajan, "Judging Justice: Godwin's Critique of Judgement in *Caleb Williams* and Other Novels" *The Eighteenth Century* 51.3 (2010): 343-363.

Jill Campbell, "Women writers and the woman's novel: The trope of maternal transmission", in Richard Maxwell and Katie Trumpener (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to the Fiction of the Romantic Period*. Cambridge UP, 2008. 159-176.

Ana Wierda Rowland. "Sentimental Fiction," in Richard Maxwell and Kate Trumpener (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to the Fiction of the Romantic Period*. Cambridge UP, 2008. 191-206.