

**English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832**  
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**Romantic Poetry: Romanticism and sentiment**  
**Introduction: Sensibility and Passion**

Hello everybody, welcome to the NPTEL course on the English Romantic writers 1798-1832. In the previous sessions we have looked at the context in which Romanticism arose. Its connections with the European philosophies, context within England political, social and cultural. We have focused on the fact that English Romantic literature, poetry and fiction drew upon contexts such as the rise of revolutionary sentiments, the larger question of rights for women and others, but also philosophical thoughts on questions of sensibility, passion and sentiment.

We also made it a point to note, authors like William Wordsworth for very keen on developing ideas about the sentiment of response to say nature, other humans, racial and cultural others. So while the empire or slavery may have been contexts of the dramatic writers in writing their pros, fiction, poetry and others, there was a dominant attitude and that dominant attitude informed by questions of European ideas on the sentiments and Passion introduced a theme of sensibility.

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Romantic Poetry 1: Romanticism and Sentiment  
**Introduction: Sensibility and Passion**



Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* has often been credited with the making of a new genre – the sentimental novel.

The 'literature of sensibility' has several distinguishing features.

The literature is marked by a considerable amount of self-reflexivity. The first-person narrator's focus is not only on the 'I' but the process of seeing, perception and assimilation of the world.

There is self-reflexivity in the narrative, particularly in the novel and poetry, where attention is paid to the process of composition.

Protagonists of such literature are represented as easily moved by sights and stories of human deprivation and suffering.

Sensible meant

(1) "conscious . . . aware" and the rarified (2) "having sensibility; capable of delicate or tender feeling"



Sensibility and passion, which is the subject of today's lecture here, drew upon various sources. The 18th-century sentimental novel, European ideas of sentiments, passion and feeling. It has wide sources such as Jean Jacques Rousseau and fiction. Henry Mackenzie's novel, *A Man of Feeling* has often been credited with the making of a new genre, the sentimental novel. And the literature of sensibility evolving out of this 18th-century phenomena in has several distinguish features.

The literature is marked by a huge amount of self-reflectivity. Therefore what you normally find is a 1st person narrative dominates the genre. But interestingly, the narrators focus in the 1st person narrative is not only on the seeing eye as in me but on the process of seeing, perception. You will recall some of the material we have discussed down Coleridge where Coleridge in poems like *Eolian Harp* was not only talking about nature but on the poet's perceptions of nature. In Wordsworth we have noticed how when for instance clattering about the experience of *Tintern Abbey* or Shelley in the experience of the skylark focuses on how the poet, how the speaker perceives these objects in nature.

So the process of saying, perception and assimilation of the world is central to the literature or sensibility. This is what we now understand in theoretical work in the today century as self-reflexive writing. There is self-reflexivity in the narrative particularly in the novel and poetry, when attention is paid to the process of composition as well. What do we mean by this? That is when Wordsworth is documenting how he perceives *Tintern Abbey*, so as he walks across the landscape, he looks at *Tintern Abbey*, the river, the woods around and the Pastoral setting, he writes about how he sees the composition of nature, but also the composition of his own writing.

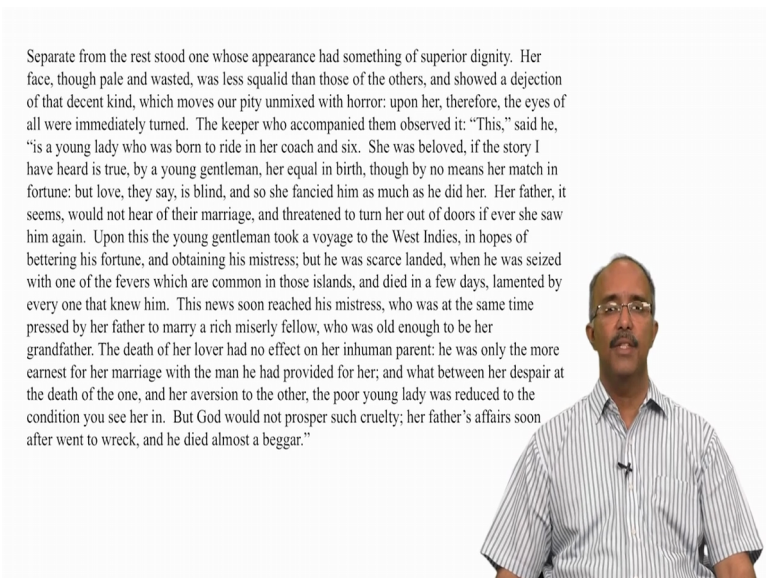
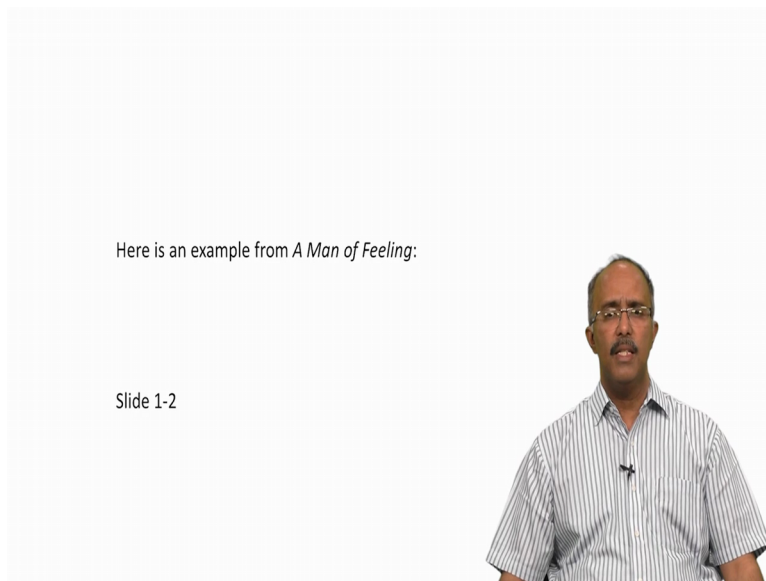
So in many cases self-reflexivity is not only about the attention paid to the process of perception through the eye, perception through the senses including hearing, but also to the process of composing the piece of literary artefact. Protagonists in such literatures are represented as very easily moved by sights and stories of human deprivation and is suffering. So, in Henry Mackenzie's the man of feeling, to which we will turn in a minute or 2 and Wordsworth will speak about not just seeing but the effect of seeing something.

So you will recall poems like the Solitary Reaper, Tintern Abbey, the Eolian Harp and many of the poetry that we have already discussed including Shelley's, the West wind over others, will showcase the effect of the natural elements on the speaker. Which means to say if I am moved by something, I will document what I am moved by and how I am sentimentally affected. So the literature and sensibility showcased not only suffering but the response to human suffering and this is very important.

It is very important because as contemporary critics like Lynn Hunt have argued, this is the foundation for massive campaign for human rights as well. But that is not really the subject of our conversation now. What I want you to understand is protagonists in literature of sensibility are often moved by sights, stories and visuals, spectacles of human deprivation or human suffering. To be sensible meant to be conscious, to be aware and having the sensibility capable of tender or delicate feeling. So it is not only about how awareness but the ability to feel on behalf of the suffering author.

Please understand this, it is different from what we have discussed so far because it is not only about me, it is not only about my senses, my sensations, my passions and my intellect, it is about how I respond to the outside world. So, it is about formal narrative, discursive and sentimental response to the author. In order to illustrate this, I am putting up on the next couple of slides and instance from Henry Mackenzie's A man of feeling.

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Here is a longish excerpt, read the excerpt carefully. It is about a woman who is standing to one side and according to Mackenzie's writing, shows a dejection, but dejection of a decent kind. And which says McKenzie moves our pity and mixed with horror. Moves our pity, and that is the key phrase I want you to keep in mind, it showed a definition of a decent kind which moves our pity and mixed with horror. Upon her therefore the eyes of all were immediately turned. Notice what is happening in the 1st 5 lines.

There is a description of the sad, pale and wasted woman, then there is the description of the audience, that all attention of the audience is focused on this woman's suffering. What we mean by this? What do we understand by this? What MacKenzie is talking about is that as this woman appears on the scene, the audience's perceptions are all focused on her, the

narrative talks about not only the focusing of attention but the effect of that attention on the audience. So you observe people observing, you observe people's sentiments, this is important.

And through the account then the story is being narrated, the keeper who accompanied them observed. This is a young lady who was born to write in the coach and 6. She was belaboured, if the story I have heard is true, by a young gentleman, her equal in birth, though by no means her match in Fortune, but love they say is blind, and she fancied. This is a story being narrated by an innkeeper and he is narrating the story of the woman's downfall, of her being reduced to this situation and it is a story calculated to arouse in use sympathy and pity.

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Though this story was told in very plain language, it had particularly attracted Harley's notice; he had given it the tribute of some tears. The unfortunate young lady had till now seemed entranced in thought, with her eyes fixed on a little garnet ring she wore on her finger; she turned them now upon Harley. "My Billy is no more!" said she; "do you weep for my Billy? Blessings on your tears! I would weep too, but my brain is dry; and it burns, it burns, it burns!"—She drew nearer to Harley.—"Be comforted, young lady," said he, "your Billy is in heaven."—"Is he, indeed? and shall we meet again? and shall that frightful man (pointing to the keeper) not be there!—Alas! I am grown naughty of late; I have almost forgotten to think of heaven: yet I pray sometimes; when I can, I pray; and sometimes I sing; when I am saddest, I sing:—You shall hear me—hush!

Henry MacKenzie, *A Man of Feeling*



Look at the next slide. The story is now over, as in the keeper has narrated the story. And the focus now shifts to the woman, the keeper to one member in the audience, Harley. Mackenzie writes, it had particularly attracted Harley's notice, he had given it the tribute of some tears this is the man of feeling. Remember what I have said, it is not only a question of perception, but the effect the perception has on me, that is important. And it says here, Mackenzie writes here, though the story was told in very plain language, it had particularly attracted Harley's notice.

He had given it the tribute of some tears, the unfortunate young lady had till now seemed entranced in thought, vaporise face and a little garnet ring she wore on her finger, she turned them now upon Harley. "My Billy is no more", said she, "Do you weep for my Billy? Blessings on your tears. I would weep too, but my brain is dry and it burns, it burns, it

burns!" Please notice the melodramatic language. She drew near to Harley and this is the response being recorded for us, "be comforted young lady", said he, " your Billy is in heaven." "Is he indeed? And shall we meet again? And shall that frightful man (pointing to the keeper) not be there! Alas, I am growing naughty of late, I was most forgotten to think of heaven, yet I pray sometimes when I came, I pray, and sometimes I sing."

Now notice this rather melodramatic piece of dialogue and scene from Henry McKenzie's novel *A Man of feeling*. It began as you know with the arrival of this woman in the midst of a group. The keeper narrates the story and now the effect on Harley is being recorded. He has shed some tears and the woman has a little conversation with him. "Do you weep for my Billy?" Now, Harley does not know Billy, Harley does not know this woman, what he responds to is the power of the story. I want you to understand this, it is the power of the narrative that moves Harley, it is the power of evocative, melodramatic language that forced Harley.

This is a literature of sensibility, which requires a very different form of language generation. And he of course burst into tears, he does not burst into tears but he has some tears flying. It is in the expression of sympathy for the deprived, for the underprivileged, for the oppressed that the protagonist's humanity is really proved. Sensibility is a marker of the human in other words, how do we know Harley is human? We know Harley is human because he responds with tears to the woman's story and the woman's appearance. To be sentimental is what defines the human, not intellect but sentiment.

So not head, but heart. You know, if you think carefully about this, this is a theme that has continued from the literature of sensibility of the late 18th and early 19th century, all the way to cyborg cultures in the present, where the cyborg is distinguished from the humans because the cyborg cannot feel, it can sing but it cannot feel. And the entire reinvention of cyber cyborg, cybernetic organisms in films like *Robocop* or *Terminator* is to show the increasing sentimentalisation of a cyborg because of some human element.

Sensibility is the marker of the human, what then is the function of such scenes of sentiments? As in, what purpose does it serve? The function of such scenes of sentiments draws out the human in us, that is the reader. It shows us the erroneous ways of mankind, it shows us that X does not respond to this evocative situation of suffering, but Y does so. So Y is more human than X. Mackenzie would say in *A man of feeling*, I have observed one in

credit, somewhat necessarily in a man's composition towards happiness, which people of feeling would do well to acquire.

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It is in the expression of sympathy for the deprived and the abject that the protagonist's humanity is really proved.

'Sensibility', then, is the marker of the human.

The function of such scenes of sentiment was to draw out the human in us, including the reader.

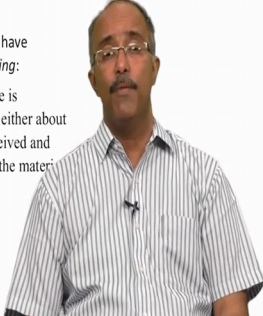
But they also had characters aware of the erroneous ways of mankind.

Mackenzie would say in *A Man of Feeling*:

Indeed, I have observed one ingredient, somewhat necessary in a man's composition towards happiness, which people of feeling would do well to acquire; a certain respect for the follies of mankind

Sensibility was also a combination of both reason and sentiment. John Locke may have inaugurated this view when he wrote in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

To this I answer, in one word, From EXPERIENCE: In that, all our Knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives it self. Our Observation employ'd either about external, sensible Objects; or about the internal Operations of our Minds, perceived and reflected on by our selves, is that, which supplies our Understandings with all the materials of thinking.



A certain respect for the follies of mankind. So, sensibility was a combination then offered the sentiments and passion but something else and that is a key paradox in the literature of sensibility. Note what Mackenzie is saying. Irrespective of the follies of mankind, you respect the errors of the ways of man. Sensibility is a combination of reason and sentiments. John Locke may have inaugurated this view when he actually wrote this in an essay concerning human understanding, to which I will turn in second. Sensibility is not just your passion, plot sentiment, it is a mixture of reason and sentiment, because you respond evocatively to suffering but you are also aware of human flaws.

Human flaws are detected through processes of evaluation. Evaluation requires a certain rationality, certain set of rational criteria and that is what we are looking at here. Sensibility is a combination of reason and sentiment. John Locke writes in an essay concerning human understanding and I quote "To this I answer in one word, from experience. In that all of our knowledge is founded and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observation employed either about external sensible objects all about the internal operations of our minds, perceived and reflected on by ourselves."

Perceived and reflected on by ourselves. At this part I would like to draw your attention to something they have already discussed and that is Wordsworth famous definition of poetry in the previous to the lyrical balance. When he spoke about the spontaneous overflow of



powerful feelings and emotions and later qualifies it by saying that is not all. What Wordsworth says is, it is a recall, yes, but it is a recall of emotions recollected in tranquillity. And through preface to the lyrical balance, Wordsworth would speak not only about sentiments but also about remembering, recalling and reformatting sentiments. He does not say that we take the language of rural folk which is a famous contribution, but he then says we adapted.

Wordsworth contradiction is to say there is sentiment, that there is a reflection on sentiment, as in the thinking about sentiment, which is basically what John Locke is talking about here as well. So, thinking therefore in the 18th century involves 2 things, senses and passion. Senses and passion do not themselves dominate reason, but they are integral to the process of rational thinking. So, the word sentiment became a vehicle for the synthesis of reason and of emotion. The idea of sensibility and sentiment as an inner core of the human arose during this particular period, somewhere around the mid-18th century.

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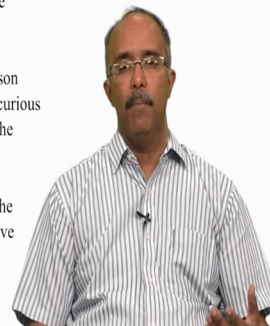
That is, senses and the passions are important to the process of "thinking." The sensations and passions do not themselves dominate reason, but they are integral to the process of rational thinking.

The word "sentiment" became a vehicle for the synthesis of reason and emotion.

The idea of sensibility and sentiment as the inner core of the human arose during this period (the mid-late 18th century)

What the ideologues and proponents of sentiment argued was: When reason loses its moral authority and becomes less normative, "sentiment," that curious combination of emotion, reason, and sensation, rises to take its place as the representative of our natural and normative inner self.


Emphasis on intense friendship or ardent romantic love as indicators of the ability to feel, and continued emphasis on expressivism and using narrative techniques to affect emotion in the audience.





Poems of sensibility, such as WW's 'The Mad Mother' were also in line with such an ideology

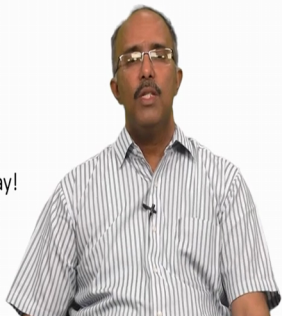
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What the ideologues and proponents of sentiment argued was, when reason loses its Moral authority and becomes less normative, sentiment comes into play. So, when there is no Moral authorities to logic or rationality or reasoning, sentiment takes its place. It becomes the condition of as in normal humans. Emphasis therefore on a combination of both. Having situated that context formally, let us turn to a couple of poems. William Wordsworth, "The Mad Mother" which is classifiable as a poem of sensibility. Coming up next on the set of 3 slides is the poem.

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Oh! smile on me, my little lamb!  
For I thy own dear mother am.  
My love for thee has well been tried:  
I've sought thy father far and wide.  
I know the poisons of the shade,  
I know the earth-nuts fit for food;  
Then, pretty dear, be not afraid;  
We'll find thy father in the wood.  
Now laugh and be gay, to the woods away!  
And there, my babe; we'll live for aye.

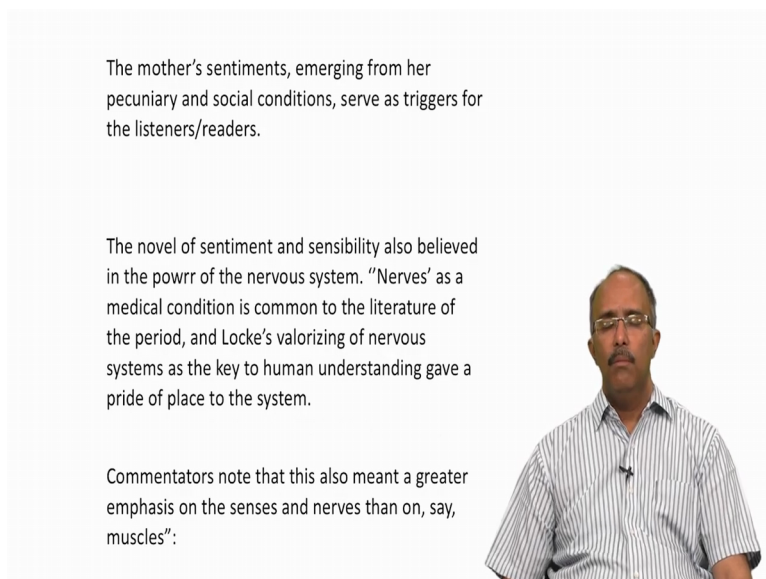


Her eyes are wild, her head is bare, and there she proceeds. And after the 1st stanza, she is singing a song in the English tongue as Wordsworth makes very clear. It is addressed to her child, it is actually a babe. They say that I am mad, then she says, but nay, my heart is far too

glad and I am happy when I sing and she goes on. And in the next stanza she will refer to "Oh lovely, lovely little boy. Now thou art thy mother's only choice. And do not treat the waves below, when over the Sea-Rock's edge we go. The high crag cannot work me harm, nor leaping torrents when they howl, the payback carry on my arm."

She describes her life, "I am thy fathers wedded wife" and all of that and she describes her child for the child, "I will teach my boy the sweetest things, I will teach him how to do saying, my little paper, the lips are still and thou has almost son die for. What had gone in my own dear child. Smile on, my little lamb" she says. "For thy own dear mother am, my love for the has well been tried, have sought thy Father Farrell White, I know the poisons of the shade, I know the earth that is not fit for food, then pretty dear and be not afraid, we will find thy father in the woods. Now laugh and be gay to the woods away and there might babe we will live for aye.


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The mother's sentiments, emerging from her pecuniary and social conditions, serve as triggers for the listeners/readers.

The novel of sentiment and sensibility also believed in the power of the nervous system. "Nerves" as a medical condition is common to the literature of the period, and Locke's valorizing of nervous systems as the key to human understanding gave a pride of place to the system.

Commentators note that this also meant a greater emphasis on the senses and nerves than on, say, muscles":



Now notice what the poem does. The mother's sentiments, emerging from her financial and social conditions, service triggers for the listener. The poem invites us to respond in a certain way. The poem tells us, look at this mother, this mother is poor, the mother looks injured or is unable to take care of the baby, that is our cue to behave, respond, react in certain ways. That is the sentimental poem. In the idyll of the sentimental poem is a sad story. So let us get this right. The literature sensibility forces you to pay attention to The Mad Mother's mental and emotional states.

But it also points out that this is a consequence of a very specific financial condition. Financial conditions are subject to scrutiny which are not necessarily sentimental but objective and economic, basically reason and rationality. This is the point I am trying to make, that there is a merging of the sentimental and the objective/rational in poem like this. Having said that, we need to also address something else. The novel of sentiment and sensibility believed in the power of the nervous system.

Some of you may recall if you have read the Victorians, nerves is a medical condition, to the literature of the entire 19th century. People suffer from nerves. John Locke valorise the nervous system as the key to human understanding. So the nervous system is at the heart of human, more than famous else. What does that mean, as in what does it imply? It implies that there has to be a greater emphasis on never senses and nerves, rather than on bones and muscles. So, it marks a considerable shift from the focus on the humans to the question of what constitutes a human.

So the nerves, the nervous system and sensibilities are more central shall be say to the making of a human. Inger Brody, from whom I shall quote now makes this connection very clear. As sympathy and sensibility replace Charity, the emotions in the sensible spectator become more important than any actions that this virtuous observer may take to alleviate suffering. Personally their spontaneous overflowing feeling replaced character, plants and discipline and eventually action. Nerves and glands came to bear greater ethical significance than muscles. What is Inger Brody talking about here?

The question of an audience responding in a certain way to subjects, objects, events of sufferings is based on my as in if I am a spectator on my nervous system. It is based on my responses to whatever I am seeing. The important thing to realise is, this is transformed into an ethical condition, to be able to respond to the other because ethics, ethics are always directed that, there is no such thing as an ethics directed at myself, ethics is always directed at others. So the cornerstone of the literature of sensibility is the ethical significance of a certain kind of sentimental response.

This is something you need to keep in mind and if you look at what we said about the Mad Mother poem, you pay attention to her cries and tears, but you also keep in mind the cause of that suffering which is economy, which is therefore social. In short, what we need to understand about literature of sensibility is that there is no such thing as pure sentiment in

Wordsworth poetry or Shelley's work. There is no such thing as pure passion. Passion, sentiment, affect, are all rooted in specific social contexts.

So the literature of sensibility which forms the backbone of the English Romantic writers is not about pure sentiments, it is not about pure passion, it is a mixture of everything. But what is important to remember is the emotional melodramatic texts evokes and invokes a certain set of sentiments in the readers. It evokes a certain kind of response, that is at the heart of the romantics. So the Romantics is not only about how Wordsworth responds to nature, it is about how Wordsworth ingenious are response to nature awareness poetry.

So, please keep this in mind in our recall here, the dramatic poetry is not only about sentimentalizing the crumble and beggar, the female vagrant, the characters at the foot of Mont blanc. Romantic poetry is about the evocation and inspiration of passion and sentiment on the part of the reader. Thank you.