

English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832
Prof. Pramod K Nayar
Department of English
University of Hyderabad, Indian Institute of Madras

Backgrounds to the English Romantics, 1798-1832
Dissent and Revolution

In lesson 2 for the second week, as part of the Backgrounds to the English Romantics, 1798 to 1832, we will be looking at Dissent and Revolution.

(Refer Slide Time: 0:25)

The Romantic Period in literature, traditionally given to nature and sentiment was also interested in science as we have seen before in our earlier lessons. It was interested the empire, imperial conquest and the cultural other. But it also was the period of considerable turbulence. The French Revolution 1789, culminating in Napoleon's coup of 1799 was at the opening moments of the English Romantic Period. The French Revolution and its aftermath had its reverberations in England's political culture and in its literature. The English poets, notably Wordsworth and Coleridge, were, at least, initially major supporters of the revolution. (Wordsworth had a personal connection with France as well. He had visited France during the revolutionary years, met Annette Vallon and had a daughter by her.)

Wordsworth would describe England in "London 1802" as "a fen/ of waters" and call upon Milton to return to give the English "manners, virtue, freedom, power!" When Edmund Burke, statesman, published his "Reflections on the Revolution in France" 1790, he argued that if such a revolution ever occurred in England it would end Britain's wonderful traditional institutions and result in anarchy.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:58)

The famous poem, "The Mask of Anarchy" (the entire poem can be found at <http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/PShelley/anarchy.html>) is a key text to understanding the political fervor.

Other influential texts included William Godwin's "Inquiry into Political Justice" (1793) and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. As a result of the revolution and the deeply polarized debates, such as the ones we have just seen, literature and

intellectual writings were consistently political in nature. On the one hand, there is conservative Burke who said, “Oh, my God! What happens if revolutions such as the French come to England?” And then there was like Shelley who said, “Well, we do need some revolution.” The revolution represented for many of the English writers, a new beginning, a new social order change.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:02)



Richard Carlile, Painting of the Peterloo Massacre
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Peterloo-1819-R-Carlile_\(partial\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Peterloo-1819-R-Carlile_(partial).jpg)



Here is a painting by Richard Carlile, “Painting of the Peterloo Massacre” (can be accessed also through the URL provided). The massacre was documented and utilized a number of times by the literary scholars of that time.

Here is Wordsworth, erupting in joy at the idea of a revolution, in *The Prelude*:

(Refer Slide Time: 3:30)

Oh! pleasant exercise of hope and joy!
For mighty were the auxiliars which then stood
Upon our side, we who were strong in love!
Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!—Oh! times,
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
The attraction of a country in romance!
When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights,
When most intent on making of herself
A prime Enchantress—to assist the work

Which then was going forward in her name!
Not favoured spots alone, but the whole earth,
The beauty wore of promise, that which sets
(As at some moment might not be unfelt
Among the bowers of paradise itself)

.....
They who had fed their childhood upon dreams,
The playfellows of fancy, who had made
All powers of swiftness, subtilty, and strength
Their ministers,—who in lordly wise had stirred
Among the grandest objects of the sense,
And dealt with whatsoever they found there
As if they had within some lurking right
To wield it;—they, too, who, of gentle mood,
Had watched all gentle motions, and to these
Had fitted their own thoughts, schemers more wild,
And in the region of their peaceful selves;—

.....
Not in Utopia, subterranean fields,
Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!
But in the very world, which is the world
Of all of us,—the place where in the end
We find our happiness, or not at all!

Wordsworth is enthusiastic, he is welcoming the revolution and he does not think of it as utopia. Not in utopia, he says, subterranean fields or some secreted island, Heaven knows where! In other words, Wordsworth is not speculating on a revolution somewhere out there, somewhere in the distant geographically and temporarily distant place, he is talking about a revolution here. Look at what he is saying, “in the very world which is the world of all of us, the place where in the end we find our happiness or not at all.”

The second example is from Coleridge in *France: An Ode*.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:26)

When France in wrath her giant-limbs upreared,
And with that oath, which smote air, earth, and sea,
Stamped her strong foot and said she would be free,
Bear witness for me, how I hoped and feared!

There is a sense of ambivalence that Coleridge is proposing here. It is not just a welcoming interest and passion for the revolution, there is an anxiety that things may not go as planned, which is why he says, *how I hoped and feared*. And the exact opposite, the contrary to what we have just seen from Wordsworth and Coleridge, Edmund Burke says, on the possible

dangers of revolutionary ideas crossing over into England in *Reflections in the Revolutions in France*:

(Refer Slide Time: 6:11)

You will smile here at the consistency of those democratists who, when they are not on their guard, treat the humbler part of the community with the greatest contempt, whilst, at the same time, they pretend to make them in the depositories of all power.

Kings will be tyrants by policy when subjects are rebels from principle.

The next is a rather extended quotation but a crucial one,

It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the Queen of France, then the Dauphiness, at Versailles; and surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision. I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she had just begun to move in, glittering like the morning star full of life and splendor and joy.

Oh, what a revolution! and what a heart must I have, to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall! Little did I dream, when she added titles of veneration to those of enthusiastic, distant, respectful love, that she should ever be obliged to carry the sharp antidote against disgrace concealed in that bosom; little did I dream that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon her, in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honor, and of cavaliers! I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards, to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult.

But the age of chivalry is gone; that of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded, and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever. Never, never more, shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom! The unbought grace of life, the cheap defense of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise is gone. It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honor, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness.

What is Burke doing here? Burke is mourning the loss of a traditional system of values. He is mourning the collapse of traditional ways of thinking, of hierarchies, of social order. And look at what he is saying, the chastity of honor has been stained and that ought to have inspired courage. Throughout the *Reflections upon a Revolution in France*, Burke is worrying that a similar situation may arise in England. He is worrying that all those things that were happening will cause a collapse of the social order. He is saying is the aristocrats will stand to lose their elite status. Their power, their wealth, and of course their ability to oppress other people.

(Refer Slide Time: 8:17)

Later with the Napoleonic wars, which ended with Waterloo in June 1815, debates about the economic and social costs of extended wars were also reflected in literary texts. Wordsworth's poems therefore detail the life of the "discharged soldier" and the fears of invasion became the subject of poems like Coleridge's "Fear in Solitude". (Infact, the invasion theme combined war with disease, as we have seen in Bewell's reading of the pathology of English Romantic Literature). And has been already mentioned in an earlier lesson, Blake's soldier who now has come back from the war is injured and he hates monarchy, the palace and that the palace – the institution of monarchy which sent him to war and has caused this kind of damage and has given him nothing in turn.

Coleridge here is speaking about the possible invasion of England itself. That is, just as Burke is beginning to, in his reflections on the revolution in France worry that there is imminent revolution in England, Coleridge's *Fears in Solitude* is also saying this:

(Refer Slide Time: 9:13)

It weighs upon the heart, that he must think
What uproar and what strife may now be stirring
This way or that way o'er these silent hills
Invasion, and the thunder and the shout,
And all the crash of onset; fear and rage,
And undetermined conflict – even now.
Even now, perchance, and in his native isle:
Carnage and groans beneath this blessed sun!

(Refer Slide Time: 9:36)

Now you see what you can document very easily from what we have said so far, is the two opposing views about the revolution. Wordsworth and Coleridge initially welcoming of it but Coleridge as we have just seen in the excerpt from “Fears in Solitude”, the anxiety that this invasion will come to their – what he calls “native hill, to their quiet highland”. Having looked at some of these poets, let us take a look at what Tom Paine would say in *Rights of Man*.

Whatever is my right as a man is also the right of another; and it becomes my duty to guarantee as well as to possess.

When it can be said by any country in the world, my poor are happy, neither ignorance nor distress is to be found among the, my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggar, the aged are not in want, the taxes are not oppressive, the rational world is my friend because I am not the friend of happiness. When these things can be said, may that country boast its constitution and government.

What are the present governments of Europe, but a scene of iniquity and oppression? What is that of England? Do not its own inhabitants say, it is a market where every man has his price, and where corruption is common traffic, at the expense of a deluded people? No wonder, then, that the French Revolution is traduced.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:35)

He is arguing that England is also ready for a revolution because its government is just the same. Propaganda against Napoleon dominated the periodical press in England, and Wellington's victory (in the Battle of Waterloo) was seen as the triumph of good over evil. But it was not always the external invasion and war that occupied the literary minds of the age.

Social inequalities, decreasing employment, food scarcity, all of these begin to accumulate towards the first decades of the 19th century, in an age of professed humanitarianism and visible territorial expansion overseas, generated discontent in the working classes. Public institutions came in for polemical attacks. People begin to ask these questions, what are we doing with all these wars when our own country is suffering? Here is Percy Shelley in his well-known sensational *England in 1819*:

(Refer Slide Time: 11:03)

An old, mad, blind, despised and dying king,-
Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn, - mud from a muddy spring –
Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,
But leech-like to their fainting country cling.
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow, -
A people starved and stabbed in the untilled field,—
An army, which liberticide and prey
Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield
Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;
Religion Christless, Godless—a book sealed;
A Senate,—Time’s worst statute unrepealed,—
Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom may
Burst, to illumine our tempestous day.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:41)

Shelley is attacking English monarchy here, “rulers who can neither see, nor feel, nor know,” its institutions such as the Church and politics. Shelley’s other poems, such as *The Mask of Anarchy*, were equally harsh critiques of the British political culture. Blake’s ‘London’ mounted a savage attack on monarchy, the church, the commercial/business institutions and marriage, pointing to these as hypocritical institutions that created and fostered social injustice and poverty.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:11)

Wordsworth wrote,

Their ministers,—who in lordly wise had stirred

Among the grandest objects of the sense,
And dealt with whatsoever they found there
As if they had within some lurking right
To wield it;—they, too, who, of gentle mood,
Had watched all gentle motions, and to these
Had fitted their own thoughts, schemers more wild,
And in the region of their peaceful selves;—
Now was it that both found, the meek and lofty
Did both find, helpers to their heart's desire,
And stuff at hand, plastic as they could wish;
Were called upon to exercise their skill,
Not in Utopia, subterranean fields,
Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!
But in the very world, which is the world
Of all of us,—the place where in the end
We find our happiness, or not at all!
“The French Revolution at its Commencement”

These poets were all extremely anxious, angry, upset at what was going on. But they were equally upset and unhappy about what was going on in England. Wordsworth, in “The French Revolution at its Commencement”, which was later incorporated into *The Prelude*, would express hope and joy and he would say that perhaps it is time we have another kind of government, a more socially relevant one.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:40)

The point you need to understand is that there were other forms of dissent as well, not just against monarchy but against, say, religious principles. Blake starts this with “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” and “The Songs of Innocence & Experience” where he began to speak against religion. But this is also Percy Shelley’s famous, “The Necessity of Atheism”, which like Blake’s work, was an interrogation of the religious discourses of the time.

The poems reflect the large-scale discontent and spirit of protest in the period. In terms of actual physical action, there were the food riots in 1794-96 and 1799-1801, the military revolts in 1795, protests against machinery in 1811-12 (the anti-machinery Luddite movement) and the

protests at Peterloo that culminated in the massacres of 1819. In his 'Human Abstract' from the *Songs of Experience*, Blake would make a huge point about our "noble virtues".

(Refer Slide Time: 13:15)

Pity would be no more
If we did not make somebody Poor;
And Mercy no more could be
If all were as happy as we.
And mutual fear brings peace,
Till the selfish loves increase;
Then Cruelty knits a snare
And spreads his baits with care.
.....
And it bears the fruit of Deceit
Ruddy and sweet to eat;
And the Raven his nest has made
In its thickest shade.
The Gods of the earth and sea
Sought through nature to find this tree,
But their search was all in vain:
There grows one in the Human Brain.

But note what has already been said about the binary between nature and culture. What Blake is doing is to say that it is not only in nature that there is cruelty. The human person, the human mind or the human emotional component is not just about charity, and mercy and pity. What he is saying, is something horrific. You cannot show pity unless you keep somebody poor.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:13)

You cannot show mercy if everybody is equally happy. In other words, what Blake is revealing is a hypocrisy behind our "virtues". What he is saying is all our virtues are actually attempts at masking social inequalities.

We have covered the idea of dissent and revolution but also dissent in the form of what we have just seen in Blake, where he is arguing that let us not think of human, the human components of emotion or intellect as being all about good and virtue. They are also about

social inequalities. It is this kind of dynamic and this kind of tension about dissent that informs the English Romantics.

Additional/ Recommended Reading

Howard Mumford Jones, *Revolution and Romanticism*. Oxford UP, 1974.

Marilyn Butle, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background, 1760-1830*. Oxford UP, 1981.

Pamela Clemit (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to British Literature of the French Revolution in the 1790s*. Cambridge UP, 2011.

Mark Canuel, *Religion, Toleration, and British Writing, 1790-1830*, Cambridge UP, 2002.