

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture – 08
Literature and Romanticism (I)

Hello and welcome to another lecture in this series on Literary Theory. Over the next two lectures we will take up the topic of Romanticism and we will see how this late 18th and early 19th century phenomenon impacted the field of English literary theory. This period under consideration was marked in the history of Europe by a major political upheaval and here of course, I am thinking about the French revolution of the 1790s, which established the first republican government in France and which thereafter went on to inspire several political movements throughout the world.

This political revolution created a radically changed cultural milieu and in today's lecture we will see how this change cultural scenario created new notions about creating and theorizing literature. But, apart from the political upheaval the period between late 18th and early 19th century was also a time of a deeper and more profound revolution of ideas a philosophical revolution if you will about how man and the universe around him is to be conceptualized is to be connected with each other.

In the lectures on romanticism we will also do well upon this revolution of ideas and we will see how romantic theory of literature made use of it to create some very lasting notions about literature about nature and about the role of the poet. But before we move on to these different revolutions and their relation to a romantic theory of literature, we need to look at the term romanticism and spend a little time discussing what the term might actually mean.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:32)

Romantic or Romanticism as it is applied within the field of literary studies is derived from the word Rome.

Now, the term romantic or romanticism as it is applied within the field of literary theory literary studies is ultimately derived from the word Rome. Now, Rome is today known to us as merely the name of a city.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:58)



But, in the first three centuries of the Common Era; the city also gave its name to a huge empire radiating from it to cover much of Europe, the whole of modern day Turkey and also the fringes of Africa, northern Africa.

One of the chief binding features of this Roman empire was the language Latin and the term romance thus came to be associated and indeed it is still associated today with languages which originated from Latin. So, for instance Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese these languages which originated from Latin are all referred to as romance languages.

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- One of the chief binding feature of this Roman empire was the language Latin.
- The term “romance” thus came to be associated, and in fact is still associated, with languages which originated from Latin.
- For instance Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese are all referred to as romance languages as they originated from Latin .

So, the connection therefore is Rome, its association with the language Latin, its association with certain other modern languages like for instance Italian, French, Spanish etcetera.

Now, by the middle ages the word romance also acquired a more specialized meaning. When it was used not just to designate languages derived from Latin, but also writings in these languages in these romance languages.

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•By the middle ages, the word romance acquired a more specialized meaning.

•Romance was used to mean specific kinds of writings
- tales of chivalrous adventures, of magic, of courtly love, filled with knights, princesses and a host of fantastical creatures.

The meaning was even further narrowed down when romance was used to mean not merely writings in certain languages, but also specific kinds of writings of depicting the tales of chivalrous adventures depicting tales of magic and of courtly love, which were filled with knights, princesses and a host of fantastical creatures.

Now, these particular kinds of writings which were usually in the form of metrical tales referred simply as romances later on form the mainstay of medieval European literature. Thus if we look at the history of English literature for instance we find a large collection of these metrical romances based on the lives and adventures of king Arthur and his famous band of courtiers. The word romance and the adjective form romantic registered another shift in meaning in English language during the late seventeenth and early 18th century, as you will know from our previous lecture on neoclassical literary theory this was a period when enlightenment prioritized reason and mid rationality the touchstone of judging the value of everything related to man and his universe.

During this period the terms romance and romantic with their association with the magical and the fantastical were turned into pejorative words. In fact, the very first use of the adjective romantic that Oxford English dictionary records is from 1650 and here the pejorative connotation is already noticeable and the quotation is as follows.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:25)

The first use of the adjective *romantic* that OED records is from 1650: "Being a history which is partly true, partly romantick (sic), morally divine".

Being a history which is partly true, partly romantick, morally divine. Note here the way in which the word romantic is placed in opposition to the word truth. This gives the impression that the romantic involves things which are fabricated, which are fantastical and therefore, not quite true and if we go down the list of references provided by the oxford English dictionary we soon realized that by the mid 18th century the pejorative quality of the objective romantic is fully established.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:07)

- As per the references in the OED, by the mid 18th century, the pejorative quality of the adjective "romantic" is fully established.

- In the year 1740 we find this following line: "This Account, as Whimsical and Romantic as it is, was told to the Lady Cowper...by Dr. Patrick."

Thus in the year 1740, we find the reference of this following line and I quote: This Account, as Whimsical and Romantic as it is, was told to the Lady Cowper by doctor Patrick. Romantic and whimsical these two terms have become synonymous here and both signifies the notion of something which is capricious, which is fantastic and in general which is not amenable to reason.

Now, as you will know from our discussion of neoclassicism that during the late seventeenth and 18th century the valorization of reason within the field of literature was translated into various forms of valorization of the classics and it involves celebrating the rules which putatively underlined the classical literary world of the ancient Greek and Latin authors. Thus within the field of late seventeenth century early 18th century English literature, we find the term romantic being used to designate a kind of negative literary space within which the classical rules and conventions were not in operation.

One example of such use can be found in the preface to English dramatist Thomas Shadwell's 1668 play *The Sullen Lover*, in that preface Shadwell writes how he has meticulously tried to abide by the classical conventions of the three unities and how in the matter of obeying the class rule he has found Ben Jonson to be his only worthy predecessor. Shadwell then goes on to add this line and I quote.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:07)

Thomas Shadwell goes on to add this: "most other Authors that I ever read . . . have wild Romantick Tales, wherein they strain Love and Honour to that Ridiculous height, that it becomes Burlesque".

(Preface to *The Sullen Lover*)

Most other authors that I ever read have wild Romantick Tales, wherein the strain Love and Honor to that Ridiculous height, that it becomes Burlesque.

The romantic is here identified almost as a wild site that is in sharp contrast to the meticulously organized garden of neoclassical literature, but these various attributions like wild, fantastical, magical, whimsical only gives us a rather vague idea of what exactly does the word romantic mean and this is precisely the problem. Because, if we study the use of the word romantic in late 17th and early 18th century we find it to mean more or less just a negative space, that is beyond the pale of enlightenment reason, that is beyond the pale of rule governed neoclassicism.

And, throughout the course of the 18th century this negative space identified by the name romantic is filled with various different and even contradictory attributes most of which are again pejorative. The negative space identified by the term romantic will only gradually come to acquire the prestige of a positive and influential category of creating and thinking about literature and the world in general during the course of the 19th century. The process starts actually from the very end of 18th century, but really happens during the course of 19th century.

But, even after the term romantic gets stabilized during the course of the 19th century it will not have a clearly defined meaning that is for instance as late as 1924 we find the American scholar A O, Lovejoy arguing this and I quote.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:14)

In 1924 A.O. Lovejoy argues:

“[Any] attempt at a general appraisal even of a single chronologically determinate Romanticism – still more, of "Romanticism" as a whole – is a fatuity. When a Romanticism has been analyzed into the distinct "strains" or ideas which compose it, the true philosophic affinities and the eventual practical influence in life and art of these several strains will usually be found to be exceedingly diverse and often conflicting.”

Any attempt at a general appraisal even of a single chronologically Determinate Romanticism – still more, of Romanticism as a whole – is a fatuity. When a romanticism

has been analyzed into the distinct strains or ideas which compose it, the true philosophic affinities and the eventual practical influence in life and art of these several strains will usually be found to be exceedingly diverse and often conflicting and this is in 1924.

So, the point here is that in our quest to explore romantic theory we will actually be dealing with various strains which are exceedingly diverse. Ah my lecture today therefore, would not attempt at a comprehensive analysis of either romanticism in general or of romantic theory of literature in particular. Primarily because, such generalizations at least in the case of romanticism is not quite possible. So, with this in mind let us turn to the first major strand which informed the romantic theory of art that emerged during the late 18th and early 19th century and this is the strand of the French revolution.

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Storming of The Bastille by Jean-Pierre Houël



Source: Wikipedia

On the fourteenth of July in 1798 the fortress of Bastille in Paris which was used by the French aristocracy primarily as a political prison was stormed by a raging crowd and with this iconic act the French revolution burst onto the world stage. Within a few years the French monarch Louis 16th was beheaded along with his wife Marie Antoinette and in many ways these scenes of violence and even of regicide that were playing out in the streets of the late 18th century were repetitions of what had happened in England during the 1640s and we have already discussed this period in English history in our previous lectures.

So, in both the cases the absolute monarch was removed from the throne and that act was followed by an attempt to restructure the political system, so as to end the autocratic rule of one person or a small section of the society who formed the aristocracy and to bring in a more representative form of government. In both the cases absolute monarchy was replaced for varying periods by a republic, where the hierarchy of the monarchical system gave way to the dreams of creating a more egalitarian society.

And, in both cases again the dream was only partially fulfilled, because political agency was indeed expanded beyond the narrow domain of aristocracy, but it was still not extended to a large section of the population. In fact, in both the cases the initial attempts to revolutionize the way political power was structured within the society ended with the return of monarchy. In England it ended with the return of Charles the second on the throne and in France it returned in the form of emperor Napoleon. But, in spite of these many similarities it has to be noted that the French revolution had a much wider global impact than the beheading of Charles the first and the establishment of the British republic.

The democratic and the rebellious spirit of the French revolution produced a much more pronounced sense of exhilaration among its followers and its followers were really global not just restricted to France or even to Europe. We witness some of this wild exhilaration in the lines of poetry written by William Wordsworth in which he recounts the emotions he felt while he was in Paris during the tumultuous years when the French revolution was unfolding. These are the words of the poet.

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William Wordsworth, while in Paris during the French
Revolution writes:

“Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven! O times,
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
The attraction of a country in romance!”

(The Prelude)

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very Heaven O times, In which the meager, stale, forbidding ways Of custom, law and statute, took at once The attraction of a country in romance! Look at the use of the word romance here.

The distinction that had developed in English language by the mid 18th century between romance and romantic on one side and customs, laws, rules, and classical conventions on the other is preserved here, but what is interesting is that the values of the two sides are overturned. So, rules, conventions and laws, which were so dear to the intellectuals of the new classical period is turned here into a negative thing through it is association with the oppressive regime of the old guard and romance acquires a positive charge which is identified with the transformative spirit of the French revolution.


Now, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the two pioneers of English romanticism were both eager enthusiasts of the French revolution and the possibilities of change that this revolution embodied, but like many enthusiasts of the French revolution both Wordsworth and Coleridge were also fast disillusioned with the revolution as it failed to live up to its more radical promises and as it ended up with a monarch coming back to the throne. Now, these radical promises which so inspired romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge and which also propelled the French revolution at least in its early days were found most clearly in the writings of the French intellectual Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

And, to really understand the impact of the ideas of French revolution on the English Romantic Movement, we need to understand some of the key arguments that Rousseau produced.

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau
(1712 - 1778)

- Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men
- Emile
- The Social Contract
- Confessions



Source: Worldcat Identities

The dates of Jean-Jacques Rousseau are 1712 to 1778 and he was one of the most influential figures, he still remains in fact, one of the most influential figures in the history of modern west. Rousseau through his writings like *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*, *Emile*, *The Social Contract*, *Confessions* strongly shaped almost all aspects of French social, cultural and political life during the second half of the 18th century and it were these influences which formed much of the intellectual basis of French revolution.

One of the key ideas that Rousseau proposed in his work is that of a noble savage. Now, as we have discussed in our earlier lecture, the new classical intellectual tradition primarily conceived man as a social creature. The most representative human being of this era was therefore, a man engaging with his peers within the institutions that made up the bourgeois public sphere. Rousseau expanded this narrow perception of man and introduced in his writings the idea of a pre social man. This pre social man is innately good in nature according to Rousseau and therefore, the term noble savage and this pre social man is also characterized by two basic instinctual drives. One is the drive of self

preservation and the other which keeps the first drive in check is a drive of compassion; compassion for the others in their misery and troubles.

Now, this pre social existence which Rousseau presented as an original state of human beings proved to be a very attractive idea to the British romantics. Indeed they hailed this natural state of being as a source of all human virtues and profusely wrote about returning to this stage by removing themselves from the social species within the cities and embracing a state of solitude within the lap of nature. The romantics also valorized this idea of the pre-social existence by celebrating the state of childhood, because a child like the noble savage has not yet entered the social domain, and is mainly a creature of its instincts.

But, here I want to flag a problem. Since the classes of English literary studies Rousseau is usually taught and he is usually read as a prelude to the romantic literary movement. It is often assumed that Rousseau not only presented the idea of the noble savage, but also valorized this idea and indeed argued for a return to that state of being, but the thing is that Rousseau in fact, did no such thing he never valorized the concept of noble savage because for Rousseau the state of being a noble savage is only the first stage in a complex process of human evolution.

So, according to Rousseau noble savage is the first stage originally stage and man will and. In fact, man needs to evolve from that stage into a social animal because things like morality for instance it is absolutely absent among the noble savages.

So, in other words Rousseau does not present a binary where the noble savage in the lap of nature is all good and then suddenly turns bad as he evolves into a social being. Indeed for Rousseau the noble savage irrespective of how noble he is lacks valuable qualities, lacks qualities like reason for instance of morality as I mentioned and is really a creature of instincts. So, while studying Rousseau and while studying him to understand his influence on the romantics we have to be alert to the ways in which the English romantics not only adapted their ideas from Rousseau, but also modified these ideas to create their own worldview.

However, let us now move from Rousseau idea of the noble savage to some of his political ideas which will again bring us back to the context of the French revolution. The

fundamental basis of Rousseau's political ideas is a radical egalitarianism in his discourse on the original basis of inequality among men Rousseau writes and I quote.

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In his Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men, Rousseau writes:

"it is manifestly against the law of nature [...] that a handful of men be glutted with superfluities while the starving multitude lacks necessities".

It is manifestly against the law of nature that a handful of men be glutted with superfluities while the starving multitude lacks necessities. This is clearly directed against the socio-political order where a monarch along with a group of entitled, aristocrats hold absolute sway over the affairs of the state. In a place of such quote unquote unnatural system unnatural at least according to Rousseau system of social and political existence Rousseau proposes a radical alternative and this alternative is based on a social contract which and I again quote from Rousseau.

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Rousseau proposes the social contract theory which

“establishes equality among the citizens in that they are all obligated under the same conditions and are all entitled to the same rights”.

(Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men)

Establishes equality among the citizens in that they are all obligated under the same conditions and are all entitled to the same rights. It is these political ideals of Rousseau which sought to destabilize the entrenched privileges of a small group of social and political elites and these ideals inspired the leaders of the French revolution. And, these were also the same ideals which inspired the British romantics like Wordsworth, like Coleridge and even the next generation of romantics like Shelley for instance or Byron or Keats and they were swayed by a sense of tremendous enthusiasm that the early phase of the French revolution produced a phase which was really propelled by these revolutionary ideas of Rousseau.

Both the ideas of the pre social noble savage and the idea of sociopolitical egalitarianism resulted in the foregrounding of a new image of man in romantic literature. Thus whereas, for the new classical authors the ideal human representation was the adult rational mature man of the bourgeois republics fear for the romantics it became a motley crowd of individuals who symbolized the oppressed, the marginalized and the disenfranchised.

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William Blake in a portrait
by Thomas Phillips
(1757 - 1827)



Source: Wikipedia

This centering of individuals from the social margins is already evident in what is usually categorized as the pre romantic poetry of William Blake, whose songs of innocence and of experience was published in the same year that Bastille was stormed, 1798.

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Blake wrote poems about orphaned chimney sweepers, who sleeps in soot and dreams horrible nightmares about him and his friends

“Dick, Joe, Ned, and Jack/ [...] all of them locked up in coffins of black”.

Thus for instance we find Blake writing poems about orphaned chimney sweepers for instance, who sleeps in soot and dreams horrible nightmares about him and his friends Dick, Joe, Ned and Jack all of them locked up in coffins of black. Such a tendency to

bring to the foreground the marginalized and the oppressed is also prominently evident in Wordsworth's poetry.

Consider for instance two of his poems; the first is the Female Vagrant and the second is Resolution and Independence. At the heart of the first poem the female vagrant is a story of a woman living at the edges of a strongly class divided society. Her life leads her from one misfortune to another and she finally, ends up as a homeless vagrant wandering across the fields to eke out whatever meager living is possible.

The second poem introduces us to another rendering figure situated at the margins of the society and this figure is the figure of an old leech gatherer during 18th and 19th century, it was common practice to gather leeches for medicinal purposes because leeches were used to suck bad blood out of the body that was a very common medical practice and so, there were leech gatherers and this poem resolution and independence talks about one such old leech gatherer piecing about the very moles continually wandering about alone and silently.

Now both Blake and Wordsworth foregrounds figures from the social margins, rather than seeking their inspiration from the bourgeois public sphere, but they also have important differences and I would like to bring to your attention one of the key differences that distinguishes Wordsworth's representation of these marginalized figures and Blake's representations of them. Thus unlike Blake, Wordsworth situates all of these marginalized figures within a very close proximity to nature. So much so, that the distinction between these human figures and their natural surroundings starts blurring.

Consider for instance these lines from the female vagrant.

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"I lived upon the mercy of the fields,
And oft of cruelty the sky accused;
On hazard, or what general bounty
yields,
Now coldly given, now utterly refused.
The fields I for my bed have often used:"

("Female Vagrant", William Wordsworth)

I lived upon the mercy of the fields, And oft of cruelty the sky accused; On hazard, or what general bounty yields, Now coldly given, now, utterly refused. The fields I for my bed have often used. Now, in these lines the vagrant is entirely turned into a creature of the moors into a creature of the fields in which she wanders and completely exposed to the nature she almost becomes one with it.

This a blurring of the distinction between the human and the natural is even more pronounced in Wordsworth's description of the old leech gatherer where the leech gatherer is first introduced not even as a human being, but rather as almost looking like a stone a static thing of nature situated by the lakeside. I quote from the poem.

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As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie
Couched on the bald top of an eminence;
Wonder to all who do the same espy,
By what means it could thither come, and whence;
So that it seems a thing endued with sense:
Like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf
Of rock or sand reposes, there to sun itself;

Such seemed this Man, not all alive nor dead,
Nor all asleep [...]

("Leech Gatherer", William Wordsworth)

As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie Couched on the bald top of an eminence;
Wonder to all who do the same espy, By what means it could thither come, and whence;
So that it seems a thing endued with sense: Like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf
Of rock or sand reposes, there to sun itself; Such seemed this Man, not all alive nor
dead, Nor all asleep.

So, as you can see very clearly that the distinction between the human and the natural is really absolutely blur here. The figure looks almost like a part of nature like a massive stone standing next to the lake or like a creature from out of the lake who is bathing itself in the sun and this close intertwining of the human and the natural forms the basis of a larger romantic view of the world and in need of the romantic theory of literature as well. It is to this man nature relationship that we will turn to in our next lecture.

Thank you.