

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

ENGLISH DRAMA

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Overview of English Literature

English literature is richly represented for all the major modern periods—Mediaeval, Renaissance, 17th century, 18th century, 19th century, 20th century, and now our own 21st century. In addition there is a great early text, discovered only in modern times but composed in the 8th century—*Beowulf*—which adds a new dimension to the English tradition, itself being of both Germanic and Anglo Saxon provenance. As for the periodization by centuries, this rough and ready means of classifying the stages of English literature is at least a useful guide to assessing the development of this rich body of texts.

From the Mediaeval period we retain texts of profound religiosity, like those of Julian of Norwich or William Langland the author of *Piers Plowman*, tales with religious inflection but vast imagination, like *Sir Gawain*, or *Le Morte Darthur*, or epic panoramas of the life and times of a cross section of people, pilgrims to a shrine, as it happens, but very down to earth and realistic personages, as it also happens; the characters of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The narratives and perspectives of the Middle Ages linger among these documents, but reveal the first contours of modernity here and there, especially in Chaucer.

During certain centuries, specific genres prove dominant. In the sixteenth century Renaissance, of Elizabethan English, there is a great flowering both of sonnet poetry, and of drama, and a noticeable decline in the presence of religious themes in literature. One might say that with the growth of the autonomy of the individual, and the quickening pace of that commerce which forces people together, genres of intellectual directness are surging to the fore. The sonnet, that verse form so often consecrated to love and lovers, and circumscribed by a strict formality, becomes a showpiece of literary achievement, reaching its highest achievement in the works of Shakespeare, and in the work of Wyatt and Surrey. Nothing in the poetry of the time surpasses this sonnet work, except perhaps *The Faerie Queene*, the recondite verse masterpiece of Edmund Spenser. As for drama, there is not only Shakespeare, the master of them all, but the brilliant Christopher Marlowe—and others we can't find place to mention here, in this century of dramatic explosion.

The poetic genius of English Renaissance Literature is rivalled by the complex, often religious and passionate, poetry of the 17th century group later called Metaphysicals—Donne, Herbert, Marvell. This efflorescence of subtle and ironic language, written into many forms, is still today a living directive to the poetic impulse. At the other end of the literary creative spectrum, in this century marked in England by heavy political turmoil—the conflict between the Stuart monarchy and Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth form of government—lies the epic creativity of the time: John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. These two profoundly different, but most influential, texts prove the continuing life of the Christian perspective in seventeenth century English literature. Other genres of literature begin to abound, in this century which sees Britain taking on the forms of a middle class early modern society. The satirical dramas of Ben Jonson, directed at the new members of that society, would be appropriate examples.

18th century British literature is likely to seem, from our current view point, more distant than the achievements of the centuries before and after it. One might think of such towering figures as Samuel Johnson, Alexander Pope, John Dryden, Jonathan Swift: while deeply immersed in their own times, these highly educated writers are masters of critique, of social interpretation, of wit and irony. They are not among the driving originators of the new in English literature. One of the most generative figures of the period is Daniel Defoe, a novelist, journalist, and social critic, who anticipates much of the thinking of our own time, about the nature and perils of the social contract.

The 19th century, in British literature as in global culture, is multi dimensional and hard to assemble. The Romantic Movement, at the beginning of the century, is the most easily classified period of development, and with it, in England and Western Europe, the Napoleonic Wars, followed by a sequence of efforts to shore up conservative values. (And, not long after the Restoration in France, the development of Marxist thought, which would rumble through the remainder of the century.) The Romantic Movement saw radically new developments in English poetry—one thinks first of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, a trio as startlingly brilliant as the Metaphysicals in the 17th century. Wordsworth's *Prelude*, with its conversational line, its introspective power, and its world-sensitive modernity, marks an extraordinary step forward. Of equal innovative power, in 19th century British literature, is the multi sided development of the novel genre. Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy are among the several, profoundly different, fictional voices that turn their attention onto the confused but 'progressing' society around them.

The 20th century will advance into new forms of poetry and drama, and startle the world with the innovations of an English language which is gradually expanding out beyond its British margins, beyond any expectations of literary tradition. In drama, Samuel Beckett, writing both in French and English, creates a stark minimalist theatre which counterpoints the dense allusiveness of the fiction of his fellow Irishman, James Joyce, in *Ulysses*. In poetry Yeats, Auden, and T.S.Eliot go very diversely about opening rare new spaces for the imagination. The novelist D.H. Lawrence, stepping away from the subtleties of the Joycean world, commits himself to a new kind of earthy passion in fiction—and carries it off with a sure touch.

The 21st century has not yet a name or voice, in English literature. But it seems easily predictable that the vigor of the English literary tradition will maintain the world directive standards so long associated with the English language, which is itself increasingly becoming the second world language.

Mediaeval

The Background

The literary culture of pre-conquest Britain can be said to have opened with the introduction of Christianity into Britain, and to be marked by a date like 597, when the Benedictine monk Augustine, sent by Pope Gregory, arrived in Kent, effected the conversion of King Ethelbert, and became the first Archbishop of Canterbury. From that point on access to the classical heritage of the west was made possible. When it came to the discovery of a national literary consciousness, however, the dominant tone in Britain was marked by sharp conflict, among the remaining vestiges of Roman culture and tradition, the introduction of new classical learning, the influence of religious texts reflecting Mediaeval Christianity in several forms, and Germanic influenced Old English texts, which reflected the cultural mix created by a confluence of tribes: Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and native Britons. The greatest work of the pre-conquest period, from the literary standpoint, was *Beowulf* (8th century), and precisely there we see clearly the blend of the Christian with the pagan Germanic. In fact the poetry of the time in general reflects the blending of Christianity with the pagan. The poet we call Cynewulf (750-825) wrote, in his *The Dream of the Rood*, about Christ's cross' reflection on the Crucifixion. (The felling of the cross tree, to begin with, swells with pagan implications, while the tree's power, in confronting injustice, is redolent of pre-Christian vitalism.) An even earlier poet, Caedmon (7th century), wrote religious literature of which nothing remains but nine lines of a Hymn admiring the Creator. This hymn praises the noble vault of heaven, but in terms that could ring from a pagan as well as a Christian soul. This pre-Conquest culture will serve as a reference point in the present entry on 'British literature,' but as you read the works from this early period you will experience the difference of their world from the world introduced by the Norman Conquest, to which we keep referring. That Conquest, which will bring French culture and language into Britain, will decisively link Britain to the classical world of Roman and Greek culture, a world which in earlier Britain was present only as a colonial occupation, not as a driving cultural force. Not the least of the post-conquest differences will be in language: for the blend of French (and thus Latin) with English, which was a byproduct of the Conquest, was to set the tone for a new literary culture in the British Isles; and to open the door to an evolving form of the language you speak today.

Discussion Questions

1. Does *Beowulf* belong to English literature? Does the author of the poem feel he/she is working in any national tradition, or belongs to a nation? Does the poem embody a deep relation to cultures other than British? *Are there vestiges of ancient classical learning in Beowulf?*
2. What attitudes and literary strategies does Chaucer share with the other writers considered in this Unit? Is he deeply touched by the Christian tradition you find in Julian of Norwich or *Sir Gawain*? Would he appreciate the kinds of humor and dark passion we find in *Morte Darthur*? Or is Chaucer a Humanist for the ages, who stands out and above his time?
3. Where do you find allegorical thinking in early English literature, and what do we need to know about allegory, in order to understand the way it works in this early literature? Is it possible for us to take pleasure in allegorical literature today? Do we create and consume allegory ourselves?

Renaissance

The Background

The first Tudor monarch, Henry VII, died in 1485, bringing (in some senses) conclusion to the period of what we have been calling Mediaeval Britain. In the following four centuries Britain took similarly large strides toward what we would, looking back from our moment, probably still call modernity, although we too do not think ourselves so confidently 'modern' as we did a century ago. Kingship under a single monarch, and with strong family lines, was firmly established in the Renaissance period. The language evolved from a condition in which Latinized French was just merging with Anglo Saxon English, into a coherent blend which in Elizabethan England reached a high point of maturity. Above all the consciousness of the British people, as participants in a single national identity, grew to new clarity. At the same time, during this period, the English people were entering into contact with the wide world of Europe, in which dramatic transitions were holding sway. Columbus' discovery of America opened a new pathway for British exploration and trade; scholars went from England to Italy, and brought back inspiring texts of Greek and Latin literature; Martin Luther led a world shaking rebellion against the practices of the Catholic Church. As if in reaction to these challenging events on the world scene, the British cultivated, under their dominant and brilliant Queen Elizabeth, a new sense of national identity. The greatest playwrights in British history—Shakespeare and Marlowe—surged into popularity, giving an unimagined tone and color to London's cultural life.

Discussion Questions

1. Are the Renaissance texts we read here mirrors of their time? Does the social life of England appear clearly through these texts? Is social background a good measure of literary achievement?
2. What relation do you see between the work of Sidney and that of Edmund Spenser? Is Spenser a romantic, in his fascination with archaic diction? Are the two poets similar in their insights into human nature? What is the role of Italian culture and Neoplatonism in shaping the work of the two writers?
3. Is *Twelfth Night* comic, in a sense contemporary to us today? What do you think of the raw humor in this play? Does it contribute to the point of the whole? Does the same kind of raw humor enforce the power of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*?

William Shakespeare

The importance of William Shakespeare. William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is widely viewed as the most powerful and interesting British playwright and poet. He has been translated into every living language, and continues to exercise a huge influence on writing throughout the world, as well as on educated opinion about the nature and importance of literature. He was the author of thirty eight plays, 154 sonnets, and two long narrative pieces.

The Life of William Shakespeare. William Shakespeare was born in the small market town of Stratford-on-Avon in April 1564. He was the son of John Shakespeare, an alderman and successful glover who later in his career suffered considerable financial losses. From what we know, we gather that William was educated at the local school, close to his family home, at which he would have had considerable training in Latin. (He later refers to having 'small Latin and less Greek,' but was able to make very effective use, in his work, of Latin historical sources.) At the age of eighteen Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, with whom he had three children. Subsequently he went to London, where he began what was to be a very successful career as an actor (1585-92); in fact he parlayed that career into a role as part owner of an acting company, later called The King's Men, which was for some time a central venue for theater in London. He began his career as a playwright in the early 1590s by writing comedies and history plays. His brilliance was soon recognized, and from comedies, in his early stage, he went on to write both tragedies, and tragic-comedies. His subsequent professional life in London was involved with the theater. In 1613 he returned to Stratford on Avon, where he spent his last years.

Shakespeare's Works. Lest they get mentioned last, Shakespeare's sonnets require initial attention. Many of these splendid poems, all of which follow the formal sonnet rules of the time, and are thus formalized, break out from within their formalities to a passion rarely equaled in literature. A young man—is he an idealized lover, a homosexual partner?—is the object of many of the sonnets, as is the general theme, which the erotic issue reinforces, of the passing of what is beautiful and transitory. The richness of Shakespeare's dramas defies all summary. One need only think of *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, or *Othello*—tragedies; of *All's Well that Ends Well*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* or *A Comedy of Errors*—comedies; or of plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Tempest*—fantasy comedy; to encompass a creative spirit which seems, as the ages have been glad to confirm, to have no limits in empathy or understanding.

Reading

Primary source reading

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Ed. Miola, New York, 2003. Norton critical edition.

Secondary source reading

Drakakis, John, ed. *Shakespearean Tragedy*, London, 1992.

Further reading

Thomas, Vivian, *The Moral Universe of Shakespeare's Problem Plays*, London, 1987.

Suggested paper topics

1. The literature on Shakespeare is endless. Give yourself a treat and read a small masterpiece, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London, 1942), by E.M.W. Tillyard. Through the window of this little book you will see a backdrop of customs, religious beliefs and practices, and philosophical assumptions which will help to convince you that Shakespeare lived in an Age profoundly different from ours. I suspect you will also feel the closeness of Shakespeare's world to that of the later Middle Ages, not only to Chaucer but to Christian sophistates like the author of *Gawain and the Green Knight*. Do you?

2. What kind of villain is Lady Macbeth? Does she seem truly evil, in today's terms? Is Macbeth a weak man? Or is his only problem corrupt ambition? What is his relation to his wife? Finally, do you see a relevance of this story to the theme of corruption in politics today?

Excerpt <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/full.html>

SCENE I. A desert place.

Thunder and lightning. Enter three Witches

First Witch

When shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

Second Witch

When the hurlyburly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

Third Witch

That will be ere the set of sun.

First Witch

Where the place?

Second Witch

Upon the heath.

Third Witch

There to meet with Macbeth.

First Witch

I come, Graymalkin!

Second Witch

Paddock calls.

Third Witch

Anon.

ALL

Fair is foul, and foul is fair:
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

Exeunt

Christopher Marlowe

The Life of Christopher Marlowe. Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) died at the age of 29, tangled in (so it seems) secret agent plots, furtive trips to foreign nations for which he needed to be absent from college. During such times he may well have been living on the borderlines of the underworld. (You will remember that Thomas Mallory, author of *Morte Darthur*, also lived on the borders of lawlessness; evidence that the literary genius is not always Mr. Mainstream. Across the channel in France the same was true for one of the greatest of poets, Francois Villon, a professional criminal—among other things.) Yet by the time of his death Marlowe was a highly educated Cambridge graduate, the author of a number of closely admired plays, and a recognized servant of the Queen, running various private anti-Catholic missions for her in Europe. We can trace in the amazingly intense life of this young man his dominant fascination with tragic heroes who will transcend the bonds of normal human existence, becoming outreachers of daring power. The characters he portrays clearly emerge from his own life, whose origins were humble if little known. He was born in Canterbury, to the shoemaker John Marlowe, and his wife Catharine. He went to the King's School in Canterbury, then to Corpus Christi College at Oxford. He earned his B.A. degree in 1584, after which he disappears from sight for several years—during his twenties; at which time, we surmise from indirect evidence, he may have been carrying out secret missions for the Queen, on the continent.

The works of Christopher Marlowe . From the start of his career as a dramatist, Marlowe, like his contemporary Thomas Kyd (1558-1594), seems to have caught the pulse and temper of his time, the high Elizabethan period in which Elizabeth was a world powerful monarch, the British Empire, backed by the British navy, was surging around the world, and the man on the streets, with a little more money than he was used to a century earlier, was lustily demanding theatrical entertainment forceful enough to hold his attention. Theaters were springing up, a chief source of public entertainment, and Marlowe's dramas, like *Tamburlaine* (1584), *The Jew of Malta* (1589), or *Doctor Faustus* (1616) were created to hold the public attention. Each of his plays highlights a central 'overreaching' male figure, who has great plans of conquest and power, but who is in the end defeated by the exaggeration of his own miscalculations. (There is thus a strong Promethean theme in Marlowe's plots, and plenty of room for elaborate and world shaking downfalls, such as confronted Prometheus himself.) *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* turns around a powerful ambition and miscalculation. The Doctor represents the new man of knowledge and power, a practitioner of dark arts which he can turn to contemporary power, and a scorner of God's laws and the power of Christian redemption. In the end Faustus uses his power foolishly, expends it without care for himself or others, and is left a shell of a human, longing for Christ's mercy. He proclaims: 'And then has thou but one bare hour to live/ And then thou must be damned perpetually./Stand still, you ever moving spheres of heaven/that time may cease, and midnight never come...' The audience will have shuddered for their own fates, and examined their own consciences, as Shakespeare surely made his audience tremble, in the same years of theatrical glory.

Reading

Primary source reading

Doctor Faustus and other Plays, ed. Bevington and Rasmussen, Oxford, 1995.

Secondary source reading

Healy, Thomas, *Christopher Marlowe*, London, 1995.

Further reading

Sales, Roger, *Christopher Marlowe*, London, 1991.

Suggested paper topics

1. Does Marlowe's concern with the outreachers take our minds to other literary images of power: Macchiavelli's Prince or Nietzsche's *Uebermensch*? Is there something in common among these power manipulators, and if so what? How are they different? (The Prince, for one thing, is above all a calculator; while the other two figures are passionate extremists.) How does the legend of Faust, in Goethe, play into this tradition? Is Goethe's *Faust* more conflicted than Marlowe's, in his search for the power that goes with knowledge?

2. In hurrying to the center of great works written long before our time, we often hurry past the details which explain the text we seek. In the case of Marlowe's *Faustus* we need to return to the theological strife of Marlowe's learning years at Cambridge at the end of the 16th century. The Calvinists and anti-Calvinists were in heated strife concerning issues of theodicy, of the justification of God's ways to man. (Question: is the pervasive pain and suffering in the universe part of God's plan? This issue of justification will still dominate the religious/epic thinking of John Milton.) These issues frame the desire of Faustus for a temporary respite from the human condition, in order to enjoy perfect pleasure.

Excerpt <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.03.0013>

Enter Barabas in his Counting-house, with heapes of gold before him.

Barabas

So that of thus much that returne was made:
And of the third part of the *Persian* ships,
There was the venture summ'd and satisfied.
As for those *Samnites* and the men of *Uzz*
That bought my Spanish Oyles, and Wines of Greece,
Here have I purst their paltry silverlings.
Eye; what a trouble tis to count this trash.
Well fare the Arabians who so richly pay
The things they traffique for with wedge of gold,
Whereof a man may easily in a day
Tell that which may maintaine him all his life.
The needy groome that never fingred goate,
Would make a miracle of thus much coyne:
But he whose steele-bard coffers are cramb'd full,
And all his life time hath bin tired,
Wearying his fingers ends with telling it,
Would in his age be loath to labour so,
And for a pound to sweat himselfe to death:
Give me the Merchants of the Indian Mynes,
That trade in mettall of the purest mould;
The wealthy Moore, that in the Easterne rockes
Without controule can picke his riches up,
And in his house heape pearle like pibble-stones,
Receive them free, and sell them by the weight;
Bags of fiery *Opals, Saphires, Amatists,*
Jacints, hard *Topas,* grasse-greene *Emeraulds,*
Beauteous *Rubyes,* sparkling *Diamonds,*
And seildsene costly stones of so great price,
As one of them indifferently rated,
And of a Carrect of this *quantity,*

17th Century

Background

In the 17th century Britain was evolving into an early form of the complex society we now experience in our own time. The government was a functioning monarchy, with increasing bureaucratic and legislative power, and the first budding of consumer society could be remotely perceived. (Daniel Defoe is a good example of the new man of this society.) This growing modernity of British society affords the perfect milieu for the development of the man of letters, the kind of figure we find in Browne (a doctor), Dryden (playwright and critic) and Ben Jonson, playwright, literary critic, arbiter of opinions. At the same time there are still immense developments both for the epic, in which John Milton and John Bunyan, though profoundly different from one another, join in passionate engagement with the Cromwellian revision. At the same time there is a sharp renewal of the ever British lyric tradition, and poets of unusual genius and wit—Marvell, Donne, and Herbert—not to mention religious sensibility, rise up as if from the ground, and open vast new vistas for English language writing.

Discussion Questions

1. Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* is one of the most original and pluralistic of British commentaries on literary values. It features several voices assuming different positions on literary values. How does this text compare to Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy*, from the previous century? Has there been a powerful change in overall values during this period?
2. What do you take 'metaphysical' to mean, as a description of the poetry of Donne, Herbert, and Marvell? Is that poetry intricate and complex to read, as is some philosophy? Is there a world view coming through the poetry of these metaphysicals? How do you explain both the rejection of these poets in the 18th century, and the new embrace of them in the 20th?
3. Milton is arguably the most complex, erudite, and passionate of British writers of the long poem, the epic, while John Bunyan, also the writer of a long epic on Christian themes, is of a relatively simple mindset, and an almost totally allegorical poetic inclination. What does it say, about the British reading public, that it heartily embraced both of these doctrinal writers?

Jonson, Ben

The Life of Ben Jonson. Ben Jonson (1572-1637) was an English playwright, poet, critic, and actor, who exercised a huge influence on the writers and poets of his time. He was born into a family which had its roots in the Anglo-Scottish border country. His father was a clergyman, who died shortly before Ben Jonson's birth. Jonson's mother remarried a master bricklayer. Ben Jonson himself was sent to school at the local, in St. Martin's Lane, then to Westminster school, where the foundations were laid for his excellent knowledge of Latin. (Jonson was foremost among the generally well educated Latinists, among his contemporary English fellow writers.) For a time Jonson worked as an apprentice bricklayer, not being laterally connected to distinguished fellow family members, and then, in his late teens, he went into military service in Holland, and fought with one of the regiments of Francis Vere. After this period with the military—during which he is said to have killed an enemy soldier in direct hand to hand combat, no small feat for a poet—he returned to London, where he found his way into the vibrant theatrical milieu; there his skills as actor, director, and before long writer were highly welcome. By 1597 Jonson was fully employed as an actor in London. He had begun to produce his own plays, one of which, of no great importance otherwise, brought a charge of lewdness, and disruption of social mores, by the Queen; for which Jonson was imprisoned, and while imprisoned, worried about his soul's fate, converted to Catholicism.

The work of Ben Jonson. Jonson was distinguished in several genres of writing: critical theory (as in his *Timber, or Discoveries made upon Men and Manners*, posthumously published in 1640), in lyric and epigrammatic poetry (as in his collection *The Forrest*, 1616), or above all in a series of dramas—he was here at his peak between 1605-1620—like *Everyman in his Humor* (1598), *Volpone* (1605), *The Alchemist* (1610). In *Timber* Jonson defends the idea of comedy, emphasizing that for the Greeks and Romans, who were valuable role models for Britain, comic drama was valued as highly as tragic, and stressing the distinctively thoughtful character of good stage comedy, in which human foibles are typically pilloried, and values therefore thought through and sustained. In his own plays Jonson, like his French contemporary Moliere, typically attacks 'vices' in his comedy, and not infrequently vices that are byproducts of the nouveau riche bourgeoisie, which is increasingly declaring itself in seventeenth century Europe. Volpone, the unscrupulous Venetian merchant, will stop at nothing in his headlong pursuit of gain--(Good morning to the day; and next my gold/Open the shrine, that I may see my saint./{Mosca draws a curtain, revealing piles of gold)/HaiL the world's soul, and mine!...) In his poetry, as elsewhere, Jonson builds on the classics: his anti urban moralism takes off frequently from the verse precedents of Martial or Horace, as in his ardent tribute to a friend's country estate: /Where comes no guest, but is allowed to eat,/Without his feare, and of the lord's own meat:/Where the same beer, and bread, and self-same wine/That is his Lordships, shall be also mine./

Evaluation of Ben Jonson. Ben Jonson is, along with Samuel Johnson, the most Latinate and classical of the major English writers. From that perspective he is both the most invigorating and the most severe of the great writers of English.

Reading

Primary source reading

Ben Jonson's Plays and Masques, ed. R. Harp, New York, 2001.

Secondary source reading

Barton, Anne, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*, Cambridge, 1984.

Further reading

Womack, Peter, *Ben Jonson*, Oxford, 1986.

Suggested paper topics

1. Moliere's satirical comedies, contemporary to those of Ben Jonson, tend to target the new middle class of Louis XIV's France. Is Jonson similarly a kind of social critic, directing his bitter satirical dramas to the nouveaux riches of his society?
2. What is the contribution of Roman/Latin culture to Jonson's creativity and world view? What aspects of the ancient classical world most capture his attention? Do those aspects inform his poetry, as well as his drama and criticism?

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/begging-another-2/>

*For love's sake, kiss me once again;
I long, and should not beg in vain,
Here's none to spy or see;
Why do you doubt or stay?
I'll taste as lightly as the bee
That doth but touch his flower and flies away.*

*Once more, and faith I will be gone;
Can he that loves ask less than one?
Nay, you may err in this
And all your bounty wrong;
This could be called but half a kiss,
What we're but once to do, we should do long.*

*I will but mend the last, and tell
Where, how it should have relished well;
Join lip to lip, and try
Each suck other's breath.
And whilst our tongues perplexed lie,
Let who will, think us dead or wish our death.*

18 Century

Background

By the 18th century the British Empire, which we described as moving toward a middle class and a growing commercial, even international commercial environment, was at the height of its power. British ships controlled the waters, London became an international commercial capital, and British pre colonial presence was about to announce itself in prospective colonies throughout the world. It was into that world of growing geopolitical confidence that the confident public-minded authors of the century grew up and found their voices. Johnson and Pope were strenuous participants in the urban literary and coffee house scene, which was making of London a center of high intellectual culture. Daniel Defoe was a journalist and social commentator, who worked in texts like *A Journal of the Plague Year* to think out the fragilities and dangers of urban society. While the British 18th century was not supreme, for poetic achievement, it excelled in social critique, satirical poetry, like Pope's, and refined aesthetic/ethical perspectives, like those of Shaftesbury.

Discussion Questions

1. The 18th century, in Western culture, is traditionally called the Age of Enlightenment. That term broadly connotes: a practical, demythologized view of human personality and destiny; a devotion to life on this earth; faith in human reason. Do you see those Enlightenment traits in the work of Swift, Dryden and Pope?
2. What is a national literary canon? Who determines what texts belong in a literary canon? Does it make sense to include document-like works, such as those of Mrs. Burney or Equiano, in a literary canon? (Check those 'minor authors' in any anthology of British literature. Are they minor?)
3. The poetry of John Dryden and Alexander Pope fell under sharp criticism, during the Romantic Movement in the 19th century, for being stiff, too formal, too pointed, and even, in many views, mechanical. (When you read Wordsworth and Coleridge, in the next Unit, you may reflect back onto the gap between these century-separated poetries.) What do you think about such charges. Can you read 18th century English poetry as a living part of your own experience?

19th century

The divisions of a national literature by periods is arbitrary, yet after the periodization occurs it seems to have defined a fact of nature. Such is the case with English literature. As one sees from the pre Romantic poets, like Cowper, there was already by the mid-18th century a marked softening of sensibility in some popular poetry, and something like a rediscovery of the power of nature. The same changes were visible in the landscape painting of the time. At any rate the period we call Romantic was on the horizon, and it was to acquire sharper definition with the political and social awakening provoked by the Napoleonic Wars, and the defeat of that autocratic Empire on the battlefield at Waterloo. It has become a convention to define the Romantic period from 1798, when Wordsworth and Coleridge published *The Lyrical Ballads*, to 1832, the year of the death of the great Romantic historical novelist Walter Scott. By this latter date, the British government had passed Reform Legislation which sanctified the privileges of the Middle Class, and changed England from a rural nation to a semi industrialized urban one.

Revolution and Society. We have seen the power of poetry throughout English literature; from *Beowulf* to the *Canterbury Tales* to Shakespeare to Pope—to create a very mixed bag—dominant expressions in poetry were formative for the whole tenor of a literary age. With the advent of the Romantic Period this feature of English literature is marked: passionate and powerful poetry—in Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and many more—assumes the leading role in defining the art tone of the period. At the same time there is a strong sense that the shape of culture and society is changing. Revolutions—American in 1776, French in 1798—are convulsing the pattern of Western history, and the Industrial Revolution is beginning to modify the social life of Western Europe and especially England.

The Revolutionary Spirit: All the major Romantic poets, with the exception of John Keats, were enthusiasts for the new spirit of Revolution in Europe and America. All that was liberating in these movements seemed to want expression in the spirit of poetry. Wordsworth thought it was bliss to be born at the time of the French Revolution, while Shelley and Byron were particularly moved by the self-liberation of the Greeks from the Ottoman occupation. Everywhere human rights were being promoted as sacred—just at the Industrial Revolution was rendering those rights endangered.

New conception of literary language: Wordsworth and Coleridge, in *The Lyrical Ballads* (1798) promoted the speech of common men and women, as they heard it in the Lake Country which was home to them. This speech seemed to be the richest source for poetic creation, and it was a source totally different from that privileged by a Neoclassicist like Alexander Pope. (Remember the Latinate sophistication of Pope's rhymed couplets.) There is an unmistakable correlation between Wordsworth's poetic language and the movement toward popular democracy in the Revolutions of the time.

A New Model of the Past. The Romantic Movement saw a turning away from the model of the ancient Greek and Latin classics, and from the historical setting those Classics emerged from. (The trend was reflected in educational practice, too, for from early in the 19th century the study of Greek and Latin gradually began its decline.) In place of the classical model the Middle Ages—a period of grail quests, faith and idealism; at least if you saw it that way—began to dominate the imagination.

Discussion questions

1. You will notice that Pope and Swift died only a few years before the birth of William Blake, in 1757. In with the new! If you were to mix up the works of these three writers in a pile, with no author identification tags on them, would you be able to tell which of the works were by Blake, and which by the other two? How would you tell?
2. Review Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, and the *Preface* to them. Do you find in the early Wordsworth lyrics that simplicity of diction, that general hostility to poetic high style, which will be profoundly different from the ornate language of such as Dryden and Pope? Are Wordsworth's lyrics themselves simple, in language or thought?
3. When you look at the poetry of Byron (d. 1824), Keats (d. 1821), and Hopkins (d. 1899) can you see some unifying factor(s) which marks the group as 19th century? Please take this question back into our earlier entries, and consider whether centuries seem useful categories for literary history, or whether perhaps generations seem more useful benchmarks, for understanding groups of writers?

20th Century

Background

The Twentieth Century represents a break from the preceding centuries, not only because of the emergence of globally-encompassing total war, but because the technologies developed during this time made human tampering with fate, human history, and nature a matter of the touch of a button. Sweeping political change and social movements characterize the twentieth century, and they provide much of the underlying tension and motivation in the literary works of the time. While one might imagine that the century's preoccupation with self-awareness would lead to evidence that consciousness of self was, in fact, heightened, the events of the period would argue just the opposite to be true. Consumerism and materialism co-opt self-consciousness by reducing spirituality itself to a commodity. At least these were the insights of the late twentieth century. Perhaps they were simply the self-evident truths of a planet of Peter Pans who use the promise of technology to gain power of nature in order to provoke disruption – not just in the status quo, but in processes that were, in the past, known to be inviolable law (of nature, of humanity).

Many of the highest literary creations of the twentieth century were powerfully contorted by the distresses of society, political conflict, and personal questioning of the meaning of existence. These witnesses to our extreme social discomfort would be such as Beckett, Yeats tormented by the issues of Irish English conflict, Eliot writing out the loss of faith in a small apocalyptic epic, Hardy and Lawrence, very differently assassinating the mediocrity of their own time. The early part of the century, of course, saw the high bloom of Modernism, aspects of which we have already reviewed: the work of Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust in France, Thomas Mann in Germany. Modernism, an aesthetic substitute for the lost harmony cosmos of Alexander Pope or John Donne, acquired through art the simulacrum of a better world no longer believed in.

Discussion Questions

1. Beckett and Joyce represent two opposite styles of writing. Both Irishmen—but consummate writers of English—the one is stripped down and absurdist, while the other is prolix, and brimming over with allusive meanings and implications. Would you say that these are two representative ways of responding to the complexity of the twentieth century world climate? Which style seems to you to do its expressive work better?
2. In her novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, and elsewhere, Virginia Woolf puts into play her view of the fractured and pulsive nature of human perception. Consciousness is broken down into what we know is true; we are constantly alert, in innumerable registers, to many coordinate sensations, from which we pass from one to another without rest, until death. Does Woolf's project, to write out this state of consciousness, seem to you peculiarly part of the self-awareness of the twentieth century literary mind?
3. Yeats and Eliot, at various points in their writing, pay tribute to the aristocratic ideals which are fading in their century. Yeats is attracted to the pride and dignity of some of the old families of Ireland. Eliot pays tribute to the beauties of a class society in which everyone knows, and values, his place—the world view of Alexander Pope. Among the major twentieth century English writers do you see any strong tendency toward the opposite view from that of Yeats and Eliot? Does the Marxist perception, of a classless society and human economic equality, play any part in the major literature of the century?

Samuel Beckett

The Life of Samuel Beckett. Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) was born near Dublin. He came from an ardent Anglican Church of Ireland family. His father was a very successful quantity surveyor, and the family lived in a comfortable town house with a tennis court, surrounded by green spaces, and walkways where Samuel used to walk and talk with his father. The tenor of Beckett's childhood seems to have been comfortable and creative. His first schooling was at Earlsford House School, a neighborhood play school; from there he graduated to Pontora Royal School, where his considerable skills at cricket began to declare themselves. From 1923-1927 Beckett studied at University College, Dublin, majoring in French, Spanish, and Italian, and proving to be a record winning cricketer. In the year after graduation he was contracted to teach English in the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris—where he made the acquaintance of James Joyce, whose research assistant he would soon be, working with the master on the recondite references of *Finnegans Wake*--and then the following year he returned to earn his M.A. in Dublin. In 1937, Beckett settled permanently in Paris, where he was to become a fixture of the literary culture of the city. He was at this time beginning his practice of writing in French, then translating his work into Irish-inflected English. His first works, *Proust* and *Murphy*, were published at this time. He is best-known for his plays, especially *Waiting for Godot* (1948), and *Endgame* (1957). Beckett focuses his dramatic work on fundamental questions of existence and nonexistence, the mind and the body; and in fighting with the French Resistance during the War—for which he received the *croix de guerre*—he proved the breadth of his commitment to the cause of a humanity, which he so often portrays bleakly. It was this complexity and humanity of vision which lay behind the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Beckett in 1969.

The Work of Samuel Beckett. Beckett, as noted, became not only a research assistant but a close friend of James Joyce, a fellow Irishman and writer. As their relationship developed, Beckett grew increasingly awed by Joyce's ability to synthesize vast ideas and references, until it occurred to Beckett, who was already well launched in his writing career, that his own path might be the polar opposite of Joyce's. Beckett's drive was ultimately to be toward minimalism and absurdism, as it became called, to reduce the immense proliferation of words, places, and things, which stud the long novels of Joyce, and to strip down plot and narrative to their essentials—a couple of old men talking about meaninglessness—as in *Waiting for Godot*—and speaking in language stripped to the barest essentials of communication. We can track this progression to the minimal through the increasingly austere, and fascinating of Beckett's plays: *Waiting for Godot* (1953), *Endgame* (1955), and *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958). These plays, like Beckett's fictions—*Murphy* (1938) or *Molloy* (1951)—were typically composed in either English or French (usually the case) and then translated into the other language, by Beckett. (Beckett's preference for French, as he explained, had a simple explanation: he wanted to write 'without style,' and that was easier for him in a language which was not his native language. In the end it is astonishing that Beckett was able to create, out of style-less language and minimalist plots, a set of texts and plays which is rivetingly interesting.

Reading

Primary source reading

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot; A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*, New York, 2011.

Secondary source reading

Pilling, John, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*, Cambridge, 1994.

Further reading

Knowlson, James, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, London 1996.

Suggested paper topics

1. Do you see a connection between Beckett's practice of writing in two languages, often translating himself from one to the other, and the 'minimalism' of his plays, which grow increasingly bare and stark? Does his bilingualism lead to a paring down of language and thought?
2. Beckett is a thinker, as well as a writer. On the surface his 'philosophy of life' may seem obvious. But is it? Are there elements of hope? Irony? And if so, what are they based on? Does his pessimism seem to you rooted in a particular tradition?

Excerpt http://archive.org/stream/samuelbeckett031321mbp/samuelbeckett031321mbp_djvu.txt

Beckett's patient concern with bicycles, amputees, battered hats, and the letter M; his connoisseurship of the immobilized hero; his preoccupation with footling questions which there isn't sufficient evidence to resolve; his humor of the short sentence; his Houdini-like virtuosity (by preference chained hand and foot, deprived of story, dialogue, locale) : these constitute a unique comic repertoire, like a European clown's. The antecedents of his plays are not in literature but to take a rare American example in Emmett Kelly's solemn determination to sweep a circle of light into a dustpan: a haunted man whose fidelity to an impossible task quite as if someone he desires to oblige had exacted it of him illuminates the dynamics of a tragic sense of duty. ("We are waiting for Godot to come Or for night to fall. We have kept our appointment and that's an end to that. We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?") The milieu of his novels bears a moral resemblance to that of the circus, where virtuosity to no end is the principle of life, where a thousand variations on three simple movements fill up the time between train and train, and the animals have merely to pace their cages to draw cries of admiring sympathy that ...