

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# ENGLISH ESSAY

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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, 20<sup>th</sup> century, and now our own 21<sup>st</sup> century. In addition there is a great early text, discovered only in modern times but composed in the 8<sup>th</sup> 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 17<sup>th</sup> 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.

18<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 17<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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* (8<sup>th</sup> 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 (7<sup>th</sup> 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*?

## 17<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup>?
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?

## **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 18<sup>th</sup> 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?

## Shaftesbury

**Importance of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury.** The 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713) was an English philosopher, moralist, and writer who exercised great influence over the aesthetic and moral thought of his own culture, and over European (especially German) thinking in the eighteenth century.

**The Life of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury,** Anthony Ashley-Cooper was born in Exeter House, London. He was the grandson of the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury, a man of power and influence over his grandson. His mother was Lady Dorothy Manners, and of his father, it seems, little was said at the time except that he was inadequate physically and mentally. As a consequence of this paternal failing, of which in fact we know almost nothing, the philosopher John Locke, a trusted friend of the first Earl, was called in to negotiate the marriage between Anthony's parents. It is consequently understandable that Locke's pedagogical theories should have played a major role in Anthony's education. (Those theories included a good deal of directed freedom for the student, and a careful search for the student's areas of expertise.) By the age of eleven Anthony could easily read Greek and Latin, and for the rest of his life, of exceptionally active mind, he was fundamentally (and very thoroughly) self-educated. In 1683 he was sent to Worcester College, but was miserable there; shy and marginalized. Subsequently, for more than five years, he traveled on the Continent, which was increasingly the learning ground for young English gentlemen of the time. In 1689 he returned to England, to stand for Parliament, and to be elected M.P. for Poole in 1689. It was at this time, though, that his generally weak health seriously caught up with him, and asthma, triggered by the increasing smoke problem from London, obliged him to return to the Netherlands, a less toxic—and intellectually more vigorous and liberated—atmosphere. There he found himself at the center of a lively group of largely European expatriate thinkers, like Pierre Bayle, who helped the Earl to formulate his ethics and aesthetics. (He was still not known in the British intellectual world.) In 1701 he moved back to England again, where, at the age of forty, he married, fathering one child. In 1711 he was at work on his major text, *The Characteristics*, and much of the rest of his (increasingly debile) life was spent writing, on his English country estate and in the Folly Structure, 'Philosopher's Tower', which he had erected and put to use for an increasingly meditative life.

**The Work of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl.** *The Characteristics* is a system of ethics and aesthetics, which are the most mature reflections of Shaftesbury, on these human branches of philosophy. Not only does Shaftesbury write for the general public—he is not a technical philosopher—but he writes on aspects of speculative thought which put him at the center of the new sensibilities which lead in the direction of Romanticism. (His influence, in this regard, falls strongly on Continental movements of thoughts, where such thinkers as Herder and Goethe were attentive to the Earl's views.) Shaftesbury promoted a vision of harmony, in both ethics and aesthetics, which is rooted in the fundamental balance and graciousness of our innate senses—moral and aesthetic. His view of a well ordered cosmos—like that of Pope's *Essay on Man*, and of the English deists in general—was hungrily absorbed by English nature poets like Thomson, in *The Seasons*, and by the growing British readership for 'sentimental' fiction, such as that of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748).

### Reading

#### Primary source reading

Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, Liberty Fund, 2001.

#### Secondary source reading

Gill, Michael, *The British Moralists on Human Nature and the Birth of Secular Ethics*, Cambridge, 2006.

#### Further reading

Schneewind, J.B., *The Invention of Autonomy*, Cambridge, 1995.

#### Suggested paper topics

1. Shaftesbury, and many of his contemporaries, particularly disliked what they called 'enthusiasm.' Look into the meaning of that term, for that time, and the reasons for the objections to the emotion described there.
2. How does Shaftesbury embody ancient Greek philosophy and cultural values in the construction of his view of life? What did he actually know of ancient Greece, and where did he get his knowledge? Was he familiar with the new breakthroughs in classical archeology in his time?

**Excerpt** <https://archive.org/details/characteristics02shaf>

*It has been an established custom for poets to introduce their work by addressing themselves to some muse; the ancient poets began this practice, but even in our days we find it almost constantly imitated. But I can't help thinking that this imitation, this fashionable revival, must sometimes have stuck a little with your Lordship, who is used to examining things by a better standard than that of fashion or the common taste. You must have noticed that our poets are remarkably uncomfortable when they're obliged to take on this character of Poet Addressing his Muse; and you may have wondered why that air of enthusiasm that fits so gracefully with an ancient should be so spiritless and awkward in a modern. But it won't have taken your Lordship long to see the explanation; and this could only serve to put you in mind of something that has often occurred to you on other occasions as well, namely that truth is the most powerful thing in the world, because even fiction itself must be governed by it—the only way a work of fiction can be pleasing is by resembling the truth. Any representation of a passion can be agreeable only by appearing to be the real thing. And to be able to move others we must first be moved ourselves, or at least seem to be so. . . . Now, what possibility is there that a modern writer, who is known never to have worshipped Apollo or believed in any such deity as the Muses, should persuade us to enter into his pretended devotion and move us by his fake zeal in a religion that no-one believes any more? The ancients, on the other hand, are known to have derived their religion and their political arrangements from the art of the Muses; so it must have seemed natural for anyone at that time—and especially a poet—to address himself in raptures of devotion to those acknowledged Patronesses of wit and science.*

## Samuel Johnson

**The Importance of Samuel Johnson.** Samuel Johnson, 1709-1784, was an English moralist, poet, essayist, lexicographer, historian of letters, and all around ‘man of letters’ in an exceptional sense, unique to the British tradition. Though he is perhaps best known to us through the biography of him by James Boswell, he was in his own time most widely known for his commanding public presence.

**The Early Life of Samuel Johnson.** Johnson was born in Lichfield, Staffordshire, son of Michael Johnson, a bookseller, and his wife. Johnson regularly referred to his own youth as poverty stricken, although we know that his family had money, shortly before his birth. As a consequence of this poverty, Johnson was obliged to work in his father’s bookstore, binding and gluing books—a natural activity for what was to be this supreme bibliophile. It also marked young Johnson’s childhood that he was plagued with some of the illnesses that would pursue him through life, and blessed with a preternatural literary intelligence. Among those illnesses was scrofula—a tubercular disease—and the first stages of a tic-disease we now believe to have been Tourette’s. (As an adult, Johnson was disturbingly off centered, swaying back and forth and plagued with nervous gestures which made many chance acquaintances confused and nervous.) As for the extraordinary intelligence with which he entered life, we may think of feats like memorizing and reciting considerable portions of *The Book of Common Prayer* in his third year.

**The Later Life of Samuel Johnson.** Samuel Johnson was sent to Litchfield Grammar School, where he began his acquaintance with Latin. From there he matriculated to Pembroke College, Oxford, where he would remain for about a year, until his funds ran out. At that point he moved to London, where he gradually inserted himself into the vibrant social/intellectual life of the new London. It was in that center of cultural life that Johnson—the celebrated figure of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* (1791)—became the arbiter of opinion for London’s literary scene. It was from that post that he wrote many of the works for which he is still known—the *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), *Rasselas* (1759), his *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1779-81).

**The Work of Samuel Johnson.** Samuel Johnson was versatile, in various genres. In poetry his earliest work, ‘The Vanity of Human Wishes,’ 1779-81, was among his most successful works. After that, we have seen, he created a wide variety of works, from lexicography to his *Lives of the English Poets*, to innumerable essays on literature and morals. In *Rasselas* he presents the broad scope of his intelligence at its best. An ingenu, *Rasselas* wanders in far climes, learns the habits of foreign cultures, and, together with his teacher Imlac, works up the elements of an aesthetic which is normative for the thinking of eighteenth century classicism. In a characteristically thoughtful encounter with *Rasselas*, his teacher, Imlac says that the goal of the artist is to work to present general truths, not specific ones. The goal of the artist is not to depict the streaks in the lily but the general properties of the lily—the universally human. This generalist notion, which Johnson shared with many of his fellows, and particularly with the portrait painter, Sir Joshua Reynolds, is typical of the relatively abstract character of eighteenth century aesthetics, and of the thinking that is soon to merge into the critical thought of Immanuel Kant.

### Reading

#### Primary source reading

Samuel Johnson: *The Major Works*, ed. Greene, Oxford, 2009.

#### Secondary source reading

Rogers, Pat, Samuel Johnson, Oxford, 1993.

#### Further reading

Hudson, Nicholas, *Samuel Johnson and Eighteenth Century Thought*, Oxford, 1988.

#### Suggested paper topics

1. In his moral tale, *Rasselas*, Johnson speaks of the importance of going for an understanding of the general, not the individual; of appreciating the whole flower and not the streaks in it. What is the meaning of the ‘general’ for Johnson, and why does he put so much stress on it?
2. Look into the relationship between Johnson and his biographer/friend Boswell. What drew the two together? Was Boswell a passive amanuensis or an active collaborator? Do you think Johnson’s crusty *obiter dicta*, which



make up much of the Biography of him, were taken down literally or recreated later?

**Excerpt <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/rasselas.html>**

Ye who listen with credulity to the whispers of fancy, and pursue with eagerness the phantoms of hope; who expect that age will perform the promises of youth, and that the deficiencies of the present day will be supplied by the morrow; attend to the history of Rasselas prince of Abissinia.

Rasselas was the fourth son of the mighty emperour, in whose dominions the Father of waters begins his course; whose bounty pours down the streams of plenty, and scatters over half the world the harvests of Egypt.

According to the custom which has descended from age to age among the monarchs of the torrid zone, Rasselas was confined in a private palace, with the other sons and daughters of Abissinian royalty, till the order of succession should call him to the throne.

The place, which the wisdom or policy of antiquity had destined for the residence of the Abissinian princes, was a spacious valley in the kingdom of Amhara, surrounded on every side by mountains, of which the summits overhang the middle part. The only passage, by which it could be entered, was a cavern that passed under a rock, of which it has long been disputed whether it was the work of nature or of human industry. The outlet of the cavern was concealed by a thick wood, and the mouth which opened into the valley was closed with gates of iron, forged by the artificers of ancient days, so massy that no man could, without the help of engines, open or shut them.

From the mountains on every side, rivulets descended that filled all the valley with verdure and fertility, and formed a lake in the middle inhabited by fish of every species, and frequented by every fowl whom nature has taught to dip the wing in water. This lake discharged its superfluities by a stream which entered a dark cleft of the mountain on the northern side, and fell with dreadful noise from precipice to precipice till it was heard no more.

## 19<sup>th</sup> 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?

## S. T. Coleridge

**The significance of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.** Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) was an English poet, theorist and critic, and intimate friend of William Wordsworth, with whom he collaborated closely in creating the seminal works of the Romantic movement in literature.

**The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.** Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born in Ottery St. Mary, Devonshire. His father was a respected local vicar, and headmaster of the town school. In his second marriage, Coleridge 's father had ten children, of whom Samuel Taylor was the second youngest. This studious child—Samuel was interested only in reading, and early read all the classics of English literature. At the age of eight he was sent to Christ's Hospital, where he struck up a creative friendship with Charles Lamb. From 1791-94, Coleridge was educated at Cambridge, Jesus College, but proved a wayward student, too much the scholar to fit comfortably with his classes, addicted to high living, and eventually to crippling debt. (His only significant friendship from this period was the future literary figure Robert Southey.) Having proven himself an indifferent scholar, in the University context, his only recourse was the military, in which he was even more a failure. Back at Cambridge again, Coleridge paired up not only with the poet Robert Southey, but soon with William Wordsworth, who (with his sister Dorothy) was to be the great intellectual mate of Coleridge throughout much of his life—though a bitter quarrel estranged them for some years—and for decades Coleridge shared with Wordsworth the distinction of being the leading British poet and thinker. 1797-8 were the most fruitful years of Coleridge's life, for in 1798 Coleridge published (with Wordsworth) *The Lyrical Ballads*, with its epoch changing Preface, and also his most famous long poem, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.' It should be mentioned, because it sharply distinguished Coleridge from Wordsworth, that the former spent considerable time studying German philosophy of the day, and came away from that experience, at the University of Goettingen, far more the speculative thinker than Wordsworth. It is unfortunate for the world that Coleridge's lifetime poor health, treated over that lifetime with laudanum, left him in his later years a pretty miserable victim of opium addiction.

**The Work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.** Coleridge was active both as a poet and as a critic/philosopher. In fact, *besides* his major poetry, of which 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' was an early and huge success, as the star piece of the *Lyrical Ballads*, and *besides* the extraordinary critical daring he deployed in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), in which he transposed into English a basically German conception of *Einbildungskraft* (imagination), which revolutionized critical thinking for the Romantic Movement, Coleridge was immensely influential in interpreting German philosophy and higher culture for England. At the time of publication of *The Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge took an extended trip to Germany, in which he made the acquaintance of many of the leading thinkers of the burgeoning new German Humanism. He left a strong impression wherever he traveled, and came home with a particularly strong impression of the thinking of Herder and especially Immanuel Kant, whose three *Kritiks* were at the time virtually unknown outside Germany. This introduction, of the outlines of a profound system of aesthetics and ethics, was to prove hugely nourishing to the still fairly parochial literary thinking of turn of the century England.

### Reading

#### Primary source reading

*Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works*, ed. Jackson, Oxford, 2009

#### Secondary source reading

Holmes, Richard, *Coleridge: Early Visions*, London, 1989.

#### Further reading

Leask, Nigel, *The Politics of Imagination in Coleridge's Thought*, Basingstoke, 1988.

#### *Suggested paper topics*

1. In his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge observes that in the *Lyrical Ballads*, which bear the authorship of both himself and of Wordsworth, he (Coleridge) created poems of the supernatural, while Wordsworth, as he insisted, wrote poems bearing the real speech of real men in daily life. Do you find this distinction born out in the poems you have read, and if so what is the *supernatural* element in Coleridge's work? Take 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,' 'Christabel,' and 'The Eolian Harp.' What is supernatural about those poems? Why would Coleridge have used that

term about those works?

2. Coleridge's definition of imagination, as given in the *Biographia Literaria* (Chapter 13), claims that that faculty is 'the living power and prime agent of all human perception.' Do some reading in the thought of those German contemporaries of Coleridge, from whom he drew the foundations of this radical new aesthetic. (Think how totally this aesthetic differs from that of Dryden and Pope, hardly a century earlier.) Good starting point (with a commentary): the German philosopher Schelling's contemporary *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), which gives the priority to the aesthetic, in the human construction of reality.

**Excerpt** <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/a-soliloquy-of-the-full-moon-she-being-in-a-mad/>

*Now as Heaven is my Lot, they're the Pests of the Nation!  
Wherever they can come  
With clankum and blankum  
'Tis all Bothereation, & Hell & Damnation,  
With fun, jeering  
Conjuring  
Sky-staring,  
Loungerin g,  
And still to the tune of Transmogrification--  
Those muttering  
Spluttering  
Ventriloquogusty  
Poets  
With no Hats  
Or Hats that are rusty.  
They're my Torment and Curse  
And harass me worse  
And bait me and bay me, far sorer I vow  
Than the Screech of the Owl  
Or the witch-wolf's long howl,  
Or sheep-killing Butcher-dog's inward Bow wow  
For me they all spite--an unfortunate Wight.  
And the very first moment that I came to Light  
A Rascal call'd Voss the more to his scandal,  
Turn'd me into a sickle with never a handle.  
A Night or two after a worse Rogue there came,  
The head of the Gang, one Wordsworth by name--  
'Ho! What's in the wind?' 'Tis the voice of a Wizzard!  
I saw him look at me most terribly blue !  
He was hunting for witch-rhymes from great A to Izzard,  
And soon as he'd found them made no more ado  
But chang'd me at once to a little Canoe.  
From this strange Enchantment uncharm'd by degrees  
I began to take courage & hop'd for some Ease,  
When one Coleridge, a Raff of the self-same Banditti  
Past by--& intending no doubt to be witty,  
Because I'd th' ill-fortune his taste to displease,  
He turn'd up his nose,  
And in pitiful Prose  
Made me into the half of a small Cheshire Cheese.  
Well, a night or two past--it was wind, rain & hail--*

## Walter Pater

**The Life of Walter Pater.** Walter Pater (1839-1894) was born in Stepney, in London's East End. His father was a doctor who had moved to London, early in the nineteenth century, to practice medicine among the poor. Upon the father's death, when Walter was still young, the family moved to Enfield. Walter was sent for a while to Enfield Grammar School, then, in 1883, to King's School in Canterbury, where the beauty of the Cathedral impressed him deeply. (He was at the time reading Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, a book that strongly reinforced these first aesthetic impressions.) In 1858 Pater enrolled at Queen's College, Oxford; during his stay there he made a journey to Europe, especially Germany, where he immersed himself in the reading of Hegel. (It was around this time that Pater lost his faith in Christianity.) In 1864 he was offered a classics fellowship at Brasenose College, but at this point implications of his homosexuality began to surface, and he was turned down at the last minute. (This issue would continue to plague his academic life.) In 1865 he visited the Continent again, and at this point began writing those essays—one on Winckelmann was among the first—which would be included in his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873); his long meditation on Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* is one of the cameo pieces of that text. (It was in that volume that Pater wrote that 'all art constantly aspires toward the condition of music.' In his later years, at Oxford, Pater went on to write considerable fiction, in which he gave various forms to the basic aestheticism of his earlier work, and clarified his 'metaphysic,' in which first place was given to grasping the fleeting beauty of the moment.

**The Work of Walter Pater.** Walter Pater was an aesthete and metaphysician (in a literary sense) who distinguished himself for the brilliance of his word portraits of great works of Renaissance art, and in his highly imaginative fiction. The works of his which most shaped opinion in his reading public were the *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), and *Imaginary Portraits* (1887). Throughout this body of work, expressed in an exquisite and often highly nuanced style, runs a theme of *carpe diem* prose:

*every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive for us, – for that moment only.*

Behind this perspective lies the highly developed notion that the world is essentially flux, and that man's role in it is to grasp the sensually significant instant. It can be imagined that this perspective, which Pater carried through to the first beginnings of a genuine art history, aroused concern among the guardians of public morals. The original Conclusion of *The Renaissance*, which appeared to invite unrestricted hedonism, had to be removed from later editions of the book, because of the outcry of conservatives like the novelist George Eliot. *Marius the Epicurean* transposes this set of concerns, about the values of sense experience and morality, onto a larger canvas, the conflict between developing Christianity and the pagan culture of late antiquity, as it played out in the spiritual world of a young man, Marius, who is open both to the power of the new Christian view of the world, and to the subtle, life-affirming values of the pagans in the countryside.

## Reading

### Primary source reading

Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in the Art of Poetry*, Kindle Edition, Amazon Digital Services, 2012.

### Secondary source reading

Seiler, R.M., *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage*, London, 1980.

### Further reading

Donoghue, Dennis, *Walter Pater, Lover of Strange Souls*, New York, 1995.

### Suggested paper topics

1. Does Pater's novel, *Marius the Epicurean*, throw light on the kind of view he has of Renaissance Art? Does Pater put his ideas across effectively in fiction?

2. Discuss the relation between Pater's Lucretian metaphysics, his poetically scientific view of the flux of life, and his art criticism. Is there a close relation? Is Pater a genuine philosopher?

**Excerpt <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4060/pg4060.html>**

*The various forms of intellectual activity which together make up the culture of an age, move for the most part from different starting-points, and by unconnected roads. As products of the same generation they partake indeed of a common character, and unconsciously illustrate each other; but of the producers themselves, each group is solitary, gaining what advantage or disadvantage there may be in intellectual isolation. Art and poetry, philosophy and the religious life, and that other life of refined pleasure and action in the conspicuous places of the world, are each of them confined to its own circle of ideas, and those who prosecute either of them are generally little [xiv] curious of the thoughts of others. There come, however, from time to time, eras of more favourable conditions, in which the thoughts of men draw nearer together than is their wont, and the many interests of the intellectual world combine in one complete type of general culture. The fifteenth century in Italy is one of these happier eras, and what is sometimes said of the age of Pericles is true of that of Lorenzo:—it is an age productive in personalities, many-sided, centralised, complete. Here, artists and philosophers and those whom the action of the world has elevated and made keen, do not live in isolation, but breathe a common air, and catch light and heat from each other's thoughts. There is a spirit of general elevation and enlightenment in which all alike communicate. The unity of this spirit gives unity to all the various products of the Renaissance; and it is to this intimate alliance with the mind, this participation in the best thoughts which that age produced, that the art of Italy in the fifteenth century owes much of its grave dignity and influence.*

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## 20<sup>th</sup> 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?