

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

ENGLISH POETRY

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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?

William Langland

Life and Work of William Langland. William Langland (1332-1386) comes to us virtually without personal details. He was from the West of England, and was, as we can see from his major poem, immersed in the religious and social values of his time. It seems he was an unbench'd clerk in minor orders, thus an ecclesiastic. And thus, to add, he was thoroughly familiar with holy writ, and with the meanings it had both for his own religious values, and for moral and aesthetic imagination. He was also in sync with the aesthetic assumptions of contemporary serious poets—compliant in the long, talkative pentameter line, compliant in the framing of his most serious work in terms of dream and allegory. We have to imagine that Langland's own values are wrapped up in the allegorical clothing of his text, for *The Vision of Piers Plowman* is not only a history of the major events of the Christian story, but a revelation of the poet's understanding of Christ's significance. Piers, Peter, bears the weight of cosmic meaning on his shoulders, in an unfolding allegory which is at the same time a lively narrative based on alleged vision, and in which is embedded the confusion, chaos, and uncertainty of human societies in our fallen world.

A sample of the work. *Passus* (Section) 18 of *Piers Plowman*, opens on the picture of a world-trudging pilgrim dreaming of 'Christ's passion and pain' and of His people, which includes one Piers the Plowman, a slightly tweaked version of our poet himself. Through the lens of dream, Piers allows allegorical figures—Peace, Love, Mercy, Righteousness—to play through an account of the tale of Christ's sacrifice. There is a blending, here, of the Christian vision of the inherent glory of the created world with a narrative of the weariness of all things human. Even today's reader, often uncomfortable with the larger terms of this narrative argument, is likely caught up in the sharp edged energy with which Langland juxtaposes the divine and human worlds. Still in *Passus* 18, Langland goes on to dramatize the meeting and marriage of Righteousness and Peace, and to mirror, in the language used, the blending of differences required in that juxtaposition.

Thou seist (sayest) sooth (truth), said Righteousness, and reverently her kissed Peace, and Peace her per secula seculorum (till the end of time, phrase from Roman liturgy.)

Middle English and Latin are juxtaposed within a single couplet, as is done elsewhere in this *Passus*. One must be in Langland's culture, where both Latin and Middle English were vibrantly present speech forms, to grasp the almost Modernist literary play put into action here; juxtaposition and interweaving of languages as we in the twentieth century find it in the fiction of James Joyce or the poetry of T.S.Eliot. The reader of this Langland Modernism may also reflect that Langland's was a culture in which two languages—Latin and English-- were prominent, at least among the educated. We are at a transitional intersection, the mediaeval world slowly slipping away, and the Renaissance, nationally self-aware British world starting to take full control of itself, and Langland knows just how to exploit the aesthetic of the speech of his moment. The blending of Catholic theology with dramatic tale carries this aesthetic subtlety so effortlessly, that we realize we are in a setting where the Christian narrative is widely and comfortably accepted in English literature—perhaps as convincing an acceptance as we will find in later British literature.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Vision of Piers Plowman, London, 1978.

Secondary source reading

Godden, Malcolm, *The Making of 'Piers Plowman'*, London, 1990.

Further reading

Alford, John, ed. *A Companion to Piers Plowman*, Berkeley, 1988.

Suggested paper topics

1. In many ways the Christian mediaeval imagination—allegorical, indirect, trading in symbols drawn from intense belief—is hard for us to read, harder either than ancient classical literature or even the difficult works of our own time, like James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* which requires a detailed commentary. What do you think is the reason for the choice of allegory by William Langland?

2. In *Piers Plowman* Langland creates a character in search of the best way to lead the Christian life. The social perspective, under which that search is imagined as possible, is communitarian, and in a way conservative, supporting the reigning feudal structure of the time. Is it easy to penetrate that world view, from the angle of our contemporary society?

Excerpt <http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/authors/langland/pp-pro.html>

N a summer season · when soft was the sun,
I clothed myself in a cloak as I shepherd were,
Habit like a hermit's · unholy in works,
And went wide in the world · wonders to hear.
But on a May morning · on Malvern hills,
A marvel befell me · of fairy, methought.
I was weary with wandering · and went me to rest
Under a broad bank · by a brook's side,
And as I lay and leaned over · and looked into the waters
I fell into a sleep · for it sounded so merry.
Then began I to dream · a marvellous dream,
That I was in a wilderness · wist I not where.
As I looked to the east · right into the sun,
I saw a tower on a toft · worthily built;
A deep dale beneath · a dungeon therein,
With deep ditches and dark · and dreadful of sight
A fair field full of folk · found I in between,
Of all manner of men · the rich and the poor,
Working and wandering · as the world asketh.
Some put them to plow · and played little enough,
At setting and sowing · they sweated right hard
And won that which wasters · by gluttony destroy.

Beowulf

Beowulf, its literary greatness. The greatest single achievement of Old English poetry, *Beowulf* ranks as one of the world's most touching and mysterious epic poems. The pagan and the Christian blend here, and do so in an atmosphere that rinses away the differences between the two cultures. This oral work was composed in Northumbria about 750 A.D., and was doubtless performed by a scop in regional mead halls, to the accompaniment of the harp.

Preservation of the poem: a product of an ancient oral tradition, *Beowulf* was probably put to writing around 1000 A.D., by a literate Anglo Saxon with significant knowledge of both pagan Germanic cultures and Christianity, and with a good feel for the rhythms of Anglo Saxon poetry. The blending of Christian with pagan themes, in the poem, belongs to the end of the first millennium: God, as in Caedmon's *Hymn* (7th century), is the supreme creator, while the beastly Grendel—a descendant of Cain, in the poem—is diabolical, and Hell her appropriate abode. It is important to note that, although the epic was created in the earliest period of the development of the English language, it slipped out of sight for the first seven centuries of its existence, and only in the eighteenth century did it become a factor in the development of English literature. Even at that—and we pause to think of the fragility of the literary tradition—the one manuscript of *Beowulf* barely survived a fire, which destroyed many of the manuscripts with which it was housed, in the country library of an English bibliophile.

Historical setting of the poem: *Beowulf* may well have been composed in the mid 8th century, and probably, though the work is clearly a blend of legend and history, reflects both ancient Anglo Saxon events, from the sixth century at the latest, and events that transpired at the turn of the millennium in Britain, at the time the poem was written down. Those earliest events, to the extent we can plausibly place them, involved turf wars and rivalries among immigrant Anglo Saxon and Germanic tribes in Britain. The poem, therefore, serves as a precious key to the earliest period of British culture, as well as to the contemporary seafaring intersections between Scandinavian and British culture.

The tale in a nutshell: Beowulf, a hero of the Geats, is the central figure of the narrative, which he holds together by defeating three antagonists: the dreadful monster Grendel, who has been attacking the warrior residents of the mead hall of Hroðgar (the king of the Danes); Grendel's mother; and finally an unnamed dragon. After the first two victories, Beowulf goes home to Geatland in Sweden and becomes king of the Geats. The last fight, against the unknown dragon, takes place fifty years later. In this final battle, Beowulf is fatally wounded. After his death, his servants bury him in a tumulus in Geatland. And so you have it, the ingredients of either a masterpiece or a generic potboiler. The wise course is to take this epic, loose in construction when compared to the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid*, as a document in the working through of contrasting religious/cultural values. While monster slaying is of central concern, all the conquests of the untamed world can also be read as episodes in Christ's overcoming of the savage evil of the world.

Reading

Primary source reading

Beowulf: A New Translation, trans. Seamus Heaney, New York, 2000.

Secondary source reading

Irving, E.B. *Rereading 'Beowulf'*, Philadelphia, 1989.

Further reading

Niles, J.D., *Beowulf: The Poem and its Tradition*, Cambridge, 1983.

Suggested discussion questions

1. Do you read *Beowulf* as a pagan or as a Christian text? What elements of belief in Christian religion do you see? What is the meaning of this archaic epic poem for us today in the West?
2. *Beowulf* seem to you part of the early literature of England, or to belong to another world of values and styles? Does the language itself seem to you part of the English language of today? Does the reading of *Beowulf* throw some special light on contemporary English?

Excerpt <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16328/16328-h/16328-h.htm>

In the boroughs then Beowulf, bairn of the Scyldings,
Belovèd land-prince, for long-lasting season

Was famed mid the folk (his father departed,
The prince from his dwelling), till afterward sprang

5

Great-minded Healfdene; the Danes in his lifetime

He graciously governed, grim-mooded, agèd.

Healfdene's birth.

Four bairns of his body born in succession

Woke in the world, war-troopers' leader

Heorogar, Hrothgar, and Halga the good;

10

Heard I that Elan was Ongentheow's consort,

He has three sons—one of them, Hrothgar—and a daughter named Elan. Hrothgar becomes a mighty king.

The well-beloved bedmate of the War-Scylfing leader.

Then glory in battle to Hrothgar was given,

Waxing of war-fame, that willingly kinsmen

Obeded his bidding, till the boys grew to manhood,

15

A numerous band. It burned in his spirit

To urge his folk to found a great building,

A mead-hall grander than men of the era

He is eager to build a great hall in which he may feast his retainers

Ever had heard of, and in it to share

With young and old all of the blessings

Geoffrey Chaucer

The Early Life of Geoffrey Chaucer. Geoffrey Chaucer was born in London about 1340, to a family of French descent who had made their fortune in the wine trade. We know that the family had grown prosperous and that it was Chaucer's fortune to have been brought up near the Wine-Trade docks of the River Thames, where he had a chance to watch foreigners at work and play, as well as to begin his observation of a wide variety of English and foreign personal types, an exposure which was to serve him well in what turned out to be a highly developed writing career. When he was ready for a career his father got him a job as a page at court, and from there, Chaucer further developed his experience of society in action. In fact the court, and the social/commercial life it fostered, was to prove a stepping stone for Chaucer into an active life of business and diplomacy.

Chaucer in Mid Life. Not only did Chaucer live from the vintner profits of the family, but, while marrying and enjoying fatherhood, he committed substantial periods of time to diplomatic service in Europe. He became acquainted, in that way, with many of Europe's literary luminaries, like Petrarch and Boccaccio. Chaucer went on to form many fruitful personal royal connections as well, to observe life in its pageantry, especially as it played out into the separation among the three dominant classes of society: the nobility, the church and the commoners. It was this last mentioned opportunity that especially enriched Chaucer's awareness of his world, of which we need to note the sharply transitional quality in the second half of the fourteenth century. From other contemporary writers, like William Langland of *Piers Plowman*, or the author of *Gawain and the Green Knight*, we would not know that the formation of a vibrant class society was under way, and that the older feudal world, which is still amply present in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, was yielding to a pre modern Europe.

The Canterbury Tales. *The Canterbury Tales*, which draws on this broad experience of humanity, is a long poem considered by most critics to be Chaucer's greatest work. He wrote a number of smaller and less ambitious works, an extraordinary study of the Astrolabe, allegorical works of considerable charm like *The House of Fame* or *The Book of the Duchess*, but the finest work is *The Canterbury Tales*, which recounts the events of a pilgrimage to the tomb of Saint Thomas à Beckett at Canterbury, and the stories told, over dinner at the Tabard Inn, by an array of fascinating pilgrims—to whom Chaucer could direct his eye for the social and his mind for the satirical. He brings his full life experience to harvest. It consists of a General Prologue and twenty-four stories told by pilgrims making their way as a group to Canterbury. While the society from which the characters were drawn was in transition, and vibrant, it was still marked by strong differences of 'degree,' and the 'classification' of his characters, by Chaucer, is marked by its attention to status. From the Knight, who naturally comes first, to those reprobates—the Reeve, the Miller, the Summoner, and the Pardoner—who come at the end of the tale, we encounter an unparalleled richness of social tapestry. It is striking, and of typical modesty, that Chaucer includes himself at the very end of the list of story tellers, as a high ranking royal official.

Reading

Primary source reading

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, New York, 2013.

Secondary source reading

Boitani, Piero, and Mann, Jill (eds.), *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, Cambridge, 1986.

Ford, Boris, *Mediaeval Literature, Part One: Chaucer and the Alliterative Tradition* (Harmondsworth), 1987.

Further reading

Mann, Jill, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, London, 1991.

Suggested discussion topics

1. You will be struck by Chaucer's fascination with social classes, and their typical representatives, as they gather in the Tabard Inn. Does it seem to you that Chaucer is consciously creating a portrait of his own society? If so, does that portrait spring from the narrative instinct or from the desire to portray society? In other words is Chaucer above all a story teller whose society is rich with interest for him, or is he an observer of society who has found a narrative style for characterizing that society?

2. You see from the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* that Chaucer is fascinated with character types—the Miller, the Pardoner, the Knight, The Wife of Bath. Does he conceive of these characters as abstractions, which sum up many traits in a generalized package, or are these fully developed characters, each one distinct as Chaucer conceives him or her?

Excerpt <http://classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/gchaucer/bl-gchau-can-mill.htm>

THE MILLER'S PROLOGUE

The Words between the Host and the Miller
Now when the knight had thus his story told,
In all the rout there was nor young nor old
But said it was a noble story, well
Worthy to be kept in mind to tell;
And specially the gentle folk, each one.
Our host, he laughed and swore, "So may I run,
But this goes well; unbuckled is the mail;
Let's see now who can tell another tale:
For certainly the game is well begun.
Now shall you tell, sir monk, if't can be done,
Something with which to pay for the knight's tale."
The miller, who with drinking was all pale,
So that unsteadily on his horse he sat,
He would not take off either hood or hat,
Nor wait for any man, in courtesy,
But all in Pilate's voice began to cry,
And by the Arms and Blood and Bones he swore,
"I have a noble story in my store,
With which I will requite the good knight's tale."
Our host saw, then, that he was drunk with ale,
And said to him: "Wait, Robin, my dear brother,
Some better man shall tell us first another:
Submit and let us work on profitably."
"Now by God's soul," cried he, "that will not I!
For I will speak, or else I'll go my way."
Our host replied: "Tell on, then, till doomsday!
You are a fool, your wit is overcome."
"Now hear me," said the miller, "all and some!
But first I make a protestation round
That I'm quite drunk, I know it by my sound:
And therefore, if I slander or mis-say,
Blame it on ale of Southwark, so I pray;
For I will tell a legend and a life
Both of a carpenter and of his wife,
And how a scholar set the good wright's cap."
The reeve replied and said: "Oh, shut your trap..."

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (ca. 1375-1400)

The author of Gawain. Of the author of *Sir Gawain* we know even less than of the author of *Piers Plowman*. What conclusions we can draw are again based on linguistic evidence, and point to the area of the northwest Midlands, in the second half of the fourteenth century. From the tale the author creates here, in the alliterative verse which roots this English in the oral traditions which pre date the Norman Conquest—the dividing line (1066 A.D.) separating Anglo-Saxon from Anglo-Norman England—we see that the author is deeply engrained in the Arthurian lore traditions which ruled much of mediaeval literature. Arthur and his Knights, in their ancestral home of Camelot, maintain the twin traditions of chivalry and knighthood, under the sign of the Cross and the Holy Virgin. The author of *Gawain* is also deeply versed in Holy Scripture, like the visionary author of *Piers Plowman*.

The Gawain Tale. We have noted the sophisticated insouciance with which William Langland juxtaposes Latin and Middle English; proof enough of the high literary level of fourteenth century English poetry. The *Gawain* author—author of four interconnected texts of which *Gawain and the Green Knight* have received foremost attention--goes even harder for the aesthetically dramatic. The poem opens with a lead-in reference—to that line of British kings, sprung from the politically embroiled Brutus of the Roman Republic, which leads directly into the reign of King Arthur. After that intro the poet springs violence: into King Arthur's court rides a heavily armed foe/challenger, dressed in bright green, horse and armor bright green, and a holly branch in hand. (Green—this is part but only part of the literary fireworks, is the working symbol of regeneration and of the Savior who rose again.) The challenge issued by the Green Knight proves his cultural origins, in primitive Celtic—not Christian—rite: he seeks a challenger who will behead him, in return for being himself beheaded a year later, on New Year's day. King Arthur's nephew, Gawain, takes up the challenge, beheads the intruder, and is then astounded to see the headless challenger rise, take his head in his hands and ride away. The remainder of the poem introduces us to Gawain's quest to find the Green Knight, within the appointed time, and to do so while behaving himself nobly in the chivalric Christian tradition. (The pagan Celtic and the Christian perspectives co exist throughout the poem.) In the end, chivalric graciousness—we are in the magic world of Arthurian culture—wins out, and Gawain is released from his obligation to be beheaded.

The chivalric theme of the poem. Chastity, a high Feudal virtue twinned to the protection of woman, is a major virtue for Gawain, and he struggles manfully, and successfully, to maintain his purity. (An image of the Virgin Mary is embroidered onto the inside of his shield.) However he errs against the chivalric code, in the wilderness Castle at which he arrives as he sets out in search of the Green Knight. (How important and punctilious is that code we rapidly learn.) On the first night in the Castle Gawain's host stipulates that his guest must return his 'winnings' from his stay, and this is what Gawain fails to do. He has received a modest girdle—a warder off of death—from his hostess at the Castle, and fails to return it to the lady before his departure. Consequences and humiliation follow, the overcoming of which becomes in the end the true test of Gawain's chivalric valor.

Reading

Primary source reading

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, trans. Kline, 2007; online.

Secondary source reading

Brewer, Elisabeth, '*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*': *Sources and Analogues*, Cambridge, 1992.

Further reading

Barron, W.R.J., '*Trawthe*' and *Treason: The Sin of Gawain Reconsidered*, Manchester, 1980.

Suggested discussion topics

1. The place of the Christian religion, in the thinking and writing of the Middle Ages, cannot be overstated. We encounter the Christian world in the Pardoner, the Nun's Priest, and the Parson of Chaucer; in all which tales there runs a thread of irony; in *Piers Plowman*, and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. What is the particular significance of Christianity in *Sir Gawain*?

2. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* invokes what literary scholars have often called archetypal patterns; in this case, say, the patterns of the heroic chivalric quest, that of Gawain, and of the ritual beheading and survival of the

Green Knight. These patterns are typical lines of narrative, which occur in multiple texts and which seem to derive from fundamental forms of human experience. What kind of archetypal patterns do you find in *Sir Gawain*?

Excerpt <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/English/GawainAndTheGreenKnight.htm>

1

Soon as the siege and assault had ceased at Troy,
the burg broken and burnt to brands and ashes,
the traitor who trammels of treason there wrought
was tried for his treachery, the foulest on earth.
It was Aeneas the noble and his high kin
who then subdued provinces, lords they became,
well-nigh of all the wealth in the Western Isles:
forth rich Romulus to Rome rapidly came,
with great business that burg he builds up first,
and names it with his name, as now it has;
Ticius to Tuscany, and townships begins;
Langobard in Lombardy lifts up homes;
and fared over the French flood Felix Brutus
on many banks all broad Britain he settles
then,
where war and wreck and wonder
betimes have worked within,
and oft both bliss and blunder
have held sway swiftly since.

2

And when this Britain was built by this baron rich,
bold men were bred therein, of battle beloved,
in many a troubled time turmoil that wrought.
More flames on this fold have fallen here oft
than any other I know of, since that same time.
But of all that here built, of Britain the kings,
ever was Arthur highest, as I have heard tell.
And so of earnest adventure I aim to show,
that astonishes sight as some men do hold it,
an outstanding action of Arthur's wonders.

Thomas Mallory

The Life of Thomas Malory. Scholars still debate the life of Thomas Mallory, for whose work there are two possible claimants. It appears that the Thomas we have here is a well attested felon and jailbird, who set his literary imagination on a time and place, the mythical Arthurian period of English history, into which he could interject his disappointments and wishes. It seems that his period of creative ferment came during a period when he was in prison on charges of extortion, rape, theft, and violence. Like the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Mallory found in the roundtable world that same zone of chivalric lords and ladies which keeps Camelot alive before our thoughts even today. (Cf. for instance the legend of the Kennedy clan and their Camelot.) But the imaginative work of Mallory is far different from that of the *Gawain* poet. Where the *Gawain* poet was dramatic and allegorical, Mallory is a prose stylist recounting a precise mythical history.

Le Morte Darthur was published in 1485, thus a century later than the writings of Chaucer, Langland, and the *Gawain* poet. The poem was published by the brilliant printer, William Caxton (1422-1491), who had played an important role in arranging and editing Mallory's text. (To repeat: two 'Mallories' contend for the honor of authorship of this poem, but it seems plausible—although it still makes us wonder—that the criminal Mallory was indeed the author of the great poem we are considering.) Mallory was a brilliant stylist, who captured the whole extent of the haunting legend of King Arthur and his roundtable, whose history had become a cultural rallying point for the forming British nation. The England that Mallory's Arthur rules is both a mythical Christian kingdom, and a dream world of heroic myth. In recounting the realms of these diverse worlds, Mallory gives thorough accounts of the main figures in the Arthurian legend: Tristram, Gareth, Lancelot are all followed through their legendary journeys, and the Pursuit of the Holy Grail is actively highlighted. Arthur himself is tracked, in splendid prose, from his initial optimistic removal of the knife from the stone, to his despondent death, cloaked in the phrase, 'the noble felyshyp of the Rounde Table is brokyn for ever.'

The influence of Mallory's *Morte Darthur*. The brilliant pathos, with which Mallory described the exploits, passions, and ultimately demise of the Arthurian project left a great impression on later generations of British writers, who were long conscious of the power of the Arthurian theme in the formation of British culture. In the sixteenth century Edmund Spenser, the author of *The Faerie Queene*, and Sir Philip Sidney, both looked to Mallory as a fountainhead of understanding of their own literary ancestry. In the nineteenth century Alfred Lord Tennyson deepens the entire tale, making the chivalric interrelations into romance, and idealizing even the mediaeval mantle of honor which enshrouded Mallory's work.

The importance of Caxton to Mallory. Malory's own background may have been socially dubious, but his printer—in that age when printing was an individual job requiring a lot of hands on skill—was an aspiring middle class entrepreneur of the kind required to ground and distribute texts. Caxton was a product of the new economic confidence, the earlier demise of which Mallory recounts in his doleful history of the Arthurian legend.

Reading

Primary source reading

Le Morte Darthur, ed. Stephen Shepherd, New York, 2003.

Secondary source reading

Bennett, J.A.W., *Middle English Literature*, Oxford, 1986.

Further reading

Riddy, Felicity, *Sir Thomas Malory*, Leiden, 1987.

Suggested paper topics

1. *What is Mallory's attitude toward the adultery between Lancelot and Guinevere, and toward Lancelot's behavior after that adultery?* This question begs attention because Lancelot is a generically noble figure in the Arthurian scene, and his relation to Arthur is defining for the whole society of the roundtable. Mallory says in an aside that he is not sure what the two lovers were doing in Guinevere's chamber. Is Arthur made a fool?

2. You might want to browse in the Troubadour poetry being composed in Southern France at the end of the Middle Ages, especially in the 13th century. You will find that poetry populated with love/death themes, in which idealized love for the noble lady leads either to dark illegitimate passion or a sublimation of love in which the lover is cancelled out. What parallels do you see between that literature and Mallory's?

Excerpt <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/mart/mart000.htm>

CHAPTER I How Uther Pendragon sent for the duke of Cornwall and Igraine his wife, and of their departing suddenly again. IT befell in the days of Uther Pendragon, when he was king of all England, and so reigned, that there was a mighty duke in Cornwall that held war against him long time. And the duke was called the Duke of Tintagil. And so by means King Uther sent for this duke, charging him to bring his wife with him, for she was called a fair lady, and a passing wise, and her name was called Igraine. So when the duke and his wife were come unto the king, by the means of great lords they were accorded both. The king liked and loved this lady well, and he made them great cheer out of measure, and desired to have lain by her. But she was a passing good woman, and would not assent unto the king. And then she told the duke her husband, and said, I suppose that we were sent for that I should be dishonoured; wherefore, husband, I counsel you, that we depart from hence suddenly, that we may ride all night unto our own castle. And in like wise as she said so they departed, that neither the king nor none of his council were ware of their departing. All so soon as King Uther knew of their departing so suddenly, he was wonderly wroth. Then he called to him his privy council, and told them of the sudden departing of the duke and his wife. <2> Then they advised the king to send for the duke and his wife by a great charge; and if he will not come at your summons, then may ye do your best, then have ye cause to make mighty war upon him. So that was done, and the messengers had their answers; and that was this shortly, that neither he nor his wife would not come at him. Then was the king wonderly wroth. And then the king sent him plain word again, and bade him be ready and stuff him and garnish him, for within forty days he would fetch him out of the biggest castle that he hath.

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*?

Edmund Spenser

The Life of Edmund Spenser. Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) was born in E. Southfield, London, in 1552. He was educated at the Merchant Taylors' School, and subsequently at Pembroke College, Cambridge. In the following years he spent much of his career life carrying out administrative roles for the British Crown, in Ireland. The colonizing role of England in Ireland was a rough and contentious one, and over an extended period the colonized were in endless rebellion against their colonial masters. Spenser was on the whole one of the tough colonialists. His attitude to Ireland was that the colony was not worth the having, unless it could be reformed and modernized. (In more than one writing he made suggestions, for the future of Ireland, that are today viewed as absolutely genocidal.) Meantime he was becoming increasingly known in England for his poetic work, and admired in England by all including the Queen. In 1579 his *Shepherd's Calendar* was published, to broad acclaim. In 1590 the first three books of *The Faerie Queene* appeared, winning from the Queene a life pension of 50 pounds annually. England, therefore, was a crucial part of Spenser's support and audience base. However he probably acquired in Ireland the distinctive blend of fantasist—the *Faerie Queen* creator, the myth maker--and realist, whose knowledge of human psychology is sharp and penetrating. In the end he was, in some sense, conquered by the culture he approved of colonizing.

The Work of Edmund Spenser. Spenser was a contemporary of Shakespeare and Marlowe, creators usually associated with the full energies of the Renaissance mind. However Spenser, unlike some of his great contemporaries, consciously looked back on the archaic past, shall we say the past of *Piers Plowman* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*? In his greatest work, *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser emulated an old fashioned poetic English, which smacked of late Mediaeval writers, and he peopled his *Faerie Queene* with allegorical figures and abstractions of the Virtues and Vices. The intention of this very long epic poem, written in its own distinctive nine line Spenserian stanza, was to follow several knights on an examination of several virtues—Holiness, Chastity, Friendship, Justice, Charity, Magnificence; its aim being 'to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtues and gentle discipline.' On the other hand, though, Spenser confronts the human situation with a direct analytical eye that makes him read as anything but archaic. The struggles of the Redcross Knight, on behalf of Una, are testimonies of heroic valor and virtue, but the subsequent faithlessness of the Knight sears him with a sense of sin which we can feel on ourselves today. The Virtues and Vices that play through this poem have the bite of real life on them. *Hence the question about the modernity of Spenser. Does he 'get to you' as much as Shakespeare? Is Spenser too our contemporary?*

Spenser and Shakespeare. The worldwide attention to Shakespeare's work was not lavished on Spenser's contemporary epic work, although Spenser is a brilliant stylist, story teller, and prosodist. What limits our attention to the great Spenser? In addition to the thematic materials, which we have mentioned, and which tend to the abstract, Spenser is an archaizing poet, emulating mediaeval styles and language practices, while Shakespeare, daring and inventive in language, is continually taking us into territory of expression which we had never imagined.

Reading

Primary source reading

Spenser, *The Faerie-Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton, 2001.

Secondary source reading

Hume, A., *Edmund Spenser, Protestant Poet*, Cambridge, 1984.

Further reading

Bernard, John D., *Pastoralism in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser*, Cambridge, 1989.

Suggested paper topics

1. Among other things, Spenser is a Renaissance Neo-Platonist, fascinated with the theories of ideal love developed by Plato, but widely popularized during the Hellenizing movements of the Renaissance. Much of the inspiration for Spenser's work and thought also came from the Italy of his time, which was a source of artistic inspiration in England. You might cross the channel, and take a look at Erwin Panofsky's great *Studies in Iconology* (London, 1939), which looks at the Neoplatonism in Italian painting of the Renaissance. Anywhere you turn in that book will give you insight into the thought world of Spenser, heir as he was both to Platonism and Italian culture

2. A long set of narrative sequences, concerning the pursuit of virtue, may seem far from what we can imagine enjoying today. Comparative Literature is involved with phases of taste and sensibility, and not least with the tastes of the comparatist him/herself. In other words, there is a reflexive dimension to the critical work of Comparative Literature. From that viewpoint, can you explain what it is, in our cultural reading habits, that puts us far from Spenser's sensibility, but that puts Spenser's work at the very center of his own time?

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/sonnet-54/>

*Of this worlds theatre in which we stay,
My love like the spectator ydly sits
Beholding me that all the pageants play,
Disguysing diversly my troubled wits.
Sometimes I joy when glad occasion fits,
And mask in myrth lyke to a comedy:
Soone after when my joy to sorrow flits,
I waile and make my woes a tragedy.
Yet she, beholding me with constant eye,
Delights not in my merth nor rues my smart:
But when I laugh she mocks, and when I cry
She laughs and hardens evermore her heart.
What then can move her? if nor merth nor mone,
She is no woman, but a senceless stone.*

Sir Philip Sidney

The Life of Sir Philip Sidney. Philip Sidney (1554-1586) was born in Penshurst Place, Kent. His father and mother, Sir Henry Sidney and Lady Mary Dudley, were deeply connected to the nobility. Philip's mother was the senior daughter of the Duke of Northumberland, and the sister of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. His younger brother was a highborn statesman and diplomat, and his sister, Mary, who married the second Earl of Pembroke, was a writer and translator, to whom Sidney dedicated his most ambitious work, the *Arcadia*. Philip himself, thus embedded in noble family networks, was educated at Shrewsbury School and Christ Church, Oxford. In 1572 Sidney was elected Member of Parliament from Shrewsbury, and at that same time was sent on mission to Europe, to negotiate a marriage between Elisabeth I and the Duc d'Alençon. For the next several years he traveled widely in Mainland Europe, on diplomatic and social missions for her Majesty. He was widely exposed, at this time, to many of the outstanding intellectuals and writers. In 1575 he returned to England, where he met Penelope Devereux, who was to become Lady Rich, and who would be the inspiration for his sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella*. Sidney was to marry Penelope, but her father, who favored the marriage, died before it could be carried out. Following a number of dramatic quarrels, and a withdrawal from court life, Sidney—who was combining this highly active life with extensive writing—joined forces fighting for the Protestant cause in the Netherlands, and during the battle of Zutphen he was wounded in the thigh and died of gangrene, with his last breath proffering his last sips of water to an even more terminally wounded comrade. Sidney remains the paragon of the Renaissance courtier—a type closely based on the character central to Castiglione's *Courtier*, a text admired and followed throughout the higher circles of European honor.

The Works of Sir Philip Sidney. Sidney remains known to us especially for his **Defence of Poetry**, published in 1579, and for his sonnets, collected in the *Astrophel and Stella* sequence, and based around Sidney's love for Penelope Devereux. Sidney's sonnets are infused with the expected—even in Shakespeare—Renaissance themes of anxiety, hope, melancholy, and terror at the swift passage of time, all matters treated with great care in Sidney's *Defence of Poetry*. There Sidney argues that poetry 'awakens and enlarges the mind itself, by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought.' *Praxis*, rather than *gnosis*, thus becomes the goal and accomplishment of great poetry, which has the power to teach and discipline virtue. Prudence, accordingly, comes through as a central virtue taught by poetry. The poet, in the creation of poetry, is fundamentally a creator of value in society. The metaphorical visions which the poet embodies in his work touch harmonies which are central to the universe, and the special power of great poetry resides in its capacity to touch cosmic chords.

The Influence of Sidney's Poetics. The nineteenth century Romantic poet, Shelley, in his *Defence of Poetry* (1858), writes exuberantly of Sidney's deep conception of the poet as leader and source of inspiration. Shelley writes that 'the poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world'; and with that formulation seals the well nigh universal interest in poetry inspired by Sidney's work.

Reading

Primary source reading

Sir Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, ed. Evans, London, 1997.

Secondary source reading

Buxton, John, *Sir Philip Sidney and the English Renaissance*, London, 1987.

Further reading

Kay, D., ed., *Sir Philip Sidney: An Anthology of Modern Criticism*, Oxford, 1987.

Suggested paper topics

1. The sonnet form was used as early as the work of Chaucer and Dante, in the 14th century, and gained widely admired currency—especially among lovers—with the sonnets of Francesco Petrarch in Italy, and of Shakespeare, who was himself the author of over a hundred sonnets. The form has flourished throughout the development of English literature, and in certain poets of the last century and a half—Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Gerard Manley Hopkins—the sonnet has acquired new forms and emphases. Suggestion: take a close look at the rare, and rarely used, *curtal* sonnet in the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins. What do you see as Sir Philip Sidney's primary contribution to this tradition?

2. Sir Philip Sidney was an astute literary critic, whose *An Apology for Poetry* was one of the principal Renaissance theoretical works on the nature of literature. You might want to look at that brilliant essay, which takes you, in the mode of Comparative Literature, back in thought to Aristotle, whose view of art as imitation is strong in Sidney, to Plato, whose view of ideal forms is dominant in Sidney, and forward to Shelley, the Romantic poet who most admired Sidney's inspired view of the poet.

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/sonnet-54/>

*"Who is it that this dark night
Underneath my window plaineth?"
'It is one who from thy sight
Being, ah! exiled, disdaineth
Every other vulgar light.'*

*"Why, alas! and are you he?
Be not yet those fancies changed?"
'Dear, when you find change in me,
Though from me you be estranged,
Let my change to ruin be.'*

*"Well, in absence this will die;
Leave to see, and leave to wonder."
'Absence sure will help, If I
Can learn how myself to sunder
From what in my heart doth lie.'*

*"But time will these thoughts remove:
Time doth work what no man knoweth."
'Time doth as the subject prove,
With time still the affection groweth
In the faithful turtle dove.'*

*"What if you new beauties see?
Will not they stir new affection?"
'I will think they pictures be,
Image-like of saint's perfection,
Poorly counterfeiting thee.'*

*"But your reason's purest light
Bids you leave such minds to nourish."
'Dear, do reason no such spite,—
Never doth thy beauty flourish
More than in my reason's sight.'*

*"But the wrongs love bears will make
Love at length leave undertaking."
'No, the more fools do it shake
In a ground of so firm making,*

Wyatt and Surrey

The lives of Wyatt and Surrey. Odd though it may seem, it is customary to link together these two gentleman poets, whose contributions to English literature are closely interinvolved. And it is of course relevant, as background to that state of affairs, to remark that both of these men were born into elite and noble society. Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) was born near Maidstone, in Kent. His father was a trusted privy councilor to King Henry VII; he was himself educated at St. John's College, Cambridge. In the course of his life he served the King as a diplomat in foreign affairs throughout Europe. Active and literate, he was familiar with Latin and especially with contemporary Italian literature—Boccaccio, Petrarch—and throughout his short life he wrote a considerable body of poems and sonnets, almost none of which was published until fifteen years after his death, in Tottel's *Miscellany* (1557). The same *Miscellany* brought to English Renaissance poetry the sonnets of Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey (1517-1547). Howard was a descendant of kingly lines from both his Mother and his Father. He was reared at Windsor Castle and for much of his own brief life he was in service as a soldier of the Queene, a role in which he distinguished himself for bravery and gallantry. Like Sir Thomas Wyatt, the Earl of Surrey was a serious and innovative writer, much influenced by the Italianate developments in poetry, and a great contributor to the growing power of British lyric poetry.

The Work of Wyatt and Surrey. There was little development of lyric poetry, or the sonnet, in pre-Renaissance England, and the broad development of these literary skills was largely inspired by the growing awareness of Italian culture, which, by the sixteenth century, had become a magnet and style center for the English upper classes and creative artists. The sonnet, as it had been brought to consummate form by Francesco Petrarca in the fourteenth century, was taken over into English at just the right time when the upper society in Britain was attuned to those attitudes, of the lover and beloved, which were centrally enshrined in England: the notion of the beloved as hard hearted, the lover as anxious and entreating, the world as a whole attuned to the pathos of courtly love. Into this mould of sentiments these two brilliant poets, Wyatt and Surrey, build the framework of the English sonnet, which was to depart from the Italianate outer form—*octave, sestet*, and, with a number of variations, to replace it with the formula of three quatrains and a closing couplet. This new form provided for a succinct closure, and an attractively tripartite incremental build-up of lover-expressed sentiments. (With three introductory quatrains there was room for an embedded dialogue between the lover-poet and his hard mistress.) The following sonnet conclusion, from the Earl of Surrey, illustrates the way the final couplet wraps up the final of the three quatrains of the Italianate sonnet:

*And coward Love then to the heart apace
Taketh his flight, where he doth lurk and plain
His purpose lost, and dare not show his face.
For my lord's guilt thus faultless bide I pain;
Yet from my lord shall not my foot remove:
Sweet is the death that taketh end by love.*

One also sees, in the partial sonnet above, the complex mixture of pain, shame, and persistence which marked the mindset of the sonnet lover.

Reading

Primary source reading

Selected Poems of the Earl of Surrey, ed. Keene, New York, 2003.

Secondary source reading

Thomson, Patricia, *Sir Thomas Wyatt and his Background*, London, 1964.

Further reading

Greenblatt, Stephen, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Chicago, 1980.

Suggested paper topics

1. The sonnet form, in the hands of Wyatt and Surrey, tends to develop formal attitudes between a lover and a beloved. How do you feel about the emotion in these sonnets? Is it artificial? Is it heartfelt but in the fashion of another time?
2. Look across the Channel at the contemporary work of the Meistersingers in Germany or the Pleiade poets in France. In all these traditions the love poem is central, and the presentation formal. Is the love in question, in these traditions, Romantic, or is it another kind of love from any we are familiar with today?

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/my-galley-charg-d-with-forgetfulness/>

*My galley chargèd with forgetfulness
Through sharp seas in winter nights doth pass
'Twene rock and rock; and eke mine enemy, alas,
That is my lord, steereth with cruelty.
And every oar a thought in readiness
As though that death were light in such a case;
An endless wind doth tear the sail apace
Of forcèd sighs and trusty fearfulness.
A rain of tears, a cloud of dark disdain
Hath done the wearied cords great hindrance,
Wreathèd with error and eke with ignorance.
The stars be hid that led me to this pain,
Drownèd is reason that should me comfort,
And I remain despairing of the port.*

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.*

John Donne

The Life of John Donne. John Donne (1572-1631) was a poet, satirist, lawyer, Anglican priest, and translator, whose influence on English poetry was immense. He was born into a devout recusant Catholic family at a time, in sixteenth century England, when prejudice, harassment, and religious hatred made any faith but that of the Church of England, the cornerstone of British national fervor, suspect and diabolical. (The rejection of Catholicism by Henry VIII, and various laws requiring attendance at Anglican services, had heralded a brutal repression of Catholic priests in England and Ireland.) Donne's father was warden of the Ironmongers Council of London—a prestigious post—and his mother was the daughter of the playwright John Heywood. (On both sides of the parental family stretched lateral branches of distinguished Catholics.) Donne was educated at Hart Hall, later Hertford College, Oxford, and then at Cambridge, but because of his Catholicism neither institution was able to grant him a degree. Consequently in 1592 he entered Lincoln's Inn, in the London Courts of Law, to study for a law degree. By this time, having taken advantage of his many influential connections, Donne was busied on a variety of diplomatic missions to Europe, as well, of course, as on the output of powerful and startling poems (often erotic or sharply satirical) which was to draw attention to him. (In 1602 Donne married Anne More, to whom he remained wedded for sixteen years, and with whom he had twelve children.) Having suffered the victim end of his faith, having seen relatives and close friends tortured for their Catholic beliefs, Donne turned to the Church of England in the 1590's, was ordained a priest of that Church in 1615. There, by stages, he rose to positions of high power, finally in 1621 assuming the prestigious position of Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral. In his priestly role Donne wrote fiery and brilliant sermons, much admired to this day for their theology and their prose style. He also, and foremost, continued to create the brilliant sonnets and songs which, already by the 1590's, were making him a central figure in London letters.

The work of John Donne. One of Donne's most famous poems runs thus:

*No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were:
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind,
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.*

This poem is Donne at his simplest—as he sometimes is in texts like his *Songs and Sonnets* (1633). And yet the very simplicity of the ruling metaphor, of geological interdependence, develops, on reflection, an increasingly rich relevance to the community of humans. Donne's sermons, of which he left eighty handwritten copy at his death, are similarly rich in the rhetorical power with they move against the hearer. In The 'Sermon of Valediction,' preached at Lincoln's Inn before his departure for Germany in 1619, he wrote the following demand to his audience.

No man would present a lame horse, a disordered clock, a torn book to the king. Thy body is thy beast, and wilt thou present that to god, when it is lamed and tired with excess of wantonness.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Love Poems of John Donne, Digireads.com, 2010.

Secondary source reading

Edwards, David L., *John Donne: Man of Flesh and Spirit*, London, 2001.

Further reading

Bald, R.C., *John Donne: A Life*, Oxford, 1970.

Suggested paper topics

1. 'The Canonization,' is one of Donne's richest poems. Is that poem both erotic and religious? In their love, the two lovers share a hermitage, in which they are enabled to give full growth to their love, and to become images for one another of the whole created world. Imitators of God—Cf. ll. 44-5—the lovers make themselves saintly, secular saintly, worthy of canonization. Donne's erotic poetry, which is passionate and spiritual at the same time, is forever blending the religious with the secular. Try out this notion on any of Donne's sonnets.
2. The fortunes of Donne's poetry are a thermometer for the emotional temper of subsequent English poetry. There was great respect for Donne in 18th century writers like Samuel Johnson and Ben Jonson, but by the 19th century, the moment of Romanticism—we will be there shortly, and your understanding of this point will be sharper—Donne was seen as a wit rather than a real poet. It was only in the 20th century, with the turning of the wheels of taste, that the poet T.S. Eliot (and others) drew new and enthusiastic attention to the achievement of the so called Metaphysicals—Donne and his contemporary lyricists—and privileged Donne as one of the greatest English language poets. Cf. T. S. Eliot's essay, 'The Metaphysical Poets,' 1921. How does Donne read for us today, in the early twenty first century?

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/confined-love/>

*Some man unworthy to be possessor
Of old or new love, himself being false or weak,
Thought his pain and shame would be lesser
If on womankind he might his anger wreak,
And thence a law did grow,
One might but one man know;
But are other creatures so?*

*Are Sun, Moon, or Stars by law forbidden
To smile where they list, or lend away their light?
Are birds divorced, or are they chidden
If they leave their mate, or lie abroad a-night?
Beasts do no jointures lose
Though they new lovers choose,
But we are made worse than those.*

*Who e'er rigged fair ship to lie in harbours
And not to seek new lands, or not to deal withal?
Or built fair houses, set trees, and arbors,
Only to lock up, or else to let them fall?
Good is not good unless
A thousand it possess,
But dost waste with greediness.*

Herbert, George

Life of George Herbert. George Herbert (1593-1633) was an English poet, orator, and Anglican priest, especially known as one of the most distinguished among the Metaphysical poets—that group comprising Donne, Herbert, and Marvell—who brought such fascinating new life to British poetry in the seventeenth century. (One need only go back to the poetries of Wyatt and Surrey or to Sir Philip Sidney, to recover the first timid efforts of British writers, drawing heavily from Italianate work, to formulate a courtly and emotive style for English poetry.) Herbert was born into a wealthy and artistic family. He was born in Powys, Wales, son of Richard Herbert, Lord of Cherbury, an outstanding English deist, and metaphysical thinker whose explorations of the nature of prayer remain guiding to our day. His mother was the daughter of Sir Richard Newport, and a friend of the poet John Donne. His father was a Member of Parliament and a keeper of the official roles of court, *custos rotulorum*. At the age of 12 George Herbert was sent to the Westminster School, and in 1609 he was admitted to Trinity College, Cambridge. At Trinity he excelled in languages—Greek and Latin especially—and in 1620 he became the University’s Public Orator, a position he held from 1620-1628. In his thirties, along with writing a large number of poems and tracts, he served several brief stints as Member of Parliament, then, no longer gratified by his prospects in politics, he took holy orders. Then in 1629 he entered the priesthood and took up a small and intimate country parish, where he remained, essentially, for the rest of his life.

The Work of George Herbert. When Samuel Johnson, a century and a half later, christened a group of early seventeenth century poets—Donne, Vaughan, Herbert—as ‘metaphysicals,’ he meant to praise with reservations, for like many of his own contemporaries Johnson found the work of these poets excessively witty and intricate, if at the same time innovative and decisive for the new developments of English poetry. It was commonly thought that in these poets the ‘itch of wit’ was too prominent, and it is easy to see why, during the Romantic Movement, such verbal art was rarely given its due. That ‘itch’ eventuated in artifices like punning titles of poems, the teasing of letters into special anagram shapes, as in the ‘Anagram of the Virgin Marie,’ or a variety of rhyming and echo effects within poems. (Though it was a point seldom argued by the authors in question, the purposes behind these devices were seldom trivial, and customarily built themselves forcefully into the points of the poems themselves.) The more pronounced of these efforts, to build the visual into the verbal, were the pattern poems, at which Herbert was a master: ‘the Altar’ mimes both the shape of the altar and the service upon it; ‘Easter Wings,’ with the poem printed out sideways so that the poem emulates the rising flight of winged being, is a stunningly successful example of wit in the service of faith. For the most part, though, Herbert’s poems in *The Temple* (1633) depend on less intense wit, and, as in the example of this collection, on the gradual build up, through the titles and themes of the poems, of the conceptual shapes that lead to the whole of the Christian temple. Lest wit turn into trick, Herbert is always there as the governing voice, intimately humble and looking for God’s grace.

Reading

Primary source reading

The English Poems of George Herbert, ed. Wilcox, Cambridge, 2007.

Secondary source reading

Fish, Stanley, *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing*, Berkeley, 1978.

Further reading

Hodgkins, Christopher, *Authority, Church and Society in George Herbert*, London, 1993.

Suggested paper topics

What do you think of the ‘visual poems’ of George Herbert? Are they tricks, or does the visual element contribute to the beauty and power of the poetry?

Does the term ‘metaphysical’ seem apt to describe the poetry of Herbert? Is there any philosophical validity to the term, in his case, or is ‘metaphysical’ here just a term of literary discourse?

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/discipline/>

*THROW away Thy rod,
Throw away Thy wrath;
O my God,
Take the gentle path!*

*For my heart's desire
Unto Thine is bent:
I aspire
To a full consent.*

*Not a word or look
I affect to own,
But by book,
And Thy Book alone.*

*Though I fail, I weep;
Though I halt in pace,
Yet I creep
To the throne of grace.*

*Then let wrath remove;
Love will do the deed;
For with love
Stony hearts will bleed.*

*Love is swift of foot;
Love 's a man of war,
And can shoot,
And can hit from far.*

*Who can 'scape his bow?
That which wrought on Thee,
Brought Thee low,
Needs must work on me.*

*Throw away Thy rod;
Though man frailties hath,..*

Marvell, Andrew

Andrew Marvell, the man. Andrew Marvell (1621-1670) was an English metaphysical poet, friend of John Milton, and Member of Parliament, whose enrichment of poetic skills left an indelible mark on the development of the nation's verse forms, and who has been vigorously rediscovered by poets in our century.

The Early Life of Andrew Marvell. Andrew Marvell was born at Winestead in Holderness, in the East Riding of Yorkshire, near the city of Kingston. His father was a clergyman. The family moved to Hull when Andrew's father was appointed lecturer at Holy Trinity Church in that city. Andrew was then educated first at Hull grammar school, and then at age thirteen he went off to Cambridge, to begin his studies at Trinity College. While at Trinity College Marvell pursued the study of languages—his friend John Milton later noted that Marvell was fluent in four languages other than English—and there he published (in Latin) his first poems; one on the birth of a child to King Charles I. From this point on we assume rightly that Marvell was a serious poet, writing regularly, though during his lifetime he was known almost only for his satirical prose.

Marvell in mid life. From 1642 on, that is to say essentially during the hot period of the English Civil War, which lasted until 1651, Marvell was basically living in Europe, traveling on various business and diplomatic assignments in the Netherlands, Spain, and Italy. As this was a period of great uncertainty for England, and the outcome of the Cromwellian Protectorate very hard to predict, Andrew Marvell was eager not to show his political position. In 1650 his Horatian ode laments the regicide, while lauding the return of Cromwell from Ireland. (It will be remembered that while at Cambridge, Marvell had written a Latin poem in praise of the royal child; he was careful to maintain good relations on all sides, and consequently survived the return of the Monarchy. His friend, John Milton, had been a strong antagonist of the monarchy, and only Marvell's intervention saved Milton from execution at the end of the Protectorate.) From 1650-52, once again in England, Marvell served as secretary to the prominent Lord Appleton, at whose country estate, Appleton House, Marvell wrote some of his finest poems, including 'To his coy mistress.' In 1653 Marvell joined John Milton—who had by this time fully lost his sight—as Latin Secretary to Cromwell's Council of State. In 1651, after the restoration of the monarchy, Marvell was elected Member of Parliament for Hull, and found himself so shocked, by the high level of political corruption on all sides, that he sharpened his pen to write some of his bitterest political satires.

The poetry of Andrew Marvell. Marvell's poetry is learned and complex, but perfectly tailored to the emotions expressed in it. Take the following eight lines of 'To his coy Mistress,' in which to this point the poet has been yielding to his mistress' dallying:

*But at my back I alwaies hear
Times winged Charriot hurrying near:
And yonder all before us lye
Desarts of vast Eternity.
Thy Beauty shall no more be found;
Nor, in thy marble Vault, shall sound
My ecchoing Song: then Worms shall try
That long preserv'd Virginity...*

The overriding sentiment, impatience to get down to love's business, could not be cloaked with more elegant desperation. One might test this kind of poetry against that of Wyatt and Surrey, who in their sonnets, as we have seen, adopt stock postures of the anxious lover faced with the cruel mistress. Marvell, with the skill of a Donne or Herbert, injects an immediacy, into the love situation, which brings the experience of literature newly close to life.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Complete Poems of Andrew Marvell, London, 1972. Penguin.

Secondary source reading

Chernaik, Walter, *The Poet's Time: Politics and Religion in the Work of Andrew Marvell*, Cambridge, 1983.

Further reading

Swift, Nigel, *Andrew Marvell: The Chameleon*, New Haven, 2010.

Suggested paper topics

1. As you see it, what is the relation between Marvell's lyric poetry and the tumultuous political events of his time? Does he subtly incorporate those events into his poetry? How? To what effect?
2. How do you explain the ups and downs of literary reputation, of writers like Marvell—and the other metaphysical poets? What explains such instability in literary tastes, from one century to another?

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/eyes-and-tears/>

*How wisely Nature did decree,
With the same Eyes to weep and see!
That, having view'd the object vain,
They might be ready to complain.*

*And since the Self-deluding Sight,
In a false Angle takes each hight;
These Tears which better measure all,
Like wat'ry Lines and Plummets fall.*

*Two Tears, which Sorrow long did weigh
Within the Scales of either Eye,
And then paid out in equal Poise,
Are the true price of all my Joyes.*

*What in the World most fair appears,
Yea even Laughter, turns to Tears:
And all the Jewels which we prize,
Melt in these Pendants of the Eyes.*

*I have through every Garden been,
Amongst the Red, the White, the Green;
And yet, from all the flow'rs I saw,
No Hony, but these Tears could draw.*

*So the all-seeing Sun each day
Distills the World with Chymick Ray;
But finds the Essence only Showers,
Which straight in pity back he powers.*

*Yet happy they whom Grief doth bless,
That weep the more, and see the less:
And, to preserve their Sight more true,
Bath still their Eyes in their own Dew.*

*So Magdalen, in Tears more wise
Dissolv'd those captivating Eyes,
Whose liquid Chains could flowing meet
To fetter her Redeemers feet.*

John Dryden

The Life of John Dryden. John Dryden (1631-1700) was born in the village of Aldwinckle, in Northamptonshire. He was the oldest of fourteen children, and was fortunate enough to have high bred ancestry. He was the paternal grandson of Sir Erasmus Dryden, and the second cousin of the prominent writer, Jonathan Swift. He was educated first at the local grammar school, then at Westminster School, whose headmaster he both feared and admired. (At Westminster Dryden profited from a rigorous classical education, and from insistent training in rhetoric. He was made into a seasoned debater, skilled at adopting a variety of views of any given topic. This skill was to play an important role in much of his later writing.) In 1650 Dryden graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge. The self-taught training in formal verse, social participation, and a brilliant ear for the cadences of English—added to the rhetorical skills from Westminster—all followed Dryden into a career of highly public literary prominence, which rendered him the most noted literary figure in England for the last forty years of the seventeenth century. He was a playwright, satirist, lyric and ode writer, translator, jack of all trades in language; and in addition aided, thanks to his favor and caution with the Cromwell Interregnum, by a series of governmental posts and commissions which he was able, again through cautious tiptoeing, to parlay into equally remunerative work upon the return of the Stuarts.

The Work of John Dryden. Dryden was a man of letters, active in many literary roles, in the new urban culture of London. That culture had grown, with the economic vitality of the Empire, into a cosmopolitan machinery, revolving around publications, fashionable author trends, and a vibrant coffee house culture in which the prominent artists and writers of the day participated. Within that social/cultural circuit Dryden became a figure of commanding importance. In 1662 he was appointed as a Fellow of the Royal Society—an honor he let slide by failure to pay his annual dues. In 1663 Dryden married, tying himself socially into the life of central London. By 1677 he was becoming a highly popular playwright: a sequence of popular dramas—*Marriage a la Mode* (1678) and *All for Love* (1678)—brought him widespread attention, as did an epic poem, in a stylized, sophisticated form, *Annus Mirabilis*, 1667, a tribute to London for its survival of the great fyre which had been so disastrous the year before, and a tribute to the restored monarchy. At the same time, for Dryden was a tireless and brilliant wordsmith, he was busy with his remunerative translations of Latin poetry. His translation of *The Works of Virgil*, 1697, was a major success, including, as it did, a preface in which Dryden hoped to link the glories of the Augustan imperium to those of the Stuart line—though history snatched this recipe away from Dryden, thanks to the banishment and exile of James I. To us, today, the most vivid of Dryden's achievements may be his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), in which a wide canvas of literary critical ideas is vigorously laid out—a work as energetic as Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poetry* a century earlier. In the course of the Essay four major literary critical perspectives are developed—a throwback, perhaps, to Dryden's educational experience at Westminster: there is an advocate of ancient literary values, another of modern values, another of French values, a fourth (Dryden's preference) of English values. The whole discussion is vigorous, if inconclusive, and opens a window onto the wide variety of meanings literature had for Dryden and his time.

Reading

Primary source reading

John Dryden: Selected Poems, ed. Hopkins, New York, 1998.

Secondary source reading

Winn, James Anderson, *John Dryden and his World*, New Haven, 1987.

Further reading

Hopkins, David, *John Dryden*, Cambridge, 1986.

Suggested paper topics

1. Dryden was a much published translator of Latin literature, in an age when such work could be remunerative and of intense public interest. (The Renaissance marked a renewal of interest in Greek and Latin literatures, especially in their original forms. By Dryden's time, the ability to read these languages had started to decline, but, like most of his educated contemporaries, Dryden was intensely trained, from childhood on, in Latin and some Greek.) To widen your sense of this classical tradition, and the waves of change that have stirred it during our modern centuries, take a

look at Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition* (Oxford, 1985). You will see that the Renaissance fervor for the Classics has persisted through many ups and downs of taste.

2. Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* may well attract your interest, for its creative role in the development of English literary awareness. Dryden was deeply aware of the classical tradition of criticism, and especially of the role of the Elizabethan period in fortifying the English sense of its own literary values. Long after his time, Dryden's *Essay* remained a standard setter for writing in English. Suggestion: take a look at Rene Wellek, *History of Literary Criticism*, a massive context setter for the whole western enterprise of literary critical awareness. What do you see as Dryden's distinctive addition to the development of critical theory?

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/can-life-be-a-blessing/>

*Can life be a blessing,
Or worth the possessing,
Can life be a blessing if love were away?
Ah no! though our love all night keep us waking,
And though he torment us with cares all the day,
Yet he sweetens, he sweetens our pains in the taking,
There's an hour at the last, there's an hour to repay.*

*In ev'ry possessing,
The ravishing blessing,
In ev'ry possessing the fruit of our pain,
Poor lovers forget long ages of anguish,
Whate'er they have suffer'd and done to obtain;
'Tis a pleasure, a pleasure to sigh and to languish,
When we hope, when we hope to be happy again.*

Browne, Sir Thomas

The Life of Sir Thomas Browne. Sir Thomas Browne (1605-1682) was an English prose stylist, antiquarian, archeologist, and religious speculator, who is widely considered one of the greatest stylists of the English language. He was the son of a silk merchant, who was active at Upton, Cheshire, and was born in St. Michael, Cheapside, London. Thomas was sent to school at Winchester College, then matriculated to Pembroke College, Oxford, where he was graduated in 1623. From Oxford, Browne moved to medical studies in Europe, where, as was the fashion of the time, he moved among several universities: attending the Universities of Montpellier and Padua, then receiving his official medical degrees both from Leiden (1633) and from the University of Oxford. The remainder of his life was passed, for the most part, in Norwich, where from 1637-1682 he practiced medicine. Apart from his medical practice and his writings, which were voluminous, we know rather little about him from those years. It is clear that he remained a supporter of the monarchy, throughout these turbulent interregnum years. During the Civil War he supported Charles I, and from Charles II he received his knighthood.

The work of Sir Thomas Browne. The writings of Sir Thomas Browne are long, elegant, digressive, and learned, and yet they tend toward a consistent series of themes, and attitudes to life, which give them coherence. Those attitudes are marked by great openness and curiosity about other peoples, cultures, and religious perspectives, a tolerance unusual for the bigoted times Browne lived, and an endless curiosity about ancient cultures and their religious and funerary practices. His first published work was *Religio Medici*, a broad survey of his views on life and death, religion and some of its ancient solace, which was offered to the public without Browne's authorization, in 1642, and in a form which was discomfiting to Browne—a rather dangerous mix of religious openness, friendliness to Catholicism, and a lot of Baconian scepticism. In 1645 this book was put on the index for its relaxed attitude to Protestant doctrinal issues, and Browne made some effort to modify his positions. But this vigorous creator was not long to be subdued, and with great stylistic verve—he is said to have contributed more than one hundred eighty new words to the vocabulary of English—he advanced into new lengthy texts in which he developed a wide range of religious anthropological views on the world as known in his time.

Urne Burial. In 1658 he published *Hydrotaphia, Urne Burial*, which was concerned with various religious practices from the ancient and archaic worlds. (This work was occasioned by various Bronze Age burials from the area of Norfolk, all of which led Browne to reflections on funerary practice.) *The Garden of Cyrus*, also published in 1658, continues Browne's sets of reflections on death, decay, transmigration and the next world. Interestingly enough he retains his Christianity throughout all these investigations. 'Pyramids, Arches, Obelisks were but the irregularities of vainglory, and wild enormities of ancient vainglory...the most magnanimous resolution lies in Christian Religion, which trampleth upon pride, and sits on the neck of ambition, humbly pursuing that infallible perpetuity, unto which all others must diminish their diameters...' It remains only to add, in his quick survey of a perplexingly rich tribute to Christian orthodoxy, that Browne was a devout believer in witchcraft and the occult, as well the Platonic quincunx; secret and cultish paths to salvation.

Reading

Primary source reading

Religio Medici, Sir Thomas Browne, Cambridge, 2008. Digitized reprint.

Secondary source reading

Bennett, Joan, *Sir Thomas Browne*, Cambridge, 1962.

Further reading

Huntley, Frank Livingstone, *Sir Thomas Browne: A Biographical and Critical Study*, Ann Arbor, 1962.

Suggested paper topics

1. Does Sir Thomas Browne seem to you foremost a medical mind, or does medicine concern him simply as a byproduct of anthropological investigation? Is his kind of entry point into medical issues a valuable launching stage in the development of experiment based medical practice?
2. Browne was a believer in 'witchcraft,' who had no doubt of the efficacy of such practices and their harmful effect on good society. Does that belief seem to you consistent with his kind of curiosity about ancient religious

cultures and their peculiarities?

Excerpt <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/586/pg586.html>

SECT. 1.—For my religion, though there be several circumstances that might persuade the world I have none at all,—as the general scandal of my profession,—the natural course of my studies,—the in-differency of my behaviour and discourse in matters of religion (neither violently defending one, nor with that common ardour and contention opposing another),— yet, in despite hereof, I dare without usurpation assume the honourable style of a Christian. Not that I merely owe this title to the font, my education, or the clime wherein I was born, as being bred up either to confirm those principles my parents instilled into my understanding, or by a general consent proceed in the religion of my country; but having, in my riper years and confirmed judgment, seen and examined all, I find myself obliged, by the principles of grace, and the law of mine own reason, to embrace no other name but this. Neither doth herein my zeal so far make me forget the general charity I owe unto humanity, as rather to hate than pity Turks, Infidels, and (what is worse) Jews; rather contenting myself to enjoy that happy style, than maligning those who refuse so glorious a title.

2.—But, because the name of a Christian is become too general to express our faith,—there being a geography of religion as well as lands, and every clime distinguished not only by their laws and limits, but circumscribed by their doctrines and rules of faith,—to be particular, I am of that reformed new-cast religion, wherein I dislike nothing but the name; of the same belief our Saviour taught, the apostles disseminated, the fathers authorized, and the martyrs confirmed; but, by the sinister ends of princes, the ambition and avarice of prelates, and the fatal corruption of times, so decayed, impaired, and fallen from its native beauty, that it required the careful and charitable hands of these times to restore it to its primitive integrity. Now, the accidental occasion whereupon, the slender means whereby, the low and abject condition of the person by whom, so good a work was set on foot, which in our adversaries beget contempt and scorn, fills me with wonder...

John Bunyan

The Early Life of John Bunyan. John Bunyan (1628- 1688) was born in Elstow, a small hamlet in Bedfordshire, the local environment of which was to play an important role in his later writing. He was the son of Thomas and Margaret Bunyan, the Bunyans being widespread in the area, and arguably descendants of Anglo-Norman French settlers. John Bunyan's grandfather was a juror, a sign of his belonging to the land, and his father was a chapman—that is a dealer or trader—or brazier. (These were essential and honorable trades in the area, but were not easy to parlay into higher commerce.) John was probably schooled in house, and not much past the reading and writing elements. It was John's choice to be a tinker, a mender of tinware and pots, which in the absence of new commodities were mended over and over.

John Bunyan and his Career Life. Bunyan was born into a sharply Dissenting family, and at a time when the struggles between Cromwell and his anti-monarchists were fighting it out for national dominance. Bunyan was called up for conscription in the Parliamentary army (1644-47), and served for three years, during which time he inevitably partook in manly pastimes like cursing, drinking, and who knows what—for all of which Bunyan was not much later to find himself tortured with guilt. (He was in fact to refer, later, to the three moral outrages he had committed during this period: profanity, dancing, and bell-ringing.) It was about this time that Bunyan began to hear voices, condemning him for his sinful past. After the Restoration of Charles II, a new law was passed, prohibiting private preaching, especially by Dissenters; this law, however, had no effect on John Bunyan, who by this time had become a much listened to preacher, at least in his area of Bedfordshire. In 1660 Bunyan was arrested for preaching in contravention of this law, and jailed for three months, then jailed a second time, upon repeated offense, for a period of six years. It was during this time that he conceived the plan for the most realized of the more than sixty titles he completed (most of them expanded sermons) during his lifetime.

The Work of John Bunyan. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1680 and later) is a Christian allegory of the path to Heaven. Though written by an author with limited book learning—although with a very thorough knowledge of Scripture—and with a religious, not literary, mind, *Pilgrim's Progress* has proved to be one of the most widely read books in English. (The eminent historian Macaulay claimed that the only two Englishmen of surpassing imaginative power, in the seventeenth century, were Milton and Bunyan.) The story is simple, but labyrinthine—as is the passage from ground zero of life, through sinfulness, to ultimate grace. Christian, the hero, must find his way from the City of Destruction, our present location, to the Celestial City, but there are many obstacles in his way. He heads toward a shining light, which he has been told to watch for. As he proceeds, his way is blocked by Obstinate and Pliable, who have nothing to contribute to his progress. He falls into the Slough of Despond, nearly drowning in muck. Pilgrim is pulled out of the muck by Health, but then is once again led astray by Mr. Worldly Wise, who represents the law. The straight and narrow path, seemingly so easy to observe, turns out to be fraught with obstacles, though ultimately attainable.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Pilgrim's Progress, John Bunyan, ed. Owen, New York, 2009.

Secondary source reading

Colmer, Robert, *Bunyan in our Time*, Columbus, Ohio, 1990.

Further reading

Newey, Vincent, ed. *'Pilgrim's Progress': Critical and Historical Views*: Liverpool, 1980.

Suggested paper topics

1. It has been estimated that, second to the Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress* is the most widely disseminated and read text in English literature. (Can that conjecture be confirmed?) Can you see why that would be true? What is the extraordinary draw of Bunyan's epic?
2. Religious allegory has figured prominently in English poetry. Compare Bunyan's use of such allegory with that of *Piers Plowman* from the mediaeval period. Do you see a difference between the allegory of Langland and Bunyan, that corresponds to the difference in cultural environments they lived in?

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/meditations-upon-a-candle/>

*Man's like a candle in a candlestick,
Made up of tallow and a little wick;
And as the candle when it is not lighted,
So is he who is in his sins benighted.
Nor can a man his soul with grace inspire,
More than can candles set themselves on fire.
Candles receive their light from what they are not;
Men grace from Him for whom at first they care not.
We manage candles when they take the fire;
God men, when he with grace doth them inspire.
And biggest candles give the better light,
As grace on biggest sinners shines most bright.
The candle shines to make another see,
A saint unto his neighbour light should be.
The blinking candle we do much despise,
Saints dim of light are high in no man's eyes.
Again, though it may seem to some a riddle,
We use to light our candles at the middle.
True light doth at the candle's end appear,
And grace the heart first reaches by the ear.
But 'tis the wick the fire doth kindle on,
As 'tis the heart that grace first works upon.
Thus both do fasten upon what's the main,
And so their life and vigour do maintain.
The tallow makes the wick yield to the fire,
And sinful flesh doth make the soul desire
That grace may kindle on it, in it burn;
So evil makes the soul from evil turn.
But candles in the wind are apt to flare,
And Christians, in a tempest, to despair.
The flame also with smoke attended is,
And in our holy lives there's much amiss.
Sometimes a thief will candle-light annoy,
And lusts do seek our graces to destroy.*

John Milton

The Significance of John Milton. John Milton (1608-1674) was an English poet, pamphleteer, political activist, and moral philosopher. He remains best known for his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, but he created a number of prose and verse works which have remained influential. He is widely considered one of the greatest of writers of English.

The Life of John Milton. John Milton was born on Bread Street, London. He was the son of the composer John Milton, who made a great impression on the young John, with his music and his musical friends. His mother was Sarah Jeffrey. Milton's father had moved to London in 1583, after being disinherited by his devoutly Catholic father. As a young man John was tutored by a well educated Scotsman, Thomas Young, who is credited with having fueled John's ready inclination to independence and freedom of thought. John was sent for schooling to St. Paul's, the church school of St. Paul's Cathedral. There he received an intense classical education. (The exercises imposed by the masters at Paul's were exemplary: passages to translate from Latin into Greek and then back again, with emphasis on retaining the same words and verse structure in the Latin that returned from the Greek.) In 1629 John Milton entered Christ's College, Cambridge, where he was immersed in humanistic studies, and outstanding friends, like Edward King, to whom he was later to dedicate the wonderful elegy, *Lycidas*, and Roger Williams, the Anglo American religious reformer. We can note, as an indication of the creative/scholarly level, of the young Milton, that while at Cambridge he created his own brilliant set pieces, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, studies of the idealized happy and gloomy personality types. After leaving, Milton set out on a tour of Europe, where his open personality and extraordinary learning recommended him to many of the most distinguished circles. (Among many other luminaries he met Galileo, who was under house arrest.) Upon returning from the Continent Milton found himself in an England that was consumed with civil conflict and a period of outright Civil War (1642-1651), which yielded the Commonwealth government that was until 1660 the working space of the interregnum ruler, Oliver Cromwell. Milton himself, as he had made clear long before, had strong anti-monarchical sentiments, and found himself playing an important role as Latin Secretary to Oliver Cromwell; a position to which he was appointed in 1649. His later years were shadowed by the complete blindness to which he fell victim, yet in those later years, after having escaped the punishment of execution, for his participation in the Protectorate, he created his greatest literary work.

The work of John Milton. John Milton, as we have noted, was brilliantly creative as early as his University days, when he wrote *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. When we look at his seminal works—*Areopagitica* (1644), *Paradise Lost* (1667) and *Samson Agonistes* (1671)—we are startled by the consistent emphasis on the importance of freedom, independent thought, and almost Christ-like endurance of sufferings, in the interest of the good. In *Paradise Lost*, his most ambitious work, a complex drama--Fall, diabolical undermining of man, raging battles between Heaven and Hell, mankind's loss of direction in the cosmos—is played out in almost faultless iambic pentameter, which is the perfect dignified vehicle for the highest possible poetic theme. In *Samson* Milton transfers his own struggle for greatness and purity to a sightless man of power and integrity, in whom we can see Milton fighting for his own soul.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton, ed. Kerrigan, New York, 2007.

Secondary source reading

Bennett, Joan, *Reviving Liberty: Radical Christian Humanism in Milton's Great Poems*, Cambridge, 1989.

Further reading

Milner, Andrew, *John Milton and the English Revolution*, London, 1981.

Suggested paper topics

1. John Milton and John Bunyan are near contemporaries, and lived through the same social and political turmoil that defined seventeenth century England. Did the two poets have similar attitudes toward the political environment they lived? Explain.
2. How does John Milton conceive of Satan? Does he manage to make Satan hateful, or is Satan too interesting to be put in that category? What does Milton do to give personality to Adam? Is Adam as interesting as Satan in

Paradise Lost?

Excerpt <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/20/pg20.html>

*Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal tast
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of EDEN, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
Of OREB, or of SINAI, didst inspire
That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,
In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth
Rose out of CHAOS: Or if SION Hill
Delight thee more, and SILOA'S Brook that flow'd
Fast by the Oracle of God; I thence
Invoke thy aid to my adventurous Song,
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above th' AONIAN Mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime.
And chiefly Thou O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all Temples th' upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for Thou know'st; Thou from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss
And mad'st it pregnant: What in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support;
That to the highth of this great Argument
I may assert th' Eternal Providence,
And justifie the wayes of God to men.*

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?

Alexander Pope

The Life of Alexander Pope. Alexander Pope (1688-1744) was born to Catholic parents. His father was a linen merchant, working at Plough Court in Lombard Street, London. He was taught reading by his Aunt, but for the most part he had no formal elementary education. As a Catholic, Alexander Pope was unable to go to University, vote, or hold public office. The recently passed Test Act had increased the severity of anti-Catholic legislation in England, and anti-Catholic sentiment was common among the British population. Catholics were not permitted to live less than ten miles from London, so that their integration into the advantages of urban life was difficult. To all of which, in the way of disadvantages, should be added that Pope suffered all his life from bad health: his lifelong plague was Potts disease, tuberculosis of the spine, which left him hunchbacked, four feet six inches tall, and prey to all kinds of difficulties of gait and self-image.) He was sent to Twyford School for a few years (1698-99), but beyond that his possibilities were severely limited. Through his own energy, and avidity at reading, Pope educated himself voraciously in languages—becoming highly proficient in Classics and reading in all the Latin classics as well as the classics of English literature—and despite obstacles rapidly made contacts with some of the leading figures in London cultural life—for instance the playwrights Congreve and Wycherley. Before long Pope made his way to the heights of London literary life. He was above all a frequenter of those coffee-houses which were springing up everywhere in London. (Literary talk was to flourish in those locales, as it was to do throughout the 18th century, in part replacing the salons of aristocrats, where in earlier centuries the ruling intellectuals met. The tastes of the moment changed, as did the composition of literary groups, but Pope remained for decades a leader of London cultural life—in a way worthily succeeding Dryden, who had been such an eminence a half century earlier.) In his later years, Pope retired to his country house at Twickenham, where he had constructed a charming grotto, a floral nucleus of work and social interaction which was the delight of his life.

The Work of Alexander Pope. Pope's *Pastorals*, 1709, his first published poetry, brought him success, and from that time on his dexterity with the heroic couplet, his unusual wit, and his stimulating world-view enabled him rapidly to surmount the various obstacles, mentioned above, which surrounded the development of his life. As a social intellectual, one of the founders of the Scribblers Club, he was a prominent London figure. A variety of attention grabbing texts—*The Essay on Criticism* (1711), '*The Rape of the Lock*' (1712), the translation of Homer's *Iliad*, *The Essay on Man* (1734)—placed Pope at the center of his culture, establishing him as a fervent (and very conservative) social critic, as a dominant literary critic, and as a social satirist (say in '*The Rape of the Lock*'), unmatched in his time. Perhaps the most remarkable of his achievements was the rendering of Homer's dactylic hexameters into heroic couplets. Pope's translation of the *Iliad*, while transposing the brilliance of one early culture into his own urban modernity, succeeded in a miraculous transformation, and proved out the popularity of Homer. Behind Pope's technical genius lay his deep sense of the universal in mankind's cultural adventure, and his desire to render 'what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed.'

Reading

Primary source reading

The Poems of Alexander Pope, ed. Butt, Abingdon, 1966; newly digitized, 2005.

Secondary source reading

Mack, Maynard, *Pope: A Life*, New Haven, 1985.

Further reading

Thomas, Claudia, *Alexander Pope and Eighteenth-Century Women Readers*, Carbondale, 1994.

Suggested paper topics

1. Scholarship on the British eighteenth century abounds. I recommend a look at Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background* (1940), for a well written general study of the cultural climate of 18th century English literature. You will see how Pope's view of nature—and that of his contemporaries—was tinted by both contemporary developments in natural science and by the view that the culture held of 'science,' and of the workings of nature. You can supplement Willey with the classic *The Great Chain of Being* (1936) by A.O. Lovejoy, a history of the idea—intimately congenial to Pope—that all of God's creations were perfectly sorted out by him, and exist as a descending chain of being from him.

2. We know the basic outlines of eighteenth century rational humanism, the Enlightenment perspective announcing itself in the work of Dryden and Swift. (In 18th century England, as throughout Europe, there was to be an explosion of empirical science; building on the theoretical insights of the previous century, in Newton and Descartes.) The heart of that perspective was faith in man, and in the orderliness of the reasonable universe that frames man. *How does Pope's poetry exemplify that perspective?* In the *Essay on Man*, Pope sums it up—and notice his genius at summarizing the human condition—by announcing that ‘whatever is is right.’ In his *Essay on Criticism*, Pope recurs to Nature as the model for art, and when it comes to details he turns to the art of the Greeks as the model form of nature, ‘nature methodized.’ The ‘natural,’ in this sense, is man ‘s artistic foundation. Whatever is natural is right. This too is the Enlightenment perspective. And *The Rape of the Lock*? How is this elegant poem part of the Enlightenment project? One way of looking at the poem is as a cry of support for women’s dignity and private space. Another is, as a satire on the least natural aspect of human affairs, the hypertrophy of elegance in social behavior.

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/sound-and-sense/>

*True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.
'Tis not enough no harshness gives offense,
The sound must seem an echo to the sense:
Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;
But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,
The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar;
When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
The line too labors, and the words move slow;
Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain,
Flies o'er the unbending corn, and skims along the main.
Hear how Timotheus' varied lays surprise,
And bid alternate passions fall and rise!*

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?

William Wordsworth

The significance of William Wordsworth. William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was an English poet and critic, who was instrumental in creating the Romantic movement in poetry and criticism. His *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, and the long poem, *The Prelude*, opened totally new vistas to the western poetic tradition.

The Earlier Life of William Wordsworth. William Wordsworth was shaped by the Wye Valley and the Lake District of Northwest England; in the village of Cockermouth, in today's Cumbria. There he grew up freely in a classically beautiful landscape, the second of five children, comfortable enough in his family life; his father had a large mansion in the small town where the children were born, and worked as the legal representative of the First Earl of Lonsdale. While William's relation to his father was not close, his father nonetheless imposed on his son a thorough regime of poetry memorization; Shakespeare, Milton, and Spenser. William went briefly to the local Hawkshead Grammar School in Lancashire, then was sent to Penrith School, and in 1787 enrolled in St. John's College, Cambridge.

Wordsworth in Mid Life. After University, in 1790, Wordsworth set off on a walking tour through Europe. His constant companions, at this time, were his sister Dorothy, and for a long time, during his most creative period, his fellow collaborator Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He also fell in love, while walking in France; in love both with the growing spirit of the French Revolution, for which Wordsworth became a powerful advocate, and with a French woman, with whom he had a child, and whom he supported—despite the fact that the two never married. While he was in early life a passionate supporter of the French Revolution, like the fiery Mary Wollstonecraft, and while he was close to France for romantic and cultural reasons, Wordsworth grew more nearly mainline and conventional of philosophy, as he aged. In 1798, he began to move into his full creative powers. In that year he (with his friend Coleridge) created the *Preface to The Lyrical Ballads*, and in the same year Wordsworth began writing *The Prelude*, his life's greatest work, and one on which he would remain busy until his death.

The Work of William Wordsworth. In the renowned *Preface to The Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth makes clear that he wants to break with the formal language and formal metrical conventions of the poetic tradition, and address commonplace daily life through language appropriate to it, rather than through the kinds of language, say, we encounter in Pope and Dryden. He puts it this way, in describing the nature of poetry: 'all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings...' and thereby he makes clear that true poetry will create its own formal conditions.

*A pleasant loitering journey, through three days
Continued, brought me to my hermitage.
I spare to tell of what ensued, the life
In common things--the endless store of things,
Rare, or at least so seeming, every day*

Found all about me in one neighbourhood--

In these characteristic lines from *The Prelude* Wordsworth introduces the kind of modest, but meditatively fertile setting from which he lets his poetry rise. 'The life in common things,' deeply experienced as part of his own spiritual journey, is itself as rich as the subtlest classical mythology. The limber and conversational iambic lines, in which Wordsworth inscribes his testimony to 'the life in common things,' build a consistent pattern, but do so with the flexibility of 'the speech of common men.' Of such modest care is poetic revolution made.

Reading

Primary source reading

William Wordsworth: The Major Works, ed. Gill, Oxford, 2008.

Secondary source reading

Baron, Michael, *Language and Relationship in Wordsworth's Writing*, London, 1995.

Further reading

Gill, Stephen, *William Wordsworth: A Life*, Oxford, 1989.

Suggested paper topics

1. When *The Lyrical Ballads* was published, in 1800, the seemingly extreme simplicity of these poems appeared silly, unworthy of the great traditions of poetry. The fact is that Wordsworth and Coleridge were both in rebellion against the concept of the poem in the 18th century and earlier. (Think back to Dryden and Pope, for examples of that earlier poetry at its best. It is full of poetic diction, personified virtues with capital letters, a vocabulary level which belongs to educated speech, instead of to the voices of common people, as Wordsworth understood it.) In the end which tradition prevailed, that of Wordsworth or that of Pope?

2. Wordsworth's place in the shaping of literary history is decisive. His views of the common voice, of the power of imagination, of the omnipotence of memory, of the impending threats of industrialism and vulgarity, all fall into line with perceptions and cultural developments which dominate Wordsworth's own time. From the Napoleonic Wars, to the French Revolution, to the mid-19th century growth of the middle class in Europe: all these events coincide with the powerful growth of Wordsworth's sensibility. I suggest you take a look at Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (1944), for a broad survey of the cultural landscape in which Wordsworth lived. Geoffrey Hartman's *Wordsworth's Poetry* (1964) is a guide to the simple mysteries of Wordsworth's early lyrics. Devote some thought and writing to the relation of Wordsworth the poet to Wordsworth as political consciousness.

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/a-complaint/>

*There is a change--and I am poor;
Your love hath been, nor long ago,
A fountain at my fond heart's door,
Whose only business was to flow;
And flow it did; not taking heed
Of its own bounty, or my need.*

*What happy moments did I count!
Blest was I then all bliss above!
Now, for that consecrated fount
Of murmuring, sparkling, living love,
What have I? Shall I dare to tell?
A comfortless and hidden well.*

*A well of love--it may be deep--
I trust it is,--and never dry:
What matter? If the waters sleep
In silence and obscurity.
--Such change, and at the very door
Of my fond heart, hath made me poor.*

John Keats

The Significance of John Keats. John Keats (1795-1821), though only partially appreciated during his short life, was by the end of the nineteenth century viewed as one of the greatest English poets, especially wondrous for his sonnets and odes, and for the critical thinking he revealed in his Letters. The English Romantic poets seldom lived long, and Keats led them all in early death, at age 26. It is a widely held belief that had Keats lived a full life he would have excelled such as Chaucer and Shakespeare in achievement. Yet rather than mourn we may better suppose that the brevity of this life was the price of Keats' distinctive brilliance, intermixed as it is with the premonition of death.

The Life of John Keats. Keats was born in London, Moorgate, the eldest of four surviving children. His father was an ostler in the stables of the Swan and Hoop Inn, which he later managed. Keats was baptized at St. Botolph-without-Bishopsgate, then sent to the local 'dame's school.' In 1803—his parents lacked the funds to send John to Harrow or Oxford—Keats was sent to John Clarke's School in Enfield, where he developed his rapidly growing interest in history and classics—his attention being particularly drawn to the readings of Torquato Tasso and Spenser, and to the renowned Chapman translations of Homer. In 1804, Keats' father died of a skull fracture, after a horseback voyage to visit two of his sons at school. This tragedy left Keats in a precarious financial and personal situation, which was rendered worse by the death of Keats' mother a few years later. Accordingly Keats recognized the importance of gaining a regular income, and went into training as an apothecary-surgeon. Keats exercised his medical career for a brief period, then found his way into a lively circuit of London poets and before long had decided to devote himself to poetry. His own brilliant activity as a poet was frenetic, dominated by his premonition of death, and in fact fate proved him right, for in 1820 he began to cough up blood, a result of tuberculosis, and a year later he was dead. He had been a known and published poet only during the last four years of his life.

The Work of John Keats. Keats was a brilliant master of the verse forms of the Ode and Sonnet, and works of his like his 'Ode to the West Wind,' 'Ode to a Nightingale,' 'The Eve of St. Agnes,' 'Endymion,' 'Ode to a Grecian Urn' have taken their places among the most effective, formal and passionate both, works of English poetry. Keats' brilliance is equally stunning in his letters, among which the most noteworthy is that in which he describes the nature of the poet:

A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity – he is continually in for – and filling some other Body – The Sun, the Moon, the Sea-- and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute – the poet has none; no identity – he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures.

The creative power Keats attributes to the poet is 'negative capability,' which, paradoxically, is the condition in which the poet finds his way to the inside of everything in the world.

Reading

Primary source reading

John Keats: *The Complete Poems*, ed. Barnard, 1988.

Secondary source reading

Roe, Nicholas, ed., *Keats and History*, Cambridge, 1995).

Further reading

Gittings, Robert, *John Keats*, London, 1968.

Suggested paper topics

1. Keats' *aesthetic perspective* is uniquely pervasive, and finds exquisite expression in his work. It is not that Keats is arty, or superficially caught up in the details of beautiful things, but that he finds truth, as he said, in beauty. That is not all he finds in beauty, either, for in the evanescent, shimmering will o the wisp of the aesthetic he finds his own deepest human environment, the proximity of sleep, narcosis, and that kind of loveable death toward which the Nightingale draws him. Discuss this aesthetic perspective more fully, and relate it to later theories of the meaningfulness of beauty.

2. How is literature related to music? You might want to compare Keats to other poets whose work seems to border on the musical. (I think of Whitman in America, Paul Verlaine in France, Heine in Germany; you can supply other and better examples.) Does pure sound have significance by itself, in poetry, or must sound be allied to meaning in order to constitute poetry? You might apply this subtle question to a poem like the 'Ode to a Nightingale,' which is about the music of the bird's call, as it ultimately narcotizes rational (or perhaps any) meaning. Keats is forever working the borders between music, as topic and as part *of* his poetry, and music as thematic material *in* his poetry.

Excerpt

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/a-complaint/>

*Pensive they sit, and roll their languid eyes,
Nibble their toast, and cool their tea with sighs,
Or else forget the purpose of the night,
Forget their tea -- forget their appetite.
See with cross'd arms they sit -- ah! happy crew,
The fire is going out and no one rings
For coals, and therefore no coals Betty brings.
A fly is in the milk-pot -- must he die
By a humane society?
No, no; there Mr. Werter takes his spoon,
Inserts it, dips the handle, and lo! soon
The little straggler, sav'd from perils dark,
Across the teaboard draws a long wet mark.
Arise! take snuffers by the handle,
There's a large cauliflower in each candle.
A winding-sheet, ah me! I must away
To No. 7, just beyond the circus gay.
'Alas, my friend! your coat sits very well;
Where may your tailor live?' 'I may not tell.
O pardon me -- I'm absent now and then.
Where might my tailor live? I say again
I cannot tell, let me no more be teaz'd --
He lives in Wapping, might live where he pleas'd.'*

Gerard Manley Hopkins

The Life of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1899) was born in Stratford, Essex. He was the first of nine children. His father was the founder of a marine insurance firm, and had earlier served as British Vice-Consul in Hawaii, while later he worked as a Church Warden. (Hopkins' grandfather was a physician, and friend of John Keats.) That is, however, to say far too little about the remarkable family from which young Hopkins emerged. Hopkins' father was a poet and novelist, while Hopkins' siblings were distinguished as writers, musicians, poets, and scholars. (It should be added that his parents were ardent High Anglican members of the Church of England, and thus would be deeply disapproving when their son took his eventual path to Rome.) Stimulated by these surrounding skills, Hopkins himself became a very proficient draughtsman. His natural talents were enhanced by a fine education. At ten the family moved to Hampstead Heath, not far from where John Keats had lived; and in the same year Gerard Manley entered the distinguished Highgate School, where he was to remain for almost ten years (1854-63). From 1863-67 Hopkins studied at Balliol College Oxford, where he absorbed the world of great intellectual figures. Matthew Arnold, poet and humanist, was among the great figures, but the particular inspirations for Hopkins were two: Walter Pater, essayist and aesthete, a thinker for whom the artistic was always close to the moral; John Henry Newman, whose conversion to Roman Catholicism had much to do with Hopkins' own similar move. (Hopkins entered the Catholic Church in 1866, and ultimately joined the Society of Jesuits in 1868, and became a Jesuit priest.) In 1884 Hopkins was appointed Professor of Classics at University College in Dublin, Ireland, and there completed his professional work life, excelling as a classical scholar, as well as a poet. Or rather, to put it more carefully, perfecting a rare poetic talent, but in the end suppressing it, lest it conflict with the submissiveness required of his Jesuit asceticism.

The Work of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Hopkins was brought up in an intensely artistic and urbane family, and wrote poetry early in life, but upon deciding to join the Jesuit Order he burned most of his earlier work. It was not until he was a member of the order that he followed his Superior's suggestion, to write a long poem about the wreck of a German ship in the River Thames, and the subsequent drowning of many, including five Franciscan nuns. The poem that emerged from this request, in 1875, was 'The Wreck of the Deutschland,' and it heralded Hopkins' entry into his most mature writing phase. He was closing in on his mature style, which was strongly shaped by his reading and learning in Old English and Old Welsh poetries. The new prosody he forged, using poetic units of a widely varying number of syllables, can be read off a good hearing of the following master lyric, 'God's Grandeur':

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge & shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.*

Reading

Primary source reading

Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Digireads, 2010.

Secondary source reading

Martin, Robert Barnard, *Gerard Manley Hopkins—A Very Private Life*, New York, 1992.

Further reading

White, Norman, *Hopkins—A Literary Biography*, Oxford, 1992.

Suggested paper topics

1. You will have noticed that Hopkins—with his sprung rhythm and inscape and instress theories—puts heavy stress on the manipulation of the oral/sensuous presentational side of poetry. (In his youth, Hopkins wrote in the vein of Keats, and you can see the aestheticism of, say, *Sleep and Poetry*, in Hopkins.) In addition Hopkins viewed the instress of inscape as a form of address to the created identity of the object of the poem, and thus a fairly direct

access to Christ, the emblem and Lord of the created world for Hopkins. If you follow this issue of confrontation with Christ through its embodiment in a poem you will come on the source of conflict, for Hopkins, between his religious vocation and his artistic creativity. Inside himself he doubted that he should substitute an artistic simulation of the Christ encounter for the direct encounter in the Mass, the central act of his priesthood. In the latter part of his life, Hopkins abandoned poetry. Discuss your understanding of Hopkins' reasons for abandoning poetry.

2. To read Hopkins' lyrics—think of 'God's Grandeur' or 'As Kingfishers catch Fire'—is to pay close attention to the prosody that drives his thought, (Is Hopkins' prosody itself a kind of embodied thought?) Take 'The Windhover.' Notice the effect of sprung rhythm, as Hopkins called it, in which there is a regular number of stressed syllables, but a highly variable number of unstressed, and some consequent breathless linking of one line to another. Do you see this pattern creating a novelty in English lyric? Or is Hopkins simply varying familiar patterns with a slight tweak?

Excerpt

*And he said, If the Lord do not help thee, whence shall I help thee? out of the barnfloor, or out of the winepress?
2 Kings VI: 27*

*Thou that on sin's wages starvest,
Behold we have the joy in harvest:
For us was gather'd the first fruits,
For us was lifted from the roots,
Sheaved in cruel bands, bruised sore,
Scourged upon the threshing-floor;
Where the upper mill-stone roof'd His head,
At morn we found the heavenly Bread,
And, on a thousand altars laid,
Christ our Sacrifice is made!*

*Thou whose dry plot for moisture gapes,
We shout with them that tread the grapes:
For us the Vine was fenced with thorn,
Five ways the precious branches torn;
Terrible fruit was on the tree
In the acre of Gethsemane;
For us by Calvary's distress
The wine was racked from the press;
Now in our altar-vessels stored
Is the sweet Vintage of our Lord.*

*In Joseph's garden they threw by
The riv'n Vine, leafless, lifeless, dry:
On Easter morn the Tree was forth,
In forty days reach'd heaven from earth;
Soon the whole world is overspread;
Ye weary, come into the shade.*

William Blake

The Importance of William Blake. William Blake (1757-1827) was a British engraver, painter, and poet

William Blake

The Importance of William Blake. William Blake (1757-1827) was a British engraver, painter, and poet whose powerful expressions of artistic emotion and visionary awareness rendered him a moving symbol of Romantic imagination.

The life of William Blake. William Blake was born in Broad Street, in the Soho region of London. He was the third of seven children. His father was a hosier, of medium wealth. Young William went briefly to the local school, where he learned reading and writing, but left school by the age of ten. From that point on he was home schooled by his mother, baptized at the local St. John's Church, although both his parents were Dissenters, refusers of the Anglican Communion. Then in 1772, having given evidence of native brilliance as a draughtsman, he was sent out as apprentice to an engraver. By the age of twenty one he qualified as a professional engraver—he was a master of original techniques of intaglio engraving, which forever bore his trademark skill—and in 1779 he became a student in the Royal Academy, which was under the Directorship of Sir Joshua Reynolds, the most eminent British portrait painter of the day. In 1782 Blake married Catherine Boucher—his great love, to whom he would remain united all his life—and in 1800 the pair moved to Sussex, where Blake lived and created for the remainder of his life. It should be noted that Catherine was, at the time of marriage, illiterate, but that Blake taught her to be his assistant, and that she played an instrumental role in the technical development of his later art. By his mature years, Blake earned a good living producing engravings, setting type, and giving drawing/engraving lessons.

The Spiritual Setting of Blake's World. In the sixteenth century, under the reign of Henry VIII, Britain instituted a national church, the Anglican Church, and did its best to extirpate other forms of communion—most notably Roman Catholicism—in the British Isles. Dissidents of all sorts, and that included the family of William Blake, were marginalized. Blake himself drew his spiritual energies largely from the Bible and Milton—himself a dissident—from the hymns of the reformer, John Wesley, and from the visionary theology of Johannes Swedenborg (1688-1772), a brilliant Swedish scientist and visionary, who like Blake was granted many direct visions of the heavenly kingdom.

The Work of William Blake. Blake's technique of engraving, and illustrating his own voluminous text, ensured an intimacy of imagination so close, that one can hardly speak of a difference between his visual and his verbal arts. For instance his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794) are poems accompanied by engravings. They are meant to represent what Blake refers to as 'two contrary states of the human soul.' The contrast is this evident:

'The Shepherd'

How sweet is the shepherd's sweet lot!
From the morn to the evening he strays;
He shall follow his sheep all the day,
And his tongue shall be filled with praise.

For he hears the lambs' innocent call,
And he hears the ewes' tender reply;
He is watchful while they are in peace,
For they know when their shepherd is nigh

'My Pretty Rose Tree'

A flower was offered to me,
Such a flower as May never bore;
But I said, 'I've a pretty rose tree,'
And I passed the sweet flower o'er.

Then I went to my pretty rose tree,
To tend her by day and by night;
But my rose turned away with jealousy,
And her thorns were my only delight.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. Erdman, Bloom, Golding, New York, 1997.

Secondary source reading

Ackroyd, Peter, *Blake*, London, 1996.

Further reading

Frye, Northrop, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*, Princeton, 1947.

Suggested paper topics

1. For Blake, who developed an elaborate poetic mythology to frame his visions, the same single fallen world can be viewed either as a source of joy or of gloom and despair. To pick a simple example, Blake's Tyger and his Lamb represent the opposed perspectives. Do you see such a joy/gloom opposition playing out through the poems of *Innocence and Experience*? Is this opposition readable with delight and fascination today? Is this material in our present grain? Is it too simplistic? Or too allegorical—almost in the vein of *Piers Plowman*?
2. Scholarship is a fine form of our effort to understand cultural products, and among the literary byproducts of a great writer, like Blake, count the scholarly works he/she has brought into existence. You might want to look at Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1968), a now classic work of criticism, which contains copious and insightful references to Blake, while constructing a schema of literature which shares many traits with the vision of Blake himself. Write an essay on the relation of Frye's visions to those of Blake.

Excerpt

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/a-cradle-song/>

*Sweet dreams form a shade,
O'er my lovely infants head.
Sweet dreams of pleasant streams,
By happy silent moony beams*

*Sweet sleep with soft down.
Weave thy brows an infant crown.
Sweet sleep Angel mild,
Hover o'er my happy child.*

*Sweet smiles in the night,
Hover over my delight.
Sweet smiles Mothers smiles,
All the livelong night beguiles.*

*Sweet moans, dovelike sighs,
Chase not slumber from thy eyes,
Sweet moans, sweeter smiles,
All the dovelike moans beguiles.*

*Sleep sleep happy child,
All creation slept and smil'd.
Sleep sleep, happy sleep.
While o'er thee thy mother weep*

*Sweet babe in thy face,
Holy image I can trace.
Sweet babe once like thee.
Thy maker lay and wept for me*

*Wept for me for thee for all,
When he was an infant small.
Thou his image ever see.
Heavenly face that smiles on thee,*

Lord Byron

The significance of Lord Byron. Lord Byron (1788-1824) represents the dissolute genius in the fullest expression of what was to be the Romantic spirit. How appropriate that, after a life of erotic expenditure, passionate friendship—as with the poet Shelley and his wife—Byron ultimately met his death fighting for Greek Independence in the War against the Turks. This cause, of real and symbolic power throughout Europe, was widely seen in the West as a Battle to release the imprisoned spirit of Ancient Hellenism. Byron was heroic to the end, as well as a superb narrative poet, known throughout Europe.

The Life of Lord Byron. George Gordon, Lord Byron was born in London, in Holles Street. He was the child of aristocracy on both sides. His father, Mad Jack Byron, was a flamboyant seducer, who had acquired, then lost, two fortunes by means of seduction, while his mother, a descendant of Cardinal Beaton, was an alternately indulgent and draconian supervisor of the young man. From these parents Byron inherited both extreme handsomeness and a club foot, for which he would throughout his life compensate by unusual bouts of exercise. Byron spent his childhood at the family home in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, and was sent to Aberdeen Grammar School for his primary education. In 1801 he was enrolled at Harrow, where his homosexual tendencies first came into full play, and where he first found true same sex passion. From Harrow Byron went up to Trinity College Cambridge, from which he did not graduate, and where he did too much besides study. In 1809-1811 he went to Europe on the Grand Tour expected of British gentlemen of class, and there he gave way to his passion for travel; for a life which would take him eventually to many corners of Europe—the Ottoman Empire, Persia, Armenia, as well as throughout Western Europe, and that would ultimately, in 1823, lead him to Greece, where he ardently and effectively supported the Greek War of Independence, and where he died of malaria in 1824.

The Work of Lord Byron. Byron was a prolific poet, drawn to long epic or mock epic lines, frequently embodying his own experience, though in an inflated and dramatized form. Two of his greatest works are *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*—the publication of which began in 1812, and *Don Juan*, arguably the strongest epic written in English since Milton's *Paradise Lost*. While the two poems share many motifs, and represent different facets of their author, they are, perhaps thanks to the broader canvas and world view of the latter, of different ambition. *Childe Harold*—'childe' is the Middle English word for a young man who is a candidate for knighthood—is a world weary wanderer, whose malaise clearly reflects the European sense of exhaustion from the aftermath of the Revolutionary Era and the Napoleonic Wars—think Europe and American after Depression, Two World Wars, social dislocations of every kind—and who travels throughout Europe in search of new sources of value. *Don Juan* picks up the same thematic—which is pervasive throughout all of Byron's poetry—but extends the range of considerations, in the mind of this cynical, world weary, but life loving hero, who strongly resembles Byron himself. The epic ranges over world history and the whole range of human hopes, and does so with often jaunty and stinging, sometimes deeply passionate, metrical verve. Byron's power, in both these poems, derives from his deep—and always ironic—grasp of the nature of the world he lives in.

Reading

Primary source reading

Secondary source reading

Lansdown, Richard, *Byron's Historical Dramas*, Oxford, 1992.

Further reading

MacCarthy, Fiona, *Byron: Life and Legend*, London, 2002.

Suggested paper topics

1. Byron took the *ottava rima* form of *Don Juan* from a strong tradition in Italian verse. (The scheme is *abababcc*; with an alternation of four and five stress syllables in the rhyming lines. One would say a bouncy, jocose and impish scheme, and so it is.) So what is the secret of Byron's placing a set of tales of romance into the rollicking onward advance of this meter? He never pauses, he presses forward without unnecessary commentary, he mocks himself regularly, he mocks Don Juan regularly, he keeps his own person flittingly intrusive throughout the tale; and above all, of course, he is a master of the erotic tease, as Chaucer had been. *Are we getting close to Byron's secret? What do you think?*

2. Byron's *Don Juan* is his masterpiece. Refresh yourself on the libretto of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, which was completed in 1788. In that opera, with a noted libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte, Don Giovanni, Don Juan, comes off as a charming and obsessed sexual predator, attracted to an endless series of women, whom he loves to enumerate. By making this comparison between poetry and opera you will, among other things, double your awareness of Byron's passive Don Juan, to whom women just happen. You will also be asking yourself about the difference of music from narrative poetry, as a medium for constructing character. What difference do you see?

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/my-soul-is-dark-2/>

*My soul is dark - Oh! quickly string
The harp I yet can brook to hear;
And let thy gentle fingers fling
Its melting murmurs o'er mine ear.
If in this heart a hope be dear,
That sound shall charm it forth again:
If in these eyes there lurk a tear,
'Twill flow, and cease to burn my brain.*

*But bid the strain be wild and deep,
Nor let thy notes of joy be first:
I tell thee, minstrel, I must weep,
Or else this heavy heart will burst;
For it hath been by sorrow nursed,
And ached in sleepless silence, long;
And now 'tis doomed to know the worst,
And break at once - or yield to song.*

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?

W. B. Yeats

The Importance of William Butler Yeats. William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), though Irish, proved to be the outstanding force in English language poetry in the twentieth century. He won the Nobel Prize for poetry, in 1922, and served two years as an Irish senator, in the last years of his life. We might say that his work constituted a major enlargement of the culture of English literature for an entire century.

The Life of William Butler Yeats. William Butler Yeats was born in Sandymount, County Dublin, but the family soon moved to the beautiful region of Sligo, which was to be the sympathetic cultural matrix of Yeats' upbringing. Both his father and mother inherited well, and the family was both prosperous and highly artistic. Yeats' father was a successful painter, and Yeats' siblings supported a creative atmosphere, which played a decisive role in the development of Yeats' own poetic sensibility. As an infant, in 1867, Yeats' family moved to England for a couple of years—to help the Father in his painting career—but moved back to Dublin. Yeats himself was then enrolled in Erasmus Smith High School—where his work was mediocre, his Latin tolerable but his spelling very bad. From 1884-86 Yeats was enrolled in an Art School—he too had vivid painting skills, though, oddly enough, he was tone deaf. In 1887 the family returned to England. (One sees, in this back and forth traveling, the genesis of the complex relation Yeats developed, toward Ireland and England. It has been said that a person is formed by the kind of world he/she lives in at the age of twenty. For Yeats, that period in the mid-eighties coincided with the strong push for Irish Home Rule, and for true independence from Britain; Yeats was deeply sensitive to the issues, and in a complex way a strong Irish Nationalist.) As he matured, Yeats found many of his best energies going into Irish culture, his increasingly subtle poems with historical richness, his founding—with Lady Gregory and others—of the Irish Literary Theater, his repeated efforts to win the Irish Nationalist Maud Gonne, for his wife.

The Work of William Butler Yeats. The early work of Yeats, in poetry, tended to a sentimental Irish Romanticism, drawing on Celtic mythology and nationalism. The soft lapping melodies of 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' (1890) show the young Yeats gifted at the writing of traditional verse, still far from his mature style.

*I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee;
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.
And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where
the cricket sings; There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.*

But by, say, 'The Second Coming,' 1920, Yeats turns his deep appreciation of mysticism, the apocalyptic, and social critique into powerful and complex lines:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

Much of the mystery of Yeats' greatness is embedded in these lines, whose tone is unrivalled in English poetry, except by Blake, when it comes to isolating the terror of an age and of the human condition.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats, ed. Finneran, New York, 1996.

Secondary source reading

Macrae, Alisdair, *W.B. Yeats: A Literary Life*, London, 1995.

Further reading

Foster, Roy, *W.B. Yeats: A Life, i. The Apprentice image, 1865-1914*, Oxford, 1997.

Suggested paper topics

1. Politicians and poets are often very different from one another. But is Yeats an exception? Does he know how to convert his political ardor into powerful poetry? How does he do it?
2. The poet W.H. Auden criticized Yeats for dabbling, throughout his life, in mysticism and the occult. To Auden that seemed a childish pursuit. Do you see to what uses Yeats put those concerns, in his poetry? What poetic resource do you see, in Yeats' personal mythology of the tower, pern, and gyre?

Excerpt <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/never-give-all-heart>

*Never give all the heart, for love
Will hardly seem worth thinking of
To passionate women if it seem
Certain, and they never dream
That it fades out from kiss to kiss;
For everything that's lovely is
But a brief, dreamy, kind delight.
O never give the heart outright,
For they, for all smooth lips can say,
Have given their hearts up to the play.
And who could play it well enough
If deaf and dumb and blind with love?
He that made this knows all the cost,
For he gave all his heart and lost.*

Auden

The Life of W. H. Auden. W.H. Auden (1907-1973) was born in York. His father was a physician, and his mother was trained as a nurse. In 1908 the family moved to Birmingham, where Auden's father was to become a Professor of Public Health. Auden's relation to his father was close and important; in his father's well stocked library Auden read devotedly as a young person, especially in psychoanalytic literature. It was expected, at this time, that Auden would become a mining engineer, for he was directly interested in geology, and in the culture of mining. (In his first year of University he was to major in Geology, though by the second year he had switched to English.) Auden's first formal education took place at St. Edmund's School in Surrey, where Auden first made the acquaintance of his mentor and lover to be, Christopher Isherwood. In 1925 Auden enrolled at Christ Church, Oxford, where he built on his erotic relation with Isherwood, and entered with gusto into the wider, and idea fraught, literary milieu. He became close friends with brilliant young writers and thinkers like C.Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, and Louis MacNeice, all of whom were not only reshaping British poetry, but thinking intensely about the larger issues of their time, which was preoccupied with its own pre-war social crises, and with the still quite fresh implications of a new social system, the Communism which to some degree fascinated all of these young men. Upon graduation, Auden traveled to Europe, where his observations of the brutal preparations for WW II, and of the social injustices pursuant on the Depression in Europe and Britain, led him (like most of his closest intellectual friends) to support the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War, and for a long time to espouse the politics of the far left, Communism above all. All his life, however, Auden was a practicing Anglican, as well, of course, as a prolific poet whose major works appeared between the mid-thirties and 1960, and by the end of his writing career his humanism and love of peace had increasingly taken on the guise of religious intensity. By the time of his death he had given full expression to the bias for religious transcendence, which had only occasionally come to the front in his earlier thinking.

The Work of W.H. Auden. It will be noted that Yeats died in 1939, the year of the outbreak of WW II. Hardy died ten years earlier. Although both writers were increasingly pessimistic, as they aged, neither of them had the special pressure of a global war to factor into their pessimism. Auden's life segued directly into the inter-war years of the 30's, then into the Great War itself, and fully into the Cold War. If you look through the Auden poems in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* you will see that almost all of the included pieces deal somehow with the Second World War, or with the collateral damage done by it. The Age being ushered in, during the period of World War II, has been called the Age of Anxiety. Auden's book of that title, *The Age of Anxiety*, which though published in 1947 was full of poems from the previous decade. You can feel the force of that Age in much of Auden's work, and as he sits "in one of the dives/on Fifty-Second Street/Uncertain and afraid..." he is the quintessential intellectual of the forties, open and hopeful, but surrounded by devastating military/political hatred. No poetry written in English so vividly catches the spirit of that time.

Reading

Primary source reading

Selected Poems of W.H.Auden, ed. Mendelson, New York, 2007.

Secondary source reading

Carpenter, Humphrey, *W.H. Auden: A Biography*, London, 1981.

Further reading

Smith, Stan, *W.H. Auden*, Oxford, 1985.

Suggested paper topics

1. Look into the relation between Communism and Anglican Christianity in Auden's thought. What were Auden and his elite Oxford friends looking for, when in the twenties they followed the God of Russian Communism? Was it simply a new form of the Christian God?
2. Auden's father was a mining engineer, and Auden was from early on destined to a career as an engineer. In later life he wrote a lot of poetry about geology. Can you trace some strands of scientific interest throughout his poetry? How does he use his experience of science in his writing?

Excerpt**poets.org/poetsorg/poem/i-walked-out-one-evening**

*As I walked out one evening,
Walking down Bristol Street,
The crowds upon the pavement
Were fields of harvest wheat.
And down by the brimming river
I heard a lover sing
Under an arch of the railway:
'Love has no ending.
'I'll love you, dear, I'll love you
Till China and Africa meet,
And the river jumps over the mountain
And the salmon sing in the street,
'I'll love you till the ocean
Is folded and hung up to dry
And the seven stars go squawking
Like geese about the sky.
'The years shall run like rabbits,
For in my arms I hold
The Flower of the Ages,
And the first love of the world.'
But all the clocks in the city
Began to whirr and chime:
'O let not Time deceive you,
You cannot conquer Time.
'In the burrows of the Nightmare
Where Justice naked is,
Time watches from the shadow
And coughs when you would kiss.
'In headaches and in worry
Vaguely life leaks away,
And Time will have his fancy
To-morrow or to-day.
'Into many a green valley
Drifts the appalling snow;
Time breaks the threaded dances
And the diver's brilliant bow.
'O plunge your hands in water,*

Eliot, T. S.

The Life of T.S. Eliot. Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) was born in St. Louis, Missouri. He had four sisters and one brother. His father and mother were of old East Coast patrician stock, but had for several generations been fixtures of St. Louis higher society. Eliot's father was President and Treasurer of the Hydraulic Press Brick Company. Young Thomas' childhood was spent essentially in reading, from his father's library. Cursed with a congenital double inguinal hernia, which would plague him all his life, Eliot was in pain much of the time when he was very young, and was able to conquer this condition with reading. (He was for a long time obsessed with Wild West adventures!)

The Education of T.S. Eliot. From 1898-1905 Eliot was a student at Smith Academy, where he studied Latin, Greek, French and German. Subsequently he attended Milton Academy, then enrolled at Harvard as an undergraduate, where he studied for three years (1906-09), getting his B.A. after just three years. In the following years, Eliot studied both at Oxford and in Paris—where he heard lectures by Henri Bergson. In 2011-2014 Eliot returned to Harvard, where he worked on Indian philosophy and Sanskrit, and wrote his doctoral dissertation on F.H. Bradley's notion of the knowledge of the external world. (Eliot earned a Ph.D. but the degree was never granted, as he never returned from England for the necessary viva voce final oral exam.) From this point on Eliot's education was pretty much education in life. In 1927 he became a naturalized British citizen. He began, while in England, both to work in a bank and to teach at several private schools, and finally, after a lucky meeting with Geoffrey Faber, the London publisher, Eliot took up a position as Editor with Faber, a position in which he remained from 1925-1965. Among the array of educational experiences, for Eliot in these years, was the formation of a powerful relationship with Ezra Pound, and a long and unhappy marriage.

The Work of T.S. Eliot. In 1914, Eliot met Ezra Pound in London, and a long creative relation grew from that point. Eliot firmed up his critical stance, which he had been trying out in essays, and in 1917 published a keystone essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' in which he lays out ideas about literature which he retained for his whole creative life. Not much later he published incisive essays on the English metaphysical poets, in which he reinforced his earlier thinking; his critical stance held that poetry is a traditional skill, that it is not about emotion but about escape from emotion, and that a mature world view—Eliot was deepening in his own Anglo-Catholicism all this time—was indispensable for significant writing. In the major creative works, which surrounded these critical arguments, Eliot digs deeply into the expression of the great traditions of spiritual experience, and into a precise and originally trimmed metric. A flow of great poems marks his maturing: 1911, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'; 1922, 'The Wasteland'—Eliot's mini epic, and one of the century's greatest works; 1927, 'The Journey of the Magi'; 1930, 'Ash Wednesday'; 1943, 'The Four Quartets.' Throughout these works, and Eliot was a perfectionist but not hugely prolific, Eliot dug into themes of personal identity, social disintegration, the quest for meaning, especially transcendental religious meaning. His final achievement is of limited dimensions—a number of his plays could be mentioned—but of huge insight into the meanings and weaknesses of his own age.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Collected Poems of T.S. Eliot, 1909-1962, New York, 1991.

Secondary source reading

Ackroyd, Peter, *T.S. Eliot*, London, 1984.

Further reading

Gordon, Lyndall, *Eliot's New Life*, London, 1988.

Suggested paper topics

1. Do you see Eliot's 'Wasteland,' and his general conversion to monarchy and Anglo-Catholicism, as responses to the post-WW I climate of the England he adopted? Or does Eliot just use those enviroing conditions as vehicles for poetry?

2. Eliot wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on philosophical questions of our knowing of the outer world. Do you see a philosophical turn of mind permeating his poetry? You might review *The Four Quartets* in relation to Eliot's metaphysics and theology.

Excerpt <http://www.bartleby.com/198/9.html>

*WHEN Mr. Apollinax visited the United States
His laughter tinkled among the teacups.
I thought of Fragilion, that shy figure among the birch-trees,
And of Priapus in the shrubbery
Gaping at the lady in the swing. 5
In the palace of Mrs. Phlaccus, at Professor Channing-Cheetah's
He laughed like an irresponsible fœtus.
His laughter was submarine and profound
Like the old man of the sea's
Hidden under coral islands 10
Where worried bodies of drowned men drift down in the green silence,
Dropping from fingers of surf.
I looked for the head of Mr. Apollinax rolling under a chair
Or grinning over a screen
With seaweed in its hair. 15
I heard the beat of centaur's hoofs over the hard turf
As his dry and passionate talk devoured the afternoon.
"He is a charming man"—"But after all what did he mean?"—
"His pointed ears ... He must be unbalanced,"—
"There was something he said that I might have challenged." 20
Of dowager Mrs. Phlaccus, and Professor and Mrs. Cheetah
I remember a slice of lemon, and a bitten macaroon.*

Final discussion questions

1. The foregoing set of entries is based on the assumption of a canon of great writers of English literature. Does there seem to be an axis of central or defining works, that constitute a canon of the best, or is there nothing of that sort, only a variety of "interesting" works written in England and its cultural orbit, in English?
2. What role do you see for the Christian religion in the evolution of English literature? At what points in our entries has this role been most conspicuous? At what points has it dwindled? Based on our entries, what direction would you see for the future development of this relation between English literature and Christianity?
3. Do you see the Romantic movement—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, et al.—as a decisive turning point in the development and direction of English literature? (We have pushed this perspective, but doubtless there are various ways to plot the development of English literature.) Or if you were to write a developmental history of English literature, would you look for any large scale scheme at all?
4. Pick one author from each Unit we have studied, and briefly place him or her in his/her historical/cultural context. When you have completed this job, take a look at the general relationship between literary texts and historical setting. Is historical setting a useful framework for explaining the nature of literary works?
5. Is English literature strongly marked by optimism about the human condition—that is, belief that humanity is good, the world surrounding mankind is benign, and there is a purposefulness in the universe? Or is there a strong thread of pessimism, in English literature, in all of the above regards?