

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# ENGLISH LITERATURE – Early Modern Period

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## Contents

Overview of English literature

*16<sup>th</sup> CENTURY - Renaissance*

**Drama** (Shakespeare; Marlowe)

**Epic** (Spenser)

**Lyric** (Sidney; Wyatt and Surrey)

*17<sup>th</sup> CENTURY*

**Drama** (Jonson)

**Poetry**

**Lyric** (Donne; Herbert; Marvell)

**Narrative** (Dryden; Browne)

**Epic** (Bunyan; Milton)

*18<sup>th</sup> CENTURY*

**Poetry** (Pope)

**Fiction** (Defoe; Swift)

**Essay - Philosophy** (Shaftesbury)

Essay - **Criticism** (Johnson)

## Renaissance

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

### Discussion Questions

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

## William Shakespeare

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

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

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

Reading

### Primary source reading

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

### Secondary source reading

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

### Further reading

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

### Suggested paper topics

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

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

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

**SCENE I. A desert place.**

*Thunder and lightning. Enter three Witches*

**First Witch**

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

**Second Witch**

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

**Third Witch**

That will be ere the set of sun.

**First Witch**

Where the place?

**Second Witch**

Upon the heath.

**Third Witch**

There to meet with Macbeth.

**First Witch**

I come, Graymalkin!

**Second Witch**

Paddock calls.

**Third Witch**

Anon.

**ALL**

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

*Exeunt*

## Christopher Marlowe

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

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

### Reading

#### Primary source reading

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

#### Secondary source reading

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

#### Further reading

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

#### Suggested paper topics

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

2. In hurrying to the center of great works written long before our time, we often hurry past the details which explain the text we seek. In the case of Marlowe's *Faustus* we need to return to the theological strife of Marlowe's

learning years at Cambridge at the end of the 16th century. The Calvinists and anti-Calvinists were in heated strife concerning issues of theodicy, of the justification of God's ways to man. (Question: is the pervasive pain and suffering in the universe part of God's plan? This issue of justification will still dominate the religious/epic thinking of John Milton.) These issues frame the desire of Faustus for a temporary respite from the human condition, in order to enjoy perfect pleasure.

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

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

**Barabas**

So that of thus much that returne was made:

And of the third part of the *Persian* ships,

There was the venture summ'd and satisfied.

As for those *Samnites* and the men of *Uzz*

That bought my *Spanish Oyles, and Wines of Greece,*

Here have I purst their paltry silverlings.

Eye; what a trouble tis to count this trash.

Well fare the *Arabians who so richly pay*

The things they traffique for with wedge of gold,

Whereof a man may easily in a day

Tell that which may maintaine him all his life.

The needy groome that never fingred goate,

Would make a miracle of thus much coyne:

But he whose steele-bard coffers are cramb'd full,

And all his life time hath bin tired,

Wearying his fingers ends with telling it,

Would in his age be loath to labour so,

And for a pound to sweat himselfe to death:

Give me the Merchants of the *Indian Mynes,*

That trade in mettall of the purest mould;

The wealthy Moore, that in the Easterne rockes

Without controule can picke his riches up,

And in his house heape *pearle* like pibble-stones,

Receive them free, and sell them by the weight;

Bags of fiery *Opals, Saphires, Amatists,*

*Jacints*, hard *Topas*, grasse-greene *Emeraulds*,

Beauteous *Rubyes*, sparkling *Diamonds*,

And seildsene costly stones of so great price,

As one of them indifferently rated,

And of a Carrect of this quantity,

## 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  
Taket 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.*

## 17<sup>th</sup> Century

### Background

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

### Discussion Questions

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

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

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



## Defoe, Daniel

**Importance of Daniel Defoe.** Daniel Defoe (1660-1725) was a new and highly innovative type on the British literary scene. He was a trader/businessman, a spy—both for the government and its opposition, a proto novelist, a poet, and a pamphleteer. His ‘travelogue,’ *Robinson Crusoe*, 1719, remains as his most memorable text.

**The Life of Daniel Defoe.** Defoe—the *De* is a ‘distinguished addition’ which he appended to his family name, Foe--was born (probably) in the parish of St. Giles Cripplegate. His father was a tallow chandler, of comfortable means, and a member of the Butchers’ Company, a notable honorary membership of ancient vintage in the City of London. Unlike many early modern English authors, Defoe did not benefit from a distinguished formal education, but as a young man made his life way directly into trade. He traded actively in wines, cotton fabrics, and hosiery, as well as in civet cats—of which he had a collection—for the production of perfume. Despite these multiple involvements, he was frequently in financial difficulty, and we have reason to think he could barely support his wife and eight children, during a marriage which lasted more than fifty years. His unusual insight into the growing commercial vitality of England makes him a particularly valuable witness to the modernization of London, and other major cities of England and Scotland. (His book, *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, 1719, identifies the development of road and factory building, of banking and industry, throughout the nation, and oozes with praise for the importance of commerce in nation building.) Defoe profits, in his extensive writing—he wrote more than five hundred books—from his own existential involvement with the higher politics of his time, which various personal acquaintances led him into, and from the pure chance that he was present during or shortly after intense and developmentally crucial times in the history of his island nation: the Great Plague which took some 70,000 lives in 1665, and the Great Fire of London, which ravaged the city six years after Defoe’s birth.

**The Work of Daniel Defoe.** We have noted that Defoe wrote more than five hundred books—a total which includes pamphlets and broadsides, as well as full six folios, and which testifies to the explosive development of the urban publishing business in Defoe’s London. Among Defoe’s best known work are titles which indicate how engrossed he was in depicting the ongoing life of his time, a preoccupation in pursuing which he became what might be called modern Europe’s first journalist, or even ‘economic journalist.’ *Robinson Crusoe*, which was published in 1719, placed a shipwrecked sailor on a desert island, where the way in which he made use of his environment, and managed the small population of animals and cannibals with whom he was surrounded on the island, indicate Defoe’s sharp sense of the way a society, especially a colonial society, is constructed. *Moll Flanders*, 1722, gives us a searching adventure into the world of a street trollop and her on the whole highly successful ways of securing her living. In the same year *The Journal of the Plague Year* was published, a haunting and tangible study of the way a society comes apart under internal pressures which it cannot control. In all of these works Defoe writes as narrator/novelist, journalist/sociologist, and poet.

## Reading

### Primary source reading

Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Shinagel, New York, 1993. Norton Critical Edition.

### Secondary source reading

Backscheider, Paula, *Daniel Defoe: His Life*, London, 1989.

### Further reading

Rogers, Pat, ed. *Daniel Defoe: The Critical Heritage*, London, 1972.

### Suggested paper topics

1. Is Defoe a journalist, a novelist, a reporter? Are those terms clearly defined in his time? (Are they clear in our day, when journalism has assumed many previously unknown forms?) Does Defoe’s poetry bear the same stamp of ‘social awareness,’ as does his prose?
2. Compare Robinson Crusoe to Lemuel Gulliver, the protagonist in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. How would you compare the approaches of Defoe and Swift to creating the narrative of a protagonist who faces ‘the extreme other’?

**Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-true-born-englishman-excerpt/>**

*Thus from a mixture of all kinds began,  
That het'rogeneous thing, an Englishman:  
In eager rapes, and furious lust begot,  
Betwixt a painted Britain and a Scot.  
Whose gend'ring off-spring quickly learn'd to bow,  
And yoke their heifers to the Roman plough:  
From whence a mongrel half-bred race there came,  
With neither name, nor nation, speech nor fame.  
In whose hot veins new mixtures quickly ran,  
Infus'd betwixt a Saxon and a Dane.  
While their rank daughters, to their parents just,  
Receiv'd all nations with promiscuous lust.  
This nauseous brood directly did contain  
The well-extracted blood of Englishmen.*

*Which medly canton'd in a heptarchy,  
A rhapsody of nations to supply,  
Among themselves maintain'd eternal wars,  
And still the ladies lov'd the conquerors.*

## Jonathan Swift

**The importance of Jonathan Swift.** Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) was an Irish poet, satirist, pamphleteer and political activist (first Whig, then Tory), novelist, and finally Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin.

**The Life of Jonathan Swift.** Jonathan Swift, a posthumous child, was born of English parents, John and Erik, in Dublin in 1667. Through the generosity of an uncle, he was educated at Kilkenny School and Trinity College, Dublin, from which he graduated in 1686. In 1688 he went to England to serve as the private secretary to Sir William Temple, who was to be an important guiding figure throughout Swift's life. At Templeton's estate Jonathan Swift met Esther Johnson, the Stella of his early poems, and a figure of emotional importance for him. In 1692 Swift earned his M.A. from Oxford, and shortly thereafter he was ordained a priest in the Church of Ireland, and given a small country parish, whose isolation he hated. About 1696-7, he wrote his powerful satires on corruption in religion and learning, which were published in 1704 and reached their final form in a fifth printed edition in 1710. In 1702 Swift received a Doctorate of Divinity, from Trinity College Dublin. At age thirty-two, he returned to Ireland where he devoted his talents to politics and religion, and his works in prose were written to further various political causes. In 1709 he published *The Tale of a Tub* and *The Battle of the Books*, both of which brought him public attention. After 1720 he began his greatest work, *Gulliver's Travels*, which he completed in 1728.

**The Work of Jonathan Swift.** *Gulliver's Travels* is Swift's most enduring satire. Although full of allusions to recent and current events, and vibrant with Swift's own very strong political opinions, the work still rings true today, for its objects are human failings, the defective political, economic, and social institutions that they call into being. Swift adopts an ancient satirical device: the imaginary voyage. His narrative center, Gulliver, appears among four different cultural or genetic groups—some tiny (from his view point) some huge (from his view point), some foolish, some gifted. There is not only satire but anthropology in this work, the structure of which also mirrors the travelogues and explorationist diaries that were very popular in the centuries following encounter with the Americas, and the ensuing colonial efforts. *The Tale of a Tub* and *The Battle of the Books* continue to develop Swift's disinterested social objectivity. *The Tale of a Tub* airs the religious views of three different passengers on a vessel, displaying what seem the exaggerated view of a religious sceptic and a religious zealot, and the relatively moderate view, that of Swift himself, clearly, of an Anglican clergyman. *The Battle of the Books* is Swift's take on the controversy, of heated interest at the time, over whether the ancients or the moderns are to be preferred in matters of taste and value.

**The evaluation of Jonathan Swift.** As a poet, satirist, commentator on his time, and political activist, Swift has a uniquely powerful ability to transport us back into his world. One theme threads his whole opus, and deserves mention as perhaps Swift's most lasting originality. The Dean of St. Patrick's had many friends, loved various individuals, but had a dim and often bitter view of humans as a species. He considered mankind gross, self-interested, contentious, and smelly. In so asserting, throughout his work, he made no apologies.

### Reading

#### Primary source reading

Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, New York, 1996. Dover reprint.

#### Secondary source reading

Ehrenpreis, Irvin, *Swift*, 3 vols., London, 1962-83.

#### Further reading

Higgins, Ian, *Swift's Politics: A Study in Disaffection*, Cambridge, 1994.

### Suggested paper topics

1. Jonathan Swift frequently writes the grotesqueness of the human body into his fictions. He seems fascinated with the dark fallen condition of mankind. As an aid to understanding this side of Swift's work, look into the book *Life and Death* (1959), by the American classicist Norman O. Brown. A wonderful paper could result from reviewing Swift in the light of Brown.
2. At the time of Swift the European discovery of far distant lands and cultures was far under way. Columbus had come upon a new world, and Montaigne reflected the excitement of that discovery well over a century before its time. Swift taps into the growing fascination with the travel narrative, and puts it to use both to satirize his own culture—especially through the Houyhnhnms—and to fantasize the adventures of Lemuel in relation to other worlds

and attitudes. In other words, this set of Gulliver tales is full of self awareness and analysis. Gulliver is in each tale set off from the people he discovers, by size or personal traits. *Does the unique charm of Swift's presentation come down to a kind of inner social geometry each of us carries inside, by which we are intrigued by seeing and feeling events from different angles?*

3. In the 19th century, which was on the whole scornful of 18th century British literary styles, Swift was even more reviled than Pope or Dryden. Thomas de Quincy, in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote that 'the meanness of Swift's nature, and his rigid incapacity for dealing with the grandeurs of the human spirit, with religion, with poetry or even with science when it rose above the mercenary practical, is absolutely appalling. His own Yahoo is not a more abominable one-sided degradation of humanity than he himself is under this aspect. . . .' I think you see that Swift's scatological imagination, his scorn for social traditions, his mocking of human pretenses all goes against the grain of thinking which flies under the Romantic banner. You might want to enlarge your sense, of this Classical/Romantic polarity, by checking out Irving Babbitt's scholarly classic, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919).

**Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/a-beautiful-young-nymph-going-to-bed/>**

*Corinna, Pride of Drury-Lane,  
For whom no Shepherd sighs in vain;  
Never did Covent Garden boast  
So bright a batter'd, strolling Toast;  
No drunken Rake to pick her up,  
No Cellar where on Tick to sup;  
Returning at the Midnight Hour;  
Four Stories climbing to her Bow'r;  
Then, seated on a three-legg'd Chair,  
Takes off her artificial Hair:  
Now, picking out a Crystal Eye,  
She wipes it clean, and lays it by.  
Her Eye-Brows from a Mouse's Hide,  
Stuck on with Art on either Side,  
Pulls off with Care, and first displays 'em,  
Then in a Play-Book smoothly lays 'em.  
Now dextrously her Plumpers draws,  
That serve to fill her hollow Jaws.  
Untwists a Wire; and from her Gums  
A Set of Teeth completely comes.  
Pulls out the Rags contriv'd to prop  
Her flabby Dugs and down they drop.  
Proceeding on, the lovely Goddess  
Unlaces next her Steel-Rib'd Bodice;  
Which by the Operator's Skill,  
Press down the Lumps, the Hollows fill,  
Up hoes her Hand, and off she slips  
The Bolsters that supply her Hips.  
With gentlest Touch, she next explores  
Her Shankers, Issues, running Sores,  
Effects of many a sad Disaster;  
And then to each applies a Plaster.  
But must, before she goes to Bed,  
Rub off the Daubs of White and Red;  
And smooth the Furrows in her Front,  
With greasy Paper stuck upon't.  
She takes a Bolus e'er she sleeps;  
And then between two Blankets creeps. With pains of love tormented lies;*

## Shaftesbury

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

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

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

### Reading

#### Primary source reading

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

#### Secondary source reading

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

#### Further reading

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

#### Suggested paper topics

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

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

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

## Samuel Johnson

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

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

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

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

### Reading

#### Primary source reading

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

#### Secondary source reading

Rogers, Pat, Samuel Johnson, Oxford, 1993.

#### Further reading

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

#### Suggested paper topics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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