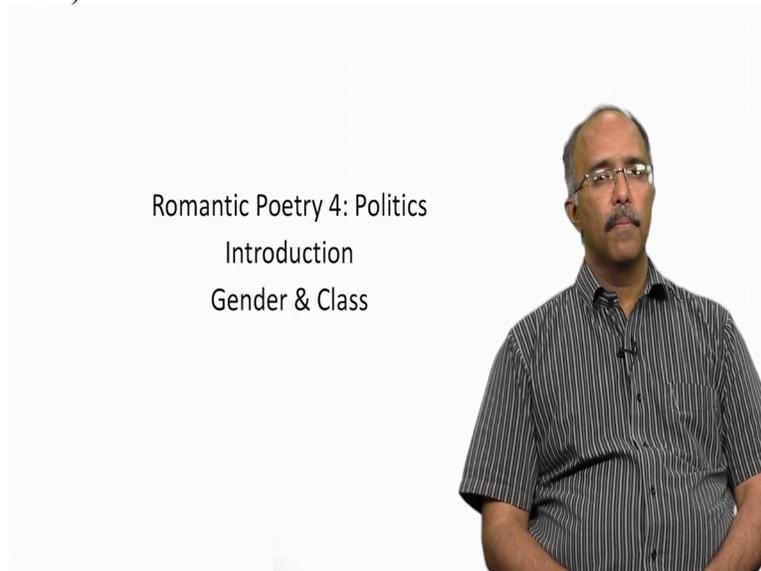


English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832
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Romantic Poetry 4: Politics
Introduction Gender and Class

Hello everybody. Welcome to the NPTEL lessons on the English Romantic writers, 1798 to 1832. My name is Pramod Nayar. I teach at the Department of English in the University of Hyderabad. We have over the past several weeks, explored the Romantic novel, The Rise of sensibility and sentiment. We have looked at the emergence of the genres such as the Gothic. Some study of the visual cultures of the period, we have examined kinds of poetry, kinds of themes and concerns such as environmentalism. In our continuing exploration, we now turn to the politics of the English Romantic poets.

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By the time Wordsworth ends his poem 'Nutting' he has shown us a boy's destruction of the woods: the boy violently cuts down branches. The boy's actions leave him saddened, says Wordsworth: 'a sense of pain', is what the boy experiences. Then Wordsworth concludes with some troubling lines:



We begin with the gender and class. Some of you may recall the poem, 'Nutting', Wordsworth's 'Nutting' which opens with the boy going out with a little axe. There is an incident where he chops off the patches of the tree. And eventually, he will be a little saddened at his actions. The focus is not on the boy's action alone but the way the poem concludes. Wordsworth admits that the boy feels a sense of pain at whatever he has done, he has cut the branches of the trees and it is an uncalled for, gratuitous act of violence.

But Wordsworth concludes with some particularly disturbing lines and I want you to pay attention to these lines coming upon your slide now.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:29)

Then, dearest Maiden, move along these shades
In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand
Touch—for there is a spirit in the woods.



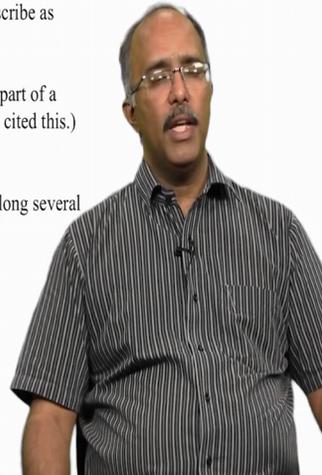
Then, dearest Maiden, move along these shades
In gentleness of heart; with a gentle hand
Touch-for there is a spirit in the woods.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:38)

So is it the woman's responsibility to balance the actions of the boy?
Does Wordsworth therefore align, in what is now a traditional
stereotype, woman and natural? [What the ecofeminists describe as
'naturalizing the feminine and feminizing nature']

Wordsworth's famous Lucy poems, critics have noted, are part of a
gendered theme of 'naming and leaving'. (We have already cited this.)

The politics of gender in the Romantic poets may be read along several
lines.



So the question for us is, is it the woman's responsibility to balance the actions of the boy? The boy has been destructive and it is the woman's job to make sure that nature is restored, taken care of, nurtured. So this Wordsworth therefore align in what is now a traditional stereotype, woman and major. What the ecofeminist would famously describe as naturalizing the feminine and feminizing nature. Wordsworth famously Lucy poems, as critics have noted and which we have already cited, are part of the gendered theme in Wordsworth, of naming and leaving.

He names the women and then leaves them. The politics of gender in the Romantic poets may be read along several lines and we will look at a few of them..

(Refer Slide Time: 2:20)

First, there is the feminization of poetry itself by poets like Felicia Hemans. Hemans made domestic affections the ideal subject of poetry. In poems like 'The Indian City', Hemans makes domestic tragedy (the death of her young son, at the hands of the natives), the source of Maimuna's military campaign. Thus, even as Hemans shows Maimuna as a heroic figure, she suggests that these are subordinate to her feelings as a mother.

The poetess figure in Hemans is one given over to such emotions..., as Adriana Craciun suggests



First, there is a feminisation of poetry itself by poets like Felicia Hemans. Hemans made domestic affections the ideal subject of a poetry. In poems like 'The Indian City', Hemans makes domestic tragedy that is the death of her young son in this case at the hands of natives, the source of Maimuna's military campaign. Thus, even though Hemans shows Maimuna as a heroic martial figure, suggest that these are subordinate to her feelings as a mother. The poet's figure in Hemans is one given over to such emotions.

As the critic, Adriana Craciun suggest. Coming up in the slide, Adriana Craciun's comments that are illustrated by text like, The grave of poetess.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:05)

Where couldst thou fix on mortal ground
Thy tender thoughts and high?
Now peace the woman's heart hath found,
And joy the poet's eye

'The Grave of a Poetess'



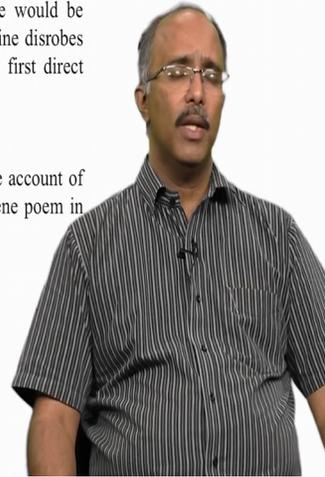
Where couldst thou fix on mortal ground
Thy tender thoughts and high?
Now peace the woman's heart hath found,
And joy the poet's eye

Notice what the lines are doing. As Craciun suggests, the poetess figure is given over to such emotions and here, the Grave of a poetess describes how she was as a poet. Where could you on the mortal ground have fixed your tender thoughts and high? Peace the woman's heart has found and joy the poet's eye. So that is the first theme, the feminisation of nature, the sentimentalisation of nature.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:41)

Second, there is the shift in heterosexual desire that some poets in the age dared to represent. The most famous of these would be Coleridge's famous scene in 'Christabel', where Geraldine disrobes before Christabel's eyes, and thus offers us one of the first direct instances of lesbian desire in English poetry:

[critics and reviewers called the poem, as a result of the account of Christabel's veiled homoerotic longing, 'the most obscene poem in the English language']



Our 2nd theme is a shift in the nature of heterosexual desire that some poets, a few poets in the age actually dared to represent. As we have noted the audience was still being shaped and we have spent some time talking about the preference to lyrical ballads where Wordsworth was trying very hard to justify the kind of poetry he was (())(3:59), the kind of poetry that Coleridge had put together in the lyrical ballads volume. But it was also important for them to not displease the audience altogether.

So there is this balance, this tension between having to cater to existing tastes but also to generate new taste. So there is a shift in the new heterosexual desire that some poets in the age actually dared to represent. And the most famous of these would be Simon Taylor Coleridge's scene in Christabel where Geraldine disrobes before Christabel's eyes and thus offers us one of the first direct instances of lesbian desire in English poetry.

As I said, it was not very often that you would discover a poet willing to represent such a theme. And the poem created such ripples that many of them looking at Coleridge's homoerotic language, described it as the most obscene poem in the English language.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:00)

So half-way from the bed she rose,
And on her elbow did recline
To look at the lady Geraldine.

Beneath the lamp the lady bowed,
And slowly rolled her eyes around;
Then drawing in her breath aloud,
Like one that shuddered, she unbound
The cincture from beneath her breast:
Her silken robe, and inner vest,
Dropt to her feet, and full in view,
Behold! her bosom and half her side—
A sight to dream of, not to tell!
O shield her! shield sweet Christabel!



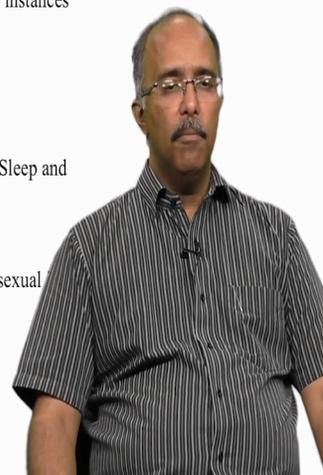
Now here, coming up in your slide is a set of lines from Coleridge's Christabel. Please look at those lines. As you can see, it is considerably erotic. Its graphic in parts and there is evidently sexual desire between the women and the woman staring at the woman is a reversal of the traditional trope which is find in say erotic riding or pornography. So that is our 2nd major theme about gender and politics.

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Third, in poets like Keats, the soft luxuriating imagery has often be read as both sensual and sexualized, and mainly feminine. For instances verses such as these:

Yet, to my ardent prayer,
Yield from thy sanctuary some clear air,
Smoothed for intoxication by the breath
Of flowering bays, that I may die a death Of luxury ... ('Sleep and Poetry')

James Najarian summarizes the complicated gender and sexual in Keats thus....



In poets like Keats and this is our 3rd theme, the luxuriating imagery that has often been read as both sensual and sexualised, is mainly feminine. For instance, verses such as these and I am quoting here from ‘Sleep and Poetry’, one of Keats’ very famous poems.

Yet, to my ardent player,

Yield from the sanctuary some clear air,

Smoothed for intoxication by the breath Of flowering bays, that I may die a death Of luxury.

Verses such as these transform or represent we shall say sensuality and sexuality as primarily feminine. James Najarian summarises the complicated gender and sexual identity in Keats as follows. And there is a small excerpt from Najarian’s work on your slide now.

(Refer Slide Time: 6:21)

Keats’s poetics of languor – of the passive experience of the senses – implies a passive acceptance not just of sensuousness, but of sensuality and implicitly sexuality, a passiveness stereotypically attributed to the feminine ...



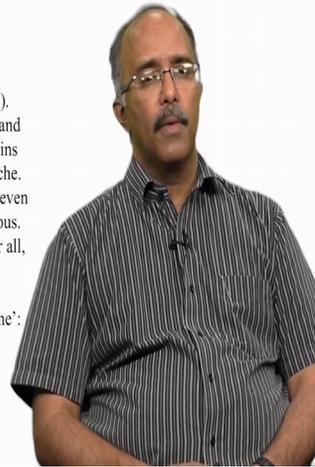
Najarian says, its poetics of languor of the passive experiences of the senses implies a passive acceptance not just of sensuousness but sensuality and implicitly sexuality, a passiveness stereotypically attributed to the feminine.

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Fourth, and related to the previous point, Critics note that when Keats apostrophizes poetry and the muses as women, there is a rhetoric of control – implying that the masculine/male poet controls the feminine/female muse.

Keats brings Psyche under his control. She becomes “the symbolic projection of the masculine poet’s dreaming ego” (Watkins 1996: 118). Throwing Cupid out of the original temple “drains the sexual energy and excitement away from Cupid and onto the identity of the poet” (Watkins 1996: 121). So Keats’s poetic identity is in part confiscated from Psyche. Watkins is on to something. Keats not only takes the place of Psyche even as he says he is asking permission to do so; he makes Cupid superfluous. He seizes much of Psyche’s role of sexual companion for Cupid, after all, if he encapsulates Psyche in his mind (cited in Najarian 535).

This argument is based on lines like the following from ‘Ode to Psyche’:



We now move onto our 4th and related point to the previous one. Critics note that when Keats’ apostrophizes poetry and the Muses as women, there is a rhetorical of control implying that the masculine or the male poet controls the feminine female muse. So the muses as you recall or as you know, are traditionally feminine. And the argument being made here is Keats managed to communicate the idea that these muses are subordinated to or controlled by the masculine male poet. Keats for example brings psyche under his control.

She becomes “the symbolic collection of the masculine poet’s dreaming ego” as Watkins describes it. Throwing Cupid out of the original temple “drains the sexual energy and excitement away from Cupid and onto the identity of the poet”. So psyche loses her energy but the poet, the male poet gains energy. Keats’s poetic identity is in part abducted, confiscated from psyche. Watkins is onto something here. Keats not only takes the place of psyche even as he says he is asking permission to do so; he makes Cupid superfluous.

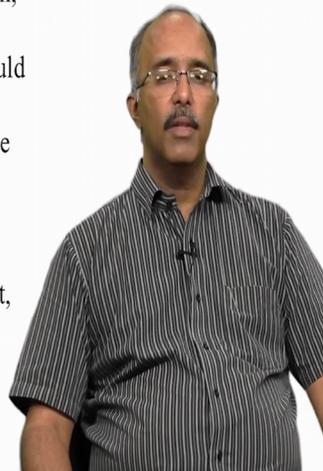
He seizes much of psyche’s role of sexual companion for Cupid, after all, if he encapsulates psyche in his mind. This argument is based on the lines from ‘Ode to psyche’ coming up now on your slide.

(Refer Slide Time: 8:04)

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane In
some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with
pleasant pain, Instead of pines shall
murmur in the wind:
Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd
trees
Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by
steep;
And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds,
and bees, The moss-lain Dryads shall be
lull'd to sleep;
And in the midst of this wide quietness



A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,
With buds, and bells, and stars without a
name, With all the gardener Fancy e'er could
feign,
Who breeding flowers, will never breed the
same: And there shall be for thee all soft
delight
That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
To let the warm Love in!



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some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branch thoughts, new grown with
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Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by
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And thereby zephyrs, streams, and birds,
and these, The moss-lain Dryads shall be
lulled to sleep;

And the midst of this white quietness
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With the wreathed trellis of a working brain,
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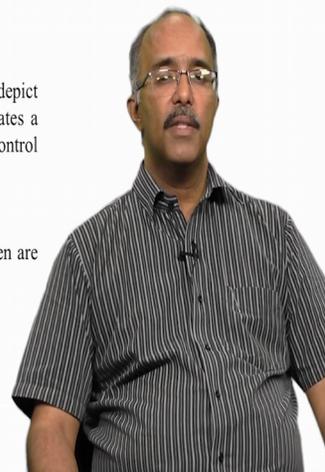
That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
To let the warm Love in!

(Refer Slide Time: 9:02)

In poems like *The Prelude*, Anne Mellor notes, the representation of Nature as a feminine figure that inspires the poet's imagination, actually shows how the masculine poet 'usurps' (Mellor's terms) Nature's power and leaves her 'silent and even absent'.

Mellor's key point is that as long as the Romantic poets depict Nature as feminine, the rhetoric of Romanticism demonstrates a clear gender politics where the masculine poet is always in control over Nature, subordinating 'her' within the poem.

Further, Mellor notes that all or most of Wordsworth's women are dead, either literally or figuratively.



In poems like Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, there are very distinguished (9:04) Anne Mellor notes, the representation of Nature as a feminine figure that inspires the poets imagination,

actually shows how the masculine poet ‘usurps’ and that is Mellor’s term, usurps nature’s power and leaves her silent and sometimes even absent. Mellor’s key point is that as long as the Romantic poets depict nature as feminine, the rhetoric of romanticism demonstrates a clear gender politics where the masculine poet is always in control over nature, subordinating her within the poem.

Mellor argues that all or most of Wordsworth’s women are dead, either literally or figuratively. So much for gender. We now turn to our next dimension in politics, Class.

(Refer Slide Time: 9:47)

Class in Romantic poetry may be read along various lines and themes, all drawing upon the contexts of the age the poets were writing in:
Enclosures, agrarian reform and the shifting nature of community and class (gentry, small farmers).
Eg.: John Clare’s poetry, Wordsworth’s famous ‘The Solitary Reaper’ (who owns the field she works in?)
Aristocratic, upper class identity: Byron
Domesticity and gender across classes: Felicia Hemans



Class in Romantic poetry may be read along various lines and themes, all drawing upon the contexts of the age the poets were writing in:

Let us list a couple of those contexts. Enclosure Acts, the fencing you know of province into private properties. Agrarian reform as tried beautifully by Joanne Therks in her agricultural history of England. The shifting nature of community and class. Small farmers was gently. And you have seen the Thomas James as a painting which people have at one of our sessions about the pictures, beautiful landscape which is primarily about property and ownership rather than just plain aesthetics.

So you will see the tension between small farmers versus gentry, large farmers versus small farmers. And if you read text like John Clare’s poetry, Wordsworth’s famous ‘The Solitary

Reaper' we have to ask questions like who owns the land she is working in? As in, the solitary Reaper poem is set in a field. So who owns the field? Is it her own field? And things like that?

(Refer Slide Time: 10:54)

Questions of rural poetry, unemployment and lack of social support – all questions of class – may be found in Wordsworth's texts.

Simon Lee
The Old Cumberland Beggar
The Female Vagrant
The Discharged Soldier
The Pedlar

Are all figures who symbolize dispossession, poverty and destitution.

In other texts, Wordsworth will attribute the suffering of particular classes of people on war and civil turmoil:



Questions of rural poetry, unemployment and lack of social support, questions of rural poverty I am sorry, unemployment and lack of social support, all questions of class. And then maybe found in Wordsworth's principal texts. I have listed about 5 here. Surely if you look through the coppers, you will find more. Simon Lee, The Old Cumberland Beggar, The Female Vagrant, The Discharged Shoulder, The Peddlar.

They are all figures symbolise dispossession, poverty and destitution. In other texts, Wordsworth will attribute the suffering of particular classes of people on war that war is responsible for this. Here are 2 segments from the ruined cottage coming upon your slide now.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:36)

You may remember, now some ten years gone,
Two blighting seasons when the fields were left
With half a harvest. It pleased heaven to add
A worse affliction in the plague of war.

As I have said, 'twas now
A time of trouble; shoals of artisans
Were from their daily labour turned away
To hang for bread on parish charity

The Ruined Cottage

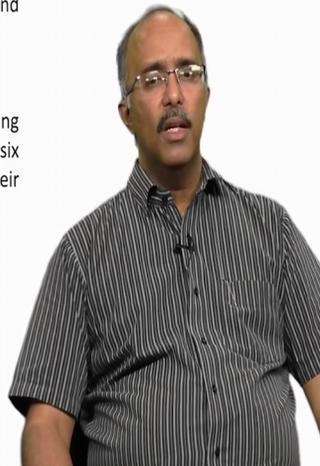


As you can see, these are descriptions of people who work for daily wages and this segment of the ruined cottage will link poverty to 2 things. The blighting seasons as in the failure of the crops and war.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:57)

In poems like 'The Solitary Reaper', 'The Female Vagrant'
and 'Home at Grasmere', we discern both gender and
class politics intersecting.

In *Home at Grasmere*, first, domesticity in a working
class home revolves around the girls (the home as six
daughters, their mother is dead, and they live with their
father):



In poems like the solitary Reaper, the female vagrant and home at Grasmere, we can discern both gender and class politics intersecting. In home at Grasmere, first, domestic city in a working-class home revolves around the girls. The home has 6 daughters, their mother is dead and they live with their father.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:13)

Companion of her Father, does for him
Where'er he wanders in his pastoral course
The service of a Boy, and with delight
More keen and prouder daring: yet hath
She Within the garden, like the rest, a bed
For her own flowers, or favorite
Herbs, a space Holden by sacred charter; and I guess
She also helped to frame that tiny Plot
Of garden ground which one day 'twas my chance
To find among the woody rocks that rise
Above the House, a Slip of smoother earth . .
Home at Grasmere



Here is a description from Home at Grasmere on your slide now.

Companion of her father, does for him
Wherever he wanders in his Pastoral course
The service of a Boy, and with a delight
More keen and prouder daring: yet hath
She Within the garden, like the rest, a bed
For her own flowers, or favourite
Her, a space Holden by sacred charter; and I guess
She also helped to frame that tiny Plot
Of land garden ground which one day it was my chance
To find among the woody rocks that rise
Above the house, a Slip of smoother Earth.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:48)

As Judith Page notes, there is in Wordsworth a link forged between the girl tending to the garden and domesticity: both are cast as gendered roles.



As Judith Page notes, there is in Wordsworth a link between the girl tending to the garden and domesticity: both are cast as gender roles.

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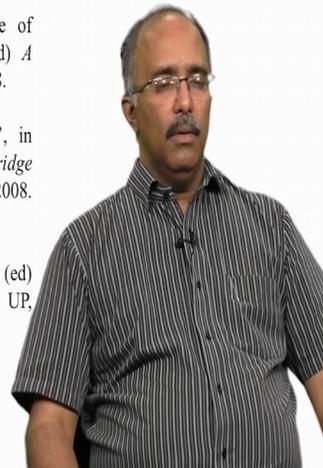
Additional/Recommended Reading

Anne Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender*.

James Najarian, 'Sexual Politics and the Performance of Gender in Romantic Poetry', in Chares Mahoney (ed) *A Companion to Romantic Poetry*. Blackwell, 2011. 521-538.

Adriana Craciun, 'Romantic poetry, sexuality, gender', in James Chandler and Maureen N. McLane (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry*. Cambridge UP, 2008. 155-177.

Judith Page, 'Gender and Domesticity', in Stephen Gill (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*. Cambridge UP, 2003. 125-141.



So what is it we take away from the politics in Wordsworth and his generation? One, there is a politics of gender where there is a feminisation of nature and the naturalisation of the feminine. There is the question and anxiety over the gender of the poetess, the kinds of themes she wants to address. There are of course their typical concerns over vulnerable women, in England and elsewhere. The idea of the mother which emerges constantly through a lot of the poets.

But there is also as we have looked at today, the interest in class and the question of class and class identity where for instance what we are seeing, questions of property ownership are connected to larger social context like enclosure, dispossession, war and other text. There was a list of poems we put up *The Peddlar*, *The Vague Rift*, *The Female Vagrant*, which are all people by those who have lost their lands, lost their livelihood. There are questions about unemployment, of social welfare that you seek constantly in these writers. Thank you.