


History of English Language and Literature
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Lecture 12a
The Age of Johnson

Welcome again to the NPTEL course, The History of English Language and Literature. In today's lecture which is a continuation of the previous lecture we shall be looking at the Age of Johnson and trying to situate the age in connection with the various changes and various transitional effects which were happening during the 18th century. So as we begin to notice in the previous lecture, the Age of Johnson falls towards the latter half of the 18th century and this also is known as the age of transition towards the next age which is also dominated by romanticism.

We also notice that this is a change which is dominated by the prose writers and also characterized by a lot of changes which would be predominated especially in the new genre which is yet to evolve, the novel. In the Age of Johnson, the second most important literary figure is perhaps Oliver Goldsmith and he is considered as the writer who stands nearest to Johnson in terms of merit and wit. And he also said to you shared a very close friendship with Samuel Johnson from 1761 onwards.

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+ Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774)



- The writer who stands nearest to Johnson – friendship from 1761
- 'the most eccentric of an eccentric family' – the son of a Protestant clergyman, Irish
- Bohemianism - Reputation for wildness and stupidity – studies at Dublin – Edinburgh to study medicine ('nominally pursuing' – Leyden – earned a little money by teaching – lost it all at the gaming tables
 - "Inspired Idiot" – Horace Walpole
- 1755 – The Grand tour of Europe – Flanders to Paris to Switzerland, across the Alps, to Italy – Padua, back through France – funds? Still a mystery!
 - *The Traveller* (poem), *The Vicar of Wakefield* (novel)
- 1756 – reaches London penniless and friendless – an apothecary's assistant, an usher

In terms of his personality Goldsmith is considered quite interesting. Hudson in fact talks about him as the most eccentric of an eccentric family. He was born as a son of a Protestant clergyman. He was also Irish which also had to led to a lot of controversies in terms of his political and ethnic affiliations. During his youth Oliver Goldsmith's major cling to fame was his Bohemian lifestyle. He right from a very young age had a reputation for wildness and stupidity.

He, initially he had studied at Dublin which he did not continue much for various reasons and we also notice later that he leaves for Edinburgh to study medicine. But nevertheless historians do notice that he was only nominally pursuing the study of medicine, Edinburgh. His interest were always elsewhere. He also had briefly left for Leyden where we lived for some time. And we also, history tells us that he earned a little money by teaching for a while. But he also loses all of it at the gaming tables.

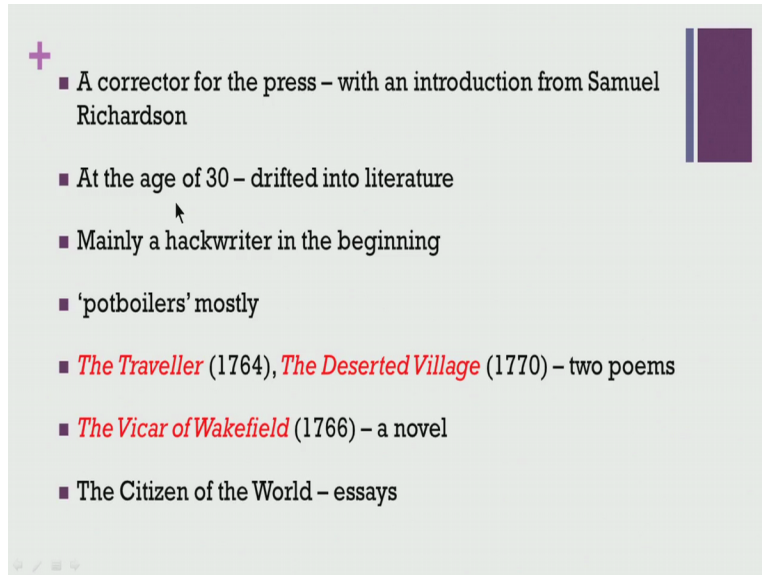
Because of this reckless lifestyle that he led, he was not a favorite of many during his, many of his contemporaries. Horace Walpole, contemporary of him later mentioned about him as the inspired idiot. In 1755 we get to know that keeping in tune with his very Bohemian lifestyle, he takes off with his grand tour of Europe. And we also noted in one of the earlier sessions that the, this grand tour of Europe was considered as an essential part of a man of learning and a man of scholarship during those times.

So we find Oliver Goldsmith going on this major trip from Flanders to Paris, from Paris to Switzerland and then he moves across the Alps to Italy and goes almost till Padua. And then we find that he comes back through France. And if he had lived to Bohemian lifestyle without any steady income and without having pursued any proper form of study with a seriousness, how would he fund all of these travel that continues to be a source of mystery and there is absolutely no available record of how he fended for himself during his this grand tour of Europe.

And in terms of direct effect of this grand tour on his literary writings, it is very notable to highlight at this point that two of his works, *The Traveler* and *The Vicar of Wakefield*, one a poem and the other a novel, both these works were majorly influenced by this grand tour that he undertook at an earlier point in his life. By 1756 after having completed this grand tour, we find that he finally reaches London penniless and friendless. He also serves for a while during his

time as an apothecary's assistant because he was also trained nominally to be a doctor. He also worked as an usher in a school.

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- A corrector for the press – with an introduction from Samuel Richardson
 - At the age of 30 – drifted into literature
 - Mainly a hackwriter in the beginning
 - 'potboilers' mostly
 - *The Traveller* (1764), *The Deserted Village* (1770) – two poems
 - *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766) – a novel
 - The Citizen of the World – essays

But however what proved to be the turning point in his life was his, was the career that he began as corrector for the press. And this was a job that he secured with an introduction from Samuel Richardson, other contemporary writer of 18th century. And so we find that with this introduction and with this new found interest in writing and in the world of letters, we find him slowly drifting towards literature at the age of 30.

This also proved to be a major turning point in his career, in his personality and we also know that after that there was no looking back. In the beginning he was only hack writer. He was beginning to be noticed in the London circles. And the initial works were only considered mostly as potboilers. However the works, *The Traveller*, *The Deserted Village*, these two major poems did bring him some fame in the beginning. But it was *The Vicar of Wakefield*, the novel published in 1766 that ensured a permanent position for him in the word of letters in the London literary circles. He also had compiled a set of essays together and had published them under the name *The Citizen of the World*.

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- Goldsmith - One of the original members of Johnson's Club
 - 'though Johnson often bullied Goldsmith, he would allow no one else to do so'.
- Slow in conversation, a perfect genius for blundering
- A laughing stock of the wits of London's literary world
- The favourite of Burke and Reynolds
- Capricious, vain, improvident – but also large-hearted, sympathetic and humane
- "wrote like an angel, and talked like poor Poll" (Garrick's mock-epitaph)
- 1774 – died, still in debt
- "a gentle master who left scarcely any kind of writing untouched, and touched nothing that he did not adorn" (Johnson's Latin epitaph in Westminster Abbey)

When we talk about the literary influence of Oliver Goldsmith, it is very important to mention right at the outset that he was one of the founding members of Johnson's Club which was quite coveted club during the 18th century. And in terms of his relationship with Johnson, Boswell's biogeography makes a detailed note of the kind of relationship that both of them shared, the kind of deep friendship that both of them had for each other.

It was of a very curious nature. Johnson, it seems used to bully Goldsmith quite a bit but as the historians point out though Johnson often bullied Goldsmith, he would allow no one else to do so. So in that sense Johnson also try to protect him from various other forms of bullying attacks. Goldsmith was also of very different nature. We do not find him being classified among the other leading figures of those times were witty both in writing and in their conversation.

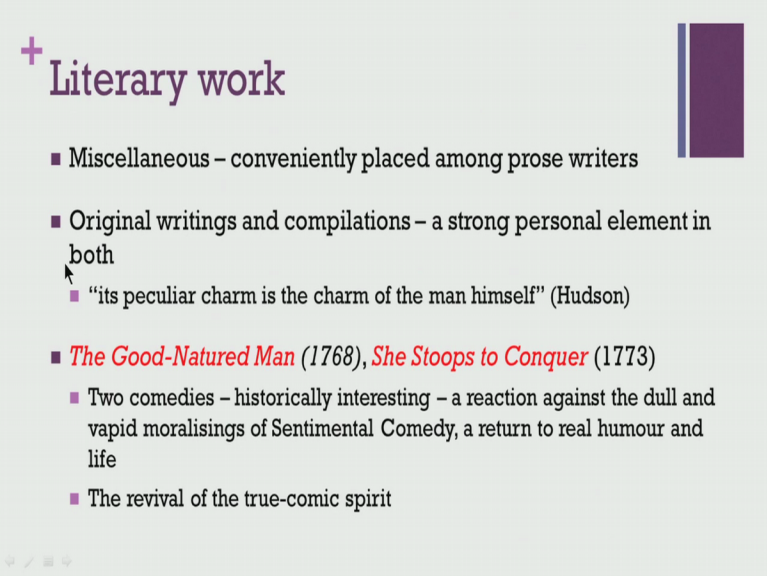
Goldsmith was considered slow in conversation and also it said that he had a perfect genius for blundering. If you remember at the outset itself we noticed that Horace Walpole had spoken about him as an (())(06:36). So due to various kinds of blunders that he used to commit in his day-to-day life, he was a laughing stock of the wits of London's literary world. But however he remained the favorite of Burke and Reynolds throughout his lifetime. They also shared a very deep friendship with each other.

In terms of his personality there were lot of things that people did not like about him. He was capricious, he was vain and he was improvident. But at the same time he was also large-hearted,

sympathetic and humane which also forced many of them to overlook the faults and kind of look at Goldsmith as quite an enduring character. And in terms of his writing abilities, there is this backhanded compliment that the famous actor of those times, Garrick who was also close companion of Johnson and also a member of the club, he makes this particular statement that Goldsmith wrote like an angel and talk like poor Poll.

So this was the kind of reputation that Goldsmith enjoyed during his lifetime and he also was one of the very few writers of those times who was quite well-known during those times but did not make enough money even to come out of the debts that he had accumulated. In 1774 he dies and he is still and he was still in debt even at deathbed. Nevertheless there is this epitaph written by Johnson which also talks a lot about the kind of everlasting effect that Goldsmith had left in the literary world, “a gentle master who left scarcely any kind of writing untouched and touched nothing that he did not adorn.”

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+ Literary work

- Miscellaneous – conveniently placed among prose writers
- Original writings and compilations – a strong personal element in both
 - “its peculiar charm is the charm of the man himself” (Hudson)
- *The Good-Natured Man* (1768), *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773)
 - Two comedies – historically interesting – a reaction against the dull and vapid moralisings of Sentimental Comedy, a return to real humour and life
 - The revival of the true-comic spirit

When we again try to talk about the literary output of Oliver Goldsmith, it is very useful to state at the outset that his work was mostly miscellaneous in nature. However in terms of convenience of understanding literary history, we find Oliver Goldsmith being placed mostly among the prose writers of the period. But as we noted he had also written considerable amount of poetry. He had contributed to the other genres and other forms of writing as well.

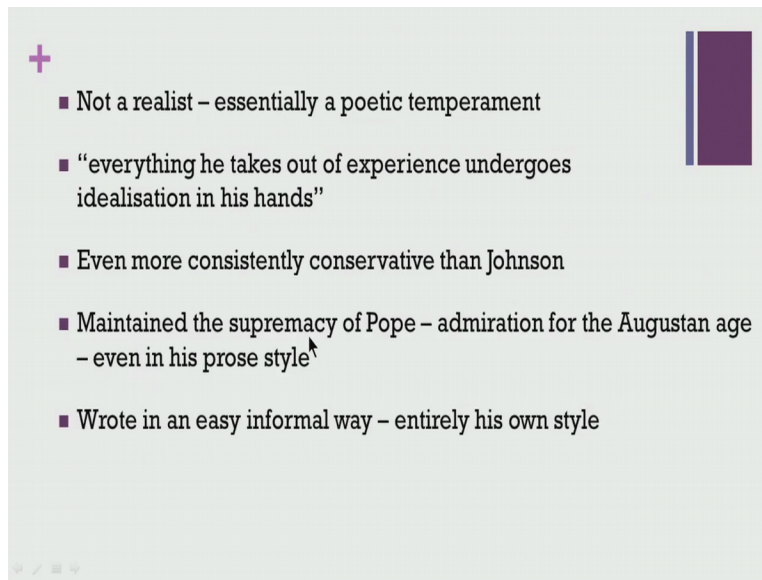
And in terms of his writing, it could be classified in the two. He had composed original writings, he also had compilations of the existing works. But however it is possible to say that in both of these sets of writings, the original ones as well as the compilations of other's writings, he always left a very strong personal element which is what had forced the historian Hudson to remark about his writings that its peculiar charm is the charm of the man himself.

So he was one of those very rare writers who could leave a personal element and a personal touch of his genius and even his personality in his writings whether it was original, whether it was creative original writing or whether it was just a technical compilation. Sometime later we also we find Goldsmith turning towards the theatre. He had come up with two major plays, *The Good-Natured Man* produced in 1768 and *She Stoops to Conquer* which was staged in 1773.

She Stoops to Conquer especially was a major success and we also we notice that in the 18th century which was not a promising time for theatre or plays, we find that *She Stoops to Conquer* is one among the fewer plays of those times which continues to be talked about even in the contemporary. So these two comedies, it also have another historically interesting element. It was reaction against the dull and vapid moralizing of the sentimental comedy which was the kind of that even the major writers of those times such as Addison and Steele had produced.

And with these two comedies, especially with *She Stoops to Conquer*, we find that there is a return to real humor and life which the English society had been majorly missing ever since the 18th century had dawned upon them. So in these works, in these plays, we also find a revival of the true comic spirit which was also starkly missing from the 18th century writings which was dominated mostly by formal approach and a lot of cynical approach towards life.

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- Not a realist – essentially a poetic temperament
 - “everything he takes out of experience undergoes idealisation in his hands”
 - Even more consistently conservative than Johnson
 - Maintained the supremacy of Pope – admiration for the Augustan age – even in his prose style
 - Wrote in an easy informal way – entirely his own style

Goldsmith was very different from the other writers of his times. In the 18th century, especially when the 18th century began, we notice that the age was dominated by a lot of cynicism, a lot of formalist approach. So we do not find any of those, these tendencies getting reflected in the writings of Goldsmith. He was far from a realist. His writing and his personality were essentially wrapped in a poetic temperament.

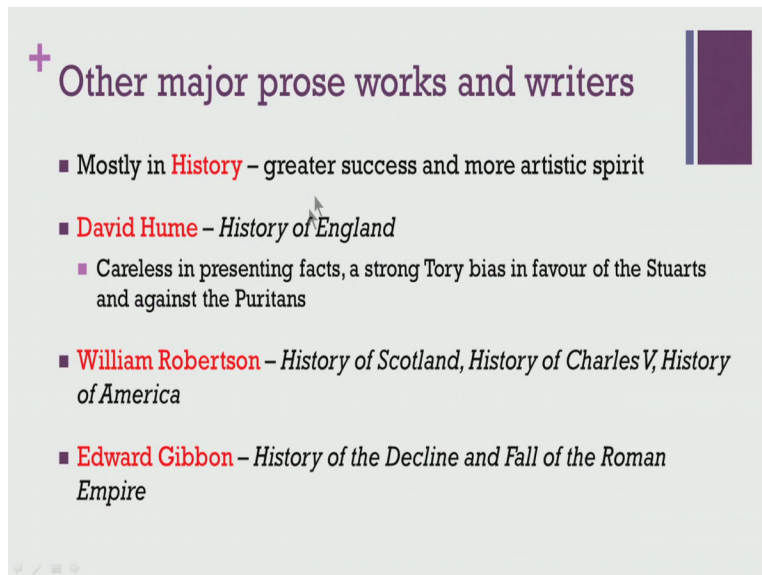
And in fact it said about him that everything he takes out of experience undergoes idealization in his hands. So this was a sort of approach that he had towards life and also towards his writings. Again interestingly if we compare Oliver Goldsmith with the other writers of his times, we notice that he was even more consistently conservative than Johnson himself. So in that sense it is very difficult sometimes to kind of do comparison between the Bohemian lifestyle that Oliver Goldsmith led as a youth and also the conservative approach that he had in general towards life and also the kind of principles that were getting reflected in his writings.

He also was the kind of writer who believed in the supremacy of pope though it was the Age of Johnson, quite removed from the formal principles that pope had established. We do find that Oliver Goldsmith maintaining a certain kind of an admiration for the Augustan Age and even in his prose style we find a reflection of this. But nevertheless if we analyze Goldsmith's writings, the curious fact remains in such a way that his writing was also easy and informal. And the style

was entirely his own though he was, he majorly admired many other writers, though he was influenced by the other sort of major dominating principles of different ages and different times.

We find him developing his own kind of style and this was also very important in the 18th century because this was an age when literary writing was moving away from standard principles and rigid fixities towards a freer kind of experimentation which would find its fruition in the succeeding age especially in the age of romanticism.

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+ Other major prose works and writers

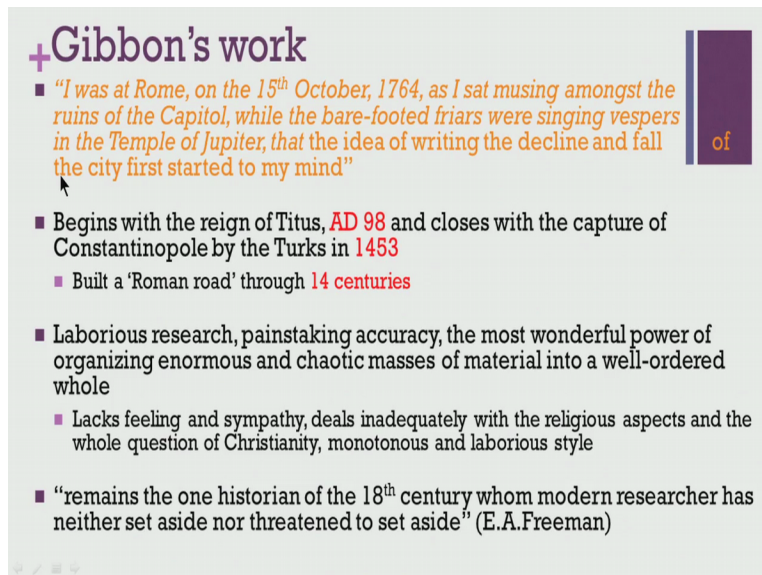
- Mostly in **History** – greater success and more artistic spirit
- **David Hume** – *History of England*
 - Careless in presenting facts, a strong Tory bias in favour of the Stuarts and against the Puritans
- **William Robertson** – *History of Scotland, History of Charles V, History of America*
- **Edward Gibbon** – *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

Now we begin to take a look at the other major prose works and writers of those times. It would be of most interest to note that the works in history dominate the other prose writings of this time. We also find many writings in history achieving greater success and also achieving more artistic spirit. David Hume's *History of England* is of special mention at this point of time. This work however also had faced a lot of critic at a later point because it was careless in presenting facts.

He was also a strong, being a very strong supporter of the Tory party, we also find him displaying a very strong Tory bias in favor of the Stuarts and also against the Puritans. And it is also well-known fact that Hume was better known as a philosopher later on. And William Robertson' *History of Scotland, History of Charles V and History of America* were also very popular history works written during that time.

History was not seen as a boring, pedagogic form of writing but it was seen as a way in which people begin to look at the ways in which they themselves and also their community, the society, the nation itself were getting framed and shaped from the earlier times onwards. And this interest in history, in fact we find it continuing into the later centuries and also developing into a proper kind of discipline and academic interest at later point of time.

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+Gibbon's work

- *"I was at Rome, on the 15th October, 1764, as I sat musing amongst the ruins of the Capitol, while the bare-footed friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind"*
- Begins with the reign of Titus, **AD 98** and closes with the capture of Constantinople by the Turks in **1453**
 - Built a 'Roman road' through **14 centuries**
- Laborious research, painstaking accuracy, the most wonderful power of organizing enormous and chaotic masses of material into a well-ordered whole
 - Lacks feeling and sympathy, deals inadequately with the religious aspects and the whole question of Christianity, monotonous and laborious style
- "remains the one historian of the 18th century whom modern researcher has neither set aside nor threatened to set aside" (E.A.Freeman)

Edward Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire is perhaps the most important prose work of this period. It also deserves to be talked about a little more. Gibbon's work was quite influential during those times and it continues to be one of the most referred works of the 18th century. And this is how Gibbon began his work on a very personal note which was not really associated with history writing during those times.

One of the beginning statements of Gibbon's work goes like this, "I was at Rome on the 15th October, 1764 as I sat musing amongst the ruins of the Capitol while the bare-footed friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind." So beginning with such a personal note he goes on to cover the history of 14 centuries. So it said that the work began with the reign of Titus from AD98 onwards and he closes with the capture of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453.

In that sense it is also said that Gibbon had built a Roman road through 14 centuries. So this work was quite unique in many respects. It was a result of laborious research and it also displays

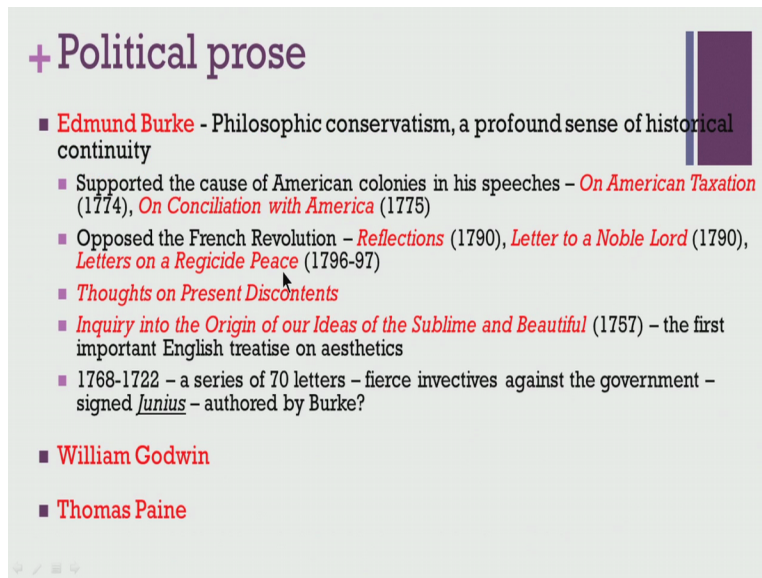
painstaking accuracy which was also a very commendable fact during those times. If you remember many of the historical works of those times and especially in the, especially even from the early modern era, we find that the truth value of even the historical writings were much contested.

And this work is most supremely noted for its wonderful power of organizing enormous and chaotic masses of material into a well-ordered whole. And this sort of research oriented production of history was not a technique which was taught or not a technique in which people were much trained during the 18th century. This was also makes it all the more unique and all the more special. And nevertheless there are also lot of criticisms against Gibbon's work on Roman history.

It said that it lacked feeling and sympathy. It also had dealt inadequately with the religious aspects of those times. And this is also said to be a result of the very formalist and very indifferent approach towards history. And it also had rejected the whole question of Christianity and in terms of the writing style it was seen as monotonous and quite laborious and not very friendly to the reader. Nevertheless the uniqueness and the supremacy of this cannot be disputed.

And as one of the later historians, E. A. Freeman notes, "Gibbon remains the one historian of the 18th century whom modern researcher has neither set aside nor threatened to set aside." This also reminds that towards the end of the 18th century literary and non-literary writings were moving closer and closer to the modern times. There is also very little that begin to distinguish the earlier writings from even the contemporary ones that we access today.

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+ Political prose

- **Edmund Burke** - Philosophic conservatism, a profound sense of historical continuity
 - Supported the cause of American colonies in his speeches – *On American Taxation* (1774), *On Conciliation with America* (1775)
 - Opposed the French Revolution – *Reflections* (1790), *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1790), *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1796-97)
 - *Thoughts on Present Discontents*
 - *Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) – the first important English treatise on aesthetics
 - 1768-1722 – a series of 70 letters – fierce invectives against the government – signed *Junius* – authored by Burke?
- **William Godwin**
- **Thomas Paine**

The end of the 18th century named as the Age of Johnson was also an age dominated by political prose. We find Edmund Burke as his prolific best during those times, he was a philosopher who celebrated a kind of philosophic conservatism in his works. He also had a profound sense of historic continuity keeping in time, keeping in tune with the spirit of those times. He was one of the very few who supported the cause of the American colonies in his speeches. This also had led to a lot of controversy in Britain during those times.

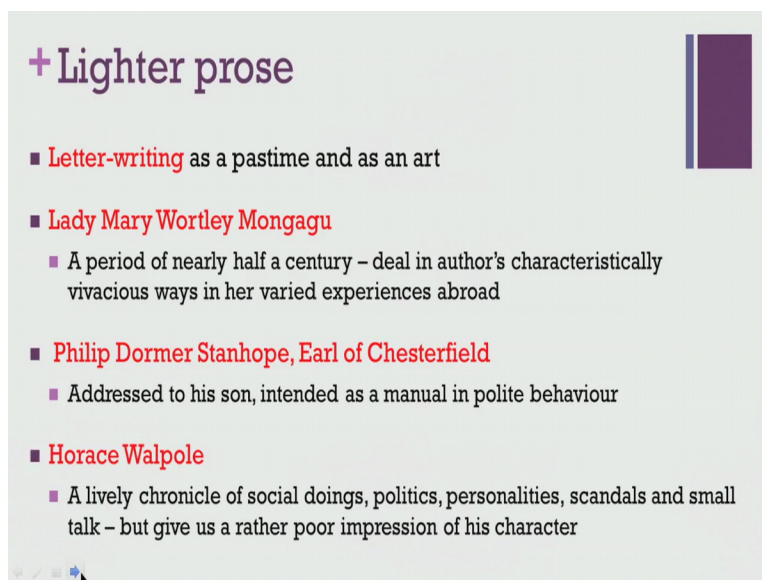
And some of the works along those lines include *On American Taxation* published in 1774 and *On Conciliation with America*, 1755. He also had opposed the French Revolution in his works *Reflections*, *Letter to a Noble Lord* and *Letters on a Regicide Peace*. So we also find that during this time not just Edmund Burke but also many others through his, through their literary and non-literary writings they began responding to the international affairs of those times as well.

As we have noted in one of the earlier lectures, this was also the period which witnessed the emergence of various revolutions and the emergence of nation states in various parts of Europe and also in rest of the world. His other major work was *Thoughts on Present Discontents* followed by an *Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. This was considered as the finest important English treatise on aesthetics and also given the 18th century there was much demand and interest for this kind of formalized reading on aesthetics, on politics, on the philosophy of mind so on and so forth.

Edmund Burke was also had a certain controversial site to his life. From 1768 to 1772, a series of 70 letters were produced anonymously. This also included fierce invectives against the ruling government. So these letters were signed Junius and it certainly was not the real name of the author. So there was this conspiracy, so there was this assumption that perhaps the author of all of these 70 letters were Burke himself. Though there is, though this is a much disputed claim and there are also historians who feel that it could have been authored by someone else, this remains one of the things which are credited to Burke's account.

Two other important writer philosophers of those times include William Godwin and Thomas Paine. And Thomas Paine also had responded to some of Edmund Burke's writings during those times.

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The slide is titled '+ Lighter prose' in a purple font. It contains a bulleted list of authors and their works, with each author's name in red and their work's description in black. The list includes:

- **Letter-writing** as a pastime and as an art
- **Lady Mary Wortley Mongagu**
 - A period of nearly half a century – deal in author's characteristically vivacious ways in her varied experiences abroad
- **Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield**
 - Addressed to his son, intended as a manual in polite behaviour
- **Horace Walpole**
 - A lively chronicle of social doings, politics, personalities, scandals and small talk – but give us a rather poor impression of his character

Amidst the very serious kind of writing that dominated the 18th century we also find that sort of lighter prose also prevailed. Letter-writing primarily was considered as a pastime and as an art during those times. We also find many of them collecting together some personal and private letters and compiling them and publishing them as a work of art. So some of those deserve particular mention over here. The series of letters by Lady Mary Wortley Mongagu, that was considered quite important then.

So her account covers a period of nearly half a century. And it also deals majorly with the author's characteristically by vivacious ways in her varied experiences abroad. So this personal

touch also give a lot of interest to the readers because this was not something which was far remote from reality but it was closer to reality and also in certain way distant because it was not their own experience. But it was nevertheless real kind of experience noted down by real person.

So these letters also give the readers an opportunity to take a look into the private worlds which were otherwise inaccessible. So we also find Philip Dormer Stanhope's publication of letters also becoming quite popular. This series of letters were addressed to his son and it was intended as a manual in polite behavior. So it said that many during those time they prescribed this work as a must have in the family circles in order to have a certain kind of manual for raising young men with polite behavior.

Horace Walpole also had published a series of letters. It was considered as a lively chronicle of social doings, politics, personalities, scandals and small talk. It was very interesting during those times and we also find it, they were hugely popular, people used to consume it quite interestingly. But nevertheless on hindsight it also reveals that this series of letters also had given a rather poor impression of the character of Horace Walpole. We shall come back to take a look at Horace Walpole again in the context of our discussions about novel which shall be forthcoming.

And that also reminds us that all of these works, the private and the public tellings of history, the formal and informal kinds of prose writings and also the various debates and discussions into politics, society, mankind's behavior, the international relations, so on and so forth, they were all in a certain way or the other paving way for the emergence of novel as a proper genre in the coming decades. So in the next session we shall be taking a look at the emergence of novel and various things that contributed to the same in the 18th century. With this we also begin to wind up today's lecture. Thank you for listening and look forward to seeing you in the next session.