

**History of English Language and Literature**  
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**Lecture 15**  
**The Age of Romanticism: Introduction**

Hello everyone. Let me welcome you to another session of the NPTEL course the history of English language and literature. In the previous session we began noticing how Britain and the rest of Europe were getting majorly swept over through major literary, social, cultural and political events which were dominating each nation, each province and particular communities as well. And we also noticed how all of these had a major impact in the kind of literature which was getting (pro) produced.

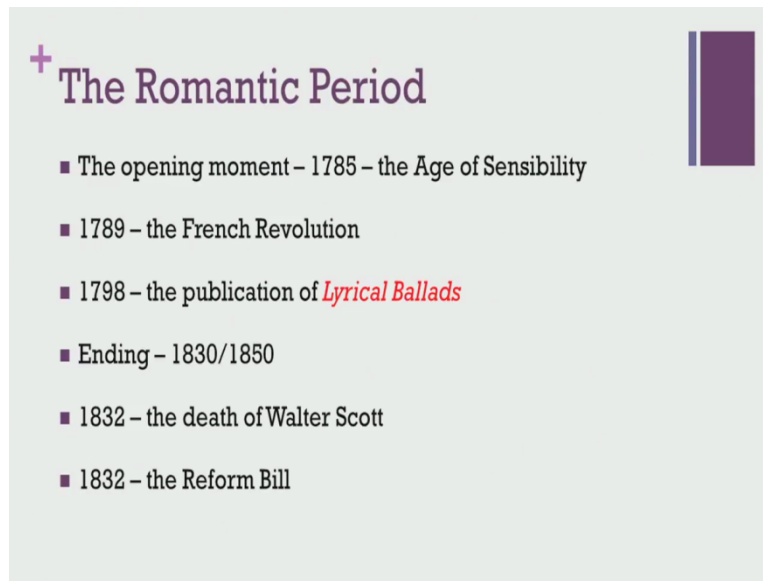
Taking off from the prioritization of feeling which dominated the poetry of people such as Burns who also signalled a transition towards romantic age, there was only one way forward as far as a literary movement was considered. And this is what eventually culminated in the age of romanticism.

So from the end of the 18th century onwards moving away from the tenets of the Augustan literature, moving away from the dry (intellect) intellectuality which dominated the 18th century we find poetry and literature in general moving towards a more romantic as well as a revolutionary spirit. So if we try to classify this period and try to talk about this period in terms of the years that it covered it would be quite problematic to identify the opening movement of the age of romanticism.

Some feel that the age of romanticism is a continuation of the age of sensibility of the 18th century and in that sense identifying 1785 as the opening movement of the romantic period. And certain others identify the event of French Revolution as not just the herald of a new age in world history but also as a new age in world literature. And some locate precisely 1798 the year which marked the publication of the Lyrical Ballads as the year which inaugurated the romantic movement in English literature.

And as to when this period ended that is also much debated thing. In the sense there are historians who feel that the (move) romantic movement ended in 1830 and there are others who contested it with the opinion that the moment ended in 1850.

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## + The Romantic Period

- The opening moment – 1785 – the Age of Sensibility
- 1789 – the French Revolution
- 1798 – the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*
- Ending – 1830/1850
- 1832 – the death of Walter Scott
- 1832 – the Reform Bill

But however it would be safe to assume that this movement began to decline towards the end of the 19th century and particularly with two major events which marked the latter half of the 19th century, the death of Walter Scott and also the passing of the reformer. These are some of the things that we shall come back to take a look at again.

And meanwhile it is important to again locate the significance of revolution and imagination in the shaping of this new literary age known as the romantic age. This period generally described as the age of romanticism and more precisely known as the age of Wordsworth was an age of revolution and history and politics. So these changes were felt not just in Britain but also in different parts of Europe. And it also had its replication in certain colonial provinces as well.

These are some of the details that we should come back to take a look at again and the ((0)) (03:37) itself is very important to state that this movement was not limited to literature but it was a very wide spread kind of a sweeping chain which was taking over literature, society, culture and everything that mattered to mankind.

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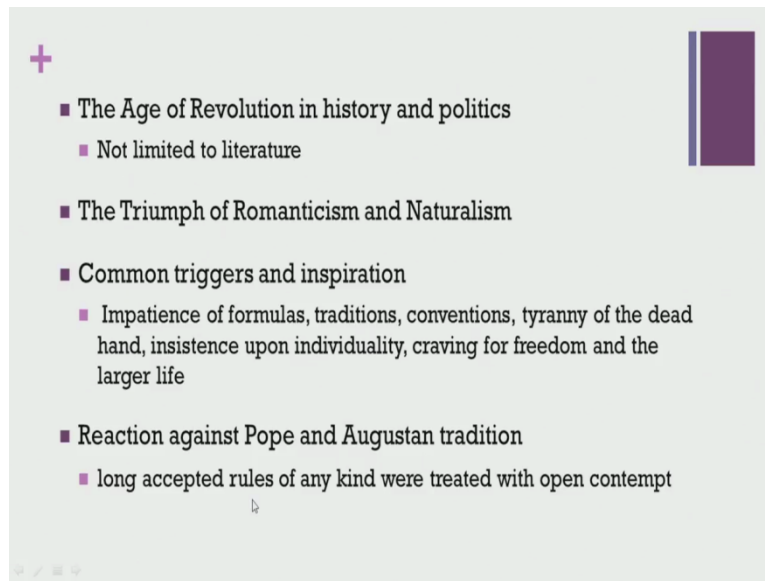
- The Age of Revolution in history and politics
  - Not limited to literature
- The Triumph of Romanticism and Naturalism
- Common triggers and inspiration
  - Impatience of formulas, traditions, conventions, tyranny of the dead hand, insistence upon individuality, craving for freedom and the larger life
- Reaction against Pope and Augustan tradition
  - long accepted rules of any kind were treated with open contempt

So in that sense also moving away from the major things that dominated the 18th century, the end of the 18th century as well as the early 19th century also saw the triumph of romanticism and naturalism. And though these had two different kinds of trajectories when it came to movement in arts and literature and also movement in social political and historical affairs, it is important to note that they all had certain common triggers in inspiration.

Some of the major ones being the impatience with this set formulas and the set conventional traditions and also tendency to move away from the tyranny of the dead hand, the insistence upon individuality, the craving for freedom and a very larger sense of life. So this was clearly a departure from the narrow sense of understanding of life and individuality that the 18th century thinkers and 18th century writers had.

And in terms of the writing conventions it was also a very strong reaction against the traditions which were prevalent during the age of Pope and the Augustan tradition in general. So in that sense we also find the writers, the thinkers and all the learned men of the period reacting against the long accepted rules and also treating all of those dominant conventions with an open sense of contempt.

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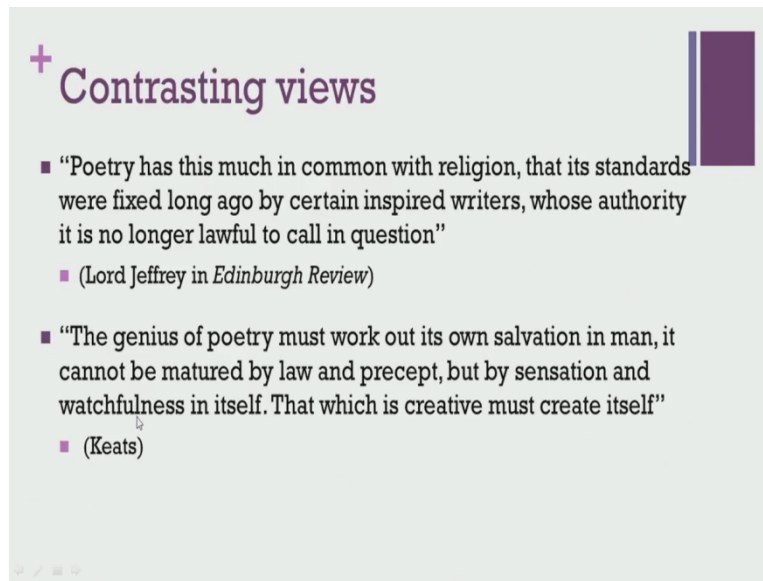


It is in that sense that we begin to identify the age of romanticism as an age of revolution in writing and literature and in arts in general. This period like all the other periods were also characterized by certain contrasting views. There were some of the writers who felt right at the beginning that this moving away from detentions was not an acceptable thing at all but on the other hand they were also freer and secular kind of writers and thinkers who believed that this was the opening of a new era itself.

For instance Lord Jeffrey wrote in Edinburg Review that he did not approve of this new tenancy which was a setting in. He opined, Poetry has this much in common with a religion that its standards where fixed long ago by certain inspired writers whose authority it is no longer lawful to call in question. So in a way by comparing poetry with religion there were also these people like Lord Jeffrey who belong to the old school of thought who believed that poetry like religion could not be questioned.

But given that in the 18th century and the 19th century even the religious tenets were being questioned, being challenged and being put to trial. It was quite natural that a thing as poetry should also undergo a mass of change. Just as Keats was to later remark, The genius of poetry must work out its own salvation in man, it cannot be matured by law and precept but by sensation and watchfulness in itself. That which is creative must create itself.

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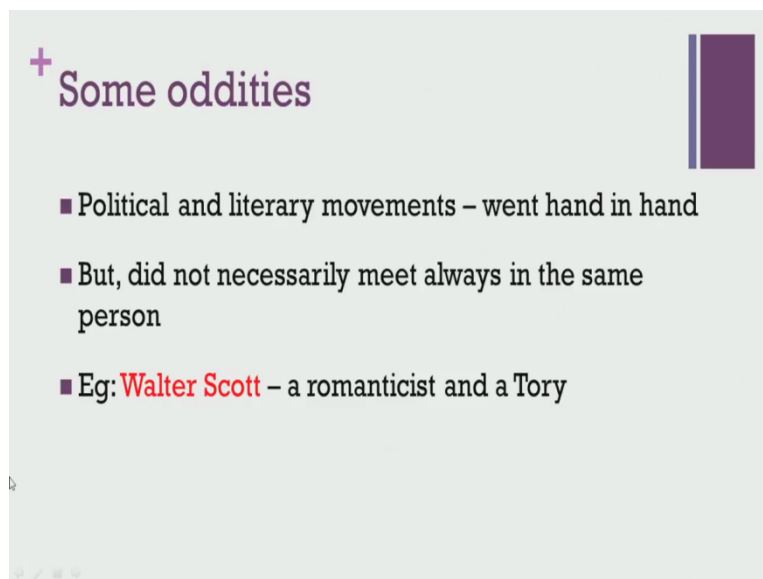
+ **Contrasting views**

- “Poetry has this much in common with religion, that its standards were fixed long ago by certain inspired writers, whose authority it is no longer lawful to call in question”
  - (Lord Jeffrey in *Edinburgh Review*)
- “The genius of poetry must work out its own salvation in man, it cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself. That which is creative must create itself”
  - (Keats)

So we begin to see a prioritization of experience, a feeling and everything that is more natural and inherent in human beings. This period was also characterized by certain oddities. When we say that the political and literary movement went hand in hand it is quite natural to assume that most of the writers had similar kinds of political and literary principles that they believed in.

But however there were certain exceptions because we do not find the political and the literary ideas meeting always in the same person in the same way. For example there was Walter Scott who was a romanticist and also a very strong supporter of the Tory party.

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+ **Some oddities**

- Political and literary movements – went hand in hand
- But, did not necessarily meet always in the same person
- Eg: **Walter Scott** – a romanticist and a Tory

So in spite of these many oddities we find that the age of romanticism or the age of revolution was quite significant in creating new pathways and word literature itself. So at this juncture it is only appropriate to take a look at the influence that French Revolution had on poetry in particular and also British literature in general. French Revolution was a major event which changed the course of world history from the end of the 18th century onwards.

Its changes and its impact was felt not just in France and the neighbouring countries but it actually was felt across Europe and also as we mentioned earlier even in some of the colonial provinces. The year 1789 that marked the herald of French Revolution with the fall of the prison of Bastille. It was a major event and many thinkers and many historians have spoken about it with a lot of enthusiasm. It is said that this event sent a thrill of fresh life through the whole civilized world.

And the literary historian Hudson talks about in a very (enthusi) enthusiastic way. He notes the French Revolution, It came as the prophecy of a new day and for the moment it seem as if, leaving behind it all the evils of the past, humanity at large was to pass forward immediately into an era of realized democratic ideals of liberty, brotherhood and the rights of man.

In a certain way at a later point when we look at the poetry of the period in detail we will also begin to identify that whatever was being talked about the political ideas of the period was quite true when we analyze the literary output of the period as well. It was rightfully that Wordsworth remarked at a later point, he wrote in one of his poems that, Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven.

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## + French Revolution and English poetry

- Striking changes in the temper of European society – major influences
- 1789 – ‘sent a thrill of fresh life through the whole civilised world’ – “It came as the prophecy of a new day, and for the moment it seemed as if, leaving behind it all the evils of the past, humanity at large was to pass forward immediately into an era of realised democratic ideals – of liberty, brotherhood and the rights of man”
- “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, /But to be young was very heaven” (Wordsworth)

This was a kind of major impact that the French Revolution had on the literary output and on the cultural ethos of this period. And many later historians have also tried to analyze this impact that French Revolution had on British literature of the later 18th in the early 19th century. There were many works with titles such as, *The French Revolution and English Literature*, *The French Revolution Debate in English Literature and Culture*, and also the *British Literature of the French Revolution in the 1790s*.

This connection between the revolution and the literary output it is not a (( ))(10:13) one but however it is a very direct kind of influence that we should begin to notice further when we move on with the analysis as well.

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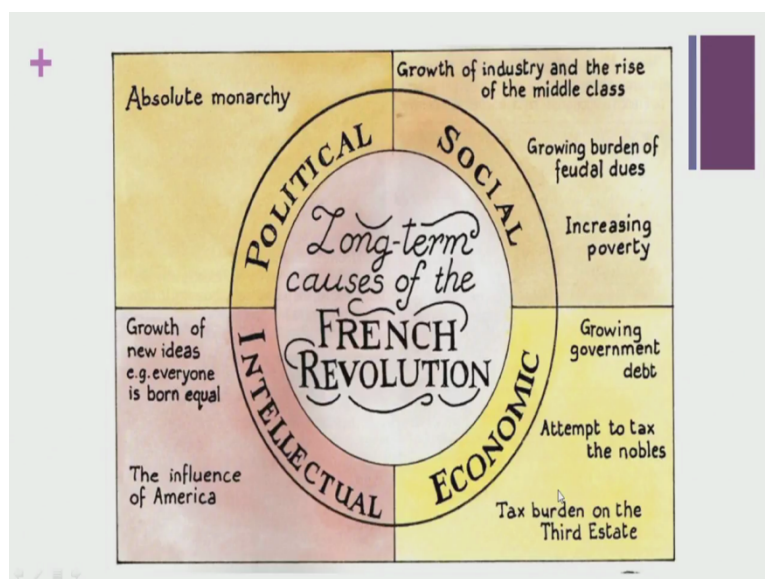
It is also important to take a look at what exactly were the reasons that made the British writers sympathize quite directly with the French Revolution. If you remember there was a long standing hostility between Britain and France but we do not find any of those coming in the way when it came to this event. We find the British thinkers and the British leaders openly sympathizing with the revolution and also all that causes which triggered it.

So if we look at the long term causes of the French Revolution which would be classified into political, social, economic and intellectual. We do find that there is a way in which the British were able to identify with most of the things which the French were reacting against towards the end of the 18th century. For instance there was absolute monarchy which the French masses were protesting against.

This was something that the British had protested against maybe you know couple of centuries back itself. And also in terms of the social problems all of those problems were problems that England could also relate with because they also had battled with all of these forces at one point or the other.

And also as far as economic reasons are concerned it is also useful to remember that Britain also had even beheaded a king due to these practices of absolute monarchy, because of the practices of heavy taxation on the common man and also the growing in concern and in difference that the government should towards the people.

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And alongside there was also a growing influence of the American ideas on all of these new revolutionary kind of ideals. And also we find that the people were increasingly getting



fascinated by this new ideal that everyone was born equal. So these ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity it was not just limited to the land of France but it also had a major influence and a major impact on many of these neighbouring European countries including Britain.

And Britain especially took all of these things to heart because Britain was one of the forerunners of the movement towards democracy and towards individual rights and human freedom. To later appreciate the impact that the French Revolution had on British literature it is very important to understand the trajectory of the French Revolution. Broadly speaking it happened in two different stages.

The first stage was from 1789 . The event that marked the beginning of the revolution was the fall of the Bastille prison. So it was some 1789 to early 1793 and this period is also largely known as the successful stage of the revolution. So beginning with the storming of the Bastille prison it continued to successfully eliminate the domination of the aristocracy and also it went on to adopt the declaration of the rights of man quite inspired by the American Revolution as well.

And it would also rightfully and eventually resulted in King Louis XVI's (ex) execution. So all together not just for the political thinkers and the political theorist but also for the common man it gave the promise of a brighter day, the promise of regenerated man and regenerated earth. So this was a context which laid the foundation to these basic principles which also become associated with French Revolution, the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.

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**+ French Revolution**

- Two stages
- 1789 to early 1793 – the successful stage
  - Storming of the Bastille
  - Elimination of the aristocracy
  - The adoption of the declaration of the rights of man
  - King Louis XVI's execution
  - “the promise of a brighter day, the promise of regenerated man and regenerated earth”
  - Liberty. Equality. Fraternity

**Liberté  
égalité  
fraternité**

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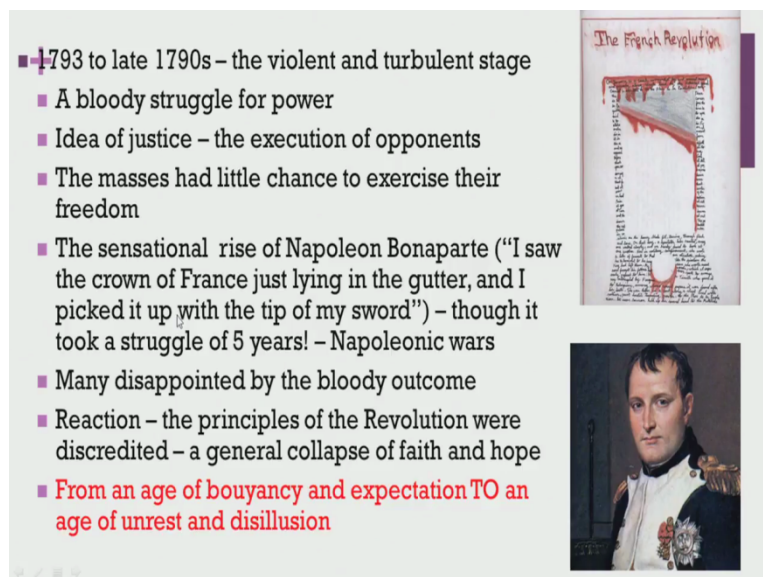
So in that sense the first stage was immensely successful and also immensely influential in shaping the early poetry and the early literature of Britain and also the main things which were getting written and circulated in different parts of the world. But moving on the second stage was not that commented. From 1793 to late 1790s the French Revolution took a more bloody turn.

It became more violent and turbulent and it was also the time when many other thinkers who were supporting the French Revolution in the beginning they were disillusioned by this and revolution in general also lost the support of many of the early supporters. It would turn to eventually a bloody struggle for power and the idea of justice eventually narrowed down to an understanding of the execution of opponents. It moved away from all the grand ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity that it had stood for.

And also during this time the masses had very little chance to exercise their freedom. It was only the transfer of power and the transfer of tyranny from the (( ))(15:03) to another set of people. It was during this time that Europe in general was a quite even frightened by this sensational rise of Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon Bonaparte in fact talking about his own rise to power rather dramatically this is how he remarked about it, I saw the crown of France just lying in the gutter and I picked it up with the tip of my sword.

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- 1793 to late 1790s – the violent and turbulent stage
  - A bloody struggle for power
  - Idea of justice – the execution of opponents
  - The masses had little chance to exercise their freedom
  - The sensational rise of Napoleon Bonaparte (“I saw the crown of France just lying in the gutter, and I picked it up with the tip of my sword”) – though it took a struggle of 5 years! – Napoleonic wars
  - Many disappointed by the bloody outcome
  - Reaction – the principles of the Revolution were discredited – a general collapse of faith and hope
  - From an age of bouyancy and expectation TO an age of unrest and disillusion



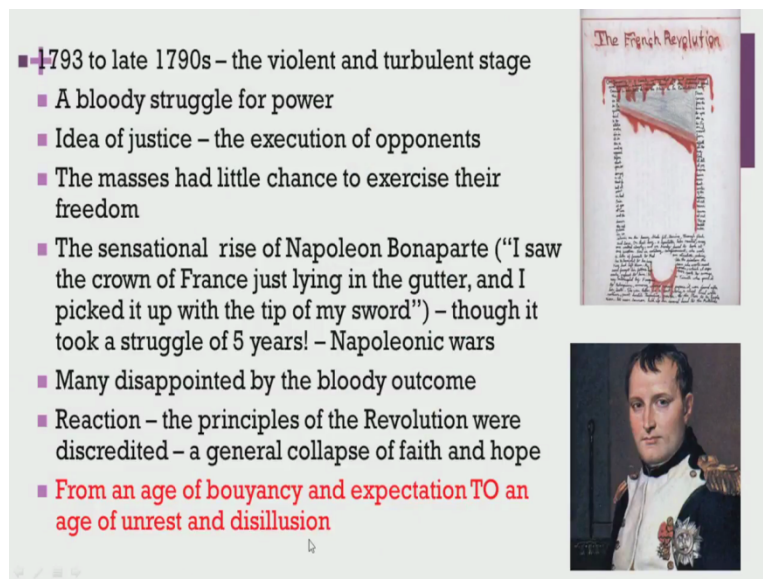
Though this took a long struggle of 5 years characterized with the Napoleonic wars and also later the major wars which were fought for domination within Europe we do find that the rule of Napoleon was not really the kind of change that the French people or the European people

were looking forward to. So many were in general quite disappointed by the bloody outcome of this war which began with a grand pronouncement of great democratic ideas.

The reaction to this disappointment was also quite dramatic in the sense that the principles of the revolution were discredited and also there was a general collapse of faith and hope which had found a regeneration in the beginning at the outside of the revolution. So we find in general a transition from an age of buoyancy and expectation to an age of unrest and disillusion.

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- 1793 to late 1790s – the violent and turbulent stage
  - A bloody struggle for power
  - Idea of justice – the execution of opponents
  - The masses had little chance to exercise their freedom
  - The sensational rise of Napoleon Bonaparte (“I saw the crown of France just lying in the gutter, and I picked it up with the tip of my sword”) – though it took a struggle of 5 years! – Napoleonic wars
  - Many disappointed by the bloody outcome
  - Reaction – the principles of the Revolution were discredited – a general collapse of faith and hope
  - From an age of bouyancy and expectation TO an age of unrest and disillusion



So this also had a major impact on the kind of poetry and the kind of literature which was getting produced in Britain. So accordingly we find that romantic poetry of produced during the earlier period of the revolution and the poetry produced during the later period of the revolution were quite different from each other. We find the poetry in general embracing all of these ideals in the beginning and also trying to struggle with the later discreditation of these same principles which once became an inspiration for most of the romantic poets.

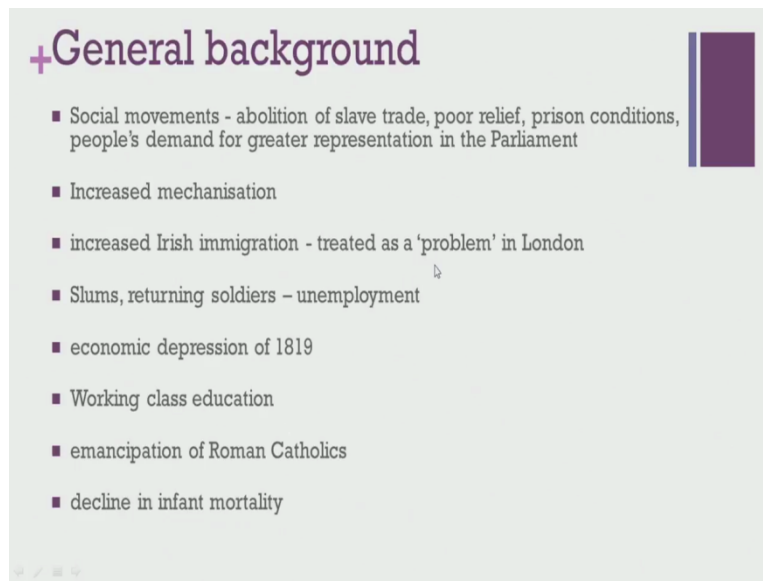
Though French Revolution remains as the single most important influence during the romantic literary period it is also important to take a look at the other general things which were happening in England as well as in rest of Europe. This was in general the period of social movement. So we find a lot of unrest and struggle for the abolishing of slave trade.

There are lot of new initiatives from the government for poor relief, there is an improvement of prison conditions and people also demand for greater representation in the Parliament. Though the French Revolution acted as a triggering point we find the impact of it reaching

out into various other social political and cultural and economic sectors as well. This is also the period of increased mechanization.

The detail of industrial revolution is something that we shall take a look at in detail when we talk about the output of the 19th century. There was also an increased Irish immigration from the beginning of the 19th century onwards and this was also treated as a problem in London.

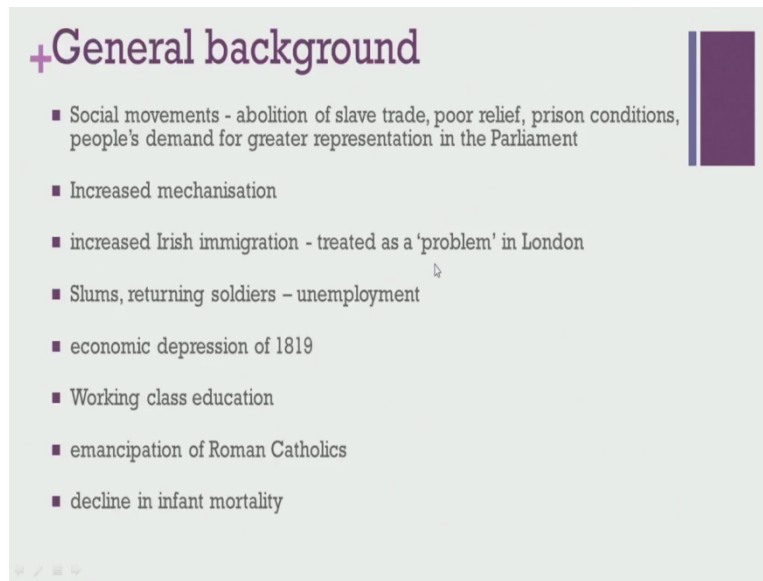
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And this coupled with the ongoing tussle that the British people had with the Irish and also with the Scottish we find that it takes a different turn all together with an increased sense of national consciousness also to lead to other kind of territorial problems at a later point of time. So later in the 20th century Celtic revival was taking place in the literary imagination of Britain. All of these details come quite important in shaping our understanding as well.

There was also an increased growth of slums and also there were lot of these soldiers returning from the wars which were happening and all of these together led to the rise in unemployment which was too much for England to handle and we also find London going through a tough time during this period which also led to the economic depression of the 1890 from which Britain took some time to recover from.

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**+General background**

- Social movements - abolition of slave trade, poor relief, prison conditions, people's demand for greater representation in the Parliament
- Increased mechanisation
- increased Irish immigration - treated as a 'problem' in London
- Slums, returning soldiers - unemployment
- economic depression of 1819
- Working class education
- emancipation of Roman Catholics
- decline in infant mortality

So we also see that amidst all of these troubles England continued to produce lot of good literature and also continued to contribute much towards the growing power of industrialisation and the power of colonization. This was a period which also stressed a lot on the working class education and we also find that education and writing and also reading material began to reach the common public irrespective of class and gender.

And this age also began to bring in more hope for the Roman Catholics because at an earlier point in the 16th century and in the 17th century specially it is useful to recall that it was even considered as an act of treason to convert to Catholicism and also that the Roman Catholics were excluded from all kinds of offices and all kinds of prominent positions. So in that sense this age also began to promise a more immense patient for the Roman Catholics and also a freer kind of situation for practicing one's own religious faith.

The general health conditions in England was also improving. We find in that sense a decline in infant mortality as well. Given these basic positive things which were happening in and around Europe, particularly in England, there was only one way forward as we have noted earlier. The literary output of this period was heavily dominated by this single term known as imagination. So it is for the first time that we encountered this term in the history of English literature and we find that there is no going back from this period onwards.

And until this point of time there was a domination of classical tenets, or there was always the domination of a certain dry intellectual wit. There was also a need to always imitate the predecessors and also prove oneself worthy of the legacy that Britain already had. But from

the romantic age onwards we begin to see a prioritization of feeling and imagination and the experience over every other kind of emotion and every other kind of influence.

And this in a way as we began to note in the beginning of this lecture it was only a continuation. Some of the historians feel that it was only a continuation of the cult of sensibility which was prevalent from the mid 18th century onwards. And some historians have also identified certain kind of prioritization of feeling even in the 18th century writing such as found in *The Man of Feeling* by Henry Mackenzie.

And in that sense many even point out that this was not a complete break away from the tradition but it was only a continuation of a certain dominant kinds of traditions and conventions of the 18th (cen) century. Taking a look at the major influencers who also produced major literary output during this period they were William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor, Coleridge and William Blake.

And under the leadership of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake we find romantic age going on to be one of the most successful literary periods in English literary history. It is also useful to remember as we begin to wrap up this lecture that the romantic poets continue to be the most anthologized poets of all literary ages and of all literally languages.

And with this understanding it is also useful to remember that we shall be coming back in the next lecture to talk in more detail about the individual influences and the individual output which begin to characterize the 19th century as a whole as the age of imagination and particularly as age of Wordsworth. And more importantly this age was dominated by literary output in terms of poetry as compared to the previous age which was known as the age of novel.

And the previous age in the 18th century there was a general sense that poetry perhaps may never make a comeback, this being the age of prose. But however the 19th century literary revolution was to prove otherwise and we do see a new kind of flowering of poetical genius dominating the English literary scene. So with this we wind up today's lecture. Thank you for listening. And I look forward to meeting you in the next session.