

**English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832**  
**Professor Pramod K Nayar**  
**Department of English**  
**University of Hyderabad**  
**Romantic Poetry 1: Sensibility and Passion**

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Romantic Poetry 1: Sensibility and Passion



In the age of sensibility, the irregular, the fragmented, the unruly, even the nervous became not only aesthetically desirable, but morally superior to regularity, completion, and order.

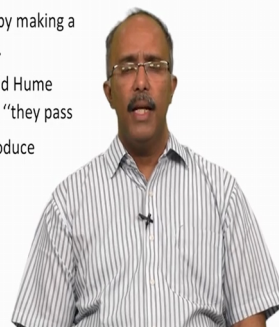
Now the question was: if sensibility is linked to virtue, ethics and morals, why is it that most humans lack these?

How come, as Hobbes suggested, human beings were fundamentally selfish?

The Romantics and the writers of sensibility sorted this problem by making a case for rustic simplicity as the source and root of true sensibility.

There was also the anxiety that passions were transmissible. David Hume believed that passions are "contagious" and "communicable"; "they pass

with the greatest facility from one person to another, and produce correspondent movements in all human breasts



Hello everybody, let us continue with our discussion in this week of sensibility and Passion, with specific reference to the poetry of the English, of the Romantic period, 1798 to 1832. In our previous session we spoke about the rise of the literature of sensibility and the kind of paradox at the heart of the romantic writing. Sensibility and passion which constitutes both reason and sentiment mixed. In the age of sensibility, the Irregular, the fragmented, the

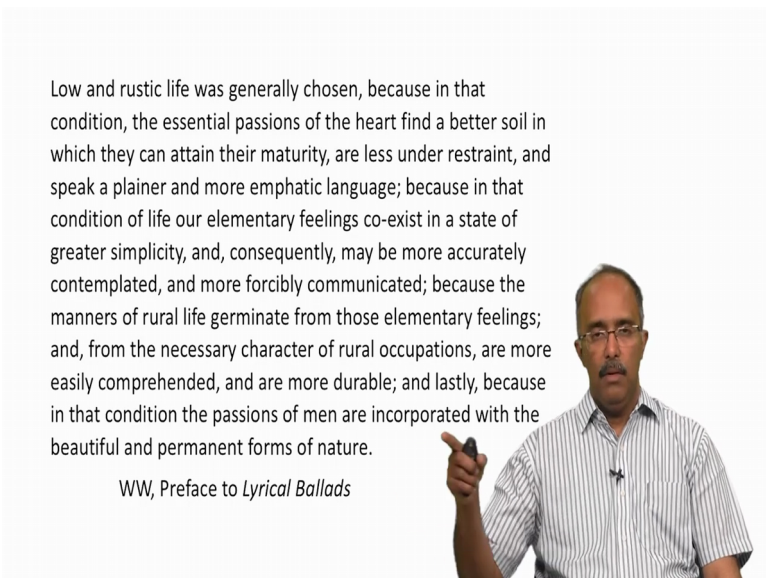
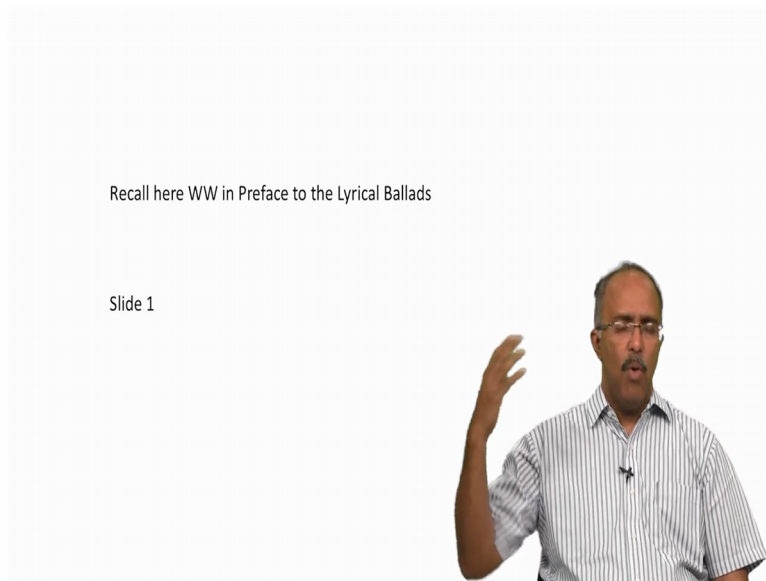
unruly, even the nervous becomes not only aesthetically desirable but morally superior to regularity, completion and order.

The triumph of sentiment over the condition of rational thinking. Now the question was if sensibility is linked to virtue, ethics and morals, why is it that most humans lack these? In other words, to be a virtuous being, have to have sensibility, passion and reason mixed, how come more humans are not? Human in that sense. Please recall what we have said, to be human is to have a sensibility towards suffering. How come as Hobbes suggested human beings were fundamentally selfish. The romantic slated to address this question.

It was not easy to say now, that is not quite relevant. Because as Thomas Hobbes demonstrated throughout his career, substantial career, human beings are fundamentally selfish. We are only interested in power, we are only interested in ourselves, we are not interested in the world outside. The Romantics and the writers of sensibility in this period addressed this problem by making a case for rustic simplicity is the source of true sensibility. That is, it is only within the rural population, within the rural humans that there is true sensibility.

People in the city are already morally corrupt and depraved. In other words you create a very smart, very clear binary, the pure, uncontaminated country and the maligned, corrupt and contaminated city. That is point 1. But there was also a concern, that passions were transmissible. David Hume, the philosopher believed that passions are contagious and communicate will. As he put it, they pass with the greatest facility from one person to another and produce corresponding movements in all human breasts. On this point, let us turn now to William Wordsworth in preference to the lyrical balance. Coming up next on your slide is a short excerpts from the preface to the lyrical balance.

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And please recall what we have said. The binary between the corrupt, morally depraved city and the pure, passionate, authentic rustic life. This is Wordsworth in preference to the lyrical violence, please read that excerpt carefully. Low and rustic life was generally chosen because in that condition the essential purchase of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint and speak a plainer and more emphatic language. Note what he is saying at the 1st level itself.

They are people where the essential passions of the heart are rooted, find a better soil, in that condition the passions of men are incorporated in beautiful and permanent forms of nature. What is Wordsworth talking about? Having said that there is a binary between London or any metropolis and the rustic and you will see this in poems like Wordsworth upon Westminster


Bridge, where he will say that the great heart of London lies still. What Wordsworth is talking about in this short excerpt you have just seen on your slide from the preface to the lyrical balance is that the incorruptibility of the rustic.

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The incorruptibility of the rustic mind and heart is central to the Romantic theory of sensibility and passions.

Byron's passionate heroes are also divided personalities, implying that an overabundance of passions can also be hard to deal with.

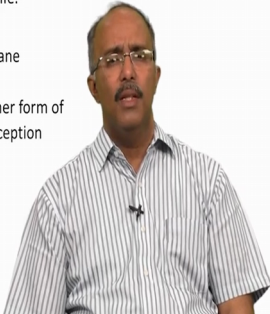
The age of sensibility however was not unified. There was a tension between optimism and pessimism. Many were undecided between social change and a conservative world view, but most importantly, they were caught between virtue as natural and virtue as highly cultivated, between ruins and carefully constructed buildings, between narratives and fragments



But they were also caught between a desire for social change and the terror of the same. The Gothic, critics argue, a genre devoted to the excesses of passion, was revived, with all its insistence on ancient ghosts, buildings and events, precisely as a device to ward off the uncertainties of present passions (such as the French revolution): the skeletons and demons in old closet and resurrections of archaic, unsocialized passions must have reassured a complacent British public

This also meant, commentators note, a distrust of civil society and urban life.

The new moral aesthetic left no room for more urban forms of virtue: urbane sophistication was untrustworthy; erudition was formed for abuse; civility was another form of dishonesty; and those with education were seen as most skilled in deception



The rustic mind and heart therefore becomes the central, the core tenets of the romantic theory of sensibility and passions. Byron's passionate heroes are also divided personalities, implying that there is an overabundance of passion that can also be hard to deal with. Having noted this example from Wordsworth, I should also perhaps address the fact that the age of sensibility was not uniform and unified. There was frequently a tension between optimism and pessimism. Many were undecided between social change and conservative worldview. But most importantly, they were caught between virtue as a natural and virtue as cultivated.


That is am I born virtuous or is virtue cultivated slowly through cultural training and education and the society in which I live, between people who are born good and people who shall we say achieve goodness? But the Romantics were also caught between, the tension between wanting social change having better people but worrying about what kind of change it would be. That is you want social change but you are not sure that the social change is what you and I will like. There is a terror of the social change as well. The Gothic which arises in this period, critics have noted is a genre devoted to the excesses of passion, it was revived with all its insistence on ancient ghosts, buildings and events, precisely as a device to ward off the uncertainties of present passions, such as the French Revolution.

The skeletons and daemons in old closets and resurrection of archaic, socialised passions must have reassured a complacent British public. This also meant, commentators note, distrust of civil society and upper life. The new Moral aesthetic building on the literature of sensibility, building on the idea of passion and the caution against excessive sentiment, left no room for more urban forms of virtue. Urban sophistication was inherently untrustworthy, erudition is for abuse, civility is a form of dishonesty and those with education were seen as most skilled and deception.

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It is in this context that the idea of the noble savage and the virtuous primitive emerged in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and mid 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The rise of sensibility also treated the ancient world as purer and closer to the passions than the modern, implying that civilization corrupts the passions. Works such as Rousseau's and later poetry in Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), James Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian* (1760-63) praised the ancient world.

JJ Rousseau wrote  
Slide 2



It is in this context that the idea of the noble savage and the virtuous primitive emerged in the late 17th and 18th centuries. The rise of sensibility treated the ancient world, and I am moving on to quickly to the next one, I will return to the question of noble savage in the next slide. The rise of sensibility treated the ancient world as purer and closer to the passions than the modern, implying that civilisation corrupts the passions. This is something you will also

recognise. People of every generation complain that there was a golden age before the present generation came.

This present generation is corrupt, they do not like them, they do not understand them. But it remains that every generation believes this of itself and of the proceeding and the future generations. So, in the romantic age, they believed that there was an ancient world purer, authentic as compared to what we are now. The works of Jean Jacques Rousseau and poetry suggest Thomas Percy's relics of ancient English poetry, MacPherson's poems of Ossian praised the ancient world for this reason. I now turn, coming up on your next slide to Rousseau.

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Before art had shaped our manners and taught our passions to speak an artificial language, our customs were rustic but natural; . . . Today, more subtle study and a more refined taste have reduced the art of pleasing to a system; a vile and misleading uniformity prevails in our manners, so that one would think all minds had been cast in the same mold. Unremittingly, politeness requires this; decorum legislates that; unceasingly we follow these forms rather than our own genius

JJ Rousseau



Passion must be cultivated by the more evolved minds. The passions can be the foundation of the moral and the ethical. They become, in WW, for instance, a means of receptivity or sensitivity to external situations and sights, whether Tintern Abbey, London or a reaper. Throughout his poetry, WW would posit the poetic mind as one more receptive to the world.

Here is WW in his famous Tintern Abbey

Slide 3-4





Please take a look at this. Before art had shaped our manners, before Art had shaped our manners and taught our passions to speak an artificial language, our customs were rustic but natural. Please recall what Wordsworth had said in which we have already looked at in the earlier slide. That it is in the rustic life that you see authentic human passion. That is what Rousseau is also saying. Rousseau is arguing that before we came into civilisation, before we were civilised or in a manner of speaking trained, our customs may have been crude, may have been rustic but they were natural.

The point is there is an anxiety incipient in people like Wordsworth that our education, formal and informal, were civilisation is actually taking us further away from our natural virtuous state. We need to cultivate it in certain ways. Passions can be the foundation for Moral and ethical but and this is a crucial part, it means not all of us have it, as in not you and I. Of course it is a special kind of person to possess passion. For Wordsworth passions are Moral and ethical, or rather they form the foundations for the Moral and ethical. In Wordsworth, they are a means of receptivity or sensitivity to external situations and sights.

Whether it is Tintern Abbey or war or whatever it might be, throughout his poetry Wordsworth would posit the poetic mind as one more receptive to the world. And again to return to his key text preface to the lyrical balance, Wordsworth would say that. All of us will listen to poetry, all of us have this but only certain kinds of people will have a mindset and in Tintern Abbey he will say that. Here it is, coming up on your slide, Tintern Abbey, an excerpt rather. Please read those lines carefully.

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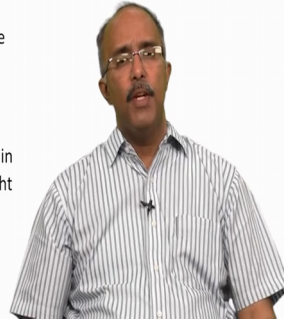
These beauteous forms,  
Through a long absence, have not been to me  
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye; But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din  
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,  
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,  
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;  
And passing even into my purer mind, 30  
With tranquil restoration: — feelings too  
Of unremembered pleasure; such, perhaps,  
As have no slight or trivial influence  
...



In his *Supplement to the 1815 Preface* WW would say:

The appropriate business of poetry, (which, nevertheless, if genuine is as permanent as pure science), her appropriate employment, her privilege and her *duty*, is to treat things not as they *are*, but as they *appear*; not as they exist in themselves, but as they *seem* to exist to the *senses* and to the *passions*

But he also believed that passions needed to be controlled, 'in tempering and restraining the passion' to produce poetry (Preface to *LB*). Hence in poems like 'Strange fits of passion have I known', WW keeps a tight control over the metre, as a way of controlling the passion that inspires but cannot be allowed to dominate poetic practice.



Yet it was not undiluted admiration for passions, there was also an anxiety that passions could cause restlessness. In *The Recluse*, WW would write:

Slide 5



These beautiful forms, through a long absence have not been to me as a landscape to a blind man's eye. But oft, in lonely rooms, and amid the din of towns and cities, I have owed to them, in hours of weariness, sensations Sweet felt in the blood and felt along the heart. And note the line after that, and passing even into my purer mind, with tranquil restoration, feelings too of unremembered pleasure, such perhaps as I have no slight or trivial influence. What is Wordsworth actually doing? Wordsworth is speaking about sensations Sweet, which is a phrase from the poem, though sensations, he feels in the blood along the heart.

And then he says but they also passed even into my purer mind. Wordsworth is very emphatic that sensations, passions are both about heart and mind. He continues in *Tintern Abbey*, to elaborating this response as you can see. Please read your next slide as well. In the supplement to the 1815 preface, Wordsworth would say, the appropriate business of poetry,



her appropriate employment, privilege and her duty, is to treat things not as they are, but as they appear, not as they exist in themselves but as a seem to exist to the senses and the passions.

In other words, what Wordsworth is talking about is you need not talk about, Uninor describe things as they are there, this amount and this is where, and sounds of all. We should rather ask how do they appear to my eye, how do they exist in my senses. We also believe that passions needed to be controlled in tempering and restraining the passion to produce poetry is what he writes in the later preface to the lyrical balance. In poems like Stein fits of passion have I known, Wordsworth keeps a very tight control over the metre as a way of demonstrating the passion inside him.

But all this seems to suggest that there was an undiluted passion and admiration from sentiment and there was also an anxiety for passions that could become and produce restlessness. That is if you recall what we have said in the previous slide, point about the Gothic as dealing with excess of emotion, access of passion, there was an anxiety in the Wordsworth era that passions could perhaps produce restlessness. In the recluse, Wordsworth would write, here it is.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:18)

Must turn elsewhere, and travel near the tribes  
And fellowships of men, see ill sights  
*Of passions ravenous from each other's rage,*  
Must hear humanity in fields and groves  
Pipe solitary anguish, or must hang  
Brooding over the fierce *confederate* storm  
*Of Sorrow, barricadoed evermore*  
*Within* the walls of cities – may these sounds  
Have their authentic comment, that even these  
Hearing, I be not heartless or forlorn!



In his *Supplement to the 1815 Preface* WW  
would say:

Slide 6



The appropriate business of poetry, (which, nevertheless, if  
genuine is as permanent as pure science), her appropriate  
employment, her privilege and her  
*duty*, is to treat things not as they *are*, but as they *appear*; not as  
they exist in  
themselves, but as they *seem* to exist to the *senses* and to the  
*passions*.

WW. *Supplement to the 1815 Preface*



Must turn elsewhere and travelled the other tribes and fellowships of men, see ill sights of  
passion ravenous from each other's rage. Look at those wordings. Passions and ravenous from  
each other's rage. Must early humanity in fields and groves, pipe solitary anguish or must  
hang brooding over the fierce Confederate storm, of sorrow barricaded evermore within the  
walls of cities. Made these sounds have their authentic comment, that even these hearing, I be  
not heartless or forlorn.

What is Wordsworth doing here? Wordsworth's worrying about the passion as ravenous from  
each other's rage, passions that feed off each other and the fact that humanity comes very  
close to declaring war over things like excessive passions. Later in the supplement to the  
1815 preface he would write, Wordsworth would add, the appropriate results of poetry, the  
appropriate business of poetry, her appropriate employment, privilege and her duty, and her

due to ease to treat things not as they are but as they appear, not as they exist in themselves but as they seem exist to the senses.

What is Wordsworth doing here? Wordsworth emphasis on the passion is something he is tempering as in he is reducing its effect by saying, yes, we understand passions are like this, that we are driven to passion in certain moments of time. But is that a feature of the thing itself? Is that a feature of whatever you are perceiving, you are holding up? No, depends on how they appear, what they appear as. So in short it is only why our senses that we see the world, it is only why our sights, sounds that we perceive the world. It is not about whether they exist independent of us, but they seem to exist because of us, within our senses and passions.

In short what we have been talking about here is the fact that poetry is about the engagement of the senses, it is about the engagement of passions to something you see. Which comes first, we cannot say. Is it the natural object that comes into being before we do, if it does come into being before us, how does anybody recognise it, unless we shared cultural training? The important thing to take away from this lesson is that there is a complicated nature of relationship between the passion/sentiment and reason/intellect. It requires certain evolved minds to cultivate the passions.

Passions cannot be left to run the way they want, that is not possible. You cultivate them, you train them. You think that is contradictory to what Wordsworth had been saying? At some point you begin to ask yourself, Wordsworth had been talking about spontaneous overflow, nothing about this is spontaneous. If you have thought about it, you have discovered the contradiction here or the paradox here, that on the one hand he speaks about spontaneous overflow, powerful feelings, all of that, at the same time Wordsworth would also argue that this is the result of training of some kind, there is a history to how our senses are evolved. Thank you.