

English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832
Prof. Pramod K Nayar
Department of English
University of Hyderabad, Indian Institute of Madras

Backgrounds to the English Romantics, 1798-1832 – Empire

In this lesson, we are looking at another context for the study of the English Romantics: Empire. The English Romantics were writing at a time when the British government, the East India Company and the army were acquiring large swathes of territory across the world, specifically in the East – in Asia. What role did empire, fledgling but nevertheless a proto-empire, have to play in the making of the English Romantics?

One argument to be understood and assimilated when looking at Wordsworth, Coleridge and their generation is that distant parts and “peripheries” of the world were coming closer home because material and information was being brought into the English countryside, English stores and the English home. For example, china (as in pottery) was imported from the colonies and tobacco which dates back to Edmund Spenser’s time was also similarly brought in from the colonies. All sorts of products were entering England.

Samuel Pepys has recorded in his diary the event of the arrival of tea from China to India, and from India into England. Indian travellers, Indian seamen and sailors were also arriving in England. This also generated an interest in the cultural and racial Other. The Turkish, the Chinese and Indians were the subject of several pieces of literary works during those times.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:52)

As a kind of epigraph to the lesson, let us look at Byron’s description of Hassan in *The Giaour*.

his creed,
Which saith that woman is but dust,
A soulless toy for tyrant’s lust.

(Refer Slide Time: 2:03)

What is Byron doing here? Byron is stereotyping the vulnerable non-European woman, held prisoner by the tyrannical Turkish monarch. Elsewhere, such a vulnerable racial gendered Other is the subject of Wordsworth's "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman".

(Refer Slide Time: 2:18)

Given below is an extract from "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman":

Alas! you might have dragged me on
Another day, a single one!
Too soon despair o'er me prevailed;
Too soon my heartless spirit failed;
When you were gone my limbs were stronger,
And Oh how grievously I rue,
That, afterwards, a little longer,
My friends, I did not follow you!
For strong and without pain I lay,
My friends, when you were gone away.

Please note that when he says "Indian", he refers to a Native American, not a subcontinental Indian.

He continues...

My child! they gave thee to another,
A woman who was not thy mother.
When from my arms my babe they took,
On me how strangely did he look!
Through his whole body something ran,
A most strange something did I see;
—As if he strove to be a man,
That he might pull the sledge for me.
And then he stretched his arms, how wild!
Oh mercy! like a little child.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:12)

And then it concludes:

Young as I am, my course is run,
I shall not see another sun,
I cannot lift my limbs to know
If they have any life or no.
My poor forsaken child! if I
For once could have thee close to me,
With happy heart I then would die,
And my last thoughts would happy be.
I feel my body die away,
I shall not see another day.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:36)

The poem is about a nomadic Native American tribe. Wordsworth focuses on the vulnerable, ailing Native American woman, abandoned to die, while her tribe marches onward. But her child is taken away because they think that the child has a better chance of survival.

The poem documents the woman's grief at being parted from her son. She has no food and she recognizes signs of her own death. As she says, she cannot lift her limbs to know if they have any life in them. The poem ends with her wishing that she could see her son once more before she dies.

Think of the number of instances where other cultures, races and geographies figure in the *Lyrical Ballads*. I have a short inventory: The Spanish discovery and penetration of the Americas in "The Foster-Mother's Tale," depictions of British colonial wars and their consequences in "The Female Vagrant" and "The Mad Mother" or the exoticism of what we have just looked at, "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman."

(Refer Slide Time: 4:35)

Then there is of course the famous Coleridge poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" with its depictions of the South Pole and the tropical latitudes. Many texts from this time featured Arabian characters, Moors, and the distant East. We can take as examples, the Malay dream sequence in

Thomas De Quincey's *The Confessions of An English Opium Eater*, Byron's *Turkish Tales*, William Beckford's *Vathek* and Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*.

The Romantic interest in the exotic, as numerous critics such as Sara Suleri, Saree Makdisi, Nigel Leask, Tim Fulford and others have shown, emerged out of the encounter with the cultural Other in the colonies. Clearly, the British Romantic writers were equally obsessed and concerned with the distant Others. English identity in the Romantic period was built within a growing Empire.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:24)

A useful resource for us would be the [“maproom” on the British Empire’s website](#) which displays a map of the world during this period. There is also a video on the [“Map of the British Empire”](#) that we may examine. Why this insistence on looking at the empire in our lesson? The point I am making is contrary to established ideas and traditional readings of the English Romantics. They have long been seen as concerned only with their countryside and their local cultures. Rather, I emphasize they were just as interested in their racial, cultural and distant Others.

(Refer Slide Time: 6:01)

The Romantic period must, therefore, be contextually located within major moments in Britain’s imperial history. The country had just lost its then principal colony, America, in the period 1776-1783. Consequently, it had set its sights on Asia (mainly India), Australia, the Caribbean, and South Africa. By 1820, i.e. by the midpoint of the Romantic period, 200 million people or over a quarter of the world’s population was under British domination.

In the light of these statistics, it is clear that British identity could not have been built on its local cultures alone. It also drew upon this particular context.

(Refer Slide Time: 6:47)

England, as already mentioned, became an exporter and importer of raw materials: sugar, tobacco, tea, silk, muslin, etc. It therefore needed both source materials and markets. The period saw the expansion of an already extensive slave trading system. For Britain, this system dates back to the 16th century: slaves were transported from Africa to the Americas and then to the Caribbean. There

was a national debate over slavery, with the British involvement in the slave trade being abolished in 1807 and the slavery in the British colonies abolished in 1834.

Convicts were being transported to Australia, and more of Africa began to be explored and discovered. Britain acquired the Cape Colony from the Dutch in 1815. England's Indian empire began to be settled from the 1760s. The East India Company changed its status from just being a trader to being a ruler, through a series of political strategies including war and alliances. By 1793, India alone was annually making a direct contribution of 500,000 pounds to the English treasury. This is just before the start of the official English Romantic period, marked by the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. It is a huge amount of money by any stretch of imagination. The English Parliament, therefore, realized that India was a necessity for whatever British identity was likely to be.

(Refer Slide Time: 8:17)

Here is a map of British territories in 1815 sourced from the BBC's page on ["British Empire in 1815"](#). If we take a look at the territories marked here, we see that the ones in blue are the territories claimed by Britain but not yet settled, the orange marks British territory held before 1793 and those small yellow specks stand for territory temporarily occupied by Britain.

(Refer Slide Time: 8:49)

Thus, we see that the progress of empire was far from smooth. The acquisition of empire is a messy job. The East India Company experienced serious mismanagement including corruption and infighting. Its debts ran high and the English Parliament and social commentators often called for an investigation into the Company's operations. In the 1780s, for instance, the trial of Warren Hastings, beginning in 1788, followed by the appointment and disputed recall of Governor-General Arthur Wellesley, eroded the Company's reputation.

The periodical press began to make frequent nasty observations about the East India Company and the company men. Company men were called decadent and corrupt. Even as a measure of pride remained, commentators agreed that the way in which these territories were managed was not right.

There was something else. The deaths and sufferings of the English soldiers, particularly in wars with Tipu Sultan throughout the 1790s, were documented in newspapers like the London *Times* (launched in 1785) on a regular basis. Several commentators began to argue that maybe the acquisition of empire was not such a wise idea since so many young British men lost their lives in its pursuit. Incidentally, Coleridge's brother died at the siege of Seringapatam. Thus, while the Company's huge standing army was trying to acquire territory, many people were also dying. Several families lost their young sons to such wars and conflicts in India.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:17)

Saree Makdisi has proposed that poets like Shelley and Byron use the Orient in different ways so as to invent an idea of "Europe" itself. Suffering is one component of this – the images of the English men who go to the colonies and suffer. Sara Suleri has noted the intersection of aesthetic theories and political thought in people like Edmund Burke. Even supposedly individualist texts such as *The Prelude*, critics like Mary Jacobus have argued, mark a "historical repression" of the British slave trade. The Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh edited *Romanticism, Race and Imperial Culture* traces such connections between the discourses of Romanticism and imperial culture.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:46)

The crucial idea here is that the English Romantic authors were not only looking at the English countryside. They were also looking elsewhere. We need to remember that several exchanges, transactions and circulations marked the relations between Britain and its empire: money, 500,000 pounds from India, as mentioned earlier, was entering the English economy while English people were travelling to the colonies.

Stories of English suffering entered the English public and social discourse. The loss of young men also meant the loss of wage and income. Often, injury-ridden young men came back to England. The Ancient Mariner is one such person. He goes out there to the peripheries of the known world but he returns a rather damaged sailor.

English literature of the 1798 to 1830 period is full of returning English men. These returning English men are not in the best condition, mentally, physically and emotionally. They have been damaged and injured. In William Blake's famous poem, "London", a soldier curses the palace. Why? The soldier is perhaps one who went to the colonies and fought on behalf of the East India Company and his country. On his return, he is perhaps injured, unable to work and therefore unemployed.

Therefore, we must attend to how the context of imperial conquest and the exploration of different cultures impinged upon the English Romantics. Sara Suleri in *The Rhetoric of English India* has argued that even theories of the "sublime" which were supposedly based on English and European landscape descriptions and pictorial traditions, drew upon a rhetoric influenced deeply by exposure to other cultures.

Clearly then, the search for the iteration of imperial conquests brought England and its people including its authors into close encounters and exchanges with their racial and cultural Others. Much of English Romantic poetry, therefore, must be seen as an instantiation of a transnational connection.

Further/ Recommended Readings

"Britain's Empire in 1815". *BBC History*.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/empire_seapower/britain_empire_01.shtml

"Map of British Empire". Posted by Kaliningrad General. *Youtube*. May 3, 2014.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2Tn4uOSe6o>

"The Geographical Spread of the British Empire". Maproom, British Empire.

<https://www.britishempire.co.uk/maproom/maproom.htm>

Leask, Nigel. *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire*. Cambridge UP, 1992.

Makdisi, Saree. *Making England Western: Occidentalism, Race, and Imperial Culture*. U of Chicago P, 2013.

Makdisi, Saree. *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity*. Cambridge UP, 1998.

Richardson, Alan and Sonia Hofkosh, editors. *Romanticism, Race and Imperial Culture*. Indiana UP, 1996.

Suleri, Sara. *The Rhetoric of English India*. U of Chicago P, 1992.