

English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832

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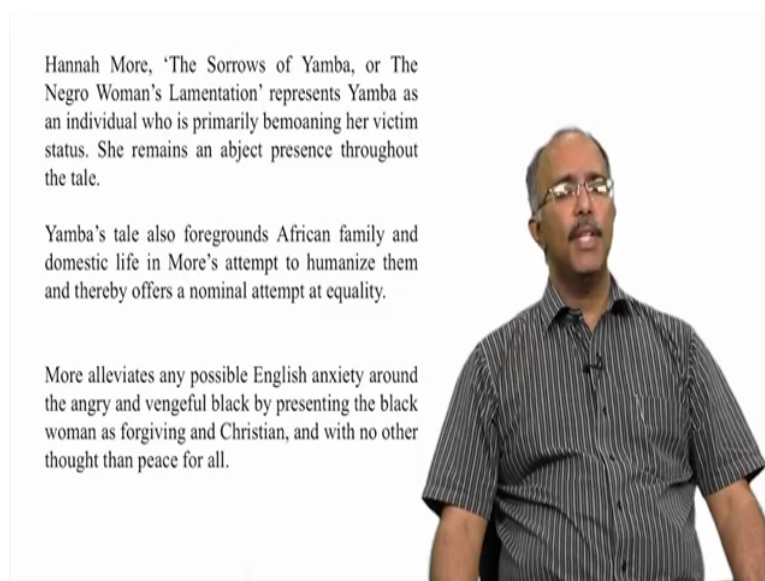
Romantic Poetry 4: Politics Abolitionist Poetry

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Hello everybody so here we continue our discussion of the English Romantic writers particular poetry and their politics, today's session is devoted to abolitionist poetry, poetry about abolishing the slave trade and slave itself and we looking at a range of poetry poetic texts.

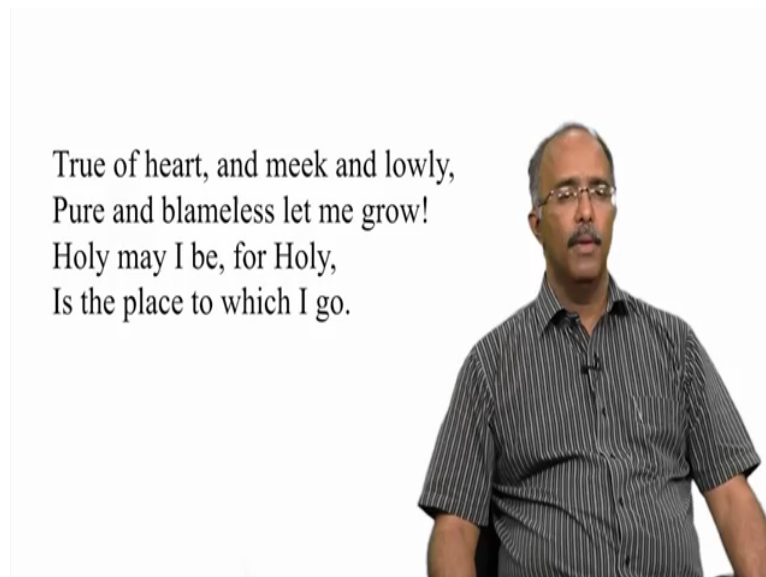
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Hannah More, 'The Sorrows of Yamba, or The Negro Woman's lamentation' represents Yamba as an individual who is primarily bemoaning her victim status she remains an abject presence throughout the tale. Yamab's tale also foregrounds African family and domestic life in More's attempt to humanize them to at least notionally give them a sense of equality by saying you know what the blacks are not peculiar creatures or animals they are human after all and there is an attempt to humanize the African individual but also the African family and the African population.

More alleviates any possible English anxiety around the angry and vengeful black by presenting the black woman as forgiving and Christian with no other thought than peace for all.

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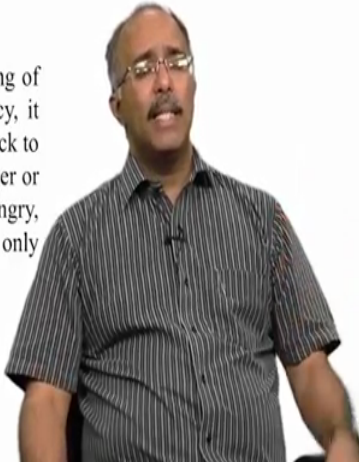


Here is an instance coming up on the screen now as part of a first slide and said line a set of lines from Hannah More true of heart and meek and lowly pure and blameless let me grow, holy may I be for holy is the place to which I go it is a little cringe making as my colleague would say to read that kind of poetry but yes of course it is highly emotional, it is very dramatic but the idea is to communicate to the unfeeling, uncaring English public that here are the slaves, the blacks, the Africans who are human in their sentiment.

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The black body is sentimental and vulnerable but also cringing and quiescent.


The portrayal of the black body as possessing of sentiment does suggest a measure of agency, it could also be read as the reduction of the black to a mass of harmless sentiment, but minus anger or rebelliousness: none of these poems depict angry, ready-to-fight slaves, what we see are only snivelling and weeping-for-comfort black.

A man with glasses and a striped shirt is speaking. He is positioned on the right side of the slide, with his body angled towards the left. The background is a plain, light color.

So the black body is primarily sentimental, it is vulnerable. The portrait of the black body as possessing of only sentiments does suggest a measure of agency but it also means you can reduce it reduce the black person to a mass of harmless sentiment, not necessary intellectual, not necessarily the (())(2:20) and reason but sentimental slaves.

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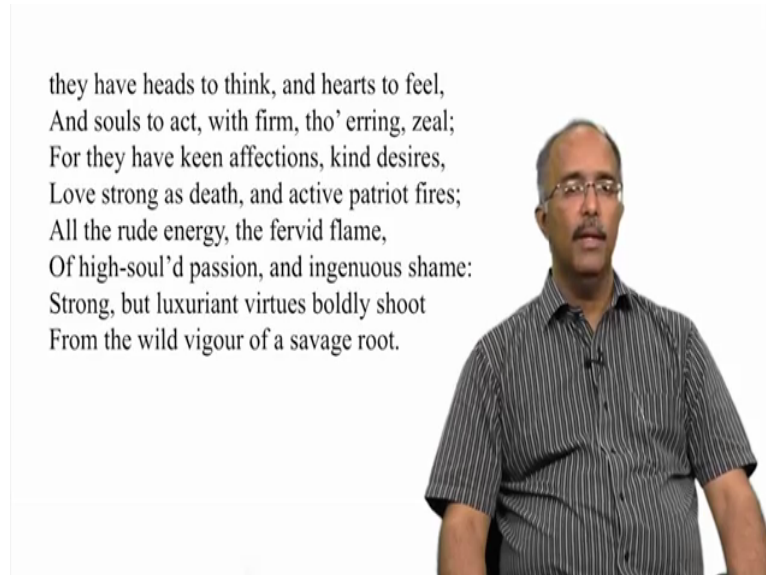
In More's 'Slavery: A Poem', she begins by proposing that the blacks have the power of rationality, and then smoothly shifts to their characteristic 'passions'

A man with glasses and a striped shirt is speaking. He is positioned on the right side of the slide, with his body angled towards the left. The background is a plain, light color.

In More's 'Slavery A Poem', she begins by proposing that the blacks have the power of rationality. So she opens (())(2:31) but she does not want to project that black as a racial type possessing rational behaviour, rationality, rational thinking and reasoning. So she slowly shifts the characteristic of the black from rationality and reason to passions. Here coming up

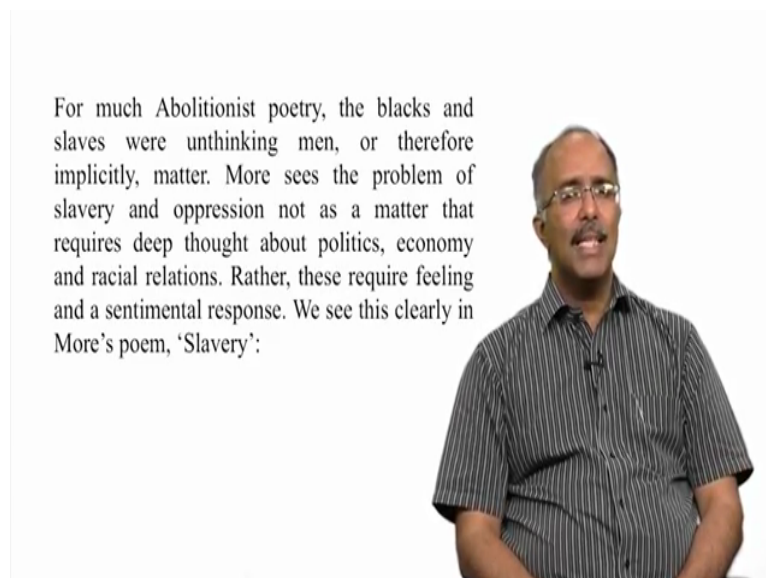
on your slide is an excerpt from Hannah More's 'Slavery A Poem', it was a very well-known poem it was used as part of abolitionist gatherings through the early 19th century.

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Notice what she is saying they have heads to think and hearts to feel, but as you proceed down to those lines she will speak primarily of high-souled passion and ingenuous shame strong but luxurious boldly shoot from the wild vigour.

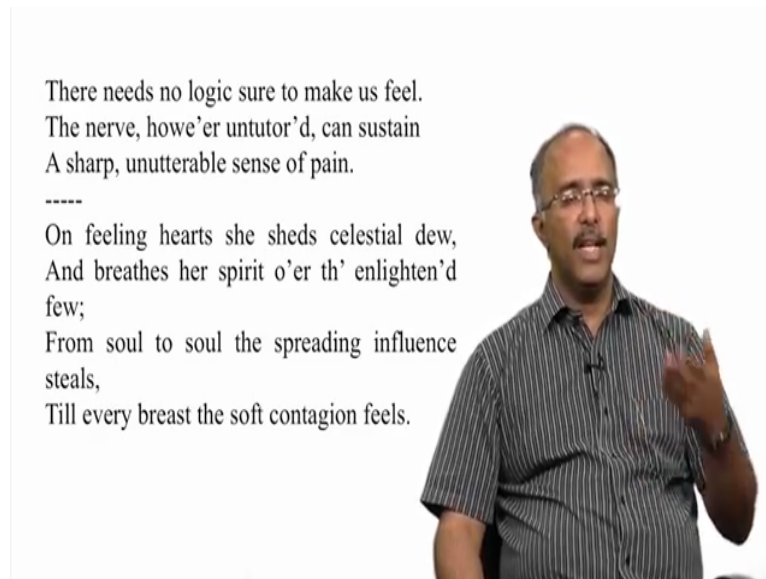
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For much abolitionist poetry the blacks and slaves were unthinking men, or therefore implicitly just matter. More sees the problem of slavery and oppression not as a matter that requires deep thought about politics, economy or racial relations rather these require feeling

and a sentimental response. What I am suggesting is they did not want I mean people like Hannah Moore did not want a rational response to slavery, they said these poor creatures are suffering, you respond a sentimental beings as well.


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Coming up now on your slide is another set of lines which indicates this argument which invites this argument. There needs no logic sure to make us feel and that is a very important sentence, you do not need logic, you do not need rationality to make us feel, we should feel for the African, we should feel for the slave. She is not speaking legal reasoning, she is not speaking rational thinking or mathematical thinking or scientific objectivity, she is arguing that in order to respond to the black person's suffering we need to be sentimental creatures as well as English.

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In Amelia Opie's 'The Negro Boy's Tale' (1795), the black boy wishes to go on the ship to England, for then he would be free. The white girl, Anna, wishes she could help, but her father refuses and the boy, desperately trying to get on the ship, drowns and dies. The poem is structured around the boy's tale, about being separated from his mother, his subsequent slavery, his dreams of returning to his mother, but it is equally structured around the politics of the white girl's sentiment. The heart of the poem is the boy's plea to the white girl and the white girl's request to her father, that she should be allowed one black friend who could, ostensibly, be the object of her charity:




In Amelia Opie's 1795 text, 'The Negro Boy's Tale' the black boy wishes to go on the ship to England for there he would be free, the white girl Anna wishes she could help but her father refuses, the boy trying to struggle and get onto the ship drowns and dies. So the poem is structured around the boy's story and his tragedy of being separated from his mother, his slavery and his dreams of returning to his mother but ultimate death, but it is equally structured around the politics of the white girl sentiment.

So the boy's plea to the white girl is matched by the white girl's plea to her father that she should be allowed one black friend as you can see from these lines.

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'I know', she cried, 'I cannot free
The numerous slaves that round me pine;
But one poor negro's friend to be,
Might (blessed chance!), might now be
mine'.




One poor Negroes friend is what I would like to be she says.

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The despairing black slave is at the heart of the rhetoric of objectification here where all we have is the feeling individual, no more and no less.


William Cowper advises the slaves thus..



The despairing black slave is at the heart of abolitionist poetry, in what you can think of as a rhetoric of objectification because all we have is a feeling individual, a body as a material body which feels, not (())(5:30) who thinks. William Cooper therefore building on his argument will advise a slave like this coming up on your slide now.

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Bid suffer it a while, and kiss the rod,
Wait for the dawning of a brighter day,
And snap the chain the moment when you may.
Nature imprints upon whate'er we see,
That has a heart and life in it, Be free!
The beasts are charter'd—neither age nor force
Can quell the love of freedom in a horse:
He breaks the cord that held him at the rack;
And, conscious of an unencumber'd back,
Snuffs up the morning air, forgets the rein;
Loose fly his forelock and his ample mane;
Responsive to the distant neigh, he neighs;
Nor stops, till, overleaping all delays,
He finds the pasture where his fellows graze.
Cowper, 'Charity'




He will say bid suffer it, please suffer it for a while I mean do not claim things now, do not anticipate what you need to do now just suffer it for a while eventually it will all go away and you will be free. Another example of such poetry the abolitionist kind is Ann Yearsley poem a

poem on the inhumanity of the slave trade published in 1788, it constructs a family for the slave object, why family? The presence of the family humanizes the slave and it is seen as a more of establishing an equivalence between the Native Americans and the whites, the whites have families, so did the Native Americans. So therefore you will have an image of the happy family among the Native Americans.

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Ann Yearsley's 'A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade' (1788) also constructs a family for the slave-object so as to suggest a recognizably human character even among native Americans.


And, like other similar portraits of the willing slave/labourer, Yearsley gives us the following image:

A man with glasses and a mustache, wearing a dark and light striped short-sleeved button-down shirt, is speaking. He is positioned on the right side of the slide, with his body angled slightly towards the left. The background is plain white.

Here is an example from Ann Yearsley a poem on the inhumanity of the slave trade.

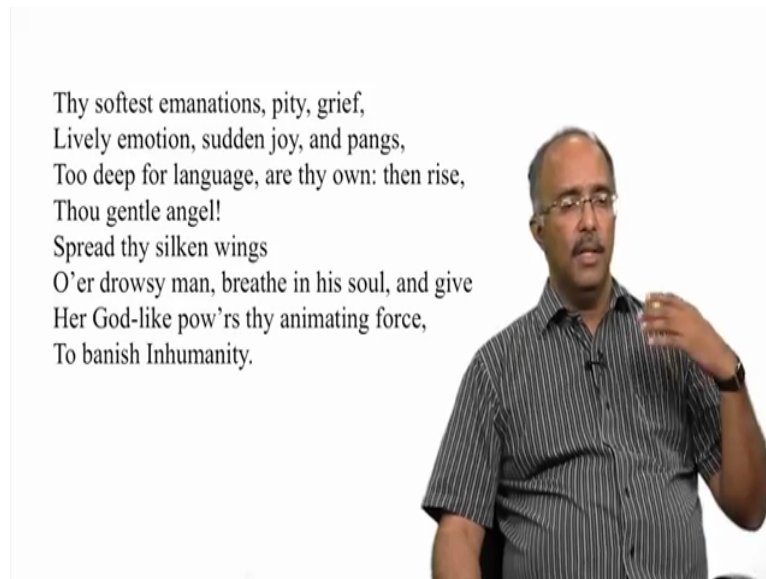
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He strives to please,
Nor once complains, but greatly smothers grief.
His hands are blister'd, and his feet are worn,
Till ev'ry stroke dealt by his mattock gives
Keen agony to life; while from his breast
The sigh arises, burthen'd with the name
Of Incilanda.
Time inures the youth,
His limbs grow nervous, strain'd by willing toil;
And resignation, or a calm despair,
(Most useful either) lulls him to repose.

A man with glasses and a mustache, wearing a dark and light striped short-sleeved button-down shirt, is speaking. He is positioned on the right side of the slide, with his body angled slightly towards the left. The background is plain white.

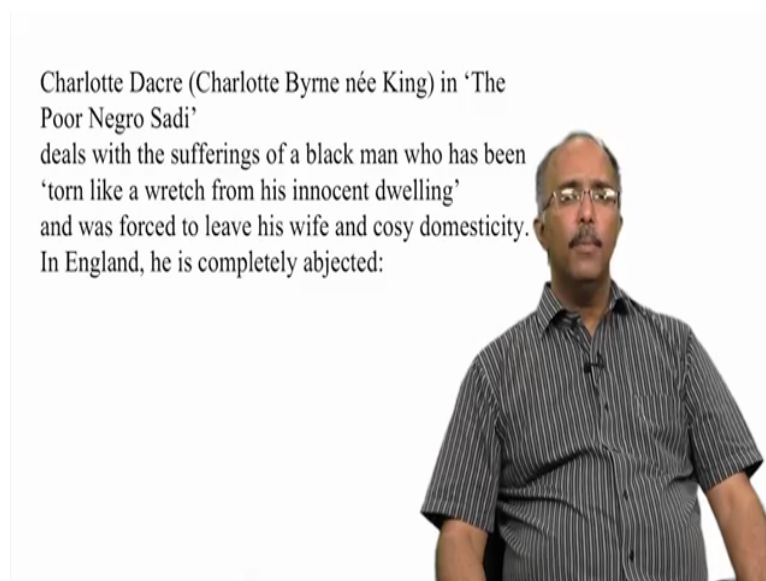
The attempt as you can see is to show agonized black bodies, but also a nice emotional passionate body. Towards the end of the poem Yearsley calls for a different sentimental response to the conditions of the West Indian rule as she puts it coming up now on your slide.

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Here it is, why should we banish such things, we should banish inhumanity and look at all the descriptions their pity and grief, lively emotion, sudden joy, pangs, too deep for languages she says like Ann Yearsley and Hannah More before her.

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Hear the Charlotte Dacre in 'The Poor Negro Sadi' which is a poem that deals with the sufferings of a black man who has been torn like a wretch from his innocent dwelling, he is

forced to leave his wife and cosy domesticity and he reaches England where he is completely abjected.

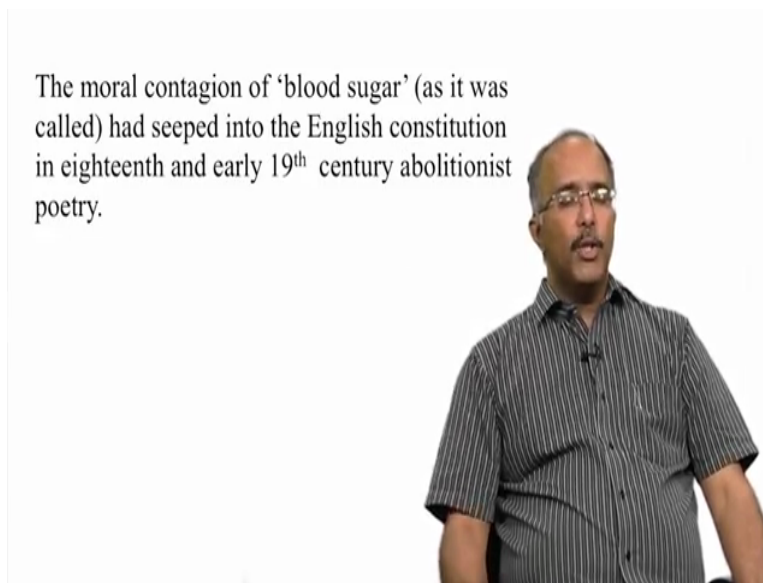
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So here is Charlotte Dacre writing about this Oh, Britons! so fam'd in the annals of glory, the poor Negro Sadi is cast on your plains. Oh! Britons if just be a fame or your glory the poor Negro Sadi shall bless your domains. So this poor Sadi savvy who has been detached from his family in all of that (7:49) the streets of London, he is cold, he is hungry, he is miserable but she says Dacre says he is invisible to the English as she puts it by many scarce seem nobody actually recognizes him, it is invisibility or the invisibilization of the black.

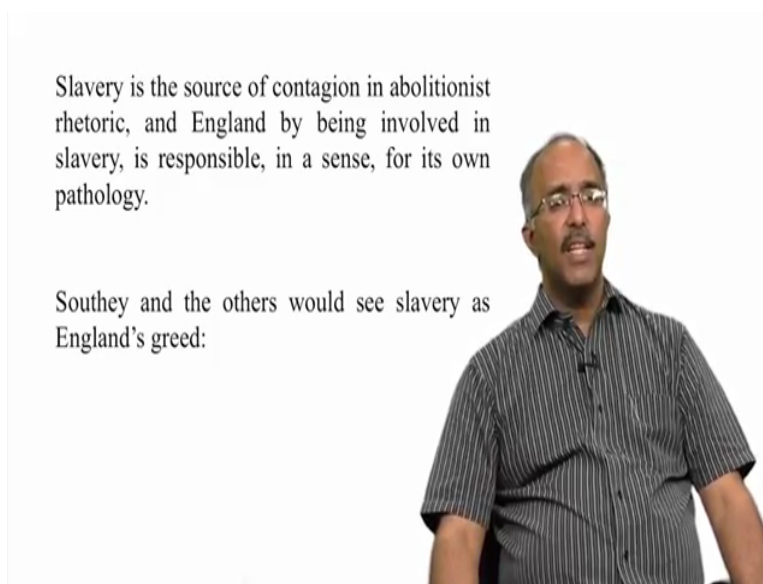
Eventually lying down to die in a doorway he is thrown out from the minimal shelter and Sadi eventually dies unaided alone. Having said all that there are other dimensions to the abolitionist poetry and the rhetoric of objectification of sentimentality, one is what we are about to turn to.

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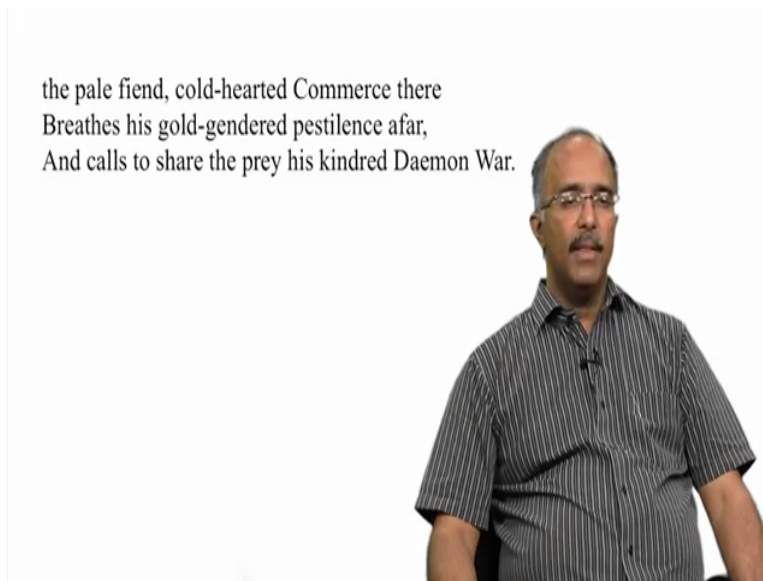
The moral contagion of blood sugar, blood sugar is sugar cane and the common phrasing sugar cane actually is connected to the question of slave labour that is why the term used was blood sugar.

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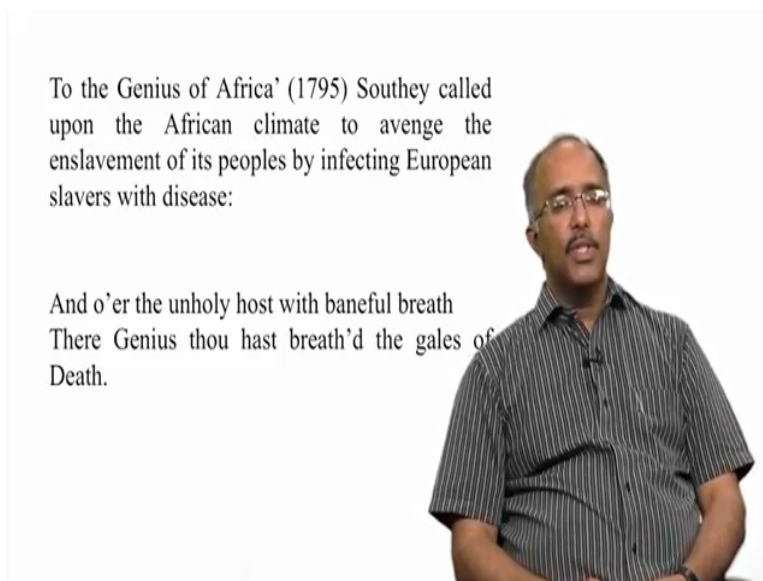
For many people writing abolitionist poetry slavery is a source of contagion and England by being involved in slavery is responsible for its own pathology. Robert Southey for example would see England's greed as primary and here is Robert Southey who wrote several abolitionist poems.

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The pale fiend, cold-hearted Commerce there Breathes, Breathes his gold gendered pestilence afar and calls to share the prey his kindred Daemon War

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In Robert Southey to the genius of Africa 1795 he will call upon African climate, African whether to avenge the enslavement of its people and he says England deserves to be infected by disease as he puts it over the unholy hosts with painful breath their Genius thou has breathed the gales of death, what Southey he is doing is he saying you people have enslaved the blacks, now whatever has happened will return as a contagion to harm you.

So the metaphor of disease of contagion is central to Robert Sauthey's imagination of the slave trade. As you can see Abolitionist poetry has a wide variety of rhetorical and rhetorical strategies, it sentimentalizes the black, it paints racial relations in tension in contests but also shows that sentimentality wins, there is often a demand for a restitution in the form of a sentimental response rather than a material or legal response.

Then of course there is a call for revenge of the black person's revenge rooted in of course melancholy and mourning to show the English what they have actually done, this is only a partial study of abolitionist poetry for those of you interested you might want to look at the volume called subject to change which has a considerable amount of material on abolitionist poetry, thank you.