

English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832
Professor Pramod K Nayar
Department of English
University of Hyderabad
Romantic Poetry 4: Politics Wordsworth and Shelley

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Hello everybody, so here we continue our exploration of romantic poetry and its politics. Our cases today are Wordsworth and Shelley, if you recall we spoke about abolitionist poetry in the last session where we examine the various tropes through which politics about slavery, race, tyranny and of course English restitution for slavery have been encoded in the writings of Ann Yearsley, Hannah More, Charlotte Dacre and Robert Southey, our text today are Wordsworth and Shelley.

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We have already discussed and noted Wordsworth's early endorsement and enthusiastic reception of the French Revolution and some of his concerns with land, enclosures and technology.

We have also studied his environmentalist thought, which was integral to his politics.

He referenced liberty as an ideal in texts like 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty' (1807 and 1815)

We now examine some of these themes again, and some new ones...

First, Wordsworth on liberty, then on war and the suffering of families ruined by war. Then a few points on how Wordsworth sees England as a refuge from tyranny.




We have already noted in some nominal fashion Wordsworth early endorsement and enthusiastic reception of the French Revolution and some of his concerns with saw land, enclosures, technology and environmentalism. We have looked at liberty in a text such as sonnets dedicated to liberty's 1807 and 1815, let us examine some of these things again and some new ones. First Wordsworth on liberty, then on war and the suffering of families ruined by war, then a few points on how Wordsworth would see England as a refuge.

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In the more radical Wordsworth, he grants the peasant a sense and understanding of liberty: he possesses a spiritual basis for his rights. Critics have noted that Wordsworth's 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty' traced the spirit of British freedom back to the constitutional upheavals of the mid-17th century (Philip Connell).

Wordsworth at this point in his career implies that that political empowerment is as important to our souls as it is to our material welfare. We see this political stance in *Descriptive Sketches*.




In the more radical Wordsworth he grants the peasant a sense and understanding of liberty, he possesses a spiritual basis for his rights, critics have noted that Wordsworth's sonnets dedicated to liberty trace the spirit of British freedom back to the constitutional upheavals of

the mid-17th century this is Philip Connell's famous argument. Wordsworth at this point in his career implies that the political empowerment is as important to our souls as it is to our material welfare. We see this political stance in descriptive sketches coming up now on your slide.

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And as on glorious ground he draws his breath,
With Freedom oft, with Victory and Death,
Hath seen in grim array amid their Storms
Mix'd with auxiliar Rocks, three hundred Forms;
While twice ten thousand corselets at the view
Dropp'd loud at once, Oppression shriek'd, and flew.
Oft as those sainted Rocks before him spread,
An unknown power connects him with the dead.
For images of other worlds are there,
Awful the light, and holy is the air.
Uncertain thro' his fierce uncultur'd soul
Like lighted tempests troubled transports roll;
To viewless realms his Spirit towers amain, Beyond the
senses and their little reign.
Wordsworth, Descriptive Sketches



This is an excerpt from Wordsworth's descriptive sketches there is reference to freedom and victory and death, questions of power, of course it is cast in the usual sublime description of lighted tempests and things like that.

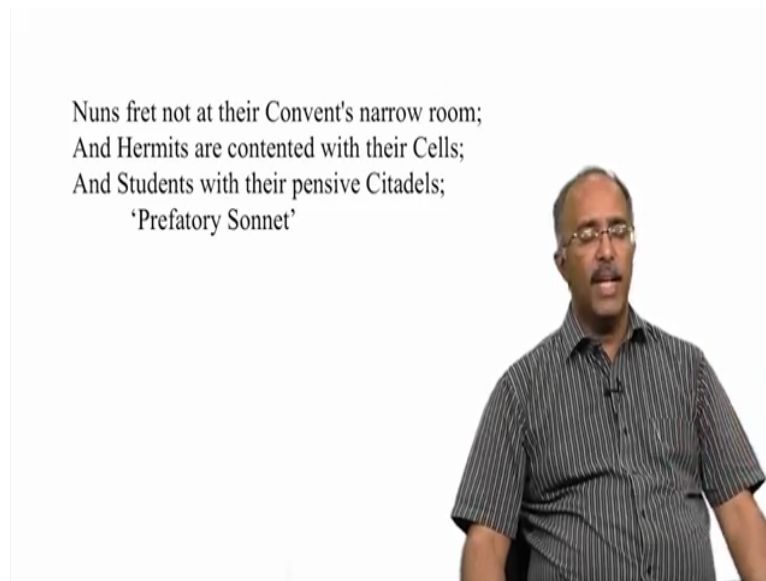
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Wordsworth sets liberty as an individual condition and examines it as a national, political condition as well. Nature, of course, is the place of individual liberty. Such a freedom to wander is contrasted with the limited space for nuns, hermits and students, although they do not see it as lack of liberty (that is, Wordsworth sees people as getting used to loss/lack of liberty:



Wordsworth sets liberty as an individual condition, he examines it as a national political condition as well. So nature is the place of individual liberty such a freedom to wander is contrasted with a limited space for nuns, hermits and students, although they do not see it as lack of liberty that is Wordsworth sees people as getting used to loss or the lack of liberty which is the dangerous one that even if freedom is taken away you do not even rebel because you are used to the loss of liberty.

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Here on your slide Prefatory Sonnet from a set of lines from Wordsworth Prefatory Sonnet. Nuns fret not at their convents narrow room and hermits are contented with their cells and students with the pensive Citadels. Look at what he is saying there, nuns fret not at their convents narrow room, hermits are contented with their cells and students with their pensive Citadels, (())(3:00) is saying is we get used to the loss of freedom as well and that is what we need to worry about.

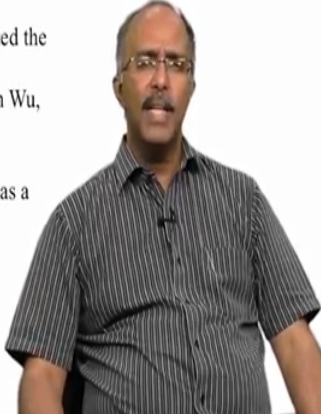
Surely all of us even in this day and age understand the sentiment and the thought behind this that as our freedoms are taken away, as our freedoms are consistently eroded, you need to worry that you will get used to the loss of freedom rather than fight for them.

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Wordsworth also wrote some anti-war lines into his poetry. Themes of men, women and families ruined by war, many fleeing from oppression, occur in many of his poems, most famously in Margaret's story in *The Ruined Cottage*.

In Adventures on Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth depicted the Sailor, becomes a murderer largely as a result of the injustices perpetrated on him. For critics like Duncan Wu, this shows the influence of William Godwin.

In an early poem, he notes the history of Stonehenge as a history of its barbaric human sacrifices.....




Wordsworth also wrote some anti-war poetry, themes of men, women and families ruined by war, many fleeing from oppression are current poems most famously in Margaret's story in the ruined cottage which you have had reason to cite before. In adventures on Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth depicted the sailor who has become a murderer largely as a result of various social injustices.

For critics like Duncan Wu, this shows the influence of William Godwin. In an early poem he notes the history of Stonehenge as a history of its barbaric human sacrifices.

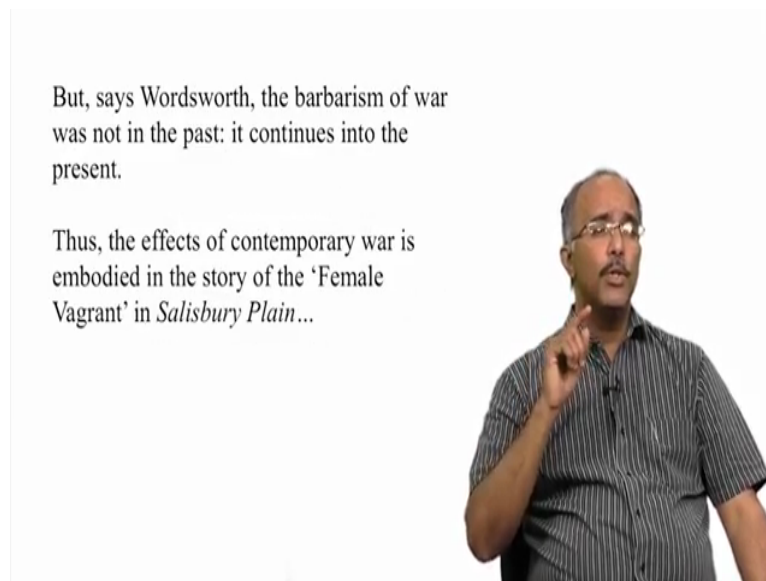
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And oft a night-fire mounting to the clouds
Reveals the desert and with dismal red
Clothes the black bodies of encircling crowds.
It is the sacrificial altar fed
With living men. How deep it groans – the dead
Thrilled in their yawning tombs their helms uprear;
The sword that slept beneath the warrior's head
Thunders in fiery air: red arms appear
Uplifted thro' the gloom and shake the rattling spear.
Wordsworth, *Salisbury Plain*



On your slide Wordsworth's Salisbury Plain here is an account of the sacrificial altar of Stonehenge fed as he says with living men and he asks what kind of culture is this, what is the history of our architectural or historical or antiquarian memorial. The point that Wordsworth makes is the barbarism of war is not exclusively in the past, you cannot say that oh it happened some years ago and it is now all right, it is not all right.


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What Wordsworth is pointing to is that the barbarism of war continues into the present and therefore in poems segments of the poems like female vagrant in the Salisbury Plain shows the effect of contemporary war. So it is not Stonehenge barbarism war and over and done with, no what Wordsworth does is to show that whatever produced a Stonehenge is happening even now that whatever was Stonehenge historical social context in which violence appeared is also the context for today. In effect Wordsworth is mapping a continuum of war.

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I lived upon the mercy of the fields,
And oft of cruelty the sky accused;
On hazard, or what general bounty yields,
Now coldly given, now utterly refused.
The fields I for my bed have often used:
But, what afflicts my peace with keenest ruth
Is, that I have my inner self abused,
Foregone the home delight of constant truth,
And clear and open soul, so prized in fearless youth.
Wordsworth, *Salisbury Plain*




Here is an excerpt from *female vagrant* on your slide now I lived upon the mercy of the fields and oft of cruelty the sky accused on hazard, or what general bounty yields. Now coldly, given now utterly refused, the fields I for my bed have often used, but what afflicts my peace with keenest ruth is that I have my inner self abused, foregone the home delight of constant truth and clear and open soul surprised in fearless youth.

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In *The Ruined Cottage*, Margaret is a war-widow. She neglects her children in her distress, and they eventually die. She lapses into madness and then dies. The cottage becomes the symbol of socially-induced distress.

Wordsworth, even as he seeks to explore the inner world of the characters examines the social milieu of suffering, the absence of social security and the neglect of war-families (those whose men had gone to war). He writes in two passages:



In the ruined cottage Margaret is a war-widow, she neglects her children, they eventually die, she lapses into madness and dies. The cottage that is Margaret's cottage which is called the ruined cottage becomes a symbol of socially induced distress. Wordsworth even as he seeks to explore the inner world of characters is aware of the social milieu. The traditional


argument that Wordsworth was not really concerned about the world outside he was only obsessing about his own mind, he is not strictly accurate, he was very concerned about the social milieu, how he chose to represent and interpreted that is a different issue altogether.

He writes about this depravation induced socially in some passages here as you can see coming up on your screen and this is the ruined cottage.

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You may remember, now some ten years gone,
Two blighting seasons when the fields were left
With half a harvest. It pleased heaven to add
A worse affliction in the plague of war
...


As I have said, 'twas now
A time of trouble; shoals of artisans
Were from their daily labour turned away
To hang for bread on parish charity



You will remember, now some 10 years gone, two blighting seasons when the fields were left with half a harvest. It pleased heaven to add a worse affliction in the plague of war. So there was a distress in the form of famine and now there is war as well.

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Wordsworth also presents England as a space of refuge from oppression in other lands. We see this explicitly in 'Emigrant French Clergy'..



But that is not all Wordsworth also presents England as a space of refuge from oppression in other lands and that is most explicitly stated in immigrant French clergy where Wordsworth will say.

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More welcome to no land
The fugitives than to the British strand,
—
while the moral tempest roars
Throughout the Country they have left, our shores
Give to their Faith a fearless resting-place.



More welcome to no land the fugitives than to the British strand, this is a place where all of them can come. In other words he is creating what is traditionally called a (())(7:02) a place of amenity and he is saying the oppressed of the world from France or other parts of Europe can all come here this is the fearless resting place he argues.

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In 'September 1, 1802', Wordsworth's headnote would denounce the 'capricious acts of tyranny' by which France 'chas[ed]' the blacks out of the country.



In September 1, 1802 Wordsworth headnote would denounce the capricious acts of tyranny the capricious acts of tyranny, what he is referring to his how France chased the black people out of the country.

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We had a female Passenger who came
From Calais with us, spotless in array,
A white-robed Negro, like a lady gay,
Yet downcast as a woman fearing blame;
Meek, destitute, as seemed, of hope or aim
She sate, from notice turning not away,
But on all proffered intercourse did lay
A weight of languid speech, or to the same
No sign of answer made by word or face:
Yet still her eyes retained their tropic fire,
That, burning independent of the mind,
Joined with the lustre of her rich attire
To mock the Outcast – O ye Heavens, be kind!
And feel, thou Earth, for this afflicted Race.
‘September 1, 1802’



Wordsworth describes this for us in September 1, 1802 a white robed negro like a lady gave but she is downcast, destitute and she does not want to speak much but Wordsworth concludes by saying be kind and feel thou, earth, for this afflicted race. So Wordsworth is concerned about racial discrimination, but he uses it to talk about England as a place of refuge. So those countries do all those bad things too, these other races but we are of course welcoming.

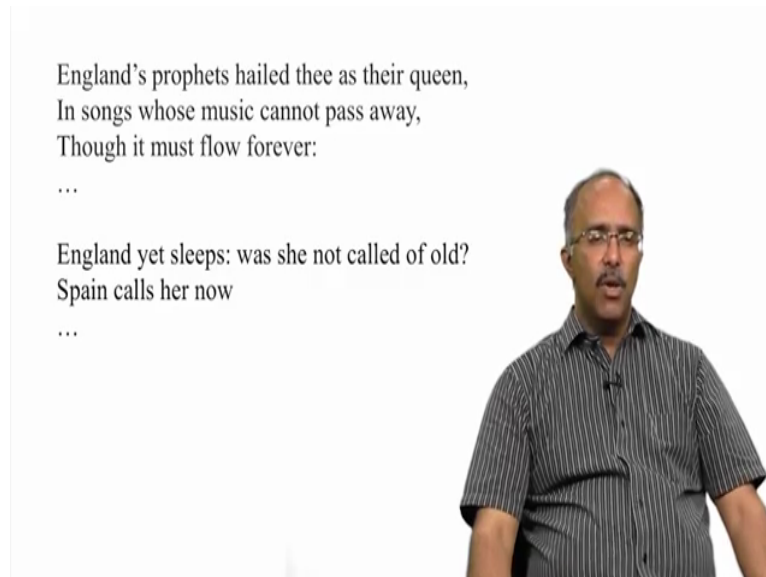
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In his 'Ode to Liberty', Shelley argues that a fulfilling human life is impossible without liberty. He then traces a history of liberty: Greece, its collapse after the Roman Republic, its rebirth in Saxon England, its growth through the Reformation and English Renaissance and its glorious manifestation in the French Revolution. But he sees this hope in France also collapse due to napoleon's rise, and looks to Spain, Italy and England to revive the spirit of Liberty.



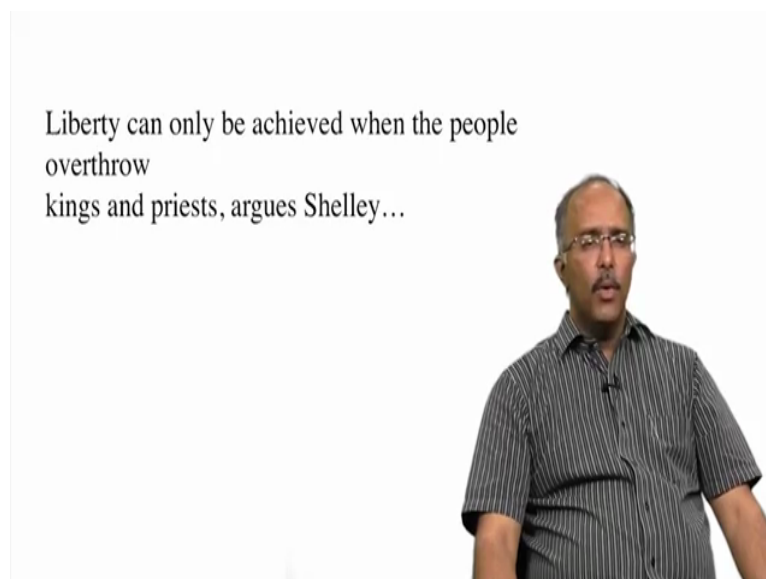
We now turn to Shelley in his 'Ode to Liberty', Shelley argues that a fulfilling human life is impossible without liberty, he traces the history of liberty from Greece through the Roman Republic and down to the present. And in text devoted to it such as 'Ode to Liberty', Shelley would focus on this.

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England's prophets hailed thee as their queen, in songs whose music cannot pass away, though it must flow forever.

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Liberty Shelley argues can only be achieved when the people overthrow kings and priests, as he puts it in these lines coming up on your screen now.

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Oh, that the free would stamp the impious name
Of KING into the dust!


...

Oh, that the wise from their bright minds would kindle
Such lamps within the dome of this dim world,
That the pale name of PRIEST might shrink and dwindle
Into the hell from which it first was hurled,



This will finally produce true Liberty:

Till human thoughts might kneel alone,
Each before the judgement-throne
Of its own aweless soul, or of the Power unknown!



So until you stamp the impious name of King into dust you will not be free, unless you destroy the pale name of the priest you will not be free. So true liberty requires that we throw out extinguish institutions like (())(8:54) and the church, clearly these are radical views. So if you recall we have already discussed environmentalism as a political concept and as a political perspective but we also discussed in previous sessions not today's questions of gender and politics, we have discussed the attitudes of the English Romantic writers to the French Revolution, but as we saw today questions of liberty, questions of socially induced distress are part of the political makeup of the English romantics as well, thank you.