Introduction to English and American Literature

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Session II – English Literary History

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Overview - Epochs of British Literature and Culture

- Old English Literature
- Middle English Literature
- The Renaissance
- The Seventeenth-Century
  - The Early Seventeenth Century
  - English Revolution and Commonwealth Period
  - Restoration
- The Eighteenth-Century
- Romanticism
- Victorianism
- Modernism
- Post-1945
### Epochs of British Literature – One Version

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Old English Literature (450 - 1100)

• All anonymous, mostly oral poetry; little has survived
• Poetry does not rhyme; alliteration is the central principle
• *Beowulf* (~800), a heroic epic in alliterative verse
• Caedmon's Hymn as the earliest extant Old English poem (a prayer), ~ 660-680)
Caedmon's Hymn (earliest extant Old English poem (~ 660-680) (contained in Beda's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, 731)

Nu sculon ðerigean heofonrices weard, meotodes meahte and his modgeþanc, weorc wuldorþæder, swa he wundra gehwæs, ece drihten, ord onstealde. He ærest sceop ielda bearnum hæofon to hrofe, halig scyppend; ða middangeard moncynnes weard, ece drihten, æfter teode ðeða ælmihtig

Now we must praise heaven-kingdom's guardian, the measurer's might and his mind-plans, the work of the Glory-Father, when he of wonders of every one, eternal Lord, established the beginning. He first created for men's sons heaven as a roof, holy Creator, then middle-earth, mankind's guardian, eternal Lord, afterwards made For men earth, Master almighty
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Middle English Literature (1100 - 1500)

- 1066: the Norman Conquest: William the Conqueror invades England; the Normans begin to rule England
- French becomes the language of the court and of administration
- Oxford University founded in 1167, Cambridge in 1209
- Drama: miracle plays and mystery plays performed in market square (originally religious drama)
- Chaucer (~1343 – 1400) as the most important Middle English writer
  - *Canterbury Tales*
    - Frame narrative: pilgrims on their way to Canterbury tell each other stories
    - Individual tales: very different genres, from drastically sexual *fabliaux* ("Miller's Tale") to long sermon ("Parson's Tale")
Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, "General Prologue", 1-18

When in April the sweet showers fall
That pierce March's drought to the root and all
And bathed every vein in liquor that has power
To generate therein and sire the flower;
When Zephyr also has with his sweet breath,
Filled again, in every holt and heath,
The tender shoots and leaves, and the young sun
His half-course in the sign of the Ram has run,
And many little birds make melody
That sleep through all the night with open eye
(So Nature pricks them on to ramp and rage)
Then folk do long to go on pilgrimage,
And palmers to go seeking out strange strands,
To distant shrines well known in distant lands.
And specially from every shire's end
Of England they to Canterbury went,
The holy blessed martyr there to seek
That hem hath holpen, when that they were seeke. Who helped them when they lay so ill and weal
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The Renaissance (~ 1485 – 1603)
Major political and cultural changes in England and Europe

• 1476: first printing press in England (William Caxton)

• 1485: end of the Civil War ("War of the Roses"); Henry VII (Tudor) becomes king

• 1492: Columbus "discovers" America (1492)

• "Rediscovery" of Classical Learning

• European humanists in contact with each other (Th. More, Erasmus of Rotterdam …)

• Reformation in Northern Europe
  – Luther, 1517
  – Henry VIII, 1534
Renaissance Poetry

• Strong influence from Italy, where the Renaissance began ~ 200 years earlier

• Petrarch (Francesco Petrarcha, 14th century) a major influence

• Under Henry VIII (king from 1509-1547), Wyatt and Surrey "imported" the sonnet from Italy (1530s/1540s)

• Cult of the sonnet form, usually a cycle of love sonnets (Sidney, Spenser, Watson …=> modified by Shakespeare)

• The lady is beautiful but unreachable

• Platonizing love, "sublimation"

• Eros and agape ("sex" versus "love of soul") as a constant problem
A strife is grown betwenee Vertue and Love,
While each pretends that Stella must be his:
Her eyes, her lips, her all, saith Love do this;
Since they do weare his badge, most firmely prove.

But Vertue thus that title doth disprove,
That Stella (ô deare name) that Stella is
That vertuous soule, sure heire of heav'nly blisse:
Not this faire outside, which our hearts doth move.

And therefore, though her beautie and her grace
By Love's indeed, in Stella's selfe he may
By no pretence claime any maner place.

Well Love, since this demurre our sute doth stay,
Let Vertue have that Stella's self; yet thus,
That Vertue but that body graunt to us.

(Sonnet LII)
That *Plato* I read for nought, but if he tame
Such coltish gyres, that to my birth I owe
Nobler desires …
(XXI, 4f.)
Edmund Spenser (1552-1599)

from: *Amoretti*

The sovereign beauty which I do admire,
Witness the world how worthy to be praised!
The light whereof hath kindled heavenly fire
In my frail spirit, by her from baseness raised …

(III, 1-4)
William Shakespeare, "SONNET 18'' (1590s)
Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? a
Thou art more lovely and more temperate: b
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, a
And summer's lease hath all too short a date: b

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, c
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd; d
And every fair from fair sometime declines, c
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd; d

But thy eternal summer shall not fade e
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st; f
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade, e
When in eternal lines to time thou growest: f

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, g
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. g
Elizabethan Age (1558-1603)

- Under Elizabeth I (1558-1603), England becomes the dominant power in Europe ("Spanish Armada, 1588)
- English drama flourishes (Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson)
- Shakespeare (1564-1616)
  - Comedies (*Much Ado About Nothing*, *Midsummer Night's Dream* …)
  - Histories (*Richard III*, *Henry V* …)
  - Tragedies (*Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*)
  - Romances/Problem Plays (*Tempest*, *Winter's Tale* …)
  - Poetry: *Sonnets*, *Venus and Adonis* …
The Globe Theatre - Early 17th-Century
Apron stage
Stage of the reconstructed Globe
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The 17th Century (~1603 – 1688)

• In 1603, Queen Elizabeth dies => end of the Tudor line
• James of Scotland becomes James I of England
• Charles I becomes king in 1625 and rules without Parliament from 1625-1640
• Civil War 1642-1646 and 1648-1652
• Charles I executed January 30th, 1649
• Under Oliver Cromwell, England a republic from 1649-1660 "Commonwealth")
• 1660: Restoration of monarchy with Charles II (son of Charles I)
• 1685: Catholic James II (brother of Charles II) becomes king
• Has to leave the country in 1688, replaced by William of Orange and Mary ("Glorious Revolution")
• At the end of the 17th century, the English political system has roughly reached is present-day form
Early 17th Century: "Metaphysical Poetry"

- Witty, complex, paradoxical poetry, formally innovative and inventive

- George Herbert (1593-1633): innovative religious poetry

- John Donne (1572-1631)
  - Early phase: daring, inventive and witty erotic poetry
  - Later phase: religious poetry
John Milton, (1608-1674)

- Major political writer in favour of the English Revolution
- Defended the execution of Charles I in 1649
- Briefly imprisoned after 1660
- Publication of *Paradise Lost* in 1667, an epic based on the story of Adam and Eve in Paradise (Genesis 1-3)
- Sometimes read as a representation of the English Revolution
Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,

Sing, Heavenly Muse, that, on the secret top
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
That shepherd who first taught the chosen seed
In the beginning how the heavens and earth
Rose out of Chaos: or, if Sion hill
Delight thee more, and Siloa's brook that flowed
Fast by the oracle of God, I thence
Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song,
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above th' Aonian mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.

(Book I, 1-16)
And chiefly thou, O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all temples th' upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for thou know'st; thou from the first
Wast present, and, with mighty wings outspread,
Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast Abyss,
And mad'st it pregnant: what in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support;
That, to the height of this great argument,
I may assert Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.

(Book I, 17 - 26)
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18th Century – the "Augustan Age" (~1688 – 1750)

- "Augustan Age", named after emperor Augustus (63 BC-14 AD), during whose reign Roman literature flourished with writers such as Virgil, Horace and Ovid

- English literature between ~ 1688-1750 frequently goes back to literary ideas and ideals of this period

- The major authorities are Aristotle and Horace

- Major writers are John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift

- The key poetic idea is “Mimesis“: imitation of nature rather than autonomous expression is to be the key aim of poetry

- Heroic couplet as the key poetic form:
  - Iambic pentameter
  - aa bb cc dd
Now hardly here and there a hackney-coach
Appearing, show'd the ruddy morn's approach.
Now Betty from her master's bed had flown,
And softly stole to discompose her own.
The slip-shod 'prentice from his master's door
Had par'd the dirt, and sprinkled round the floor.
Now Moll had whirl'd her mop with dext'rous airs,
Prepar'd to scrub the entry and the stairs.
The youth with broomy stumps began to trace
The kennel-edge, where wheels had worn the place.
The small-coal man was heard with cadence deep;
Till drown'd in shriller notes of "chimney-sweep."
Duns at his lordship's gate began to meet;
And brickdust Moll had scream'd through half a street.
The turnkey now his flock returning sees,
Duly let out a-nights to steal for fees.
The watchful bailiffs take their silent stands;
And schoolboys lag with satchels in their hands.
18th Century – the "Rise of the Novel"

• In the 18th century, the novel becomes the dominant literary form

• Forerunners:
  – the epic (narrative poetry),
  – Bunyan: The Pilgrim's Progress (1678)

• Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe (1719)

• Samuel Richardson, Pamela (1740), an epistolary novel (novel in letters)

• Henry Fielding, Tom Jones (1749)

• Laurence Sterne, Tristram Shandy (1759-1767, nine volumes), already a parody of the novel form
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Romanticism (~1790-1830)

• Major shift in aesthetics in the 1780s and 1790s

  – Classicist aesthetics: poetry is a mere MIRROR of nature
  – Romantic aesthetics: poetry as an autonomous creation, an expression of self; poetry as a LAMP rather than a mere MIRRROR

• William Wordsworth in 1800: "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings … recollected in tranquility" (*Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*)

• Key words: nature, heart/mind/soul, imagination, feeling

• Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, > 10 000 lines of poetic autobiography and self-stylization, unthinkable in the 18th century
Romanticism (~1790-1830)

- Politically dominated by the French Revolution (since 1789) and its consequences (Napoleon and the Napoleonic wars)
- The "Big Six" of Romantic Poetry:
  - First generation Romantics:
    - Blake (1757-1827),
    - Wordsworth (1770-1850)
    - Samuel Taylor Colderidge (1772-1834)
  - Second generation Romantics:
    - Lord Byron (1788-1824)
    - Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)
    - John Keats (1795-1821)
- Major novelists:
  - Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)
  - Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818)
  - Sir Walter Scott, *Waverley* (1814), *Ivanhoe* (1819)
I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed--and gazed--but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.
William Wordworth, *The Prelude*

My seventeenth year was come; I, at this time,
Saw blessings spread around me like a sea …
From Nature and her overflowing soul,
I had received so much that all my thoughts
Were steeped in feeling … (II, 405ff.)

[I was]
Contented when with bliss ineffable
I felt the sentiment of being spread …
O'er all that … lost beyond the reach of thought
And human knowledge, to the human eye
Invisible, yet liveth to the heart … (II, 418ff.)

… Wonder not
If such my transports were, for in all things
I saw one life, and felt that it was joy;
One song they sang, and it was audible—
Most audible then when the fleshly ear …
Forgot its functions and slept undisturbed. (II, 428ff.)
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Victorianism (1830 – 1901)

- Queen Victoria (queen from 1837-1901)
- Rapid industrialisation and technological progress
- Urbanization and development of urban proletariat
- Reform Bills of 1832, 1867, 1884/85
- Imperialism and the British Empire
- "dramatic monologue" (Browning, Tennyson)
- Poetry as a "socially useful" form (Matthew Arnold)
Victorianism (1830 – 1901)

• The "social problem novel" (Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell)
  – Charles Dickens: *Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, Hard Times*
  – Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*
  – Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil, or: The Two Nations*

• The Brontë sisters
  – Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847)
  – Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (1847)
  – Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey* (1847)
Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)

East London (1867)

'Twas August, and the fierce sun overhead
Smote on the squalid streets of Bethnal Green,
And the pale weaver through his windows seen
In Spitalfields, looking thrice dispirited;
I met a preacher there I knew, and said:
"Ill and o'erworked, how fare you in this scene?"
"Bravely," said he; "for I of late have been
Much cheered with thoughts of Christ, the living bread."
O human soul! as long as thou canst so
Set up a mark of everlasting light,
Above the howling senses' ebb and flow,
To cheer thee and to right thee if thou roam,
Not with lost toil thou labourest through the night!
Thou mak'st the heaven thou hop'st indeed thy home.
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Modernism (1901 - 1945)
- Major intellectual influences -

• Sigmund Freud/psychoanalysis
  – power of the unconscious
  – human autonomy becomes problematic

• Modern physics:
  – Einstein (theory of relativity),
  – Heisenberg (quantum physics; "uncertainty principle")
  – objectivity becomes problematic

• de Saussure/modern linguistics
  – language is arbitrary
  – language cannot "reflect" reality but shapes the perception of reality
  – Reality becomes "unknowable"
  – language and representation becomes problematic

"objective" representation becomes problematic;
there can be no privileged perspective
Pietro Perugino,
"Giving of the Keys to St. Peter", 1480s
19th century
Pablo Picasso,
"Dora Maar Seated"
(1937)
Modernism (1901 - 1945)
- Developments in literature -

• If objectivity is no longer possible, an omniscient narrator is no longer appropriate either

• Perspective and subjectivity become central

• Figural narrative perspective, interior monologue and stream of consciousness are central narrative techniques

• Radically "psychological" novels (James Joyce, Virginia Woolf)
My reader then is not to be surprised, if, in the course of this work, he shall find some chapters very short, and others altogether as long; some that contain only the time of a single day, and others that comprise years; in a word, if my history sometimes seems to stand still, and sometimes to fly. For all which I shall not look on myself as accountable to any court of critical jurisdiction whatever: for as I am, in reality, the founder of a new province of writing, so I am at liberty to make what laws I please therein. And these laws, my readers, whom I consider as my subjects, are bound to believe in and to obey …

(from: Book II, chapter I)
Radical subjectivity: the stream of consciousness
from: James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922)

... I can feel his mouth O Lord I must stretch myself I wished he was here or somebody to let myself go with and come again like that I feel all fire inside me or if I could dream it ... I was coming for about 5 minutes with my legs round him I had to hug him after O Lord I wanted to shout out all sorts of things fuck or shit or anything at all ... O Lord I cant wait till Monday frseeeeeeeeefronnnng train somewhere whistling the strength those engines have in them like big giants ... I better not make an alnight sitting on this affair they ought to make chambers a natural size so that a woman could sit on it properly he kneels down to do it I suppose there isnt in all creation another man with the habits he has look at the way hes sleeping at the foot of the bed ... I suppose he used to sleep at the foot of the bed too with his big square feet up in his wifes mouth damn this stinking thing anyway ...
Modernism (1901 - 1945)

• Break with traditional ideas of "poetry" (T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot)
  – Poetry no longer has to be "beautiful"
  – "I want to speak of poetry as I speak of pigs" (T.E. Hulme)
  – Playing with poetic conventions
  – Use of symbolism and mythology (T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats)

• 1922 as "annus mirabilis" of Modernism
  – T.S. Eliot, Waste Land
  – James Joyce, Ulysses

Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: Σίβυλλα τί θέλεις; respondebat illa: ἀποθανεῖν θέλω.

For Ezra Pound

*il miglior fabbro*

I. THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.
Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.
The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
Out of the window perilously spread
Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays,
On the divan are piled (at night her bed)
Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.
I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest -
I too awaited the expected guest.
He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,
A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare,
One of the low on whom assurance sits
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.
The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
Endeavours to engage her in caresses
Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defence;
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference.
(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
Enacted on this same divan or bed;
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall
And walked among the lowest of the dead.)
Bestows one final patronising kiss,
And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit . . .
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Literature since 1945
- Cultural Contexts -

• Even more radical questioning of concepts such as "reality", "representation", "identity"
  – Simulation and simulacrum, the media "replace" reality
  – Language constructs rather than reflects reality
  – Individuality and the subject are questioned

• Since the 1960s: "Postmodernism"

• De-Colonization, Post-Coloniality

• The "global village"
  – globalization, migration, inter-cultural encounters
  – media and the internet

• Rapid technological innovation, strong sense of being overpowered by globalisation, technology etc.
Literature since 1945
- Key trends in literature -

- Hard to classify, many different branches and traditions
- Radical formal experiments in all genres
- Idea that everything has been tried and done, originality is no longer possible ("Literature of Exhaustion", John Barth)
  - only conscious recycling, parody, ironic playing with conventions remain possible
  - self-reflexivity: literature constantly foregrounds its own "constructedness"
- The world as "text"
- Distinction between "high" and "popular" culture questioned
- New Literatures in English, Post-Colonial Literatures
Literature since 1945
- Key trends in literature -

• Often free verse, formal innovations, but also continued use of established forms

• The postmodern novel (Salman Rushdie, A.S. Byatt, Graham Swift, Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Kate Atkinson …)
  – Metafiction
  – intertextuality,
  – questioning of history, time, place, identity

• Theatre of the Absurd (Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot, 1953)

• In-yer-face theatre (since the 1990s): drastic representation of sex and violence (ex: Mark Ravenhill, Shopping and Fucking, 1996)