

Unit 1: The Age of Reason and the Rise of the English Novel

Semester 3, Week 1

Section: British Literature

Unit 1: The Age of Reason

Time allotted: One Session

Weekly Workload : 1 hour 30 mn

Description

A general revision of the lecture previously covered in the second semester of L1 entitled “The Rise of the English Novel”, that covers the basic philosophical principles of the age of reason to facilitate understanding of the social changes that occurred in the period. By the end of the course the students have a good knowledge of the drives that have led to the rise of a new social class and how that has become an incentive for the creation of a new literary genre. The students are also exposed to a literary text from the period, Daniel Defoe’s *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*.

Objectives

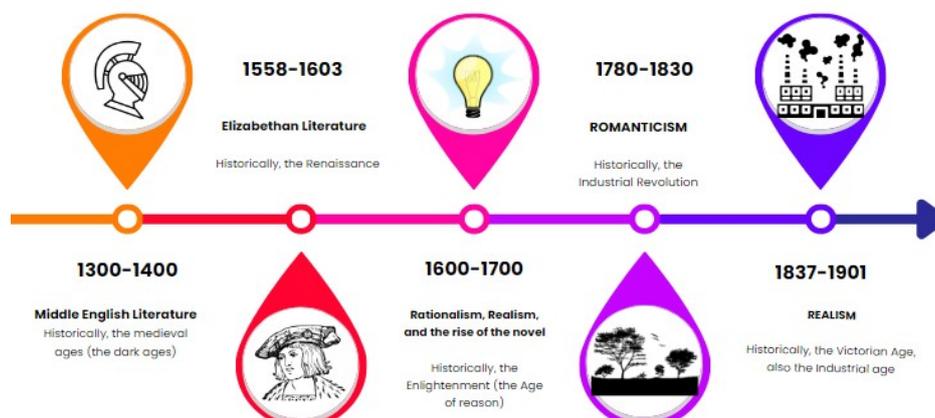
- To familiarize the learners with the principles of rationality.
- Highlighting the extent to which the cultural background influences and shapes the text in the eighteenth century realist novel.
- To explore the literariness of the text and prepare the students for literary analysis.

Pre-requisites A good knowledge of the basic literary movements and periods in the history of British literature. A reading of the novel *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* prior to the lecture, and an understanding of the basic concepts in literary analysis, merely the themes, character, Settings, and figures of speech.

Lesson Plan

1. Introducing a timeline of literary movements and historical periods in Great Britain
2. Exposition of the prominent historical events that have led to the cultural change.
3. Focus on the principles of rationality.
4. Analysis of the main consequences of industrialization
5. Analysis of the social situation in the country that has led to the rise and spread of the new literary genre known as the Novel.
6. Definition of the novel, types, aspects, major figures.
7. Study of the novel *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe as a sample of the first English novel and practice of the method of literary analysis

Timeline of British Literary Movements:



Lecture 1: The Enlightenment (The Age of Reason)

The late sixteenth to the seventeenth century in Europe witnessed the Renaissance, which is a scientific, cultural and intellectual movement, considered as the birth of sciences in Europe. The next period in Europe, and England in particular is that of the Enlightenment, often referred to as the Age of Reason (and Modernity), is a consequence of the Renaissance. The birth of sciences enhanced the intellectual life in Europe, many philosophers and thinkers started to write about reason and scientific truth. The spirit of this age centered around science as the only truth man can be sure of, thus any knowledge which is not calculable, or scientifically proven, is not reasonable. Reason thus became synonym to truth, and science becoming a definition of truth.

For Emmanuel Kant, the Enlightenment is “Man’s emergence from one’s own self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the **inability** to use one’s own understanding **without the guidance** of another. This immaturity is self imposed if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of the enlightenment is therefore: Sapere Aude! **Have courage to use your own understanding**”. (*Aufklärung* is the German translation of the word Enlightenment)

The Main Writers of the Enlightenment:

There have been many thinkers in the Enlightenment age who spoke and wrote about this movement. The literature of this period was rather rational and intellectual instead of fictional. The first thinkers to define the Enlightenment are French, German, and English philosophers and scientists, who together formed a movement they called *Philosophes*.

This movement included Jean Jacques Rousseau (French), Renée Descartes (French), John Voltaire, Denis Diderot, and others. These philosophers defined the Enlightenment starting from Descartes’ principle (I think therefore I am), thus relating

man's existence to his ability to think for himself (which leads back to Kant's definition of the Enlightenment)

Other British thinkers like Locke, Isaac Newton, David Hume, related the Enlightenment to science and truth, having Newton's theory of the Gravity, and his essays about science, as an inspiration leading them to conclude that natural and human laws contribute in making things happen.

Some thinkers approached the Enlightenment from a more spiritual viewpoint, thus meditating about God and creation, without being superstitious. Society was becoming less religious and more rational. English poet Alexander Pope says: "know then thyself presume not god to scan the proper study of mankind is man".

Principles of the Enlightenment

- Individualism: Unlike previous ideologies, the enlightenment puts man in the centre of the universe. Knowledge is supposed to serve man and to improve his life. Man is thus the most important creature in the universe
- Humanitarianism: all human beings should be helpful to each other regardless of their status or class.
- The separation of the church and the state: Secularism. The enlightenment came as a reaction against the corrupted authority of the church, thus it has put an end to the power of the church in politics and other fields of life.
- The rational thinking stipulates that human reason can understand the natural laws of the universe and determine the natural rights of mankind.
- Human beings, based on reason, can provide unending progress in knowledge, technical achievement, and moral values
- The human self is conscious, rational, autonomous, and universal.
- The human self is the only objective form of reasoning.
- The only knowledge obtained by rational thinking is science.
- The knowledge produced by science is "truth," and is eternal.
- The knowledge/truth produced by science (by the rational objective knowing self) will always lead toward progress and perfection.

- All human institutions and practices can be analyzed by science (reason/objectivity) and improved.
- Reason is the ultimate judge of what is true.
- If what is rational is true, what is true is also right and indisputable.

The Consequences of the Age of Reason (also factors of the rise of a new literary genre: the novel)

1. The rise of a new social class, the Bourgeois class, composed of tradesmen of the middle class, with limited education and great wealth
2. The spread of intellectual cafés which enhanced political and intellectual debates
3. The invention of the printing machine and the translation of the bible
4. Higher education rate among the commons
5. The need of a literature that represents the middle class to entertain them

The Rise of the English Novel

The eighteenth century developments in economy and culture led to the rise of new forms of expression and interests in British society. The emphasis of the rational thinking on truth extended to literary expression, which had to be truthful and rational instead of fictional and fantasist. Moreover, the spread of a growing reading public who was becoming more literate increased the number of its audience. The literacy of the eighteenth century society meant limited culture and the ability to read and write, which was difficult to the laymen and middle class in general to read and understand poetry. This social group also enhanced the rise of the new genre with their growing demand for a literature that reflects their lives.

Unlike the upper classes, the middle class culture was different and sometimes considered alien by the aristocracies. This latter caused the novel to be rejected by the upper classes, reason for which writers remained within the realist tendency to preserve the aspect of rationalism. Thus, the novel of the eighteenth century particularly represented the everyday life and experiences of the middle classes based on the criteria of verisimilitude (very similar to the real) as an attempt to faithfully render their lives and to preserve its sustainability.

The realist tendency of the novel was further emphasized by the attempt to reflect the truth of the middle class individual. The British critic and scholar Ian Watt reports that the term Realism itself came as a reaction to the term Idealism which told very little truth of the condition of the human being. In this case, realism as a movement permits the novelist to portray the individualistic aspect of society. The novel concerned itself with the life, emotions, the psychology, and the condition of the middle class individual. The personal experiences and struggles of this character are reflected with more depth and complexity by the novel than by any other genre.

Novel Defined

The novel as a genre has been changing its characteristics and focus through time. It is thus difficult to fix a definition for it, yet, it can be described as a long prose narrative about characters and events acting in a plot that is inspired from the real life. It is distinguished by its length to be thus distanced from the form of a short story. One of the characteristics of the eighteenth century novel is the idea of verisimilitude, (the faithful imitation of the real life), yet, starting from the nineteenth century, this criterion became disputable as the novel became less representative and more fictitious. The word novel is taken from Italian *novella* and French *Nouvelle* which mean new.

Different critics defined the novel in relation to its characteristics. The most important elements that define it as the existence of **characters** (more precisely common individuals), a **plot**, a scene (or **setting**), and the representation of personal experiences. The novel emphasizes man's struggles which are depicted in four different types of conflicts:

- Man against himself
- Man against society
- Man against nature
- Man against God

The leading figures of the novel are: Daniel Defoe author of *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Samuel Richardson, author of *Clarissa, or History of a Young Lady* (1748), Henry Fielding author of *Tom Jones* (1749), Tobias Smollet

author of *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748), Laurence Stern author of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman.*(1759), and John Bunyan author of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). They are the fathers of the English novel

The Types of Novels

There are different types of novels, among them:

- The Detective novel: a novel about mystery and crime stories, usually including a character doing the work of a detective to solve a crime.
- The sentimental Novel: a novel characterized by its expression of emotions, sensitivity, and moral sentiment.
- The comic novel: a humorous novel that includes laughter often to criticize.
- The adventure novel: a novel that presents dangerous and exciting journeys for the main character. The plot in this novel is built on suspense and thrill. with heroic protagonists and exotic settings
- The picaresque novel: originating from Spain in the sixteenth century, Picaresque is derived from *Picaro* with means rascal and rogue. It is about an anti-hero who would often throw himself in misadventure and survives through wit and deception.
- The epistolary novel: a novel written in letters that are exchanged between the characters and the protagonist or different characters in the novel.
- The Gothic novel: a novel of darkness and fear, including stories about supernatural creatures, ghosts, ghoulish brides, anxiety, death, and pessimism
- Moralistic novel: a didactic novel that takes as objective to teach morality to its audience. It is usually written for social reform like the works of Charles Dickens.
- Satire: a novel that includes irony; anger, and sarcasm and which depicts political and social criticism.

**More information about the novel can be found in the handout of Prof. Kheladi Mohamed via*

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