

Historical, Social, and Gothic Novels around 1800

Precursors

The end of the Age of Johnson

- Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764): reaction against Richardson and domestic romance.
 - Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1760–67) and *A Sentimental Journey* (1768). Culture of *digressions*.
Shandyism is the incapacity for fixing the mind on a serious object for two minutes together. (Goethe)
The man is not a great humourist; he is a great jester. (W. M. Thackeray)
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After the French Revolution

- Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792).
- William Godwin's political novels and prose writings: *Political Justice* (1793); *Caleb Williams* (1794):
 - Mary Wollstonecraft's husband and fellow thinker;
 - transition from Calvinism through materialism to atheism;
 - anarchistic political views (cf. second generation of Romantics, Mary Shelley, P. B. Shelley, Byron).
- Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794):
 - Gothic romance centred around a persecuted heroine (Emily St. Aubert);
 - setting: 1584, near the border between France and Italy; happy ending; love;
 - weakness: explains the seemingly supernatural elements;
 - influenced Jane Austen (*Northanger Abbey* is a burlesque based on this novel).
- Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801):
 - decadent society, anticipating social criticism of 19th-century novels;
 - first edition: depiction of interracial marriage (Jamaica) – removed from subsequent editions;
 - commended by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey*.
- Charles and Mary Lamb's children books; most notably *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807).

Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832)

- Father of Scottish historical novels; almost immediate international success.
 - Born in Edinburgh but sent to the Border region in early childhood (to cure acquired lameness).
 - **1779**: education begins at the Royal High School in Edinburgh.
 - **1783**: University of Edinburgh (studies classics).
 - **1786**: joins father's office to study legal matters.
 - **1786–87**: reads Ossianic poetry; meets Robert Burns in a literary salon.
 - **1789–90**: back to university (law, moral philosophy, universal history) – themes for later novels.
 - **1802–03**: *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* published (ballad collection in three volumes);
 - co-operation with James Ballantyne – publishing business.
 - **1809**: co-founder of and regular contributor to the *Quarterly Review*.
 - weight of his poetic career gradually diminishing, due to Byron's appearance, among other things.
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On Lord Byron: "He beat me out of the field in description of the stronger passions and in deep-seated knowledge of the human heart."

- **1814**: *Waverley*, his first truly historical novel published:
 - Jacobite uprising of 1745 pictured;
 - main protagonist (Edward Waverley): initially a Tory supporter of Jacobitism, he goes over to the camp of King George and the Hanoverian monarchy (stability wins over nationalism);
 - published anonymously in order not to damage fame as a poet ("the Wizard of the North");
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To this slight attempt at a sketch of ancient Scottish manners the public have been more favourable than the Author durst have hoped or expected. He has heard, with a mixture of satisfaction and humility, his work ascribed to more than one respectable name. Considerations, which seem weighty in his particular situation, prevent his releasing those gentlemen from suspicion by placing his own name in the title-page; so that, for the present at least, it must remain uncertain whether Waverley be the work of a poet or a critic, a lawyer or a clergyman, or whether the writer, to use Mrs. Malaprop's

phrase, be, “like Cerberus, three gentlemen at once.” The Author, as he is unconscious of anything in the work itself (except perhaps its frivolity) which prevents its finding an acknowledged father, leaves it to the candour of the public to choose among the many circumstances peculiar to different situations in life such as may induce him to suppress his name on the present occasion.

(From the Introduction to the Third Edition)

- **1817: *Rob Roy*:**
 - set around the time of the Jacobite uprising of 1715;
 - title originates in the name of a supporting character (Robert Roy MacGregor), a Scottish leader;
 - Jacobite rebellion portrayed faithfully, in spite of some possible improbabilities;
 - dramatic plot full of murder and intrigue;
 - Northumbria, England, and Scotland depicted in a very colourful way; splendid characterization.
- **1819: *Ivanhoe*:**
 - breaks away from the Scottish theme: 12th-century England (Richard the Lionheart);
 - Robin Hood features in one of the side roles;
 - one of the heroines, Rebecca, is a Jewish girl – emancipation of the Jews an issue with Scott;
 - conflict of Saxons and Normans portrayed realistically;
 - historical facts generally accurate but serve primarily as a background to fiction.

The Author of the Waverley Novels had hitherto proceeded in an unabated course of popularity, and might, in his peculiar district of literature, have been termed “L’Enfant Gate” of success. It was plain, however, that frequent publication must finally wear out the public favour, unless some mode could be devised to give an appearance of novelty to subsequent productions. Scottish manners, Scottish dialect, and Scottish characters of note, being those with which the author was most intimately, and familiarly acquainted, were the groundwork upon which he had hitherto relied for giving effect to his narrative. It was, however, obvious, that this kind of interest must in the end occasion a degree of sameness and repetition, if exclusively resorted to. . . . The public are, in general, very ready to adopt the opinion, that he who has pleased them in one peculiar mode of composition, is, by means of that very talent, rendered incapable of venturing upon other subjects. . . . There is some justice in this opinion, as there always is in such as attain general currency. It may often happen on the stage, that an actor, by possessing in a preeminent degree the external qualities necessary to give effect to comedy, may be deprived of the right to aspire to tragic excellence; and in painting or literary composition, an artist or poet may be master exclusively of modes of thought, and powers of expression, which confine him to a single course of subjects. . . . Whether this reasoning be correct or otherwise, the present author felt, that, in confining himself to subjects purely Scottish, he was not only likely to weary out the indulgence of his readers, but also greatly to limit his own power of affording them pleasure. (Introduction)

- **1827: *Life of Napoleon*:** great effort but not quite adequate as a reliable biography.

Jane Austen (1775–1817)

The author’s knowledge of the world, and the peculiar tact with which she presents characters that the reader cannot fail to recognize, reminds us something of the merits of the Flemish school of painting. The subjects are not often elegant, and certainly never grand; but they are finished to nature, and with a precision which delights the reader. . . . Her merits consist much in the force of a narrative conducted with much neatness and point, and a quiet yet comic dialogue, in which the characters of the speakers evolve themselves with dramatic effect. The faults arise from the minute detail which the author’s plan comprehends. Characters of folly or simplicity, such as those of old Woodhouse and Miss Bates, are ridiculous when first presented, but if too often brought forward or too long dwelt upon, their prosing is apt to become as tiresome in fiction as in real society. (Walter Scott on *Emma*)

- Background typical of the country gentry; father rector of the Anglican parish at Steventon, Hampshire.
- Scope limited, world seen from a country estate; information about city manners from banker brother Henry as well as the odd visit to London (very often combined with attending the theatre).
- Home education followed by a boarding school from **1783** to **1786** (French, writing, dancing, music).
- Father encouraged writing activity of both Jane and her sister Cassandra.
- **1796–97: *First Impressions*** written and submitted by George Austen to Thomas Cadell (London publisher); publication refused immediately – later rewritten to become *Pride and Prejudice*.
- **1801–06:** family lived in Bath.
- **1802:** marriage proposal from Harris Bigg-Wither – Austen first accepted (for practical financial and legal reasons) but changed her mind the morning after; she remained unmarried for the rest of her life.

- **1803:** copyright of *Susan* (later *Northanger Abbey*) sold to Benjamin Crosby for £10. Manuscript unpublished; copyright only bought back in **1816**. Novel published posthumously.
- **1806–09:** after George Austen's death (1805), Jane, Cassandra, and their mother moved to Southampton.
- **1809–17:** the three women took up residence in Chawton village.
- **1811:** *Sense and Sensibility* published.
- **1813:** *First Impressions* rewritten as *Pride and Prejudice* and published by Thomas Egerton (London) – “by the author of *Sense and Sensibility*.”
- **1814:** *Mansfield Park* published – successful with the public, though little noticed by critics.
- **1815:** *Emma* published by John Murray.
- **1816–17:** terminal illness.
- **1817:** *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* published in one posthumous volume by Murray at the request of Cassandra and Henry Austen. Jane Austen identified officially as the author of the novels for the first time.

Jane Austen's Social Novels

- Tackle questions of society and the individual's place therein.
- The gentry are generally the centre of attention; high society depicted with sharp criticism.
- Contrast between the city and the country (in the best tradition of the comedy of manners).
- Primary aim: marriage – to secure long-term social stability, especially for women.

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters. (*Pride and Prejudice*, Ch. 1)

- Critical of the domestic sentimental romance tradition in fiction; divergent ways leading to marriage.
- **Structure:** third-person narrative told by an omniscient narrator; extensive dialogues utilizing (i) direct discourse, (ii) indirect discourse, and (iii) free indirect discourse. Turning points often marked by letters inserted into the narrative – a remain of the epistolary tradition originally embraced by Jane Austen.

“My dear Mr. Bennet,” said his lady to him one day, “have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?” [i]

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not. [ii]

“But it is,” returned she; “for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it.”

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

“Do not you want to know who has taken it?” cried his wife impatiently.

“You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.”

This was invitation enough. [iii] (*Pride and Prejudice*, Ch. 1)

- Places and social occasions reflecting the life of country gentry.
- Suspense element used for the creation of psychological depth, anticipating later proceedings.

Elizabeth said no more – but her mind could not acquiesce. The possibility of meeting Mr. Darcy, while viewing the place, instantly occurred. It would be dreadful! She blushed at the very idea; and thought it would be better to speak openly to her aunt than to run such a risk. But against this there were objections; and she finally resolved that it could be the last resource, if her private enquiries as to the absence of the family were unfavourably answered. (*Pride and Prejudice*, Ch. 42)

- Detailed description of scenery is generally absent; places associated with their owners.

When all of the house that was open to general inspection had been seen, they returned down stairs, and, taking leave of the housekeeper, were consigned over to the gardener, who met them at the hall door.

As they walked across the lawn towards the river, Elizabeth turned back to look again; her uncle and aunt stopped also, and while the former was conjecturing as to the date of the building, the owner of it himself suddenly came forward from the road, which led behind it to the stables.

They were within twenty yards of each other, and so abrupt was his appearance, that it was impossible to avoid his sight. Their eyes instantly met, and the cheeks of each were overspread with the deepest blush. He absolutely started, and for a moment seemed immovable from surprise; but shortly recovering himself, advanced towards the party, and spoke to Elizabeth, if not in terms of perfect composure, at least of perfect civility. (*Pride and Prejudice*, Ch. 43)

Mary Shelley (1797–1851)

- Born as Mary Godwin Wollstonecraft (daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft).
- Her mother died when she was 11 days old; her father remarried soon – step-sister Claire Clairmont.
- Imbued with father's radical political views: republicanism, inherent goodness of humanity.
- Enormous library; meetings with famous statesmen and cultural icons (e.g. Aaron Burr, ex-vice-president of the United States or Samuel Taylor Coleridge).
- **1814**: eloped with Percy Bysshe Shelley and Clair Clairmont to France, Switzerland, and then back along the Rhine. Became pregnant by Shelley but her daughter died soon after being prematurely born.
- **1816**: Percy Bysshe Shelley's first wife, Harriet Westbrook committed suicide; Mary and Percy married.
- **1817**: Geneva, Switzerland – met Lord Byron; writing contest; the germ of *Frankenstein* created.
- **1818**: moved to Italy; second and third child died;
- **1819**: fourth child, Percy Florence born.
- **1822**: Percy Bysshe Shelley and a close friend of theirs, Edward Williams, drowned in a storm in the Bay of Spezia, while on their way back from Leghorn to Lerici, where they were staying.
- Never remarried, though she received several offers.
- **1839**: edited Percy Bysshe Shelley's poetry for the press.
- **1844**: Shelley's father died – she gained financial security.
- **1851**: died of brain tumour.

Works

- *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818):
 - written near Lake Geneva, in the company of Lord Byron, his doctor Polidori (father of vampire stories), Claire Clairmont, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, prompted by a writing contest stimulated by the reading of German ghost stories;

It proved a wet, ungenial summer, and incessant rain often confined us for days to the house. . . . I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world.

(From Mary Shelley's Introduction and Preface to the 1831 edition)

- uncontrolled scientific improvement seen as a threatening prospect;
- ethical attitude required in all scientific and other experimentation; a statement of humanism;
- quotations from one another, e.g. Shelley's poetry:

Alas! Why does man boast of sensibilities superior to those apparent in the brute; it only renders them more necessary beings. If our impulses were confined to hunger, thirst, and desire, we might be nearly free; but now we are moved by every wind that blows and a chance word or scene that that word may convey to us.

We rest; a dream has power to poison sleep.

We rise; one wand'ring thought pollutes the day.

We feel, conceive, or reason; laugh or weep,

Embrace fond woe, or cast our cares away;

It is the same: for, be it joy or sorrow,

The path of its departure still is free.

Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;

Nought may endure but mutability!

(*Frankenstein*, Ch. 10)

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- **Gothic elements:**
 - supernatural factors (giving life to dead matter through electricity);
 - extreme emotions on a broad scale;
 - gloomy settings, foreboding, premonition in a dream (psychological justification);

It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. (Chapter 5)

- *Rambles in Germany and Italy* (1844): travelogue with radical political ruminations.