

# *LITERATURE IN CONTEXT*

**CULTURE AND SOCIETY**

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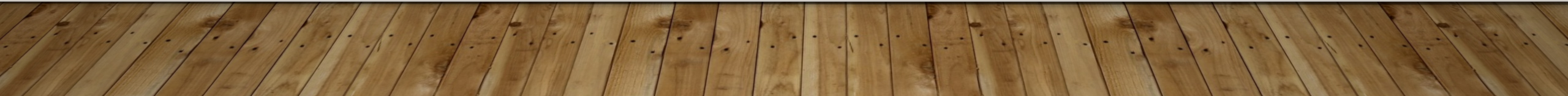
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# CULTURE AND SOCIETY

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## **Culture and society – Agrarian Economy – No real class system**

At the **beginning of the Romantic period**, Britain was still an **agrarian economy** with much of the population employed as rural workers or in domestic service;

by the end of the period it was a rapidly industrializing nation with mushrooming towns and cities.

In the eighteenth century there was no real class- consciousness;

Britain had a limited aristocracy, a substantial rural gentry and what were referred to as the **'middling sorts': professional people, merchants and rural and urban workers.**



# Culture and society - modern class-consciousness

**By 1830** something like a **modern class-consciousness** had emerged with more clearly identifiable **upper, middle and working classes**.

**Notions of rank, order, degree and station based on birth** became supplanted by groupings of landlords, capitalists and labourers.

# Culture and society – Exponential rise of population

In the late eighteenth century the population of the British Isles began to grow dramatically

Between **1771** and **1831**, the population of England more than doubled from 6.4 million to 13 million.

In Scotland the population rose from something like 1.3 million in the mid-eighteenth century to 2.4 million by 1831.

Never before had the **population risen** so markedly over such a short period of time.

# Culture and society – Exponential rise of population

Historians still argue about the reasons for this explosion but whatever the reason it **changed British society for ever.**

The increasing size of the **population expanded the labour force**, as well as the demand for goods and services.

**Economically this was beneficial**, as a larger labour force **reduced the cost of labour and of the goods and services** produced, which, in turn, **accelerated the industrial process.**

# Culture and society - **process of urbanisation**

As well as aiding industrialisation, **the growth in population also contributed to the process of urbanisation,** or the phenomenon of the increasing concentration of the **population in large cities and towns.**

In 1770 less than one-fifth of the population lived in an urban community;

by 1801 the proportion had risen to over one-third and

by 1840 it was almost one-half.

**In the 1750s London and Edinburgh were the only cities in Britain with in excess of 50,000 inhabitants;**

by 1801 there were eight towns of over that size and by 1841 there were twenty-six.



# Culture and society – Britain – the First Urbanised society

The great commercial, industrial and manufacturing cities of **London, Manchester, Glasgow, Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds and Bradford** increased exponentially in size.

By the **mid-nineteenth century, for good or for ill, Britain** had become the world's first urbanised society.

The factory towns of England tended to become rookeries of jerry-built tenements, while the mining towns became long, monotonous rows of company-built cottages, furnishing minimal shelter.

The bad living conditions in the towns can be traced to lack of good brick, the absence of building codes, and the lack of machinery for public sanitation;

but they were also due to the **factory owners' tendency to regard workers as commodities, or 'hands', and not as a group of human beings.**

# Culture and society – Working class

In addition to a **new factory-owning bourgeoisie, the Industrial Revolution\* created a new working class.**

The new class of industrial workers included all the men, women and children labouring in the textile mills, pottery works and mines.

Often skilled artisans, such as the 'handloom weavers', found themselves degraded to routine process labourers as machines began to mass produce the products formerly made by hand.

**Generally speaking, wages were low, hours were long and working conditions unpleasant and dangerous.**

# The Industrial Revolution\*

The Industrial Revolution is defined as the application of power-driven machinery to the manufacturing of goods and commodities.

In the eighteenth century all Western Europe began to industrialise to some extent, but in Britain the process was most highly accelerated.

## **The reasons for this are several.**

Britain had large deposits of coal still available for industrial fuel.

There was an abundant labour supply to mine coal and iron, and to man the factories.

From its established commercial empire, Britain had a fleet and possessed colonies to furnish raw materials and act as captive markets for manufactured goods.

Tobacco merchants of Glasgow, and tea and sugar merchants of London and Bristol, Had capital to invest and the technical expertise to exploit it.

**By the beginning of the eighteenth century the use of machines in manufacturing was already**

## **The Industrial Revolution\***

In 1762 Matthew Boulton built a factory which employed more than six hundred workers, and installed a steam engine to supplement power from two large waterwheels which ran a variety of lathes and polishing and grinding machines.

In Staffordshire an industry developed giving the world good cheap pottery, chinaware brought in by the East India Company often furnished a model.

Josiah Wedgwood was one of those who revolutionised the production and sale of pottery.

Improvements in the textile industry also occurred.

In 1753 John Kay patented his flying shuttle allowing weaving to proceed more quickly.

In 1771 Richard Arkwright's water frame was producing yarn.

About the same time, James Hargreaves patented a spinning jenny on which one operator could spin many threads simultaneously,

## **The Industrial Revolution\***

Then in 1779 Samuel Crompton combined the jenny and the water frame in a machine known as Crompton's mule, which produced quantities of good, strong yarn.

By 1840 the labour cost of making the best woollen cloth had fallen by at least half.

The first modern steam engine was built by Thomas Newcomen in 1705 to improve the pumping equipment used to eliminate seepage in tin and copper mines.

In 1763 James Watt began to make improvements on Newcomen's engine, changing it from an atmosphere to a true steam engine.

In 1774 Michael Boulton took Watt into partnership, and their firm produced nearly five hundred engines before Watt's patent expired in 1800.

The factory was now freed from reliance on water power.



# **Culture and society - The Revolution in transport system**

The **transport system** improved considerably throughout the period.

The spread of turnpike roads made it possible to transport goods and materials quickly throughout the year.

From the 1760s onwards, the canal system reduced the costs of haulage.

**The revolution in transportation was completed by the beginnings of the railway system.**

By the **mid-nineteenth century railway trains travelling at 30 to 50 miles** an hour were not uncommon, and freight steadily became more important than passengers.

## **Culture and society** - substantial changes in agriculture

There were **substantial changes in agriculture** as the countryside was transformed.

Agrarian capitalism reached a period of development and crisis in the early nineteenth century with the growth of a class of agricultural workers who possessed only their labour to sell to tenant farmers.

The period sees the decline of the independent smallholder (often idealised as the 'yeoman' class), movingly presented in Wordsworth's representations of what he referred to as 'Cumbrian statesmen', such as Matthew from his *Lyrical Ballads*.

# **Culture and society - scientific agriculture**

**The open-field system of cultivation gave way to compact farms and enclosed fields.**

Bogs and fens were drained, adding to the availability of land suitable for cultivation.

**Propaganda for the new agriculture was largely the work of Arthur Young.**

**In 1793 the Board of Agriculture** was established with Young as its secretary.

Although a failure as a practical farmer, he was a great success as a publicist for scientific agriculture.

# **Culture and society – Dissatisfaction- unrest among workers**

**changes to the lifestyle of the rural worker were often bitterly resented.**

The loss of customary rights, **occasioned by enclosure\***, (refer the next slide for enclosure) and the reduction in the value of wages led to dissatisfaction and unrest, culminating in resistance, rioting and rick-burning.

Alternatives to this form of agrarian capitalism were broached. **Thomas Paine's *Agrarian Justice* (1796)** claimed that land rights derived from commonality and argued for a land tax to militate against rural poverty.

**Radicals like Thomas Spence and his followers were further, arguing for the redistribution of land and the wealth derived from it.**

# **Culture and society** - public and private space and the role of women

18th century Britain became a society with a marked difference between two spaces to specific activity, the public and private.

There **developed an expanding public sphere of political, civil and intellectual life**, typified, in particular, by the growth of the coffee house as a venue for reading and debating information.

In contrast, **the private sphere involved** family life and the care and education of children.

**These two spheres were gendered as masculine and feminine.**

Notions of **gender also underwent a redefinition in the period**, largely due to growth in the mode of sensibility, which influenced all aspects of culture.



# Culture and society – Role of women

sensibility was very much a middle class and commercial culture which stressed the fineness of feelings.

Women were possessed of sensibility to a greater extent than men, because their nerves were considered to be finer and thus capable of delivering more delicate feelings.

Likewise, it was argued that **women should devote themselves to the domestic life** and not interfere in the public sphere. They were the guardians of morality but not of political action.

It was also feared that sensibility, with its stress on fine feeling and emotion, might lead to men becoming feminized.

# Culture and society - patriarchal family

similarly with the growth of Evangelical religion in the latter half of the century, the stress on the **woman at the centre of family life increased.**

**Denied participation in the world of public affairs,** women were nevertheless meant to act as the moral guides to men and to set moral and religious tone for the household.

The period is also generally known as one in which the authoritarian and patriarchal family give way to a more **closely entwined unit held together by the values of affective individualism, based on respect, loyalty and filial obedience.**

While retaining patriarchal control and authority, fathers were obliged to take more interest in their children's lives and education.

Enclosure refers to the conversion of common land strip-based open-field farming into compact and contained holdings enabling more efficient and sustained farming. This process, which occurred piecemeal incrementally, had begun in the late medieval period but was vastly accelerated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and especially in the Romantic period. Each action of enclosure required parliamentary approval, and between 1762 and 1844 more than 2,500 Enclosure Acts were passed, encompassing over 4 million acres of land.

The enclosing of common lands contributed vastly to the increase of agricultural productivity, but this was only achieved with massive dislocation and distress to numbers of the rural population. The process benefited the larger farms and landowners who saw rents increase with the productivity of their lands. Large sections of rural population were increasingly vulnerable to pauperisation with the increase of seasonal unemployment and the lessening of opportunities for female and child labour.

## **\*Enclosure**

The customary access of the landless to grazing land, gleaning peat-cutting, firewood, fishing and game was lost. This loss was especially hard when rural wages were in decline, and it was bitterly resented. The poetry of Clare, Goldsmith Crabbe and Wordsworth articulates a strong dissatisfaction with the process and its implications for the rural poor. The process was also sometimes violently resisted with rioting, the destruction of hedgerows and the burning of ricks.

# Culture and society - popular culture – under threat

Some argue that popular culture came under threat in the early nineteenth century. Not only did the gap between elite and plebeian culture appear to widen, but popular pastimes, customs and morality were scrutinised by a bourgeois class possessed of reforming zeal, both utilitarian and Evangelical.

**The culture of sensibility, with its concomitant attempt at the reformation of manners, is important here, as is the religious revivalism of the Evangelicals and their commitment to good works and strict morality.**

There were attempts to regularise and control activities such as pugilism, bull-baiting and cockfighting, and increasing regulation of public spaces, including the coffee house, dramshop and inn.

Popular festivities such as the maypole and morris dancing were discouraged and Sunday Schools and religious processions encouraged.

**The Society for the Suppression of Vice (1802)** targeted gambling and drinking as activities to repress.



# Culture and society

Popular culture was a wide-ranging field of activity which crossed notions of polite and vulgar, elite and plebeian, pre-industrial and modern.

It was formed from both print and oral cultures, the Bible, hymns, chapbooks, almanacs, newspapers, romances, gallows speeches and so on.

It manifested the survival of superstitions and beliefs involving popular millenarian thought of vulgar prophets such as Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcott, as well as activities for self improvement, especially in the artisan classes by such figures as the radical tailor Francis Place.

# Culture and society- The World of visual arts

The place and function of visual art in an increasingly commercial and industrialised world also troubled the age. The market for some kinds of artworks began to spread beyond affluent aristocratic circles. **The Royal Academy was founded in 1768 with Sir Joshua Reynolds as its first president.**

It became the nation's most powerful institution for the visual arts with forty full and twenty associate members.

The Academy organised classes for its students as well as an annual exhibition of paintings, sculpture and drawings by British artists in the splendid halls of Sir William Chambers's neo-classical masterpiece, Somerset House.

It sought to support young artists and raise the standard of public taste.

**In 1805 the British Institution was founded** to showcase the works of contemporary British artists.

Various commercial galleries were also established, reflecting the commodification of art for a middle-class market.

The most notable of these was John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, which opened in 1786 in Pall Mall, exhibiting new paintings from Shakespeare that were then engraved for prestigious editions of the plays.

# Culture and society- painting

The highest genre of oil painting was that of the history painting, what Reynolds called '**the grand style**', depicting figures from the Bible, mythology, or national history. In particular, the period saw a number of contemporary subjects reflecting Britain's military and naval success.

Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770) is often regarded as an exemplar of this. In France, Jacques-Louis David produced works commemorating recent events in the grand style such as *The Tennis-Court Oath* (1791), *the Death of Marat* (1793) and *Napoleon at St Bernard* (1800).

Other genres such as portraiture, landscape and still life also increased in prestige. **The genre of landscape painting** was elevated in the period. The two most important British landscape painters were John Constable and J. M.W. Turner.

Constable developed a series of agricultural landscapes from his native Stour valley in Suffolk, the most famous of which are *Flatford Mill* (1817) and *The Hay Wain* (1821).

Turner produced a huge opus of incredible variety. He began his career painting in the style of Claude Lorrain, the model for picturesque theorists, and was known for his extensive landscape paintings. He later pioneered a visual style evoking the sublime and apocalyptic (as opposed to Constable's predilection for picturesque beauty).

# Culture and society- Painting- landscape

Turner's main rival in the sublime was the Newcastle painter **John Martin**, who, in 1820s and 1830s, produced spectacular works illustrating among other things the Bible, Milton and Byron, such as

*Belshazzar's Feast* (1826), *Manfred on the Jungfrau* (1817), *Paradise Lost* (1827) and *The Fall of Babylon* (1831).

Philippe Jacques de Loutherberg essayed a series of sublime industrial landscapes, including his *Coalbrookdale by Night* (1801).

Another key artist of the period, Henry Fuseli, was Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy for two periods (1799-1805 and 1810 to his death).

His work eschewed the concern with history and the public for a depiction of the tragic, sublime and extreme emotions of love, hate, revenge, jealousy and alienation, such as his paintings for Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery and his famous pre-Freudian depiction of the *Nightmare*.

# Culture and society- Women Artists

The Academy was dominated by male artists but females such as Maria Cosway, Mary Moser and Angelica Kauffman did exhibit there.

Many artists chafed against what they saw as the Academy's dominance of the art world.

Both James Barry and the engraver William Blake decried the stultifying influence of those like Reynolds who prescribed rules for art.

Blake produced his small and highly symbolic experimental pictures for sale to his select patrons.



# Culture and society – Fine Arts and art market

Although not a part of the fine art market as such, topical political prints were extremely popular and contributed substantially to the political debate of the 1790s and beyond.

Key caricaturists such as James Gillray, George and Isaac Cruikshank and Thomas Rowlandson, though not known as individual artists, produced large numbers of hand-coloured etchings on political events, sold to the public in print shop windows and exhibitions.

Typically such prints would contrast British freedoms, with a well-fed John Bull, against French liberty, with its vicious and starving *sans-culottes*. They demonstrated a fear of French democracy and popular movements at home, savagely caricaturing Whig leaders such as Charles James Fox and other contemporary reformers.