



Topic: Englishness in XVIII and beginning of XIX century of English literature

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Abstract: The concept of Englishness in 18th and early 19th-century English literature embodies the evolving national identity, cultural values, and social structures of the period. Writers like Daniel Defoe, Samuel Johnson, and Jane Austen reflect notions of Englishness through depictions of rural life, class hierarchies, morality, and the significance of place. This era witnessed a growing emphasis on politeness, rationality, and social duty, often juxtaposed against colonial and cosmopolitan influences. Literature served as a medium to assert a distinct English identity, balancing tradition and change amidst the pressures of industrialization and imperial expansion. This paper examines how Englishness is constructed and challenged in representative works, focusing on themes such as landscape, social order, and the cultural imaginary of English life.

Key Words:

Englishness, 18th-century literature, early 19th-century literature, national identity, rural life, class hierarchy, morality, William Wordsworth, Sir Walter Scott, Jane Austen

English writing in the late 18th and early 19th centuries was greatly influenced by the notion of Englishness, especially as it became entangled with the Romantic movement, the emergence of nationalism, and the changing political and social climate. During this time, national identity, the place of the individual in society, and England's connection with the rest of the globe were all thoroughly examined. The late 18th-century Romantic movement, which frequently idealized the English countryside, culture, and history, was closely linked to ideas of national identity. Particularly in England, the growth of national identity was intimately related to the advent of Romanticism in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. As a literary and artistic movement, romanticism placed a strong emphasis on personal experiencing, the majesty of nature, and a strong bond with the past. The growing sense of Englishness, which was being influenced by historical occurrences, cultural changes, and the developing concept of the nation-state, found resonance in these topics.



A profound, emotional involvement with life—whether via reflection, feelings, or the natural world—was stressed by romanticism in literature. Romanticism urged people to trust their intuition and go within for inspiration, in contrast to the pragmatic, rational, and scientific methods that dominated the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution. Romantics also aimed to put nature above the scientific revolution's achievements because they thought this would change how people saw the world and help them understand themselves better. (Dr. Justina Anyadiegwu 2020)

One of the most renowned English Romantic poets is William Wordsworth, whose poetry frequently emphasizes the value and beauty of the English countryside. Wordsworth thought that the human spirit was greatly impacted by nature. His paintings frequently highlight the tranquil, healing aspects of nature and juxtapose them with the complexity and depravity of city life. The beauty and significance of the English countryside, which William Wordsworth saw as a source of moral inspiration, spiritual rejuvenation, and introspection, are central to his poetry. In contrast to the confusion of urban life, he frequently praised nature as a living force that influenced human experience. His work is mostly centered on the rural environment of England, particularly the Lake District, where he lived for a large portion of his life. For instance, Wordsworth considers the Welsh scenery surrounding Tintern Abbey and its enduring influence on his spirit in his poem "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey." He conveys his profound spiritual bond with nature, which gives him serenity and understanding of the secrets of life. The poem focuses on how his ideas and feelings are influenced by the landscape.

Example:

"Once again

Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,

Which on a wild secluded scene impress

Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect

The landscape with the quiet of the sky." (Wordsworth, William 1798)

The emergence of nationalism in the late 18th and early 19th centuries had a big impact on literature, especially historical novels. The effect of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and major political upheaval during this time prompted authors to examine issues of national identity, heritage, and the interplay between the past and present. Events like the American Revolution

(1776), the French Revolution (1789), and the ensuing wars in Europe in the late 18th century gave rise to nationalism as a potent ideology. Through historical narratives that honored national heroes, folklore, and cultural history, writers began to convey a developing feeling of national identity, pride, and distinction.

Several authors played significant roles in the development of historical novels that reflected the burgeoning nationalism of the time, one of them is Sir Walter Scott was a pioneering Scottish novelist and poet whose works played a significant role in the development of the historical novel, particularly in the context of burgeoning nationalism during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. His novels often explore themes of identity, heritage, and the interplay between the past and present, reflecting the romantic nationalism of his time. For example in *Waverley* (1814) it is considered one of the first historical novels. It tells the story of Edward Waverley, an Englishman who becomes embroiled in the Jacobite uprising in Scotland. Through *Waverley's* experiences, Scott explores themes of loyalty, national pride, and the complexities of Scottish identity.

"The hearts of a nation are seldom found to beat alike, and the affections of the people often do not follow the same course as their interests." (Scott, Walter 1814)

Jane Austen's contribution to the concept of Englishness lies in her vivid portrayal of rural life, social structures, and cultural values of early 19th-century England. Through her novels, Austen highlights the importance of place, particularly the English countryside, as a defining element of national identity. Her works, such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, emphasize the interconnectedness of land, heritage, and social status, presenting a vision of England rooted in tradition and stability. Austen's exploration of class dynamics and social mobility reflects the nuanced hierarchy of English society, where landownership and propriety were central to one's identity. Jane Austen's exploration of Englishness can be found in her novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), particularly through her depiction of the Bennet family estate, Longbourn, and its contrast with Mr. Darcy's grand estate, Pemberley.

Pemberley represents the idealized vision of English landownership: it is described as beautiful, harmonious with nature, and reflective of its owner's good character. Elizabeth Bennet's admiration of Pemberley signals her growing recognition of Darcy's virtues, as the estate symbolizes not only wealth but also



responsibility, stability, and moral integrity—key aspects of Englishness tied to the landed gentry. Austen writes, "Elizabeth, as they drove along, watched for the first appearance of Pemberley Woods... and at length the West side of the house was seen... a large, handsome, stone building, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills." (Austin, Jane 1813)

The representation of Englishness in 18th and early 19th-century literature serves as a rich reflection of the evolving national identity during a period of profound social, political, and cultural change. Through the works of writers like William Wordsworth, Walter Scott and Jane Austen, we see how literature was used to explore the values and ideals associated with being English such as landownership, social hierarchy, and morality. Defoe's depictions of individualism and colonialism, Johnson's commitment to rationality and tradition, and Austen's portrayal of social manners and rural life all contribute to a multifaceted understanding of what it meant to be English. These literary works not only define Englishness but also critique and question the structures that sustain it, providing a nuanced perspective on national identity that resonates even today.

References:

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