

Eighteenth-Century Prose Fiction

Second Year (Part 1)

First Lecture

**Introduction to Eighteenth Century
English Society and Culture**

Eighteenth-Century English Society

- If one is to read eighteenth-century English novels, delve into their worlds and characters, and gain insight into their character and thematic concerns, it is imperative that an overview of contemporary society and culture be introduced. The 18th-century novel, as we shall see in the course of this module, marks the very beginning of the novel as a genre. Why did it rise in this age? How did it develop? Who read the novel and who wrote it? These are key questions to tackle in the upcoming lectures.

Eighteenth-Century English Society

- The eighteenth century (1700-1799) is a turbulent age that was marked by many changes and discoveries.
- What significant events do you recall that happened in the eighteenth century?
- Examples: Industrial revolution (invention of the steam engine, printing press..etc), French Revolution which influenced many English thinkers and writers, the Romantic era, the rise of the novel....etc.)

Eighteenth-Century English Society

- In this lecture, we are going to have an idea of 18th century society, culture, people, habits, classes...etc., which all contribute to the fertile soil for the rise and development of the novel, and help us understand the novel we are going to study (particularly since these novels were realistic and aimed to offer a reflection of society and people).
- Please note that the eighteenth century society was not a homogeneous unit: early 18th century differs from mid and late 18th century life style and conditions. This will be marked clearly where relevant.

Eighteenth-Century English Society

- Early eighteenth century society was a very dark period. It was marked by:
 - 1) **Poverty:** many people died due to malnutrition, poverty, poor health conditions and no proper medical treatment. Infant death rate was also high.
 - 2) **Crime and prostitution:** because of difficult life conditions and poverty, crime (particularly theft and robbery) reached an alarming rate. Prisons were full of convicts, many were executed for petty theft (stealing small things like a loaf of bread), or deported to America. Women had no option but to marry in order to survive. They did not have proper education, and were not allowed to work except as maids. If a woman does not marry, is widowed or left alone for any reason, she would either go into service, or sell her body (prostitution) to survive.
 - 3) **Misery:** due to the above, life was miserable, grim and risky for many people as you will see from the pictures and contemporary paintings depicting the age presented below.

London Poverty



London Poverty



This is typical of poverty and drinking habits that were prevalent at the time. Notice the woman who is so drunk she doesn't notice her baby is falling off her lap. People used to drink to escape their misery.

London Poverty



London Poverty



London Poverty



A Street in the Slums

This is one of the streets (slums) of London full of poor miserable people. The streets of London used to be dark, dirty, and a dangerous place to walk since many thieves and criminals would be waiting for their victim.

London Prostitution



Street walker is the name given to a prostitute. The way a prostitute dressed had to do with her clients. In this picture, the street walker is well dressed because her clients are of the upper class.

Eighteenth-Century English Society

- By **Mid** eighteenth century, and due to expanding trade with the colonies, the country witnessed increasing prosperity (pavilions, theatres, parks...etc).
- The new culture was one of politeness: introducing cutlery and China wear into households, giving more attention to personal hygiene, encouraging good conduct and sensibility.
- During the mid 18th century, the cult of **sensibility** emerged, giving more importance to fellow feeling, sympathy and sentiments, stressing the need to engage in philanthropic and charitable activities.

Consumerism



By mid-18th century, shops became more spacious, cleaner and full of merchandise (in this case silk) from the colonies.

Consumerism



London Prosperity



It was customary for families to go out to parks for excursions when the weather permitted. More attention was paid to making these places more pleasurable.

London Prosperity



Compare this picture of London in mid 18th century with the earlier one of the slums. Notice how changed and more prosperous London had become by then: wider streets, cleaner places and more impressive architecture.

London Prosperity



London Prosperity



Politeness



With the culture of politeness, families paid more attention to manners and etiquette. Notice this middle class family drinking tea in a decorous way.

Eighteenth-Century English Society

- Eighteenth-century English society was a stratified society made up of: Aristocracy, Middle Class and Lower classes.
- 1) Aristocracy: this class was comprised of either the Gentry (landowners), or nobility (inherited titles).
- Aristocrats were viewed as morally loose, intently keen on seeking pleasure (gambling, fashion, balls and partying...etc). See the pictures and illustrations below for a glimpse of aristocratic life.

Aristocracy: Balls



Aristocrats spend most of their time in pleasure-seeking activities: drinking, gambling, partying and spending their money on fashion and clothes.

Aristocracy: Balls



Aristocracy: Balls



Ballrooms were large, with crowds of aristocrats dancing and having a pleasurable time.

Aristocracy: Pleasure



Aristocracy: Carelessness



This is one of the practices of aristocratic mothers which revealed carelessness for their babies, and for which they were largely criticized and subjected to contempt by the public: breastfeeding their babies without holding them, getting a maid to carry the baby while its being fed. Lack of emotion and care was heavily exposed.

Eighteenth-Century English Society

2) The Middle Class: members of this class had professions to earn their living (tailors, carpenters, shopkeepers...etc). They enjoyed relative financial stability. They also had:

- a) Limitless appetite for social improvement.
- b) emphasis on education as a priority, even for women.
- c) Belief that manners and moral strictness are imperative.
- Aristocratic ideology (one's worth determined by wealth, genealogy, rank...etc) was replaced by a Progressive ideology (education, manners, and personal merit outweigh money and rank). This gave momentum to middle-class aspirations to better themselves.

Middle-class education



Middle class girls were given private tuition. But the course of education for females was traditional, and focused on teaching women the skills they needed to become marriageable (music, dancing, French to present themselves in balls, and cookery, sewing, child care...etc.)

Middle-class education



Reading

- Reading was a widely practised habit by the majority of people at the time.
- Middle class families paid special attention to reading novels which inculcated moral lessons, and conduct books.
- Reading was either done collectively in a group, or privately.

Collective Reading



Collective Reading



Collective reading meant that a member of the family would read chapters or selected pages of a book or novel to the family in the evening, in the form of episodes where they would share the entertainment of listening to stories and learn moral lessons at the same time.

Private Reading



Private reading allowed for more freedom and privacy, creating a sense of personal relationship between the reader and author.

Private Reading



Circulating Libraries

- Circulating libraries were established in 1740.
- A **circulating library** (also known as lending libraries and rental libraries) were established as a form of business to profit from letting the public borrow books for a fee.
- This made it possible to practise reading even among servants.

Circulating Libraries



Circulating Libraries



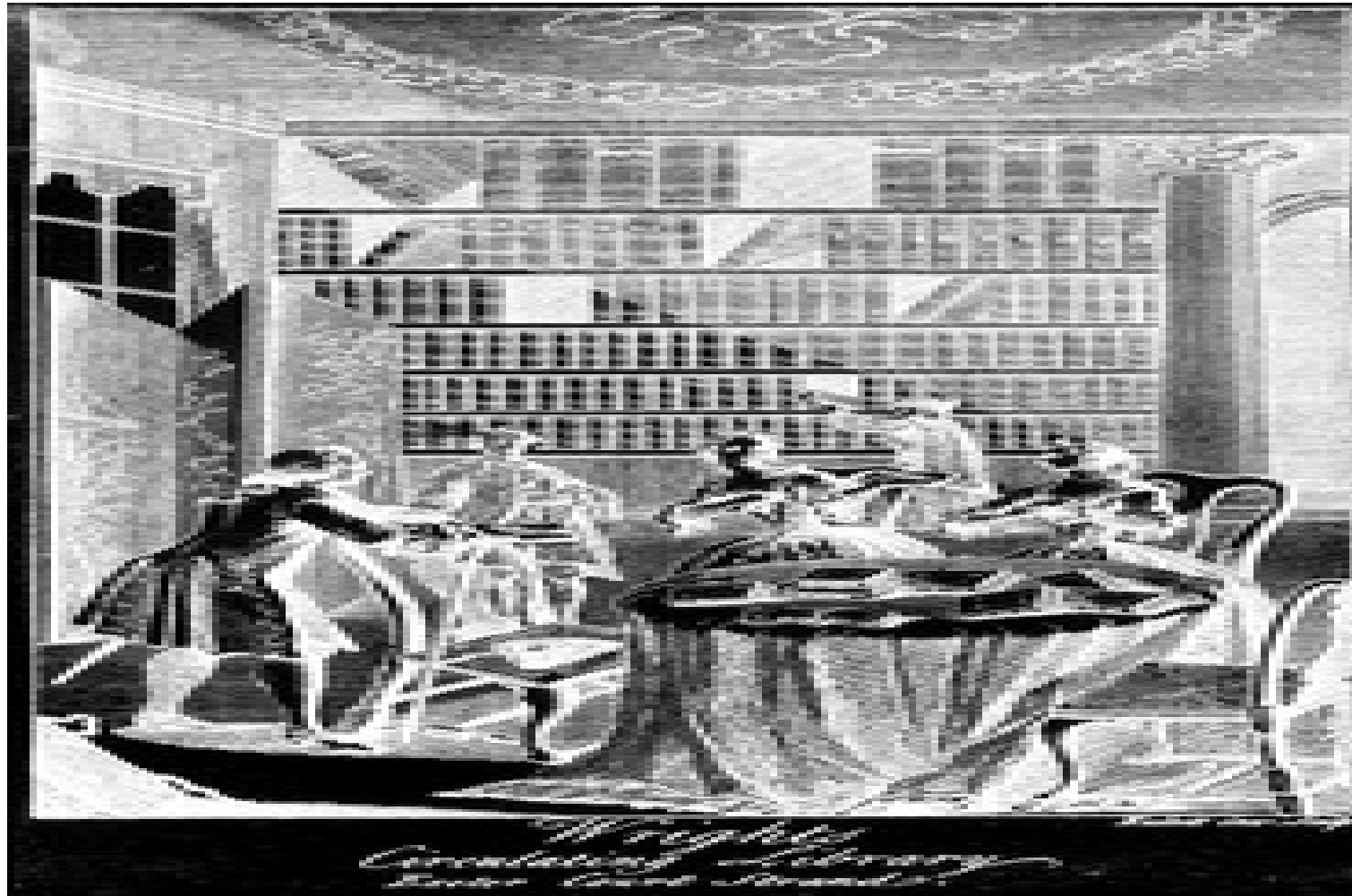
Circulating Libraries



[A Street in]

[The Library]

Circulating Libraries



Family Life

- The extended family was replaced by the nuclear family.
(private lives, secrets...etc)
- Marriage: no longer a family alliance or a means of social and financial embetterment, but a means of self-fulfillment through free choice.
- Authoritarian relationships between parents and children/ spouses were overtaken by a trend towards greater freedom and more equality.

Affectionate Family



Affectionate Family



Gender Roles

- Women mainly stayed indoors, were primarily concerned with household chores, childcare and other duties. They would occasionally go to balls.
- Men filled their time with outdoor activities, like coffee houses where political, social...etc. debates would be held; hunting; partying...etc.

Coffee Houses



Female Indoor Activities

