

陈 嘉 著

A History of  
English Literature  
英国文学史

Volume 3



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# A HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

Volume III

(In Four Volumes)

*by*

**Chen Jia**

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陈嘉著

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# Contents

## Chapter VI

### ENGLISH LITERATURE OF EARLY 19TH CENTURY

|                    |   |            |
|--------------------|---|------------|
| <b>Section I</b>   | <b>The Historical Background and the Literary Trends in<br/>Early 19th-Century England. ....</b>  | <b>1</b>   |
| 1.                 | The Historical Background: Economic, Political and Ideological. ....  | 1          |
| 2.                 | The Literary Trends: The Romantic Movement in English Literature as Part of the Romantic Movement in European Literature; Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats; the Prose Fiction of Walter Scott and Jane Austen; the Different Schools of Prose Writers..... | 3          |
| <b>Section II</b>  | <b>Romantic Poetry in Early 19th-Century England. ....</b>  | <b>5</b>   |
| 1.                 | Wordsworth. ....  | 5          |
| 2.                 | Coleridge.....  | 39         |
| 3.                 | Byron. ....   | 59         |
| 4.                 | Shelley.....  | 90         |
| 5.                 | Keats.....  | 119        |
| <b>Section III</b> | <b>English Prose in Early 19th Century. ....</b>  | <b>132</b> |
| 1.                 | Prose Fiction: Walter Scott; Jane Austen. ....  | 132        |
| 2.                 | Significant Writers of Prose in Late 18th and Early 19th Centuries: William Godwin, Paine, Cobbett.....   | 149        |
| 3.                 | Essayists in Early 19th Century: William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb; Thomas De Quincey. ....   | 159        |

## Chapter VII

### ENGLISH LITERATURE OF MID- NINETEENTH CENTURY

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Section I The Historical Background: Social and Intellectual....                                      | 177 |
| Section II Chartist Literature. ....  | 184 |
| 1. A General Survey of Chartist Literature: Different<br>Literary Genres, Stages of Development. .... | 184 |
| 2. Two Major Chartist Poets: Ernest Jones and William<br>James Linton. ....                           | 188 |
| 3. Gerald Massey and Minor Chartist Poets.....  | 197 |
| 4. Chartist Prose Fiction: Thomas Martin Wheeler,<br>Thomas Frost. ....                               | 199 |
| Section III Democratic Poetry in the Age of Chartism. ....  | 205 |
| 1. Thomas Hood and His "Song of the Shirt". ....  | 205 |
| 2. Ebenezer Elliott the Corn-Law Rhymers. ....  | 207 |
| 3. Elizabeth Barrett Browning and "The Cry of the Chil-<br>dren".....                                 | 210 |
| Section IV Major Novelists of Critical Realism in the Mid-19th<br>Century. ....                       | 212 |
| 1. Charles Dickens. ....  | 212 |
| 2. William Makepeace Thackeray. ....  | 241 |
| 3. Elizabeth Gaskell. ....  | 254 |
| 4. Charlotte Brontë. ....   | 258 |
| 5. Emily Brontë. ....   | 261 |
| 6. George Eliot. ....   | 264 |
| Section V Major English Poets of the Mid-19th Century. ....   | 271 |
| 1. Alfred Tennyson. ....  | 271 |
| 2. Robert Browning.....   | 285 |
| 3. Matthew Arnold and Arthur Hugh Clough. ....  | 301 |
| 4. Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Christina Rossetti.....   | 313 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| 5. Algernon Charles Swinburne. ....   | 318 |
| 6. Edward Fitzgerald's Translation of the "Rubaiyat of<br>Omar Khayyam" .....   | 326 |
| Section VI Non-Fiction Prose in Mid-19th-Century England...   | 328 |
| 1. Thomas Carlyle. ....   | 329 |
| 2. Thomas Babington Macaulay.....   | 337 |
| 3. John Ruskin.....   | 340 |
| 4. John Henry Newman. ....  | 350 |
| 5. John Stuart Mill. ....   | 358 |
| 6. Thomas Henry Huxley.....   | 367 |
| Section VII Minor Victorian Novelists: Charles Kingsley,<br>Benjamin Disraeli, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Charles<br>Reade, Wilkie Collins, Anthony Trollope. .... | 372 |

## Chapter VIII

### ENGLISH LITERATURE OF THE LAST QUARTER OF THE 19TH CENTURY

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Section I The Historical Background and the Different<br>Literary Schools. ....        | 381 |
| 1. The Historical Background: Political and Ideological.....                           | 381 |
| 2. The Different Literary Groups and Their Characteristics....                         | 385 |
| Section II William Morris and Other Writers of the 1880's....                          | 387 |
| 1. William Morris.....   | 387 |
| 2. Other Poets in the Socialist Movement of the 1880s:<br>Joyces, Salt, Connell. ....  | 404 |
| 3. Prose Writers in the Socialist Movement of the 1880s:<br>Bramsbury and Others. .... | 409 |
| Section III Critical Realists and Other Progressive Writers....                        | 417 |
| 1. George Meredith. ....   | 417 |
| 2. Thomas Hardy.....   | 425 |
| 3. Samuel Butler. ....   | 440 |
| 4. Voynich. ....   | 451 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| 5. Mark Rutherford. ....  | 455 |
| 6. Wilfrid Blunt. ....  | 458 |
| Section IV The Schools of Naturalism, Neo-Romanticism and<br>Aestheticism. ....           | 460 |
| 1. The Naturalists: Gissing, Moore.....   | 460 |
| 2. The School of Aestheticism: Walter Pater, Oscar<br>Wilde.....                          | 464 |
| 3. Neo-romanticism: Robert Louis Stevenson. ....  | 470 |
| Section V Apologists of Imperialism and Colonialism:<br>Rudyard Kipling, W.E. Henley..... | 475 |

## Chapter VI

# ENGLISH LITERATURE OF EARLY 19TH CENTURY

### SECTION I THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND THE LITERARY TRENDS IN EARLY 19TH-CENTURY ENGLAND

#### **1. The Historical Background: Economic, Political and Ideological.**

The industrial revolution in England in the second half of the 18th century, and the French Revolution of 1789—94 and the ensuing Napoleonic Wars had their strong impact upon England's economic, political and social scenes in the first few decades of the 19th century.

The industrial revolution brought with it modern machinery and modern industry, industrial capitalism and the proletariat. Economic exploitation and political struggle between the industrial capitalists and the proletariat for the first time in English history became the major social conflict in that country.

Not only the labouring people but even some feudal aristocrats and part of the bourgeoisie in England showed their sympathy toward the French Revolution of 1789 when it first overthrew France's age-old monarchical and aristocratic tyranny, but as the radical Jacobins came into power, the ruling classes in England became frightened and they joined with the reactionary forces on the Continent of Europe and waged war with France till the fall of Napoleon in 1815.

In the meantime, following the workers' disturbances in York, Nottingham and Leicester, there were in the late 1790s the revolutionary risings among the navy in 1797 and the national rising in Ireland in 1798. Then in the first two decades of the 19th century two major events took place: (1) the Luddites' destruction of machinery in 1810—1811 and (2) the massacre of a popular gathering in St. Peter's-



Fields (later ironically known as "Peterloo") near Manchester in 1819. The post-Napoleonic wars brought economic depression to England, and the fall of agricultural production and the introduction of the Corn Laws, with the consequent rise of the price of bread, led to greater miseries for the people and to their stronger demands for reform. On the other hand, the industrial bourgeoisie who had emerged as a political force since the industrial revolution began to fight for supremacy in political power with the landed aristocrats and the finance and commercial bourgeoisie. Finally came the so-called parliamentary reform of 1832, which brought the industrial capitalists into political power, but the poor people who supported them in the fight for reform got nothing from it except greater poverty and intensified exploitation in the 1830s and 1840s.

In the 1790s the political ideology of the ruling classes in England was represented by Edmund Burke (1729—1797) who was opposed to revolution and violence, but advocated revolutionary social change in his "Reflections on the French Revolution" (1790), while on the radical camp Joseph Priestley (1733—1804) retorted with his "Letter to Burke" (1791), Thomas Paine (1737—1809) with "The Rights of Man" (1791—92) and William Godwin (1756—1836) with "An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Political Justice" (1793). These radical writers argued for the rights of the people to fight against tyranny and to overthrow any government of oppression. In Godwin's case, he even attacked capitalist exploitation alongside feudal oppression. Somewhere between these two camps there was William Cobbett (1763—1835), a social worker and a publicist who from 1800 to the year of his death published a series of pamphlets and tracts on economic and political problems, entitled "Political Register". Marx spoke of him, "William Cobbett, an instinctive defender of the masses of the people against the encroachment of the bourgeoisie, was considered by others and by himself as a fighter for the interests of the industrial bourgeoisie against hereditary aristocracy". Special mention should also be made here of the or-

ganizations of the new proletariat at the turn of the century, including the London Corresponding Society under the leadership of the shoemaker Thomas Hardy, the Luddites under Ned Ludd, the Constitutional Society under John Horne Tooke (1736—1812) and the Revolution Society under Joseph Priestley (1733—1804) and Richard Price (1723—1791). Lastly, the influence of the writings of the French Enlighteners Montesquieu, Diderot, Voltaire and Rousseau, especially the last two, was much felt in England from the late 18th to the early 19th century.

## **2. The Literary Trends: The Romantic Movement in English Literature As Part of the Romantic Movement in European Literature; Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats; the Prose Fiction of Walter Scott and Jane Austen; the Different Schools of Prose Writers.**

Following the Enlightenment and its impact on literature, there was a period of literature in Western Europe generally known as the Romantic Movement. As a literary movement it came earliest in Germany, with the “Sturm und Drang” (“Storm and Stress”) of the late 18th century; it began in England a little later, with the romantic precursors in late 18th century and then the great romantic poets in the last years of the 18th century and the first two decades of the 19th; and it arrived last in France, flowering in the early 19th century, with Victor Hugo, Chateaubriand, Beranger, Lamartine and George Sand.

Taken as a whole, the literature of the Romantic Movement, whether in England, Germany or France, expressed a more or less negative attitude of the different social strata of the time toward the existing social and political conditions that came with the industrial revolution and the growing importance of the bourgeoisie. However, such negation emanated from quite different stands and with entirely different aims in view. Some literary spokesmen of romanticism spoke for the aristocracy who lost out in their battle for supremacy with the bourgeoisie, some pleaded on behalf of the patriarchal peasantry that suffered from the agrarian revolution and the

industrial revolution, while others stood for the new industrial proletariat suffering from increased tyranny and exploitation after the industrial revolution and the Napoleonic wars.

In England the literary output of the Romantic Movement appeared as early as the mid-18th century, with nature poetry in "The Seasons" (1726—30) of James Thomson, sentimentalism in Edward Young's "Night Thoughts" (1742—44), and in Laurence Sterne's "Tristram Shandy" (1759—67), medievalism in James MacPherson's "The Poems of Ossian" (1765), in Thomas Chatterton's "Rowley Poems" (1777), in Thomas Percy's edition of old ballads "The Reliques of Ancient English Poetry" (1765), and in the Gothic romances of Horace Walpole ("The Castle of Otranto", 1764) and of Mrs. Anne Radcliffe ("The Mysteries of Udolpho", 1794). These works, mostly of minor significance artistically, were written in reaction to the realistic writings of Fielding and Smollett and Sheridan, to the works of Samuel Johnson and Richardson and to the poetry of Thomas Gray and William Cowper. Toward the end of the 18th century, romanticism found its expression chiefly in the poetry of the great Scottish peasant poet Robert Burns (1759—1796) and of the poor engraver poet of London William Blake (1757—1827).

But it was not until the very last years of the 18th century and the first two decades of the 19th that romanticism as a literary movement in England reached its full flowering, especially in the realm of poetry where the works of Byron and Shelley and Keats appeared side by side with the verse of the "Lake poets" Wordsworth and Coleridge. Walter Scott, both a poet of Scottish literary heritage and a great master of historical fiction, carried the spirit of romanticism first into Scottish folk and legendary verse and then into vivid prose narrations of people and events of the past not only of Scotland but also of England and other European countries, quite in contrast to the other well-known novelist of this period, Jane Austen, who in her few novels reported chiefly in minute detail the everyday life of landed gentry, to the neglect of weighty social and political

themes of her day. This was also an age of romantic essays. Aside from William Cobbett whose popular prose took the form essentially of journalistic tracts and Coleridge with his critical essays, the outstanding "romantic" essayists of the first decades of the 19th century include William Hazlitt with a somewhat progressive stand, Thomas de Quincey with his decadent outlook and Charles Lamb in the middle ground, sympathizing with the poor but getting absorbed most of the time in his whimsical and dreamy sort of subjectivity. Two other prose writers of some repute were Leigh Hunt, a representative of the bourgeois liberals of the day who leaned slightly to the left, and Walter Savage Landor who was a classicist and a formalist.

The era of the Romantic Movement in the early 19th century English literature was a period of great poetry and great prose. The imperishable poetry of Byron, Shelley and Keats as well as Wordsworth and Coleridge, the great historical fiction of Walter Scott and the scintillating, humorous essays of William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb are among the invaluable gems in the treasure-house of English literature.

## SECTION II ROMANTIC POETRY IN EARLY 19TH-CENTURY ENGLAND

### 1. Wordsworth

Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey were known as "Lake Poets" because they lived and knew one another in the last few years of the 18th century in the district of the great lakes in Northwestern England. The former two published a book of poems ("The Lyrical Ballads") together in 1798, while all three of them had radical inclinations in their youth but later turned conservative and received favours from the great (pensions and poet laureateships). They were attacked consistently by Byron as the "Lakers", and Southey launched his counterattack on Byron and Shelley. This conflict between the two camps was, however, not simply one of personal

animosity, but in a way reflected the broad social struggle between the landed aristocracy and the oppressed multitude of the English people, for the Lake Poets criticized the industrialized capitalist society by advocating the return to the patriarchal society of the past while Byron and Shelley attacked the forces of oppression and exploitation both feudal and capitalist and called on the oppressed people to rise against earthly tyrants. Curiously enough, however, Byron and Shelley came from aristocratic families while Wordsworth and Coleridge and Southey originated from the petty bourgeoisie.

William Wordsworth (1770—1850) was the oldest and best known of the Lake Poets. He was born in the family of an attorney in Cumberland, and received his education at Cambridge University. In 1790 and then again in 1791—92 he travelled and resided for some time in France during the early days of the French Revolution; he seemed at first to be somewhat attracted to the slogans of “liberty, fraternity and equality”, but was soon shocked by the bloodshed during “the September massacres” and the “Reign of Terror” as the Jacobins came into power. Gradually he became a Conservative in politics. He obtained some legacies from some “gentleman friend” and from a Lord Lonsdale, his father’s patron, and these incomes enabled him to live for a number of years, together with his sister Dorothy, in the district of the great lakes in north-western England, where he made friends with Coleridge and Southey and where he was engaged chiefly in writing poetry. In 1798, in collaboration with Coleridge, he published his first major volume of poetry, entitled “The Lyrical Ballads”, which was at first not well received by the public. A second edition appeared in 1800 with a significant “Preface” affixed to it and excited some hostility from the critics. But years later the poems became hailed not only in England but in the whole Western world as an epoch-making book in English poetry.

In the winter of 1798, Wordsworth, his sister Dorothy, and Coleridge went to Germany. In the following year Wordsworth and Dorothy returned to England and lived near the lake of Grasmere

for eight years. In the meantime he married and made occasional visits to Scotland where he met Walter Scott. He continued to live a quiet life in the countryside and to write poetry. One volume after another were printed but they met with adverse criticism. In 1813 he was given, through the influence of the Earl of Lonsdale, a sinecure as distributor of stamps in the county of Westmorland with a substantial annual income.

In the same year he moved to Rydal Mount, near Grasmere, where he lived for 37 years, till his death. He took trips again and again to Scotland and to the continent of Europe, chiefly to Italy. Then, beginning from the late 1830s he became known as a poet. He was honoured with the honorary degree of the Doctor of Civil Laws at Oxford University in 1839, and in 1842 he received through Sir Robert Peel an annual pension from the Crown, after he resigned from his job of distributor of stamps in favour of his son. In 1843, upon the death of Robert Southey he was offered the Poet-Laureateship and in 1844 Lord Jeffrey, the severest of his literary critics, wrote in the "Edinburgh Review" in praise of the poet's great merits.

Wordsworth had a long poetic career and turned out many volumes of poetry, but his major poems were written all in the last decade of the 18th century and the first quarter of the 19th century. His earliest poems, "An Evening Walk" (written 1787—89, published 1793) and "Descriptive Sketches" (1793) were descriptive records of his travels in the lake district in northwestern England and also in Switzerland and France and they already revealed the poet's absorption in nature and natural scenery which was to last through his life. In the latter poem should be noted also his attitude toward the French Revolution which he still considered as the symbol of liberty at the time, though not without misgivings. Among these earliest poems should be mentioned also "Guilt and Sorrow" (written in 1793—94; published 1842) in which the poet relates with a great deal of sympathy for the wretched sailor and the still more miserable widow of a soldier and criticized the "frauds" that took all the sailor earned and thus led him to murder, as well as the "severe

mischance and cruel wrong" and the "disease and famine, agony and fear" of war that brought misery and woe to the soldier's widow. Here he seemed to blame the "social order" as he wrote, "Bad is the world, and hard is the world's law".

Although in some of his poems appearing in the two editions of "The Lyrical Ballads" of 1798 and 1800 and in his long autobiographical poem "The Prelude" which he finished writing in 1805, Wordsworth already showed his unfavourable attitude toward the Jacobin Dictatorship stage of the French Revolution (e.g., Sonnet: One might believe that natural miseries / Had blasted France, and made of it a land / Unfit for men), yet he also wrote during this period quite a number of poems showing his unmistakable sympathy for the common people in his protests against military aggression and political tyranny in the international scene. In "To Tossant L'Ouverture" he praised the Negro chieftain who led an uprising in Haiti; in "On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic" he bewailed the loss of freedom for the Venetian people; in "Thoughts of a Briton on the Subjugation of Switzerland" he showed much sympathy for the Swiss people who lost their liberty upon the invasion of the French army; in "Rob Roy's Grave" he lamented the death of Rob Roy who fought for the freedom of the poor people in Scotland; in "Milton, Thou Shouldst Be Living at This Hour" he expressed his wish for someone like Milton to defend the freedom of the English people at the time. In fact, besides these outstanding and well-known sonnets that are remembered not only for their lofty thoughts but also for their artistic finish, there were many other poems, mostly sonnets, written by Wordsworth in defence of national liberty and in condemnation of political tyranny, not alone in his youth but also in his later years (e.g., his sonnets on the Tyrolese fight for liberty, on the struggle of the Spanish guerillas against French invaders in 1811, on the plight of the French army in Russia in 1812—13 and on the Battle of Waterloo). He was particularly anxious over the threatened invasion of England by the French army under Napoleon, and so his numerous sonnets written in eu-

logy of "British freedom" during the years of the Napoleonic wars are easily understandable as showing his patriotic feelings while he was obviously unaware of the regressive conservatism of the British ruling class in league at the time with the reactionary regimes of Russia, Austria and Prussia (e.g., Sonnets: "Inland, within a hollow vale, I stood", "It is not to be thought of that the flood", "Vanguard of liberty, ye men of Kent"). Also it should be pointed out here that Wordsworth was ever in sympathy with the oppression from which the Negroes suffered at the time (e.g., Sonnets: "To Thomas Clarkson, on the Final Passing of the Bill for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, March, 1807" and "Driven from the soil of France, a female came").

More striking are the numerous poems among Wordsworth's early works that deal with the simple rural folk whom the poet was familiar with as a result of his long stay in the Lake district. The best known of these are the Lucy poems, all five of which describe with rare elusive beauty of simple lyricism and haunting rhythm the lowly country girl leading her simple life of obscurity far away from civilization. Especially in "Strange fits of passion I have known" and "She dwelt among the untrodden ways" there is the peculiar charm of simple tales of simple emotions told in simple words in simple ballad metre. Likewise the three simple poems celebrating the simple emotions of an old village schoolmaster Matthew ("Matthew", "The Two April Mornings", "The Fountain, A Conversation") are memorable for the poet's overflowing sympathy for the sad, aged patriarch as the latter reminisces about the death of his daughter of nine and complains of the "heavy laws" oppressing the poor folk.

In a goodly number of similar poems Wordsworth revealed his true compassion for the sufferings of the poor and the unfortunate on the mountains and near the lakes where he dwelt. "The Affliction of Margaret" and "The Sailor's Mother" record the sad wailings of two old mothers over the loss of their sons: in the former the lonely parent has all sorts of apprehensions about the fate of her only son gone for seven years as she hopes against hope for



his return, while in the latter the beggar mother knows her sailor lad to be dead and her only treasure left is the bird and its cage left behind by her son. At greater length and with stronger feelings is narrated the story of an old shepherd Michael whose son has gone to the bad after leaving the pastoral scene for "the dissolute city" (in "Michael"). In all three poems the sorrows of the parents are the sharper because in their old age their sons have become their only hope and support in life. "Michael" is a powerful poem with its detailed descriptions of the simple life of the shepherd and of his strong affections for his only son Luke born to him in his old age, but Wordsworth wrote other moving tales about the aged and the helpless that are at least equally effective. In "The Last of the Flock" a poor shepherd has to sell all fifty of his sheep in order to feed his family of six children as now he holds in his arms a little lamb as the last of his flock and bewails his fate in "an evil time". In "Simon Lee, the Old Huntsman" the aged hunter as "poorest of the poor" is now barely alive and he and his wife Ruth can hardly till their small scrap of land or even unearth the root of an old tree. Similarly, in "The Old Cumberland Beggar" a solitary aged beggar creeps from door to door and barely keeps himself alive on alms. But the poet seems to have his strongest sympathy for the old leech-gatherer in "Resolution and Independence". Here "the oldest man he seemed that ever wore grey hairs", appearing "not all alive nor dead, / Nor all asleep", but "motionless as a cloud", the leech-gatherer stirs the pond with his staff and has to travel far and wide to gather leeches for his livelihood. While admiring the old man for his "resolution and independence" the poet really shows his compassion on the wretched person who stands for "solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty". Although in these poems Wordsworth was obviously preaching the doctrine of meekness and stoicism by praising those poor and aged people for bearing their hardships in silence and submitting to God's will patiently, and although in "Michael" may even be detected the poet's eulogy of patriarchal happiness or "return to nature", yet in these "simple