

The Industrial Revolution and the Romantic Spirit

The Industrial Revolution refers to a series of significant shifts in traditional practices of agriculture, manufacturing, and transportation, as well as the development of new mechanical technologies that took place during the late 18th and 19th centuries in much of the Western world. During this time, the United Kingdom, as well as the rest of Europe and the United States soon after, underwent drastic socio-economic and cultural changes. During the late 18th century, the United Kingdom's economic system of manual and animal based labor shifted toward a system of machine manufacturing while more readily navigable roads, canals, and railroads for trade began to develop. Steam power as well as the sudden development of metal tools and complex machines for manufacturing purposes underpinned the dramatic increase in production capacity.

The Industrial Revolution had a profound effect upon society in the United Kingdom. It gave rise to the working and middle classes and allowed them to overcome the long-standing economic oppression that they had endured for centuries beneath the gentry and nobility. However, while employment opportunities increased for common working people throughout the country and members of the middle class were able to become business owners more easily, the conditions workers often labored under were brutal. Further, many of them were barely able to live off of the wages they earned. During this time, the industrial factory was created, which, in turn, gave rise to the modern city. Conditions within these factories were often deplorable and, by today's standards, unethical: manufacturers frequently used children for labor purposes and laborers were required to work long hours. Conditions were often dangerous, if not deadly. A group of people in the United Kingdom known as the *Luddites* felt that industrialization was ultimately inhumane and took to protesting and sometimes sabotaging industrial machines and factories. While industrialization led to incredible technological developments throughout the Western world, many historians now argue that industrialization also caused severe reductions in living standards for workers both within the United Kingdom and throughout the rest of the industrialized Western world. However, the new middle and working classes that industrialism had established led to urbanization throughout industrial cultures, drastic population increases, and the introduction of a relatively new economic system known as *capitalism*. Industrialization seemed to exemplify humankind's ability to dominate and manipulate nature by understanding (through science) its laws. It also spurred cultural developments, as it enabled the cheaper production of books and other printed materials, gave members of the middle-class more leisure time, and made consumer goods more affordable and accessible for many.

Romanticism developed in the United Kingdom in the wake of, and in some measure as a response to, the Industrial Revolution. Many English intellectuals and artists in the early 19th century considered industrialism inhumane and unnatural and revolted – sometimes quite violently – against what they felt to be the increasingly inhumane and unnatural mechanization of modern life. Poets such as Lord Byron –

Saylor URL: www.saylor.org/engl203/#3.1.3

particularly in his addresses to the House of Lords – and William Blake – most notably in his poem “The Chimney Sweeper” – spoke out and wrote extensively about the psychological and social affects of the newly industrial world upon the individual and felt rampant industrialization countered the human spirit and intrinsic rights of men. To a large extent, English Romantic intellectuals and artists felt that the modern industrial world was harsh and deadening to the senses and spirit. These intellectuals called for a return, both in life and in spirit, of the emotional and natural, as well as the ideals of the pre-industrial past.

This response and its various dimensions can be seen in the readings for this subunit. Byron’s speech, in response to a law outlawing the activities of the Luddites, emphasizes the economic hardships that industrialization has created among working people. He insists that the Luddites are only reacting due to “circumstances of the most unparalleled distress” (Byron 1812). Only such desperation could have pushed the perpetrators – despite the presence of military and police forces – to continue destroying the machinery. He emphasizes that the underlying problem is that while the new machinery allowed the capitalists to increase their profit it did so by “throw[ing] out of employment” large numbers of workmen who “were left in consequence to starve” (Byron 1812). Rightly according to Byron, the workers thus felt “themselves to be sacrificed to improvements in mechanism” (Byron 1812).

Blake’s “The Chimney-Sweeper” similarly reflects on the conditions of workers displaced by the new industrialization and concomitant urbanization. The child who speaks begins by commenting on his mother’s death, but the central image of the poem is the contrast between Tom’s vision of all the sweepers in a heaven where they run “down a green plain, leaping, laughing” (15) and the reality of their lives where “in soot” they sleep also figured through the image of them “locked up in coffins of black” (12). The poem also suggests that this religious vision helps to maintain the system, as the last line states that “If all do their duty” (24) and if they continue to work long hours in dirty conditions, then they will receive their reward in heaven. This idea is reiterated in Blake’s “London,” when he comments on “How the Chimney-sweeper’s cry / Every blackning Church appalls” (9–10) setting up the contrast between the sweepers and the church, even as it suggests their interconnection. “London” also begins to develop another key point of the Romantic reaction to industrialization and urbanization, their sense that these processes are not only economically unfair but also are dehumanizing and unnatural. The images Blake begins with, i.e., the repeated “charter’d” and “marks” of the opening stanza, suggest how humankind has transformed the Thames into yet another human-dominated thoroughfare (the Thames is “charter’d” just like the street) and links that denaturalization to the transformation and disempowerment of individuals who now show “Marks of weakness, marks of woe” (4). The problem, as the famous last line of the second stanza indicates, is one of consciousness and material practices, as it is “mind-forg’d manacles” (8) that he hears in every voice. Human minds have created these handcuffs, have chained themselves with the very processes – intellectual and material – that supposedly were to set people free.

Saylor URL: www.saylor.org/engl203/#3.1.3

The two Wordsworth poems from this subunit begin to move us towards the related question of the role of nature in Romanticism (see subunit 3.3.1) and further develop Blake's emphasis on the unnaturalness of London and his identification of the problem as being one of consciousness. In the sonnet "The World Is Too Much with Us," Wordsworth emphasizes the modern disconnection from nature: "Little we see in Nature that is ours" (3), averring that he'd "rather be / A pagan suckled in a creed outworn; / So might I, standing on this pleasant lea, / Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn" (9–12). Wordsworth implies that we have lost a sense of the mystery of nature and of its mythic and powerful element as epitomized in classical myths; note the reference to Proteus and Triton. While he does not diagnose exactly why, he stresses that "we are out of tune" (8) with nature, because "The world is too much with us" (1) and we "waste our power" with "Getting and spending" (2). Rather than having a spiritual connection with nature, we treat the world as an instrument, as a route to economic end. While the poem does not directly address industrialization, it epitomizes a Romantic critique of the economic materialism and instrumental rationality that defined industrialization.

The other sonnet by Wordsworth, "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802," also from the first years of the 19th century, provides a slightly different view of London, emphasizing the possibility of renewal and reconnection with something divine in nature, even in the midst of the city. That possibility, however, is only attainable at this moment in the morning, when the city seems more at one with nature: its "Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie / Open unto the fields, and to the sky" (6–7) For this moment, everything is "bright and glittering in the smokeless air" (8). The contrast with the way the city normally is intensifies the experience, as Wordsworth repeatedly comments that nothing, even in the more wild regions he is more associated with, can compare: "Earth has not anything to show more fair" (1); "Never did sun more beautifully steep / in his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill" (10); "Ne'er saw I, never felt, a clam so deep!" (11). Unlike the Thames in Blake's "London," which is "charter'd," rendered little different from the streets, here, "The river glideth at his own sweet will" (12). "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" illustrates the possibility of recovering a connection to nature even in the midst of the center of the new industrial capitalist nation. Doing so, it also embodies the Romantic emphasis on consciousness and on perspective. While the material conditions of morning – e.g., the city still being "asleep" – enable Wordsworth's speaker to have this experience, it also seems to derive from his own ability to unconsciously open himself to the world, as the city itself does at this moment, and to allow himself merely to exist within the bounty of the sun, the air, and the morning. This sonnet suggests the ways that Romanticism, even in reacting against industrialization and urbanization, did not simply call for a return to older modes of living but stressed the importance of reconfiguring our relationship to the world – a relationship that, for many Romantics, industrialization has thrown out of balance.

Summary

- The Industrial Revolution refers to the massive economic, technological, and

Saylor URL: www.saylor.org/engl203/#3.1.3

social changes that transformed Western Europe and the United States through the mechanization of production and the reorganization of labor into factory systems during the beginning of the late-18th century in the United Kingdom.

- While the Industrial Revolution produced incredible wealth, enabled the middle-classes to become dominant, and allowed some in the working-class lives of more stability, it also drove many into horrific working conditions, destroyed the livelihoods of others, and had devastating consequences for the natural environment.
- British Romantic poets and thinkers reacted against the Industrial Revolution on a number of fronts, as illustrated in poems by Blake and Wordsworth, attacking the economic devastation to working people including children, its confining human consciousness to an instrumental view of nature and other people, and its demystification of nature.

References

Blake, William. "London."

Blake, William. "The Chimney-Sweeper."

Byron, George Gordon. 1812. "Maiden Speech in the House of Lords."

Wordsworth, William. "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802."

Wordsworth, William. "The World Is too Much with Us."