

A painting of Thomas Jefferson in Italy, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a white coat over a red waistcoat. He is seated on a ledge, looking out over a landscape with ancient ruins and a volcano in the background.

JOURNEY TO ITALY: Gothic Literature

October 9, 2020



The Rise of the Modern Novel and Gothic Literature

The Novel

- What is a novel?
 - A novel is a relatively long work of narrative fiction, normally written in prose form, and which is typically published as a book.
- When was the first modern novel published in the West?
 - Most literary historians consider Cervantes' 1605 *Don Quixote* to be the first modern novel.
 - However, it is considered a singular production in Spain which did not create a genre, while in Great Britain in the 18th century, the modern novel as genre was really developed.
- What differentiates the novel from other forms of “non-true” literature?
 - Firstly, much of the history of non-historical writing in the West was in verse, such as classic to medieval epic poems.
 - Secondly, the novel differentiates itself from the romance, which preceded it, in its content. As M. H. Abrams states: “a novel is a fiction narrative that displays a realistic depiction of the state of society, while the romance encompasses any fictitious narrative that emphasizes marvelous or uncommon incidents.”
 - So, for example, Arthurian tales are romances, not novels.

The Novel

- A novel is a relatively long work of narrative **fiction**, normally written in prose form, and which is typically published as a book.
- What is fiction?
- It is argued by many scholars, such as Catherine Gallagher, that the Rise of the Novel in the 18th century went hand in hand with the Rise of Fictionality.
- Before the rise of fiction, writers either claimed their stories to be true, or else their stories were so fantastical (epic/romance) that readers understood them not to be true.
- Fiction, rather, was neither true nor fantastical. Instead, fiction imitates reality without being historically factual.
 - Thus, fiction represented a blurring of the boundary between, a redefinition of, true tales and false tales.
- Because fiction requires the tale be neither true nor implausible/fantastic, fiction novels, unlike previous literature, are most often about commoners and common occurrences, rather than important or exceptional figures and events.

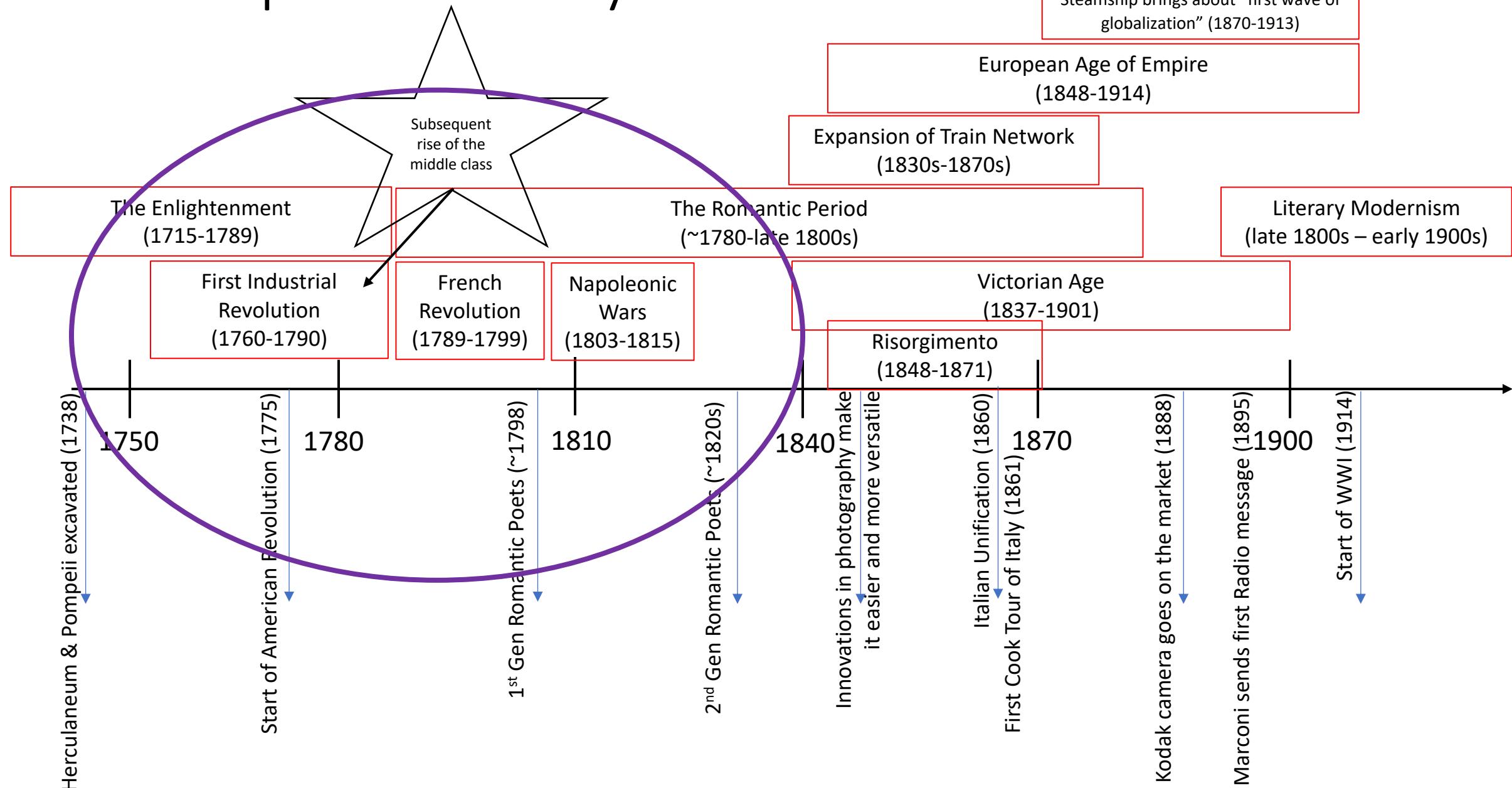
The Novel

- Why did ‘fiction’ and, in turn, the modern novel appear in Great Britain in the 18th century?
- It is argued that fictionality and modernity go hand in hand.
- Thus, as Great Britain was arguably the first ‘modern’ nation in Europe, it provided the cultural imperatives for the creation of fiction.
 - Early secularism
 - Strong scientific enlightenment
 - Empiricism
 - Capitalism
 - National consolidation (end of absolute monarchy)
 - Rise of the middle class
- It can be argued that many aspects of modernity require ironic credulity or a willing suspension of skepticism.
 - Money / paper currency
 - Modern marriage / modern career choice
- Fiction, then, was a tool to help build the flexibility of mind necessary to make decisions in the modern world.



So what?

European History Timeline



So what?

- What does this have to do with travel literature?
- The history of the Rise of Fiction and the Novel, especially in Great Britain and France, during this time period should make us supremely aware of how blurry the lines are during this period (roughly 1750-1850) between travel writing genres.
 - What was a travelogue? What was a travel guide? What was a travel novel? What is an exotic romance?
- Indeed, an early renowned modern British novels, Lawrence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1786), was written as a response to a travelogue written by Tobias Smollett two years prior: *Travels through France and Italy*.
- Today, it would be difficult for a novel to act as a response to a travel memoir, yet, at that time, genres were just becoming delineated and reified.
 - The travelogue or travel memoir acted as travel guide as well, and for this reason, it was a deceptive genre, often presenting fictions as facts.
 - The novel was brand-new and experimental still, so it also often mimicked other, traditional genres (as in Sterne's case).
 - The romance had made a comeback, now with novelistic elements, due to the return of interest in medieval forms due to Romanticism.
- What we saw in Goethe's and Stendhal's writing was a blurring of the line between truth, deception, and fiction,
 - That is, both writers make authorial truth claims in their writings, and indeed publish within genres that should represent factual accounts (Goethe's is an epistolary travelogue and Stendhal's is a tour guide).
 - In the end, both men produced works that were a combination of memoir/guide/novel.

So what?

- What does this have to do with Gothic literature?
- Part of the reason for the rise of the novel was the rise of the middle class and an increased demand, particularly newly on the part of women, for literature.
- Gothic literature answered the call of the audience for literature by providing a genre that has often been considered since very much by women for women.
- Women, who could not travel during this period, could not, therefore, create travelogues or guides either. These limitations forced/created a playful space for imaginative/metaphorical travel, which proved to do groundbreaking work in the creation of the modern fiction novel. (When no one could travel during the Napoleonic Wars, the Gothic novel reached new levels of popularity.)
- Gothic novels are often considered women's contribution to 18th-century aesthetic theory and Romantic literature, which was largely or wholly dominated by men.
- In that sense, we can see it engage with similar concerns:
 - Expressions of the beautiful and sublime (particularly the sublime)
 - Gothic castles and ruins as locales
 - An increased emphasis on emotions over intellect or rationale
 - Superstition vies with reason (there are often ghosts, etc.)
 - Obscurity (Gothic novels most often involve mysteries) over Clarity and Darkness (night scenes) over Light
- Gothic novels had a lasting influence on such fiction novel genres as detective mysteries, horror, and fantasy.

So what?

- There is a complexity of societal, political, gender, literary, and aesthetic evolution happening in this moment. The rise of Fictionality and the birth of the modern novel as a genre are harbingers and relics of many of these changes and can help us to understand the greater historical situation.
- The modern European individual was shaping herself / himself in these centuries:
 - What role does travel to Italy and literature about travel to Italy play in these changes?
 - What role does femininity and women's literature play in shaping these changes?
 - What remnants of this crucial relationship between travel, aesthetics/ethics, modern individuality and travel (particularly to Italy) still play in the West today?
 - That is, how can we relate this historical moment to later travel writing and travel films set in Italy?

What is Gothic Fiction?

"is a genre or mode of literature and film that combines fiction and horror, death, and at times romance. Its origin is attributed to English author Horace Walpole, with his 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto*, subtitled (in its second edition) "A Gothic Story". Gothic fiction tends to place emphasis on both emotion and a pleasurable kind of terror, serving as an extension of the Romantic literary movement that was relatively new at the time that Walpole's novel was published. The most common of these "pleasures" among Gothic readers was the sublime—an indescribable feeling that "takes us beyond ourselves."

The literary genre originated in England in the second half of the 18th century where, following Walpole, it was further developed by Clara Reeve and Ann Radcliffe. The genre had much success in the 19th century, as witnessed in prose by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the works of Edgar Allan Poe as well as Charles Dickens with his novella, *A Christmas Carol*, and in poetry in the work of Samuel Coleridge, and Lord Byron. Another well known novel in this genre, dating from the late Victorian era, is Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

The name *Gothic*, which originally referred to the Goths, and then came to mean "German", refers to the Gothic architecture of the medieval era of European history, in which many of these stories take place. This extreme form of Romanticism was very popular throughout Europe, especially among English- and German-language writers and artists."

-Wikipedia

What is Gothic Fiction?

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is gothic (1818)

William Polidori's first modern vampire tale, *The Vampyre*, is gothic, set partly in Italy (1819)

Edgar Allan Poe's 'tales of mystery and macabre' are super gothic

Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* is pretty gothic (1847)

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is gothic (1897)

Ann Radcliffe

- 1764 –1823
- A British pioneer of Gothic literature.
- She gained prestige for the genre by the end of the 18th century and was read by authors across the 19th century, like Keats, Poe, Austen, Balzac, Hugo, and Baudelaire.
 - *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* 1789
 - *A Sicilian Romance* (2 vols) 1790
 - *The Romance of the Forest* (3 vols) 1791
 - *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (4 vols) 1794
 - *The Italian* (3 vols) 1797
 - *Gaston de Blondeville* (4 vols) 1826
- Radcliffe was middle class but was able to use the money she made from her tremendous book sales to travel with her husband. She never traveled to Italy as she was stopped at the border of Switzerland during the war years.



Ann Radcliffe

- Ann Radcliffe's style of writing was seen as changing British ways of seeing and what they *expected* to see and experience in the landscape.
- The classical representation (of the Grand Tour) is objective, distanced, educational, perhaps we could say it focuses more on Beauty as an aesthetic drive.
- While Gothic representation is subjective, psychological, emotional, and could be said to focus on the Sublime as an aesthetic drive.
- We see British travelogues, which omitted Gothic elements in preference for Classical elements of Italian landscapes in the 18th century, begin to privilege the Gothic by the 19th century.



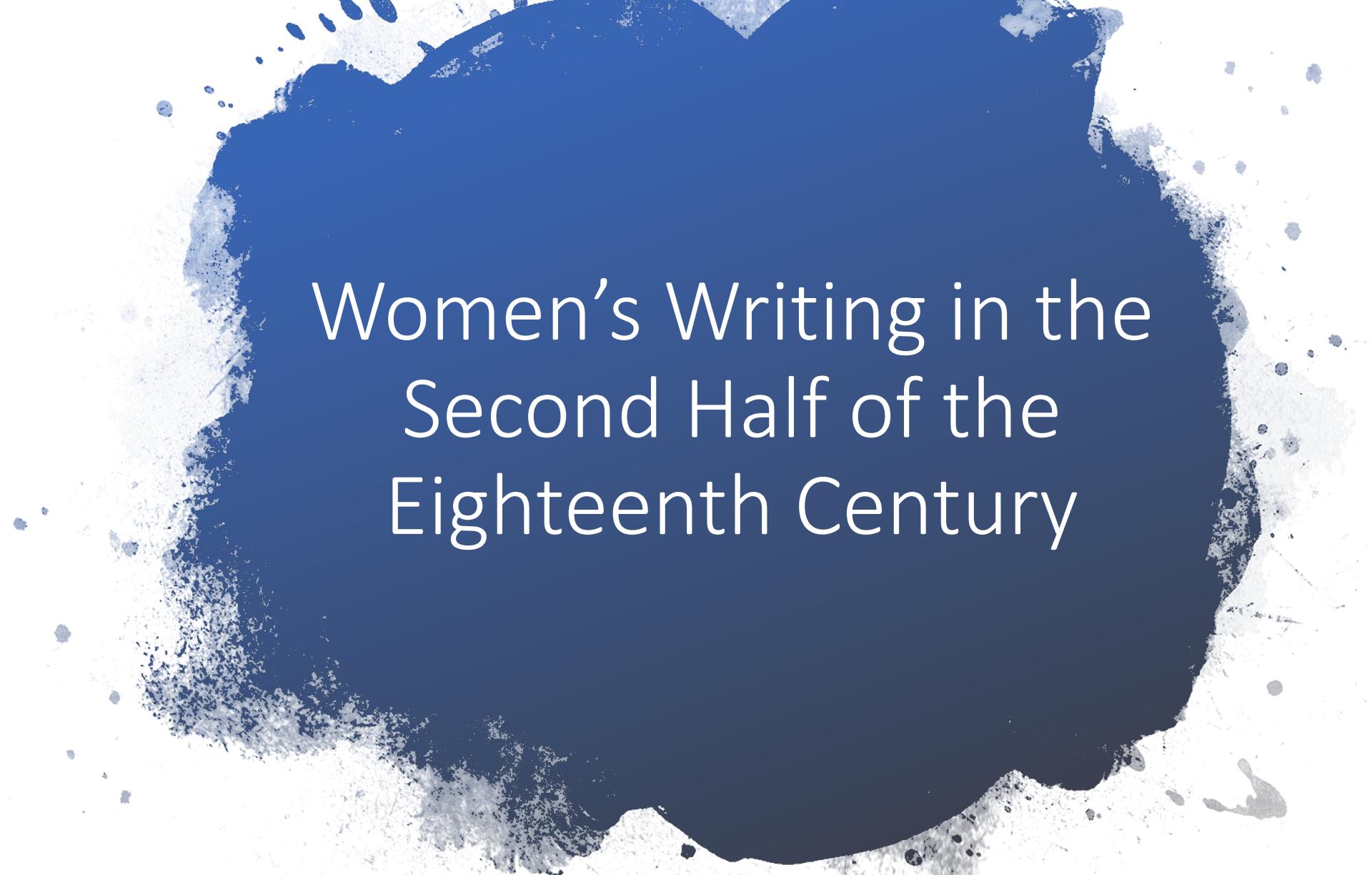
Discussion Questions

- What role does the short introduction before Chapter 1 play in framing the narrative? How does this framing relate to the course?
- How does the setting explicitly correspond to the category of Gothic Literature?
- How, in your opinion, might one say that the characters and story correspond to the category of Gothic Literature?
- Based on last class's lecture, how do you think the sensibility/emotionality of the tale may reveal its Romantic nature?
- How do you see individualism and/or the inner life of the individual attempting to (or unable to) assert itself in this novel?

The Female Gothic

- Heiland in “Rethinking the Sublime” uses Ellen Moers’ definition of the Female Gothic, stating: “this sub-genre of the gothic is one in which ‘woman is examined with a woman’s eye, woman as girl, as mother, as self,’ and, more precisely, in which women ‘give *visual* form to the fear of self.’” 57-8





Women's Writing in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century

Discussion Questions

- Edmund Burke in his 1757 treatise on the Beautiful and Sublime wrote:
 - “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime.”
- How, then, can we conceive of Gothic literature as engaging aesthetic theory about the experience of the Sublime?
- Why might women’s conception of the possible terror caused by the ‘sublime’ be less tranquil than a man’s?
- Immanuel Kant defined two sorts of ‘sublime’, the mathematical and the dynamic:
 - The “mathematically sublime” is expressed by grandeur, when we encounter something so large that it overwhelms our imagination’s capacity to understand it (a mountain, an ocean, space, etc.)
 - We consider nature as “dynamically sublime” when we consider it as “a power that has no dominion over us” (§28, 260). We have the feeling of the dynamically sublime when we experience nature as fearful while knowing ourselves to be in a position of safety and hence without in fact being afraid. (For example, like watching a storm at sea or a fire from a safe distance.) (From the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)
- It is said that the most common of the emotional “pleasures” among Gothic readers was the sublime—an indescribable feeling that “takes us beyond ourselves.” In what ways do you see the sublime expressed in the novel?

Reading Questions

- Petrarch has been called the first Humanist writer and, though he lived in the 1300s, the first exponent of modern writing. What strikes you about his poem in comparison to Byron's poem and Shelley's essay?
- What is it, do you think, about the Coliseum, in particular, especially as you see it expressed by these writers (as well as Goethe, Chateaubriand and Stendhal), that makes it a crucial space of contemplation? What does it make them contemplate?
- This class is dedicated to the Sublime, the Beautiful, and the Picturesque. Which of these aesthetic traits do you think Leopardi is meditating on in his 'The Infinite'?
 - (Do some research on these terms if you can. We will discuss them in class but they are complex and worth reading more about.)
- The ruins of Pompeii were discovered in the 1700s and Vesuvius was active. According to your reading of the Goethe excerpt, what educational experience might Grand Tourists and later travelers sought to attain through a visit to the active volcano and its ancient ruins?
- How is Felicia Hemans' poetic description of Vesuvius and Pompeii similar to / different from Goethe's?
- How is Angelica Kauffman's depiction of Vesuvius and Pompeii similar to / different from Michael Wutky's?