



JOURNEY TO ITALY: Framing the Romantics

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Map © James Martin, Europe Travel

The Goals of the Grand Tour

- “An educational rite of passage”
- What did young elite men learn through travel on the Grand Tour?
 - Exposure to Classical Antiquity and Medieval and Renaissance cultural productions
 - Specifically, it was the only way, at this period, to see important works of art from the Renaissance and, to some extent, architectural monuments from Antiquity
 - There was also an interest in the recently excavated sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum
- The Grand Tour, in many ways, was supposed to teach travelers about their own history and cultural precedents and it was supposed to teach them to ‘see’

Aesthetic Theory

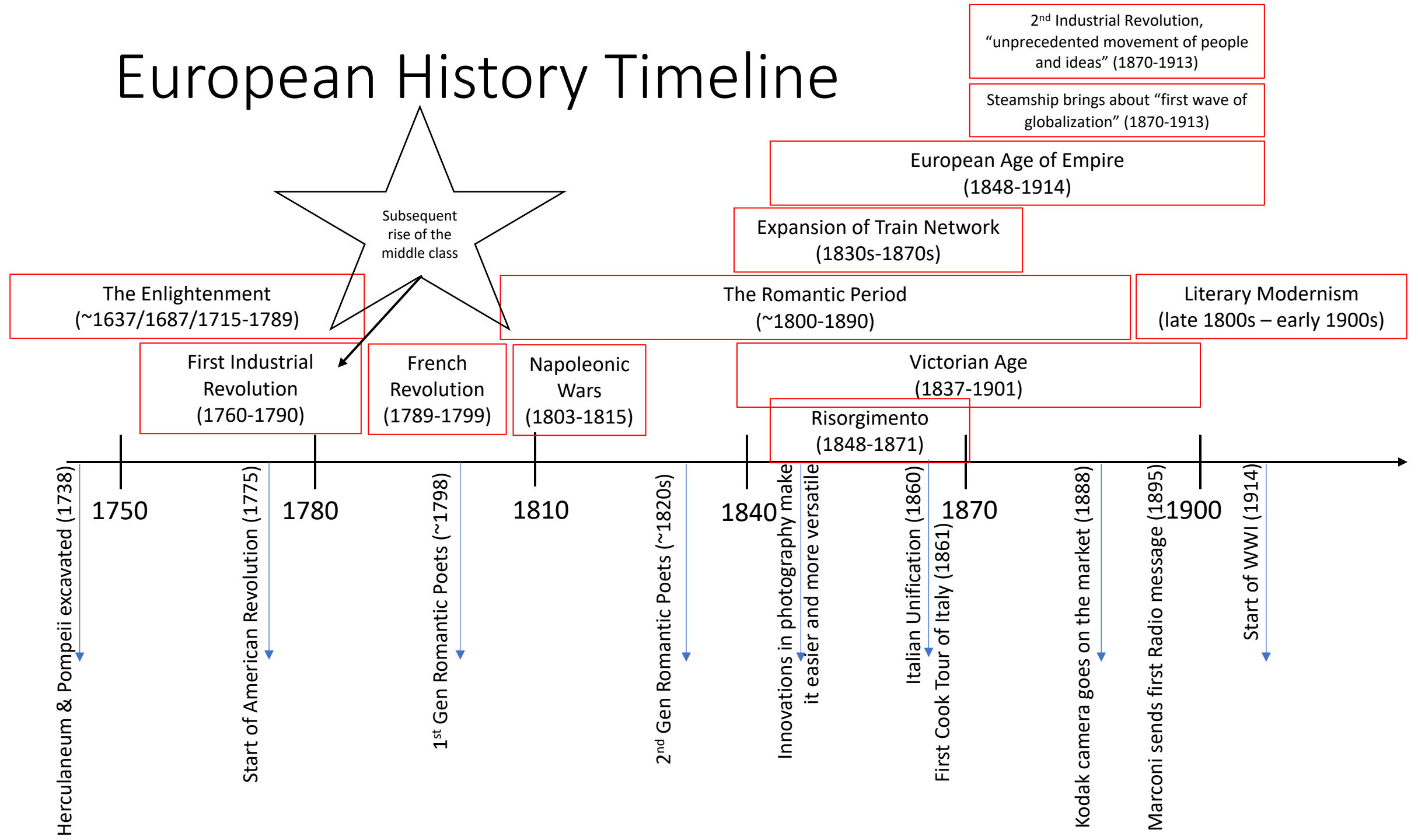
- Nature and Scope
 - Interested in the realm of experience related to the beautiful, the ugly, the sublime, the elegant
 - Interested in discussing TASTE and forms of BEAUTY as philosophical questions.
 - Interested in discovering if there is some single underlying belief that motivates all judgments of taste
 - Interested, in particular, in discussions of beauty in art and the natural world
 - Interested in the faculty of perception and its relationship to aesthetic objects, such as art and nature, as well as the relationship between aesthetic judgments (judgments of taste) and other judgments, such as moral and ethical



Origin of Modern Aesthetics

- Modern Aesthetics is a branch of Modern Philosophy, an era of philosophy ranging from the 17th to the early 20th century
- Modern Aesthetics was established in its distinctive concerns within the wider field of philosophy in the late 17th century and culminated in its thinking in the late 18th century

European History Timeline



Origin of Modern Aesthetics

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- Major early works
 - 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury established ethics and aesthetics as central topics of philosophical inquiry (1711)
 - Arguing that fundamental principles of morals and taste *could be* established
 - Arguing that contemplation and action are related and that, therefore, aesthetic theory could be related to theories of ethics
 - Francis Hutcheson first posed the problem of aesthetic judgment as an epistemological question (1725)
 - How can we know that something is beautiful?
 - The term, 'aesthetic' was introduced in Alexander Baumgarten's 1735 *Reflections on Poetry*, in which he argues that poetic insights are perceptual or 'aesthetic' insights, rather than rational or intellectual ones.

18th Century Aesthetics – Central Questions

- What is taste? Is it a sense? Is it emotionally-inspired (Hume)? Is it a sign of refined good manners (Voltaire)?
- Can we define a standard of taste?
- What is the role of imagination?
 - (As philosophers like David Hume and Immanuel Kant attempted to define the 'imagination' as a faculty and its ontological and epistemological role, they laid the groundwork for the generation of Romantic writers who would follow. Indeed, there is an increased emphasis on 'imagination' or 'genius' in the Romantic age.)
- How can we define and conceive of the distinction between the BEAUTIFUL and the SUBLIME?

18th Century Aesthetics – Why was/is it important?

- Why did this field of inquiry move to a central philosophical position in the 18th century particularly?
- I would argue, to simplify matters, that it had to do with the confluence of a number of other changes in thinking and seeing.
 - Art history had recently been categorized by era and style by thinkers like Johann Winkelmann (Classical, medieval, Renaissance, Baroque)
 - Modern archeology, too, had recently led to studies of ancient cultures that brought details of ancient art and civilization to light
 - Due to changes like these, European men had become aware of their own history in a new way and because of the Enlightenment drive towards ‘understanding’ and ‘progress’, which sought to perfect human civilization and the human future through the sciences, European men sought to perfect themselves and their own futures through this understanding
 - Finally, and perhaps most crucially, as European philosophers sought a new morality, a new rule for ethics, that was not a top-down model (like Religious or Monarchical morality is), but emphasizes, rather, individual ethics so that individual freedoms are increased, many European philosophers saw aesthetic judgments as correlated to learning ethical judgments.
 - Philosophers today sometimes argue the same thing, for example in Elaine Scarry’s 1999 *On Beauty and Being Just*.

18th Century Aesthetics – Some Details

- Modern Philosophy was split between
 - The Rationalists, like Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza, who believed that all knowledge must begin from certain innate ideas in the mind. That is, that philosophical study is an *a priori* exercise.
 - The Empiricists, like Locke, Berkeley and Hume, who held that knowledge must begin with sensory experience.
- Immanuel Kant retrospectively created this taxonomy of thinkers and he, in turn, worked to unify them. He did this work in the realm of aesthetic inquiry to a large degree.
- Indeed, aesthetic inquiry in the 18th century was one of the leading and most influential fields of thought. Of particular influence were these works:
 - Edmund Burke's *On the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757)
 - Immanuel Kant's *The Critique of Judgment* (1790)
 - William Gilpin's *On Picturesque Beauty and On Picturesque Travel* (1791)

18th Century Aesthetics and Romantic Writers

- 18th century aesthetic theory laid the groundwork for Romantic writers on art, such as Schiller, Coleridge and Wordsworth.
 - Their emphasis on the centrality of imagination can be seen in the cult of the 'genius' and poet in the Romantic era
 - Their emphasis on the role of aesthetics in the modern world helped to create figures like the 19th century 'dandy' and 'flâneur' and, eventually, aesthetes like Oscar Wilde and his Dorian Gray, for whom aesthetic values are above all others and one's morality should conform them.
- 18th century philosophers, like Kant, tethered the spheres of the aesthetic and the ethical. During the great political tumult of the late 18th century and across the nation-building century that followed, philosophers would continue to attempt to rely on the aesthetic to help define and create the ethical.
 - For example, Kant argued that aesthetic judgment is at once subjective and universal. He claimed also that aesthetic judgment must be disinterested. It is because of these traits that aesthetic judgment was thought to help shape and form ethical judgment in individuals without lessening their freedom.
 - Kant's disciple, Schiller, a Romantic philosopher, would formalize the relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), in which argues that 'aesthetic experience becomes the true vehicle of moral and political education.'

Aesthetics and this Course

- This course, at least in the early weeks, when the texts come from the 18th and 19th centuries, will be fundamentally concerned with certain aesthetic concepts. For, indeed, the writers at the time were concerned with these concepts and their centrality shines through in the writing.
- KEYWORDS
 - (BEAUTY, SUBLIME, PICTURESQUE as concept) (RUINS, LANDSCAPE, ART as objects of aesthetic inquiry)
- We will see how these terms are used and how they tie to other philosophical ideas that were important in the era (political concerns for nationhood and freedom, for example).
- ***This week, we will consider the emphasis on 'seeing' and 'learning to see' (the beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque), which is expressed by some of the authors we read for today.***
- In the following readings, we will consider how theories of the SUBLIME influenced the genre of the Gothic novel, particularly as the SUBLIME was defined by Burke as: *"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."*
- We will consider why Italy seems to have been the single most important destination for aesthetic experience.



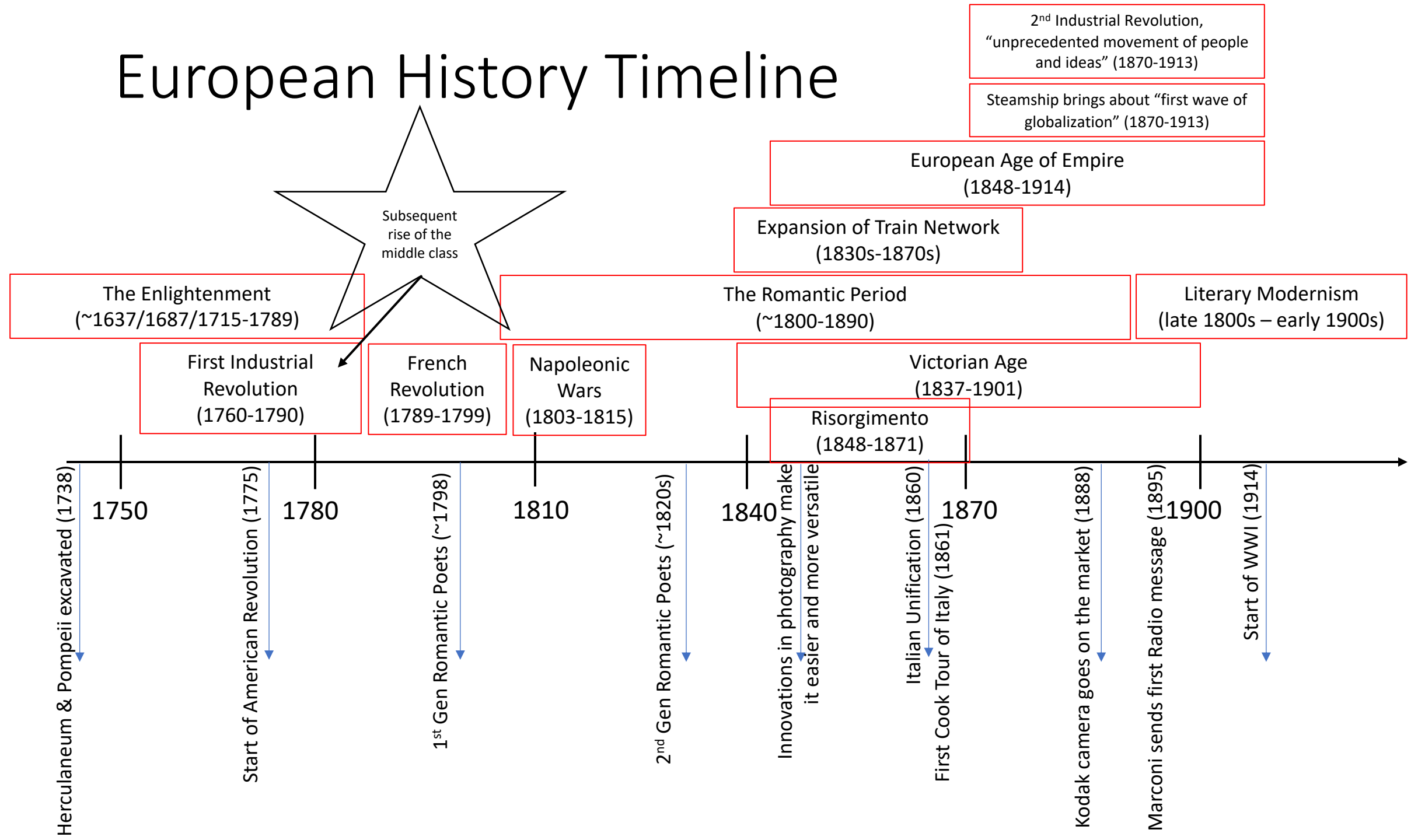
The Romantic Era

An Introduction

The Birth of the Romantic Era

- The Romantic movement was rebellious and was in line with the revolutionary characteristics of the time in the Europe.

European History Timeline



The Birth of the Romantic Era

- The Romantic movement was rebellious and was in line with the revolutionary characteristics of the time in the Europe.
- Romance was originally a descriptive term used to refer to Renaissance and Baroque epic poems, such as Ariosto's and Tasso's, both of whom were great literary heroes to the Romantics and, especially Tasso, models for Romantic poets in the 19th century.
- Initially, use of the term 'Romantic' to describe the new literary movement was considered derogatory. Some thought the term implied 'light' and 'inconsequential' literature.
- It didn't take hold in a serious sense until August Wilhelm Schlegel used it in a lecture course at Berlin, 1801–4, when he made the distinction between Classical and Romantic:
 - "Romantic literature, he argued, appeared in the Middle Ages with the work of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio [...] Romanticism was 'organic' and 'plastic', as against the 'mechanical' tendencies of Classicism." *Cambridge Companion to Romanticism*
- The debate about definitions of Romanticism was never resolved and it is still difficult to define universally today.

So what was Romanticism?

- **It was a revolt** against the First Industrial Revolution and the dirt and noise of the industrial cities, like London.
 - Thus, it was a return to Nature and to the contemplation of Nature.
- **It was a revolt** against old models of State power (the monarchy) and many Romantic poets (especially later Romantic poets) believed that poetry, like philosophy, could be a tool for political revolution
- **It was a revolt** against the Age of Reason
- It was influenced by the increased '**sensibility**' of the 18th century
 - That is, by the mid-18th century, in response to the rationalism of the preceding/current age, there was a climate of 'sensibility' that promoted the emergence of emotional responses in prose literature, poetry, and travel accounts
 - The Irish philosopher Edmund Burke's work in the field of aesthetics classified and gave dignity to primary emotional drives
 - This climate heightened to a near-cult of sensibility, which can be seen expressed in much of the 19th century writing in this course, and today, particularly, in Goethe.
- In line with its revolt against the Age of Reason, it was interested in medieval forms of literature and architecture. From this characteristic, we get, for example, Gothic literature.
- In line with its revolt against the Age of Reason, it was interested in the aesthetics of the night and the moon, rather than the day and the sun. The aesthetics of chaos/decay rather than order/progress (in ruins).

Framing the Romantic Era in Today's Class

- For today we read
 - An important German proto-Romantic (Goethe) (1770s-90s)
 - Two important French Romantic writers, one early and one late
 - Chateaubriand (early 1800s)
 - Stendhal (1830s and 40s)
 - An important late Romantic English woman poet (LEL) (1820s-30s)
- These readings give a sense of the length and breadth of the Romantic movement in Europe, from the mid to late 1700s to the mid 1800s in Great Britain, France, and Germany especially.
- They also give a sense of what Travel Literature looked like at the moment when travel, itself, in the West was just beginning to transform into and become reified in the form we know it today.

The Romantic Era beyond Today's Class

- It is worth noting that Great Britain is particularly well known for its so-called 'two generations' of Romantic poets.
- First Generation
 - Late 1790s and early 1800s: William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, and William Blake
 - Wordsworth and Coleridge both traveled a great deal in Italy and wrote about it
 - Optional Further Readings for today including poetry about Italy by William Wordsworth.
 - Blake never left England, but he famously engaged Dante's *Divine Comedy* just before his death by producing watercolor illustrations of the epic poem.
- Second Generation
 - After the Napoleonic Wars and culminating in the 1820s: Byron, Shelley, Keats
 - All three of these men famously lived and traveled in Italy and wrote expansively, and some of their most famous works, while in Italy and about Italy.
 - Byron and Shelley, particularly, will be of central relevance in this course when we read Romantic poetry in a couple of weeks.

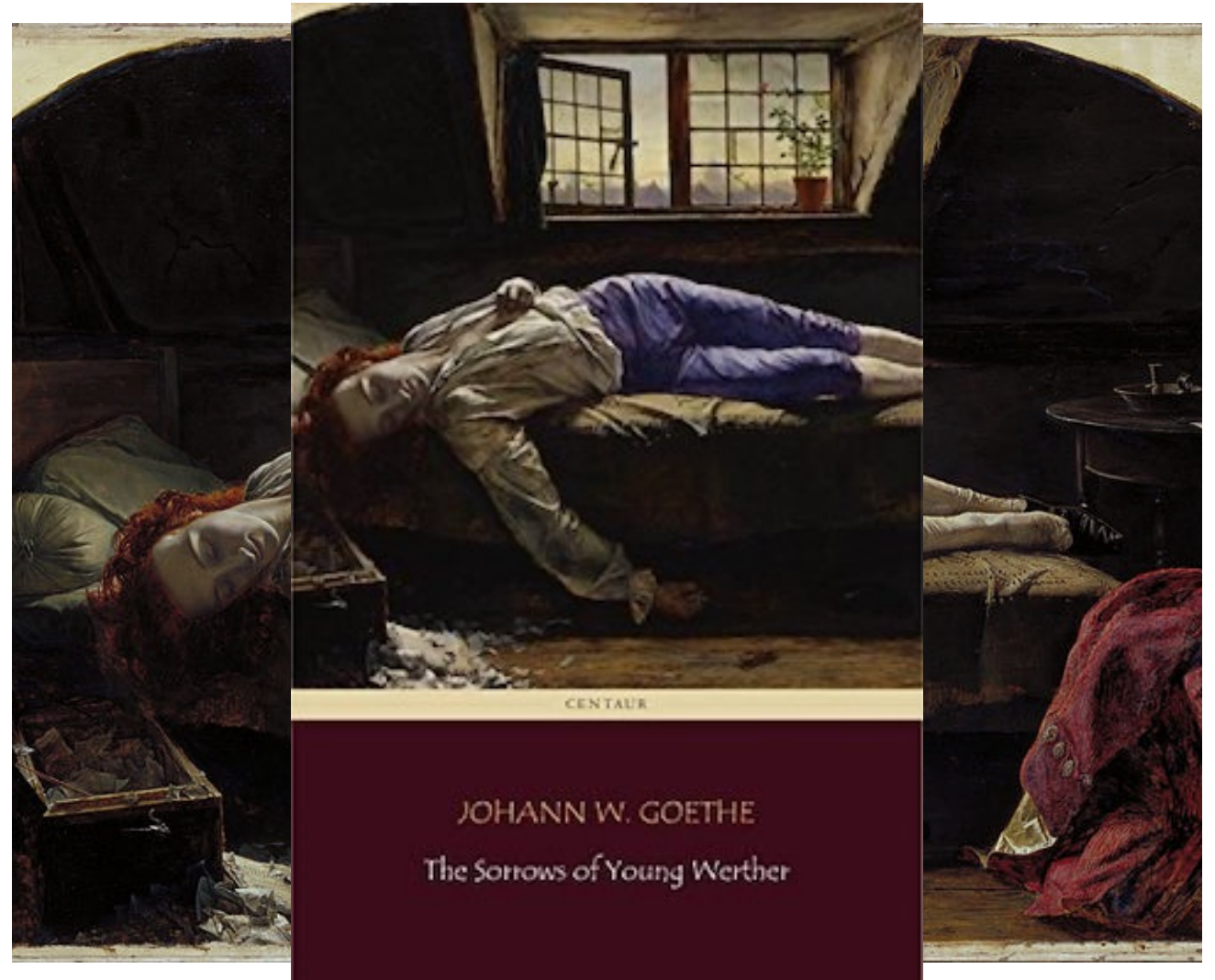
Goethe (1749-1832)

- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was a proto-Romantic German writer whose first epistolary novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), made him famous in his 20s and helped create the model for the Romantic hero/poet.
 - The novel was part of the proto-Romantic *Sturm and Drang* [Storm and Stress] movement in Germany (1760-80)
 - “Within the movement, individual subjectivity and, in particular, extremes of emotion were given free expression in reaction to the perceived constraints of rationalism imposed by the Enlightenment.” Wikipedia
- Young Werther became a model for Romantic heroes, and this was in large part due to the way he interfaced with the world through emotion, rather than reason. Goethe’s interest in ‘sensibility’ can be seen in his writing on Rome as well.
 - For example, in his *Italian Journey* he says: “I have never been so sensitive to the things in the world as I am here.” (124)
- While Goethe’s *Werther* expresses an emotional response to the world, and particularly beauty (Lotte’s), his *Italian Journey* is very much in line with Enlightenment aesthetic thinking that sought to rationalize and categorize aesthetic experience.

The Death of Chatterton

Henry Wallis's 1856 pre-Raphaelite painting shows 17-year-old English early Romantic poet Thomas Chatterton, after he poisoned himself with arsenic in 1770. Chatterton was considered a Romantic hero for many young and struggling artists when the painting was made.

It is often the cover image for Goethe's *Werther*.





Goethe, *Italian Journey*

- What seems to be the ultimate goal of Goethe's tour of Italy?
- What does Goethe spend his time in Italy doing?
- How is Goethe engaging with aesthetics?
- How is he engaging with emotions/sensibility?



Goethe, *Italian Journey*

- “A new era is beginning for me. My spiritual horizons have been so extended by all my looking and learning that now I have to knuckle down to some definite piece of work. Human individualism is a strange thing: it is only during the last year, when I have had to depend solely on myself and at the same time be in daily contact with complete strangers, that I have really come to know my own.” 404



Goethe, *Italian Journey*

- What seems to be the ultimate goal of Goethe's tour of Italy?
- What does Goethe spend his time in Italy doing?
- How is Goethe engaging with aesthetics?
- How is he engaging with emotions/sensibility?
- How are women treated by Goethe?



Reading 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?
- What elements of the tale, in your opinion, seem to represent the sublime?
- 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 today’s lecture, how do you think the sensibility/emotionality of the tale may reveal its Romantic nature?