

History and its influence on british 17th century's literature



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History and its influence on British 17th century's literature By regarding British' literary works up to the 17th century, one can recognize many parallels to the history and culture of that time. In my following term paper I am though going to investigate where the parallels between history, culture and literature are.

I will do so by using chosen passages from British literary texts from the Renaissance and Restoration Literature. Therefore I will first define the characteristics of both epochs. Secondly I will compare the plots of the chosen passages to the historical and cultural context and accentuate the similarities. As I believe, these similarities between literatures, cultural and historical context can be found in any literary work.

3. Renaissance Literature The term Renaissance as an epoch describes the transition from medieval times to the modern ages which took place between 1485 and 1603 in England. It means the rebirth of ancient values and ideals in painting, architecture, science, philosophy and literature. Due to the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg, which was established in England by the help of William Caxton in 1474, authors got the chance to write in vernacular language. Since there were from then on more people who could read and understand the texts, Renaissance knowledge was accessible for the folks (cf. Olague) The early Renaissance in England has strongly been influenced from Italy where it begun about 200 years earlier and from the medieval concept of courtly love.

Courtly love meant the poetry by errant knights, often a king's third son who travelled around the countryside to get a place to work. The only chance for

those errant knights to gain their social status back was to get a rich lord's daughter, so many minnesong poems were written by them. The major contents of those poems were the beauty and elusiveness of the lady. The knights had to sublimate their sexual desires and show real love to succeed and climb the " gradation amoris", the love-ladder from " eros", sex to " agape", the pure love without taking physical interaction. During the Elizabethan Age, from 1558 until 1603, the ideal of a woman's sight was formed and every woman who was described in a poem was described with the terms of that ideal sight in comparison with nature. Bartholomew Griffin's *Fidessa* for example contains all the characteristics of Renaissance poetry as one can see in the following excerpt (Sonnet 39): My Lady's hair is threads of beaten gold; Her front the purest crystal eye hath seen; Her eyes the brightest stars the heavens hold; Her cheeks, red roses, such as seld have been.

Her pretty lips, of red vermilion dye; Her hand of ivory, the purest white; Her blush, AURORA, or the morning sky; Her breast displays two silver fountains bright. The spheres, her voice; her grace, the Graces three; Her body is the saint that I adore; Her smiles and favours sweet as honey be. But ah, the worst and last is yet behind: For of a griffon she doth bear the mind ! In this poem, the " Blazon", the description of the Lady's beauty from head to toe is accentuated. In this poem one can also recognize the concept of *kalokagathia*, which means that an outer beauty means a good soul, while an ugly appearance is accompanied to a bad soul. That concept is another typical characteristic for the English renaissance literature and one can find

it in this poem since there is no description of the lady's behaviour but her outer appearance.

4. Restoration Literature The literary epoch of the Restoration lasted from 1660 until 1688/89. The most common forms of Restoration literature were satires to criticise the noble and religious texts in prose or verse. It triggered " the official break in literary culture caused by censorship and radically moralist standards under Cromwell's Puritan regime" (cf. English literature).

One example for a religious text is " Paradise lost", by John Milton. Paradise lost is an epic poem of ten books, written in blank verse from 1640 until 1642. Milton transfers Greek epic to a biblical context, though Paradise Lost contains the plot of the first pages of Genesis, how Adam and Eve were created and how they lost Paradise, " expanded [...

] into a very long, detailed, narrative poem. " (New Arts Library). Paradise lost can be interpreted in two possible ways but not both at the same time. The first possibility is to interpret it as a rewrite of the Bible " as it might have been written with the benefit of a humanist English education" (Alexander 148).

The other possibility is to interpret it in political context as a critique on the upcoming civil war and " The Eleven Years Tyranny" by Charles I who reigned without parliament for eleven years after his father, James I died in 1625. One Example of a satire is " A Satyr on Charles II", by John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, which was delivered to the King by accident instead of one the King had actually ordered. (cf. Lynch) The Satyr is written in verse and consists of three stanzas. In the first stanza, Charles II is described as a King
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who lacks ambition “ Him no ambition moves to get renown” but still reigns better than Louis XIV “ Like the French fool that wanders up and down starving his people” and that he is good for England.

The second stanza describes Charles II’s genitals “ His sceptre and his prick are of a length” and that he lets his penis reign “ thy prick [... will govern thee”, which means that he takes his mistresses as political consultants. The last stanza says that if Charles II’s sexual power would decline, his political power would decline as well, because of the political power of his mistresses and in the last two lines Rochester says that he hates all monarchs “ All monarchs I hate, and the thrones they sit on”.

5. Conclusion By regarding any literary text from epochs up to the 17th century, one can always find parallels to cultural or historical terms. This is obvious since the authors would not have anything to write about without a context to a current proceeding. Still there is often more than one possibility to interpret literary works and sometimes it is also difficult to understand how the epoch’s literary features developed. Considering Renaissance literature, it is not easy to say today, why the woman’s role in those times was that high. It is obvious, that poets tried to improve their social status by winning a noble man’s daughter by writing blazon poems about her.

Another reason for the women’s high position could till be worship of the Virgin Mary or Queen Elizabeth in those times. By regarding the Blazon, one also has the question of the chicken and the egg, since we only know that Queen Elizabeth was always described and painted in the ideal of beauty in the early Renaissance England. What we do not know is whether that ideal of

beauty was formed because of her sight or whether she was only described and painted in a way to fulfil the ideal. In reflection on paradise lost, one either has the opportunity to interpret it on historical grounds or on humanist religious base. Both ways are connected to history or culture, so that in paradise lost, one definitely has literature which leads to one of the two contexts.

The satires of Restoration literature are almost all critiques on those time's politics, so that the connection to history is obvious. All three examples for literary epochs that I have chosen have a relative to history or culture, but since we do not always know the development of culture or literary features, we cannot know how it is actually related. There also is the fact, that these are only three examples of thousands of literary works, though it is far too less to prove a general tendency. As a conclusion I can so only make out that every literary work must contain at least some cultural features, since every human being and so every author is influenced by it.