

Literary Condemnation of the Slave Trade and Wealth as the Cause of Corruption Represented in the Light of English Literature

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Abstract

This article has illustrated how, within the framework of English literature, the slave trade and money are both literarily condemned as the root causes of corruption. When the slave trade was prohibited in the British Empire in 1807, the idea of equating labourers with slaves was highly controversial. That had happened very swiftly after a campaign that had only really begun 20 years before. Both slavery and the trade in Africans have already been condemned on occasion and in literature. The social objective of imitating the great landed nobility was examined and criticised by Adam Smith. The literature of the eighteenth century was also afflicted by the contradiction between the social and moral hierarchy. It is significantly more focused on the landed classes than the corporate sector, even though it is sometimes considered a bourgeois art form. Contrary to popular belief, writers of the late eighteenth century did not promote bourgeois principles in opposition to those of the aristocracy. Conversely, in the last decades of the century, they favoured a rural way of life and resisted urbanisation. They tended to side with the underclass against their new rulers, the industrial bourgeoisie, in the class struggle that industrialization sparked.

Keywords: *Cause of Corruption, Eighteenth-Century English Literature, Slave Trade, Wealth and Greatness.*

Introduction

The literary critique of the slave trade and money as the root causes of corruption in English literature has been made clear in this article. Upon the outlawing of the slave trade in the British Empire during the early 1700s, the notion of equating employees with slaves sparked significant controversy. That had come about pretty rapidly after a campaign that had started only twenty years earlier. Both slavery and the African slave trade have faced criticism from time to time as well as from literary works. Adam Smith looked into and disapproved of the social ideal of emulating the wealthy and landed aristocrats. The literature of the eighteenth century also reflected the contradiction between the social and moral hierarchy. Though it is considered a bourgeois art form, the landed classes use it far more frequently than the corporate world. Contrary to popular belief, writers of the late eighteenth century did not support bourgeois values in order to combat nobility. Rather, they opposed urbanisation and campaigned for a rural lifestyle throughout the 20th century. They had a tendency to support the underclass against their new oppressors, the industrial bourgeoisie, in the class conflict that industrialization caused.

Aim of the Study

To reveal the literary condemnation of the slave trade and wealth as the cause of corruption represented in the light of English literature.

Literary Condemnation of the Slave Trade

John Dyer drew a line at the slave trade in his poem *The Fleece*, which extolled trade. In the last book of *Tristram Shandy*, Lawrence Sterne complains about the way Europeans treat Africans. As he was composing it, the black butler of the Duke of Montagu, Ignatius Sancho, sent him a letter. Ignatius wrote: "I am one of those people whom the illiberal and vulgar call a nigger."

He had read and enjoyed *Tristram Shandy* as well as Sterne's *Sermons*. One sermon in particular, "Job's Account of the Shortness and Troubles of Life Considered," had impressed him because of what he called a "truly affecting passage" on slavery.

"Consider slavery—what it is," Sterne observed in it, "how bitter a draught! and how many millions have been made to drink of it." Sancho requested that Sterne continue writing about the topic, which "handled in your own manner, would ease the yoke of many, perhaps occasion a reformation throughout our islands."

To comply, Sterne put in a scene where Corporal Trim asks Uncle Toby if a black person has a soul in the ninth volume of *Tristram Shandy*.

Toby replies: "I suppose God would not leave him without one, any more than thee or me' . . . 'Why then, an' please your honor, is a black wench to be used worse than a white one?' 'I can give no reason,' said my uncle Toby.

‘Only,’ cried the Corporal, shaking his head ‘because she has no one to stand up for her.’ ‘Tis that very thing, Trim,’ quoth my uncle Toby, ‘which recommends her to protection—and her brethren with her; ’tis the fortune of war which has put the whip into our hands now—where it may be hereafter, heaven knows.’”¹

“In 1776, Adam Smith wrote the economic death warrant for slavery,” and David Shields makes this observation in one of the few studies of the literature's reaction to the fight to end slavery. Smith stated in a passage that abolitionists adopted as a sort of bible during the 1800s that -

“the experience of all ages and nations, I believe, demonstrates that the work done by slaves, though it appears to cost only their maintenance, is in the end the dearest of all. A person who can acquire no property, can have no other interest but to eat as much, and to labour as little as possible.”²

Shields notes “the formation in the 1770s of a school of poets whose members included William Cowper, John Marjoribanks and Hannah More” who took up the cause of slaves. He also highlights *The Guinea Voyage* by James Field Stansfield as “the rhetorical horizon of anti-slavery poetry.”³ In it, Stansfield paints the African being taken to a slave ship.

“Confin’d with chains, at length the hapless slave,
Plung’d in the darkness of the floating cave,
With horror sees the hatch-way close his sight—
His last hope leaves him with the parting light.”

Historians have lately focused more on the economic than the theological factors that contributed to the slave trade's demise in 1807⁴. But more than money, the literary reaction to the effort throughout the later decades of the eighteenth century won over readers' hearts.

Wealth as the Cause of Corruption

Adam Smith noted in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that the “disposition of mankind to go along with all the passions of the rich and the powerful.” He continued to criticize it as

“the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments. That wealth and greatness are often regarded with the respect and admiration which are due only to wisdom and virtue; and that the contempt, of which vice and folly are the only proper objects, is often most unjustly bestowed upon poverty and weakness, has been the complaint of moralists of all ages.”⁵

Rather than focusing on the social relations of the middle classes, eighteenth-century novelists examined those of the nobility and gentry. Rather of citing merchants and manufacturers, they tended to cite professional individuals, the clergy, doctors, lawyers, and soldiers, when discussing issues affecting those below the landed nobles. Novelists hardly ever criticised the

landed gentry as a whole prior to the 1790s. Rather, they condemned oppressive landowners and championed the idea that heroes and heroines should aspire to aristocratic position.

However, after the French Revolution, articles challenging the appeal of identifying as aristocratic started to surface. Aristocrats were characterised in Gothic literature as social vultures who tormented people under them on a social and psychic level. The most well-known of these was Montoni, the despotic Italian aristocrat from Anne Radcliffe's best-selling novel *Mysteries of Udolpho*. All he did was set the standard for this popular style of Gothic villainy.

Aristocrats were criticised in great detail in Jacobin writings. Godwin's Caleb Williams denounced the system that kept the landed class in power as well as individuals who did not live up to the patriarchal ideals of aristocracy. Thus, the early Romantics foresaw the argument among historians between optimists and pessimists regarding whether the Industrial Revolution had more negative than good impacts on society. The Romantic perspective was definitely unfavourable.

William Cowper addressed how people had lost sight of Nature in towns in his poem *The Task*, which was one of the ways in which he hinted at the Lake poets..... "breathed darkness all day long." In 1798, the famed Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* condemned "the increasing accumulation of men in cities." It is debatable whether Blake intended to criticize "dark satanic mills" or mental processes when he used the phrase when referring to the impacts of industry. In his *Letters from England* (1807), Robert Southey provided a less ambiguous critique of industrialization when he examined the rise in poverty.

“many causes have contributed to the rapid increase of this evil. . . . But the manufacturing system is the main cause; it is the inevitable tendency of that system to multiply the number of the poor, and to make them vicious, diseased and miserable.”

He provided evidence for these claims by arranging for the fictional Letters author Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella to visit a cotton plant in Manchester. Two hundred people, including little children, were employed. Espriella received word from the mill owner that they were taken care of. “Here Commerce is the queen witch,” observed the Don, “and I had no talisman strong enough to disenchant those who were daily drinking of the golden cup of her charms.” Since, in Southey's view, the truth was very different. Poverty, ignorance, illness, and theft were all commonplace. The employees either perished from illnesses brought on by their environment

“or they live to grow up without decency, without comfort and without hope, without morals, without religion, and without shame, and bring forth slaves like themselves to tread in the same path of misery”⁶

Discussion

This study examines several historical perspectives on the social and economic conditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially as they relate to the representation of the aristocracy and the impact of the industrial revolution on society. Adam Smith's critique of the tendency for powerful and affluent individuals to act in a way that fulfills their goals and perverts moral precepts. Pre-1790 novelists emphasized the social interactions between the aristocracy and gentry in their works, while simultaneously condemning harsh landlords and endorsing the idea of aristocratic position. After the French Revolution, there was a shift in literature that questioned the allure of identifying as aristocrats, especially in Gothic literature where aristocrats were represented as oppressors of society.

Jacobin writings offer a thorough critique of aristocracy as well as the structure that sustains their position of authority. William Cowper's poem "The Task," which embodies the Romantic viewpoint the best, criticizes how industrialization has caused cities to become disconnected from nature. William Wordsworth expresses concern about the negative impacts of industrialization in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. In "Letters from England," Robert Southey criticizes the manufacturing system for its role in the rising rates of depravity, poverty, and moral decline.

It is interesting to note that attitudes towards aristocracy and the impacts of industrialization on society have evolved over time. A few early romantic poets expressed pessimism about the ramifications of the Industrial Revolution on the moral and social fabric of society. The literature of that era frequently addresses the debate over the consequences of the industrial revolution and the portrayal of aristocrats as social oppressors.

Conclusion

This article's conclusion makes the literary critique of the slave trade and its connection to corruption in English literature clearer. There was indignation when workers were compared to slaves following the British Empire's prohibition of the slave trade in the early eighteenth century. This change in public perception came about following a twenty-year struggle. Numerous criticisms of slavery and the African slave trade have been made throughout history; some of these criticisms have even been included into works of literature.

The article also discusses Adam Smith's investigations and criticisms of society's inclination to emulate the wealthy landed lords. Literature from the eighteenth century also reflected the differences in social and moral status. Even though literature was regarded as a bourgeois art form, the landed classes preferred reading it over working in the corporate sector. Contrary to popular assumption, writers of the late eighteenth century favored a rural lifestyle and resisted urbanization rather than adopting bourgeois ideals in an attempt to combat the nobility. These

writers tended to side with the lower class against the new oppressors, the industrial bourgeoisie, during the industrialization era and the accompanying class struggle. The detailed representations of crime, enslavement, and societal difficulties that may be found in English literature are highlighted in the article's conclusion. It demonstrates how concepts have evolved towards social hierarchy and conveys the authors' opinions about how class relations and industrialization are changing society.

References

1. L. Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (Everyman, 1914), 447.
2. Shields, *op. cit.*, 86, citing *The Wealth of Nations*. As Shields notes (241): “no adequate literary history of the abolitionist poets exists, and to write one would be a worthy effort.”
3. *Ibid.*, 82. To them might be added William Blake, who wrung the withers with his poem “The Little Black Boy.”
4. J. Walvin, *Slaves and Slavery: The British Colonial Experience* (1992), 88–100.
5. A. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. McFie (1976), 61–62.
6. R. Southey, *Letters from England*, ed. J. Simmons (1951), 142–47, 207–13.