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The Age of Revolution: Synopsis

Seniors' University Group, Fall 2025; University of Regina

Thanks to all for signing up, for attending and for contributing interesting comments and questions. The slides will remind you of some of the topics we discussed but here is an outline.

September 15th

We began with some review of this turbulent period in history, including the American and French Revolutions, the industrial and agricultural revolutions, revolutionary ideas about individual rights and democracy, revolution against the traditional idea that humans are inherently sinful and the theory that we are born as "clean slates," the resistance of conservative thinkers to these democratic ideas (the debate between Burke and Paine), revolution against slavery by the Abolitionists and the emergence of revolutionary ideas about the rights of women to education and greater participation in society. We looked at some poems by Robert Burns for their democratic sentiments but also for their use of Scots dialect as a vehicle for serious literature.

September 22nd

William Blake was a political radical and a religious mystic. In poems such as "London" he made a harsh critique of his society's standards and institutions. William Wilberforce and John Newton were evangelical Christians who led in the movement to abolish slavery. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* shaped the feminist ideas of subsequent generations of advocates for

women's rights. Anna Letitia Barbauld was one of several women who had successful careers as writers—one of the few occupations open to women beyond housekeeping.

October 6th

Both Wordsworth and Coleridge as young men were ardent supporters of the French Revolution, at least until radicalism turned to the terror of mass executions. They both expressed a “religion of nature,” the idea that a divine spirit is immanent in the natural world, that God is not a remote being like the Deists’ “clockmaker” who made the world but has no part of it. Blake also expressed this idea. Felicia Hemans was a successful female writer who supported her family with her pen; like some others of these years she was gradually dropped from the literary “canon,” until her work was rediscovered by feminist scholarship since the 1970s.

October 20th

One theory has been that the work of Hemans and other women writers of this era was simply eclipsed by the phenomenal success of Jane Austen as a first-rank novelist; now Austen is a cultural industry as well. We discussed whether Austen’s circumscribed rural world can be considered as part of the revolutionary spirit of the age. Some have seen Austen’s depiction of middle-class and aristocratic life as acceptance of the hierarchical status quo. Others, including me, believe that her characters offer quiet but absolute resistance to preferments based on other than merit and determined support for the idea that all humans, including women, should be able to “expand their faculties” (as Wollstonecraft put it). Frankenstein’s creature offers a case study in *tabula rasa*, the revolutionary idea that humans are born with potential to be anything; the creature is turned to “the dark side” when he is rejected by his creator and the people he meets. We concluded with a brief look at Byron and Shelley as political radicals who supported the rights of working people in England and the right to political freedom for all people.