Week 12 Lecture 1: Literature

Literature comes under the humanities as one of the modes of expression.  It concerns itself with the written expression of language, and includes novels, poetry, prose, and drama.

There is no doubt that storytelling was a part of prehistoric cultures, but with the development of writing, those narratives could be preserved outside of oral transmission.  Writing itself is believed to have arisen from the need to record surpluses of goods and so was an outgrowth of the shift from hunter-gatherer to agriculture-based societies.  The earliest literature we have is from the ancient Sumerians and ancient Egyptians.

The ancient world of the Greeks and Romans produced epic literature, but today we have but a small fraction of their output.  Much of the literature of the classical era was lost when the [Great Library of Alexandria (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site.](http://www.bede.org.uk/library.htm) was destroyed in war campaigns.

After the end of the Greek and Roman cultures, a manuscript culture arose in the Middle Ages, in which monks has special rooms in their monasteries called scriptoriums.  They created beautiful works by hand, hence the name manu (hand) scripts (writing).  In addition to creating[amazingly gorgeous artworks (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site.](http://www.themorgan.org/collection/medieval-and-renaissance-manuscripts), the monks were preserving knowledge.

Maybe it wasn't easy to go from scrolls to manuscript books.  Someone apparently wondered whether monks found the new form as puzzling as we find new software . . .

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xmTTzCAALc (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xmTTzCAALc)

With the invention in the West of the printing press by Gutenberg in 1440, the potential for larger volumes of reading material increased dramatically.  This would lead to increased literacy for people other than Church scholars.  By the 16th century there were 20 million printed works in circulation, a number that would increase tenfold in just another century.

It's appropriate to consider literature at the same time we study the Industrial Age, because as England led the way as the first industrialized nation, it experienced an explosion of print materials, from pamphlets to newspapers and magazines to novels. Literacy rates shot up; the working poor read out loud to each other in their pubs, and city workers bought novels from convenient stands in the railway stations as they commuted.  Many of the world's greatest novels were written in Victorian England, including those of Charles Dickens, often considered the greatest novelist in the English language, because, like Shakespeare in drama, his ability to create characters brought his books to vivid life.

Dickens spent time as a 12-year-old in a bootblacking factory, when his father was briefly imprisoned for debt, and this experience gave him a lifelong sympathy for the working poor and an equally lifelong antipathy for some of society's "solutions." He grew up to be a very keen observer of life, as he roamed London's street as a newspaper reporter, and watched all levels of society.

In his novel Nicholas Nickleby, Dickens dramatized a scene in which a boy is beaten at a 'boarding school' that was really more like a prison/death camp.Dickens had investigated such schools as a reporter, noting that boys were often sent there by relatives or guardians who expected they would not be coming back. Young Nickleby has been hired as a teacher at Dotheboys Hall, and suddenly has had his fill of watching the abuse.

[Here's the chapter (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site.](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Nicholas_Nickleby/Chapter_13), and here is the scene from the 2002 film Nicholas Nickleby.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d\_t77ai5GEk (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_t77ai5GEk)

In our own time, we've made another huge transition, from a print culture to a digital culture.  The impact on human existence is so great that we won't know the extent of it for decades, but undoubtedly it has expanded access to the written word in volume and breadth beyond imagination.  The presence of screens has changed the way we process information, for good and for ill.