

BRITISH LITERARY CLUBS AND SOCIETIES BETWEEN THE 18TH – 20TH CENTURIES

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Abstract:

Rooted in the 17th century, when the guilds started to organise in England, and then developing into social and professional societies and associations in the 18th and 19th centuries, these clubs and societies have served as sanctuaries for people of similar social standings, providing a space for fellowship, networking, and developing ideas and thoughts with fellows sharing the same concerns. While the main purpose of these literary clubs and societies was to offer a friendly and professional environment to validate the same concerns, they also played a crucial role in shaping the collective mentality of their members, influencing everything, from political opinions to social behaviours. This analysis explores the phenomenon of group mentality as expressed within the context of British literary clubs and societies, examining how these exclusive environments stimulated a sense of unity, conformity, and shared identity among their members.

Keywords: *Literary clubs and societies, British literature, British collective mind, cultural institution, cultural identity.*

British literature has often explored themes of class divisions, societal norms, and individual aspirations. Dickens' novel “Oliver Twist” vividly portrays the harsh realities faced by the lower classes in Victorian London, shedding light on poverty, exploitation, and the struggle for social justice.

Bearing in mind their important social function, it comes as no surprise that the British literary world owes much of its development to the associational structures called *clubs*, *societies* or *groups*. Literary clubs and societies have been active agents in the shaping of literary schools and movements as well as cultural politics, environments encouraging a free

exchange of ideas and, as such, they also found reflection in literature: the literary and the fictional clubs are the complementary sides of the same coin.

The majority of these literary clubs were associated with certain journals and periodicals voicing the principles and literary tastes of their members, and they were the favourite meeting places of writers, journalists, illustrators and cartoonists, painters, sculptors, but also of the art and literary critics. Voluntary associations like clubs and societies were an important mode to socialise for the intellectual elite of the Enlightenment in the 18th century, and they led to the formation of the public sphere. They were the sites where public opinion was formed. Often, writers and thinkers were members of two or more clubs and literary societies, and thus the circulation of ideas and dissemination of tastes and opinion across various societal layers was facilitated.

Peter Clark identifies the first associational structures resembling a literary club as dating back to as early as the end of the 16th century. Such an early example is *The Aeropagus*, with Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser as its prominent members²⁸. In the 17th and early 18th centuries, most clubs, including those of the people from the literary and publishing business, were informal gatherings, often changing their members and venue. Although flexibility was one of their great advantages, Clark notes that “the absence of rules often led to less agreeable encounters, and so a process towards formalization began: clubs were founded on a set of rules, and some of them even had club regalia.”²⁹

John Timbs mentions, among the first literary clubs, the club founded at *Mermaid Tavern* by Sir Walter Raleigh and quotes a story recounted by Gifford:

“Sir Walter Raleigh, previously to his unfortunate engagement with the wretched Cobham and others, had instituted a meeting of beaux esprits at the Mermaid, a celebrated tavern in Friday Street. Of this Club, which combined more talent and genius than ever met together before or since, our author [Ben Johnson] was a member; and here for many years he regularly repaired, with Shakespeare, Beaumont, Fletcher, Selden, Cotton, Carew, Martin,

²⁸ Peter Clark: *British clubs and societies 1580 - 1800* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 47.

²⁹ Ibid., 70 – 71.

Donne and many others, whose names, even at this distant period, call up a mingled feeling of reverence and respect.”³⁰

However, other writers think that this is just a legend and that Gifford invented the *Mermaid Club*. What is certain is that there was a tale that Raleigh had founded the *Mermaid Club*, yet its origin was impossible to trace, so the *Mermaid Club* may or may not have existed. At the same time, an informal club led by Ben Johnson, seems to have gathered at the *Devil's Tavern*. Quoting Leigh Hunt, Timbs notes that Johnson had written the *Leges Conviviales* for this club, of which an important one stipulated '*Insipida poemata nulla recitantur*' - Let nobody recite insipid poetry.

Perhaps, the most famous literary club of all times, and the model for all literary clubs to come, was the 18th century *The Literary Club*, or simply *The Club* in London, established and frequented by Dr. Samuel Johnson (nicknamed 'Dictionary Johnson', on account of his erudition and great intellect), James Boswell (Johnson's biographer), Sir Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke, Oliver Goldsmith, and, as if to prove that medicine and literature are no strangers to each other, Dr. Christopher Nugent, one of the most successful physicians and playwrights of the period. Though initially membership had been limited to nine people, over time other luminaries were admitted to the society. Among them were David Garrick, the best actor of the time, a British politician, Charles James Fox, Adam Smith, the economist, and Edward Gibbon, the historian. Before joining *the Club* in 1776, Adam Smith had been a member of the *Select Society* in Edinburgh, together with the philosopher David Hume. Reynolds had proposed the toast which remained forever associated with the club (*Esto perpetua!* = Let it be perpetual), and Johnson himself, in an attempt to confine membership only to intelligent and entertaining characters had coined the term *clubbable*: men who wanted to join the club had to be clubbable.

However, the literary club was not exclusively a male preoccupation. Samuel Johnson, Joshua Reynolds and Edmund Burke were frequent visitors of *The Bluestocking Society*, a group of aristocratic women who championed women's right to education and a career.

³⁰ John Timbs: *Clubs And Club Life In London: With Anecdotes Of Its Famous Coffee Houses, Hostelries, And Taverns, From The Seventeenth Century To The Present Time* (Legare Street Press), 2021.

Founded in the mid-18th century, *The Bluestocking Society* members represented a new type of female, with an intellectual interest in the arts and rational conversation. In a painting by Richard Samuel, the most prominent of the *Bluestockings*, writers Elizabeth Carter, Elizabeth Griffith, Charlotte Lennox and Anna Barbauld, artist Angelica Kaufmann, singer Elizabeth Sheridan, historian Catharine Macauley and abolitionist Hannah More were represented alongside their mentor and founder of the group, Elizabeth Montagu as the nine muses: an allusion both to their noble descent and to their intelligence and talents. Often identified as feminists *avant-la-lettre*, the *Bluestockings* were actually welcoming male companionship: the name of the group came from botanist and writer Benjamin Stillingfleet's habit of appearing to the meetings in worsted blue stockings (of an inferior quality compared with the aristocratic black ones). However, Hannah More, in the poem *The Bas-Bleu; or, Conversation* traces the history of the blue-stocking as far back as ancient Greece and Rome, though her intention might have been to lend some classical 'weight' to a society of women, who, Timbs remarked, was marked by "the vanity of small advances in literature".³¹

There were many other notable literary clubs in the 18th century, like the *Scriblerus Club*, which, in spite of its very short period of activity (less than a year), managed to foster a critical-satirical spirit through the persona of its mentor, Martin Scriblerus. This imaginary character, appearing in Alexander Pope, John Arbuthnot and Jonathan Swift's joint prose piece, *Memoirs of the Extraordinary Life, Works and Discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus* (1741) was supposedly a German from Muenster, a man of great knowledge and science, yet highly impractical. He follows the esoteric tradition of Paracelsus, as he is learned in both medicine and metaphysics, and endeavours to find the seat of the soul. This type of scientific pursuit, though very much at home in German-speaking countries, was however at odds with the practical and experimental spirit of the British, who were disdainful of theories and speculation. The main purpose of the club, therefore, was to ridicule pretentiousness and foolishness in men of letters and science, and mock modern culture for being the slave of

³¹ Ibid., 169.

opinion and false belief, or, as John Timbs puts it, “Satire upon the abuse of human learning was their leading object”.³²

Though not exactly a literary club – according to Timbs it was a “threefold celebrity – political, literary and artistic”³³, *the Kit-Cat*, founded by members of the Whig party in the first decades of the 18th century, and thus named after the owner of the tavern, Cristopher Katt, who produced an excellent mutton pie called *Kit-Cat*, was home to many famous literary figures, such as Joseph Addison and Richard Steele (the journalists writing for *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*) as well as the playwright William Congreve. When the club shifted its premises to its secretary’s house (Jacob Tonson, a well-known publisher and bookseller of the period), a series of famous portraits of the literary elite of the age (including those of John Dryden and Matthew Prior) was produced there by Gotfried Kneller. Timbs remarked that this was the golden period of clubs, and quotes one of Addison’s articles in the *Spectator*:

“Man is said to be a sociable animal; and as an instance of it we may observe, that we take all occasions and pretences of forming ourselves into those little nocturnal assemblies, which are commonly known by the name of clubs. When a set of men find themselves agree in any particular, though never so trivial, they establish themselves into a kind of fraternity, and meet once or twice a week, upon the account of such a fantastic resemblance.”³⁴

In Birmingham, the *Lunar Circle*, later on formalised to the *Lunar Society*, was an informal club for the learned men of the Midlands Enlightenment which functioned between 1765 and 1813. The members of the club jokingly referred to themselves as ‘lunaticks’, since they used to meet at the full moon: not on any mystical or esoteric grounds, but simply because the more intense light during the full moon ensured a safer trip home in the absence of street lighting. Though not particularly associated with literature, the *Lunar society* gave rise to fruitful intellectual debates on natural philosophy, religion, science and politics. Erasmus Darwin, a distant relative of the future Charles Darwin, the father of his uncle, who hosted some of the meetings of *the Lunar Society*, was a physician who first translated into English Carl Linnaeus’ *Genera Plantarum* as *The Botanic Garden*. Other notable members of

³² Ibid., 20.

³³ Ibid., 47.

³⁴ Ibid., 6.

the Lunar society were the chemist Joseph Priestley and James Watt, the inventor of the steam engine. Anna Seward, a poet and member of the *Bluestocking Club*, also frequented the meetings of the *Lunar Society* outside Birmingham.

The Garrick and the *Savile* were clubs founded with the purpose of facilitating the meeting of aristocracy and the great minds of the period. *The Garrick* attracted many playwrights as well as journalists (the editors of *Punch*), but also painters like Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Millais and novelists. *The Savile*, founded three decades later, is famous for its library which includes the Savile Monument, where the first editions of the books written by club members are collected. Among them were Rudyard Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson and H.G. Wells. The club provided a nurturing environment for writers like Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw to exchange ideas and collaborate on literary projects that pushed the boundaries of British literature.

Charles Dickens joined the *Arts Club* in London together with novelist Edmund Yates. In the 19th century the club gathered together writers, including Dickens, Kipling, Swinburne, Mark Twain, even the Russian Ivan Turgenev, painters, sculptors and architects, like Monet, Whistler, Rodin, “for the purpose of facilitating the social intercourse of those connected, either professionally or as amateurs, with Art, Literature, and Science”³⁵. It was quite transnational in scope, as foreign artists and men of science could be elected honorary members for a limited period of time. But before opening up the *Arts Club*, Dickens had been a member of two other clubs, the *Garrick* and – briefly – the *Ghost Club*. Dickens and Trollope had both quit the *Garrick* on account of a scandal involving Edmund Yates, a journalist and close friend of Dickens.

In 1862 Dickens joined the *Ghost Club*, the oldest paranormal research association in the world, closely tied to the Spiritualist movement. The following year he joined the group that founded the *Arts Clubs*. The Arts Clubs was in many ways a typical gentlemen’s club, with frequent speeches given in honour of its members who happened to be elected to the Royal Academy, the hunt for information, and a taste for jokes and good spirits. In a poem written by J.M. Horsburg in 1892 on the occasion of an R.A. election, the members of the club are

³⁵ G.A.F. Rogers: *The Arts Club and its Members* (Truslove and Hansom, Ltd.), 1920, 1.

evoked with all their peculiarities of speech and habit. One such character, W. Fisher, gives sound advice in the spirit of capitalist modernity: "Tis not enough that you should early rise/ To be successful you must advertise".³⁶

The Athaeneum Club used to gather together writers and philosophers like Alfred Tennyson, Thomas Carlyle, John Sterling and John Stuart Mill for intellectual debate. Dickens and Matthew Arnold, a great conversationalist, were also frequent visitors of the *Athaeneum*, as was the great naturalist Charles Darwin. The club is famous for its literary history: it was the place where Richard Burton translated the *Arabian Nights* into English, and where both Anthony Trollope and W.M. Thackeray found inspiration for their novels.

A similar club was founded in the United States in 1841 by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who used his house as a meeting place for intellectuals willing to engage in vivid discussions of the social, economic and religious issues of the period. Because it was here that R.W. Emerson had expressed his ideas about Transcendentalism (a philosophical doctrine with roots in German idealism, particularly Immanuel Kant, and British Romanticism, especially William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge), the club came to be called the *Transcendental Club*. Transcendentalism, its valuation of intuition and emphasis on the individual conscience, became a mark of the New England intellectual elite, and one of the earliest American attempts at an independent cultural production. Among the members of the *Transcendental Club* was Henry David Thoreau, one of the earliest proponents of social communism, and the originator of the concepts of 'passive resistance' and 'civil disobedience' which later led to revolutionary movements and decolonisation. The Transcendentalist tendency of looking for higher symbolism in nature and the material things exerted a great influence on American writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville and Walt Whitman.

R.W. Emerson was also a member of the *Saturday Club* in Boston, a club with a more prominent literary and artistic membership, who met on the fourth Saturday of each month. The group had been brought together by Horatio Woodman, a lawyer and publishing agent, concerned with promoting a literary journal. The gatherings of the club led to the creation of

³⁶ Ibid., 21.

The Atlantic Monthly, whose name was suggested by Oliver Wendell Holmes. Among its notable members were William Dean Howells, appointed editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and the novelist Henry James.

In history, the club's activity remains tied to the crusade against slavery and the struggle for the emancipation and citizenship of the black population. *The Saturday Club* was made famous by Oliver Wendell Holmes's poem, "At the Saturday Club" (1884), where the poet describes the atmosphere and the surroundings of the club and reminisces about his dead friends. A typical day of the Club induces Holmes in one of the favourite activities of most clubbers – sleeping, yet sleep is used as a pretext for reviving the ghosts of the former members:

"A month had flitted since The Club had met;
The day came round; I found the table set,
The waiters lounging round the marble stairs,
Empty as yet the double row of chairs.
I was a full half hour before the rest,
Alone, the banquet-chamber's single guest.
So from the table's side a chair I took,
And having neither company nor book
To keep me waking, by degrees there crept
A torpor over me,- in short, I slept.

Loosed from its chain, along the wreck-strown track
Of the dead years my soul goes travelling back;
My ghosts take on their robes of flesh; it seems
Dreaming is life; nay, life less life than dreams,
So real are the shapes that meet my eyes.
They bring no sense of wonder, no surprise,
No hint of other than an earth-born source;

All seems plain daylight, everything of course.”³⁷

In his sleep, he sees everyone as they used to sit, each in his place: Longfellow the poet, Jean-Louis Agassiz the professor, Hawthorne the romancer “Virile in strength, yet bashful as a girl/ Prouder than Hester, sensitive as Pearl” and Emerson, “the Buddha of the West”, “a winged Franklin, sweetly wise”.³⁸

In his authorial note to the poem, Holmes gives us a first-hand description of the functioning of the club:

“The club deserves being remembered for having no constitution or by-laws, for making no speeches, reading no papers, observing no ceremonies, coming and going at will without remark, and acting out, though it did not proclaim the motto: ‘Shall I not take mine ease in mine inn?’ There was and is nothing of the Bohemian element about this club, but it had had many good times and not a little good talking.”³⁹

The 17th, 18th and early 19th century arts and literary clubs were places of conviviality which created solid artistic and cultural communities as well as professional networks. Texts and ideas circulated in a creative environment, in an informal way, contributing to a material culture which was hard-wired to the modern machine of progress. The communities of art and philosophy, developed by the functioning of the club, played a vital role in the evolution of a modern European culture whose foremost values were individual knowledge and talent in the service of society. Literary clubs and societies, such as the *Royal Society of Literature*, or literary groups, like the *Bloomsbury Group*, have been in the leading positions of literary innovation in Britain. *The Royal Society of Literature* has recognised and celebrated exceptional British writers, promoting a culture of literary excellence and creativity. *The Bloomsbury Group*, known for its members (e.g. Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster), revolutionised British literature in the early 20th century through their experimental writing and unconventional approaches to storytelling. *The PEN Club*, a global association of writers promoting freedom of expression, has used literature as a powerful tool for raising

³⁷ Holmes, Oliver Wendell. “At the Saturday Club”, *The Atlantic*, January 1884, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1884/01/at-the-saturday-club/632992/>

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

awareness about human rights violations and social injustices. Its members have used their literary works to shed light on pressing social and political issues, sparking conversations and inspiring action for positive change. Writers associated with these clubs have utilised their creative expressions to criticise political systems, challenge authority, and advocate for social justice. *The Inklings*, a literary discussion group that included authors like C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, engaged in conversations about morality, politics, and religion, which influenced the themes and messages present in their literary masterpieces.

These exclusive institutions have provided fertile grounds for intellectual exchange, creative collaboration, and advocacy, leading to significant impacts on British literature, social norms, and political ideologies. Through their commitment to literary excellence, engagement with social issues, and contributions to political discourse, these institutions have left a long-lasting mark on British culture and society, inspiring generations of writers, thinkers, and advocates for positive change.

The link between philosophy of thinking and English literature throughout history is profound and multilayered. English literature often reflects philosophical ideas, and philosophers frequently draw inspiration from literary works. The relationship between philosophy of thinking and English literature is symbiotic, as each discipline enriches and informs the other, contributing to a deeper understanding of the human experience and the complexities of existence.

Both philosophy and literature are full of fundamental questions about existence, meaning, and the human condition. Existentialist themes, such as the search for identity, the nature of reality, and the existence of free will, are prevalent in both disciplines. For example, Shakespeare's "Hamlet" is centred on existential dilemmas and questions of life, death, and purpose.

English literature often presents ethical and moral dilemmas, prompting readers to reflect on ethical principles and values. Similarly, ethical theories developed in philosophy inform the actions and motivations of literary characters. One notable example is John Milton's "Paradise Lost," which explores themes of morality, temptation, and the fall of humanity, drawing upon Christian theology and ethical philosophy.

Literary criticism frequently incorporates philosophical frameworks to analyse and interpret literary texts. Philosophical concepts, such as structuralism, postmodernism, feminism, and psychoanalysis, provide tools with which scholars examine themes, characters, and narrative techniques in literature. For instance, Michel Foucault's theories of power and discourse have been applied to analyse the construction of gender and sexuality in Virginia Woolf's works.

Philosophical movements often coincide with literary movements, shaping the themes and styles of literary works. For example, the Romantic era in English literature emerged along with philosophical Romanticism, which emphasised individualism, emotion, and the sublime. Writers like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge infused their poetry with philosophical ideas about nature, imagination, and the self.

Both philosophy and literature explore epistemological questions concerning knowledge, truth, and perception. Literary texts frequently challenge the reliability of perception and the nature of reality, inviting readers to question their assumptions and perspectives. In turn, philosophical inquiries into epistemology inform discussions about the nature of narrative, representation, and interpretation in literature.

There is an obvious link between philosophy of thought, theory of mentality, British literature, and British clubs that can be explored through various themes, including the representation of mental discourse and consciousness in literature, philosophical inquiries into the nature of the mind, and the social and cultural contexts of British clubs. British literature often portrays the inner workings of the mind, highlighting characters' thoughts, emotions, and mental states. This exploration of consciousness can intersect with philosophical theories about the nature of the mind. Virginia Woolf's novel "Mrs. Dalloway" employs stream-of-consciousness narrative techniques to depict the inner thoughts and experiences of its characters, reflecting philosophical inquiries into subjective experience and the self.

British philosophers have made significant contributions to the study of the mind and consciousness. Philosophers like John Locke, David Hume and Gilbert Ryle, the latter criticised the Cartesian dualism, have explored questions about perception, identity and the nature of mental condition. Their ideas have influenced both literary representations of

consciousness, generating larger discussions about the mind in British literature, and engaging themes related to mental health, social alienation, and psychological well-being. These themes intersect with philosophical theories about the relationship between the individual and society, as well as perceptions of mental illness and stigma. Charlotte Brontë's novel "Jane Eyre" explores the psychological struggles of its protagonist and the societal constraints that shape her experiences, highlighting broader questions about identity and personality.

British clubs, such as gentlemen's clubs and literary societies, have played a significant role in the cultural and intellectual life of Britain. These clubs served as venues for social interaction, intellectual exchange, and the dissemination of ideas. *The Bloomsbury Group*, a circle of writers, intellectuals, and artists in early 20th century London, met regularly in private homes and clubs to discuss literature, philosophy and politics, influencing both British literature and intellectual thought.

As stated before, British literature often depicts scenes set in clubs and social gatherings, providing insights into the nature of social interaction and community formation. These depictions can reflect cultural attitudes towards class, gender, and social status, where group mentality plays a key role in shaping club's cultural identity.

Literary clubs played an essential role in the development of literature in Britain, in the development of the social sciences, of British thought and mentality, of the evolution of British society in general. Some of these literary clubs and societies continue the tradition to this day, being a means of inspiration for other literary organisations, both in the UK and around the world.

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