



*Background Reading:
Enlightenment And Neo-classicism*

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(Sem. - II :: Paper C3T :: 18th CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE)

Points to Remember

- When we speak of the **Eighteenth century** we speak of it in several ways—as the **Age of Enlightenment**, as the **Augustan Age** and as the **Neo-classical** period. One can legitimately call it the **Age of Enlightenment**, which it was.
- After the European Renaissance of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries there was a revival of **interest in the classics** followed by a great **rejection of the Metaphysical hair splitting arguments** of the **Medieval Church Fathers**, a rise of Individualism and the visible manifestation of this in **self-consciousness** and a general acceptance of **Man as the measure of all things rather than God**.



Points to Remember

- The focus shifted in the 18th century to France where the Philosophers extended and **deepened** the **ideas of the Renaissance**.
- Amongst the Philosophers were **Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu and Diderot**, all of whom were against the ***Ancient Regime of France*** and boldly spoke out against superstitions and prejudices and asserted a humane value system.
- “**Man is born free**”, said Rousseau, “**but is everywhere in chains**”.
- Rousseau meant that injustice and imperfection in the world was not cosmic or God given, but man made.
- That these ‘**mind forged manacles**’ (**Blake’s phrase**) could be shattered by the application of reason and understanding.
- In defense of democracy and free speech, **Voltaire** said that even if he disagreed with everything someone said, he would defend with his life that person’s right to say it.

Points to Remember

- This rational and man centered discourse was given a great fillip in England by **John Locke**, the sensationalist philosopher. He was convinced that understanding in the mind was occasioned by our sense impressions and these impressions fused together to create intellectual arguments. He is a Sensationalist philosopher. He was part of a movement to focus attention on the world and to encourage people to become attuned to it.
- Instead of metaphysics we needed physics so to speak, and **Francis Bacon**, who was a 17th century forbear of the Enlightenment, liked to call himself a natural philosopher; one who had an empirical attitude to everything and one who would accept things only on the basis of reason and experiment. In that spirit, Locke rejected metaphysics and concentrated on the world.

Points to Remember

- Locke said “The Works of Nature sufficiently evidence a Deity”. By this he meant God left humans with the responsibility of managing the world, after he finished creating it. Thus through tolerance, discussion, and rational behavior, Man could make the world perfect.
- This comfortable ideology informed the thinking of many writers in the 18th century. That is why the period has been characterized by George Saintsbury as “the Peace of the Augustans”, a reference to England’s similarity with Imperial Rome ruled by the Emperor Augustus when the Pax Romana was established in the world. Likewise this was the period of the Pax Britannica which everyone acknowledges was a period of comparative calm after the earlier turbulence. There was now an emphasis on consolidation and conservation of what had been established.

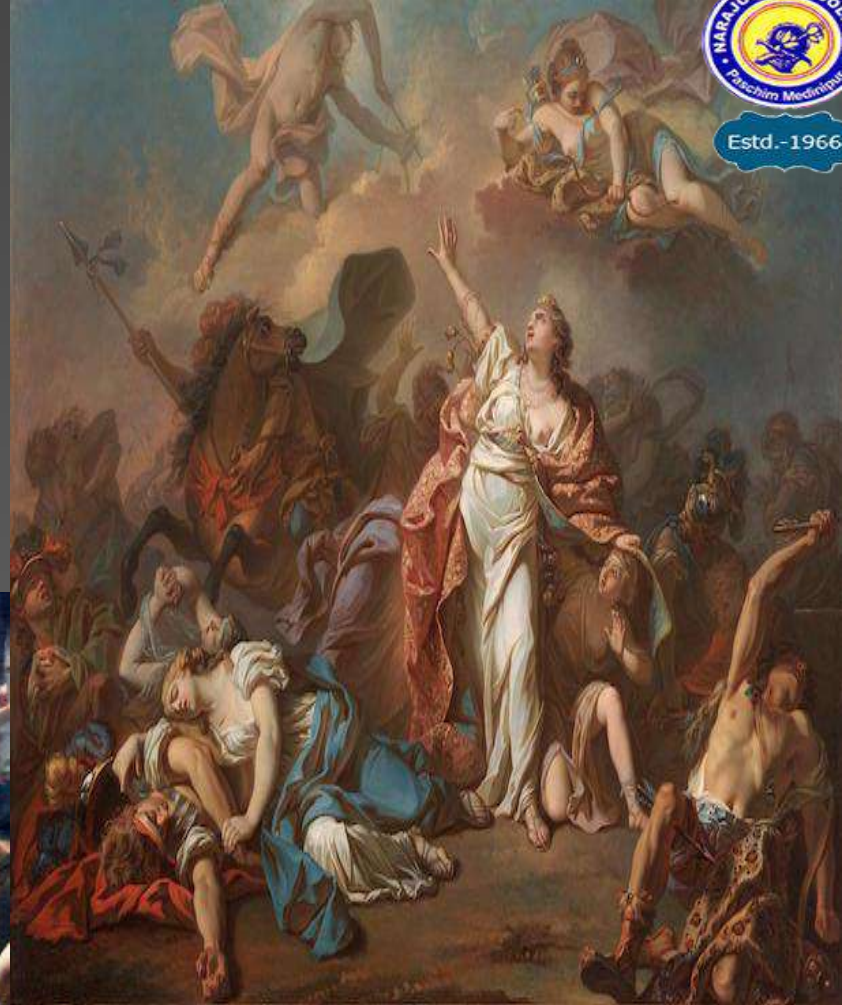
Points to Remember

- Many thinkers, contrary to what Voltaire in *Candide* disparagingly satirized said and what Johnson instinctively knew to be false felt that, “**What is, is Right**”. This optimism, of course, was not shared by the Augustan satirists and the best English writing of this period is actually a questioning of the Augustan peace and optimism.
- Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, through its four Books, punctures this optimism about the human race. Pope is satirical of the dunces and miscellaneous thinkers who perpetuate illusions and Johnson is, as **Basil Willey** has called him a, “**Cosmic Tory**” one who cannot accept this secular, almost unchristian, world view. Be that as it may, the Enlightenment period was a period of general satisfaction with the way one lived.

Points to Remember

- The **Augustan Age** is also called the **Neo Classical Age**. The long period after the classical thinkers like **Plato, Aristotle, Horace and Quintillian**, until the Renaissance was characterized by the hegemony of the Catholic Church. Overwhelmed by Catholic Christendom, it was inevitable that when the classics were revived after the so called **Dark Ages** of the medieval period, they should be suffused with Christian feeling and piety.
- We see this in Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* where in his defense of poetry against the Puritan assault he attempts to fuse Platonism with Christianity and to give Plato a renewed life as a proto Christian thinker. Johnson is in the same tradition – a neo-classical thinker and very representative of the Age. This is brought best in his treatment of Shakespeare.
- **Neoclassicism** was a Western cultural movement in the decorative and visual arts, literature, theatre, music, and architecture that drew inspiration from the art and culture of classical antiquity
- The main Neoclassical movement coincided with the 18th- century Age of Enlightenment, and continued into the early 19th century, laterally competing with Romanticism.

- "Neoclassicism" in each art implies a particular canon of a "classical" model.
- In English, the term "Neoclassicism" is used primarily of the visual arts.
- In music, the period saw the rise of classical music, and "Neoclassicism" is used of 20th-century developments.



Neoclassical architecture is based on the principles of simplicity and symmetry, which were seen as virtues of the arts of Rome and Ancient Greece, and were more immediately drawn from 16th-century Renaissance Classicism.

Points to Remember



- Each "neo"-classicism selects some models among the range of possible classics that are available to it, and ignores others.
- The Neoclassical writers and talkers, patrons and collectors, artists and sculptors of 1765–1830 paid homage to an idea of the generation of Phidias, but the sculpture examples they actually embraced were more likely to be Roman copies of **Hellenistic sculptures**.
- Neoclassical critics transformed Aristotle's observations on Greek tragedy into prescriptions for all plays, and his comments on unity of action into rules governing the **Unities**, which all plays were exhorted to imitate.
- In English literature neoclassical principles triumphed during the Augustan Age, particularly in poetry where **Alexander Pope's** masterly employment of **Heroic Couplets** constituted the standard until the first stirrings of **Romanticism** in the last decades of the 18th century.
- The neoclassical period is frequently identified with the Enlightenment in its emphasis on the principles of rationality, order, and logic. It celebrated the development of reason as the ultimate human achievement in art as well as in life, a position that the Romantic emphasis on imagination later challenged.

Points to Remember



- Between 1660 and the late 1700s, by authors such as **John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Johnson, Oliver Goldsmith, and Edmund Burke**, may serve as an introductory sketch of some prominent features of neoclassic literature:
 - > These authors exhibited a strong traditionalism of classical writers—that is, the writers of ancient Greece and Rome—who were thought to have achieved excellence, and established the enduring models, in all the major literary genres.
 - > Literature was conceived to be primarily an “art”. Alexander Pope said in *An Essay on Criticism*, “a grace beyond the reach of art.”
 - > The neoclassic rules of poetry were, in theory, the essential properties of the various genres (such as epic, tragedy, comedy, pastoral) that have been abstracted from classical works whose long survival has proved their excellence.
 - > Poetry was held to be an imitation of human life—in a common phrase, “a mirror held up to nature.” **Not art for art’s sake, but art for humanity’s sake**, was a central ideal of neoclassic humanism.
 - > In both the subject matter and the appeal of art, emphasis was placed on what human beings possess in common—representative characteristics and widely shared experiences, thoughts, feelings, and tastes.

Points to Remember

- > a primary aim of poetry is to give new and consummate expression to the great commonplaces of human wisdom, whose universal acceptance and durability are the best warrant of their importance and truth.
- > They viewed human beings as limited agents who ought to set themselves only accessible goals.
- > Many of the great works of the period, satiric and didactic, attack human “pride”
- > They sometimes envisioned as a natural hierarchy or **Great Chain of Being**.
- > In art, as in life, what was for the most part praised was the law of measure and the acceptance of limits upon one’s freedom.
- > The poets admired extremely the great genres of **epic** and **tragedy**, but wrote their own masterpieces in admittedly lesser and less demanding forms such as the **essay in verse and prose, the comedy of manners, and especially satire**, in which they felt they had more chance to equal or surpass their classical and English predecessors.
- > A distinctive quality of the urbane poetry of the Neoclassic Period was, in the phrase often quoted from Horace, “**the art that hides art**”



Thank You

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