

Eighteenth-Century Literature

The Eighteenth Century in England is called the Classical Age or the Augustan Age in literature. It is also called the Age of Good Sense or the Age of Reason. Though Dryden belonged to the seventeenth century, he is also included in the Classical or Augustan Age, as during his time the characteristics of his age had manifested themselves and he himself represented them to a great extent. Other great literary figures who dominated this age successively were Pope and Dr. Johnson, and so the Classical Age is divided into three distinct periods—the Ages of Dryden, Pope and Dr. Johnson. In this chapter which is devoted to the eighteenth-century literature in England, we will deal with the Ages of Pope and Johnson. The Age of Dryden has already been dealt with in the preceding chapter, entitled “The Restoration Period.”

The Age of Pope (1700-1744)

The earlier part of the eighteenth century or the Augustan Age in English literature is called the Age of Pope, because Pope was the dominating figure in that period. Though there were a number of other important writers like Addison and Swift, but Pope was the only one who devoted himself completely to literature. Moreover, he represented in himself all the main characteristics of his age, and his poetry served as a model to others.

The Age of Johnson (1744-1784)

The later half of the eighteenth century, which was dominated by Dr. Samuel Johnson, is called the *Age of Johnson*. Johnson died in 1784, and from that time the Classical spirit in English literature began to give place to the Romantic spirit, though officially the Romantic Age started from the year 1798 when Wordsworth and Coleridge published the famous *Lyrical Ballads*. Even during the Age of Johnson, which was predominantly classical, cracks had begun to appear in the solid wall of classicism and there were clear signs of revolt in favour of the Romantic spirit. This was specially noticeable in the field of poetry. Most of the poets belonging to the *Age of Johnson* may be termed as the precursors of the Romantic Revival. That is why the *Age of Johnson* is also called the *Age of Transition* in English literature.

The Eighteenth Century Novel

The chief literary contribution of the eighteenth century was the discovery of the modern novel, which at present is the most widely read and influential type of literature. The novel in its elementary form as a work of fiction written in prose was at first established in England by two authors—Bunyan and Defoe, who took advantage of the public interest in autobiography. The

books of Bunyan, whether they are told in the first person or not, were meant to be autobiographical and their interest is subjective. Bunyan endeavours to interest his readers not in the character of some other person he had imagined or observed, but in himself, and his treatment of it is characteristic of the awakening talent for fiction in his time. *The Pilgrim's Progress* is begun as an allegory, but in course of time the author is so much taken up with the telling of the story, that he forgets about the allegory, and it is this fact which makes Bunyan the pioneer of the modern novel.

Poets of the Romantic Age

The poets of the Romantic age can be classified into three groups— (i) The Lake School, consisting of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey; (ii) The Scott group including Campbell and Moore; and (iii) The group comprising Byron, Shelley, and Keats. The first two groups were distinctly earlier than the third, so we have two eight years flood periods of supremely great poetry, namely 1798-1806 and 1816-1824, separated by a middle period when by comparison creative energy had ebbed.

Prose Writers of Romantic Age

Though the Romantic period specialised in poetry, there also appeared a few prose-writers-Lamb, Hazlitt and De Quincey who rank very high. There was no revolt of the prose-writers against the eighteenth century comparable to that of the poets, but a change had taken place in the prose-style also.

Novelists of The Romantic Age

The great novelists of the Romantic period are Jane Austen and Scott, but before them there appeared some novelists who came under the spell of medievalism and wrote novels of 'terror' or the 'Gothic novels'. The origin of this type of fiction can be ascribed to Horace Walpole's (1717-97) *The Castle of Otranto* (1746). Here the story is set in medieval Italy and it includes a gigantic helmet that can strike dead its victims, tyrants, supernatural intrusions, mysteries and secrets. There were a number of imitators of such a type of novel during the eighteenth century as well as in the Romantic period.

The Victorian Age (1832-1900)

The Victorian Age in English literature began in second quarter of the nineteenth century and ended by 1900. Though strictly speaking, the Victorian age ought to correspond with the reign of Queen Victoria, which extended from 1837 to 1901, yet literary movements rarely coincide with the exact year of royal accession or death. From the year 1798 with the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* till the year 1820 there was the heyday of Romanticism in England, but after that year there was a sudden decline.

Poets of the Early Victorian Period

The most important poets during the early Victorian period were Tennyson and Browning, with Arnold occupying a somewhat lower position. After the passing away of Keats, Shelley and Byron in the early eighteenth twenties, for about fifteen years the fine frenzy of the high romantics subsided and a quieter mood ensued. With the abatement of the revolutionary fervor, Wordsworth's inspiration had deserted him and all that he wrote in his later years was dull and insipid.

Novelists of the Early Victorian Period

In the early Victorian period the novel made a rapid progress. Novel-reading was one of the chief occupations of the educated public, and material had to be found for every taste. The result was that the scope of the novel, which during the eighteenth century dealt mainly with contemporary life and manners, was considerably enlarged. A number of brilliant novelists showed that it was possible to adapt the novel to almost all purposes of literature whatsoever. In fact, if we want to understand this intellectual life of the period.

Novelists of the Later Victorian Period

The novel in the later Victorian period took a new trend, and the novels written during this period may be called 'modern' novels. George Eliot was the first to write novels in the modern style. Other important novelists of the period were Meredith and Hardy. The year 1859 saw the publication not only of George Eliot's *Adam Bede* but also of Meredith's *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*. Though they are vastly different from each other, they stand in sharp contrast to the works of established novelists that appeared the same year—as Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* and Thackeray's *Virginians*

Prose-Writers of the Later Victorian Period

In the later Victorian period there were two great prose-writers—Newman and Pater. Newman was the central figure of the Oxford Movement, while Pater was an aesthete, who inspired the leaders of the Aesthetic Movement in English poetry.

Modern Literature (1900-1961)

The Modern Age in English Literature started from the beginning of the twentieth century, and it followed the Victorian Age. The most important characteristic of Modern Literature is that it is opposed to the general attitude to life and its problems adopted by the Victorian writers and the public, which may be termed 'Victorian'. The young people during the first decade of the present century regarded the Victorian age as hypocritical, and the Victorian ideals as mean, superficial and stupid.

Modern Poetry

Modern poetry, of which T. S. Eliot is the chief representative, has followed entirely a different tradition from the Romantic and Victorian tradition of poetry. Every age has certain ideas about poetry, especially regarding the essentially poetical subjects, the poetical materials and the poetical modes.

Modern Drama

After the death of Shakespeare and his contemporaries drama in England suffered a decline for about two centuries. Even Congreve in the seventeenth, and Sheridan and Goldsmith in the eighteenth, could not restore drama to the position it held during the Elizabethan Age. It was revived, however, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and then there appeared dramatists who have now given it a respectable place in English literature

The Modern Novel

This is the most important and popular literary medium in the modern times. It is the only literary form which can compete for popularity with the film and the radio, and it is in this form that a great deal of distinguished work is being produced. The publication of a new novel by a great novelist is received now with the same enthusiastic response as a new comedy by Dryden or Congreve was received in the Restoration period, and a new volume of poems by Tennyson during the Victorian period. Poetry which had for many centuries held the supreme place in the realm of literature, has lost that position. Its appeal to the general public is now negligible, and it has been obviously superseded by fiction.

Post-Modern Literature

Understanding Post-modernism

Until the 1920's, the term "modern" used to mean new or contemporary, but thereafter it came to be used for a particular period, the one between the two World Wars (1914-1945). Then came up after about half a century the, magic term, "post-modern," meaning the period after the modern.

Postmodern Drama (The New Theatre)

Drama of the post-war period shares, in some ways, the dominant spirit of the age we have witnessed in novel and poetry from the 1950's onward. One thing that seems common to all the three is their concern with life at the elemental level—with life bare and bony, wholly demystified and demythologized, and with questions raised at the existential plane, and without any attempt to seek soothing escape or magic solution to the problems of existence.

POST-MODERN CRITICISM

Until the time of the modernist period of English literature, literary criticism was a “literary” activity, with leading (call them policy) documents written by the leaders of the literary movements. We know how from Dryden and Pope and Johnson to Wordsworth and Coleridge and Keats to Arnold and Rossetti and Swinburne to Eliot and Auden and Spender, English poetics was theorized by the leading English poets.