

Eighteenth Century as the Age of Prose Reason

Matthew Arnold stated that the **eighteenth century** was the **age of 'prose & reason'**. It is called so because no good poetry was written at that **age** and poetry itself became 'prosaic'. The **eighteenth century** is also referred as the Augustan **Age** or Neo-classical **Age**.

The Enlightenment, also **known as the Age of Reason**, was an intellectual and cultural movement in the **eighteenth century** that emphasized **reason** over superstition and science over blind faith. This was a sharp turn away from the prevailing idea that people needed to rely on scripture or church authorities for knowledge.

The eighteenth century, says Legouis in *A Short History of English Literature*, "viewed as a whole has a distinctive character." It was "the classical age" in English literature, and, as such, held and practised some basic principles concerning life and literature. Even then one should avoid sweeping generalizations/The temptation to generalize-the eighteenth century particularly-is hard to overcome.

"Few centuries," says George Sherburn in *A Literary History of England* edited by Albert C. Baugh, "have with more facility been reduced to a formula than the eighteenth.... Few centuries, to be sure, have demonstrated more unity of character than superficially considered the eighteenth seems to have possessed." However, it is fallacious to believe that there is a clear cleavage between the seventeenth century and the eighteenth. Observes Sherburn: "The ideas of the later seventeenth century

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continue into the eighteenth.” At any rate, in the eighteenth century there was the completion of the reaction against Elizabethan romanticism. This reaction had started in the seventeenth century with Denham, Waller, and Dryden. Pope and his contemporaries stood on the other extreme to Elizabethan romanticists and ushered in “the age of prose and reason,” as Matthew Arnold characterises the eighteenth century. Now, let us see how and how far the eighteenth century was “an age of prose and reason.”

Pope and his followers give much importance to reason in their modes of thinking and expressing. Reason may variously manifest itself as good sense, rationalism, intellect, wit or just dry logicism, but it is definitely against all excessive emotionalism, sentimentalism, extravagance, eccentricity, lack of realism, escapism, and even imagination. It is easy to see that in the eighteenth-century reason was exalted to a shibboleth. Cazamian maintains: “The true source and the real quality of English classicism are of a psychological nature. Its ideal, its characteristics, its method, all resolve themselves into a general searching after rationality.” This search which started in the age of Dryden culminated in the age of Pope. Cazamian maintains in this connexion: “One may say that the age of Pope lives more fully, more spontaneously, at the pitch of that dominant intellectuality, which during the preceding age was chiefly an irresistible impulse, a kind of contagious intoxication.” This reign of reason and common sense continued into the middle of the century when new ideas and voices appeared, and the precursors of the English romantics of the nineteenth century appeared on the scene. All the important writers of the age—Swift, Pope, and Dr. Johnson—glorified reason both in their literary and critical work and, conversely,

made unreason and bad sense the recurring targets of their satire. Swift in the fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels*, for example, chastises Yahoos for being creatures of impulse, without reason or common sense. On the other hand, Houyhnhnms are glorified as tenacious adherents of these qualities. The satire on Yahoos is, by implication, a satire on the human beings who resemble them so closely. Thus the fourth book is the most terrible satire on human lack of good sense and reason. 18th century is also known as an era of "prose and reason" because literature of that era sprouted its roots deep in reason and intellect, thus it was characterised as satirical, didactic and critical. Poetry in this era saw a decline due to it being based on imagination and enthusiasm.

This era saw an unprecedented rise of reason; it dominates all aspects of life mainly thoughts and expressions & is found in various forms- wit, intellect, rationalism all which opposed excessive imagination, enthusiasm, eccentricity. A chase after rationalism which originated in the Dryden era, was observed.

Reason was also found to dominate even religion as religious instructors appealed to the conscience and reasoning of their audiences.

Reason made its way into literature as is evident through the writings of Pope and his contemporaries.

The 18th century viewed as a whole has a distinctive character. It is definitely the Age of understanding, the age of enlightenment, where a literature which had become pellucid (clear) began to diffuse knowledge among the growing public. The supremacy of reason was unchallenged – there reigned a general belief in the advancement of human mind. This flourishing of enlightened idea and the escalation of reason and

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logical thought finds its best articulation through the triumph of English prose in the 18th century. As such, the 18th century has often been designated as the age of prose reason. The major prose writers of the age include Jonathan Swift (1667 -1745) Joseph Addison (1672 -1719), Richard Steele (1672 -1729) and Samuel Johnson (1704 – 1784). Other prose writers of significance are James Bowell (1740 – 1795), Edmund Burke (1729 – 1797) and Edward Gibbon (1737 – 1794).

This glorification of reason also- manifests itself in the form of the stress laid on the imitation of the “ancients,” that is, the Greek and Roman writers of antiquity. It was thought contrary to reason to be led by one’s own impulses and eccentricities and to devise one’s own idiom for expression. Too much of subjectivity was considered irrational. It was believed that a man should cultivate unrefined and “natural” taste by subjecting it to the influence of classical writers. Much stress was laid on controlling and disciplining one’s heady feelings and wild imagination and the personal way of expression with the help of the study of the classics. We find in this century many translations and adaptations of the classics as also their “imitations,” not to speak of their rich echoes in most works of the century. The eighteenth century-particularly its first half-is also called the classical age of English literature on account of two reasons which W. H. Hudson enumerates as follows:

- (i) “...the poets and critics of this age believed that the works of the writers of classical antiquity (really of the Latin writers), presented the best of models and the ultimate standards of literary taste.”
- (ii) “...like these Latin writers they had little faith in the promptings and guidance of individual genius, and much in laws and rules imposed by the authority of the past.”

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In 1700 Walsh wrote to Pope: "The best of the modern poets in all languages are those that have nearest copied the ancients." Swift in *The Battle of the Books* showed the supremacy of the ancients over all the succeeding writers. Walsh's expression *copied the ancients* should not lead one to believe that eighteenth-century writers were no more than copyists and as such are open to the charge of plagiarism. What they copied was only the good taste and reason of the ancients. Well did Pope observe: "Those who say our thoughts are not our own because they resemble the Ancients' may as well say our Faces are not our own because they are like our Fathers." Thus the ancients were to be respected as guides and models, not as tyrants. Among the ancients the most respected were the Latin writers of the Age of Augustus and among them, too, particularly Virgil and Horace. The one reason why this age is called the Augustan age is this. However, the English "ancients" like Chaucer and Spenser were not respected. Addison in his critical poem *Account of the Greatest English Poets* observes about *The Faerie Queene*:

.... *But now the mystic tale mat pleased of yore*
Can charm an understanding age no more.

Chaucer is dismissed as a "rude barbarian" who tries in vain to make the readers laugh with his jests in "unpolished strain." Thomas Rymer savagely criticised Shakespeare.

A. R. Humphreys observes: "Basically, the critical injunction which gained the widest, indeed, almost universal, acceptance was the call to "follow Nature". In the famous lines from Pope's *Essay on Criticism* advice is tendered to writers:

First follow Nature, and your judgement frame
By her just standard, which is still the same :
Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,

*One clear unchanged, and universal light,
Life, force, and beauty, must to all impart,
At once the source, and end, and test of Art.*

Pope's "Nature" was not the "Nature" of the romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge. The Augustans were not much interested in forests, flowers, trees, birds, etc. which inspired poets like Wordsworth. Nor did Pope and his contemporaries mean by "Nature" that Nature which, to use the words of Louis I. Bredvold, "Sir Isaac Newton had recently interpreted in terms of mathematical physics, in his *Principia Mathematica* (1687); they could hardly have gone to physics for a literary standard, and they were moreover aware that their concept of Nature antedated Newtonian centuries." For them Nature indicated, what Bredvold tells, "a rational and intelligible -moral order in the universe, according to which the various experiences of mankind could be confidently and properly valid." Nature to them meant, in the words of A. R. Humphreys, "the moral course of the world or as ideal truth by which art should be guided." Man's subjective feelings were thus discredited and sacrificed to "the laws of Nature." As Basil Willey observes in *The Nineteenth-Century Background*, "the individual mind was carefully ruled out of the whole scheme." Even in the field of religion, reason and Nature ruled the roost. This was the age of the spread of natural religion or Deism which believed in the existence of God but disbelieved in any revealed religion, not excepting Christianity. People were also talking about, "natural morality." The doctrines of the reason-loving Deists were repudiated by orthodox theologians, not passionately but with reason.

This eighteenth-century emphasis on Nature often took the form of the emphasis on the "rules" formulated by the ancients. These rules were supposed to be of universal applicability. Nature was the criterion of propriety, and the rules of the

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ancients were to be respected as they, in the words of Pope, “are Nature still but Nature methodised.” And further,

Nature like liberty, is but restrained
By the same laws which first herself ordained.

The tendency to adhere to the rules went against the eccentricities and irrationalities of individual genius. The eighteenth century was, in fact, an age of formalism in all spheres—literature, architecture, gardening, and even social etiquette. A critic maintains: ‘Just as a gentleman might not act naturally (that is, in accordance with his impulses), but must follow exact rules in doffing his hat, or addressing a lady, or entering a room, or offering his snuff-box to a friend, so the writers of this age lost individuality and became formal and artificial.’

The adoration of reason naturally implied a keen distrust of enthusiasm and imagination which could lead a man to -ludicrous extremes. 18TH Century English literature is, consequently, devoid of the enthusiasm, elemental passion, mysterious suggestiveness, and heady imagination which characterize romantic literature. These romantic characteristics were discredited as they led one to violate Nature. If a writer abandoned himself to emotions or impulses, or let his imagination *run away* uncontrolled, the result could be disastrous for his writing. Sir Richard Blackmore observed in his “Essay on Epick Poetry” (in *-Essays upon Various Subjects*) that the writers of old romances “were seized with an irregular Poetic phrenzy, and having Decency and Probability in Contempt, fill’d the world with endless Absurdities.” Swift in “Letter to a Young Clergyman” expresses his distrust of the passionate eloquence of a particular preacher. “I do not see,” says he, “how this talent of moving the passions can be of any great use towards directing Christian men in the conduct of their lives.”

In Section IX of *Tale of a Tub* he scarifies the Puritan enthusiasm by representing it as wind. Likewise, the Earl of Shaftesbury in his *Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* (1708) lashes, religious enthusiasm and fanaticism.

Jonathan Swift's works are a monstrous satire on humanity. Swift, who hated all shams, wrote, with a great show of learning famous **Bickerstaff Almanac** containing "Predictions for the year 1708 was determined by the emerging states," which first brought siff into prominence This work appeared under the pseudonym of Isaac Bickerstaff was pre-eminently focus because of his satiric worlds. Ligaments any case of hypocrisy or by notice, he sets up a remedy which is atrocious, and defuse his plan with such seriousness that the satire overwhelms the readers with a sense of monstrous falsity. Swift's two greatest satires are *A Tale of a Tub* and *Gulliver's Travels*. *The Tale* began as a grim exposure of the alleged weaknesses of three principle forms of religion beliefs, catholic, Lutheran and Christin as opposed to the Anglican; put it ended in a satire upon all science and philosophy. In *Gulliver's Travels* the practice grows more unbearable strangely enough, this book upon which swifts' literary fame generally rests, was not written from any literary motive, but rather as an outlet of the author's own bitterness, against fate and human society.

Like Swift, Joseph Addison despised shams, but unlike him he never lost faith in humanity; and in all his satires, these is a gentle kindness which makes one think letter of his fellowmen even when he laughs at their little vanities. Addison stripped off the mask of vice, so much upheld by restoration literature, to show its ugliness and deformity; put to reveal virtue in its own notice loveliness was Addison's main purpose. Further prompted and aided by the more original genius of his friend Steele, Addison seeds upon the new social life of the clubs and made it the subject of endless pleasant essays upon types of men and manners. His journals *The Tatler* and *The*

Spectator are the beginnings of the Coverley essay; and their studies of human character as exemplified in Sir Roger – De – Coverley, are a preparation for the modern novel. The most enduring of Addison's works are Essays collected from *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. To an age of fundamental coarseness and artificiality his essays came with a wholesome message of refinement and simplicity. He attaches all the little varieties and all the big circles of his time not in substantial way, but with a finally ridicule and a gently humour which appears.

His *Essays* are the best picture we possess of the new social life of England; they advanced the art of literary criticism to a much higher stage than it had ever reached before; they certainly led English men to a better knowledge and appreciation of their own literature; and finally they gave us characters that live forever as part of that goodly company which extends from Chaucer's county power to Kipling's works. Addison and Steele not only introduce the modern essay but their character forfeiture, they herald the dawn of the modern novel.

Steele was a rollicking, good – hearted, emotional, lovable Irishman. He was one of the few winters of his time who showed a sincere and unswerving respect for womanhood. Even more than Addison, he ridicules irks and makes pursue lovely. He was the origination of *The Tatler* and journeyed with Addison in creating *The Spectator* – the two periodicals which did more to influence the subsequent literature than all the magazines of the century complied. Steele was the original genius of Sir Roger and of many other characters and essays for which Addison usually received the whole credit. But the majority of the cities hold that the more original parts the characters, the overflowing kindness, are largely Steele's creation while Addison polished and perfected the essays.

Dr. Johnson was probably the most significant intellectual stalwart of the time. His **Dictionary** and his *Lives of the Poets* are worthy to be remembered through both of these are valuable not as literature, but rather as a study of literature. The **Dictionary** as the first ambitious attempt at the English lexicon is extremely valuable, notwithstanding the fact that some of his derivations are incorrect. Lives of the poets are the simplest and the most readable of his literary works. As criticisms they are often misleading, giving undue praise to artificial poets like Pope and abundant injustice to nobler poets like Milton, but as biographies, they are excellent reading, and we owe to them some of the best power picture of the early English poets. *Bowell's Life of Johnson* was one of the most famous prose works of the century. It is an immortal work where, like the Greek – sculptures the little slaves produced the more enduring work than the Greek – masters.

Burke is famous for his best known political speeches “on conciliation with America, “American Taxation’, ‘The impeachment of Warren Hastings’ and also for his famous book of prose **Reflection on the French Revolution** which are still much studied as models of English prose. Characteristic of the classic age, they abound in fine rhetoric but lack simplicity. But his works reveal the stateliness and the rhetorical power of the English language and because of the poetic prose so rich in images and symbols and the musical cadence of his sentences, and also because of his profound sympathy for humanity and his purpose to establish the truth, Burke won a significant place in the History of English literature.

Only Edward Gibbon remains to be mentioned, His famous prose work is a historical treatise, entitled. *The Decline and Fall of Roman Empire* spanning Roman history from 98 A.D to 1453 A.D. It gains little recognition because of his imposing style characterizing by the sinuous roll of his majestic sentences. Gibbon's style has been

characterized as finished, elegant, splendid, rounded, massive, sonorous, elaborate, ornate, exhaustive etc.

The flourish of prose in the 18th century like a tune is also evident in the rise of novel, brought into vogue by Richardson, Fielding, Smollett and Sterne. But since the novel is a distinct literary genre a discussion on the 18th century novels remain outside the scope of this essay. As a whole it can safely be concluded that because of the growing tendency of prose in the contemporary satires and periodicals, essays which catered to the public tastes increasingly the 18th century lonely triumphs in prose literature.