

Neoclassical Literature

Neoclassical literature was written between 1660 and 1798. This time period is broken down into three parts: the **Restoration period**, the **Augustan period**, and the **Age of Johnson**.

Writers of the Neoclassical period tried to imitate the style of the Romans and Greeks. Thus the combination of the terms 'neo,' which means 'new,' and 'classical,' as in the day of the Roman and Greek classics. This was also the era of The Enlightenment, which emphasized logic and reason. It was preceded by The Renaissance and followed by the Romantic era. In fact, the Neoclassical period ended in 1798 when Wordsworth published the Romantic 'Lyrical Ballads'.

Neoclassical Era

Understanding the **Neoclassical era** helps us better understand its literature. This was a time of comfortableness in England. People would meet at coffee houses to chat about politics, among other topics, and sometimes drink a new, warm beverage made of chocolate! It was also the beginning of the British tradition of drinking afternoon tea. And it was the starting point of the middle class, and because of that, more people were literate.

People were very interested in appearances, but not necessarily in being genuine. Men and women commonly wore wigs, and being clever and witty was in vogue. Having good manners and doing the right thing, particularly in public, was essential. It was a time, too, of British political upheaval as eight monarchs took the throne.

The English Neoclassical movement, predicated upon and derived from both classical and contemporary French models, (see Boileau's *L'Art Poétique* (1674) and Pope's "Essay on Criticism" (1711) as critical statements of Neoclassical principles) embodied a group of attitudes toward art and human existence — ideals of order, logic, restraint, accuracy, "correctness," "restraint," decorum, and so on, which would enable the practitioners of various arts to imitate or reproduce the structures and themes of Greek or Roman originals. Though its origins were much earlier (the Elizabethan Ben Jonson, for example, was as indebted to the Roman poet Horace as [Alexander Pope](#) would later be), Neoclassicism dominated English literature from the Restoration in 1660 until the end of the eighteenth century, when the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) by [Wordsworth](#) and [Coleridge](#) marked the full emergence of Romanticism.

For the sake of convenience the Neoclassic period can be divided into three relatively coherent parts: the Restoration Age (1660-1700), in which Milton, Bunyan, and Dryden were the dominant influences; the Augustan Age (1700-1750), in which Pope was the central poetic figure, while Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett were presiding over the sophistication of the novel; and the Age of Johnson (1750-1798), which, while it was dominated and characterized by the mind and personality of the inimitable Dr. Samuel Johnson, whose sympathies were with the fading Augustan past, saw the beginnings of a new understanding and appreciation of the work of Shakespeare, the development, by Sterne and others, of the novel of sensibility, and the emergence of the Gothic school — attitudes which, in the context of the development of a cult of Nature, the influence of German romantic thought, religious tendencies like the rise of

[Methodism](#), and political events like the American and [French revolutions](#) — established the intellectual and emotional foundations of English Romanticism.

To a certain extent Neoclassicism represented a reaction against the optimistic, exuberant, and enthusiastic Renaissance view of man as a being fundamentally good and possessed of an infinite potential for spiritual and intellectual growth. Neoclassical theorists, by contrast, saw man as an imperfect being, inherently sinful, whose potential was limited. They replaced the Renaissance emphasis on the imagination, on invention and experimentation, and on mysticism with an emphasis on order and reason, on restraint, on common sense, and on religious, political, economic and philosophical conservatism. They maintained that man himself was the most appropriate subject of art, and saw art itself as essentially pragmatic — as valuable because it was somehow useful — and as something which was properly intellectual rather than emotional.

Hence their emphasis on proper subject matter; and hence their attempts to subordinate details to an overall design, to employ in their work concepts like symmetry, proportion, unity, harmony, and grace, which would facilitate the process of delighting, instructing, educating, and correcting the social animal which they believed man to be. Their favorite prose literary forms were the essay, the letter, the satire, the parody, the burlesque, and the moral fable; in poetry, the favorite verse form was the rhymed couplet, which reached its greatest sophistication in heroic couplet of Pope; while the theatre saw the development of the heroic drama, the melodrama, the sentimental comedy, and the comedy of manners. The fading away of Neoclassicism may have appeared to represent the last flicker of the Enlightenment, but artistic movements never really die: many of the primary aesthetic tenets of Neoclassicism, in fact have reappeared in the twentieth century — in, for example, the poetry and criticism of T. S. Eliot — as manifestations of a reaction against Romanticism itself: Eliot saw Neo-classicism as emphasising poetic form and conscious craftsmanship, and Romanticism as a poetics of personal emotion and "inspiration," and pointedly preferred the former.

Neoclassicism (also spelled **Neo-classicism**; from [Greek](#) νέος *nèos*, "new" and [Greek](#) κλασικός *klasikós*, "of the highest rank")^[1] 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](#). Neoclassicism was born in [Rome](#) largely thanks to the writings of [Johann Joachim Winckelmann](#), at the time of the rediscovery of [Pompeii](#) and [Herculaneum](#), but its popularity spread all over Europe as a generation of European art students finished their [Grand Tour](#) and returned from Italy to their home countries with newly rediscovered Greco-Roman ideals.^{[2][3]} The main Neoclassical movement coincided with the 18th-century [Age of Enlightenment](#), and continued into the early 19th century, laterally competing with [Romanticism](#). In architecture, the style continued throughout the 19th, 20th and up to the 21st century.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoclassicism>

<http://www.victorianweb.org/previctorian/nc/ncintro.html>