Introductory Lecture on the Neoclassical Period in English Literature

Key terms: Restoration, 18th Century, Neoclassical, Augustan, Enlightenment
façade, complacency, wit, reason, decorum, self-examination, self-publicizing
diary, prose essay, periodical, ode, satire, novel
Tory, Whig, non-conformist
politeness, taste, self-control

The names given to this period are confusing: Restoration, 18th Century, Neoclassical, Augustan. Chronologically the period covers from 1660 to around 1800 (usual date is 1798, publication date of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*). It is a period where counterfeiting and façades are very important; in some ways the country was trying to act like the Interregnum and English civil wars had not happened, and there is both a willful suppression of the immediate past and a glorification of the more distant, classical Roman past--which is why it is called the **Neoclassical** period. It is also a period of conscious self-awareness—people looked at themselves and kept asking "Am I playing my role correctly?" After the Great Fire of London, too, they had the chance to totally reinvent their capital and did so in a way that let them mask their past. You need to understand the politics, sociology, and economics of the period if you want to understand its literature.

The first monarch of the period is Charles II. He personifies the fictions and façades of the age. He professed to support the Church of England but was secretly Roman Catholic. In public he professed loyalty to his childless queen Henrietta but in public had a series of mistresses, several of whom bore him bastard children (one of whom Charles would make Duke of Monmouth). He was both an intellectual and a boor. The façade of saying one thing and doing another was a major challenge in the period. After the religious Puritan revolution, most Britons were terrified of another religious takeover of government; the rumors about Charles' Catholicism, complicated by the Titus Oates plot of 1678, led to fears of a Catholic conspiracy and eventually to the 1680 Bill of Exclusion and the 1700 Act of Settlement which permanently prohibited a Catholic from taking the throne of England. (It is still in force today.) When James II inherited his brother's throne and made moves toward imposing Catholic tolerance and Catholic ministers on England, the government rebelled and imported James' stolid Protestant son-in-law, William, from Holland. William and Mary took the throne jointly in the "glorious revolution" of 1688; they were succeeded by Mary's sister Anne, and then eventually by distant German relatives from Hanover. George I was actually 52nd in line to the throne by blood, but the closest male Protestant relative, so he became king on childless Anne's death.

Political and Economic Complications

This was a time of civil profitability and military unrest. Britain was involved in a series of commercial wars against the Dutch, French, Austrians, Spanish, and eventually its own American colonists over the lucrative trade opportunities with the New World and with the South

Seas. The Restoration is the time of the great privateer/pirate trade and the celebration of British naval supremacy. Like the dot.com boom of the late twentieth century, the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were a time of sudden new wealth based on the beginnings of the stock exchange, of pyramid investment schemes like the South Sea Bubble, and all the accompanying commercialism and materialism that accompany new-found affluence. It is the time of party politics: the Tories, representing old landed wealth, conservatism, and the House of Lords, vs. the Whigs, representing fortunes made in trade, the City, and expansionist beliefs.

> It was the age of the Almighty Pound. Economics were the justification for participating in the Afro-Caribbean slave trade, colonialist expansion into India and eventually Australia and the Far East, and the enclosure of public grazing lands and anti-poaching laws in communal forests. It's in this period that "Rule, Brittania!" becomes both the anthem and unofficial motto of the realm. Britain is shifting from a kingdom to an empire, and that shift had its costs.

The monarchic succession had one major consequence that is still felt. Anne was a relatively weak ruler, and she was succeeded by a distant cousin who didn't even speak English. As a result, the Prime Minister's position grew increasingly important. Robert Walpole officially received the title in 1721 but had held the position for years before—his attitude is best summed up by his quotation about Parliament, "All those men have their price." A shrewd manipulator, he was the ultimate Whig politician. The interests of the new wealthy classes were his chief concern. He actually tried to keep Britain out of wars because it was bad for business—but when British trade interests were attacked, he mobilized the country for war. He was succeeded in the position by a series of notable Whigs, including Pitt the Elder and Pitt the Younger, who successfully pursued a policy of valorizing the moneyed classes.

There were a few voices of social reform in the later parts of the period: John Wilkes, champion of voting rights for commoners and of abolition; Mary Wollstonecraft, an early advocate of the rights of women; John Cobbett, a proto-Marxist economic reformer; and John Wesley, supporter of evangelical Methodism. They attempted to question the moral complacency of the Whig age, but with inconsistent success.

The Age of Complacency

If there is one word besides 'façade' that describes the Neoclassical period, it is 'complacency.' This was an age where comfort was celebrated. The British felt relatively invincible politically, which led to an assumption of their moral and intellectual supremacy. It is the age of the rise of the Middle Class. They were obsessed with proving they had 'good taste'. Gentlemen flocked to coffee houses in the City of London to discuss the latest periodicals, while ladies organized elaborate rituals for drinking that expensive, bitter new imported beverage, chocolate. (Taking 'tea' in the afternoon was not introduced until 1840 by Anna, Duchess of Bedford; it was way too expensive to drink every day.) It is an age of conspicuous consumption; Martha Stewart would have felt right at home. For the first time periodicals are filled with advertisements for home decorations, fashions, and furniture. Architecture enters the Baroque period. It becomes very important to wear clothing by the best designers, to have your hair done by the best hairdressers, and so on, and so forth. People whose parents were servants now had servants themselves.

The age of complacency is marked by a significant rise in literacy, because for the first time, the Middle Class had time for leisure and wanted entertainments to fill it. This is the age of the rise of the newspaper and the periodical, the return of the public theatre, and the birth of the novel. People read in reading circles—early book clubs—and men flocked to coffee houses to debate the essays in that week's fashionable periodical. Seeing and being seen was important—this is the time when the daily late afternoon "promenade" in St. James' Park became the society 'thing to do' and everyone read the Court Circular to see what was going on in the fashionable world. Theatres moved from the slums of Southwark to the fashionable West End of London, near Covent Garden (where they still remain). 'Revisers' and 'editors' like Nahum Tate took it upon themselves to make earlier works of literature more "suited to the taste" of 18th century audiences; for instance, Tate rewrote *King Lear, Othello,* and *Hamlet* to have happy endings.

The Age of Wit

This is an age where verbal skill and brilliant verbal repartee counted. None of that shouting and lack of decorum—this was the age of polished debate and clever talking. One of the key words for the entire period is **wit**, and you should watch it wherever it pops up because it is crucial to understanding the period. Not only upper-class courtiers were expected to show this descendant of *sprezzatura*; now everyone with money was supposed to be verbally talented. So you sent your sons on the Grand Tour of Europe to give them polish, while you taught your daughters just enough French and Italian words to drop into their conversation to make them seem sophisticated. Façades again. Not coincidentally, this age of wit is also the time when

formal study of the English language gains impetus—it's the time of grammar books, histories of the language, and above all dictionaries—so you wouldn't use words improperly. Grammar rules like *shall/will* and the prohibition of *I* show up in the grammar books for the first time in this period. Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* is in some ways the most representative work of the period. (Mind you, these early language analysts weren't always good at it; for instance, John Dryden thought Chaucer was incompetent because his iambic pentameter lines didn't always have 10 syllables. Dryden couldn't figure out that the final –e had been pronounced in Chaucer's time.)

Age of Marketing

The commercialism and the promotion of Whig interests led to the invention, really, of marketing. The early periodicals are filled with advertisements like "Mr. Philips has received a load of China silk that will interest ladies of most discriminating taste" and the like. One of the biggest things in newspapers was the daily or weekly list of arriving ships and their cargoes—people wanted to know what new things had come in and would be for sale. The early ancestors of *People* magazine and the society pages show up in the Court Circular (still published in the London *Times)* and the lists of marriages and birth announcements. (Remember: marriage was an economic transaction; who married whom affected where the money went.) You could buy a title if you were a wealthy enough Whig in favor with the government, and this is the age where the snobbery against "marrying a Cit" begins (see *Pride and Prejudice*). New professions spring up in this period: hairdressers, fashion designers, boot makers, dancing masters, professional portrait painters, etc. Everybody wanted to look 'right', act 'right,' and have a house that looked 'right.' They hired landscape architects like Capability Brown to redo their houses and grounds, and often tore down structures, built artificial ruins, dug new lakes and rerouted streams to make their views more **picturesque** and therefore more pleasing to the eye and mind. And they bought what would give them that look. Longman p. 1050 quotes a line from the **Spectator** that is very important: "The man of polite imagination is let into a great many pleasures that the vulgar are not capable of receiving."

Politeness, Decorum, and Moral Instruction

The emphasis on looking right and acting right meant that this was an age of **decorum**. Great value was placed on manners, on virtues like self-control and self-governance, and above all on **balance**—what Chaucer would have called ***mesure***. One was not supposed to rebel or act out or be outrageous; one was supposed to show control. At the same time, there was a certain guilty pleasure in outbursts; it is common to find the expression "I could not forebear to…" or "I surrendered to…." in writing. But politeness counts, as does pithy witticism. No more enjambment and blank verse; this is the age of the memorable **end-stopped heroic couplet**. You'll be surprised at how many clichés you know come from this period (like "To err is human,

to forgive divine"). So literature takes a decidedly **pedantic** and **pedagogic** bent in this period—it meant to show its readers how to go on, how to think, talk, behave, and interact in the world. Writers viewed themselves as shapers of Taste, and took the responsibility very very seriously.

Men and Women

This was an age when there was an acceptability, even a requirement, for self-publicizing. They saw this not as conceit but as self-awareness and believed that self-examination was a requirement for the morally correct person. It's the age of diaries, of published collections of letters, and of other reflections on the self. Pope announced that "the proper study of man is mankind" and really meant it. (See the really excellent paragraph in Longman in the middle of p. 1056.) Women were expected to do this as well, and this is the first period where women writers were able to publish under their own names and gain some acceptance at it—a few women writers were even able to earn their livings as professional writers. But women were certainly not encouraged to be rebellious or independent. Their novels show women defying convention—but generally to win the husband they wanted. They still had no independent legal existence; they remain (and are codified in Blackstone) as legal chattels of husband or father. Their sphere of power was the home, where they were mistress of the house. It is in this period that the term "domestic arts" begins to be used for a woman's duties. It's also the first period where we see guidebooks for parents, children's literature, and manuals on how to run households. Education for women remained as it had been since the later Middle Ages—girls learned enough reading and writing and math to run a household, were encouraged to read novels and periodicals, but the schools and universities remained a male preserve.

Rationality and Faith

Some people might believe that an Age of Reason would be an age where religious faith was not important, but this was not the case. One of the chief reasons for founding the Royal Society was an attempt to use science to explain and glorify the wonders of Divine creation, according to its charter. This is the first great age of scientific instrumentation—accurate clocks, the reckoning of longitude, the refinement of the microscope and the telescope—and all were put to work to explain the marvels of the universe. The New Science was seen as explaining to man for the first time *how* God worked—one common image was of God as a kind of Divine Clockmaker, setting all things in order to run perfectly. (A late version of this image is William Blake's picture of God with the compasses creating the universe.)

This was an age when people were obsessed with *how* the world worked. Newton's work on gravity led them to believe that God's work could be described in mathematical terms. For the first time, they believed that rational explanations could back up faith—i.e. that reason supported belief. It's the age of the study of anatomy and of dissection; autopsies were public spectacles, and medical schools and hospitals built operating *theaters*, a term that is still used, because they assumed there would be an audience to watch the experts work. Mathematics was used to explain many of the workings of the world. In this age, one of the most celebrated occupations was to be a *virtuoso*—not a scholar but a lay person who studied how the world worked, kept interesting items on display in his house (Pepys had a mahogany case built to display his gallstones), and so on. There is a connection between *virtuoso* and *virtue*—to study the science of God's creation was a mark of moral excellence. A famous comment about being a virtuoso is this last line from a letter written by Frederick the Great of Prussia, c. 1740: "Adieu! I must now write to the king of France, compose a solo for flute, make up a poem for Voltaire, alter some army regulations, and do a thousand things!" That's what you could call a day's work!

At the same time the façade of piety grew thicker. Going to church became as much a social as pious act. One wanted to go to the right church; St. Georges' Hanover Square in London was *the* most fashionable one to be married in. Architects like Christopher Wren were hired to rebuild churches to make them more fashionable. The Church of England dominates but there were Toleration Acts and Methodism was popular, especially in rural areas and among the poor.

The Marketplace of Literacy

All these changes meant profound changes for literature. The emphasis on self-reflection meant that genres like diaries, letters, and essays were more popular—and often read alone, in a separate reading room or 'closet' within the home. At the same time the new social fluidity meant that genres like the newspaper and periodical, the novel, the popular ballad, and the theatre would also find widespread public audiences. It is the age of the **penny dreadful** and the **lending library. Journalism** becomes a power for the first time, and Fleet Street, where most of

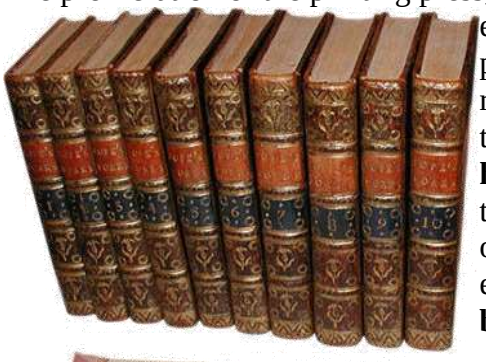
the journalists lived (near the major debtor's prison and the courthouses—where the news took place), became a powerful center of the City.

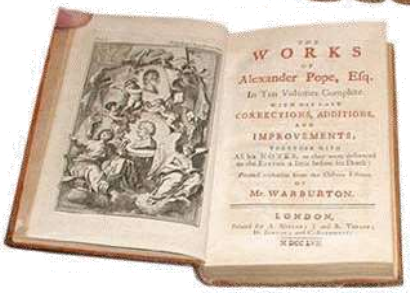
The battles between Whigs and Tories were played out in literature—it was probably the most significant age for literature influencing politics in English literary history. Well-educated Tories like Swift, Pope, and Dryden turned to Horatian and Juvenalian satire, to odes, and to mock-epics to skewer Whig political stances. Translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were used to lampoon Walpole's actions. The satires became objects of aesthetic admiration even as they were wielded as trenchant political weapons. Swift's *A Modest Proposal* is the ultimate example—it is such a superb piece of artistry that it almost masks the depth of the pain it reacts against.

In literature this is an age of **conversation**—the novel, for instance, begins with **epistolary** form, as a story told in a collection of letters. But it is also enhanced by self-reflection—*Robinson Crusoe* is the first-person diary of a supposed shipwreck survivor, turned into fiction. Poets performed these conversations in many ways: in **miscellanies** and **commonplace books** and **anthologies**; and especially in **imitations**—homages paid by trying to use and reflect the forms of the past and outdo them in the present. This wasn't seen as plagiarism but as doing the past honor—the phrase "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery" comes from this period. It is also the age of the invention of copyright with the Statute of Anne in 1710, and the beginning of the age of the footnote.

The concept of wit affects the literary style in many ways. The most significant is its effect on verse form: blank verse and enjambment take a back seat in most writers to the **heroic couplet**, the rhymed, end-stopped couplet of iambic pentameter. The greatest writers ever to use the form worked in this period, and cultivated this style to show an easy grace, a naturalness of expression, and a pithiness of content—i.e. *sprezzatura* again. In prose, the Royal Society dominated taste with its emphasis on a "plain style" of expression, third-person objectivity, grammatical parallelism and correctness, and a direct address to the reader. The theatre is full of artifice and artificiality—and for the first time, women are permitted to act on the public stage.

The proliferation of the printing press, the cheapness of paper, and the rise of literacy and economic status meant that many more people could participate in reading. Literary forms that appealed to wide range of classes were developed in this period, and we get the beginnings of **literary snobbery**. Swift coins the terms **high-brow** and **low-brow** to reflect the kinds of reading taste he saw developing, and those prejudices remain into our day. It is the first great age of **literary criticism**, where essays on the virtues (and weaknesses) of authors and **biographies** of major figures begin to dominate.





So you can see where this is a complex age, a difficult age, but a rewarding one to study. In many ways it shaped the literary tastes and values that we have up to the present day.

http://faculty.winthrop.edu/kosterj/engl201/neoclassical.htm