

18th Century Literature

Background

Eighteenth-century Britain did not have a representative democracy. Parliament was controlled by people with wealth and influence. Power was a matter of money and connections, not popularity with the voters.

Neoclassicism

The English Neoclassical movement embodied a group of attitudes toward art and human existence - ideals of order, logic, restraint, accuracy, "correctness," and so on, which would enable artists and writers to imitate or reproduce the structures and themes of Greek or Roman originals. Though its origins were much earlier, Neoclassicism dominated English literature from the Restoration in 1660 until the end of the eighteenth century, when the publication of Lyrical Ballads (1798) by the poets Wordsworth and Coleridge marked the full emergence of Romanticism.

For the sake of convenience the Neoclassic period can be divided into three parts: the **Restoration Age** (1660-1700), the **Augustan Age** (1700-1750), and the **Age of Johnson** (1750-1798).

To a certain extent Neoclassicism represented a reaction against the optimistic and enthusiastic Renaissance view of man as a being fundamentally good and having an infinite potential for spiritual and intellectual growth. Neoclassical theorists, by contrast, saw man as an imperfect being, basically 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 valuable because it was somehow useful--and as something which should be 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.