

The Augustan Age (1700–1790)

By Gerhard Richard Lomer (1882–1970)

Introduction

The period to which we now come and which covers roughly nearly the whole of the eighteenth century is variously called the Age of Queen Anne, the Age of Pope, the Augustan Age, the Classical Period, or merely the Eighteenth Century. Whatever name is used, however, the fundamental characteristics of the time remain the same. It is a period of the ascendancy of Reason, of the rule of the Intellect in literature. The great passions of the Elizabethans had died out and the turbulence of Romanticism had not yet begun to make itself felt. Goodness and warmth of heart were replaced by polish of manner and by brilliance of expression. It was the age, *par excellence*, of “Wit”—and wit of a destructive and unsocial nature, strongly contrasted with the broad good-humored toleration of Chaucer or the deep sympathetic comprehension of Shakespeare.

Each age has its outstanding characteristic which dwarfs the other aspects of the time. It is perhaps not unjust to say that the most obvious trait in English national life at the death of Swift, and that trait which makes this period one of the least constructive in the history of English literature, was cynicism. This was an age that lacked ideals. It had no vision and no poet’s dream. It had no soul.

But if the period has been described as rotten to the core, it had a life that possessed a superficial color and attractiveness. It was a picturesque age; and picturesqueness has always had its devotees. Certainly the life of London had its charm, and it is a charm which we cannot easily pass by. It calls to us from the coffee-house in the undying pages of Steele and Addison, with their echoes of immortal talk and the memory of the goodly company of Sir Roger de Coverley and his fellow-clubmen; it catches our eye in the pages of the diaries of the day where the self-satisfied but likable Mr. Pepys in his new plum-colored waistcoat struts with his wife in her new brocade; it captivates us at the tea-table or in the boudoir, where the mock-heroic nymphs and heroes of an unheroic age turn aside the darts of love with the flirt of a bejewelled fan or a lace handkerchief. It is an age of candlelight rather than of sunshine, of satin instead of homespun, of snuff instead of the fragrant wayside flower.

This age was not one, however, that could comprehend the poetry of sunburned toil in the open. We must wait until we come to Burns before we can find an understanding of the field-mouse, the daisy, or the cotter's Saturday night. The restoration of the Stuart dynasty had not been an unmixed benefit to English society. It had come at a moment when a certain part of English society had too long been repressed by the sternness of the Puritan régime. The pendulum now swung in the other direction, and the weight of court manners added to the momentum. The reaction which was introduced can hardly be said to have been a salutary one. The reigns of the first three Georges substituted for the French elasticity of moral conscience and vicious picturesqueness a Teutonic coarseness of morality which had not even imagination to make it pleasing nor delicacy to give it manners. Small wonder then, if the Early Victorians reacted violently and sought the conservative extreme of prudery.

Both the intellectual and the social life of the century were affected. The old theological beliefs were giving way under the effective criticism of philosophic concepts which men like Voltaire in France and Hume in England were directing at human thought. The Established Church had become the instrument of aristocracy, and preferment was a matter of patronage. Orthodox worship had so failed in its function that Bunyan felt himself called to lead spiritual pilgrims through the slough of despond of English life to the Celestial City, and Whitfield and the Wesleys began to infuse new spiritual vitality into the common people.

Where there is no vision, the people perish; and the case is not otherwise with literature. Upon one who reads only the fashionable fiction or drama of that day, the conviction is gradually forced that apparently all the men and women are engrossed in the royal game of seduction and that the men usually win. The middle name of any gallant of the time might have been Juan or Lothario. Even the genial Goldsmith must add this last indignity to the sufferings of his beloved Vicar, upon whom outrageous fate and a too-simple mind heap misfortunes that by contrast make Job seem almost to dwell in comfort. It strikes us as a marked indication of how taste changes that these books were regarded in their day as aids to virtuous living. To-day 'Tom Jones' has been barred from at least one public library as unfit for general reading, and books which in the eighteenth century were read aloud in the family circle to combine edification with amusement are now frequently relegated to the obscurity of the attic or to the innocuous altitude of shelves that children cannot reach.

The daily life of the eighteenth century throws light upon the literature of the time. If the novels are little more than novels of roguery, somewhat gilded and delicately perfumed, it is because the people of the day are themselves rogues, though charming and well-groomed and with a veneer of fine manner which at first glance deceives the inexpert. Gambling is one of the commonest amusements of a day in which even a minister of Parliament keeps a faro bank and in which entire well-known families have a concerted system for cheating at cards. Drunkenness is a fashionable accomplishment rather than a vice, and even Pitt is reported to have seen two Speakers in the House. The aristocracy of the day delighted in bull-fights, in cock-fights, and in prize-fights. The men who could not themselves fight obtained a keen, if vicarious, delight from a spectacle that was but the proof of their own degradation. The story of the valetudinarian bed-ridden noble who had a cock-fight staged in his bedroom is one that is only too sad a commentary upon those who sat in the seats of the mighty. One must not forget, however, that the middle class, with its more restricted opportunities and with less of the ennui of unemployment, kept the main current of English life steady and quietly progressive. We shall see that as the life of the cities became more and more exhausted, the life of the country began to assert itself towards the end of this period in the movement known as Naturalism, which was the harbinger of the great romantic outburst that indicated the renaissance of English literary life.

It was the city, however, and particularly London which at this day was the centre of literary activity. But it was a London very different from that which we know. The streets were both filthy and precarious. Gin made men brutal and quarrelsome. Robbery and murder were frequent. The lawless bands of "Mohawks" terrorized whole sections of London town. In 1751 we find Horace Walpole writing that "one is forced to travel, even at noon, as if one were going to battle." It was an age of petty crime. On one day alone seventeen persons were executed in London. It was also an age of notorious criminals, and though the echo of such names as Dick Turpin, Jack Shepherd, Jonathan Wild, and McLean of St. James Street, is drowned by the noise of the exploits of the automobile bandit and the high-financier of to-day, they made their picturesque contribution to criminal literature in the illiterate "ballads" and histories of the day. If the nurseries of that age were responsible for the character of the aristocrats, we need hardly be surprised that the prisons were the schools in which most of the criminals of the time perfected their training. Men, women, and children were imprisoned together, and, in a moral atmosphere in which every better impulse soon suffocated, they smoked, drank, and gambled in rooms that reeked with filth and swarmed

with vermin. We have to wait until the Victorian Age for the public consciousness to become awake to these conditions and for the public conscience to be aroused by them.

Hogarth's prints reveal to us all the tawdry gentility, the ugly superficiality of his age. Willingly would we believe them to be gross exaggeration, did not history and literature vouch for the truth of the testimony of their sister art. But we turn aside from the "Rake's Progress" through the art of the day only to find the rake continuing his miserable course through social life, upon the stage, and in the novels of the time. It is only when we come to Thomas Gray that we begin to hear "the short and simple annals of the poor," and that we begin to hope for the new era when men will think less of "the boast of heraldry, the pomp of power" and will begin to understand and preach that

"The pith of sense, an' pride o' worth
Are higher rank than a' that."

But such a conception of the wideness and depth of human nature and of human ideals does not come until the Romantic Movement begins the next great revolution in English letters.

Though it was not a moral or a sympathetic age, the eighteenth century had nevertheless certain qualities of intellect which had their part in the development of English literature. Its contribution of great poetry is small, partly because it lacked that unselfconsciousness, that entire forgetfulness of the individual, that quality of free surrender to a deep emotion or a high ideal which has always characterized great poetry; partly because its ear was not yet tuned to those finer, subtler, and loftier melodies of which English speech is susceptible. The ear which can listen to the continual flow of the heroic couplet and which feels no burst of impatience at its terse, epigrammatic monotony is not the ear that could imagine the unheard melodies of the singers of the age to come. They who loved "nature methodized," who made conservatism an ideal and conformity a passion, would have small use for "things unattempted yet" in the rhythmic speech of passion.

It is in prose, therefore, that we must look for the chief literary excellence of the age. Reason, clear thinking, elegance of expression, and worldly wisdom—all these the eighteenth century had, and all these are included in the term "Wit" which compactly describes both the ideal of the age and its standard of criticism.

At their worst the critics of the time are finicky, meticulous, intolerant; at their best, they are clear and accurate in their thought, and direct and polished in their expression. It was not, like Shakespeare's day, a period of emotion, but it was an age of reason. Lucid and logical thought these writers had because they were untroubled by the great disturbing passions that are the adventures of the soul, and lucid and logical thought came to be more desired than the fine frenzy of inspiration. Sophistication, finish, polish, the ability to turn into a fine phrase "what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed," the readiness to produce "le mot juste" with all the precise nonchalance of the literary prestidigitator—these were the qualities in which the writers of the day delighted to exercise themselves.

At the same time they cultivated a snobbish intolerance for what seemed to them vulgar, crude, homely, unrestrained, middle-class, or boorish. On the continent the attempt had been made, first informally in the salons and then with great dignity in the French Academy, to standardize the language of France, to codify speech, to organize it almost according to class distinctions. In England, Johnson by the publication of his 'Dictionary' did for his generation what Chaucer, in a different way, had done for his day, and the literary circles that met in the coffee-houses and the literary dictators who had their little day, however else they disagreed, all combined to make the English language an efficient instrument for the clear expression of accurate thought on a somewhat restricted group of subjects.

The London coffee-house was one of the ultimate results of Tudor exploration. The use of coffee, tea, chocolate, and tobacco grew in popularity until they became a sort of national institution. They had been to the Elizabethans part and parcel of the wonders of distant lands. To the Londoner of the eighteenth century they became necessities. The coffee-house firmly established itself in the masculine social life of the day. It was a club with a moderate fee; it provided congenial company; and the aroma of coffee and the fumes of tobacco combined to make wit and reason vie with one another in a congenial society which was elastic enough to include the academic and the bohemian. It has been stated that by the first decade of the eighteenth century there were almost three thousand coffee-houses in the city of London, and a French traveler who visited the country at this time says that in the coffee-houses "you have all manner of news; you have a good fire, where you may sit as long as you please; you have a dish of coffee, you meet your friends for the transaction of business, and all for a penny, if you don't care to spend more."

In the literary gatherings and in the discussions that inevitably sprang up in such half-professional, half-artistic groups, the rôle of leader was assumed by the stoutest intellect or the loudest tongue. Dryden, Pope, Johnson, and many others held the throne in succession in this little kingdom of English letters, and therein developed independence of thought, dogmatism of opinion, and even arrogance of speech.

As time went on, men of like taste congregated in certain coffee-houses—a fact of which Steele made use in the advertisement in the first number of ‘The Tatler’ (April 12, 1709):

“All accounts of gallantry, pleasure, and entertainment shall be under the article of White’s Chocolate-house; poetry, under that of Will’s Coffee-house; learning, under the title of Grecian; foreign and domestic news you will have from Saint-James’s Coffee-house; and what else I have to offer on any other subject shall be dated from my own apartment.”

If the “Bards of Passion and of Mirth” who met at the Mermaid Tavern or who had been the guests of Ben Jonson longed once more to

“Meet at those lyric feasts,
Made at the Sun,
The Dog, the Triple Tun,”

no less did the beaux and Boswells of Pope’s and Johnson’s day enjoy talking or listening at their ease at the Mitre or whatever inn chanced to please their fancy.

Poetry of Pope

The outstanding poet of this period and the one whose name is sometimes used to describe it is Alexander Pope (1688–1744). He sums up in his work all the characteristics of the period. The superficial glitter and high polish of his poetry are the expression in literature of the fine manners and the elaborate dress of the day. There is little of the subjective note in his work, little analysis

of emotion, little interest in the deeper affairs of the heart or in the permanent ideals of life. His poetry is dominated by what has been called the tyranny of the epithet. The exact word, the appropriate phrase, the apt allusion—all of these are ideals thought worthy of striving for. The form of verse at first popular and then universally demanded is that known as the heroic couplet, which, from its very structure, lends itself to the terse expression of the epigram and to clear incisiveness of expression. The former richness of the Elizabethan imagination now degenerates into an elaborate and artificial fancy. The prevalent ideal of “good sense” puts a ban on the so-called extravagance of romantic feeling. Everything must conform to rules; literature is classified; it develops a theory of criticism; it is dominated by the laws of a superficial and uninspired pseudo-classicism; the forms of humanistic poetry are imitated; the classics are adapted; high sounding odes are elaborately constructed. But chief of all there is satire, which in no age in England has reached such a height of effectiveness, such skill of expression, such bitterness of personal vituperation. Leaving aside Pope’s translations and imitations, we find in ‘The Rape of the Lock’ (1712) the epitome of the age with its superficial comedy of manners and its delight in mock-heroic epic. The pseudo-classical machinery, the elaborate combat over the most trivial of offenses, the rather sneering disdain of society—these stand out clearly in this masterpiece of artificiality. Pope’s personal spite is clearly rampant in ‘The Dunciad’ (1728), which is an excellent example of the prevalent bad taste of the day.

Pope’s essays—The ‘Essay on Criticism’ (1711), the ‘Essay on Man’ (1732), and the ‘Moral Essays’ (1731–1735)—help us to form a higher regard for the work of a man who had more intellect than sympathy. The first of these shows clearly the influence of Horace and of Boileau. The Ancients are held up as models; excellence of style or manner of expression is the one thing to be desired; “Nature” is to be followed, but a Nature that is an artificial creation of man. The ‘Essay on Man’ shows the influence of Bolingbroke and is full of neatly turned epigrams in which a superficial and often contradictory philosophy finds brilliant poetical expression.

Chronological Table (1700–1800)

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DATES	EVENTS
1701	Act of Settlement; House of Hanover begins to reign in England
1702–1714	Queen Anne
1704	Marlborough wins the battle of Blenheim
1707	Union of England and Scotland

1713	Peace of Utrecht
1714–1727	George I.
1715	Death of Louis XIV.
1721–1742	Walpole’s Supremacy
1727–1760	George II.
1748	War of Austrian Succession ends with Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle
1756–1763	Seven Years’ War
1759	Wolfe captures Quebec
1763	Peace of Paris
1765	Invention of steam-engine by Watt
1773	“Boston Tea Party”
1775	Beginning of American Revolution
1776	Declaration of American Independence
1785	Cartwright invents his spinning-machine
1787	Impeachment of Warren Hastings
1789	Storming of the Bastille
1793	Execution of Louis XVI.
1794	Fall of Robespierre
1796	Napoleon invades Italy
1798	Nelson wins the battle of the Nile
1799	Death of Washington

Reading Recommended

DATES	AUTHORS
1686–1758	<u>Allan Ramsay</u>
1716–1771	<u>Thomas Gray</u>
1721–1759	<u>William Collins</u>
1731–1800	<u>William Cowper</u>
1736–1796	<u>James Macpherson</u> (Ossianic Poetry)
1752–1770	<u>Thomas Chatterton</u>
1754–1832	<u>George Crabbe</u>
1757–1827	<u>William Blake</u>
1759–1796	<u>Robert Burns</u>