

Neoclassicism

Definition of Neoclassicism

The term Neoclassicism is a combination of two words: *Neo* and *Classic*. The word *neo* has been derived from a Greek word *neo*, which means new, recent, revived, modified, while the word *classic*, according to the Webster Dictionary, refers to the style and works of the ancient authors of Greece and Rome. To combine these words, we get the meaning of *Neoclassicism* as the rebirth and restoration of Classicism. Hence, *Neoclassicism* is the movement in the history of English literature, which laid immense emphasis on revival of the classical spirit. Writers of this period immensely endeavored to follow the footpaths of the writers of the period of Augustus, emperor of Rome, which produced unparalleled writers as Horace, Virgil and Ovid. That is the reason; the age of Pope and Dryden is also called the Augustan Age.

Neoclassical Poetry is a type of poetry, which follows the pattern of poetry authored by the poets of ancient time i.e., Greek and Rome. Pope and Dryden were the leading writers, who deviated from the traditional schools of poetry and sought guidance in the works of ancient Greek and Roman writers.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica:

"Classicism and Neoclassicism, in the arts, historical tradition or aesthetic attitudes based on the art of Greece and Rome in antiquity. In the context of the tradition, Classicism refers either to the art produced in antiquity or to later art inspired by that of antiquity; Neoclassicism always refers to the art produced later but inspired by antiquity. Thus the terms Classicism and Neoclassicism are often used interchangeably."

Neoclassicism flourished roughly between 1660, when the Stuarts returned to the throne, and the 1798 publication of Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads, with its theoretical preface and collection of poems that came to be seen as the

beginning of the Romantic Age. Neoclassicism was also the era of The Enlightenment, which emphasized logic and reason. It was preceded by The Renaissance and followed by the Romantic era.

Stages of Neoclassicism

Regarding English literature, the Neoclassical Age is typically divided into three periods: the Restoration Age (1660-1700), the Augustan Age (1700-1750), and the Age of Johnson (1750-1798).

The Restoration Age

It is called the Restoration Period, as King Charles II restored the monarchy in England in this era. The Restoration Period lasted from 1660-1700. Writers of this age, Dryden and Milton, endeavored to use grand and impressive style, scholarly allusions, and mythology and restrict the intense use of imagination. In the Restoration

Age, in poetry, the classical forms of the heroic couplet and the ode became popular.

The Augustan Age

The Augustan Age is also called the Age of Pope. Pope was the leading poet in this age. Poetry sparkled with the polished couplets of Pope. Mock epic was a common form of verse at that time. The Augustan Age lasted from 1700 to 1750.

The Age of Johnson

The Age of Johnson was a period of transition. It lasted up to 1798, when the Romantic Movement was underway with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge. In the Age of Johnson the greatest literary figure was Johnson himself as poet, critic, novelist, journalist as an embodiment of the ideals of neoclassical period.

Characteristics of Neoclassical Poetry

Adherence to Classical Rules

The neoclassical poets were undoubtedly great adherents of classical rules. They went all-out to revive the Classicism in their poetry by following each and every rule of Classicism. Their highest concern was to adhere to the classical rules and employ them in their poetry as much as possible. That is the reason; neoclassical poetry is also labeled as Pseudo Classical Poetry. Neoclassical poetry tended to be written in a much more elevated manner, using classical models such as epics, odes, and pastorals.

Scholarly Allusions

The neoclassical poets always loved to make use of scholarly allusions in their poetry. As they were all highly educated and well-versed in various fields of studies, they knew a lot about religious, biblical and classical literature. Allusions helped them to convey their message to their

readers effectively and easily. That is why; their poetry is brimming with plentiful allusions to classical writers i.e., Virgil, Horace and Homer. They desired to write in the manner of their classical masters.

The Goddess with a discontented air

Seems to reject him, tho' she grants his pray'r.

A wond'rous Bag with both her hands she binds,

Like that where once Ulysses held the winds.

(Rape of the Lock, Canto IV)

In the above-mentioned lines, the poet has made allusions to Homer's Odyssey.

Rationalism

Rationalism is the most essential feature of neoclassical poetry. Neoclassical poets viewed reason as the mainspring of learning, knowledge and inspiration for their poetry. Neoclassical poetry is a reaction against the renaissance style of poetry. It is a unique outcome of intellect, not fancy

and imagination. Unlike romantic poetry, which is entirely the result of sentiments of the poet, neoclassical poetry is a simulated, fabricated and stereotypical type of poetry. In romantic poetry, sentiments play a vital role in writing of poetry, while in neoclassical poetry; reason and intellect are dominant elements. The neoclassical poets made an effort to disregard imagination, emotion and feelings, while composing their poetry.

Realism

Realism is the hallmark of neoclassical poetry. The neoclassical poets, unlike romantic poets, were not living in their own world of imagination. They were hard realists and they presented the true picture of their society. They didn't turn their eyes from the harsh realities of life. They were keen observers and dwelled upon what they experienced with their open eyes in their poetry. These poets were not escapists like romantic poets, who turned their back to the

harsh realities of life and tried to escape from them with the help of flight of imagination.

Neoclassical poets were men of action and practically lived in the midst of people. That is why; they had a very keen observation of their society. They avoided abstract ideas, imaginative thoughts and idealism in their poetry. Dryden's and Pope's poetry are replete with excellent examples of realism.

**When I consider Life, 'tis all a cheat;
Yet, fooled with hope, men favour the deceit;
Trust on, and think to-morrow will repay:
To-morrow's falser than the former day;
Lies worse; and while it says, we shall be blest
With some new joys, cuts off what we possesst.**

(Aurang Zeb by John Dryden)

Objectivity

Objectivity is another important feature of neoclassical poetry. As these poets were completely against subjectivity

in poetry, they endeavored hard to write objective poetry. They avoided giving vent to their feelings; rather they dwelt upon the miseries, hardships and problems of the people around them. That is why; we find very little information about the lives of neoclassical poets in their poetry.

Didacticism

Neoclassical poets rebelled against the romantic nature of poetry of the Renaissance Period. Romantic poets loved to compose poetry just for the sake of poetry like John Keats. They tried hard to sidestep morality and didacticism in their poetry. Their foremost purpose was to give vent to their feelings. On the other hand, the neoclassical poets were chiefly concerned with the didactic aspects of their poetry. They endeavored hard to fix the teething troubles of humanity through the magical power of poetry. That is the reason; most of the neoclassical poetry is replete with didacticism to a great deal. Consider the following lines

taken from Alexander Pope's poem An Essay on Man, which is absolutely an excellent example in this regard:

**Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As to be hated needs but to be seen;
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.**

(An Essay on Man by Alexander Pope)

Concept of Nature

The concept of nature was also an important characteristic of the Neoclassical age. By nature, they never meant the forest nature, but for them, nature meant the general human nature. The general human nature was not what the ordinary men and women felt and thought, but the standard view of human nature as held by Homer and Horace. The Neoclassical writers thought of human nature also was something static and standard, which is the same in all men and remains the same at all times.

**Those RULES of old discovered, not devised,
Are Nature still, but Nature Methodized;
Nature, like Liberty, is but restrained
By the same Laws which first herself ordained.**

(Essay on Criticism by Alexander Pope)

The neoclassicists directed their concept of man as an individual within a larger social context, seeing human nature as dualistic, flawed, and needing to be curbed by reason and decorum.

Poetic Diction

Poetic diction of neoclassical poetry is completely different from that of romantic poetry. In romantic poetry, the diction is flexible and easy to use, while in the neoclassical poetry, it is restrained, concrete and rigid. The neoclassical poets were fond of using a different language for poetry. They thought that there should be a dividing line between the language of prose and poetry. That is why; they laid emphasis on specific style for poetry. They were of the view

that decorum, specific style and mannerism are the vital elements of poetry. Alexander Pope was very conscious about the language of his poetry. He says in Essay on Criticism:

**Expression is the dress of thought, and still
Appears more decent as more suitable.
A vile Conceit in pompous words express'd
Is like a clown in regal purple dress'd
For different styles with different subjects sort,
As sev'ral garbs with country, town, and court.**

No Passionate Lyricism

Romantic poetry is popular for its lyrical quality, while neoclassical poetry is lacking in lyrical features due to apathy of the neoclassical poets for passion, feelings and emotions. They looked at the passion with distrust and suspicion. That is the reason; very few lyrics were written in the age of Pope and Dryden. They didn't give free play to

their imagination; rather they dwelt upon the intellectual aspects of poetry.

Heroic Couplet

Heroic couplet is another hallmark of neoclassical poetry. The neoclassical poets were primarily responsible for reputation of heroic couplets in the history of English literature. They were the champions of heroic couplet. No poet, in the history of English literature, can compete with the mastery of neoclassical poets in handling heroic couplet. They excelled each and every poet in this regard. Chaucer was the first poet, who employed heroic couplet in his poetry. Though many renowned poets of the world tried their hands on heroic couplet, yet Dryden and Pope are the only poets, who outdid everyone in this regard. They are considered as the real masters of heroic couplet. What is most important about these two poets is that they polished the heroic couplet, corrected it, made it regular, more flexible

and a polished medium of poetic expression. His poems like Absalam and Achitopel, Mac Flecnoe and The Medal are all in heroic couplets. Look at the following example:

**Good nature and good sense must ever join;
To err is human, to forgive, divine.**

(An Essay on Criticism by Alexander Pope)

Mock Epic

A Mock-epic is a long epic poem which is written about a subject that is not really worthy of an epic. Mock epic is the product of Neoclassical age.

Pope's The Rape of Lock is a good example of the Mock-epic poem. The term Mock epic is often applied to other dignified poetic forms. e.g. Thomas Gray's comic, Ode on the Death of a Favorite Cat (1748 A.D.)