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**17.0 OBJECTIVES**

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In this unit we shall

- Discuss the salient characteristics of the age of Enlightenment and its contribution to the history of English literature.
- Discuss the major writers and their important literary works of the age of enlightenment.

### **On completing the unit, you should be able to**

- Learn the socio-philosophico-historical contexts that shaped the literary works of the age of Enlightenment.
- Learn about the key writers of the age of Enlightenment and their important works.

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## **17.1 INTRODUCTION**

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The age of Enlightenment is also referred to as the age of reason. This age spans across the second half of the seventeenth century and the whole of eighteenth century i.e. 1660-1798. Chronologically, this age can be divided into three phases: the Restoration or the age of Dryden, the Neoclassical or the Augustan age, and the age of Johnson. All the three phases mentioned above demonstrate some common characteristics due to which they were also named as the age of Enlightenment. Before discussing these characteristics, it is imperative to look into those factors that led to the rise of the age of Enlightenment.

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## **17.2 ORIGIN**

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### **17.2.1 Historical Roots:**

The seeds of Enlightenment were sown in the tumultuous Civil Wars that took place in England. The death of Cromwell in 1658 paved the way for the resurgence of the Royalists and in less than two years, Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660 which was followed by the ascendancy of James II in 1685. It was high time to rethink the structure of the government and the accession of a king and queen not by divine right but on parliament's terms. Thus movements for political change finally resulted in the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and William and Mary were installed on the throne. These historical events had manifold implications on the socio-politico-cultural landscape of England. The authority of the Church began to be questioned in favour of a more personal and spiritual kind of faith. People started to criticize the hegemony of an organized and doctrinal religious system without any fear. This open and frank criticism of the age-old custom and tradition became the order of the day.

### **17.2.2 Philosophical Roots**

Enlightenment as an intellectual movement is believed to have begun with the writings of Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) who emphasize on the scientific methods of investigation in solving the human problems. All forms of knowledge were subjected to critical examination. Reason was the sole criterion for the acceptance of any kind of truth. The spirit of scientific inquiry led thinkers to employ two different methods to acquire the truth namely rationalism and empiricism. While the Rationalists like Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz maintained that all kinds of knowledge can be gained by means of rational analysis only, the empiricists viz.

Locke, Berkeley, and Hume rejected this claim and asserted that all knowledge must come through the senses, from experience only. The methodological difference in their approaches lay in the fact that the rationalists chose mathematics and the empiricists took physical sciences as their model for knowledge. The emphasis on reason became the hallmark of the age of enlightenment and most of its literary works demonstrated the same.

- **Check your progress 1**

Q.1 In which year was Charles II restored to the throne?

- a) 1660      b) 1661      c) 1658      d) 1685

Q.2 Which event marked the shift away from monarchial rule by divine right?

- a) The Thirty years wars                      b) The Glorious Revolution  
c) The Scientific revolution      d) The Second Defenestration of Prague

Q.3 Who among the followings was an empiricist?

- a) Locke                      b) Kant                      c) Spinoza                      d) Leibniz

Q.4 One of the characteristics of enlightenment was:

- a) The spirit of Scientific enquiry      b) Reason and order  
c) Attitude of Critical examination      d) All of the above

Q.5 Who ascended the British throne during the Glorious, or Bloodless, Revolution in 1688?

- a) Elizabeth I      b) William and Mary      c) Anne                      d) James II

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## **17.3 CHARACTERISTICS**

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### **17.3.1 Imitation of the classical literature**

As has been stated above, the age of enlightenment is also known as the neoclassical or the Augustan age. These phrases implicitly refer to the classical age of outstanding literary works of Virgil, Horace and Ovid that were produced under Caesar Augustus. Most of the neoclassical writers followed the classical style of writing and emphasized on reason and intellect in lieu of imagination and emotions. These works showed the spirit of Greek and Roman period in both letter and spirit. Alexander Pope's *Rape of The Lock* (1714) and the *Dunciad* (1742-43) are the best examples of the classical poetry. They are written in mock-heroic epic style and satirize the society of early 18<sup>th</sup> century England. Look at the following examples where allusions from the Classical literature find place in Pope's poetry:

Safe past the Gnome thro' this fantastic band,  
A branch of healing Spleenwort in his hand.

(Rape of the Lock, Canto IV)

In these lines, Spleenwort is a branch of a tree which appears in Virgil's Aeneid, wherein the Aeneas succeeds in visiting the gangland safely only because he possesses the magical branch of a tree.

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)

Here, Ulysses reminds us of Homer's Odyssey.

High on a gorgeous seat, that far out-shone  
Henley's gilt tub, or Fleckno's Irish throne,

(The Dunciad, Book II)

Thus the classical style i.e. unity, order, and coherence was hallmark of this age and a stringent adherence to this style was followed by the poets of the age.

### **17.3.2 Strict adherence to the rules and regulations in art**

The imitation of classical literature could be explicitly evinced in the writings of these poets and critics. Their emphasis on the taste in poetry, the relation between Art and Nature, the meaning and function of the Rules, and the importance of the classical writers led them to revive the ancients as Pope announced:

Those RULES of old discover'd, not devis'd,  
Are Nature still, but Nature methodis'd;  
Nature, like liberty, is but restrain'd  
By the same laws which first herself ordain'd.

(Essay on Criticism)

For them, to obey the rule was equal to copying the nature and it was best demonstrated by writers like Homer and Virgil who followed Nature in a true spirit:

Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem;  
To copy Nature is to copy them.

(Essay on Criticism)

Here 'Nature' is referred to as "common sense" and it should be prioritized over romantic and emotional responses as Pope writes:

First follow Nature, and your judgment frame  
By her just standard, which is still the same,

(Essay on Criticism)

However, their love for classical form and content led these writers to the establishment of a more artificial and conventional style and their poetic diction became what Wordsworth called as ‘gaudiness and inane phraseology’ of neoclassical age.

### **17.3.3 Human society as the primary subject matter of literature:**

The focus of the eighteenth century literature is human society. Therefore Nature is replaced by human nature and the subject matter of our study should revolve around humans only as Pope announces:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;  
The proper study of mankind is man.

(An Essay on Man: Epistle II)

However, the society that this literature depicts is an urban society of London where the Court is replaced by the coffeehouse as the meeting place of the rich and educated people. Reason being the dominant force of this age leaves no scope for imagination, emotion and supernatural treatment in poetry and other genres. Moreover, the human society which is portrayed here excludes the country life and the problems of common man.

### **17.3.4 Wit and Satire as a dominant genre of literature:**

As the primary subject matter of the literature of this age was the urban society and its custom and tradition, the poets and critics used wit and satire to criticize the follies of the upper class. Some of the finest satirists of this age were Dryden, Pope and Swift who offered a sharp criticism of the social and political life of contemporary London. Dryden’s greatest achievement was his satirical verse *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) which contributed to a debate on public affairs. Dryden took the biblical story of Absalom’s rebellion against his father King David and appropriated it in the contemporary situation. The opening lines of the poem bring out a sharp comparison between Charles and King David:

In pious times, ere priest-craft did begin,  
Before polygamy was made a sin;  
When man, on many, multiplied his kind,  
Ere one to one was cursedly confined:  
When Nature prompted, and no Law denied  
Promiscuous use of concubine and bride;  
Then, Israel's monarch, after Heaven's own heart,  
His vigorous warmth did variously impart  
To wives and slaves: and, wide as his command,  
Scattered his Maker's image through the land.

Whereas *Absalom and Achitophel* is a mild and humorous verse satire, *The Medal* is a more savage attack on Shaftsbury as can be seen in the following example:

Bartering his venal wit for sums of gold,  
He cast himself into the saint-like mould;  
Groaned, sighed, and prayed, while godliness was gain,  
The loudest bag-pipe of the squeaking train,  
But, as 'tis hard to cheat a juggler's eyes,  
His open lewdness he could ne'er disguise.

*The Medal* led to couple of more satires in the form of attack and counter attack between Thomas Shadwell who wrote *Medal of John Bayes* which was attacked by Dryden in his satirical piece *Mac Flecknoe* (1682). While Dryden focused on political themes for his satire, Pope chose the upper class society of Queen Anne's reign in the first half of the eighteenth century. *The Rape of the Lock* (1712), *The Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1734) and *The Dunciad* (1743) are some of the satires by Pope. In *the Rape of the Lock*, Pope converted a trivial drawing-room episode into an epic theme and satirized the social customs of the age of Queen Anne. The epic treatment of a trivial incident is an attack on the upper class men and women of that society and their life style. See the following example:

Say what strange motive, Goddess! could compel  
A well-bred lord t'assault a gentle belle?  
Oh say what stranger cause, yet unexplored,  
Could make a gentle belle reject a lord?  
In tasks so bold, can little men engage,  
And in soft bosoms dwells such mighty rage?  
Sol through white curtains shot a timorous ray,  
And oped those eyes that must eclipse the day:  
Now lapdogs give themselves the rousing shake,  
And sleepless lovers, just at twelve, awake:  
Thrice rung the bell, the slipper knocked the ground,  
And the pressed watch returned a silver sound. (Canto I)

Pope skillfully compares the moral disaster with a trivial social incident in the following lines:

Whether the nymph shall break Diana's law,  
Or some frail china jar receive a flaw;  
Or stain her honour, or her new brocade,  
Forget her pray'rs, or miss a masquerade;  
Or lose her heart, or necklace, at a ball;  
Or whether Heav'n has doom'd that Shock must fall. (Canto II)  
In narrating the story of the battle of sexes, Pope occasionally comments on the working style of Queen Anne:

Close by those meads, for ever crown'd with flow'rs,  
Where Thames with pride surveys his rising tow'rs,  
There stands a structure of majestic frame,  
Which from the neighb'ring Hampton takes its name.  
Here Britain's statesmen oft the fall foredoom  
Of foreign tyrants and of nymphs at home;  
Here thou, great Anna! whom three realms obey,  
Dost sometimes counsel take—and sometimes tea. (Canto III)

Bringing together of an important council and taking tea in the same line suggests Pope's depiction of his society through satire.

### 17.3.5 Heroic Couplet as the standard form of Poetry:

It was their love for the classical literature that the poets of this age adhered very strictly to the closed couplets or what is known as the heroic couplet. Heroic couplet consists of lines of iambic pentameter which rhyme in pairs: aa, bb, cc, and so on. This form was suitable for the kind of poetry they wrote. They considered it to be the best medium for expressing their wit in the satirical verses. Dryden and Pope polished this poetic form and regularized it to the extent that no other form was preferred than heroic couplet for more than a century. Following are some of the examples of heroic couplet:

Music resembles poetry: in each  
Are nameless graces which no methods teach,  
And which a master hand alone can reach.  
(An Essay on Criticism by Alexander Pope)

Good nature and good sense must ever join;  
To err is human, to forgive, divine.  
(An Essay on Criticism by Alexander Pope)

#### • Check your progress 2:

Q.1 Who among the followings does not belong to the Augustan age:

- a) Virgil      b) Homer      c) Ovid      d) Horace

Q.2 Neoclassicists imitated the classical style of writing which is:

- a) Objective and impersonal      b) Subjective and personal  
c) Emotional      d) Replete with imagination

Q.3 The dominant style of poetry in the neoclassical age was:

- a) Lyric      b) Heroic Couplet      c) Sonnet      d) Ballad

Q.4 Neoclassical age is also called as the age of:

- a) Wordsworth      b) Dryden      c) Pope      d) Thomson

Q.5 Which of the following statements is not true about the 18<sup>th</sup> century literature:

- a) Its target audience was Intellectuals and educated people.  
b) Its primary subject matter was urban and upper class London.  
c) It was mostly written in the form of a satire.  
d) The style was simple and lucid.

Q.6 What was most frequently considered a source of pleasure and an object of inquiry by Augustan poets?

- a) Civilization      b) Woman      c) God      d) Nature

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## 17.4 LET US SUM UP

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**In this unit, you have learnt:**

- The socio-philosophico-historical contexts that shaped the literary works of the age of enlightenment.
- The salient characteristics of the age of enlightenment that were evinced in the representative works of this age.

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## 17.5 KEY WORDS

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<b>Augustan age</b>	Relating to or characteristic of the times of the Roman Emperor Augustus.
<b>Classical</b>	relating to the most highly developed stage of an earlier civilization and its culture
<b>Empiricism</b>	the doctrine that knowledge derives from experience.
<b>Neoclassicism</b>	Revival of a classical style but from a new perspective or with a new motivation.
<b>Satire</b>	Witty language used to convey some kind of criticism or scorn, especially by saying one thing but implying the opposite.
<b>Rationalism</b>	the doctrine that knowledge is acquired by reason without resort to experience.

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## **17.6 BOOKS SUGGESTED**

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1. The Short Oxford History of English Literature by Andrew Sanders (Oxford)
2. A Critical History of English Literature: Vol. II (The Restoration to the Present Day) by David Daiches (Supernova Publishers, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2010)
3. History of English Literature by Edward Albert (Oxford University Press)

### **❖ ANSWERS**

#### **1. Check you progress 1:**

- 1) 1660
- 2) The Glorious Revolution
- 3) Locke
- 4) All of the above
- 5) William and Mary

#### **2. Check your progress 2:**

- 1) Homer
- 2) Objective and impersonal
- 3) Heroic Couplet
- 4) Pope
- 5) The style was simple and lucid.
- 6) Nature