

**: STRUCTURE :****11.0 Objectives****11.1 Introduction****11.2 Historical Background****11.3 Social Development****11.4 Literary Features****11.5 Major Genres****11.6 Let Us Sum Up****11.7 Key Words****11.8 Books suggested****Answers**

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**11.0 OBJECTIVES**

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This unit will help you:

- Understand the period of the Augustan Age in English Literature

- Know the chief characteristics of the Age

After you finish this unit, you will be able to:

- Distinguish this Age from the previous Age
- Describe the specific features of the Age
- Appreciate the works of the Age

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**11.1 INTRODUCTION**

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The Augustan Age in English Literature is also called the Age of Queen Anne, the Neo-Classical Age, the Age of Pope as well as the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Each of these names looks at the literature of the age from a different perspective: from the ancient Age when Augustus Caesar ruled and was an Age of creative flowering, the period in which Queen Anne (a very weak queen) ruled England, the Age which considered itself to be as great as the Classical Age, the age in which an important writer was Pope, and in terms of dates was indeed the 18<sup>th</sup> century. (Caesar Augustus was one of ancient Rome's most successful leaders who led the transformation of Rome from a republic to an empire. During his reign, Augustus restored peace and prosperity to the Roman state and changed nearly every aspect of Roman life.) The Classical Age (500-336 BC) refers to the Classical Period of ancient Greece and was a time when the Greeks achieved new heights in art, architecture, theatre, and philosophy. In using the term Neo-Classical to refer to this period, we believe that it is used in a slightly derogatory sense as if the period pretended to be what it

actually was not. Different critics and literary historians seem to prefer one of these above the others. The period, however, can be the entire century (1700—1800), as it is often referred to as the 18<sup>th</sup> century. And yet, from a historical perspective it is the period after the Revolution of 1688 when major political and social developments took place and which get reflected in the literature of the Age. It is imperative to understand these developments to be able to appreciate the literature of this Age. The invention of the printing press leading to the birth of the newspaper is an important landmark in the literary development of the Age. This Age also saw the birth of the novel and the Periodical Essay as literary genres. The absence of drama also merits mention.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS I**

#### **1. STATE WHETHER TRUE OR FALSE**

- a) The Augustan Age preceded the Restoration Age.
- b) Queen Elizabeth was a more powerful ruler than Queen Anne.
- c) Drama flourished in this period.
- d) Newspapers became possible due to the invention of the printing press.

#### **2. FILL IN THE BLANKS WITH APPROPRIATE WORDS OR PHRASES**

- a) The Revolution of 1688 is also referred to as the \_\_\_\_\_.
- b) Augustus was a \_\_\_\_\_ ruler.
- c) The Classical Age refers to the flourishing of arts in ancient \_\_\_\_\_.
- d) We refer to this Age as Age of \_\_\_\_\_ because of an important poet of the period.

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## **11.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

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The 18<sup>th</sup> century in England opens with the war of Spanish succession. As Marlborough was a great military genius, the British gained two ports, two colonies and a valuable trade concession the sole right of shipping slaves to the Spanish colonies. In 1707, the Act of Union was passed uniting England and Scotland to form Great Britain.

Queen Anne died in 1714 and George I of Hanover ascended the throne. The Jacobites were bitterly disappointed and there was a rebellion in 1715, followed by another in 1745 to restore the Stuarts. All through the reigns of George I and II, the Whigs had a monopoly and it was only under George III that the Tories came into power. Sir Robert Walpole, the first Prime Minister of England, was an important statesman during this period.

George III succeeded his grandfather in 1760. Having been taught to be a king in reality, he took into his own hands the patronage of the state and church. He began distributing 'royal favours' himself, thus filling the House of Commons with mercenaries, often referred to as 'the King's friends'. As he ruled for twenty years as an autocrat, there was considerable tension and strife between the ruler and the ruled. He succeeded also in flattening almost all the Whig opposition, but this

coincided with England's dispute with her American colonies. The War of American Independence, which lasted for seven years, also brought with it the end of the King's personal rule and the restoration of parliamentary democracy.

Pitt, the Younger, was Prime Minister for 19 years (1783-1801 and 1804-1806). It was during this period that other important events took place like the French Revolution (1789), the union of Ireland with Great Britain to form the United Kingdom, the rise of Napoleon and his later exile as well as the restoration of the French monarchy.

Outside the borders of England, Clive in India, Wolfe on the plains of Abraham, Cook in Australia and the islands of the Pacific were spreading the world-wide Empire of the British.

It is in this historical backdrop that you have to look at the society of that time.'

## **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS II**

### **1. MATCH THE WORDS IN A WITH APPROPRIATE PHRASES IN B**

A	B
i) French Revolution	a) 1714
ii) Clive	b) Great military genius
iii) Death of Queen Anne	c) India
iv) Marlborough	d) First Prime Minister
v) Walpole	e) 1789

### **2. STATE WHETHER TRUE OR FALSE**

- Pitt was Prime Minister of England during the French Revolution.
- George III filled the House of Commons with mercenaries.
- Marlborough was a great politician.
- The American War of Independence lasted for 7 years.
- The Jacobites were disappointed because the House of Hanover was in power.

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## **11.3 SOCIETY IN THE AUGUSTAN AGE**

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The society that gave the 18<sup>th</sup> century England her tone and character was aristocratic. Political power seemed to be concentrated in the nobility. Bribing the voter was considered normal, during elections. Both in the academic world and in the army, everything was available for a price. The aristocracy gambled, drank deep and enjoyed their life to the hilt. They travelled to the cities of Europe and returned loaded with art-treasures to embellish their magnificent houses. It almost seemed as if their culture was artificial.

England was fighting France throughout the century but their literature and art seemed to be influenced by France and Italy too. French influence on English literature was a combination of both good and bad. Because of the general political stability following the Revolution, the eighteenth century in England was an era of peace and prosperity. Englishmen seemed to settle down to the business of peaceful and

civilised living. The streets of London continued to be unsafe, but rioting, way-laying, robbing and other forms of barbarism seemed to decline as the century progressed. The privileged class attained a high level of education and culture. And now, it was the nobility rather than the crown which patronised art and letters.

In this century can be noticed that the people of England learned the art of living together even when their opinions differed. In a single generation nearly two thousand public coffee houses, each a centre of social intercourse, sprang up in London alone. In addition to this, there were a number of private clubs too. This new social life contributed in great measure to the polishing of men's words and manners. In spite of a certain vulgarity still existing in some Londoners, men sought to refine their manners according to prevailing standards and to be elegant. Some point out that this was a kind of superficial elegance. Though there still continued the opposing Whig and Tory parties as well as the divisions in the Church, the growing social life presented an outward impression of peace and unity. The general tendency of the age was one of toleration and this was helped in great measure by the spread of education. The rule of reason and common-sense had done its work of enlightening and humanising the eighteenth century. This is demonstrated best in the civilising influence of the century in the agitation against the slave-trade and its final abolition early in the next century.

Simultaneously, schools were established, books and magazines multiplied until the press became the greatest visible power in England. Religiously, all the churches of England felt the tremendous spiritual revival known as Methodism.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS III**

#### **a) FILL IN THE BLANKS WITH APPROPRIATE WORDS/ PHRASES**

- i) The spiritual revival in the churches of England was known as \_\_\_\_\_.
- ii) The slave trade was abolished in the \_\_\_\_\_ century.
- iii) The two major political parties in the century were \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
- iv) The culture of this period seemed \_\_\_\_\_.
- v) The \_\_\_\_\_, not the crown, patronised the arts in this century.

#### **b) ANSWER IN ONE SENTENCE:**

- i) Why did books and magazines multiply in the 18<sup>th</sup> century?
- ii) What led to the spread of toleration?
- iii) What was available at a price? Why?
- iv) What did the new social life contribute to?
- v) What were the new centres of social intercourse?

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## **11.4 LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS**

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Every Age in literature shows the preponderance of one genre over the others. The Augustan Age was undoubtedly the Age of prose.

Several social factors were responsible for this and the spread of education and the advent of periodicals contributed in great measure towards this. A multitude of practical interests arising from the new social and political conditions demanded expression not merely in books, but more specially in pamphlets, magazines and newspapers. Poetry seemed inadequate for the task and hence we see the development of prose at an unprecedented pace. As Long points out: The graceful elegance of Addison's essays, the terse vigour of Swift's satire, the artistic finish of Fielding's novels, the sonorous eloquence of Gibbon's history and of Burke's orations --- these have no parallel in the poetry of the age. One of the chief glories of this age is the variety and excellence of prose works and the development of a serviceable prose style.

Some characteristics of the previous age, like the tendency to realism in subject-matter and the tendency to polish and refinement of expression, continued in the Augustan Age and can be seen both in the poetry of Pope and the prose of Addison. A third tendency that is seen in this Age is the prevalence of satire, which was the result of the unfortunate union of politics and literature. The perpetual strife of the political parties led to every writer in the first half of the century being used or rewarded by either the Whigs or Tories. This was done for either satirizing their enemies or advancing their special political interests. Satire may have various purposes but the most common one here is where a literary work searches out the faults of an individual or an institution to hold them up to ridicule. Many critics consider this a very negative kind of criticism. It may be argued that the satires of Pope, Swift and Addison are the best in the English language, the fact remains that they are never placed along with the best of English literature.

The term 'classicism' is often used to refer to the literature of the Augustan Age. One of the reasons that the word was used was because of the unusual number of great works produced in this period. The word 'classic' itself took on many meanings. In this age, the general tendency of writers was to look at life critically, to emphasize intellect rather than imagination, the form rather than the content. Writers strove to repress all emotion and enthusiasm and to use only precise and elegant methods of expression. Generally, this is what is meant by the 'classicism' of this age. It refers to the critical, intellectual spirit of many writers, to the fine polish of their heroic couplets or the elegance of their prose. This should not be considered or interpreted as having any resemblance to true classic literature. We could even say that this was a 'pseudo-classic' period--- a period of false and sham classicism.

#### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS IV**

##### **1. GIVE REASONS:**

- i) The Age is referred to as the Age of Classicism.
- ii) Satire was prevalent in this century.
- iii) There was a preponderance of prose in this Age.

## **2.FILL IN THE BLANKS WITH APPROPRIATE WORDS/ PHRASES**

- i) It is called a \_\_\_\_\_ period as it was a period of false and sham classicism.
- ii) One of the important aims of \_\_\_\_\_ is to hold up something to ridicule.
- iii) The Augustan Age was undoubtedly the Age of \_\_\_\_\_.

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## **11.5 GENRES**

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### **Prose:**

The whole of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is hailed as the Age of Prose and this is noticeable from the beginning of the century. The age saw the establishment of the periodical essay and the beginnings of prose fiction. Another predominant and remarkable feature of this period is the predominance of political satire, which reached its glorious height. The prose style of this period was used for a variety of purposes: narration, description, exposition, speculation, argument. The age also witnessed writers who could use the plain style to expound their political, philosophical or theological doctrines.

### **Poetry:**

In many ways, this Age was a continuation of the previous age and this is clearly seen in the poetry of the Age. Simultaneously is noticeable in the poetry of this Age, an unconscious revolt from the classical ideal. Romance seemed to be on the way and some of the poets of the Age became the precursors or heralds of the Romantic Movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Novel:**

Though the ancestry of the novel may be traced to the Elizabethan Age as well as to the character writers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the novel as we know it today was created and established in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The novel was then seen as a 'long tale portraying characters and incidents from real life'.

### **Essay:**

In addition to the novel, the Essay was a great gift of the century. With the invention of the printing, the spread of education and the resultant increase in readership, the essay, and in particular the periodical essay, flourished. Many of the essayists also were professional men of letters and hence excelled in other forms of literature too. Towards the end of the century, modern magazines and reviews became popular.

### **Letter-writing:**

An unhurried age of peace and leisure provides the ideal atmosphere for letter writing as an art and this is proved by the bulk and quality of the letters of this century. 'The Peace of the Augustans', as it is

often referred to, contributed to aristocratic ladies and gentlemen filling their leisure hours with writing for amusement. In addition to writing satirical verses, squibs and essays for periodicals, they found writing long letters an additional pastime.

**Drama:**

The Age witnessed the decline of drama but not of dramatic activity. Historians continue to be puzzled by the decline of drama in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and its continued eclipse till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Only two dramatists, succeeded in redeeming the drama of this age. Most talented writers chose the novel as their medium because it offered them a huger canvas and did not hamper their style as stage conventions did in drama. However, this century did produce actors and actresses who are better known than the dramatists of the Age.

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**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS V**

**1. FILL THE BLANKS WITH APPROPRIATE WORDS/PHRASES**

- i) The genre least written in this age was\_\_\_\_\_.
- ii) \_\_\_\_\_ was popular because of the unhurried pace of life.
- iii) Modern magazines became popular towards the \_\_\_\_\_.
- iv) \_\_\_\_\_ reached its glorious height in this century.

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**11.6 LET US SUM UP**

In this unit you have learnt:

- The historical events of the Age
- The major changes in society
- Their effects on the literature of the Age
- The genres that were popular

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**11.7 KEY WORDS**

- **Coffee-houses:** A new active culture evolved in 18<sup>th</sup> century England where coffee houses sprang up all over London; they attracted a variety of patrons and became the hub of news and the place where new ideas were formed
- **Letter-writing:** A popular activity in the 18<sup>th</sup> century where relaxed social life made this a favourite pastime and reflected the social aspirations of the Age
- **Periodicals:** The invention of the printing press, increase in middle-class and spread of education led to publication of periodicals which were generally four pages and dealt with social issues of the day
- **Political satire:** A satire which specialises in gaining entertainment from politics; used in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by both political parties to condemn and reward

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**11.8 BOOKS SUGGESTED**

- 1. A Compendious History of English Literature by R.D.Trivedi

2. English Literature by W. J. Long
3. A History of English Literature by Edward Albert

## **ANSWERS**

### **Check your progress I**

1. A) False      B) True      C) False D) True
2. A) Restoration B) Roman C) Greece D) Pope

### **Check your progress II**

1. i-e, ii-c, iii-a, iv-b, v-d
2. a) True b) True c) False d) True e) True

### **Check your progress III**

1. i) Methodism ii) 19<sup>th</sup> century iii) Whigs and Tories iv) artificial v) nobility
2. i) Invention of the printing press  
ii) Spread of education  
iii) Bribery in army, education etc  
iv) Polishing of men's words and manners  
v) Coffee houses and clubs

### **Check your progress IV**

1. i) Unusual number of great works produced in this period  
ii) Used by both political parties to reward and ridicule  
iii) Poetry seemed inadequate
2. i) pseudo-classic  
ii) satire  
iii) prose

### **Check your progress v**

1. i) drama  
ii) letter-writing  
iii) end of the century  
iv) political satire