The Restoration and 18th Century

Period Introduction Overview

**THE RESTORATION AND THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, 1660-1785**

- The Restoration period begins in 1660, the year in which King Charles II (the exiled Stuart king) was restored to the English throne.
- England, Scotland, and Wales were united as Great Britain by the 1707 Act of Union.
- The period is one of increasing commercial prosperity and global trade for Britain.
- Literacy expanded to include the middle classes and even some of the poor.
- Emerging social ideas included politeness—a behavioral standard to which anyone might aspire—and new rhetoric of liberty and rights, sentiment and sympathy.

**RELIGION AND POLITICS**

- The monarchical restoration was accompanied by the re-opening of English theatres (closed during Cromwell’s Puritan regime) and the restoration of the Church of England as the national church.
- Church and state continued to be closely intertwined. The Test Act of 1673 required all holders of civil and military offices to take the sacrament in the Anglican Church and deny transubstantiation; those who refused (e.g., Protestant Dissenters and Roman Catholics) were not allowed to attend university or hold public office.
- King Charles II, though he outwardly conformed to Anglicanism, had Catholic sympathies that placed him at odds with his strongly anti-Catholic Parliament.
- Charles had no legitimate heir. His brother James (a Catholic) was next in line to the throne. Parliament tried to force Charles to exclude his brother from the line of succession. Charles ended this "Exclusion Crisis" by dissolving Parliament.
- The Exclusion Crisis in a sense created modern political parties: the Tories, who supported the king, and the Whigs, who opposed him.
- Once crowned, King James II quickly suspended the Test Act. In 1688, the birth of James's son so alarmed the country with the prospect of a new succession of Catholic monarchs that secret negotiations began to bring a new Protestant ruler from Europe to oust James.
- In 1688, William of Orange and his wife Mary (James's daughter) landed in England with a small army and seized power—an event known as the Glorious or Bloodless Revolution.
- James II fled to exile in France. For over 50 years his supporters (called Jacobites, from the Latin *Jacobus*, for James) mounted unsuccessful attempts to restore the Stuart line of Catholic kings to the British throne.
• Queen Anne, another of James II's daughters, was the next monarch (1702-1714). Anne's reign was a prosperous time for Britain, as the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-1713) created new trade opportunities.

• England, Scotland, and Wales were united as Great Britain by the 1707 Act of Union.

• As Anne, like Mary, had no heirs, the succession was settled upon the royal house of Hanover. A long line of King Georges (I-IV) ensued, which is why the eighteenth century is also known as the Georgian period.

• We now associate the term "Whig" with liberalism and "Tory" with conservatism, but the principles behind these two parties remained fluid and responsive to political circumstance throughout the period.

• Robert Walpole, a Whig politician who served under both King George I and George II, held a parliamentary seat from 1701 until 1742. Walpole was the first man to be described as a "prime" minister.

• During King George III's long rule (1760-1820) Britain became a major colonial power. At home and abroad, George III's subjects engaged with a new rhetoric of liberty and radical reform, as they witnessed and reacted to the revolutions in France and America.

THE CONTEXT OF IDEAS

• The court of King Charles II championed the right of England's social elite to pursue pleasure and libertinism.

• King Charles II authorized two new companies of actors. Women began to appear on stage in female roles.

• Dogmatism, or the acceptance of received religious beliefs, was widely regarded as dangerous.

• Charles II approved the Royal Society for London for the Improving of Natural Knowledge (1662). The Royal Society revolutionized scientific method and the dispersal of knowledge.

• The specialized modern "scientist" did not exist; Royal Society members studied natural history (the collection and description of facts of nature), natural philosophy (study of the causes of what happens in nature), and natural religion (study of nature as a book written by God).

• The major idea of the period (founded on Francis Bacon’s earlier work) was that of empiricism.

• Empiricism is the direct observation of experience, which infers that experience (including experimentation) is a reliable source of knowledge. John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume all pursued differing interpretations of empiricism, and the concept itself had a profound impact on society and literature.

• Writers (including women such as Mary Astell) began to advocate for improved education for women during this period.
• Around 1750, the word "sentiment" evolved to describe social behavior based in instinctual feeling. Sentiment, and the related notions of sensibility and sympathy, all contributed to a growing sense of the desirability of public philanthropy and social reforms (such as charities for orphans).
• Increased importance was placed on the private, individual life, as is evident in literary forms such as diaries, letters, and the novel.

CONDITIONS OF LITERARY PRODUCTION

• The Stage Licensing Act (1737) established a form of dramatic censorship in which the Lord Chamberlain pre-approved and licensed all plays for performance in London.
• Censorship of other print material changed radically with the 1710 Statute of Anne, the first British copyright law not tied to government approval of a book's contents.
• Copyrights were typically held by booksellers.
• The term "public sphere" refers to the material texts concerning matters of national interest and also to the public venues (including coffeehouses, clubs, taverns, parks, etc.) where readers circulated and discussed these texts.
• Thanks to greatly increased literacy rates (by 1800, 60-70 percent of adult men could read, versus 25 percent in 1600), the eighteenth century was the first to sustain a large number of professional authors. Genteel writers could benefit from both patronage and the subscription system; "Grub Street" hacks at the lower end of the profession were employed on a piecework basis.
• Women published widely.
• Reading material, though it remained unaffordable to the laboring classes, was frequently shared. Circulating libraries began in the 1740s.
• Capital letters began to be used only at the beginnings of sentences and for proper names, and the use of italics was reduced.

LITERARY PRINCIPLES

• Literature from 1660 to 1785 divides into three shorter periods of 40 years each, which can be characterized as shown below.
• 1660-1700 (death of John Dryden): emphasis on "decorum," or critical principles based on what is elegant, fit, and right.
• 1700-1745 (deaths of Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope in 1744): emphasis on satire and on a wider public readership.
• 1745-1784 (death of Samuel Johnson): emphasis on revolutionary ideas.
• England’s Augustan age was modeled on that of Rome, when Augustus Caesar re-established stability after civil war following Julius Caesar’s assassination. English writers, following the restoration of King
Charles II, felt themselves to be in a similar situation, in which the arts (repressed under Cromwell) could now flourish.

- English writers endeavored to formulate rules of good writing, modeled on classical works, but with a new appeal to the passions, in simple, often highly visual, language. This embrace of new (neo) aims and old models is called "neoclassicism."
- Horace's phrase, *ut picture poesis* (meaning "as in painting, so in poetry") was interpreted to mean that poetry ought to be a visual as well as a verbal art.
- Augustan poets began the century's focus on nature, by examining the enduring truths of human nature.
- The classical genres from which Augustan writers sought to learn included epic, tragedy, comedy, pastoral, satire, and ode. Ensuring a good fit between the genre and its style, language, and tone was crucial.
- Augustan writing celebrates wit, or inventiveness, quickness of thought, and aptness of descriptive images or metaphors.
- The heroic couplet (two lines of rhymed iambic pentameter) was the most important verse form of Pope's age, for it combined elegance and wit. Poets also continued to use blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter, not closed in couplets).
- Not just aristocrats and classically educated scholars wrote verse: ordinary people also began to write poetry, often featuring broad humor and burlesque, thereby creating a distinction between high and low verse.

**RESTORATION LITERATURE, 1600-1700**

- Dryden was the most influential writer of the Restoration, for he wrote in every form important to the period—occasional verse, comedy, tragedy, heroic plays, odes, satires, translations of classical works—and produced influential critical essays concerning how one ought to write these forms.
- Restoration prose style grew more like witty, urbane conversation and less like the intricate, rhetorical style of previous writers like John Milton and John Donne.
- Simultaneously, Restoration literature continued to appeal to heroic ideals of love and honor, particularly on stage, in heroic tragedy.
- The other major dramatic genre was the Restoration comedy of manners, which emphasizes sexual intrigue and satirizes the elite's social behavior with witty dialogue.

**EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE, 1700-1745**
The Augustan era of writers like Swift, Defoe, Pope, Addison, and Steele was rich in satire and new prose forms that blended fact and fiction, such as news, criminal biographies, travelogues, political allegories, and romantic tales.

Early eighteenth-century drama saw the development of "sentimental comedy" in which goodness and high moral sentiments are emphasized, and the audience is moved not only to laughter, but also to sympathetic tears.

The theatre business boomed; celebrity performers flourished; less important were the authors of the plays.

James Thomson's poems on the seasons, beginning with "Winter" (1726), carried on the earlier poetic tradition of pastoral retreat and began a new trend of poetry focused on natural description.

**THE EMERGENCE OF NEW LITERARY THEMES AND MODES, 1740-1785**

- Novelists became better known than poets, and intellectual prose forms such as the essay proliferated.
- The mid-eighteenth century is often referred to as the "Age of Johnson" after the renowned essayist Samuel Johnson, who in 1755 wrote one of the first English dictionaries to define word meanings by employing quotations taken from the best English writers, past and present.
- By the 1740s the novel rose to dominate the literary marketplace, with writers like Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, and Laurence Sterne defining the form and its modes of representing the private lives of individuals.
- The late eighteenth century saw a medieval revival, in which writers venerated and imitated archaic language and forms. One important development of this movement was the Gothic novel, which typically features such forbidden themes as incest, murder, necrophilia, atheism, and sexual desire.
- Late eighteenth-century poetry tends to emphasize melancholy, isolation, and reflection, in distinction to the intensely social, often satirical verse of earlier in the period.

**CONTINUITY AND REVOLUTION**

- Some critics place the end of the eighteenth century at 1776 (linking it to the American Revolution); others at 1789 (the beginning of the French Revolution); still others at 1798 (the publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*).
- Later Romantic writers, who valued the idea of originality, also prized the meaning of "revolution" which signified a violent break with the past and often represented their work as offering just such a break with tradition. However, changes to literary forms and content occurred much more gradually than this use of the word "revolution" might suggest.