



The Contribution of Classicism to Modern Literature

Sanosi Zakaria Musa Adam¹ & Mahmoud Ali Ahmed² & Abulgassim Mohammed Elamin³

1.3 Karary University - College Of Languages

² Sudan University Of Science & Technology-College Of Languages

Abstract:

This study aimed at assuring the pivotal contribution made by the classics of ancient Greeks and Romans in one hand and the contribution of the late classicism and neoclassicism in English literature in the other hand. Literary work which is popular for a long time and is considered to be of a high quality is given the adjective "classic" or "classical". The researchers adopted the descriptive analytic method. In this regard the study highlights some literary works and genres with their writers spread out in Europe specially the countries which their languages were derived from Latin like French and Italian. The emphasis is on the eighteenth century which is called the Classical Age. The beginning of classicism abated the grasp of Puritans in the society and education was allowed for a certain types of girls which led to the emergence of some female writers like Jane Austen. Neo-classical literature though lasted for a short time compared with the movement which was between Renaissance and Romantic period, its influence in English literature is crystal clear. The Satire is the most important contribution of neoclassicism. The researchers recommended that it is better to teach literary movements in an integrated way.

Key words: *classic, classicism, neoclassicism*

مستخلص:

هدفت هذه الدراسة لإبراز المساهمة المحورية التي قدمها الكلاسيكيون من الإغريق والرومان القدماء من جهة ومساهمة الكلاسيكية المتأخرة والكلاسيكية الحديثة في الأدب الإنجليزي من ناحية أخرى. اعتمد الباحثون الطريقة الوصفية التحليلية. في الوقت الحاضر. إذا حظى العمل الأدبي بشعبية كبيرة و جودة عالية و لفترة طويلة يعطى صفة "الكلاسيكية". وفي هذا الصدد، تسلط الدراسة الضوء على بعض الأعمال الأدبية وأسماء كتابها التي انتشرت في أوروبا خاصة البلدان التي تستمد لغاتها من اللاتينية مثل الفرنسية والإيطالية. سيكون التركيز على القرن الثامن عشر الذي يسمى العصر الكلاسيكي. بداية الكلاسيكية خففت من قبضة المترمتمين في المجتمع وسمح التعلم لأنواع معينة من الفتيات مما أدى إلى ظهور بعض الكاتبات مثل جين أوستن والتي في عصرها ظهرت بوادر الرواية الحديثة. على الرغم من أن الأدب الكلاسيكي الحديث استمر لفترة قصيرة مقارنة بالحركة التي كانت بين عصر النهضة والرومانسية، فإن تأثيره في الأدب الإنجليزي واضح وضوح الشمس. من اهم نتائج الدراسة ان مساهمة الكلاسيكية الجديدة هي السخرية. وقد أوصى الباحثون بتدريس الحركات الأدبية بطريقة مدمجة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكلاسيكي، الكلاسيكية، الكلاسيكية الجديدة

Introduction:

Classic is a term used primarily to denote and characterize a type and style or period of

creative works. Strictly speaking, a classic is any ancient Greek or Roman literary work of the first



or highest quality— for example, the works of the Greek dramatist Sophocles and the Roman poet Virgil. In a broad sense, the term classic is applied to anything accepted either as a model of excellence or as a work of enduring cultural relevance and value.

Classicism, the imitation or use primarily of the style and aesthetic principles of ancient Greek and Roman classical art and literature; in modern times, it also refers to the adoption of such principles in music. The most important periods during which classicism was the prevailing movement in Western thought and creative art were the Renaissance, the late 17th and early 18th centuries—especially in England and France—and the late 18th and 19th centuries. The term neoclassicism is the name given to Western movements in the decorative and visual arts, literature, theatre, music, and architecture that draw inspiration from the "classical" art and culture of Ancient Greece or Ancient Rome.

Research Problem

There is a confusion in understanding what it is meant by Classic and Classicism even among the students of English literature. This confusion can make some problems. Therefore, the researchers cast light on its meaning and follow its historical background and the development of these concepts.

Methodology

The researchers adopted the descriptive analytic method.

Research Objectives

- i. Underscore the significance of the classics in the history of English literature.
- ii. Highlight its influence on the later movements of English literature.
- iii. Delineate on what grounds were deprecated.

Research Questions

- i. What is the contribution made by the classics to English literature?

- ii. To what extent is Classicism influential on literature?
- iii. Who took to deprecate the classics and classical trend in literature?

Research Significance

This study is intended to draw the attention to the important role played by the classics on the realm of literature, the development of the genre of novel as well as the contribution made by Classicism in literature.

Research limits

The concept of classic and classicism is investigated from the era of Plato and Aristotle till the present time with emphasis on the eighteenth century literature.

Literature Review

Oxford Dictionary defined the word "classic" as an adjective judged over a period of time to be of the highest quality and outstanding of its kind. (of a garment or design) of a simple, elegant style not greatly subject to changes in fashion. Also, very typical of its kind. As a noun work of art of recognized and established value. A garment of a simple, elegant, and long-lasting style. A thing which is memorable and a very good example of its kind. A subject at school or university which involves the study of ancient Greek and Latin literature, philosophy, and history. The classics are the works of ancient Greek and Latin writers and philosophers. A scholar of ancient Greek and Latin. A major sports tournament or competition, especially in golf or tennis. (in the UK) each of the five main flat races of the horse-racing season. (The Oxford Popular Dictionary, 2000, p53)

Note that classic means 'typical, excellent as an example, timeless,' as in John Ford directed many classic Westerns, and classical means 'relating to Greek or Roman antiquity' (the museum was built in the classical style). Great art is considered classic, not classical, unless it is



created in the forms of antiquity. Classical music is the exception to this rule, being formal music adhering to certain stylistic principles of the late 18th century. The origin of the word "classic" refers to early 17th century: from French *classique* or Latin *classicus* 'belonging to a class or division', later 'of the highest class', from *classis*. (The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, 1992, p.140)

Longman Active Dictionary also defines "classics" as a noun as follows: The following of ancient Greek or Roman principles and style in art and literature, generally associated with harmony, restraint, and adherence to recognized standards of form and craftsmanship, especially from the Renaissance to the 18th century. Often contrasted with romanticism. The following of traditional and long-established theories or styles. The revival of a classical style or treatment in art, literature, architecture, or music. (Longman Active Dictionary, 2002, P114). Cambridge dictionary defines the prefix "neo" as new, so "neoclassicism" As an aesthetic and artistic style neoclassicism originated in Rome in the mid-18th century, combining a reaction against the late baroque with a new interest in antiquity. In music, the term refers to a return by composers of the early 20th century to the forms and styles of the 17th and 18th centuries, as a reaction against 19th-century romanticism. (Cambridge Learner's Dictionary).

Characteristics and Symptoms of Classicism

Classicism has certain basic features in art as in literature. Its concern is always with the ideal, in form as well as in content. Such is the case, it is true, with virtually all artists before Romanticism, but classical artists looked back to the ideal of Antiquity as well as to its varied styles. Renaissance which is a part of classical age was a cultural movement which began in Italy during the 15th century and spread around

Europe during the 17th century. Education was not offered for girls, except for daughters of the nobility and Puritans, and even then subjects were focused on chastity and housewifery. The period is characterized by the influence of the classics (in literature, language, and philosophy), as well as an optimistic forward-thinking approach to the potential of humans (known as Renaissance humanism. The spread of Protestantism was influential in literature. The English poet and playwright, William Shakespeare, who flourished during this period, is often called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon". (Critical History of English Literature, 2009, p41).

Literature was written in a period where social order was undergoing tremendous changes. In the so called Enlightenment Period, people believed that natural passions aren't necessarily good; natural passions must be subordinated to social needs and be strictly controlled. Authors believed that reason was the primary basis of authority. They believed that social needs are more important than individual needs and that man could find meaning in order - religious, social, the order of nature, government and literary forms.

A distinctive symptoms of classicism are: belief in reason; emphasis on the civilized, modern and sophisticated modes of life; interest in urban society; preoccupation of human nature; love for mundane actuality; satirical tendency; expression of **accepted** moral truth; realistic recognition of things as they are; belief in good and evil; acceptance of established religious and philosophic creeds; attachment to normal, generic abstraction; impersonal objectivity; interest in public themes; emphasis on formal correctness and the ideal of order; popularity of poetry of prose statement; use of formal poetic



diction; self-conscious traditionalism; and rational sobriety of Latin literature.

Eighteenth-Century Literature

The Eighteenth Century in England is called the Classical Age or Augustan Age in literature. It is also called The Age of Good Sense or The Age of Reason. It was called Classical Age in literature on account of three reasons. In the first place, term classic refers in general, applies to writers of the highest rank in any nation. The term was first applied to works of great Greek and Roman writers, like Homer and Virgil. As the writers of eighteenth century in England tried to follow the simple noble methods of the great writers, they began to be called classical writers. In the second place, in every national literature there is a period when a large number writers produce works of great merits; such a period is often called Classical Period or Age. For example the reign of Augustus is called the Classical Age of Rome; and the Age of Dante is called the Classical Age of Italian literature. As during the eighteenth century in England there was an abundance of literary productions, the critics named it the Classical Age in English literature. In the third place, during this period the English writers rebelled against the exaggerated and fantastic style of writing prevalent during the Elizabethan and Puritan ages, and they demanded that poetry, drama and prose should follow exact rules. In this they were influenced with French writers, especially Boileau and Rapin who insisted on precise methods of writing poetry and who professed to have discovered their rules in the classics of Horace and Aristotle. But as the eighteenth century writers in England followed the ancient classical writers only on their external performance and lacked their sublimity and grandeur, their classicism called pseudo-

classicism i.e., a false classicism.(A History of English Literature, 2000, 173).

The term Augustan Age was chosen by the writers of eighteenth century themselves, who saw in Pope, Addison, Swift, Johnson and Burke the modern parallels to Horace, Virgil, Cicero and other brilliant writers who made Roman literature famous during the reign of Emperor Augustus. Of course, to term this as the Augustan Age is no justified because the writers of this period could not compare favorably with those of Augustan Age in Latin literature.

The eighteenth century also called the Age of Reason or Good Sense, because the people thought that they could stand on their own legs and be guided by in the conduct of their affairs by the light of their own reason unclouded by respect for ancient precedent.

Neoclassical Literature: Its Characteristics and Famous Examples

the neoclassical era is nestled between the renaissance and romantic periods of literature. Though this period lasted only for around 150 years, its influence can be seen in the literature of today.

Neoclassical authors saw the world under a new light. Unlike the previous two eras, the writers of this era gave more importance to social needs as compared to individual needs. They believed that man can find meaning in society, religion, natural order, government, and literature. In no time, the winds of a new revolution swept through Europe and North America, and changed everything from art and literature to society and fashion, on its way. Though the neoclassical era later transitioned into the romantic era, it left behind a prominent footprint which can be seen in the literary works of today. The term neo means new while classical refers to the Roman and Greek classics, hence the name is aptly coined as neoclassical.



Neoclassical literature emulated the Greek and Roman styles of writing. The neoclassical era was closely preceded by the renaissance period. Before the renaissance period, life and literature was mainly dictated by the Church. However, during renaissance, science and innovation was given the main emphasis. Thus, in the neoclassical era, a vast difference between the two ideologies can be witnessed. Therefore, you will find confusion and contrary depictions in neoclassical literature, especially when talking about drama because neo-classic tragedy departed from its Senecan model. (An Introduction to the Study of Literature, 1965, P237).

Characteristics

Neoclassical literature was defined by common sense, order, accuracy, and structure. In the literature of the renaissance period, man was portrayed to be good; however, this genre of writings showed man to be flawed and relatively more human. Their characters also practiced conservatism, self-control, and restraint.

A large number of literary works came out during this period, which included parody, fables, melodrama, rhyming with couplets, satire, letters, diaries, novels, and essays. More emphasis was given to grammar and etymology (study of words).

Stages

For the sake of convenience, experts have divided this era into three sections: Restoration period, Augustan era, and Age of Johnson.

The Restoration Period (1660-1700)

After the beheading of King Charles I, the monarchy was 'restored', and so this period got the name 'restoration'. A new era had dawned with epic works such as Paradise Lost and Areopagitica by Milton and Sodom by Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester. It also saw a new age of both sexual comedy and wisdom, with works

such as The Country Wife and The Pilgrim's Progress respectively. While writers like Richard Blackmore wrote King Arthur, it also saw critics like Jeremy Collier, John Dryden, and John Dennis who gave a new direction to understand literature and theater. Poetry too was revamped and saw the beginning of rhyme schemes. The iambic pentameter was one of the popular forms of poetry, preferred by the poets and the listeners. Odes and pastorals became the new means for exchanging ideas. The poems were mostly realistic and satirical, in which, John Dryden reigned supreme. He further divided poetry into three heads, that of fables, political satire, and doctrinal poems. You will not find any spiritual bias, moral highness, or philosophy in these poems, which became the signature style of the Restoration Era.

Augustan Age (1700-1745)

The Augustan Age took its name from the Roman Emperor Augustus, whose monarchy brought stability in the social and political environment. It is during his reign, that epic writers such as Ovid, Horace, Virgil, etc., flourished.

Writers such as Pope, Dryden, Daniel Defoe, Swift, and Addison were the major contributors to this era. Dryden's attempts at satiric verse were highly admired by many generations. This era was also called the Age of Pope due to his noteworthy contributions as his "The Rape of the Lock is conceived within the framework of the classical epic. (Twentieth Century Prose, 2010, P.31)

Age of Johnson (1745-1785)

This era made its way into the literary world by stepping out of the shadows of its previous age. Shakespearean literature found appreciation during this era. It brought forth the Gothic school of literature. Qualities like balance, reason, and intellect were the main focus of this



era. Hence, this age is also called the Age of Sensibility. Important works such as Burke's, A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas on the Sublime and Beautiful, Johnson's, The Rambler, and Goldsmith's, The Vicar of Wakefield are still read. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) gave a massive literary contribution, which till date is a great boon to one and all. And that is the Dictionary of the English Language, which was first published in the year 1755. Though many similar books were used prior to this book, the dictionary in particular was the one that was most popularly used and admired, right until the printing of the Oxford English Dictionary in 1928.

Some Neoclassical Writers and their Works

- i. John Milton (1608 - 1674), Paradise Lost.
 - ii. John Dryden (1631 - 1700), To My Lord Chancellor and Marriage a la Mode.
 - iii. Alexander Pope (1688 - 1744), Translation of the Iliad, Pastorals and An Essay on Criticism.
 - iv. Jonathan Swift (1667 - 1745), Gulliver's Travels.
 - v. Daniel Defoe (1660 - 1731), Robinson Crusoe.
 - vi. Samuel Johnson (1709 - 1784), A Dictionary of the English Language
- A new class of poets and writers rose out of the flickering ashes of neoclassical literature, and a new genre called Romanticism manifested itself with prominent writers like William Wordsworth, Coleridge, John Keats, Lord Byron, Shelley, and William Blake. (Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia).

Contribution of Classicism to English Literature: *The Age of Golden Satire:*

In any society, satire is among the most prevalent of comic forms. This is not always true, for before the eighteenth century, satire was

not a fully developed form. Satire, however, rose out of necessity; writers and artists need a way to ambiguously criticize their governments, their religious institutions, and their aristocrats. By the eighteenth century, satires were hugely popular. Satire as an art form has its roots in the classics, specially in the Roman Horace's Satires. Satire as it was originally proposed was a form of literature using sarcasm, irony, and wit to bring out a change in society, but in the eighteenth century Voltaire, Jonathan Swift and William Hogarth expanded satire to include politics, as well as art. (English Literature, 2009, P.770)

The political climate of the time was one of tension. Any criticism of government would bring harsh punishments, sometimes exile or death. In order to voice opinions without fear of punishment, malcontented writers turn to satire. Voltaire's *Candide* and Swift's *Modest Proposal* are two examples of this new genre. By creating a fictional world modeled after the world he hated, Voltaire was able to attack scientists and theologians with impunity. Jonathan Swift created many fictional worlds in his great work, *Gulliver's Travels*, where he constantly drew parallels to the English government.

The new form was not limited to literature alone, William Hogarth expanded Satire to include art as well. His series of paintings, *A Rake's Progress*, narrate the life of a young man in eighteenth century London. Hogarth's painting also illustrates that anything can be the object of Satire, as he made fun of every aspect of life, not simply the institutions of religion, science, and politics. Although not all Satire dealt with religion, science and politics, the most notable satirist of the time, Voltaire confined his writings to these subjects. His style, which has been widely used in our time is to portray a member of the society he is criticizing as



foolish and hypocritical. In one of his most famous works, *Candide*, Voltaire repeatedly mocks the supposedly all-knowing philosophers with the Character of Dr. Pangloss, professor of "Metaphysicotheologocosmolo-nigopolgy".

Voltaire portrayed this man of science as very misguided, not the brilliant thinker one would expect. Evidence of this is seen in Dr. proudest accomplishment, he proved admirably that there is no effect without cause.

Another technique used by Voltaire to convey Satire is sarcastic humor. In one description of a common eighteenth century medical cure, the patient is very fortunate to lose only one eye and an ear. In this case, as well as in many others, sarcasm is used to show Voltaire's disdain to what he sees as false profession of knowledge. Voltaire occasionally uses slapstick humor as well, not to convey any criticism, but to lighten the mood. An amusing example of this comes in the early pages of *Candide*, "The Baron's lady weighted about three hundred and fifty pounds, and was therefore a person of great consideration"

Jonathon Swift uses satire as a potent weapon to attack government injustices and political abuse. In his brilliant essay, *A Modest Proposal*, Swift projects an expeditious way of addressing Irish poverty by eating Irish babies. In a less trenchant style, Swift attacks English politics and the idiosyncrasies of the people in *Gulliver's Travels*.

Also it is looked at as his most controversial work, *A Modest Proposal* was also Swift's most ingenious essay. The purpose of this essay was to provide a cheap and easy method for making the poor Irish children "sound and useful members of the Commonwealth". He contends that eating Irish babies could solve the problem and save the economy. Swift's most famous work was without a doubt *Gulliver's Travels*.

The Lilliput civilization is parallel to English Commonwealth, which cruel and corrupt. The Lilliputian Emperor represents the English monarch who was a tyrant over the people. Also the work was a weapon against the unfair British courts. In the story *Gulliver* is told "the several committees of council have been called lately in the most private manner on your account(Swift 78). This exemplifies the secrecy and unfairness of the courts which tried to condemn people without fair trial.

William Hogarth was an innovator by appropriating the use of satire in the art. A talented painter and engraver, lively created comical scenes pokes fun on the conventions of the time, including the rich and poor, doctors and lawyers, drinkers and gamblers, and politicians and preachers. In this way, Hogarth brought the French Rococo style and combined it with a distinctively English subject matter to create some of the most well known art and satire of the eighteenth century. Hogarth's favorite device was to create a series of narrative scenes that followed the main character or characters through their encounter and submission to any one of the various social evils. For examples in his series entitled *The Marriage of a Young Lord*, arranged by his parents, begins to founder. In one scene called "Breakfast Scene" the young husband and wife sit wearily after a long night of partying. The young nobleman, with empty pockets(from gambling), his hat still on, ruffled clothing, and broken sword is obviously worn out from the last night's adventures. His dog sniff at a lace cap hanging suspiciously from his pocket. His servant, carrying un paid bills is looking upwards with despair at his master's slovenly behavior.

Another famous print, "Gin Lane and Beer Street", Hogarth exaggerates the danger of people switching from beer, considered healthy,



to gin, which was looked down upon as a drink for drunkards. The print presents two scenes. The first one, "Gin lane", shows town gone to ruins. Garbage is thrown from the windows, a cart is overflowing with the dead, and men fighting in the background. In the foreground, a mother takes some snuff, while ignoring her infant who is falling off her lap. Vagrant children wrestle with a dog for the last bit of meat on a discarded bone. In the distance, a cook is preparing a feast of baby, a shocking idea reminiscent of A Modest Proposal. In "Beer Street Scene", things are much happier. An artist paints a sign in the village square. The pawnbroker's shop, without its business, has gone to ruins. In front of it, merchants are hard at work, enjoying a thriving economy. In the background, the fishing touches are put in a brand new building. Everyone is working, everyone is healthy, and everyone is happy.

The humor in Hogarth's works is of the same thread that gives the spreads of Mad magazine their charm. Crowded scenes full of detail, have been carefully worked so that the audience may peruse subjects and setting several times and still not catch all of the details. In this way, Hogarth was able to create what would be called "conversation pieces", for in the same way children can look a where's Waldo for the hidden humor, so could the people of eighteenth century look at Hogarth's print and have fun.

At the same time Hogarth was creating pieces that would, as the classical Horace said in his Satires, "use humor for moral ends" Horace dealt with the same type of subject matter that Voltaire and Swift did notably the vanity of the rich, the corruption of the government, and the hypocrisy of religious doctrine. He criticized the behavior of the public as well, illustrating the dangers of immoral behavior. This is evident in The Rake's Progress where alcohol abuse and

other debauchery lead to good man's man downfall. Hogarth is therefore able to use Satire to bring out the change, the true quest of a true satirist.

In conclusion, the eighteenth century could be described as the birthplace of modern satire. For the first time, the educated upper crust was criticizing the establishments, and these criticisms were reaching the lower classes. Three satirists: Swift, Voltaire and Hogarth brought about necessary social justice through their wit. In an age of reason, the satirist found and exposed society's problem so that they could be laughed at, and so that they could change. Much is owed to the pioneers of satire, who personified the attitude and the dream of eighteenth century.

Conclusion

(Reaction Against the Classical Period)

Was Romanticism simply a continuation of the Classicism or only a change in the subject matter?

very new artistic period is a reaction against something, and almost always it has elements of what came before. Classicism was itself a reaction against Rococo.

Where as Classicism was very structured and an attempt to bring the ancient world classical styles to the present (grandure, majesty, importance) it was actually more about dramatic vision than about emotion. Romanticism was all about emotion and individualism (though also rather dramatic!) and was a backlash against the status quo, against established values and social hierarchies. (there were political and social reasons behind the change as well as a desire for something new)

Romanticism began in the early 19th century and radically changed the way people perceived themselves and the state of nature around them. Unlike Classicism, which stood for order and



established the foundation for architecture, literature, painting and music, Romanticism allowed people to get away from the constricted, rational views of life and concentrate on an emotional and sentimental side of humanity. ...The Romantics turned to the poet before the scientist to harbor their convictions (they found that the orderly, mechanistic universe that the Science thrived under was too narrow-minded, systematic and downright heartless in terms of feeling or emotional thought) Romanticism was most definitely a reaction against, and not a continuation of, Classicism.

Results

- i . The word "classic" underwent development in meanings as many of English words nowadays.
- ii . Satire is the most important contribution of the Classical Age to the English literature.
- iii . There is no demarcation between English literary eras, they overlap with each other.

Recommendations:

- i. When studying and teaching English literature, literary movements should be taught as integrated not isolated.
- ii. Some words develop in meanings while others retreat.

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