

Literary Theory and Literary Criticism
Prof. Aysha Iqbal
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

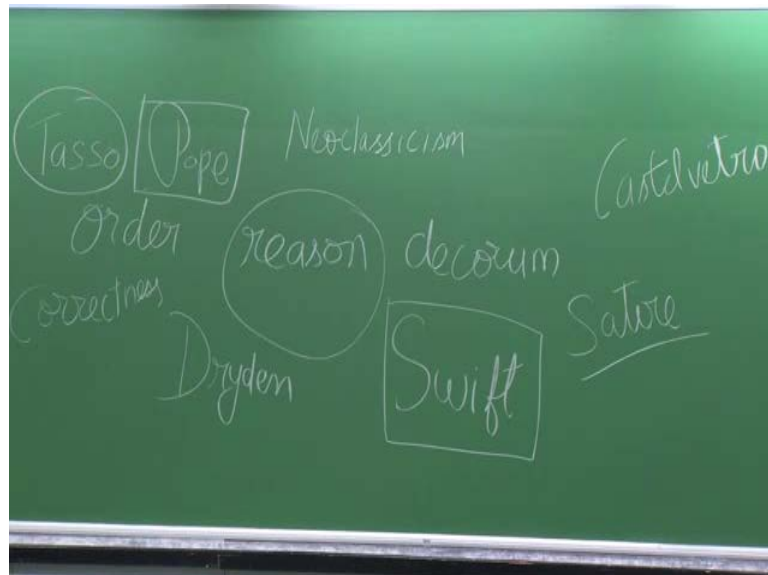
Lecture – 06

Part – B

Neoclassicism

Welcome friends to this lecture on Neoclassicism. The Neoclassic period is generally regarded as between 1660 and 1780.

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This period derives from 16th century Italian followers of Aristotle such as Castelvetro, who is strictly interpreted the unities of time and place and Tarso, whose theory of epic influenced Milton and Dryden. You may recall that Aristotle was strict about confirming to the unity of action by the time of Castelvetro. However, the emphasis was also on the observance of unities of time and place. The action should be centered in a particular place, in a specific place and should take place within a specific time period, preferably within 24 hours, think Oedipus for example.

Now, in France, I am just taking you down the journey of a neoclassicism and it is history. So, in France the Academie Francaise was founded in 1634 by Cardinal

Richelieu and he did this to regulate and maintain the French language to maintain the purity, the so called purity and their standards of the French language. Neoclassicism took it in its ultimate form when Zola maintained another French writer Zola, who maintained that there were standards of excellence in literature, which could only be attained by following the rules of the ancients and this was important.

And this sort of paved way for the English neoclassicist as well to confirm and to follow the rules as specified by the ancients, and therefore the term neoclassicism. So, follow the classical writers, we have already considered and we have already done in some detail, the classical period which was, where the key people are, people like Aristotle and Plato, Horace and Longinus. So, follow the ancients and follow the rules as prescribed by them.

For Zola, we should not follow the ancients just because of their antiquity, but because their works confirm to nature and reason. In his 1674 book *L'Art Poétique*, Zola gives the principle of rather the four principles of neoclassicism; that is adherence to nature, reason, decorum, moderation and also unity. Zola's work influenced Alexander Pope, who is one of the foremost neoclassical writers in England and his work *An Essay on Criticism* published in 1711.

Pope advises that critic to first follow nature and your judgment frame by her just standard which is still the same lines from *Essay on Criticism*. Pope highlights the importance of decorum by saying, the sound must seem an echo to the sense. So, sense is important, he also advises the young poets to avoid extremes. So, write in moderation practice, moderation and decorum.

Then, a neoclassicist often referred to Horace's saying, which is the art that hides art. So, there should not be an over emphasis, godliness or ostentatious display of art, but rather it should be more elegant and more sophisticated. The poets admired the great Johns by the poets I mean the neoclassicist, the poets of that period they admired the great Johns, such as epic and tragedy of their predecessors.

But, wrote their own works in a lesser demanding forms, you see they agreed, although they greatly admired the works of the classical writers such as Homer and Horace and the poets of antiquity, but the idea was that it is practically impossible to imitate them. So, what they did was to write their own works in lesser demanding forms and therefore,

the efflorescence of a Johns, such as the satire, the comedy of manners and prose. So, this is a period that is often remembered for these Johns, excellence in these Johns.

This is also the period which witnessed the emergence of the heroic couplet, not just the emergence, but also the flooring of the heroic couplet. This sort of meter, poetic meter reached its peak during the classical period, the neoclassical period. The heroic couplet proved to be the most suitable of all literary forms to give expression to the artistic ideals of the age. It was found to be suitable for drama, epic and satire, the three most prevalent literary forms of the age.

So, what is a heroic couplet? So, just a word about the heroic couplet, it is called heroic, because 10 syllable iambic verse is the usual form for epic verse in English, celebrating English exploits and heroic exploits. So, therefore, it was written in a 10 syllable iambic verse, this is the most important feature of the heroic couplet and this meter was used to celebrate the exploits of the heroes.

Therefore, the word, the name, heroic couplet, its use has varied from time to time and from poet to poet. However, during the neoclassical period Dryden and Pope perfected the form, it was precise and it was impassioned, it was not overwhelmingly emotional and sentimental and therefore, poets of the neoclassical age preferred it. And this form came to be regarded as the natural expression of the intellectual mood of that particular age.

Another feature of a neoclassicism was the treatment of town life. Now, London became the centre of all literary activities. So, we will be only talking about the romantic era, particularly the English romanticism, and then we will talk about the way countryside and the rural life came into prominence. However, neoclassical period was more urbane and more elegant and the idea was that London is the centre of all activities.

The coffee house became the place, where men of different professions, including authors often met to discuss a range of intellectual topics. Dryden and Pope first met at a coffee house and literature of the period drew its inspiration and its subjects from town life, rather than nature and the countryside, that was yet to come in the romantic age. Writers and this is important, writers hope to find a patron to help them with finance and influenced to further their career.

So, neoclassicism, who are the key people, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Samuel Johnson, Lord Chesterfield and many others. Generally, we associate this particular period with these prominent names. These writers were traditionalist and had great regard for the classical authors, especially the Romans, think Horace. For these writers, excellence in literature could be attained only by prolonged academic Endeavour and study.

Pope, for example, Alexander Pope was renowned for putting in long hours of work to in intellectual persuades, it also ruined his health to a large extent, but that is what these people were committed to. The writers of this age had great reverence for the rules of their art and this is important rules, not flouting the rules, but observing and adhering to the established norms and rules.

The 18th century was called the age of reason and quite fittingly these writers regarded reason and judgment as the most admirable qualities. One of the most defining features of neoclassicism was decorum, stick to the rules, observe the rules and confirm to the rules and that is known as decorum, the decorum in language thought and speech. The concept central to neoclassical literary theory and practice were imitation and nature, which were intimately related.

The notion of imitation of the external world and primarily of human action was a reaffirmation of the ideas of objectivity and impersonality, as opposed to the increasingly sophisticated individualism and exploration of subjectivity found in renaissance writers. But, also integral to this notion was the imitation of classical models, especially Homer and Virgil.

The neoclassicists emphasized on the imitation of nature, it refereed to the harmonious and hierarchical order of the universe including the various social and political hierarchies within the period. And in this vast scheme of nature, everything had it is proper and appointed place, therefore the word decorum. The concept also referred to human nature to what was the central timeless and universal human experience, hence nature had a deep moral significance.

Another key feature of this particular period was emphasis on intellectual quality; the leading writers avoided all kinds of extravagance and emotionalism. They were governed by a spirit of good sense and good taste. Practice moderation, literary artist were more

interested in modeling their work on the ancients, rather than inventing new forms. Thus, they imitated the old forms, such as epic, epigram, satire, ode, elegy, tragedy and comedy.

Although, at this stage, let me also point out that the neoclassicists, although they are often today. Remembered as writers, who followed rather than invented new forms, but the fact is that Dryden and Pope were highly individual and original writers as well. So, we have to be a little careful, when we think of all these concepts. Pope and Dryden often wrote on matters that were emotional, but never overwhelmingly so. The drama of the period also confirmed to the tenets of classicism.

One major reason for remembering people, such as Pope and Dryden and also Jonathan Swift is their quality of Wit. For example Pope, who is one of the most quotable and quoted English poets of all time, next only to Shakespeare. The neoclassicists as I have already told you were preoccupied with form, which in turn lead to a rather artificial style. Their vocabulary was neither colloquial nor technical; rather it had to be selected from what Dr Samuel Johnson advocated.

A system of words at once refined from the grossness of domestic use and free from the harshness of terms appropriated to particular arts. Consequently, the language generally tended to be stilted and standardized. The most cherish qualities were harmony, proportion, balance, restraint and correctness. Consider for example, Dryden's *An Essay on Dramatic Poetry* which debates their relative merits of French and English theatre.

The French observed Aristotle more carefully than the English, they depict only one action whereas, the English burden their place with subplots; that is what Dryden says. Dryden also criticizes Shakespeare's history place, because they tend to cramp 30 to 40 years of history into a representation of 2 and a half hours, which is not exactly an imitation of nature.

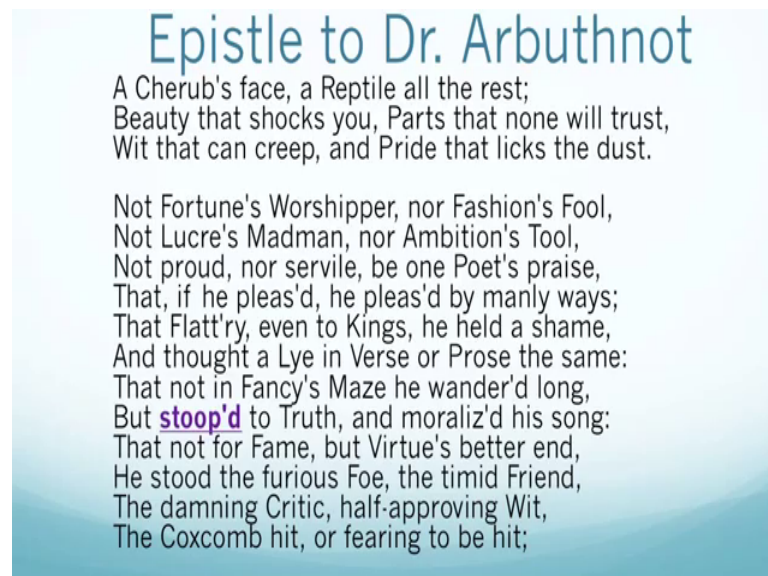
Now, contemporary scholars have also debated and interrogated Dryden's essay on criticism for all these arguments and contentions. A key feature of the neoclassicist era was the preeminence of man, they were the writers of this period were preoccupied with man in society, the concept of man in society and man and his environment. Thus in the vanity of a human wishes, Dr Samuel Johnson says let observation with extreme view survey mankind from China to Peru.

Neoclassical believes and ideals endorsed a certain vision of man and mankind, the activities of man were considered the main subjects of poetry. Consequently in his An Essay on Man, Pope says know then thyself, you know this is a line which is often quoted know thyself know then thyself, presume not God to scan, the proper study of Mankind is Man. It must be pointed out still that the Essay on Criticism is merely an imitation of French neoclassical theory.

And a Pope thus announces great wits may sometimes gloriously offend and rise to falls true critics there not meant. Pope also writes, in the epic there ought to be a difference of a style, observed in the speeches of human persons and those of the deities, the way God speak and the way human speak, there should be some kind of a difference, so therefore, another instance of the neoclassicist insistence on decorum.

The adherence to order balance and correctness was important to these writers. Therefore the popularity of satire and this immense popularity of a satire as adjourned, because satire was a tool that could be used as a corrective. So, at this point, let me draw your attention to Alexander Pope's great poem Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot and which is an enduring satire.

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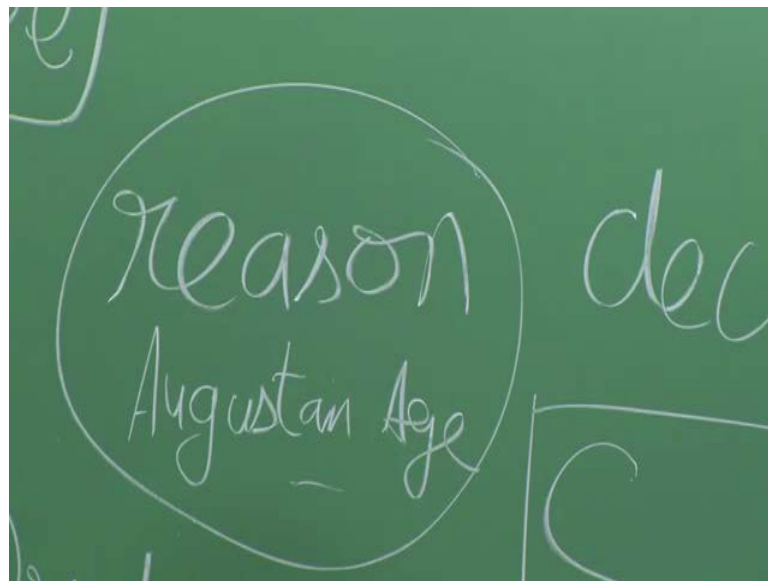


A Cherub's face a reptile all the rest, beauty that shocks you, parts that none will trust, Wit that can creep and pride that licks the dust, not fortunes worshipper nor fashion's fool, not Lucer's madman nor ambition's tool, not proud nor servile be one poets praise.

That if he pleased, he pleased by many ways that flattery even to kings, he held a shame and thought a lie in verse or prose the same, that not in fancy's maze he wandered long.

But Stoop'd to truth and moralized song that not for fame, but virtues better end, he stood the furious foe, the timid friend, the damning critic, half approving Wit, the coxcomb hit or fearing to be hit. So, that is Alexander Pope on his fellow poet satire at it is best.

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Now, the neoclassical age 17th, 18th century in England, it also goes by another name which is known as the Augustan Age. This is because during the reign of the Emperor Augustans in Rome, many distinguished writers flourished, such as Virgil, Horace and Ovid. So, neoclassicism suggests a period of urbane and classical allegiance in writing a time of harmony and decorum.

Let us move on to talk about John Dryden, I will be talking now about three very distinguish figures of this particular period, who sought of embody the neoclassical age. So, the first writer John Dryden lived between 1631 and 1700, he was named the father of English Criticism by Dr Samuel Johnson that is the highest kind of praise indeed. Dryden was a poet, critic translator, dramatist and was appointed poet laureate in 1668.

His two great poems are Mac Flecknoe published in 1682 and a political satire Epsilum and Asetophel published in 1681. His major contribution to literary criticism is essay of

dramatic poesy. Here, Dryden acknowledges the classics for providing archetypes for drama, though modern writers are at a liberty to create their own archetypes, according to Dryden. He also insists on the unity of a play and this is important, we have been talking about the insistence on the unities by the neoclassic.

And Dryden also insists that a law of nature be followed and observed in while writing plays and work of art. In his profess to *Annus Mirabilis* published in 1666, he says the composition of all poems is, are ought to be of Wit and Wit is no other than the faculty of imagination in the writer. So, that is a Wit a faculty of imagination in the writer insistence on order decorum observance of unities, adherence to nature and Wit.

And Wit is no other than the faculty of imagination in the writer; you can connect this with Coleridge and Wordsworth theories on fancy and imagination. Alexander Pope is another key writer of that particular period, he lived between 1688 to 1744. His most famous works include *The Rape of the Lock*, published in 1712 and the *Dunciad* published in 1728.

In his *An Essay on Man*, published in 1733, Pope launches a savage attack on human arrogance and pride. In his *An Essay on Criticism*, which is a poem written in the style of Horace's *Ars Poetica*, Pope sets out poetic rules and this particular poem, his *Essay on Criticism*, received much critical attention and contains Pope's famous epigrams. Such as fools go, where angels fear to tread to err is human to forgive divine, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing so. Oft coated epigrams all attributed to pope as they appear in his *An Essay on Criticism*.

The poem is divided into three sections, the first section opens with the argument that good taste derives from nature and that critics should imitate the ancient rules, established by the classical writers. The second section lists the many ways in which critics have deviated from these rules and the final section discusses, the characteristics of a good critic and concludes with a short history of literary criticism a very substantial work Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*.

For Pope the qualities of a good critic are primarily attributes of humanity or sensibility, rather than aesthetic qualities and here, you can distinguish this from the esthetes or writers, who come in the category of aestheticism. Popes observation on Wit brings it

close to the classical virtues as he says what oft was thought, but never so well expressed.

So, Wit is his is the key for the neoclassicists are other key writer and very important literary critic of all time Samuel Johnson, Dr Samuel Johnson who lived between 1709 ad 1784. He is poet essayist critic journalist and lexicographer, his major works include the life's of the most eminent English poets, the vanity of human wishes and a dictionary of the English language published in 1755.

Dr; Johnson writes in the history of restless prince of Abyssinia published in 1759 that the business of a poet is to examine not the individual, but the species to remark general properties and large appearances. In his profess to the plays William Shakespeare published in 1765, he concerns himself with three issues, how a poets reputation is established, the poets relationship and the relative virtues of nature and experiences of life as against a reliance on convention.

So, the key features of Dr; Johnson's criticism as they appear in his profess to the plays of William Shakespeare. He defends tragic comedy and states that Shakespeare best practices contrary to the rules of criticism that there should be only tragedy or comedy, you see it goes against what the classicist would adhere to. But, for Johnson there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature. The end of the writing is to instruct, the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing. So, that is about it for neoclassicism.

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Biblio

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And here is the bibliography, some seminal works that you may please refer to Nesbit and Rawson's, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, volume for The Eighteenth Century and Philip's Smallwood's, *Reconstructing Criticism. Pope's Essay on Criticism and the Logic of Definition*, published in 2003.

So, thank you very much and see you in the next class.