
ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE 18th CENTURY: ENLIGHTENMENT IN ENGLAND

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Abstract: This scientific article explores the landscape of English literature during the 18th century, a period known as the Enlightenment in England. It provides an overview of the key characteristics, notable authors, and enduring impact of this literary era. The article employs a literature review approach to examine the significant literary works, materials, and methods employed by authors of the time. The findings shed light on the cultural and intellectual transformations that took place during this period, shaping the course of English literature for centuries to come.

Key words: English literature, 18th century, Enlightenment, authors, literature review, enduring impact.

Introduction:

The 18th century in England witnessed a significant intellectual and cultural movement known as the Enlightenment. This era, marked by a surge in scientific discoveries, philosophical ideas, and political debates, had a profound impact on English literature. Writers of this period sought to challenge traditional beliefs and conventions, advocating for intellectual freedom and social progress. This article aims to explore the literary landscape of the 18th century, focusing on key authors, notable works, and the enduring impact of this period on English literature as a whole.

Literature Review:

The literature of the 18th century reflects the ideals and values of the Enlightenment. One of the defining features was the emphasis on reason, rationality, and empirical evidence. Writers of this period sought to challenge traditional beliefs and conventions, advocating for intellectual freedom and social progress. They employed various literary forms such as novels, poetry, essays, and letters to express their ideas. The literature of the time demonstrated a shift from religious and metaphysical themes towards a focus on reason, individualism, and social commentary. Satire and irony became prominent tools for writers to critique society and its institutions. The novel emerged as a popular literary form, offering realistic portrayals of characters and exploring social issues.

Notable Authors:

1. Jonathan Swift: Known for his satirical masterpiece “Gulliver’s Travels” (1726), Swift criticized societal norms and institutions, employing sharp wit and irony to highlight the follies of human nature. “Gulliver’s Travels” is a satirical narrative wherein the protagonist, Lemuel Gulliver, encounters various fantastical lands, providing a platform for Swift to satirize political and social systems of his time.
2. Alexander Pope: Renowned for his poetic works such as “An Essay on Criticism” (1711) and “The Rape of the Lock” (1712), Pope skillfully blended satire, moral teachings, and literary craftsmanship. “An Essay on Criticism” is a didactic poem that provides guidelines for good literary criticism, while “The Rape of the Lock” is a mock-heroic poem that satirizes the triviality of a society obsessed with social status.
3. Samuel Johnson: His magnum opus, “A Dictionary of the English Language” (1755), was a monumental linguistic achievement that standardized the English language, greatly influencing subsequent dictionaries. Johnson’s dictionary not only provided definitions but also included

etymologies and illustrative quotations, showcasing the richness and history of the English language.

4. Daniel Defoe: Notable for his novel “Robinson Crusoe” (1719), Defoe pioneered the development of the modern novel, crafting a compelling narrative of survival and self-discovery. “Robinson Crusoe” chronicles the story of a shipwrecked individual who must navigate a deserted island, offering a profound exploration of human resilience and the nature of civilization.

5. Jane Austen: Though primarily associated with the 19th century, Austen’s early works, such as “Pride and Prejudice” (1813), were influenced by the 18th-century literary tradition. Her novels explored social class, gender roles, and the complexities of human relationships. “Pride and Prejudice” is a witty and insightful novel that satirizes the social conventions and expectations of the time, while also portraying the journey of self-discovery and romance.

Materials and Methods:

The study employed a comprehensive literature review approach, analyzing primary sources such as novels, poetry, essays, and letters from the 18th century. It involved an extensive exploration of the works of the notable authors mentioned above, along with other influential writers of the time. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles and critical analyses, were also consulted to provide a broader understanding of the era. The analysis focused on identifying the recurring themes, stylistic techniques, and socio-cultural context that characterized the literature of the 18th century.

Results:

The 18th-century literature reflected the intellectual and social transformations of the Enlightenment. It demonstrated a shift from religious and metaphysical themes towards a focus on reason, individualism, and social commentary. Satire and irony became prominent tools for writers to critique society and its institutions. The novel emerged as a popular literary form, offering realistic portrayals of characters and exploring social issues. The works of Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, Daniel Defoe, and Jane Austen exemplify these trends and showcase the diversity and richness of 18th-century literature.

Discussion:

The literature of the 18th century played a pivotal role in shaping the course of English literature. It challenged traditional norms, fostering intellectual debates and encouraging critical thinking. The emphasis on reason and empirical evidence laid the foundation for the Romantic and Victorian eras that followed, while also influencing the development of the modern novel. The writers of this period used their literary works to engage with and critique the social, political, and cultural realities of their time. They explored themes such as social inequality, the role of women, the power of satire, and the search for personal identity. The literature of the Enlightenment in England not only entertained but also enlightened readers, provoking them to question established beliefs and advocate for social change.

Enduring Impact:

The literary works of the 18th century continue to resonate in contemporary literature and popular culture. The satirical approach, social commentary, and realistic character portrayals pioneered during this era remain relevant in addressing societal issues. The influence of writers like Swift, Pope, Johnson, Defoe, and Austen extends beyond their own time, as their works continue to be studied, appreciated, and adapted into various forms. Furthermore, the Enlightenment ideals of reason, individualism, and progress continue to shape literary and intellectual discourse today. The literature of the 18th century serves as a testament to the enduring power of literature to challenge, inspire, and shape societies.

Conclusion:

The Enlightenment in 18th-century England brought about a profound transformation in literature. Authors like Swift, Pope, Johnson, Defoe, and Austen revolutionized the literary landscape, leaving an enduring impact on subsequent generations. Their works challenged existing norms, encouraged critical thinking, and set the stage for the development of modern English literature. The literature of the 18th Century provided a platform for intellectual exploration, social commentary, and artistic innovation. It remains a significant period in the history of English literature, influencing and inspiring writers and readers alike.

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