



The British Age of Reason (1700 - 1800)

Historical Background

The peacefulness which dominated the Elizabethan Era was interrupted in 1642 by a Civil War which lasted seven years and resulted in the king being executed. On one side the King and his followers supported the established church and the aristocracy, on the other side the Puritans supported Parliament, a reformed church and a 'sinful' way of life. However, England became a republic or 'Commonwealth' for twelve years after the war had ended, but eventually monarchy was restored. During this century the power of the aristocracy had been broken for ever by the growth of trade and the emergence of a stronger middle class.

The nation, shaken by the convulsions and passions of the 17th century met the 18th century determined to lead peaceful, orderly and moderate lives. Property, decorum, correctness, gentility and common sense were what the English strived for. Any expression of feelings was ridiculed. It was a time of elegant formality, when the values of the Ancient Greeks and Romans were held in high repute. This period is often known as the Augustan Age due to the Roman Emperor Augustus who stabilized and expanded the Roman Empire.

Scientific development greatly strengthened the popularity of law and of reason. Isaac Newton had discovered many laws of the universe and man believed that, by using reason, the laws of society could also be distinguished and its progress be predicted. Satire became the dominant form in literature,

for when men think of society as a reasonable operation, but find that it is just as irrational and crude as ever, they naturally rely on satirical writing.

During the 18th century men were also peacefully divided on political, religious and personal ideas therefore they never resorted to violence to settle their differences. Writers of satire were useful in attacking and defending different persons and different ideas. The writers of this century considered themselves the "guardians of civilization". They were anxious to expose anyone, especially those who did not meet the high intellectual and social standards of the 'Coffee Houses' wherein the writers met and discussed their ideas.

The country was practically ruled by the so called new middle class. Nevertheless, they had not worked out a social code of behavior to substitute the old aristocratic ideal of chivalry or courtliness. The new educated and rich middle-classes intermingled with the nobility in 'Coffee Houses' creating a new code of behavior known as 'gentility'.

The American colonies declared independence from England during this period and inherited the manners and principles of the 18th Century. Thus the American political and social concepts derive from a specific group of English philosophers. It was from 18th century England that the three popular forms of literature in America today originated.

The Development of the Language

By the end the 17th century, writers had become displeased with the exuberant form of language of the Elizabethans. The influential thinkers, who often were concerned with science, were in search of a more concise, less decorated form of speech and of writing. The Puritans also opposed to any kind of ostentation, whether in dress, in religion or in language. Writers wished to transform English into an instrument to communicate as clearly and precisely as the classical languages they admired.

English kept on being enriched with words from other languages. Commerce with the Dutch brought many naval words and interest in Italian music introduced a great number terms from Italian.

The development of a more deliberate and precise form of expression culminated during the 18th century. Among the multitude of influences in this movement, neoclassicism might be seen as the most important. Influential writers were engaged to make English conform to the patterns of Latin where the sentences are long and the sense or meaning is sus-

pending until the last word or clause. Many Latin words were also introduced; 'persuasion', 'consequence', 'reverence', 'confidence', 'superior', etc. Using Latinized words, a writer was thought to be more precise, especially if what he intended was an abstract idea. Nevertheless, at times the text seems to be over-Latinized, long-winded and obscure to the modern reader.

Neoclassicism, however, was more interested in demonstrating dignity and formality than in providing precision. Latin words were used because they were longer and had a more formal sound. Smaller, Anglo-Saxon words were usually set aside because they were considered too low or slangy. The neoclassical wish to establish and preserve standards of purity led to the first major English dictionaries. Even though neoclassicism played a great role in toning down the bizarre and freakish speech habits of the Elizabethans, it ended up temporarily putting an end to the spirit of variety and experimentation that made the English language so rich and varied.

Lord Chesterfield (1694 - 1773)



Lord Chesterfield, a critic of 18th century society regarded the rituals and conventions of society as the single interest of the human being. As a literary device he wrote a series of 'letters' to his 'son' in which he makes comment on life. The letters are considered today the most perfect expressions of Augustan formality and sophistication.

'The Education of a Gentleman'

"Now that the Christmas breaking-up¹ draws near, I have ordered Mr. Desnoyers to go to you, during that time, to teach you to dance. I desired that you will particularly attend to the graceful motion of your arms; which with the manner of putting on your hat, and giving your hand, is all that a gentleman need attend to.

Dancing in itself is a very trifling, silly thing; but it is one of those established follies to which people of sense are sometimes obliged to conform; and then they should be able to do it well. And though I would not have you a dancer, yet when you do dance, I would have you dance well; as I would have you do everything that you do, well.

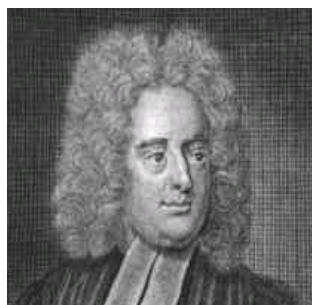
¹ holiday

² a senseless man of fashion

For instance, dress is a very foolish thing; and yet it is a very foolish thing for a man not to be well dressed, according to his rank and way of life; and it is so far from being disparagement to any man's understanding, that it is rather a proof of it, to be as well dressed as those whom he lives with. The difference in this case between a man of sense and a fop² is that the fop² values himself upon his dress; and the man of sense laughs at it, at the same time that he knows he must not neglect it.

There are a thousand foolish customs of this kind, which not being criminal, must be complied with, and even cheerfully, by men of sense ..."

Jonathan Swift (1667 - 1745)



Jonathan Swift was a fierce satirist who strongly believed in the idea that man should live harmoniously in a perfect, well-ordered society. However, in 18th century society, he witnessed corruption, brutality and ignorance. His most famous satire is a fantastic story called 'Gulliver's Travels'. In the first book, Gulliver is washed ashore after a shipwreck in the country of Lilliput, whose citizenry appear ridiculous to him because of their tiny size. In the other books of his 'voyages' he comes across other unusual societies.

'Gulliver's Travels'

... The natives came, by degrees, to be less apprehensive of any danger from me. I would sometimes lie down and let five or six of them dance on my hand; and at the last, the boys and girls would venture to come and play hide and seek in my hair. I had now made a good progress in understanding and speaking their language.

The Emperor had a mind, one day, to entertain me with several of the country shows wherein they exceed all nations I have known, both for dexterity and magnificence. I was diverted with none so much as that of the rope dances performed upon a slender

white thread, extended about two feet from the ground.

This diversion is only practiced by those persons who are candidates for great employment and high favor at court. They are trained in this art from their youth, and are not always of noble birth, or liberal education. When a great office is vacant, either by death or disgrace (which often happens), five or six of those candidates petition the Emperor to entertain his Majesty and the court with a dance on the rope, and whoever jumps the highest, without falling, succeeds in the office.

Very often the chief ministers themselves are commanded to show their skill, and to convince the Emperor that they have not lost their faculty. Flimnap¹, the treasurer, is allowed to cut a caper² on the straight rope at least an inch higher than any other lord in the whole empire.

... These diversions are often attended with fatal accidents whereof great numbers are on record. The danger is much greater when the ministers them-

(Gulliver is later released from imprisonment)

... These articles (conditions of freedom) were brought to me by Skyresh Bolgoram³ in person, attended by two under-secretaries and several persons of distinction.

After they were read, I was demanded to swear to the performance of them-, first in the manner of my own country, and afterwards in the method described by their laws, which was to hold my right foot in my left hand and to place the middle finger of my right hand on the crown of my head and my thumb on the tip of my right ear. ...I have made a translation of the whole instrument, word for word, as near as I was able, which I here offer.

Golbasto momaren evlame mully ully gue ... most mighty Emperor of Lilliput, delight and terror of the universe, whose dominions extend for five thousand blustrugs (about 20 kilometres) to the extremities of the globe, monarch of all monarchs, taller

selves are commanded to show their dexterity, for by contending to excel themselves and their fellows, there is hardly one of them that hath not received a fall, and some of them two or three. I was assured that, a year or two before my arrival, Flimnap would have infallibly broken his neck if one of the king's cushions, that accidentally lay on the ground, had not weakened the force of his fall.

than the sons of men; whose feet press down to the centre, and whose head strikes against the sun; at whose nod the princes of the earth shake their knees; pleasant as the spring, comfortable as the summer, fruitful as autumn and dreadful as winter. His most sublime Majesty proposeth to the Man-Mountain, lately arrived to our celestial dominions, the following articles which by a solemn oath, he shall be obliged to perform.

3rd. The said Man-Mountain shall confine his walks to our principle high roads, and not offer to walk or lie down in a meadow or field of corn.

4th. As he walks the said roads, he shall take the utmost care not to trample upon the bodies of our loving subjects, their horses, or carriages, nor take any of our subjects into his hand without their consent.

5th. ...etc."

¹ reference by Swift to a famous minister of the time

² dance

³ probably another reference by Swift to a living person

DISCUSSION:

1. List a few of the accomplishments expected of an 18th century gentleman.
2. What is it that Lord Chesterfield wishes to convey in his letter?
3. Why is the extract from Gulliver's Travels considered satirical and how is the satire achieved?
4. How do the extracts above reflect the society and times in which they were written?