




OVERVIEW: 18th Century



SIGNIFICANT "BUCKETS"

- POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS CHANGES;
- SOCIAL CHANGES;
- "ENLIGHTENMENT" SCIENCE;
- TECHNOLOGIES OF READING AND WRITING;
- LITERARY TRENDS



POLITICAL and RELIGIOUS changes

- POLITICAL:
 - RESTORATION: Charles II returns to power 1660;
 - PARLIAMENTARY power negotiated and entrenched;
 - POLITICAL/IDEOLOGICAL DIVISION: "Tories" (conservative, royalist, traditionalist) and the "Whigs" (reformist, republican, mercantile)
- RELIGIOUS:
 - Re-establishment of State Religion: Anglicanism
 - Test Act and other similar regulation limits the scope of participation of Catholics and Nonconformists in government and education

TENSION: traditional, stable, self-sufficient and hierarchical
VS
reformist, capitalist, globalized and liberal

SOCIAL CHANGE

- "PUBLIC SPHERE": increasing participation in a culture of public debate, inquiry, creativity and discussion (coffee-houses, newspapers, Royal Society);
- INDIVIDUALISM: "the individual" becomes the new core unit of society:
 - identity determined more by "human nature" and experience than by place in a traditional hierarchy (privacy, individual rights as the basis of law);
- Tension between the Rationalists (empiricist, emph. Reason) and the Sentimentals (emph. the universalizing power of FEELING);
- REFORMISM: new interest in the lives of others = increased emph. on charity;
- Britain as global colonial power = increased wealth and diversity AND increased agitation for human rights (abolition of slavery);
- POLITENESS: new standards of social conduct emph. order, stability and distinguish the REFINED from the VULGAR.

TENSION: increased access and liberalism in public sphere VS class polarization and barriers to access

ENLIGHTENMENT

- EMPIRICISM: the world is known through the senses, through experimentation and experience; emph. a negotiation of Reason (abstract theory) and experience (material, concrete);
- MITIGATED SCEPTICISM: rejection of dogma in favour of acute attention to the world and an acceptance of the limits of human certainty;
- NATURE: that which is unchanging and universal in human experience; "human nature"; the diversity of human experience viewed as exemplary of universal truths (natural laws govern diversity);
- EXPANDED SCOPE: wonders of the universe open to anyone with eyes (telescope, microscope, colonial expansion), but limited by ACCESS (religious, gender and class barriers to education);

TENSION: UNIVERSAL vs PARTICULAR

TECHNOLOGIES OF READING AND WRITING

- LITERARY MARKET: loosened restraints on printing + first copyright laws → establishment of authorship and bookselling as a professional, capitalist industry;
- LITERACY and ACCESS: increased literacy (middle classes, some labour classes) drives increasing diversity in subject matter and readership; CIRCULATING LIBRARIES lower some barriers to access;
- HIGH AND LOW: increased diversity of readers and writers (limited by access to education) creates discourses of "high" (legit: male, learned) art and "low" (vulgar, scandalous: female, labour classes) art;
- STANDARDIZATION and PERSPICUITY: emph. on SIMPLICITY and ELEGANCE reflects Enlightenment values (clear description of experience in language)

TENSION: ideas of universal access to knowledge VS market values driven by profit and limited by class, religion and gender

LITERARY TRENDS

- NEO-CLASSICISM (Augustinism): marrying of the wisdom and formal superiority of ANCIENT sources to the experience and communication of the particularly BRITISH;
- WIT: "perceiving resemblances between things apparently unlike" (21); combination of judgment and fancy;
- ELEVATED LANGUAGE: "a language that nobody speaks—with sentiments that everybody feels" (22)
- VERSE FORMS: Heroic Couplet (end-stopped iambic pentameter couplets: encapsulating, aphoristic, closed) and Blank Verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter: story-telling, expansive, open);
- HIGH and LOW: epic, heroic balanced by satiric and burlesque;
- "DOMESTIC" AND "PERSONAL" FORMS: novel, letters, diaries emphasized the individual particularity of lives in the context of moral or "Natural" precepts.

TENSION: extreme regulation and restraint (NEO-CLASSICAL) VS satirical critique of the overly rational in favour of excess and feeling (BURLESQUE, SENTIMENTAL)

TRANSITIONS AND TENSIONS

- Reason vs Feeling;
- Universal vs Particular;
- Traditional values vs reformist or radical values;
- Expanded access vs restricted access;
- Colonial expansion and exploitation vs awareness of shared humanity;
- Restraint vs excess;
- Individual desire vs duty to community;
- Literature as commodity vs literature as vehicle of morality
