

陈 嘉 著

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English Literature
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by

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Chapter V

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE

SECTION I THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL.

1. Political Background from the Revolution of 1688 to the End of the 18th Century.

The reactionary rule of the Stuart kings Charles II and James II, with their struggle for absolute political power and their corrupt rule and immoral court, led to greater and greater discontent from the bourgeoisie as well as a great part of the aristocracy. Eventually, James II had to flee in 1688, and William of Orange and Mary his wife became joint sovereigns on the English throne. It was called the "glorious" revolution but actually it was the beginning of the so-called "constitutional monarchy" in which the crown was more or less a figurehead and real authority was in the hands of parliament and of the cabinet responsible to parliament. Marx wrote: "The 'Glorious Revolution' brought into power, along with William of Orange, the landlord and capitalist appropriators of surplus value. They inaugurated the new era by practising on a colossal scale theft of state lands, that had hitherto been managed more modestly. These estates were given away, sold at ridiculous figures or annexed to private estates by direct seizure. All this happened without the slightest observation of legal etiquette. The Crown lands thus fraudulently appropriated, together with the Church estates, so far as these had not been lost again during the republican revolution, form the basis of the today princely domains of the English oligarchy. The bourgeois capitalists favoured the operation with the view, among others, to promoting free trade in land, to extending the domain of modern agriculture on the large farm system, and to increasing their supply of agricultural proletarians ready to hand.

Besides, the new landed aristocracy was the natural ally of the new bankocracy, of the new hatched 'haute finance' and of the large manufacturer, then depending on protective duties." So the coup d'état of 1688 was a compromise between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. It placed in the hands of the Whigs for the next century, except for short intervals, the control of the central state apparatus, while the Tory squirearchy had the control of the local government in the country districts, and thus a kind of dualism was created round which much of the political conflict of the 18th century turned.

The revolution of 1688 coming after that of 1640 definitely established the system of capitalism in England. Big trading companies were formed and money investments were made, and even capitalist ways of production began gradually to be introduced to the land that had been under feudal ownership. Enclosure, legalized by repeated parliamentary acts and carried on at a quicker pace and on a bigger scale than ever before, led to the eviction through the entire 18th century of thousands of small peasants, most of whom had to live in great misery and poverty, were driven from the land and were forced to try to earn their living in cities by working in the factories. These partly supplied the manpower needed for the factories during the industrial revolution which came about in the second half of the 18th century, but many of these peasants expropriated from the land still could not find jobs in the industries.

The invention of textile machines and other machinery toward the middle of the 18th century led gradually to the industrial revolution. England became the first powerful capitalist country in the world, and her manufactured goods flooded foreign markets.

These big changes, political and social, enriched the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy who ruled the country together, but brought great misery to the masses of people in England and even more in Scotland and in Ireland. Popular uprisings rose again and again in Ireland, especially in the 1720's. Two Jacobite uprisings took place in Scotland in 1715 and 1745, ostensibly to bring back to the throne the son and grandson of James II but actually expressing the desire of the Scot-

tish peasants to preserve their patriarchalism and to stem the entrance into Scotland of the capitalist system. In England, in the first half of the 18th century, after the death of Queen Anne in 1714 and the beginning of the Hanoverian dynasty, for 20 years (from the 1720's to the 1740's) reigned the Whig government under the Prime Minister Robert Walpole, a government notorious for its corruption and bribe-taking. In the second half of the 18th century, the bourgeois democratic movement centering around John Wilkes who was repeatedly expelled from parliament and repeatedly elected M.P. led in 1768 even to the suppression of riots and the subsequent strikes and demonstrations and cries of "Wilkes and Freedom". In 1780 there was also the so-called Gordon Riots, riots which were led by Lord Gordon against the Catholics but were significantly joined mostly by the poorest people in London.

Abroad, through the 18th century there were continued wars with France in North America and in India, ending in big colonial gains for England in those parts of the world, and this colonial expansion was quickly and inevitably followed by commercial expansion. In North America, however, in the second half of the century there broke out the American Revolution or the American War of Independence (1775 - 81) which came as a result of great tyranny and oppression of the colonial people there and which ended in the defeat of the English troops and the winning of independence for the American people.

Toward the end of the 18th century, in 1789, the French bourgeois revolution began and it had its strong effect upon England, as the English ruling classes feared the spread of the revolutionary flame across the English Channel while the progressive people in England welcomed the revolution and shared its revolutionary spirit and its slogans of liberty, fraternity and equality. The English government joined with the reactionary forces on the European Continent, the rulers in Austria, Prussia and Russia, to fight against the revolutionary forces of France, especially after the French revolution entered into its most revolutionary stage of the Jacobin Dictatorship, and then Napoleonic wars followed between France and England and her allies after Napoleon took hold of the reins of the government in France.

The 18th century saw the firm establishment of capitalism in England, the compromise between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie in their joint rule over the people, the oppression of the people through ruthless measures of extensive enclosure of land, the development of the industrial revolution and the intensifying of exploitation of industrial workers, the rise of England as a big industrial and colonial capitalist power, and the American Revolution and then the French Revolution and their effect upon England. These were the chief political and social events that took place in England in the 18th century and formed the important background for the development of the literature of this period.

2. The Enlightenment in England and Its Effect upon English Literature of the 18th century.

The Enlightenment was a progressive intellectual movement throughout Western Europe in the 18th century and in Russia in the 19th century. It was an European movement as it prevailed not only over England but also over Russia and Germany and especially France where there were such giants as Montesquieu, Diderot, Voltaire and Rousseau, writing on the eve of the French Revolution of 1789.

Lenin characterised the Enlighteners (with reference particularly to those in Russia in the 19th century) by saying that they had bitter hostility toward serfdom and all that went with it in the economic, social and juristic fields, that they strongly advocated education and self-government and freedom for the masses of people, that they asserted the rights and interests of the people, chiefly of the peasants. Lenin pointed out that though the Enlightenment was a bourgeois movement, the Enlighteners did not speak only of the narrow class interests of the bourgeoisie, for they believed that the abolition of serfdom and all the phenomena accompanying it would eventually lead to well-being for all the people, as they failed at the time to see the contradictions that would inevitably grow out of the capitalist system replacing serfdom.

But the Enlightenment in England, different from that in other European countries, appeared in an epoch not preceding but after the

bourgeois revolution. So the English Enlighteners, different from their French counterparts of the 18th century, did not call for the launching of a revolution but urged the carrying-on of the revolution to the finish. For the two bourgeois revolutions in England (in 1640 and 1688) brought about a new social-political system, at the foundation of which was the compromise between the upper strata of the old ruling class the aristocrats and the upper strata of the new ruling class the bourgeoisie, and the English Enlightenment came after this compromise.

The Enlighteners were called such because what they considered to be the chief means for the betterment of the society was "enlightenment" or "education" for the people. In other words, they believed in the power of reason, and that is why the 18th century in England has often been called "the age of reason". In the age of Enlightenment, no authorities, political or religious or otherwise, were accepted unchallenged, while almost all the old social and governmental forms and almost all the traditional concepts were placed under ruthless examination and criticism and acknowledged to be unreasonable and discarded. Practically all the past was considered to deserve only regret and contempt, and for the first time came the reign of reason, when reason served as the yardstick for the measure of all human activities and social relations, and superstition and injustice, privilege and oppression, were to yield place to "eternal truth," "eternal justice," "natural equality" and inalienable rights of man. But this reign of reason is nothing other than the idealized reign of the bourgeoisie.

The philosophers and writers and even scientists (like Isaac Newton) of the English Enlightenment did not exactly reject official religion, though Deism (the belief in natural religion) and materialistic philosophy were widely accepted and the official Christian church vainly tried to combat all the unorthodox philosophical teachings even among the clergy, while most of the Enlighteners believed that social problems could not be solved by church doctrine or by the power of God but should be tackled with human intelligence.

Though John Locke (1632 – 1704), one of the greatest of English

philosophers, lived and wrote chiefly in the second half of the 17th century, yet he was the chief representative of the new philosophy which was to have its great influence upon English society and English literature after 1688 and in almost the whole of the 18th century. Following in the steps of Bacon, Locke pointed out that knowledge is to be obtained not through intuition but from sensation and experience, from experiments and observations of facts, and that generalizations must be arrived at through the operation of thought on the particulars ("An Essay Concerning Human Understanding", 1690). In politics, he objected to the theory of hereditary and absolute monarchy, for a time exiled himself in Holland waiting for the "revolution" of 1688, and believed that all individuals are born free, that a government is no more than public service, and that property is founded, at least originally, upon labour (in his "Two Treatises of Government", 1690). He also objected to the "classical" education prevalent in England at the time and recommended the cultivation of the mother tongue for children ("Some Thoughts Concerning Education", 1693). However, in religion he respected the existing Christian beliefs and the Bible and the moral needs of conscience, though he considered religion as a purely personal affair so that each person should be allowed absolute freedom in his religious beliefs and that there should be religious toleration except when the security of the country is involved (in "The Reasonableness of Christianity", 1695; and "Letters Concerning Toleration", 1689 - 92). Thus, in the two fields of religion and science we find his dualism of materialism and idealism. His philosophy was, on the whole, that of rationalism and utilitarianism, and it not only had its great effect upon English thinkers of the 18th century but also on those on the European Continent, particularly on Voltaire.

At the end of the 17th century and in the early decades of the 18th, Deism came into prominence and was professed by a group of writers, including the philosopher and critic Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671 - 1713), known for his book "Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, and Times" (1711). The Deists admitted their belief in a Supreme Being or God as the creator of the world

of nature, but they glorified reason and so rejected the so-called "revealed" religion as well as the supernatural doctrines of Christianity. Some of the Deists even openly attacked the integrity of the Christian Bible. Shaftesbury as a Deist had his "optimistic" philosophy, believing that man is naturally virtuous, that the individual's own good is included in the good of the society. Shaftesbury's philosophy was aristocratic in nature, as he believed in the perfectibility of human nature through the aid of culture. Like other Deists, Shaftesbury, while professing to honour the Christian faith, actually exercised his wit and power of language to undermine it. The influence of Deism was especially great upon the works of Alexander Pope.

The two great English philosophers in the 18th century, following in the steps of John Locke, were George Berkeley (1685 – 1753) and David Hume (1711 – 1776). Born in Ireland of English descent, Berkeley studied at Trinity College, Dublin, came to England and became a friend to Steele, Addison, Swift and Pope. Then he travelled on the European Continent and later to America, and was Dean of Derry and Bishop of Cloyne. Berkeley held the idealistic view of philosophical immaterialism or phenomenalism, according to which what we see and touch is only a symbol of what is spiritual and eternal. He questioned the existence of matter apart from its perception to the mind, and so his formula is "to be is to be perceived" ("esse est percipi"), or in other words, material objects do not exist except in our minds, or if they do we can know them only in our minds (in his "Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Understanding", 1710). Berkeley attacked Locke's dualism of spirit and matter as skepticism and atheism.

David Hume was born in Edinburgh and studied at Edinburgh University, and then after serving on a mission to the European Continent as a judge-advocate to a general, was keeper of the Advocates' Library in Edinburgh, then secretary to the Embassy at Paris and finally Under-Secretary of State. His chief philosophical works are: "Treatise of Human Nature" (1739 – 40) and "Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding" (1748). Hume rejected Locke's belief in a material

substance as well as Berkeley's belief in a spiritual substance. According to him the continued existence of objects distinct from perception is an illusion. He argued that we have no single permanent impression of self, but only a succession of particular ever-changing impressions. Men may call themselves persons, but "are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions". A variable interrupted existence is mistaken by the imagination for an invariable uninterrupted existence. So his philosophy was that of skepticism, according to which nothing can be known by the mind but its own "impressions" (sensations) and "ideas" (faint copies of impressions). He was against supernaturalism in religion, and anticipated the positivism of the 19th century. In ethics he prepared the way for utilitarianism: he based ethical choice altogether on utility, on the sentiment that declared a preference of pleasure to pain. Hume was an aristocrat in politics and an enemy to popular government. He abandoned the views that men are naturally equal and that the society is established by contract, but he regarded political society as evolved from the family and existing for the purpose of administering justice (in "Of the Origin of Government", 1777). Hume was also a historian, and showed his Tory attitude in his "History of Great Britain" (1754 - 61).

But whatever might be the philosophical theories advanced by the different philosophers, whether it be the dualism of materialism and idealism of Locke or the philosophical immaterialism of Berkeley or the skepticism of Hume or the natural religion of the Deists, rationalism was the common demand of all, and that meant the end of the absolute rule of supernaturalism in Christian religion and the attempts of all the Enlighteners at least to fight against all things unnatural and unreasonable in the society and to hope for more natural and rational human relations.

Thus among the English Enlighteners of the 18th century there were chiefly two groups. One group supported essentially the principles of the existing social order that evolved out of the two revolutions of 1640 and 1688 and considered that partial reforms

would be sufficient. Among the most important writers of this more moderate group may be included chiefly Pope, Defoe, Addison and Steele, and Richardson. The other group of the Enlighteners, the more radical wing, struggled for more resolute democratization in the management of the government and even partly defended the interests of the exploited labouring masses, the peasants and the working people in the cities. The representative writers of this group include Swift, Fielding, Smollett, Sheridan and also Goldsmith.

While most of the writers of the more moderate group tried to work out a standard of moral conduct which proceeded from the acknowledgment that the existing social conditions of the day were essentially fair and just, many writers of the more radical and democratic stand saw more clearly the discrepancy between what they considered to constitute proper moral standards and social justice on the one hand and the actual practices in the bourgeois-aristocratic society of their age on the other. Generally speaking, in the early years of the 18th century, after the new readjustments following the bourgeois-aristocratic compromise of 1688, many writers of the Enlightenment believed it possible to affirm virtue and to create free conditions of life within the limits of the then existing civilization, but as the social contradictions grew more and more acute in the middle decades of the century, many of the Enlighteners began to envy the man of the primitive society for his greater freedom and they felt that the return to primitive existence, the "return to nature", was perhaps the only way for the rebirth of man and for the achievement of human freedom, and this cult of "primitive existence" was frequently connected with the idealization of the old patriarchal mode of life.

English literature of the 18th century, from the growth and development of the Enlightenment to its eventual crisis, may therefore be conveniently divided into three major periods or stages. (1) The first or the early period of the Enlightenment lasted roughly from the so-called "glorious" revolution of 1688 to the end of the 1730's, and in this period were formed the general principles of the new tendency of the Enlightenment, with the moderate group dominating the scene and

inclined to place great hopes upon the age. From the artistic point of view, this period was characterized by the so-called neo-classicism in poetry, of which the leading figure was Alexander Pope. During this period arose also a new prose literature in the essays of Addison and Steele (appearing in the periodicals) and in the first realistic fiction of Defoe and Swift. Swift was the only major author of this period who in his works criticized rather than affirmed the new bourgeois-aristocratic society of the age. (2) The second or the more critical period of the Enlightenment stretched from the 1740's to the 1750's, and the more important works that appeared during these decades were chiefly the realistic novels of Richardson, Fielding and Smollett, of whom the last two made rather fierce attacks on the existing social conditions but still maintained sufficient faith in the eventual triumph of virtue over vice and in the final attainment somehow of social justice. (3) The third and last period of the Enlightenment, covering the last decades of the 18th century and characterized by the decline of the Enlightenment, was marked by the appearance of new literary tendencies of sentimentalism and pre-romanticism, both coming as protests to the social injustices of the day. Sentimentalism which also had its representative writers in the field of poetry (e.g., Edward Young and to a certain extent Thomas Gray, both minor poets) had its flowering chiefly in the domain of prose fiction, with the novels of Laurence Sterne and Oliver Goldsmith. Pre-romanticism manifested itself chiefly in poetry and had its start in the middle decades of the 18th century, but it consisted chiefly of minor poets and its struggle against the poetic tradition of neo-classicism did not end in its triumph till the last decades of the century, when the poetry of William Blake and Robert Burns appeared and became known. Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the chief dramatist of the century, who wrote his plays in the 1770's, belonged more to the tradition of Fielding and Smollett in spite of his small share also in sentimentalism.

SECTION II ENGLISH LITERATURE IN EARLY 18TH CENTURY.

1. Neo-Classicism in English Literature in Early 18th Century: Alexander Pope.

Alexander Pope (1688 – 1744) was born in London of a successful linen merchant's family, of Roman Catholic faith. He went to school for a few years and then was taught by a family priest because his Catholicism prevented him from attending any university at the time and from taking any official post later on. From his childhood Pope was feeble and sickly and all his life he was subject to severe bodily pain. From his twelfth year his family moved from London to a small country estate near Windsor Forest and there they lived for sixteen years. He wrote verse early and his "Pastorals" were said to have been written in his sixteenth year, but they were not published till 1709, and two years later, in 1711, appeared Pope's famous "Essay on Criticism" which first established his reputation as a poet.

In his youth Pope was first introduced to the literary world of London by the then elderly dramatist Wycherley. Later, about 1713, he and a group of his friends, including Swift, Arbuthnot, Gay, Parnell and Congreve, formed a Scriblerus Club to write together the "Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus" to ridicule "all the false tastes in learning". In 1712, when Pope knew of a quarrel between two aristocratic families because a Roman Catholic Lord Petre had forcibly cut off a lock of hair of a Miss Arabella Fermor, he was persuaded by his friends to write a poem to burlesque the incident and make it explode in laughter. The result was "The Rape of the Lock" which first appeared in two cantos and enjoyed a great and instantaneous success, and then it was expanded by the poet into five cantos and republished in 1714.

Pope did not side definitely either with the Whigs or with the Tories. He was familiar with the literary men of the Whigs Addison and Steele, and wrote a prologue for Addison's tragedy "Cato", yet

in his descriptive poem "Windsor Forest", he made political allusions meant to please the Tories.

Pope spent nearly ten years on the translation of Homer, finishing the "Iliad" in 1720 and the "Odessey" in 1726, with the help of two Cambridge scholars in the case of the "Odessey". These translated epics further enhanced his reputation as a poet. After that he wrote two well-known works "An Essay on Man" (1732-34) and the four "Moral Essays" (1731-35). In the meantime Pope spent a number of years writing and touching up his great satirical poem "The Dunciad" (written first in 1728, enlarged in 1729, recast in 1742 and finally completed in four books in 1743), in which he attacked many of his personal enemies, including Louis Theobald (who had attacked Pope's edition of Shakespeare) and then Colley Cibber the poet laureate of the time. In the last years of his life he also wrote "Satires" in imitation of the great satirical poet of ancient Rome, Horace. During his lifetime Pope quarrelled with a number of other writers, but his fame as a poet was established rather early in life and his influence upon other poets was very great both during his time and after.

Of Pope's shorter pieces of earlier date, his "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady" (1717) and "Eloisa to Abelard" are worthy of note because the theme of a woman who destroys herself in order to escape from the torture of hopeless love and that of a nun who loves and then forswears love both belong to the romantic tradition and call forth the poet's lyrical powers although they are composed in the polished heroic couplets and show signs of classicism in the artificial language employed.

"An Essay on Criticism", conceived after the Roman poet Horace's "Ars Poetica" ("On the Art of Poetry") and the French critic Boileau's "Art Poétique", was a manifesto of English neo-classicism as Pope uttered his aesthetic theories of poetry. Consisting of 744 lines and divided into three parts, the poem opens with the author bewailing the dearth of true taste in critics and stating the need to turn to nature as the best guide for critical judgements. Then the Ancients (particularly Homer and Virgil) are praised and their rules which are regarded