

NEOCLASSICISM

NEOCLASSICISM: The term for the classicism that dominated English literature in the Restoration Age and in the eighteenth century. It draws its name from its finding of models in classical literature and contemporary French neoclassical writings...a view of humankind as limited, dualistic, imperfect... The play of mind mattered more than the play of feeling, with the result that a polite, urbane, witty, intellectual art developed... Poetic diction and imagery tended to become conventional, with detail subordinated to design. The appeal to the intellect resulted in a fondness for wit and the production of satire in both prose and verse. A tendency to realism marked the presentation of life with stress on the generic qualities of men and women. Literature exalted form and avoided obscurity and mystery. It imitated the classics...

In the twentieth century there has been a strong neoclassical tendency, growing out of a reaction against Romanticism and out of distrust of the potentialities of human beings, together with a new respect for the place of intellect in life and art. Writers such as T. E. Hulme, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Irving Babbitt, Mark Van Doren, Edith Sitwell, Hugh Kenner, Louis Zukofsky, Guy Davenport, Richard Wilbur, W. H. Auden, and the New Critics [Yvor Winters, Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren] are on many issues at one with *neoclassicism*.

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NEOCLASSICAL AESTHETIC VALUES

1. order
2. concentration
3. economy
4. clarity
5. utility
6. logic
7. intellect
8. accuracy
9. restraint
10. decorum
11. good taste
12. balance
13. symmetry
14. proportion
15. harmony
16. grace

Neoclassical values correspond in general to characteristics of a "puritanism" as described in "Model of Metaphors." These values manifest a vertical consciousness at its purest in American literature during the Age of Reason, in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1789), the epic satire *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1815) by Hugh Brackenridge, the writings of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, and the poems of Philip Freneau, in particular his "On the Uniformity and Perfection of Nature" (1815). Among the American intellectual elite the transition from Puritanism in the 17th century to Neoclassicism in the 18th century and the way Puritanism influenced Neoclassical Americans is perfectly illustrated in Franklin's *Autobiography*. Outside the cities where over 90% of the people were farming, Puritanism remained the dominant value system and evolved into the Victorianism of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Neoclassical tradition continued in the writings of the Hartford wits and the Boston Brahmins--most notably Oliver Wendell Holmes and James Russell Lowell.

In late 19th-century American literature Neoclassical values were revived in Realism--Howells, James and Wharton--evident especially in the tendency to irony. While folksy as can be, the satirical wit and moralism of Mark Twain derive from Neoclassicism. In the 20th century, Neoclassical aesthetics informed

the Imagism of Pound and the Modernism of Eliot, Hemingway, Porter, and O'Connor. Thornton Wilder and Caroline Gordon are more conspicuously Neoclassical, as was the revolution of New Criticism promoting objectivity in literary analysis. Gordon had a classical education, frequently parallels her narratives to Greek myths, wrote a novel in the form of a Greek myth and was a leading New Critic. Eugene O'Neill studied Greek tragedies and Wilder wrote a play in the form of Greek myth, a novel set in ancient Greece, and a novel set in ancient Rome. The most notable Neoclassical poets of the 20th century are Yvor Winters and J. V. Cunningham.

NEOCLASSICISM IN EARLY AMERICAN FICTION

Hugh Henry Brackenridge (1748-1816) graduated from Princeton with the later President James Madison, became a chaplain in the Revolutionary War and afterward settled in the frontier town of Pittsburgh, where he founded a newspaper. When he ran in an election for representative from his district to the first Constitutional Convention in 1787, by far the most qualified candidate, he was defeated by an illiterate weaver. Dismayed, he wrote a satire called *Modern Chivalry* in installments from 1792-1815, reversing the roles of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in a picaresque narrative illustrating what can go wrong in a democracy. His Neoclassical prose style is rational like his hero, easy to read and consistently humorous. Cervantes satirized a dying Romantic tradition of the upper classes since the Middle Ages, whereas Brackenridge satirizes the romanticism--or plain stupidity--of the uneducated lower class in a contemporary democracy.

Modern Chivalry is still a funny book--witty, droll and understated like much literary British humor and similar to the pokerfaced tall-tale tradition that began in the American South during the 1830s and reached apotheosis in Mark Twain's picaresque satire *Huckleberry Finn* (1884). The rational hero is repeatedly exasperated by his servant Teague, an illiterate Irish immigrant. Teague seduces a chambermaid and succeeds in shifting the blame to a minister, he is invited to join the American Philosophical Society only because he finds a dead owl in the road, he becomes a newspaper editor though he can neither read nor write, he gets appointed Ambassador to Great Britain and seems destined for the Presidency.

NEOCLASSICISM EVOLVING TOWARD ROMANTICISM

Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810), whose writing was admired by Thomas Jefferson, was a liberal notable for publishing the first feminist tract in American history, *Alcuin* (1797), a dialogue arguing for the legal, political, economic and cultural freedom of women. The following year, he introduced Romanticism into American fiction, though he wrote in a stiff Neoclassical style developed by his education studying Latin and reading law. His novels, written simultaneously at high speed, tend to be almost barren of sensory detail, like an early black and white silent horror movie. His most significant novel *Wieland* (1798) was published the same year as *The Lyrical Ballads* by the British poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a book usually seen as introducing the Romantic Movement in western literature. *Edgar Huntly* (1799) is a detective novel that includes adventure in the wilderness and Indians who are not idealized. James Fenimore Cooper first attacked Brown, then imitated him somewhat in his Romantic *Leatherstocking Saga* (1823-41).

In *Wieland*, Brown is Neoclassical in criticizing the inflated Romantic villain, a ventriloquist named Carwin who misuses his power and precipitates Wieland's murder of his family, an atrocity based on a real case. Brown is empirical--pseudo-scientific--in presenting evidence when the older Wieland (way-land), a Calvinist representing the old order, blows up by spontaneous combustion while praying. He sounds like a rationalist himself, but he ridicules the conventional rationalist Pleyel for his smug rigidity. Repeatedly throughout the novel, he dramatizes deceptions of the "senses," refuting the psychology of John Locke then prevailing in the Age of Reason. Brown uses the artifice of the Romantic ventriloquist to prove the limitations and inadequacy of Lockean psychology, undermining Neoclassicism.

The novel becomes an allegory of intellectual history: The truth that her brother intends to kill her is revealed to the narrator Clara in a dream, intuitive knowledge that contradicts and transcends the data of her senses, refuting Locke and agreeing with Immanuel Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), which became the philosophical foundation of the Romantic Movement. Ironically, Brown's Romantic inclination

to peer into the depths of human nature turned him back toward Calvinism. By the end of *Wieland* the vision of Clara is darkly Gothic. Gothic fiction in Europe was entertainment, a popular reaction against the prevailing optimism of upper class rationalists who believed in progress, whereas the Americans Brown and Poe were serious in their Gothic visions.

Beginning in the late 18th century--still the Age of Reason--Romantic writers overthrew the tyranny of vertical consciousness and critiqued pure reason and empiricism in art as Kant did in philosophy. In the archetypal individuation process explained in "Model of Metaphors," Romanticism rotated the vertical mode of consciousness and its rationalist puritan values of the head, giving equal or greater authority to the heart, sensibility and intuition, evolving to include complex pastoralism and in some cases attaining holistic transcendentalism. In 20th century psychological theory, the succession of Freud by Jung is comparable to the earlier succession of Neoclassicism by Romanticism in cultural history. The American Romantics who followed Brown were extremely diverse in their development, each one expressing a unique personal vision, each one blending a degree of Romanticism with Neoclassical or other characteristics.

James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) wrote his famous Romantic saga of Leatherstocking in a stilted Neoclassical prose style tending to abstraction, hierarchy and generic typing. Poe wrote like a Romantic madman in his Gothic fiction yet like a Neoclassical empiricist in his detective fiction. Hawthorne is sedately Neoclassical in his prose style and in the structuring of his allegories, as exemplified by the symmetry of the contrasting scaffold scenes in *The Scarlet Letter*. Melville is Romantic in subjects, prose style and the allegorical questing structures of *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*, whereas later in his life, the style and other aesthetic characteristics of *Billy Budd* are Neoclassical and Realistic, appropriate to a story that "is no romance" (end section 2). Captain Vere is implicitly praised for reading Montaigne and writers who "in the spirit of common sense philosophize upon realities."

REALISM & MODERNISM

Realism in fiction is Neoclassical in its objectivity, irony, emphasis on facts, social orientation, tendency to the generic and in other respects, as exemplified by the psychological analyses of James and by the stately art of Wharton. The Imagism initiated by Pound is Neoclassical, as is the influential criticism of Eliot. Modernism is an holistic synthesis of Neoclassical and Romantic aesthetics varying from one writer to another. The supreme Expressionist in American literature, William Faulkner, synthesizes Neoclassical and Romantic characteristics in his greatest novel, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), with its evocative four-part symmetrical structure containing irrational stream-of-consciousness.

The most Neoclassical major American fiction writers after Wharton are Hemingway, Wilder, Porter, and Gordon. Modernism spans aesthetic modes from Neoclassicism at one end of a spectrum to Expressionism at the opposite end. Realism resists Expressionism because it sets clarity above art, whereas Modernism sets art above clarity, refusing to be limited by the capacity of common readers to understand or appreciate a work in one reading. Hemingway's prose style is famously economical and apparently clear because it looks simple, but the Neoclassical value of *restraint* is carried to such an extreme by his iceberg principle that *clarity* requires depth perception. In Porter, Neoclassicism is evident in moral and religious implications, parallels, juxtapositions, ironies, satire, and allegory.

POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernists (1960s-) are *anti*-Neoclassical on principle, as exemplified by the obscure fantasies of Thomas Pynchon and the fractured vision of David Foster Wallace in *Infinite Jest* (1996). Postmodernism is a decadent form of Romanticism--atheistic, cynical and solipsistic.

Michael Hollister (2014)