

LESSON THREE:

The Neoclassical Period 1660-1798

Historical Context

After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, England turned its back on the grim era of Puritan rule and entered a lively period in which the glittering Stuart court set the tone for upper-class social and political life. Charles II had spent much of his long exile in France, absorbing the glamour, elegance, and intrigue of the court of Louis XIV, and after his return to England he and his courtiers tried to emulate the French court's sophistication and splendour. Lords and ladies dressed in rich silks and lace-trimmed finery, wearing elaborate wigs and sparkling jewels. They performed intricate, stately dances at elegant balls and flocked to London's newly reopened theatres. Like Louis XIV, Charles was a patron of the arts and sciences, appointing England's first official poet laureate and chartering the scientific organization known as the Royal Society. Clever and cynical, the king was also extremely self-indulgent, and his excesses both shocked and titillated the English public.

With the Restoration came a return to Anglicanism as England's state religion and a realization that future monarchs would have to share their authority with Parliament, whose influence had increased substantially. An astute politician, Charles at first won widespread support in Parliament, weathering a series of disasters that included the Great Plague of 1665 and the Great Fire of London a year later. Soon, however, old political rivalries resurfaced, creating two factions that became the nation's chief political parties: the Tories and the Whigs. The Tory party—supporters of royal authority—consisted mainly of landowning aristocrats and conservative Anglicans, who had little tolerance for Protestant dissenters and no desire for war with France. The Whigs, who wanted to limit royal authority, included several powerful nobles as well as wealthy merchants and financiers. Suspicious of the king's Catholic advisers and his pro-French sympathies, the Whigs favoured leniency toward Protestant dissenters and sought to curb French expansion in Europe and North America, which they saw as a threat to England's commercial interests.

William and Mary

Political conflict increased when Charles, who had no legitimate children, was succeeded in 1685 by his Catholic brother, James. A blundering, tactless statesman, James II was determined to restore Roman Catholicism as England's state religion, thereby losing the support even of many Tories. As a result, the

Whigs in Parliament met with little opposition when they began negotiating to replace James with his Protestant daughter Mary and her husband, the Dutch nobleman William of Orange. In 1688, James was forced to abdicate, and William and Mary took the English throne peacefully in what would become known as the Glorious (or bloodless) Revolution—a triumph of Parliamentary rule over the divine right of kings. The next year, Parliament passed the English Bill of Rights, which put specific limits on royal authority. The remaining supporters of James II—and later those who supported the royal claims of his Catholic son, James Edward Stuart—were known as Jacobites (from Jacobus, the Latin form of James).

As a Dutchman and a Protestant, King William (who ruled alone after Mary died) was a natural enemy of Catholic France and its expansionist threats to Holland. From the first year of his reign, with Whig support, he took every opportunity to oppose the ambitions of Louis XIV with English military power, beginning a series of wars with France that some historians consider a "Second Hundred Years' War." A year before William's death, Parliament passed the Act of Settlement, which permanently barred Catholics from the throne. In 1702, therefore, the crown passed to Mary's Protestant sister, Anne, a somewhat stodgy but undemanding ruler who faithfully tended to her royal duties. During her reign, Scotland officially united with England to form Great Britain, and war with France continued — although Anne, unlike William, sided with the Tories who opposed it. A peace treaty arranged by her Tory ministers, or advisers, in 1713 procured what was to be only a brief lull in British-French antagonisms.

The House of Hanover

Outliving all 16 of her children, Anne was the last monarch of the house of Stuart. With her death in 1714, the crown passed to a distant cousin of hers—the ruler of Hanover in Germany—who as George I became the first ruler of Britain's house of Hanover. The new king spoke no English and was viewed with contempt by many Tories, some of whom supported James Edward Stuart's bid for the throne in the unsuccessful Jacobite rebellion of 1715. The Whigs, on the other hand, favored the Hanoverian succession and won the new king's loyalty. Because of the language barrier, George I relied heavily on his Whig ministers; and Robert Walpole, the head of the Whig party, emerged as the king's "prime minister" (the first official to be so called)—a position he continued to hold under George II, who succeeded his father in 1727. Toward the end of George II's reign, another able prime minister, William Pitt (the Elder), arose on the political scene. Pitt led the nation to victory over France in the Seven Years' War (called the French and Indian War in America), which resulted in Britain's acquisition of French Canada.

The Seven Years' War was still being fought when George III, grandson of George II, succeeded to the throne in 1760. The first British-born monarch of the house of Hanover, George III sought a more active role in governing the country, but his highhanded ways soon antagonized many. Scornful of the Whigs, George had trouble working with nearly everyone, partly because he suffered from a mental illness that grew worse over the years. During the first few decades of his 60-year reign, he led Britain into a series of political blunders that ultimately resulted in the loss of the American colonies.

The Age of Reason

Despite recurring warfare with France and the disaster of the American Revolution, the 18th century was a time of relative stability in Britain. The thought of the time was heavily influenced by the Enlightenment, a philosophical movement inspired by the works of such late- 17th-century figures as John Locke, the political philosopher who had provided a logical justification for the Glorious Revolution, and Sir Isaac Newton, the scientist who had provided rational explanations of gravity and motion. Order, balance, logic, and reason were the paramount ideals of the day—so much so that the 18th century is often called the Age of Reason. The methods of scientific inquiry were applied to everything from farming to politics. Religion, the source of so much bloodshed a century earlier, became a far less emotional issue, although John Wesley did lead an evangelical revival that gave rise not only to the new Methodist groups but also to a revivalist movement within the Church of England.

Many British citizens lived well during the 18th century, and a few lived sumptuously. Wealthy aristocrats built lavish country estates filled with furnishings of exquisite craftsmanship and surrounded by beautifully tended lawns and gardens. When Parliament was in session, members relocated to their London townhouses on the spacious new streets and squares that had been laid out after the Great Fire. Writers, artists, politicians, and other educated members of society gathered daily in London's coffeehouses to exchange ideas, conduct business, and gossip. Educated women sometimes held salons, or private gatherings, where they too could participate in the nation's intellectual life.

Advances and Changes

The spirit of the Enlightenment led to many improvements in living conditions. Early in the century, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the wife of a British ambassador, brought back from Turkey the idea of inoculation to prevent smallpox, and by the end of the 1700s, Edward Jenner had developed an effective smallpox vaccination. Dramatic advances in agriculture helped improve Britain's food supply as wealthy landowners developed more productive methods of cultivating and harvesting crops. Breeding experiments resulted in larger animals: by the end of the century, the average weight of sheep and cattle had more than doubled. Unfortunately, putting these improvement into practice drove thousands of peasant farmers off the land. Increasingly, the open fields that had formerly been available to villagers for livestock grazing were being enclosed into large, separate tracts, held by the prosperous landowners who could then make use of the agricultural innovations. Although this enclosure of the land improved farming efficiency and output, it destroyed the traditional way of life of the English village.

Many of the villagers forced off the land sought jobs at the factories that had begun to dot the landscape. Britain, with its wealth of inventions, ample coal and iron, and ready colonial markets, was becoming a pioneer in the use of machines and steam power to manufacture goods that had formerly been made by hand. This Industrial Revolution changed the very fabric of British life. Sleepy towns in the north and west, near the sources of coal, iron, and water power, were transformed into grimy manufacturing

centres in which workers—many of them women and children—laboured long hours for low pay. By the end of the century, Britain had produced not only a solid commercial and industrial base but also a growing mass of restless, impoverished workers. The stability that had marked 18th-century life was beginning to crumble.

Development of the English Language

During the Enlightenment, emphasis on reason and logic led to efforts to stabilize and systematize the English language. In 1693, the influential writer John Dryden complained, "We have yet no prosodia, not so much as a tolerable dictionary or grammar, so that our language is in a manner barbarous," and over the next decades scholars worked to remedy the situation. One such scholar was Samuel Johnson, whose Dictionary of the English Language was published in 1755. Although Johnson recognized that language is always changing, he also recognized the importance of a standard for pronunciation, usage, and spelling. Seven years later Robert Lowth published A Short Introduction to English Grammar, in which he attempted to establish a system of rules for judging correctness in matters under dispute. Since early grammarians like Lowth based their ideas on Latin, however, their rules often proved inappropriate for English. For example, they considered the infinitive form of an English verb to consist of two words ("to stun"); but because Latin infinitives are single words, they deemed it incorrect to "split" an English infinitive with an adverb ("to completely stun"), thus creating a puzzling "rule" that has bedevilled generations of schoolchildren.

Despite the Enlightenment scholars' search for uniformity and stability, overseas colonization was bringing variety and growth to English. New environments demanded new vocabulary, often borrowed from the native languages of the regions (like raccoon and chipmunk from Native American tongues and kangaroo from the language of Australian Aborigines). In addition, the great distance of the colonies from the homeland and the slow methods of communication allowed differences between the colonists' English and that spoken in Britain to grow.

Neoclassical literature

The literary style that prevailed from the Restoration nearly to the end of the 18th century is called neoclassicism ("new classicism"). Neoclassical writers modelled their works on those of ancient Greece and Rome—especially those of Rome—emulating the supposed restraint, rationality, and dignity of classical writing. Neoclassicists stressed balance, order, logic, sophisticated wit, and emotional restraint, focusing on society and the human intellect and avoiding personal feelings. The neoclassical era in English literature is often divided into three periods: the Restoration (1660-1700), the Augustan Age (1700-1750), and the Age of Johnson (1750-1784). During the Restoration, drama flourished in England's newly reopened theatres. Influenced by the French "comedy of manners," witty Restoration comedies portrayed and often satirized the artificial, sophisticated society centred in the Stuart court. Equally popular were heroic dramas, tragedies or tragicomedies featuring idealized heroes, dastardly villains, exciting action, and spectacular staging. Although many of the comedies were in prose, the heroic dramas were usually written

in heroic couplets (iambic pentameter lines rhyming in pairs), the dominant verse form of the neoclassical period. Both the Restoration comedies and the heroic dramas appealed primarily to the elite. Attracting a much wider audience was *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), a prose allegory by the Puritan John Bunyan, in which he extolled the virtues of faith, hope, and charity and condemned the shallow inhabitants of a worldly place called Vanity Fair. Another great Restoration prose work was the personal diary of Samuel Pepys, not published until 1825.

Neoclassicism reached its zenith in the **Augustan Age**—so named because its writers likened their society to that of Rome in the prosperous, stable reign of the emperor Augustus, when the finest Roman literature was produced. An alternative name for the period is the Age of Pope, because Alexander Pope dominated the literary world of the day with his epigrammatic and satiric verses. Satire also characterized the poetry and prose of **Jonathan Swift** and the essays of **Joseph Addison and Richard Steele**, which appeared in the early English magazines *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. The 18th century also saw the birth of novels as we know them. Early examples of these works of fiction include **Daniel Defoe's** episodic tale of adventure *Robinson Crusoe*, the sentimental stories of **Samuel Richardson**, and the comic works of **Tobias Smollett and Henry Fielding**. The name "Age of Johnson" is a tribute to **Samuel Johnson**, Britain's most influential man of letters in the second half of the 18th century. Johnson was at the center of a circle that included his biographer James Boswell, the historian **Edward Gibbon**, the novelist and diarist **Fanny Burney**, and the comic dramatist **Richard Brinsley Sheridan**. Though Johnson and most of his associates affirmed neoclassical ideals, during this time poetry entered a transitional stage in which poets began writing simpler, freer lyrics on subjects close to the human heart. The reflective poetry of **Oliver Goldsmith** and **Thomas Gray** and the lyrical songs of Scotland's **Robert Burns** anticipate the first stirrings of romanticism at the very end of the century.

Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe

Genre: travel novel

About the author

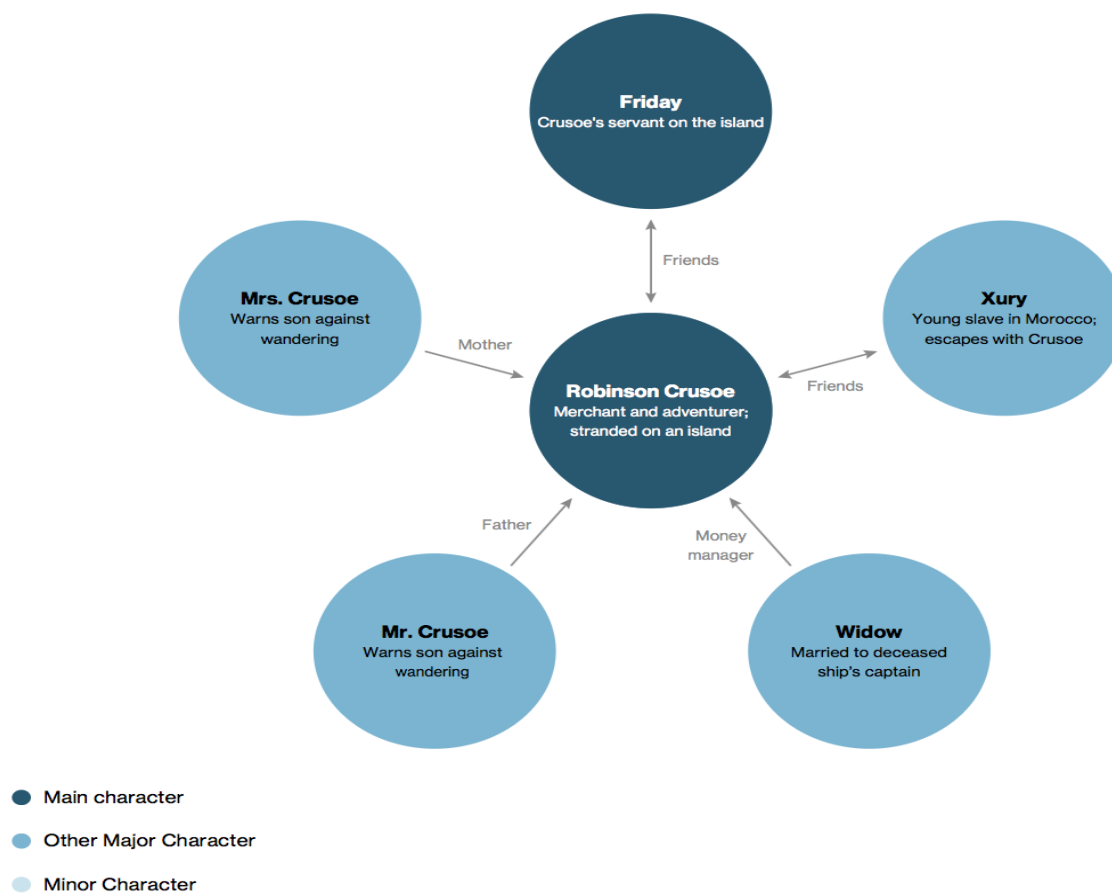
It is perhaps strange that a man who rarely left his own country and certainly never visited the exotic places he writes about should have produced the all-time adventure classic, *Robinson Crusoe*. It is even more surprising when you consider that this was his first novel, published when he was 59, although he had been a writer for magazines and newspapers since his youth. Daniel Defoe was born in 1660 in London. His father, James Foe, was a butcher and candle-maker and it seems that the young Daniel was disappointed that he was not born into a higher-ranking family. This may be the reason why he added the *De* to his surname. As a young man, Daniel toyed with the idea of becoming a minister but instead went into commerce. At the age of twenty-four, he married Mary Tuffley. Defoe's import-export business was not successful, nor was his marriage and by the early 1690s he was engaged in revolutionary activity against James II, King of England. For this he was imprisoned for a period of time. Later he wrote for whichever

side would pay him. Late in life he turned to fiction and wrote an enormous number of works, mostly adventure stories, many of them published anonymously. Some see Defoe as the Ernest Hemingway of his day. Although his books were a popular success, he was never wealthy and in fact died at the age of seventy, a poor man. *Robinson Crusoe* is considered by some critics to be the first true English novel. Defoe's writing is always straightforward and vivid, with an astonishing concern for detail. His other major works include *Captain Singleton* (1720), *Colonel Jack* (1722), *Roxana* (1724), and *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–27).

Setting

- seventeenth century England: a time when there was great interest in exploration and discovery
- London
- Crusoe's deserted island in the Caribbean sea

Characters



Plot summary

Robinson Crusoe's parents want him to stay in his home town of York but he has other ideas. He wants to become a sailor and travel the world. He leaves without saying goodbye to his parents and is shipwrecked off the coast of England. This is a foretaste of what is to come but he ignores any omens and goes to sea again. At first, he is more successful this time, and becomes a prosperous land owner in Brazil.

But he is not satisfied with his success and he sets sail again to pick up slaves from Africa. He is shipwrecked again and all his fellow sailors drown. He alone makes it to the beach of an uninhabited island.

He lives there for the next twenty-eight years. Taking as much as he can retrieve from the sunken ship, Crusoe builds a home with strong defences against attack, although for years he doesn't see another living soul. He cultivates the land and raises goats. He is, generally, happy on his island, although he dreams of going home at times. One day he chances upon a footprint in the sand, but he never discovers the person who made the mark.

Years later, people do come to the island, but they are not the rescue party he has dreamed about. They are cannibals, and he avoids contact with them the first time. But when they return, he helps one of their prisoners to escape and befriends him. He names him Friday, in honour of the day they became friends. On the next visit of the cannibals, Friday and Crusoe rescue two of their prisoners, a Spaniard and a man from Friday's island who is in fact Friday's father.

They all work to send an expedition to Friday's land to bring back sixteen white men who have been shipwrecked there. But before they can return, an English ship arrives. Once again, all is not plain sailing, as the ship is under the command of mutineers and a battle ensues in which Crusoe and Friday help the lawful captain to regain command. Crusoe sails from the island, forgetting the money he collected from two sunken ships, and finally reaches England. Good and bad news awaits him. His plantation in Brazil has thrived and he is a wealthy man. But his parents are dead. He helps the remaining members of his family and eventually returns to his old island, where he finds the original sixteen white men have become a complete colony. He gives the colony things from his ship and sends more from his home in Brazil. He even thinks about returning to live on the island again one day

Themes

Religion

Daniel Defoe's novel is, at its core, the spiritual autobiography of one man: Robinson Crusoe, mariner of York. He is first rebellious, then atones for his sins, and then converts himself and others to Christianity. The novel began with Crusoe's rebellion: defiance of his father's plan for him, an act that is framed as going against the authority of God himself. Crusoe then suffers the vicissitudes of fate - a series of misfortunes that land him on the deserted island. Once there, he finally atones for his sins and undergoes a serious religious conversion. The novel then becomes a collection of religious observations. We see Crusoe turn into a teacher, as he converts Friday upon meeting the guy. Besides the redemptive structure of Robinson Crusoe, we can see many Biblical themes developed in the novel. For example, Crusoe's own story is very much like the parable of the prodigal son. The character of Crusoe is also pretty similar to such Biblical figures as Jonah (the one who was swallowed by a whale/giant fish) or Job (the guy who loses everything

and everyone he loves) who have their faith tested through many trials and a tremendous amount of suffering.

“ consulted neither Father or Mother any more, nor so much as sent them Word of it; but leaving them to hear of it as they might, without asking God's Blessing, or my Father's, without any Consideration of Circumstances or Consequences and in an ill Hour, God knows. On the first of September 1651 I went on Board a Ship bound for London; never any young Adventurer's Misfortunes, I believe, began sooner, or continued longer than mine”.
(9)

Adventure: Life as a Perilous Journey

.....Robinson Crusoe goes to sea in search of high adventure rather than lead a humdrum life in England. He finds more than his share of adventure on several ships in stormy seas, in several countries on two continents, and on an island on which he must tame nature, learn survival skills, and fight savages. In some ways, he represents every man on his journey through life, as did Odysseus in Homer's [*Odyssey*](#), coping with many dangers and ultimately returning home after a long time.

Freedom and Slavery

.....In the beginning of the novel, Robinson Crusoe yearns to be free and independent. When he goes to sea, he escapes the prison of ordinary life in England. In the rest of the novel, Crusoe repeatedly struggles for freedom—from an angry sea, from pirates who capture him, from an empty pocketbook, from a foundering ship, from fear and hunger, from the confines of his island. Others seek freedom as well, including mutineers, their captives, and the captives of cannibals. Ironically, Crusoe tolerates and benefits by people who know no freedom, slaves.

Colonialism and Capitalism

.....In the second half of the 17th Century, when the action in the novel takes place, European companies vied for control and exploitation of colonized lands around the world. Crusoe appears to represent this imperialist spirit, first when he goes to Guinea, next when he travels to Brazil and opens a plantation, and finally when he becomes "king" of an island.

Self-Reliance

.....Crusoe learns to depend on his wits and talents to survive. On his island, he makes furniture, grows crops, and tames and uses animals.

Loneliness vs. Solitude

.....Crusoe's loneliness on the island evolves into solitude. Being alone terrified him when he arrived; later, aloneness became desirable. Theologian Paul Tillich once observed, "Language has created the word *loneliness* to express the pain of being alone, and the word *solitude* to express the glory of being alone." Crusoe came to appreciate the glory of being alone. His anxiety at discovering a human footprint is therefore quite understandable.

Master vs. Servant: The importance of mastery is present in many facets of *Robinson Crusoe*. The ideology that God is the master of the universe and that the human race must answer directly to him is one Crusoe subscribes to and believes is directly relevant to his success on the island and in trade. Crusoe also embodies the literary trope of a man who masters his own fate. He sets out on his own and overcomes the challenges he faces, effectively controlling his environment and eventually becoming the master of other men in the process. His journey from slave to master is an example of a self-man that makes the ultimate socioeconomic gain of the time within which he lived