

**ENLIGHTENMENT AND LITERARY CRITICISM**

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**Abstract:** This article provides a comprehensive overview of the development of European literary criticism from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and Neoclassicism. The study focuses on key figures and theoretical models that shaped the evolution of critical thought, ranging from P. Sidney and his defense of poetry as a morally significant art form to J. Dryden, A. Pope, and S. Johnson, who established the foundations of Neoclassical aesthetics and criticism. The analysis addresses the main aesthetic principles of the classical tradition, including mimesis, catharsis, the three unities, and the concept of “art as imitation.”

**Keywords:** Renaissance, literary criticism, classicism, neoclassicism, Enlightenment, P. Sidney, J. Dryden, A. Pope, S. Johnson, feminist criticism.

**Annotatsiya:** Ushbu maqola Uyg'onish davridan to Ma'rifat davri va neoklassitsizmga qadar bo'lgan Yevropa adabiy tanqidining rivojlanishini kompleks tarzda tahlil qiladi. Tadqiqot markazida adabiy tanqidiy tafakkur evolyutsiyasini belgilab bergan asosiy shaxslar va nazariy modellar, jumladan P. Sidning she'riyatni axloqiy ahamiyatga ega san'at sifatida himoya qilishi, shuningdek J. Dryden, A. Pop va S. Jonson tomonidan neoklassik estetika va tanqid asoslarining shakllantirilishi turadi. Klassik an'anaga xos asosiy estetik tamoyillar — mimesis, katarsis, uch birlik qoidasi hamda “san'atning taqlidiy tabiati” g'oyasi — tahlil etiladi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** Uyg'onish davri, adabiy tanqid, klassitsizm, neoklassitsizm, Ma'rifat davri, P. Sidni, J. Dryden, A. Pop, S. Jonson, feministik tanqid.

**Аннотация.** Данная статья представляет собой комплексный обзор развития европейской литературной критики от эпохи Возрождения до эпохи Просвещения и неоклассицизма. В центре исследования находятся ключевые фигуры и теоретические модели, определившие эволюцию критической мысли: от П. Сидни и его апологии поэзии как нравственно значимого искусства Дж. Драйдена, А. Попа и С. Джонсона сформировавших основы неоклассической эстетики и критики. Рассматриваются основные эстетические принципы классической традиции, включая мимесис, катарсис, три единства и идею «искусства как подражания».

**Ключевые слова:** Возрождение, литературная критика, классицизм, неоклассицизм, просвещение, П. Сидни, Дж. Драйден, А. Поп, С. Джонсон, феминистская критика.

The transition from the medieval period to the Renaissance is commonly interpreted either as the onset of modernity extending to the mid-twentieth century, or as an intermediate phase between the Middle Ages and the modern era, the latter often dated from the seventeenth-century Enlightenment through to the twentieth century. Renaissance literature and visual culture are characterized by a dual orientation: on the one hand, innovation manifested in the emergence of new literary forms such as the sonnet; on the other, a deliberate revival of classical antiquity, particularly evident in genres like Renaissance tragedy. This creative synthesis persisted into the Baroque period, notably in English metaphysical poetry, which some scholars consider the culmination of the English Renaissance. Nevertheless, this stylistically intricate mode was gradually supplanted by a renewed emphasis on classical order and restraint. Emerging from this classical revival, the intellectual movement of Enlightenment and Classicism (Neoclassicism in England) came to dominate European cultural and literary life from the mid-seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, until the rise of Romanticism introduced a new aesthetic paradigm.

Within the English Renaissance, Sir Philip Sidney stands as a central figure in literary criticism. His treatise “Defence of Poesie” is widely regarded as a foundational text in the development of English critical thought. Sidney’s critical perspective must be situated within the broader literary dynamics of his time, which were marked by both formal innovation - reflected in his own poetic production, including sonnets and pastoral works - and a strong inclination toward classical revivalism.

In addition, Sidney’s work emerged within a cultural context shaped by Puritan moral critiques of imaginative literature, particularly pastoral and sonnet traditions. These critiques often condemned poetry on ethical grounds. Sidney, a courtier, soldier, scholar, and poet, composed *Defence of Poesie* (also known as *An Apology for Poetry*) in response to Stephen Gosson’s *The School of Abuse*, a Puritan tract that denounced poetry for its perceived moral dangers and was notably dedicated to Sidney himself.

Philip Sidney is widely regarded as one of the most prominent intellectual figures of the Elizabethan period within the English Renaissance. In addition to his contributions to literary criticism, he was an accomplished poet, particularly in the pastoral tradition and the sonnet form. His *Astrophel and Stella*, published in an authorized edition in 1598 but composed during the early 1580s and initially circulated in manuscript, represents the earliest substantial English sonnet sequence, comprising 108 sonnets and 11 songs. Drawing on the Petrarchan model, the sequence engages with themes of love, emotional experience, interpersonal relations, philosophical contemplation, and the creative process itself. Formally, it also contributed to the

adaptation and partial transformation of the strict conventions of the Italian sonnet tradition within English poetry.

Sidney's major prose work, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (commonly referred to as *Arcadia*), is a complex pastoral romance that synthesizes influences from the Greek novelist Heliodorus with pastoral conventions. While idealizing rural life in line with Renaissance pastoral aesthetics, the work simultaneously incorporates intricate narrative elements, including abduction, warfare, political conflict, and violence, structured within an interconnected and multilayered plot design.

Consistent with broader Renaissance intellectual tendencies, Sidney extensively engages with classical philosophical and critical traditions. His writings reference Plato's metaphysical framework, Aristotle's theory of mimesis, and Horace's poetic principles. In particular, his definition of poetry as an "art of imitation" directly reflects Aristotelian terminology. Furthermore, he adopts and reinterprets Horace's maxim that poetry should both instruct and delight, while ultimately privileging moral instruction as the primary function of poetic discourse.

Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* demonstrates that his response to Puritan critiques of literature is constructed through the articulation of his own theoretical reflections on poetry. In doing so, he contributes to the establishment of a critical tradition in England that integrates classical authorities with contemporary literary concerns. His work is therefore regarded as foundational in the emergence of English literary criticism during the Renaissance, establishing him as its first major theorist, distinguished by both intellectual rigor and stylistic eloquence.

The development of literary criticism in Sidney's context is marked by a pronounced ethical orientation and apologetic intent. In responding to Puritan objections, he defends poetry as a morally constructive form of discourse capable of fostering virtue. Simultaneously, he formulates a horatian conception of poetry as an imitative art that unites instruction with aesthetic pleasure.

During this period, European cultural life increasingly came under French intellectual leadership. In particular, following the founding of the French Academy in 1635 and the codification of its doctrines, classical principles became institutionalized, and classicism was consolidated as a dominant cultural and literary framework across Europe.

In Britain, the rise of Enlightenment thought and Neoclassical aesthetics during the Restoration era was shaped both by Continental influence and by transformations in domestic literary taste. Neoclassicism thus emerged as a new critical and artistic orientation that contributed significantly to the development of the eighteenth-century English novel and remained the prevailing literary paradigm for over a century. Its influence extended from the late seventeenth century—most prominently represented

by John Dryden—through much of the eighteenth century, as reflected in the works of Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson.

John Dryden, a central figure of the Restoration literary scene, distinguished himself as a poet, dramatist, translator, and critic to such an extent that the period is often referred to as the “Age of Dryden.” His critical practice, combining creative and evaluative functions, is characterized by a relatively assertive and authoritative tone in literary judgment. While a substantial portion of his critical thought appears in the prefaces to his own works, his most systematic articulation of literary theory is found in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, presented in dialogue form. In this text, Dryden outlines Neoclassical dramatic theory, defending classical drama as a faithful imitation of human life and an accurate representation of universal human nature. He also addresses the doctrine of the three unities—unity of time, place, and action—as essential structural principles of dramatic composition.

Prior to Dryden, English literary criticism largely operated within inherited classical frameworks, often without significant theoretical innovation. Dryden contributed to a loosening of strict classical adherence through a more flexible and adaptive form of classicism, frequently described as “liberal classicism,” along with a more independent critical stance. For this reason, some scholars have argued that Ben Jonson should be considered the first significant English critic. Nevertheless, earlier critical thought is evident in the writings of both Sidney and Jonson, although their contributions were generally sporadic rather than systematically theoretical. Sidney’s *Defence of Poesie* was primarily composed as a response to Puritan objections to poetry, while Jonson’s critical remarks tend to take the form of occasional observations rather than a coherent critical system.

Alexander Pope is widely regarded as the most distinguished literary figure of the British Augustan age. The principal representatives of Neoclassicism in Britain include John Dryden in the seventeenth century, followed by Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century. Collectively, these writers, along with other neoclassical authors, produced a body of philosophical, didactic, and satirical poetry that addressed fundamental issues of human nature, humanity’s relationship to the universe, and its position within society.

During the eighteenth century, the theoretical foundations of Neoclassicism were most comprehensively articulated in the works of Alexander Pope, particularly in his critical prefaces, *An Essay on Criticism*, and *An Essay on Man*. Additional contributions came from Joseph Addison in his series of essays “Pleasures of the Imagination,” published in *The Spectator*, as well as from Samuel Johnson, whose critical essays, prefaces—most notably his introduction to Shakespeare and *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* significantly shaped literary criticism of the period.

Within the Augustan literary tradition, Pope (1688–1744) occupies a dominant position. Born in London into a Roman Catholic family, he experienced social and educational limitations due to the restrictions placed on Catholics, including exclusion from universities and public office. Despite limited formal schooling, he received education at home, in Catholic institutions, and through extensive self-study. His mastery of Latin, Greek, French, and Italian contributed to his reputation as one of the most intellectually accomplished writers of his time, and his influence was so profound that the period is often designated the “Age of Pope.”

Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) was a multifaceted English man of letters, contributing significantly as a poet, dramatist, essayist, moral philosopher, critic, biographer, editor, and lexicographer. His poetic works are characterized by concise expression and a strong moral sensibility, qualities that may have influenced later writers such as A. E. Housman. In his early imitation of Juvenal, *London*, Johnson employs poetry as a medium for political commentary with a youthful and energetic tone. By contrast, *The Vanity of Human Wishes* presents a more reflective and theologically oriented vision, articulated through a relatively restrained style that engages with complex Christian moral philosophy. Central to Johnson’s thought is the belief that human fulfillment is attainable only through virtuous conduct grounded in divine order.

Johnson’s critical perspective on biography and poetry informed his broader conception of literary criticism. This orientation is particularly evident in *A Dictionary of the English Language*, which he described as a scholarly reference modeled on European academies and intended for those seeking precision in critical judgment and stylistic refinement. Although later editions became widely used in households, the original work was conceived as an analytical tool for understanding lexical meaning in literary contexts. Johnson supported his definitions with extensive citations from authors such as Bacon, Hooker, Milton, Shakespeare, and Spenser, thereby illustrating word usage across domains including science, philosophy, theology, and poetry.

Rather than developing a systematic theoretical framework for aesthetics, Johnson approached literary criticism in a pragmatic manner, emphasizing interpretation and readerly understanding. In his *Preface to Shakespeare*, he underscored the active role of the reader in interpreting linguistic complexity, arguing that Shakespeare’s difficulties arise from his reliance on colloquial and idiomatic language, which naturally includes elliptical and proverbial expressions.

Johnson’s criticism of Shakespeare extends beyond textual analysis to broader reflections on literature itself. While he acknowledges Shakespeare’s artistic limitations—including moral inconsistencies, stylistic irregularities, and structural weaknesses—he simultaneously defends the naturalistic foundation of his dramatic art and rejects rigid adherence to the classical unities. Furthermore, Johnson emphasizes

the necessity of establishing accurate textual editions that faithfully represent an author's original intent, thereby contributing to the development of modern editorial and critical practices.

The Age of Enlightenment was a major intellectual and philosophical movement that significantly influenced European thought during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In contemporary scholarship, its principles and intellectual legacy have become an important focus of feminist philosophical critique. Core Enlightenment ideals such as reason, equality, and universal human rights have historically been employed as conceptual tools for challenging systems of oppression and social inequality. Feminist theorists have frequently drawn on Enlightenment discourse to interrogate and critique gender-based hierarchies. At the same time, they have critically reassessed the limitations of Enlightenment philosophy, arguing that its claims may, in practice, legitimize forms of exclusion, prejudice, and domination. From this perspective, feminist analyses of the less emancipatory dimensions of Enlightenment thought converge with other critical traditions, including postcolonial theory, post-structuralism, Marxist critique, and the early Frankfurt School, all of which emphasize the internal contradictions and tensions embedded within Enlightenment rationality.

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