

Features of the Neo-classical age focusing on Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift.

Generated: Jan 26, 2026

The Neo-classical age (1660-1785) was from the late 17th to the mid-18th century. This period was characterized by a revival of classical ideals, a focus on reason order, and a rejection of excesses. Two prominent figures of this era, Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, utilized satire as a powerful tool to critique and mock the societal, political, and literary norms of their time. Here are key points highlighting the main trends of the Neo-classical age, with a particular emphasis on Pope and Swift's satirical tone.

The Note will cover the following questions:

- **Features of the Neo-classical age focusing on Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift.**
- **Discuss the main trends of the Neo-classical age, focusing on the satirical tone of Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift.**

Rationalism and Order:

The Neo-classical age was marked by a commitment to reason and order. This reflects the Enlightenment ideals. In his poem "Essay on Criticism," Alexander Pope emphasized the importance of reason in literary criticism. He famously wrote,

First, if thou canst, the harder reason guess;

Why form'd no weaker, blinder, and no less.

Pope advocates for a rational approach to understanding and critiquing literature. He rejects excessive emotion and favours a reasoned analysis.

Satire as a Reflective Mirror of Society: Satire became popular in the Neo-classical age. It serves as a mirror reflecting the flaws and follies of society. In his masterpiece "Gulliver's Travels," Jonathan Swift employs satire to criticize various aspects of human nature and societal institutions. Through the lens of Gulliver's voyages, Swift satirizes political corruption, religious hypocrisy, and the irrationality of war. This provides readers with a critical perspective on their society.

Criticism of Society and Mockery: Pope and Swift used satire as social commentary. He targeted the vices and shortcomings of their contemporaries. Pope's "The Rape of the Lock" is a mock-epic poem that satirizes the triviality of a society obsessed with superficial concerns. In the poem, he humorously exaggerates the importance of a stolen lock of hair. It highlights the absurdity of the upper-class preoccupations of the time.

Political Satire: The Neo-classical age was marked by political turmoil and power struggles. In works like "A Modest Proposal," Swift used satire to criticize the British government's exploitation of Ireland. In proposing the absurd solution of eating babies to solve the economic problems of Ireland, Swift ingeniously satirizes the brutal economic policies and indifference of the ruling class towards the difficulty of the Irish people.

Religious Satire: Pope and Swift also directed their satirical pens towards religious institutions and practices. In Pope's "The Rape of the Lock," he humorously critiques the trivialization of religious rituals. It is seen in the mock epic when Belinda prepares for a social event. Pope satirizes the superficiality of religious observance, stating,

*Here thou, great Anna! whom three Realms obey,
Dost sometimes Counsel take—and sometimes Tea.*

Swift's "A Tale of a Tub" satirizes religious schisms and the misuse of religious authority. He uses the story of three brothers and their coats to represent the divisions within Christianity.

Mocking Literary Traditions: Pope, in addition to satirizing societal norms. He also targeted the literary traditions of the time. In "The Dunciad," Pope creates a mock epic that satirizes the decline of literature and intellectual standards. He portrays the victory of dullness. He uses satire to criticize the degradation of literary and intellectual pursuits.

Irony and Wit: Pope and Swift employed irony and wit as essential to their satirical works. Pope, in "The Rape of the Lock," uses playful irony to mock the aristocratic society's insignificant concerns. Swift's irony in "A Modest Proposal" is particularly biting, as the proposal itself is shocking, yet the underlying criticism of British policies in Ireland is scathingly clever.

In conclusion, the Neo-classical age was marked by a commitment to reason, order, and the revival of classical ideals. Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, through their use of satire, played significant roles in critiquing and mocking the societal, political, and literary norms of their time. Their works are celebrated for their keen observations, biting wit, and enduring relevance in satirizing human follies.