The 18th Century: The Enlightenment or Augustan Age

The glorious Revolution (1688-1689) had brought about the dethroning of James II of the Stuart Dynasty and his replacement by his daughter Mary and her husband William of Orange, thus setting the fierce seventeenth century struggles between King and Parliament. After the Revolution the country was ruled by a “limited” monarchy which became firmly established with the Act of Settlement (1701). This secured the Hanoverian succession (George I of Hanover) to the thrones of England and Ireland on the death of Anne (1714), the last Stuart sovereign, Queen of England and Scotland (Great Britain from 1707) and of Ireland (1702-1704). In spite of the Stuart attempts of getting back on the British throne, and the wars which were fought in far countries, the 18th century England was relatively STABLE and continued to be to until the impact of the Industrial and French revolutions began to be felt around the early 1790s. With the limitation of royal authority, sovereignty became divided between King, Lords and Commons. In practice, however, the exercise of power was shared between the Crown and the landed aristocracy, which dominated both houses of Parliament. Landed interests not only dominated Parliament but also local government, the administration of justice and the patronage of the arts. Nevertheless there was dissent. While the landed aristocracy maintained that a flourishing agriculture was the true basis of a nation’s prosperity, another equally convinced grant and emerging part of the nation claimed that commerce was much more valuable. While Europe was still a vast conglomeration of local economies in which agriculture overwhelmingly prevailed, the climate of economic opinion came round to the English situation and to the Englishman’s belief that his country had become the greatest of all reading nations and that the English merchant was a national benefactor. The greatest achievement of successive governments from 1700 onward was to consolidate mercantile enterprise by a series of diplomatic forays and wars with the major European nations. These wars were at first European, with colonial aggression in the background, but during the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-1713) as well as subsequent eighteenth century conflicts, colonial primacy came to be seen as the end, and European struggle as the means Britain had to face the problem of The American Revolution also and in 1776 the Congress of the rebel colonies declared Independence (July 2nd, 1776) Britain having last her American possession, turned to the East in order to establish what was later called the second British empire (a gradual setting up of a world network of trading posts and naval bases. India and the Pacific became the main objectives of the new imperialist trend).

The Augustan Age: this is the term generally used to refer to this important stage in the evolution of English society and literature. It took its name from the Augustan period of the Roman Empire when the triumph of a centralized political authority and autocracy combined with supreme achievements in the arts. In this period London was the largest city in Europe and England was becoming increasingly urbanized. But the period was full of extreme contradictions, for it worked the transition between two sharply opposed systems. London was the seat of the government, the great financial and commercial center, but it was in the countryside and in country-towns that the first stages of what was to be known as The Industrial Revolution were taking place. In the 18th century society was divided into 3 broad categories “the gentry”, “the tradesman” and the “mere laboring people” (Daniel Defoe). The social structure reflected the 18th century language of social
conflict: the language of GENTLEMENT (high ranks of society), the PEOPLE (50% Merchants Manufacturers) and the MOB (the crowd) ⇒ the 4th state.

The countryside had an important place in the general social hierarchy. Soon after the early 18th century, important changes affected the countryside with the agrarian revolution. The most important element in the agrarian revolution was ENCLOSURE a process by which traditional right to use the common land went lost and landlords and farmers enclosed open land. One of the most important reasons for enclosure was more land for sheep grazing that is more wool, England’s most profitable export. Enclosure wade improvement in scientific stock breeding, land use and rotation possible; but it also led to dispossession of power farmers and to rural protest among laborers who were new landless and driven out the countryside as pampers into the towns, cities and industrial factories. Between 1750 and 1850 Britain underwent the transformation from an agrarian to an industrial society: the first such transformation in human history. The most common explanation is that a series of SCIENTIFIC, TECHNOLOGICAL and CRAFT inventions determined the nature and direction of The Industrial Revolution. The steam engine, the spinning penny and other machines are often held responsible for overturning the power of the old landowners, creating the wealth of the new industrialists and giving birth to a new economic group, the industrial working class. The history of the Industrial Revolution is however a much more complex event: the process of 2 centuries of colonial expansion and exploitation, the slave trade, British governments dedicated to the accumulation produced the drive for mechanization and the wide introduction of wage labour and the factory system of production. Science itself was beginning to become a productive force; the problem of production posed for scientists and inventors by mercantile and industrial capitalists group rapidly.

The 18th century: it was also the Age of Reason: all major writers prized above all REASON which included commonsense and analytical thought. Most intellectuals hoped that reasons were applied in all human activities so that new might achieve a new Golden Age. A strong belief in progress and the validity of the human mind developed. A third spirit of the age was also emerging: an acceptance - or even celebration – of whatever was unknown and feared within man without. The conception of the Universe and man’s place in it was in terms of what can be called "the Newtonian world-machine". It was known that somehow the world was an orderly whole presided over by a benevolent God. But how exactly God managed this orderly, unified creation was not certain. God, the common reasoning went, originally created the world as a perfect machine and he had given man sufficient reason to learn about Him and achieve salvation through natural means. The form of such natural religion: DEISM (Thomas Paine: “It is only by the exercise of reason that man can discover God” “the world of God is the Creation we behold” therefore “my own mind is my own church”. Deism reflected the need for revolution or formal instruction and said that knowing the ways and will of God entailed the acceptance of natural theology - the doctrine that Nature, or things as they are, can provide that knowledge (Earl of Shaftsbury). John Lock (1632-1704) was the greatest exponent of the great British Empiricist tradition. Empiricist insists that perhaps the only source of genuine knowledge is individual experience, gained through the senses of the world outside. It pulsations the ability of human reason to attain knowledge though its own isolated activity unaided by such experience. In fact, however, experience cannot be separated from reason: together they are the key-words of the controlling
philosophy of the intellectual life of 18th century Britain. Lock’s crucial contribution was to reflect
the old Greek theory that the human mind works with inherent logic and to propound instead the
theory of associationism – that we think and feel as a result of fortuitous associations provided by
our past experience of the things we see, hear, touch, taste and smell.