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BA English Honours | Semester IV | ENG4CJ204

Literary Criticism

Module 2: Neoclassical Criticism and the Age of Enlightenment • Comprehensive Notes

Chapter 2: Rationalism, Decorum, and Neoclassical Poetics

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed the flowering of Neoclassicism across England and France. Influenced by the scientific revolution, Cartesian rationalism, and Enlightenment philosophy, neoclassical critics sought to establish universal rules of literary composition based on classical Greco-Roman models, particularly Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus.

2.1 The Philosophy of Neoclassicism

Neoclassical aesthetics rested upon foundational dogmas: the imitation of "Nature" (understood as eternal, universal moral order and human reason), adherence to the three dramatic unities (Time, Place, Action), strict decorum (appropriate social behavior and linguistic register for characters), and the dual Horatian objective of literature: *docere et delectare* (to instruct and delight).

2.2 John Dryden: The Father of English Criticism

John Dryden's landmark dialogue *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668) established modern English critical prose. Through four fictional interlocutors (Eugenius, Crites, Lisideius, and Neander, representing Dryden himself), Dryden methodically evaluates ancient drama versus modern drama, French classical regularity versus English dramatic variety, and rhymed verse versus blank verse.

While acknowledging the refined formal symmetry and adherence to unities found in French neoclassical drama (Corneille, Racine), Neander vigorously champions the lively, irregular genius of William Shakespeare and the English stage. Dryden argues that dramatic art should be a "just and lively image of human nature," demonstrating that mechanical adherence to classical rules must never stifle vitality and emotional richness.

2.3 Empirical Philosophy and Aesthetics: David Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste"

In his brilliant 1757 philosophical essay "Of the Standard of Taste," Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume confronts the profound paradox of aesthetic evaluation: While taste appears radically subjective and varied ("beauty is no quality in things themselves; it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them"), human societies universally acknowledge that certain artworks (e.g., Homer, Milton) possess objectively superior aesthetic excellence.

Hume resolves this dilemma by formulating the characteristics of the **Ideal Critic** who establishes the standard of taste:

- Delicacy of sensory imagination and emotional perception.
- Extensive practice and comparative experience across artworks.
- Freedom from personal, political, or temporal prejudice.
- Good sense and sound philosophical reasoning to check impulsive reactions.

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Advanced Critical Theory, Hermeneutics & Literary Praxis

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1. Hermeneutic Paradigms and Textual Mechanics

Critical inquiry into Module 2: Neoclassical Criticism and the Age of Enlightenment reveals how textual forms construct meaning through complex aesthetic strategies and structural choices:

- **Structuralism and Semiotic Deconstruction:** The organization of signs, tropes, and syntactical structures establishes narrative authority while simultaneously revealing internal fissures. Binary oppositions embedded within the discourse—such as center versus margin, tradition versus modernity, and subjective interiority versus objective reality—are systematically problematized through textual slippages and ambiguous signifiers.
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2. Historiographical Context and Reception Theory

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3. Comparative Aesthetic and Thematic Matrix

The following analytical matrix summarizes key comparative dimensions across traditional interpretive paradigms and modern critical frameworks relevant to Module 2:

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