

The Augustan Age (1688-1716)

The historical context

James II was deposed with the Glorious Revolution in 1688 and William of Orange, who had married one of James' daughters, was given the crown. But the royal couple had to sign "The Bill of Rights" which limited the power of the monarchy. The English Parliament got more power when the Scottish one was united to it with the Act of Union (1707). When Mary Stuart and William of Orange (the royal couple) died, Mary's sister Anne became queen. Then, when she died (1714), a new dynasty, the House of Hanover, got the power. George I, descendant on his mother's side of James I (but he was German and didn't speak English), was the new king. Since he didn't speak English, he had little influence on the general policy of the country. A new figure became important in English

policy: the Prime Minister, whose the first was Sir Robert Walpole, who held office for over 20 years. The Tories (aristocracy-nobles) and the Whigs (emerging industrial and commercial class) alternated in government.

The British Empire expanded in India, North America and the Caribbean, while Captain Cook laid the foundations for the colonisation of Australia, New Zealand and islands in the Pacific Ocean.

In this period Britain also took part in the wars of succession in many countries of Europe (external wars). There were also internal wars: the Jacobites (supporters of the Stuarts) were finally defeated in the battle of Culloden (1746). But these wars didn't interfere English policy and religion.

The social context

"Progress" is the word that best represents this period: development of agriculture and commerce, building of bridges and roads, technological inventions introduced in the manufacturing of textiles. All this led to the Industrial Revolution.

But in the countryside the enclosures made new poor people who had to move to the towns in search of work. To the urban mercantile class of tradesmen and financiers got more power while the landed gentry was losing it.

The middle class was the protagonist of a social revolution: the desire of bourgeoisie to be accepted into the aristocracy made the rising merchant class to look for more education. Greater educational opportunities and combined marriages made this social change.

The development of Fiction: the Novel

In the Augustan Age we have the birth of a new literary genre: the novel. The first novelist is considered Daniel Defoe. But why did the novel develop? There are many reasons:

- there is an improvement in printing technology. This led to the proliferation of newspapers, periodicals, English dictionaries and grammars;
- middle-class people could now read because of the expansion of the school system and the increasing number of lending libraries in which books could be borrowed at no great expense.

The new genre took from both forms of non-fiction like diaries, traveller's tales, letters and biographies of adventures and literary forms like drama and poetry.

If we consider the most important

novelists with their novels we can noticed that:

- Defoe makes a very realistic description in his "Robinson Crusoe" (1719). It's the first novel based on realism and adventures;
- Swift puts satire in his novel "Gulliver's travels" (1726), adding it to the minute realism;
- Fielding writes his "Tom Jones" (1749) following the picaresque tradition giving a first organic structure to the novel;
- Richardson gives examples of letters in his "Pamela" (1740).