The Eighteenth Century and Neo-Classicism:

The late 17th century brought tremendous change in English society. The Restoration period resumed some of the literary tradition of the period before Civil War. The period is also known as the Augustan Age and the Age of Reason as the Enlightenment philosophy gives importance to Rationalism. As a term, Neo-Classical denotes revival of classical forms of art. The Metaphysical poetry had left the literary standards and values confused and Neo-classicism led the reaction against the Metaphysical poets and insisted on writing charming poetry on the classical model taking inspiration from the matter of Greek and Latin classics. Edmund Waller and Sir John Denham were the precursors of the movement and forerunners of Dryden and Pope. “In the age of Dryden and Pope, the poetics of the Classical Age was engaged as a kind of norm-determining process and it was manifested in the choice of metre, genre and literary form.” The Neo-classical poets preferred form over substance. Every variety of verse including drama, epic, satire, ode and pastoral was found and governed by a spirit of reason and good sense, the Neo-classical poets abandoned emotionalism and accepted the intellectual principles of the Enlightenment. Their aim was to delight, instruct and correct man taking human nature as subject matter. Neo-classical poetry favoured clarity, simplicity, restraint, good sense, natural wit and intellect. Unlike the Metaphysical poets, the Neoclassical poetry surprises the reader rather than shock with its superb use of natural wit…etc.

Many of the writers of the Neo-classical period took their inspiration and example from Dryden. Dryden had a unique personality and adopted the satire mode. Dryden and other Neo-classical poets used the satire as strategy through which to place the social controversies. Most of Dryden’s poetry falls between the satiric and the didactic like ‘Absalom and Achitophel’, ‘The Hind’ and ‘The Panther’. His most delightful and most important poem is probably ‘Mac Flecknoe’, a savage satire, targeted on his poetic rival, Thomas Shadwell. Dryden has often been praised and remembered for the vigour and energy of his heroic couplet, but it is Pope who is regarded as the perfectionist of this genre. Like Dryden, Pope was also indebted to the classical heritage and responded to the culture and philosophy of the classical age. Pope’s satires are means to expose society and humanity’s foibles and vices. The union of craft and content was well achieved by Pope. ‘The Rape of the Lock’ and ‘Dunciad’ are acknowledged masterpieces of Neo-classical verse. The Eighteenth Century produced not only satire but also a group of meditative poets who took as their major themes the obsession with human mortality, a melancholy sense …etc.