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Letter III as a Neoclassical Piece

De Crevecoeur’s letter three in his *Letters from an American Farmer* can be seen as a neoclassical piece of literature because it exemplifies the four traits of neoclassism: emphasis on reason and logic, interest in science, stress on classical forms and patterns, and that society is more important than the individual.

Neoclassism was a period of rapid change classified by the rise of the middle class and the divine right of kings losing its hold on culture. During the neoclassical period, an emphasis on logic and reason became more apparent. This can be seen in Letter III when Crevecoeur stated, “the laws inspect our actions.” This quote states that laws are what govern the Americans, not religion, whereas before, religion and God controlled many of the actions preformed. Laws and rules are logical to help the human race survive without as many struggles such as who is in charge and where the next meal would come from. Another example of logic and reason is when Crevecoeur stated, “Go thou and work, and till; thou shalt prosper, provided thou be just, grateful, and industrious.” This entire quote is an example of how logic worked during the neoclassical period: if one does the work, he or she shall reap the reward. To the Americans, this seemed logical and right, not based off of feelings but off of right versus wrong. The emphasis on reason and logic makes sense when compared to the next trait: interest in science.

Science can be viewed as biology, physics, chemistry, exercise science or multiple different fields. However, there was never an emphasis on science in America until the neoclassical period. Crevecoeur’s letter III also has examples of this trait including, “men are like plants.” This is not, technically speaking, a scientific inquiry; however, it is a comparison using science instead of religion, which was uncommon before this period. This can be backed by another quote stating, “Religion demands but little of him,” meaning that religion is no longer the most important factor in life. The Americans would rather focus on science and logic than religion. One last example of the importance of science is “every industrious European who transports himself here may be compared to a sprout growing at the foot of a great tree; it enjoys and draws but a little portion of sap; wrench it from the parent roots, transplant it, and it will become a tree bearing fruit also.” Crevecoeur was making a valid point here: that if the Americans continued to rely on their European roots, they would never have been able to thrive on their own. This last quote not only uses science to make a point, but also brings trait one regarding logic back into the equation. Science, logic, and reason are only but two of the important neoclassical traits; another would be the stress on classical forms and patterns.

Patterns and forms make an appearance in almost anything completed, whether it’s how a task was completed or just the way something was written. If one were to examine the way Crevecoeur wrote his letter starting on page 310, he or she would see a reoccurrence of questions. This suggests a pattern pertaining just to the way it is structured and this pattern is continued throughout almost the entire letter. His use of rhetorical devices, such as repetition, shows the acceptance of patterns and actual structures in literature. One could also read in depth and find examples of patterns and forms within the writing. One such example would be, “they exhibit the same strong lineaments.” This is a pattern in the way the “modern settlements” were being constructed, no matter the location. This is a stress on form of construction which can also be seen in, “finish their improvements, convert the loghouse into a convenient habitation, and rejoicing that the first heavy labors are finished, will change in a few years that hitherto barbarous country into a fine fertile, well-regulated district.” That quote exemplifies the wish of the Americans to focus on modernizing the countryside and constructing buildings following a blueprint in the minds of the Americans.

One of the most important, and most easily seen, neoclassical traits would be that the society is more important than the individual. Letter III starts out with Crevecoeur praising the “work of my countrymen.” That statement alone is more about society than himself, or the individual. He praises their work in cultivating America and states that any Englishman would be lucky to live there. Crevecoeur also used a repetition of the word “our” on page 310 when speaking of the designs of America, which is an example of how he identified with his fellow Americans. Another example of this togetherness is ,”from the promiscuous breed, that race now called Americans,” which explained his melting pot theory and how, no matter which country the people were originally from, they ae all now considered as one. He furthers this by showing acceptance for people of all religions and even gives examples of different types of religious people being neighbors and working well together. He explains how easily they worked together by expressing that the importance was on how they tilled their land, not on who or what they worshipped. Crevecoeur concluded his second to last paragraph with, “the variety of our soils, situations, climates, governments, and produce hath something that must please everybody.” This quote alone proves that the society is more important than the individual. Rarely does he make statements about the importance of the individual over that of the society as a whole, even though there are a few examples of a more romanticized thought process such as ”because each person works for himself.”

The neoclassical period was characterized by a new form of literature while also returning to the use of classical architecture. The architecture could be compared to the new literature because of the emphasis on structure and patterns that were common during this period. Many works of literature during the late sixteenth century can be classified as purely neoclassical; however, these same works tend to have romanticism traits as well. Franklin’s autobiography would be one such example as would De Crevecoeur’s letters. However different these two periods may seem, literary writers during this time had a tendency to fluctuate in between both. The point of this is, that while Letter III seems more neoclassical at first, that does not mean that other literary periods are not found.

I have neither given nor received help on this assignment, nor am I aware of any infraction of the Honor Code. Jessica Smith