

A BRIEF STUDY ON THE STAGES OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

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INTRODUCTION

English literature is the literature written in the English language, and has inter-connectivity with other language literature in the world. The literature composed in English by writers not necessarily from England only, for example, Robert Burns was Scottish, James Joyce was Irish, Joseph Conrad was born in Poland, Dylan Thomas was Welsh, Edgar Allan Poe was American, V.S. Naipaul was born in Trinidad, and Vladimir Nabokov was Russian, but all are considered important writers in the history of English literature. In other words, English literature is as diverse as the varieties and dialects of English spoken around the world. In academia, the term often labels departments and programmes practicing English studies in secondary and tertiary educational systems. Despite the variety of authors of English literature, the works of William Shakespeare remain paramount throughout the English-speaking world.

ANCIENT ENGLISH

Anglo-Saxon literature : The literary works in English, written in ancient English, appeared in the early Middle Ages (the oldest surviving text is Cædmon's Hymn). The oral tradition was very strong in the early English culture and most literary works were written to be performed. Epic poems were thus very popular and many, including Beowulf, have survived to the present day in the rich corpus of Anglo-Saxon literature that closely resemble today's Icelandic, Norwegian, North Frisian and the Northumbrian and Scots English dialects of modern English. Much Old English verse in the extant manuscripts is probably a "milder" adaptation of the earlier Germanic war poems from the continent. When such poetry was brought to England it was still being handed down orally from one generation to another, and the constant presence of alliterative verse, or consonant rhyme (today's newspaper headlines and marketing abundantly use this technique such as in *Big is Better*) helped the Anglo-Saxon people remember it. Such rhyme is a feature of Germanic languages and is opposed to vocalic or end-rhyme of Romance languages. But the first written literature dates to the early Christian monasteries founded by St. Augustine of Canterbury and his disciples and it is reasonable to believe that it was somehow adapted to suit to needs of Christian readers.

MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

In the early 12th century, a new form of English now known as Middle English evolved. This is the earliest form of English literature which is comprehensible to modern readers and listeners, albeit not easily. Middle English lasts up until the 1470s, when the Chancery Standard, a form of London-based English, became widespread and the printing press regularized the language. Middle English Bible translations, notably Wyclif's Bible, helped to establish English as a literary language. There are three main categories of Middle English Literature: Religious, Courtly love, and Arthurian. William Langland's *Piers Plowman* is considered by many critics to be one of the early great works of English literature along with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (most likely by the Pearl Poet) during the Middle Ages. It is also the first allusion to a literary tradition of the legendary English archer, swordsman, and outlaw Robin Hood. The most significant Middle English author was Geoffrey Chaucer who was active in the late 14th century. Often regarded as the father of English literature, Chaucer is widely credited as the first author to demonstrate the artistic legitimacy of the vernacular English language, rather than French or Latin. The *Canterbury Tales* was Chaucer's magnum opus, and a towering achievement of Western culture.

RENAISSANCE LITERATURE

Following the introduction of a printing press into England by William Caxton in 1476, vernacular literature flourished. The Reformation inspired the production of vernacular liturgy which led to the *Book of Common Prayer*, a lasting influence on literary English language. The poetry, drama, and prose produced under both Queen Elizabeth I and King James I constitute what is today labeled as Early modern (or Renaissance).

EARLY MODERN PERIOD: ELIZABETHAN ERA

The Elizabethan era saw a great flourishing of literature, especially in the field of drama. The Italian Renaissance had rediscovered the ancient Greek and Roman theatre, and this was instrumental in the development of the new drama, which was then beginning to evolve apart from the old mystery and miracle plays of the Middle Ages. The Italians were particularly inspired by Seneca (a major tragic playwright and philosopher, the tutor of Nero) and Plautus (its comic clichés, especially that of the boasting soldier had a powerful influence on the Renaissance and after). However, the Italian tragedies embraced a principle contrary to Seneca's ethics: showing blood and violence on the stage. In Seneca's plays such scenes were only acted by the characters. But the English playwrights were intrigued by Italian model: a conspicuous community of Italian actors had settled in London and Giovanni Florio had brought much of the Italian language and culture to England. It is also true that the Elizabethan Era was a very violent age and that the high incidence of political assassinations in Renaissance Italy (embodied by Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*) did little to calm fears of popish plots. As a result,

representing that kind of violence on the stage was probably more cathartic for the Elizabethan spectator. Following earlier Elizabethan plays such as *Gorboduc* by Sackville & Norton and *The Spanish Tragedy* by Kyd that was to provide much material for *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare stands out in this period as a poet and playwright as yet unsurpassed. Shakespeare was not a man of letters by profession, and probably had only some grammar school education. He was neither a lawyer, nor an aristocrat as the "university wits" that had monopolised the English stage when he started writing. But he was very gifted and incredibly versatile, and he surpassed "professionals" as Robert Greene who mocked this "shake-scene" of low origins. Though most dramas met with great success, it is in his later years (marked by the early reign of James I) that he wrote what have been considered his greatest plays: *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Tempest*, a tragicomedy that inscribes within the main drama a brilliant pageant to the new king.

JACOBEAN LITERATURE

After Shakespeare's death, the poet and dramatist Ben Jonson was the leading literary figure of the Jacobean era (The reign of James I). However, Jonson's aesthetics hark back to the Middle Ages rather than to the Tudor Era: his characters embody the theory of humours. According to this contemporary medical theory, behavioral differences result from a prevalence of one of the body's four "humours" (blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile) over the other three; these humours correspond with the four elements of the universe: air, water, fire, and earth. This leads Jonson to exemplify such differences to the point of creating types, or clichés. Jonson is a master of style, and a brilliant satirist. His *Volpone* shows how a group of scammers are fooled by a top con-artist, vice being punished by vice, virtue meting out its reward.

CAROLINE AND CROMWELLIAN LITERATURE

The turbulent years of the mid-17th century, during the reign of Charles I and the subsequent Commonwealth and Protectorate, saw a flourishing of political literature in English. Pamphlets written by sympathizers of every faction in the English civil war ran from vicious personal attacks and polemics, through many forms of propaganda, to high-minded schemes to reform the nation. Of the latter type, *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes would prove to be one of the most important works of British political philosophy. Hobbes's writings are some of the few political works from the era which are still regularly published while John Bramhall, who was Hobbes's chief critic, is largely forgotten. The period also saw a flourishing of news books, the precursors to the British newspaper, with journalists such as Henry Muddiman, Marchamont Needham, and John Birkenhead representing the views and activities of the contending parties. The frequent arrests of authors and the suppression of their works, with the consequence of foreign or underground printing, led to the proposal of a licensing system. The *Areopagitica*, a political pamphlet by John Milton, was written in opposition to licensing and is regarded as one of the most eloquent defenses of press freedom ever written.

RESTORATION LITERATURE

John Milton, religious epic poem *Paradise Lost* published in 1667.

The Restoration literature includes both *Paradise Lost* and the Earl of Rochester's *Sodom*, the high spirited sexual comedy of 'The Country Wife' and the moral wisdom of *Pilgrim's Progress*. It saw Locke's *Two Treatises on Government*, the founding of the Royal Society, the experiments of Robert Boyle and the holy meditations of Boyle, the hysterical attacks on theatres from Jeremy Collier, the pioneering of literary criticism from Dryden, and the first newspapers. The official break in literary culture caused by censorship and radically moralist standards under Cromwell's Puritan regime created a gap in literary tradition, allowing a seemingly fresh start for all forms of literature after the Restoration. During the Interregnum, the royalist forces attached to the court of Charles I went into exile with the twenty-year-old Charles II. The nobility who travelled with Charles II were therefore lodged for over a decade in the midst of the continent's literary scene. Charles spent his time attending plays in France, and he developed a taste for Spanish plays. Those nobles living in Holland began to learn about mercantile exchange as well as the tolerant, rationalist prose debates that circulated in that officially tolerant nation.

AUGUSTAN LITERATURE

The word/term Augustan literature derives from authors of the 1720s and 1730s themselves, who responded to a term that George I of England preferred for himself. While George I meant the title to reflect his might, they instead saw in it a reflection of Ancient Rome's transition from rough and ready literature to highly political and highly polished literature. Because of the aptness of the metaphor, the period from 1689 – 1750 was called "the Augustan Age" by critics throughout the 18th century (including Voltaire and Oliver Goldsmith). The literature of the period is overtly political and thoroughly aware of critical dictates for literature. It is an age of exuberance and scandal, of enormous energy and inventiveness and outrage, that reflected an era when English, Scottish, and Irish people found themselves in the midst of an expanding economy, lowering barriers to education, and the stirrings of the Industrial Revolution. The most outstanding poet of the age is Alexander Pope, but Pope's excellence is partially in his constant battle with other poets, and his serene, seemingly neo-Classical approach to poetry is in competition with highly idiosyncratic verse and strong competition from such poets as Ambrose Philips. It was during this time that James Thomson produced his melancholy *The Seasons* and Edward Young wrote *Night Thoughts*. It is also the era that saw a serious competition over the proper model for the pastoral. In criticism, poets struggled with a doctrine of *decorum*, of matching proper words with proper sense and of achieving a diction that matched the gravity of a subject. At the same time, the mock-heroic was at its zenith. Pope's *Rape of the Lock* and *The Dunciad* are still the greatest mock-heroic poems ever written.

18TH CENTURY LITERATURE

The Age of Sensibility, literature reflected the worldview of the Age of Enlightenment (or Age of Reason) – a rational and scientific approach to religious, social, political, and economic issues that promoted a secular view of the world and a general sense of progress and perfectibility. Led by the philosophers who were inspired by the discoveries of the previous century (Newton) and the writings of Descartes, Locke and Bacon.

ROMANTICISM

The changing landscape of Britain brought about by the steam engine has two major outcomes: the boom of industrialism with the expansion of the city, and the consequent depopulation of the countryside as a result of the enclosures, or privatization of pastures. Most peasants poured into the city to work in the new factories. This abrupt change is revealed by the change of meaning in five key words: industry (once meaning "creativity"), democracy (once disparagingly used as "mob rule"), class (from now also used with a social connotation), art (once just meaning "craft"), culture (once only belonging to farming). But the poor condition of workers, the new class-conflicts and the pollution of the environment causes a reaction to urbanism and industrialization prompting poets to rediscover the beauty and value of nature. Mother earth is seen as the only source of wisdom, the only solution to the ugliness caused by machines. Coleridge and Wordsworth, however, understood romanticism in two entirely different ways: while Coleridge sought to make the supernatural "real" (much like sci-fi movies use special effects to make unlikely plots believable), Wordsworth sought to stir the imagination of readers through his down-to-earth characters taken from real life (in "The Idiot Boy", for example), or the beauty of the Lake District that largely inspired his production (as in "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey"). In America, with the essays and poetry of Ralph Waldo Emerson began an explosion of American English literature, which included the publication of Herman Melville's Moby Dick and the poetry of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson.

VICTORIAN LITERATURE

The Victorian era (1837–1901) that the novel became the leading form of literature in English. Most writers were now more concerned to meet the tastes of a large middle class reading public than to please aristocratic patrons. The best known works of the era include the emotionally powerful works of the Brontë sisters; the satire Vanity by William Makepeace Thackeray; the realist novels of George Eliot; and Anthony Trollope's insightful portrayals of the lives of the landowning and professional classes. Charles Dickens emerged on the literary scene in the 1830s, confirming the trend for serial publication. Dickens wrote vividly about London life and the struggles of the poor, but in a good-humored fashion which was acceptable to readers of all classes. His early works such as the Pickwick Papers are masterpieces of comedy. Later his works became darker, without losing his genius for caricature. H. G. Wells invented a number of

themes that are now classic in the science fiction genre. The War of the Worlds 1898, describing an invasion of late Victorian England by Martians using tripod fighting machines equipped with advanced weaponry, is a seminal depiction of an alien invasion of Earth. The Time Machine is generally credited with the popularization of the concept of time travel using a vehicle that allows an operator to travel purposefully and selectively. The term "time machine" coined by Wells, is now universally used to refer to such a vehicle.

ENGLISH LITERATURE SINCE 1900

The major lyric poet of the first decades of the 20th century was Thomas Hardy. Following the classic novels *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy then concentrated on poetry after the harsh response to his last novel, *Jude the Obscure*. The most widely popular writer of the early years of the 20th century was arguably Rudyard Kipling, a highly versatile writer of novels, short stories and poems. To date the youngest ever recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Kipling's novels include *The Jungle Book*, *The Man Who Would Be King* and *Kim*, while his inspirational poem *If*—is a national favorite. Like William Ernest Henley's poem *Invictus* that has inspired such people as Nelson Mandela when he was incarcerated, *If*— is a memorable evocation of Victorian stoicism, regarded as a traditional British virtue. Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands* 1903, defined the spy novel. The Kailyard school of Scottish writers presented an idealized version of society and brought elements of fantasy and folklore back into fashion, notably J. M. Barrie, creator of *Peter Pan*. The 1905 novel *The Scarlet Pimpernel* by Emma Orczy, is a precursor to the "disguised superhero". In 1908, Kenneth Grahame wrote the children's classic *The Wind in the Willows*, while the Scouts founder Robert Baden Powell's first book *Scouting for Boys* was published. John Buchan penned the adventure novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps* in 1915. Strongly influenced by his Christian faith, G. K. Chesterton was a prolific and hugely influential writer with a diverse output. Aldous Huxley's futuristic novel *Brave New World*, anticipates developments in reproductive technology and sleep-learning that combine to change society. The future society is an embodiment of the ideals that form the basis of futurism.

MODERNISM

The movement known as English literary modernism grew out of a general sense of disillusionment with Victorian era attitudes of certainty, conservatism, and objective truth. The movement was greatly influenced by the ideas of Romanticism, Karl Marx's political writings, and the psychoanalytic theories of subconscious – Sigmund Freud. The continental art movements of Impressionism, and later Cubism, were also important inspirations for modernist writers. Although literary modernism reached its peak between the First and Second World Wars, the earliest examples of the movement's attitudes appeared in the mid to late 19th century. Gerard Manley Hopkins, A. E. Housman, and the poet and novelist Thomas Hardy represented a few of the major early modernists writing in England during the Victorian period.

The first decades of the 20th century saw several major works of modernism published, including the seminal short story collection *Dubliners* by James Joyce, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and the poetry and drama of William Butler Yeats. Joyce's magnum opus *Ulysses*, is arguably the most important work of Modernist literature, and has been referred to as "a demonstration and summation of the entire movement".

POST-MODERN LITERATURE

The word/term Postmodern literature is used to describe certain tendencies in post-World War II literature. It is both a continuation of the experimentation championed by writers of the modernist period (relying heavily, for example, on fragmentation, paradox, questionable narrators, etc.) and a reaction against Enlightenment ideas implicit in Modernist literature. Postmodern literature, like postmodernism as a whole, is difficult to define and there is little agreement on the exact characteristics, scope, and importance of postmodern literature. Henry Miller, William S. Burroughs, Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, Hunter S. Thompson, Truman Capote, Thomas Pynchon.

POST WORLD WAR II

One of the most significant writers in this period was George Orwell. An essayist and novelist, Orwell's works are considered among the most important social and political commentaries of the 20th century. Dealing with issues such as poverty in *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Down and Out in Paris and London*, totalitarianism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*, and colonialism in *Burmese Days*. Orwell's works were often semi-autobiographical and in the case of *Homage to Catalonia*, wholly. Malcolm Lowry is best known for *Under the Volcano*. Some notable writers in the latter half of the 20th century include Ayn Rand, Terry Pratchett, Douglas Adams, J. G. Ballard, Philip Pullman, Neil Gaiman, Alan Moore, William Golding and Salman Rushdie. Ian McEwan's *Atonement* 2001, refers to the process of forgiving or pardoning a transgression, and alludes to the main characters' search for atonement in interwar England. His 2005 novel *Saturday*, follows an especially eventful day in the life of a successful neurosurgeon. J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* fantasy series, is a collection of seven fantasy novels that chronicle the adventures of the adolescent wizard, famous all over the world.

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