

A Short Overview of English Literature from its emergence to the Eighteenth Century

Old English Literature: (450- 1153)

English literature entered the world of writing by the destruction of Roman Britain by the barbaric German tribes. English, as we know it, descends from the language spoken by the North Germanic tribes who settled in England from the 5th century A.D. onwards. They had no writing (except runes, used as charms) until they learned the Latin alphabet from Roman missionaries.

Naturally, once the area later to be known as England began to settle down during the reign of Alfred, priests began to translate Latin texts into Anglo-Saxon/Old English. The earliest written works in Old English (as their language is now known to scholars) were probably composed orally at first, and may have been passed on from speaker to speaker before being written. We know the names of some of the later writers (**Cædmon, Ælfric and King Alfred**) but most writing is anonymous. Old English literature is mostly chronicle and poetry - lyric, descriptive but chiefly narrative or epic¹. By the time literacy becomes widespread, Old English is effectively a foreign and dead language

Although the story of *Beowulf* is the longest known epic poem in Old English, it is a Scandinavian tale dating from the Eighth Century. *Beowulf* is an epic. The tone² of the poem is legendary, it retains ethos³ of the pagan Germanic world.

Middle English Literature: (1154-1485)

¹Epic poetry, a long narrative poem celebrating heroic deeds and events significant to a culture or nation

²In literature, the **tone** of a literary work expresses the writer's attitude toward or feelings about the subject matter and audience.

³ In modern usage, ethos denotes the disposition, character, or fundamental values peculiar to a specific person, people, corporation, culture, or movement.

English literature begins to define itself more clearly following the Norman invasion, which resulted in a minor change, with the importation of thousands of French words. Ideas and themes from French and Celtic literature appear in English writing at about this time. By 1150, we can identify 'Middle English'. Here we have two important works, one by the poorish priest, **William Langland** (1332-1400), *Vision of William concerning Piers the Ploughman*, which is a religious journey through morality, mentioning the seven Deadly Sins of sloth, avarice, anger, gluttony, lust, envy and pride, concluding that it is better to be good than rich. In contrast, his counterpart, **Geoffrey Chaucer** (1343-1400), was well off, working in senior government and as a diplomat, going on various European trips. He wrote several works, including his renowned *Canterbury Tales*.

English Renaissance: 1500–1660

Prior to moving into the Sixteenth Century, it is important to mention that the invention of printing, which was taken up by William Caxton in 1476, had a big impact on literature, in that it became more widespread among the ordinary population. The English Renaissance was a cultural and artistic movement in England dating from the late 15th to the 17th century. It is associated with the pan-European Renaissance that is usually regarded as beginning in Italy in the late 14th century. Literally, it means rebirth or revival of letters. It is a historical period in which thinkers and scholars made attempts to get rid of the feudalism⁴ ideas, to introduce new ideas that expressed the interest of the rising bourgeoisie, and to recover the purity of the early church from the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church. Two features are striking of this movement: thirsting curiosity for the classical literature and the keen interest in the activities of humanity. This period is often subdivided into four parts, including the **Elizabethan Age** (1558-1603), the **Jacobean Age** (1603-1625), the **Caroline Age** (1625-1649), and the **Commonwealth Period** (1649-1660).

The Elizabethan Age was the golden age of English drama. Some of its noteworthy figures include Christopher Marlowe, Francis Bacon, Edmund Spenser, Sir Walter Raleigh, and, of course, William Shakespeare. **The Jacobean Age** is named for the reign of James I. It includes the works of John Donne, William Shakespeare, Michael Drayton, John Webster, Elizabeth

⁴**Feudalism** is a system of land ownership and duties. It was used in the Middle Ages. With feudalism, all the land in a kingdom was the king's. However, the king would give some of the land to the lords or nobles who fought for him. These gifts of land were called manors.

Cary, Ben Jonson, and Lady Mary Wroth. The major works of the time are Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* and Shakespeare's sonnets.

The Caroline Age covers the reign of Charles I (“Carolus”). John Milton, Robert Burton, and George Herbert are some of the notable figures. Finally, there is the **Commonwealth Age**, so named for the period between the end of the English Civil War⁵(1642–1651)and the restoration of the Stuart monarchy – this is the time when **Oliver Cromwell**, a Puritan, led Parliament, who ruled the nation. At this time, public theaters were closed (for nearly two decades) to prevent public assembly and to combat moral and religious transgressions. John Milton and Thomas Hobbes’ political writings appeared and, while drama suffered, prose writers such as Thomas Fuller, Abraham Cowley, and Andrew Marvell published prolifically.

Restoration Age: 1660–1700

On the death of **Oliver Cromwell** (in 1658) plays were no longer prohibited. A new kind of comic drama, dealing with issues of sexual politics among the wealthy and the bourgeois, arose. This is Restoration Comedy, and the style developed well beyond the restoration period into the mid 18th century almost. A fresh start for all forms of literature began such as **satire**⁶, the largest and most important poetic form of the era. **John Milton’s** *Paradise Lost* is the best known epic poem. **John Dryden** is another important poet who established the heroic couplet⁷ as a standard form of English poetry. Among the poets who were influenced by these pillars of Restoration poetry is **Alexander Pope**.

Fiction and journalism also characterized prose writing of this era. Religious writing often strayed into political and economic writing, just as political and economic writing implied or directly addressed religion. The Restoration was also the time when **John Locke** wrote many

⁵The English Civil War was a series of civil wars and political machinations between Parliamentarians (“Roundheads”) and Royalists (“Cavaliers”) principally over the manner of England's governance.

⁶Satire is a technique employed by writers to expose and criticize foolishness and corruption of an individual or a society, by using humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule. It intends to improve humanity by criticizing its follies and foibles. A writer in a satire uses fictional characters, which stand for real people, to expose and condemn their corruption.

⁷A **heroic couplet** is a traditional form for English poetry, commonly used in epic and narrative poetry, and consisting of a rhyming pair of lines in iambic pentameter. Use of the heroic couplet was pioneered by Geoffrey Chaucer in the *Legend of Good Women* and the *Canterbury Tales*,^[1] and generally considered to have been perfected by John Dryden and Alexander Pope in the Restoration Age and early 18th century respectively.

of his philosophical works. His *Treatises on Government*, which later inspired the thinkers in the American Revolution. John Bunyan stands out beyond other religious authors of the period. Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is an allegory of personal salvation and a guide to the Christian life.

Turning to Drama, It was characterized by the unsentimental tone or "hard" comedies of **John Dryden**, and **William Wycherley**, which reflect the atmosphere at Court, and celebrate an aristocratic lifestyle of unremitting sexual intrigue and conquest.

Age of Sensibility: 1750–1798

This period is also sometimes described as the "Age of Johnson". Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) was an English author who made lasting contributions to English literature. Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* was published in 1755, and it had a far-reaching effect on Modern English. Notable writers of the second half of the eighteenth century include : Oliver Goldsmith, and Laurence Sterne.

The *Graveyard Poets* were a number of English poets who paved the way for the emergence of the Ghotic genre, as well as the Romantic movement. This poetic tradition of the 18th century is characterised by its gloomy meditations on mortality, generally speaking about skulls and coffins. Moving beyond the elegy lamenting a single death, their purpose was rarely sensationalist. As the century progressed, "graveyard" poetry increasingly expressed a feeling for the "sublime" and uncanny, and an antiquarian interest in ancient English poetic forms and folk poetry .Moreover, the poor condition of workers, the new class conflicts and the pollution of the environment, led to a reaction against urbanism and industrialization and a new emphasis on the beauty and value of nature, thus paving the way for the emergence of the Romantic era.