



The Evolution of English Literature – Main Periods

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of English literature is a journey of development of a rich array of remarkable compositions. The fifteenth century is generally described as the 'barren' period of English literature; was dominated by poetry written in prose. There was a gradual transition from the exuberant gaiety and imaginative freedom of the Renaissance to that of artificial cheer, philosophic melancholy and Puritan sobriety of the Restoration. Gradually, the precision, symmetry and regularity of the Augustan school were substituted with the Romanticist belief in power of imagination and emotion, reflecting the social problems of the complex era. The twentieth century literature is further characterized by an interest in experimental techniques and English literature is continually evolving by a creative interchange with other literatures.

KEYWORDS

Literature; English; Period.

Introduction

The literature is a reflection of society, the several changes which have come about in English society, from the earliest to the modern times, have left their mark on English literature. Thus the various periods of English literature can be best appreciated with a simultaneous knowledge of English social and political history. The development of English literature can be traced back to more than five centuries. It includes contributions from a myriad of writers, in almost every major genre and style of writing, across different time periods. The periods listed below are not mutually exclusive in their timeframes, and often overlap. These phases are characterized by certain literary figures and literary movements.

The Middle English period

Middle English was the language which resulted from the modification of Anglo-Saxon dialects spoken after the Norman conquest of 1066. Around 1500's the 'London dialect', used by Chaucer became the standard literary language. Chaucer's *Canterbury tales* and *Troilus and Cressida* which rank among the greatest works of English literature laid the basis for 'modern English'. His contemporaries include John Gower, who wrote *Confessio Amantis* and William Langland's religious satire *Piers Plowman*.

The fifteenth century also witnessed the flowering of poetic talent in Scotland, by poets called 'Scottish Chaucerian' and included King James I of England, Gavin Douglas and Robert Henryson. The English prose of the period was used in romance, travel literature, and in the Wycliffe's translation of the Bible. The fifteenth century was also the age of medieval drama, miracle and morality plays and of popular lyrics and ballads. The late Middle English literature, stimulated by the substitution of English for French literature in courtly literature, included ballads, cyclic religious drama and romances.

Elizabethan Age (1558-1603)

The age was a time of great development. With the defeat of Spanish Armada in 1588, the period was marked by commercial expansion, change in outlook combined with growth of nationalistic feelings, referred to as the Renaissance. It is one of the great ages of English literature, especially in Drama, with remarkable writers like Shakespeare, Marlowe, Spencer, Jonson and Bacon.

Jacobean Age (1603-1625)

A rich period of English literature, with many of the themes and patterns carried over from the preceding Elizabethan age. The Jacobean age is marked by a late flowering of Elizabethan writing at the beginning and by growth of cynicism and

realism towards the end. During the Jacobean age, William Shakespeare wrote his greatest tragedies; Ben Jonson, John Donne, John Fletcher and Francis Bacon were at the height of their creative powers; and in 1611 the King James Bible was published. Though rich, the literature of this period was darkly questioning and preoccupied by the problem of evil. Another feature of the Drama at this time was the development of extravagant courtly entertainment known as the Masque. Comedy was best represented by the acid satire of Ben Jonson. There were two poetic streams; the first poetic stream was enriched by the intellectual complexity of John Donne and the Metaphysical poets and the second was represented by the lucid and graceful verse of Ben Jonson. In prose, Francis Bacon and Robert Burton were among the writers who displayed flexibility in style. The monumental prose achievement of the era was the great King James version of the Bible.

Caroline Period (1625-1649)

Caroline literature was a decadent carry over from the previous ages. Melancholy characterized the works of metaphysical poets. Drama was decadent, romanticism was in decline, classicism was advancing and scientific temper was growing. The period includes the later metaphysical poets, the early works of Milton, and the 'Cavalier poets'. The flamboyant cynicism of cavalier poetry was distinctive enough to be considered as typical of this age. The period was dominated by poets like Robert Herrick, Richard Lovelace and Sir John Suckling.

Commonwealth Period

England at this time was ruled by Parliament led by Oliver Cromwell. The Puritans banned theatrical performances in 1642, so dramatic writing ceased. Prose however, flourished in the non-fictional writings of Thomas Browne, Jeremy Taylor and Isaac Walton. Milton was involved in writing political pamphlets in support of the Puritans. Thomas Hobbes published his political and philosophical study *Leviathan* in Paris in 1651, and scandalized the exiled royalist court with his 'atheistic' notions. The later metaphysicals like Vaughan and Marvell were the poets of the period.

The Restoration

The forty-year period after the restoration of the monarchy in England in 1660, is characterized by the wit and control of Dryden's poetry and licentiousness of Rochester's satires. The theatre flourished after the end of the Puritan's ban of 1642; Etherege, Congreve, and Dryden developed the distinctive 'comedy of manners' called Restoration comedy. Dryden, Otway and other playwrights developed the even more distinctive form of tragedy called Heroic drama. Notable writers in prose were Samuel Butler, the religious writer John Bunyan and the philosopher John Locke.

Augustan Age

During the reign of Emperor Augustus, many distinguished Roman writers enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity which resulted in an astonishingly fertile literary output, notably by Virgil, Horace, and Ovid. In imitation of the brilliant literary period, English poets and writers of the first half of the eighteenth century have also been called the Augustans-Addison, Steele, Pope, Swift, Dryden, Goldsmith; all imitated the style and subject matter of this age. Decorum, balance, elegant wit, patriotism and concern for society are characteristics of the Augustan age. It can be described as the period of highest purity and refinement in a national literature.

Age of Reason

A term used jointly for Restoration and Augustan age; covering the final decades of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century. The ideal of reason dominated intellectual activity in the arts. Its literature is characterized by balanced judgement, lack of excess, decorum, restraint and it reflected classical qualities. Among the important English writers of the period were Dryden, Addison, Johnson, Pope, Swift and Steele.

Neoclassicism

This period of English literature lasted from 1660 until about 1800. Dryden, Pope, Goldsmith flourished in poetry and in prose; Swift, Addison, Johnson, and Gibbon were impressive. The novel of the period lacked classical model and thus the novelists are excluded from list of neoclassical writers. An exception to the above might be made for Henry Fielding who held many views in common with the neo-classicists.

Romantic Period

In English literary history, this period covers the time from 1789 to 1832, when Scott died and the passage of Reform bill signalled the political preoccupations of the Victorian era. The writers of this period are many and varied, but all tend to share some common features which were a part of the literary atmosphere called 'Romanticism'. Novelists of the period include Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen. Essayists like Lamb, Hazlitt, De Quincy and Hunt are notable for their contributions to the fast developing literary magazines. The publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* is an important landmark of the age. There were two 'generations' of 'Romantic poets': ironically many of the first generation, which include Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, outlived their younger contemporaries, the second generation Byron, Shelly and Keats who all died young.

Victorian Period

This is time of the reign of Queen Victoria lasting from 1837

to 1901. These six decades saw changes in society and outlook, and a huge variety of literary figures. Among the many writers who flourished during the Victorian reign were the novelists Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Meredith, Hardy and Samuel Butler; the poets Tennyson, Browning and Arnold, and the most prominent essayists were Carlyle, Ruskin and Pater.

Edwardian Period

The world war I led to vast changes in the fabric of British society. The Edwardian period was rich in novelists: Conrad, Kipling, Galsworthy, Wells and Henry James. In the theatre Barrie, Galsworthy and playwrights of the Celtic Renaissance such as Lady Gregory, Synge and Shaw produced notable material. In poetry; Hard, Keats and Kipling were the chief writers.

Modernism

The First World War is generally considered to be a catalyst that initiated the modern period in literature. The most typical 'modernist' feature of the twentieth century literature is its experimental quality, which is thought to be a response to the condition of living in a modernised world. Radical-technical innovations took place in all three of the major genres; in novel, Proust, Kafka, Lawrence, Joyce and Faulkner, all broke away from the broadly realist nineteenth century tradition; in poetry, Pound, Eliot, Yeats and W.C.Williams, and in theatre Strindberg, Pirandello, Brecht, and Beckett are all celebrated for their breaking of old forms and conventions.

Post Modernism

This tendency has dominated English literature since 1945, favouring clarity, irony, scepticism and a no-nonsense tone as evident in works of poets such as Philip Larkin, Donald Davie and John Wain. There has been an adverse reaction against aesthetic and philosophical radicalism in favour of reassertion of traditional modes of expression. The power of English Drama in the 1950's took the form of 'kitchen-sink drama', which deals with working-class life and social conflict.

Conclusion

Thus, English literature has successfully explored the social and psychological realities of human condition across various phases of its development. Till date English literature is characterized by a continuing interest in experimental technique and assimilation of other disciplines and literatures. The modern writers continue to reformulate, reinvent and produce remarkable work, continuously adding to the diverse and phenomenal pool of English literature.

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