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# BRITISH LITERATURE

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# THE ANGLO-SAXON PERIOD (7TH - 11TH CENTURY)

Literature started to appear in the UK after the Anglo-Saxon invasion. In the 5th century, Angles and Saxons came from north-western Europe, drove the Celtic tribes to the western and northern regions and settled in the UK. They brought no written literature with them. Their war songs and sagas were not written down and handed down orally. Only after the introduction of Christianity into Britain in the 6th century, did monks from various monasteries start to write the songs down and the monasteries became centres of culture. The language, in which this literature was written, is called Old English. It was a *synthetic language*; an inflected language, belonging to the west-Germanic group of languages and its written form did not differ from the pronunciation. The literature of this time consisted of stories, which the Anglo-Saxons brought with them from their continental Germanic homes, and of Christian stories. They were mostly elegies, war poems and heroic epic and many of them are preserved in fragments only.

The best preserved Old English heroic poem is **Beowulf**. It appeared in the 7th century but its origin is much older. It consists of more than 3,000 lines and tells us how King Hrothgar builds a great hall for his warriors. However, a monster called Grendel visits it for a period of twelve years, murdering the men asleep there. Beowulf, the nephew of a king in the south of Sweden, crosses the sea to the hall and in a bitter struggle tear off Grendel's arm. After having killed Grendel, Beowulf is attacked by Grendel's mother and then he kills her too. When he returns home, he becomes a king. He reigns for fifty years, but then he is mortally wounded in a battle when killing a dragon. The poem is valuable due to its vivid description of tribal life and like all Anglo-Saxon poems is based on alliteration.

The earliest known authors and poets were **Caedmon** [kædm n] and **Cynewulf** living in the 7th century. In the 9th century, during the reign of **King Alfred the Great** (849-901), King of Wessex, Anglo-Saxon poetry reached its peak. Alfred was a great scholar, law-giver and defender of his country. He established schools and monasteries and invited scholars from abroad to teach in them. The Anglo-Saxon poetry included poetic riddles, war songs, songs of the sea, and, after the acceptance of Christianity, poetic paraphrases of Biblical events. Prose was represented by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a year-by-year historical account of events.

## THE ANGLO-NORMAN PERIOD (1066 - 15TH CENTURY)

The Anglo-Norman literature reflects a period of strengthening of the feudal order and its first conflicts. During the 13th and 14th century, both language and literature came under a strong French influence. Norman French became the spoken language of people of culture and Latin was established as the language of the written word. From the conflict of old English and Norman French, **Middle English** developed. At the beginning, this new language was broken into many dialects, but little by little the dialect of London, the capital, and Oxford and Cambridge, the two centres of learning, gained predominance. During this period, the English language underwent two important changes. It was converted from an inflected to a non-inflected language and its vocabulary was enriched by many Roman words. This means that English was gradually changing into an *analytical language* that replaced the grammatical endings with separate words and altered the pronunciation of the graphic signs.

In literature, new subjects and new forms were adopted. The court delighted in romances, which were brought to England from France by medieval poets, called minstrels. They celebrated adventures of knights or of legendary heroes of ancient times, especially **Alexander the Great**. The minstrels also created many romances based on Celtic legends, especially those concerning **King Arthur** and **the Knights of the Round Table** which first appeared in *The History of the Knights of Britain* by **Geoffrey of Monmouth** (1100-1154). The poetry of this period reflected feudal ideals and ways of life. It was about heroic adventures and the gallant deeds of kings, knights or saints; it portrayed the moral problems of being a Christian, the conflicts of virtue and sin, of soul and body, of lofty spiritual thought and sensuous beauty and pleasure. These attitudes were often expressed through allegory.

**Geoffrey Chaucer** (1340-1400) is probably the most remarkable author of this period. He marks the first turning point between the medieval and the modern age. His great poetic work, *The Canterbury Tales*, gives a realistic, precise and lively picture of the various classes, trades and professions of that time. But this style, modern in spirit and form, was progressive back then as well and remained the single outstanding work of literature for two centuries, with the exception of excellent popular ballads (e.g. about the outlaw **Robin Hood**).

Chaucer was a court poet. He held up a mirror to life, but he was not a reformer. His criticism was very mild, mostly humorous. He did not express the popular discontent of his time, on the contrary, his characteristic tone was that of frank pleasure in the good things of life. Therefore, he may be called "the morning star of the renaissance".

Chaucer

enriched English literature not only with new subjects and ideas but also with new forms. He took over the French method of regular metres, he laughed at the Old English irregular lines and alliterations. Moreover, he was the first known poet who wrote in the London dialect, thus making it the national language. That is why he is also called "the father of English poetry and language".

'One of the prominent authors of the court romance was **Sir Thomas Malory**. (1408-1471). As a result of disorders, he spent almost twenty years in prison, where he translated French stories about King Arthur and wrote **Le Morte d'Arthur** (Arthur's Death), a compilation of Arthurian legends and the first novel in English literature. It was written in a simple, rather monotonous, but very poetic way and the legends narrated there were later used by many writers, such as **Spencer** and **Mark Twain**. In 1485, *Le Morte d'Arthur* was printed by **William Caxton**, who introduced letter-printing into England in 1474.

## RENAISSANCE AND HUMANIST PROSE (16TH CENTURY-1642)

At the end of the 15th century, English literature was influenced by the *Renaissance*, which originated in Italy and found its home at Oxford University and from there it spread quickly because of the invention of the printing press. It was a period of great geographical discoveries and development in trade when the transition from feudalism to capitalism started. It was the: rediscovery of the ancient Roman and Greek cultures that stimulated a reaction against the medieval way of thinking and a revolt against the church's authority. Humanism represented human endeavour to declare individual rights and spiritual freedoms.

The greatest English humanist, and also scientist, statesman and philosopher **Sir Thomas More** (1478-1535). His lectures made him very popular, he entered the King's service and became Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII. But he resigned to the post in 1532 in protest against Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon. He was therefore imprisoned in the Tower of London and later beheaded. More's chief work is his *Utopia*, which he wrote for the young king, Henry VIII. This fiction gave More an opportunity to express his opposition to the existing political systems of France and England. It was originally written in Latin, but translated into English in 1551 and it describes the best form of government in an ideal state, which is situated on an imaginary island called Utopia. In Utopia, everybody has the same rights, shares their possession and leads a happy life.

The reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603), was a period when English national literature and the modern English language were formed. All literature, but especially poetry and drama, were taken to a very high artistic level. Characteristic features of Elizabethan literature, in general, were the emphasis on emotions and fancy. In form, this literature was smooth, melodious and pleasant. The interest in the individual led to great development in lyrical verse, new literary forms were adopted, one of which the most favoured was a sonnet.

**Edmund Spenser** (1552-1599) was the first master of the new English language and his aim was to create purely English national poetry. **Sir Philip Sidney** (1554-1586), Spenser's friend, put sonnet form on a very high artistic level. **William Shakespeare** (1564-1616) would have been famous as one of the outstanding Renaissance poets even if he had never written a single play. His most beautiful examples of poetry are his sonnets, most of which tell of his affection for a young patron and of a dark beauty loved by the poet. Although the personal details of the sonnets remain a mystery, they are quite comprehensible.

## BRITISH LITERATURE IN THE 17TH CENTURY

**John Milton** (1608-1674), a leading poet of the English revolution, actively supported the ideas of Puritanism in his works. After the execution of **Charles I**, he was appointed Latin secretary to the newly formed Council of State in Cromwell's government. He was arrested and fined when the monarchy had been restored, but released, probably because he was blind and very old. At the end of his life, Milton bought a cottage near London and dictated his poems to his daughter. During this period, he wrote his masterpiece, *Paradise Lost*, dealing with the biblical theme of man's disobedience and thereupon the loss of paradise. The main hero in this complicated epic is Adam, representing humanity, Nevertheless, the most fascinating passages are those dealing with the revolt of Satan against heaven and against God, the almighty creator of life. In Satan's speeches, God is presented as despotic and unjust in his treatment of Satan; God and his angels reflect the attitudes of an absolute monarch and his court. Satan, in his discussions with fallen angels, supports the principles of independence and freedom of will and evokes a sympathetic response in the reader. Milton wrote immediately the sequel of *Paradise Lost*, called *Paradise Regained* in 1671.



# BRITISH LITERATURE IN THE 18TH CENTURY

The 18th century is a century of the Enlightenment, the “**Age of Reason**”. All branches of science were developed and this resulted in great technical progress. The beginning of the 18th century is marked by classicism continuing in poetry and realism which appears in prose. Classicism sets strict rules on the form and themes of poetry, uses many complicated stylistic figures. Thus, poetry was limited to the educated reader. **Alexander Pope** (1688-1744) is well known for his satirical poem *The Rape of the Lock*. **John Gay's** (1685-1732) play *The Beggar's Opera* met with remarkable success not only in his time – it was also an inspiration for other writers in the following centuries (Bertolt Brecht, Václav Havel, etc.), and it remains popular as a musical even today. It is a musical play as well as a social satire, the characters of the play come from the underworld in London.

The 18th century also led to growing popularity of reading among the middle class and prose was the most accessible form for new readers, so that essays, letters and later novels became prevailing genres. **Jonathan Swift** (1667-1745) was a sharp and embittered satirist and a critic of British society. His most popular work is a fictional novel, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). In the first part, the captain Lemuel Gulliver is shipwrecked and comes to an island inhabited by six-inch-high Lilliputians. Swift uses their miniature size to ridicule the pomp of the court and useless wars and to satirise the political and religious controversies of contemporary Britain. (e.g. the disputes between Lilliputians who wear high heels and low heels). In the second book, Gulliver appears in Brobdingnag, the land of giants. Here, Swift attacks again the European style of life. In the third book, Gulliver visits Laputa, a flying island, and this offers Swift a chance to satirise contemporary philosophers and scientists. The fourth book describes the country of Houyhnhnms, clever horses whose virtues are superior to those of the Yahoos, beasts resembling humans. While in the first three books Swift's satire is directed against politics in Britain, corrupt courts and armies, bad politicians and unjust judges, in the last book, he attacks the corruption of the human race in general.

**Daniel Defoe** (1660?-1731) started his literary career as a journalist and a pamphleteer. Nevertheless, his most popular book, published in 1719, was *Robinson Crusoe*. It tells the story of a man shipwrecked on a lonely island. Robinson embodied the qualities which the middle class needed in capitalist competition — he was energetic, hardworking and skillful, and on a deserted island, he created a miniature civilisation with his own hands.

**Henry Fielding** (1707-1754) was a satirical novelist and playwright and his masterpiece is a novel called *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*. **Samuel Richardson** (1789-1761) was the author of epistolary novels (i.e. written in a form of series of letters), a popular genre, especially for women. He showed his instinctive and deep understanding of women's sensibilities in his *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded*. **Samuel Johnson** (1709-1784) is a dominant personality in British literature of the 18th century mostly because of his central work, *Dictionary of the English Language*.

## ROMANTICISM AND REALISM (19TH CENTURY)

The 19th century can be characterised by rapid economic development in Britain, which became a leading power and a rich colonial empire. In 1837, **Queen Victoria** came to the throne at the age of eighteen and gave her name to the era, the "Victorian Age". During that time, the British Empire was very prosperous and the Queen was the symbol of the continuity and stability of the British way of life. However, Victorian England is also remembered for growing social discrepancies in towns, where slums appeared, and for hypocritical Victorian morality. These changes and social tensions are reflected in the realistic prose of the leading British novelists.

At the beginning of the 19th century, poets turned again to senses and sentiments. They were preoccupied by folk traditions, ancient history and natural mysticism. The writers were influenced by **J.J.Rousseau** and his ideas of returning to nature and setting humans free from the harmful influence of civilisation.

Pre-romantic lyrical poetry was written by **William Blake** (1757-1827). His most beautiful poems are very simple in form, inspired by songs for children. His *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* were not appreciated in his time and were rediscovered in the 20th century.

The Romantic period can be divided into two parts. The first was dominated by the so-called **Lake poets**, i.e. **William Wordsworth** (1770-1850), **Samuel Taylor Coleridge** (1772-1834), and **Robert Southey** (1774-1843) who took their inspiration from the Lake District in England. Wordsworth and Coleridge were close friends and their influence on each other was very fruitful. Together they published *The Lyrical Ballads*, an experiment which marked a turning point in British poetry but was not favourably received by critics. The Romantic movement culminated in the works of **G.Byron**, **P.B.Shelley** and **J.Keats**.

**George Gordon, Lord Byron** (1788-1824), was the son of a nobleman. He was physically disabled from birth and his physical blemish made him bitter and cynical. He became a member of the House of Lords and might have become a charismatic politician if he had not devoted himself to poetry. After publishing *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in 1812, he became famous overnight. The poem bears many autobiographical features: tired of life, Childe Harold travels all over Europe, him being a noble genius is contrasting with the hypocritical society around him. Another poem, *Don Juan*, is a satirical one, written in very complicated stanzas.

**Percy Bysshe Shelley** (1792-1822) was also a rebel against convention but he rejected the romantic melancholy and despair characteristic of Byron. In his great epic *Prometheus Unbound* he is inspired by Aeschylus tragedy *Prometheus Bound* and makes some crucial changes in the old Greek legend — Shelley's Prometheus is also chained to a rock but in the end, is saved by Demogorgon, the symbol of rebellion.

**Mary Shelley** (1797-1851), who was married to Percy B. Shelley, wrote *Frankenstein*, a novel that remains famous to this day, and has been the subject of many films.

**Sir Walter Scott** (1771-1832) is the author of many romantic and historical novels (*Ivanhoe*). Scott's novels can be divided into three major groups: stories of English history in the Tudor and Stuart periods, such as *Kenilworth* and *Old Mortality*, and lastly stories from Scottish history, such as *Waverley* or *Rob Roy*.

While the Romantics were engaged mostly in lyrical poetry, epics on historical or mythological topics, and dramas in verse, the novel was becoming a dominant genre later in the 18th century. Novelists were more interested in contemporary problems and their works often expressed sharp social criticism. Realistic tendencies can be traced in the novels of **Jane Austen** (1775-1817), such as *Pride and Prejudice*, who depicts the quiet everyday life of relatively rich people, mostly from country gentry. The major concern of her characters is to become rich, find a spouse, run their households and educate children.

**Charles Dickens** (1812-1870) was one of the best narrators of this century. He wrote about the real Victorian England and many of his characters were not rich, middle-class ladies and gentlemen, but poor and hungry people. His family was poor and Charles worked in a factory where he washed bottles. Dickens hated the experience and used it in many novels, especially *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist*. His characters are popular for being portrayed as full of colour and life. He later became a successful journalist and spent a lot of time abroad.

**William Makepeace Thackeray** (1811-1863) was a journalist whose antipathy towards snobbery, hypocrisy and the nature of the British social system forms the basis of his best novel, *Vanity Fair*. In his novel, Thackeray describes and analyses a range of various social types and criticises their pursuit of money and hypocrisy.

**Charlotte Brontë** (1816-1855) is famous for her novel *Jane Eyre*, which is based on her own experience as a governess. Her sister, **Emily Brontë** (1818-1848) is the author of another novel of world's fame called *Wuthering Heights*, a passionate story full of mystery and dark stormy scenes. Influenced by Émile Zola, **Thomas Hardy** (1840-1928) is the most important representative of the naturalistic trend in British literature. His most famous novels are *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the D'Urberville*.

Of the many poets of the second half of the 19th century, **Alfred Tennyson** (1809-1892),

**Robert Browning** (1812-1889) and his wife **Elizabeth Barrett Browning** (1806-1861) must be mentioned.

**Robert Louis Stevenson** (1850-1894) was inspired by a small map to write his masterpiece full of adventures, pirates and dangers at sea. *Treasure Island* made him famous throughout the world, though he wrote many other books, such as *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* or *The New Arabian Nights*.

## LITERATURE IN THE 20TH CENTURY

**T.S. Eliot** (1888-1965) was a man of two continents (born in St. Louis, Missouri, to a prominent Boston Brahmin family, but moved to England in 1914 at the age of 25 and went on to settle, work, and marry there), a prodigious poet who wrote relatively few creative works, a prolific literary critic, a bank employee, and a Nobel laureate. His name, alongside a few others, has come to define British modernist fiction. Eliot's most famous pieces, such as *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *The Waste Land*, are among the most widely taught and studied poems in English literature, and he remains one of the most influential poets of the 20th century.

**James Joyce** (1882-1941), one of the most recognised and seminal figures of the Modernist movement, was born in Dublin. He became convinced that the only way to achieve his literary ambitions was through self-exile. In December 1902, Joyce left Ireland for the first time. He would spend the next years living in France, Italy and Switzerland, where he would write for Italian newspapers and give lectures on British literature. Although he wrote mainly in continental Europe, Joyce's writing remained firmly grounded in his home city of Dublin. *Dubliners* were Joyce's first major work. It is a collection of short stories portraying what he saw as Dublin's inhabitants' various forms of paralysis. The work Joyce is most famous for, *Ulysses*, is a novel, taking place entirely on June 16, 1904. It is a dissection of the mind of Leopold Bloom as he wanders about Dublin. Joyce's final work, *Finnegan's Wake*, which took him seventeen years to write, is his most impressive and difficult work. In it, Joyce reached the fullest expression of his stream-of-conscious style through equivocal and seemingly nonsensical sentences.

**Virginia Woolf** (1882-1941), was born to an upper-class family in London and was home-schooled. Woolf was sexually abused by her half-brothers and her mother Julia died when Woolf was only 13 years old. After her mother's death, she experienced her first, of many, nervous breakdowns. She continued to struggle with mental health issues throughout her life, and concern for sanity versus madness appears throughout her writing. Woolf innovated the form of the novel and experimented with stream of consciousness narrative techniques. Her most famous works include *The Voyage Out*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. Despite Woolf's success, she struggled with her mental health and as World War II began, Woolf committed suicide.

**Samuel Beckett** (1906-1989) was born in Dublin to a prosperous businessman and the daughter of a gentleman. From a young age, Beckett exhibited reckless behaviour. He wrote plays (*Waiting for Godot*), poetry (*Poèmes*) and novels (*Malone Dies*). Beckett was honored with the Nobel Prize for Literature. A resident of Paris for most of his adult life, he wrote in both French and English and was a literary translator. His bleak, tragicomic outlook on existence and experience, often coupled with black comedy and nonsense. His writing became increasingly minimalist in his later career, involving more aesthetic and linguistic experimentation.

**W.B. Yeats** (1865-1939) was an Irish poet and dramatist from Dublin. Throughout his life, he spent time in different places and so was able to incorporate many themes into his poetry, including religion, politics, love, and social class. His early work was mainly a body devoted to Irish culture, some poems derived from his own personal experiences in the west of Ireland. He then also began to include English, European, and Asian cultures into his work as well. He was a recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature. His accomplishments include *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (1889), *The Countess Cathleen* and *Deirdre*, *The Tower* and *Words for Music Perhaps and Other Poems*.

**George Orwell** (1903-1950) was born in India. He was an English novelist, essayist, and critic famous for his novels *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-four*, the latter a profound anti-utopian novel that examines the dangers of totalitarian rule.

**Agatha Christie** (1890-1976) is the best-selling author of all time, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. She is the best-selling novelist of all time. She is best known for her 66 detective novels and 14 short story collections, particularly those revolving around fictional detectives Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, as well as the world's longest-running play – *The Mousetrap*. Christie is regularly referred to as the "Queen of Crime" or "Queen of Mystery", and is considered a master of suspense, plotting, and characterisation.

## LITERATURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

**Kate Atkinson** (1951-present) is a writer of short stories, plays, and novels, including the Jackson Brodie mystery series. She has won numerous awards. Her most famous novels include *Case Histories* and *Life After Life*.

**Kazuo Ishiguro** (1954-present) is one of the UK's most celebrated living writers. Ishiguro's award-winning novels are almost all written in the first person and cover genres from historical fiction to speculative fiction. His most famous works are *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*.

**Doris Lessing** (1919-2013) was the oldest writer to ever receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, at the age of 88. Although her books covered several genres, Lessing is best known for taking on social issues. Her most famous works include *The Golden Notebook* and *The Good Terrorist*.

**v.S. Naipaul** (1932-2018) is a recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Naipaul published almost three dozen books, some of which were considered controversial, over five decades. They range from his early comedic novels to more serious dramatic works later in his career. His most famous works include *A House for Mr Biswas* and *In a Free State*.

**Salman Rushdie's** (1947-present) novels are largely set in India and examine post-colonialism with allegory and magical realism. *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses* are his most celebrated works.

**Zadie Smith** (1975-present) is arguably the most popular British writer of the 21st century. Her novels have won many accolades. Her most famous works include her wildly popular debut novel, *White Teeth*, along with *NW* and *Grand Union*.

**Sarah Waters** (1966-present) is one of the greatest writers of historical fiction working today. Waters has penned several novels, many of which feature lesbian protagonists in Victorian times. Quite a few of her works have been adapted for stage and screen. Her popular and highly praised novels include *Tipping the Velvet*, *Fingersmith* and *The Little Stranger*.