

English Literature – Details & Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Literature written in English since c.1450 by the inhabitants of the British Isles; it was during the 15th cent. that the English language acquired much of its modern form.

The Tudors and the Elizabethan Age

The beginning of the Tudor dynasty coincided with the first dissemination of printed matter. William Caxton's press was established in 1476, only nine years before the beginning of Henry VII's reign. Caxton's achievement encouraged writing of all kinds and also influenced the standardization of the English language. The early Tudor period particularly the reign of Henry VIII, was marked by a break with the Roman Catholic Church and a weakening of feudal ties, which brought about a vast increase in the power of the monarchy.

Stronger political relationships with the Continent were also developed, increasing England's exposure to Renaissance culture. Humanism became the most important force in English literary and intellectual life, both in its narrow sense—the study and limitation of the Latin classics — and in its broad sense — the affirmation of the secular, in addition to the other worldly concerns of people. These forces produced during the reign (1558–1603) of Elizabeth I one of the most fruitful as in literary history.(1)

The Jacobean Era, Cromwell, and the Restoration

Elizabethan literature generally reflects the exuberant self-confidence of a nation expanding its powers, increasing its wealth, and thus keeping at bay its serious social and religious problems. Disillusion and pessimism followed, however, during the unstable reign of James I (1603–25). The 17th cent was to be a time of great upheaval — revolution and regicide, restoration of the monarchy, and, finally, the victory of Parliament, landed Protestantism, and the moneyed interests.

Jacobean literature begins with the drama, including some of Shakespeare's greatest, and darkest, plays. The dominant literary figure of James's reign was Ben Jonson, John Dryden began as a playwright but became the foremost poet and critic of his time. His greatest works are satirical narrative poems, notably *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), in which prominent contemporary figures are unmistakably and devastatingly portrayed. Another satiric poet of the period was Samuel Butler, whose *Hudibras* (1663) satirizes Puritanism together with all the intellectual pretensions of the time. During the Restoration Puritanism or, more generally, the Dissenting tradition, remained vital. The most important Dissenting literary work was John Bunyan

INTRODUCTION

The Eighteenth Century

The Glorious Revolution of 1688 firmly established a Protestant monarchy together with effective rule by Parliament. The new science of the time, Newtonian physics, reinforced the belief that everything, including human conduct, is guided by a rational order. Moderation and common sense became intellectual values as well as standards of behavior. These values achieved their

highest literary expression in the poetry of Alexander Pope(2)

Pope-neoclassicist, wit, and master of the heroic couplet was critical of human foibles but generally confident that order and happiness in human affairs were attainable if excesses were eschewed and rational dictates heeded. The brilliant prose satirist Jonathan Swift was not so sanguine. His "savage indignation" resulted in devastating attacks on his age in *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), *Gulliver's Travels*(1726), and *A Modest Proposal* (1729).

Middle-class tastes were reflected in the growth of periodicals and newspapers, the best of which were the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* produced by Joseph Addison

The Victorian Age

The Reform Bill of 1832 gave the middle class the political power it needed to consolidate—and to hold—the economic position it had already achieved. Industry and commerce burgeoned. While the affluence of the middle class increased, the lower classes, thrown off their land and into the cities to form the great urban working class, lived ever more wretchedly. The social changes were so swift and brutal that Godwinian utopianism rapidly gave way to attempts either to justify the new economic and urban conditions, or to change them. The intellectuals and artists of the age had to deal in some way with the upheavals in society, the obvious inequities of abundance for a few and squalor for many, and, emanating from the throne of Queen Victoria (1837–1901), an emphasis on public rectitude and moral propriety.

The Novel

The Victorian era was the great age of the English novel—realistic, thickly plotted, crowded with characters, and long. It was the ideal form to describe contemporary life and to entertain the middle class. The novels of Charles Dickens, full to overflowing with drama, humor, and an endless variety of vivid characters and plot complications, nonetheless spare nothing in their portrayal of what urban life was like for all classes. William Makepeace Thackeray is best known for *Vanity Fair*(1848), which wickedly satirizes hypocrisy and greed.

Emily Brontë's (see Brontë, family) single novel, *Wuthering Heights* (1847), is a unique masterpiece propelled by a vision of elemental passions but controlled by an uncompromising artistic sense. The fine novels of Emily's sister Charlotte Brontë, especially *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853), are more rooted in convention, but daring in their own ways. The novels of George Eliot(3)

The Early Twentieth Century

Irish drama flowered in the early 20th cent., largely under the aegis of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin (see Irish literary renaissance). John Millington Synge, William Butler Yeats, and Sean O'Casey all wrote on Irish themes mythical in Yeats's poetic drama, political in O'Casey's realistic plays. Also Irish, George Bernard Shaw wrote biting dramas that reflect all aspects of British society. In fact, many of the towering figures of 20th-century English literature were not English; Shaw, Yeats, Joyce, O'Casey, and Beckett were Irish, Dylan Thomas was Welsh, T.S. Eliot was born an American, and Conrad was Polish.

Poetry in the early 20th cent. was typified by the conventional romanticism of such poets as John Masefield, Alfred Noyes, and Walter de la Mare and by the experiments of the imagists, notably Hilda Doolittle (H. D.), Richard Aldington, Herbert Read, and D. H. Lawrence. The finest poet of the period was Yeats, whose poetry fused romantic vision with contemporary political and aesthetic concerns. Though the 19th-century tradition of the novel lived on in the work of Arnold Bennett, William Henry Hudson, and John Galsworthy, new writers like Henry James,

H. G. Wells, and Joseph Conrad expressed the skepticism and alienation that were to become features of post-Victorian sensibility.

World War I shook England to the core. As social mores were shaken, so too were artistic conventions. The work of war poets like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, the latter killed in the war (as were Rupert Brooke and Isaac Rosenberg), was particularly influential. Ford Madox Ford's landmark tetralogy, *Parade's End*, is perhaps the finest depiction of the war and its effects. The new era called for new forms, typified by the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, first published in 1918, and of T.S. Eliot, whose long poem *The Waste Land* (1922) was a watershed in both American and English literary history. Its difficulty, formal invention, and bleak antiromanticism were to influence poets for decades.

Equally important was the novel *Ulysses*, also published in 1922, by the expatriate Irishman James Joyce. Although his books were controversial because of their freedom of language and content, Joyce's revolutions in narrative form, the treatment of time, and nearly all other techniques of the novel made him a master to be studied, but only intermittently copied. Though more conventional in form, the novels of D.H. Lawrence were equally challenging to convention; he was the first to champion both the primitive and the supercivilized urges of men and women.

Sensitivity and psychological subtlety mark the superb novels of Virginia Woolf, who, like Dorothy Richardson, experimented with the interior forms of narration. Woolf was the center of the brilliant Bloomsbury group, which included the novelist E. M. Forster, the biographer Lytton Strachey, and many important English intellectuals of the early 20th cent. Aldous Huxley and Evelyn Waugh satirized the group and the period, while Katharine Mansfield and Elizabeth Bowen captured their flavor in fiction.

Moved by the Great Depression, the rise of fascism, and English policies of appeasement, many writers and intellectuals sought solutions in the politics of the left—or the right. Wyndham Lewis satirized what he thought was the total dissolution of culture in *Apes of Gods* (1930). George Orwell fought with the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. The experience left him profoundly disillusioned with Communism, a feeling he eloquently expressed in such works as *Animal Farm* (1946) and *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949). The poets W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Stephen Spender, and C. Day Lewis all proclaimed their leftist respective political commitments, but the pressing demands of World War II superseded these long-term ideals.

The Postwar Era to the Present

After the war most English writers chose to focus on aesthetic or social rather than political problem; C.P. Snow was perhaps the notable exception. The novelists Henry Green, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Joyce Cary, and Lawrence Durrell, and the poets Robert Graves, Edwin Muir, Louis MacNeice and Edith Sitwell tended to cultivate their own distinctive voices. Other novelists and playwrights of the 1950s, often called the angry young men, expressed a deep dissatisfaction with British society, combined with despair that anything could be done about it. While the postwar era was not a great period of English literature, it produced a variety of excellent critics, including William Empson, Frank Kermode, and F.R. Leavis. The period was also marked by a number of highly individual novelists, including Kingsley Amis, Anthony Burgess, William Golding, Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, and Muriel Spark.

Anthony Powell and Richard Hughes continued to work in the expansive 19th century tradition, producing a series of realistic novels chronicling life in England during the 20th cent. Some of the most exciting work of the period came in the theater, notably the plays of John Osborne,

Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, David Storey, and Arnold Wesker. Among the best postwar British authors were the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas and the Irish expatriate novelist and playwright Samuel Beckett. Thomas's lyricism and rich imagery reaffirmed the romantic spirit, and he was eventually appreciated for his technical mastery as well. Beckett, who wrote many of his works in French and translated them into English, is considered the greatest exponent of the theater of the absurd. His uncompromisingly bleak, difficult plays (and novels) depict the lonely, alienated human condition with compassion and humor.

Other outstanding contemporary poets include Hugh MacDiarmid, the leading figure of the Scottish literary renaissance; Ted Hughes, whose harsh, post-apocalyptic poetry celebrates simple survival, and Seamus Heaney, an Irish poet who is hailed for his exquisite style. Novelists generally have found as little in the Thatcher and Major eras as in the previous period to inspire them, but the work of Margaret Drabble, John Fowles, David Lodge stands out, and the Scottish writer James Kelman stands out.

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Bibliography

1. See A. Fowler, *A History of English Literature* (1987); *The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, ed. by G. Watson (4 vol., 1969–72); *The Penguin Companion to English Literature*, ed. by D. Daiches (1972);
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3. *St. Martin's Anthologies of English Literature*, ed. by M. Alexander et al. (5 vol., 1991); *The Oxford English Literary History*, vol. 2 by J. Simpson, 1350–1547, *Reform and Cultural Revolution* (2002), vol. 8 by P. Davis, 1830–1880, *the Victorians* (2002).