

THE EVOLUTION OF LITERATURE



Let's look through history at the different periods of English literature.



Old English or Anglo-Saxon Era (450-1066)

During this period Germanic tribes attacked and conquered the area of Celtic England. This age gave *Beowulf*, the greatest Germanic epic in the world of literature. Two major poets, Caedmon and Cynewulf, contributed to literary writing. The poetry of the time was written in the language of Anglo-Saxon people, which is now called **Old English**. The theme and subject matter of the Old English period **chiefly** revolved around religion. Alfred the Great, a West Saxon king, loved literature very much. He translated various books of Latin prose into Old English and instituted the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* as the contemporary record of important issues in England.



Middle English Period (1066-1500)

After the Norman conquest of England, in 1066, the written form of the Anglo-Saxon language continued in some monasteries, but few literary works are known from this period. As the Normans became part of Anglo-Saxon society, their language and literature mixed together. The Anglo-Saxon language went through a gradual transition into **Middle English**. A number of important works during this time show the change that occurred in the language, such as Layamon's *Brut*. The second half of the 14th century was the age of Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower, which gave great examples of religious and satirical poems like *Piers Plowman*. There was also the most famous prose romance written by Thomas Malory called *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

The Renaissance (1485-1660)

The 15th and 16th centuries are the period of the European Renaissance, one of the three or four great transforming movements of European history.

England already had a strong tradition of literature during this time and it increased as use of the printing press became common by the mid-16th century. During this time the unforgettable works of William Shakespeare, Thomas Wyatt and others were published. The plays of English Renaissance theatre were the outstanding **legacy** of the period. The English theatre scene, which performed both for the court and nobility in private performances, and a very wide public in the theatres, was the most crowded in Europe. Many important figures, such as Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, put on shows for the large audiences. All the 16th century Tudor monarchs were highly educated, as was much of the nobility, and Italian literature was quite popular, providing the sources for many of Shakespeare's plays. The one piece of Renaissance literature that has probably influenced more people than any other, however, is the *King James Bible*.





The Restoration (1660-1780)

Many typical literary forms of the modern world, including the novel, biography, history, travel writing, and journalism, began during the Restoration period. However, The Restoration period was a great period of drama. Heroic plays, influenced by principles of French Neoclassicism, were extremely popular, but the age is mostly remembered for its critical **comedies of manners** by such **playwrights** as George Etherege, William Wycherley, Sir John Vanbrugh, and William Congreve.

The Romantic Period (1780-1832)

The Romantic Movement of the 18th and 19th centuries showed the most variety in style, theme and content compared to any other period in English literature history. Romanticism usually deals with the individual more than with society. The individual consciousness and the individual imagination are especially fascinating for the Romantics. William Blake was one of the best poets of the era. Blake often included his personal spirituality and his views of theological issues in his work, perhaps most famously in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and in *Jerusalem*. However, the most prolific writer of the Romantic Period was John Keats. Keats's poetry is unlike any other writers of the period. He is best known for his sonnets and odes, particularly *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

The Victorian Age (1832-1901)

The Victorian Age was the great age of the English novel. The novels of Charles Dickens, full of drama, humour, and an endless variety of vivid characters and plot complications, realistically show how life was like for all classes. Nonfiction works also were popular during this period. The founders of Communism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, researched and wrote their books in the free environment of England. Also, Oscar Wilde, W. S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan produced some of the best examples of 19th-century British drama.



GLOSSARY

chiefly: principalmente.

legacy: eredità.

comedies of manner: commedia di genere, opera **playwrights**: commediografi.

teatrale che prende in giro i costumi e le abitudini di uno o più gruppi sociali.

TRUE OR FALSE

Decide if the following statements are True (T) or False (F).

- 1) Alfred the Great had many books translated into Old English.
- 2) Language remained unchanged during the Norman Period.
- 3) English plays and King's James Bible characterise the Renaissance.
- 4) Many forms of literature today existed in the Restoration period.
- 5) Keats had a similar style to other Romantic poets.
- 6) Victorian Age novels gave unreal image of British society.

