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## **A brief history of English literature Notes**



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## **Literary forms**

Literary forms such as the novel or lyric poem, or genres, such as the horror-story, have a history. In one sense, they appear because they have not been thought of before, but they also appear, or become popular for other cultural reasons, such as the absence or emergence of literacy. In studying the history of literature (or any kind of art), you are challenged to consider

- what constitutes a given form,
- how it has developed, and
- whether it has a future.

The novels of the late Catherine Cookson may have much in common with those of Charlotte Brontë, but is it worth mimicking in the late 20th century, what was ground-breaking in the 1840s? While Brontë examines what is contemporary for her, Miss Cookson invents an imagined past which may be of interest to the cultural historian in studying the present sources of her nostalgia, but not to the student of the period in which her novels are set. Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe is a long work of prose fiction, but critics do not necessarily describe it as a novel. Why might this be? Knowing works in their historical context does not give easy answers, but may shed more or less light on our darkness in considering such questions.

## **Old English, Middle English and Chaucer**

### **Old English**

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. 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 epic. By the time literacy becomes widespread, Old English is effectively a foreign and dead language. And its forms do not significantly affect subsequent developments in English literature. (With the scholarly exception of the 19th century poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, who finds in Old English verse the model for his metrical system of "sprung rhythm".)

### **Middle English and Chaucer**

From 1066 onwards, the language is known to scholars as Middle English. Ideas and themes from French and Celtic literature appear in English writing at about this time, but the first great name in English literature is that of Geoffrey Chaucer (?1343-1400). Chaucer introduces the iambic pentameter line, the rhyming couplet and other rhymes used in Italian poetry (a language in which rhyming is arguably much easier than in English, thanks to the frequency of terminal vowels). Some of Chaucer's work is prose and some is lyric poetry, but his greatest work is mostly narrative poetry, which

we find in Troilus and Criseyde and The Canterbury Tales. Other notable mediaeval works are the anonymous Pearl and Gawain and the Green Knight (probably by the same author) and William Langlands' Piers Plowman.

## **Tudor lyric poetry**

Modern lyric poetry in English begins in the early 16th century with the work of Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517-1547). Wyatt, who is greatly influenced by the Italian, Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch) introduces the sonnet and a range of short lyrics to English, while Surrey (as he is known) develops unrhymed pentameters (or blank verse) thus inventing the verse form which will be of great use to contemporary dramatists. A flowering of lyric poetry in the reign of Elizabeth comes with such writers as Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586), Edmund Spenser (1552-1599), Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618), Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) and William Shakespeare (1564-1616). The major works of the time are Spenser's Faerie Queene, Sidney's Astrophil and Stella and Shakespeare's sonnets.

## **Renaissance drama**

The first great English dramatist is Marlowe. Before the 16th century English drama meant the amateur performances of Bible stories by craft guilds on public holidays. Marlowe's plays (Tamburlaine; Dr. Faustus; Edward II and The Jew of Malta) use the five act structure and the medium of blank verse, which Shakespeare finds so productive. Shakespeare develops and virtually exhausts this form, his Jacobean successors producing work which is rarely performed today, though some pieces have literary merit, notably The Duchess of Malfi and The White Devil by John Webster (1580-1625) and The Revenger's Tragedy by Cyril Tourneur (1575-1626). The excessive and

gratuitous violence of Jacobean plays leads to the clamour for closing down the theatres, which is enacted by parliament after the Civil war.

## **Metaphysical poetry**

The greatest of Elizabethan lyric poets is John Donne (1572-1631), whose short love poems are characterized by wit and irony, as he seeks to wrest meaning from experience. The preoccupation with the big questions of love, death and religious faith marks out Donne and his successors who are often called metaphysical poets. (This name, coined by Dr. Samuel Johnson in an essay of 1779, was revived and popularized by T.S. Eliot, in an essay of 1921. It can be unhelpful to modern students who are unfamiliar with this adjective, and who are led to think that these poets belonged to some kind of school or group - which is not the case.) After his wife's death, Donne underwent a serious religious conversion, and wrote much fine devotional verse. The best known of the other metaphysicals are George Herbert (1593-1633), Andrew Marvell (1621-1678) and Henry Vaughan (1621-1695).

## **Epic poetry**

Long narrative poems on heroic subjects mark the best work of classical Greek (Homer's Iliad and Odyssey) and Roman (Virgil's *Æneid*) poetry. John Milton (1608-1674) who was Cromwell's secretary, set out to write a great biblical epic, unsure whether to write in Latin or English, but settling for the latter in *Paradise Lost*. John Dryden (1631-1700) also wrote epic poetry, on classical and biblical subjects. Though Dryden's work is little read today it leads to a comic parody of the epic form, or mock-heroic. The best poetry of the mid 18th century is the comic writing of Alexander Pope (1688-1744). Pope is the best-regarded comic writer and satirist of English poetry. Among

his many masterpieces, one of the more accessible is *The Rape of the Lock* (seekers of sensation should note that "rape" here has its archaic sense of "removal by force"; the "lock" is a curl of the heroine's hair). Serious poetry of the period is well represented by the neo-classical Thomas Gray (1716-1771) whose *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* virtually perfects the elegant style favoured at the time.

## **Restoration comedy**

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. The total number of plays performed is vast, and many lack real merit, but the best drama uses the restoration conventions for a serious examination of contemporary morality. A play which exemplifies this well is *The Country Wife* by William Wycherley (1640-1716).

## **Prose fiction and the novel**

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), wrote satires in verse and prose. He is best-known for the extended prose work *Gulliver's Travels*, in which a fantastic account of a series of travels is the vehicle for satirizing familiar English institutions, such as religion, politics and law. Another writer who uses prose fiction, this time much more naturalistic, to explore other questions of politics or economics is Daniel Defoe (1661-1731), author of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*.

The first English novel is generally accepted to be *Pamela* (1740), by Samuel Richardson (1689-1761): this novel takes the form of a series of letters; Pamela, a virtuous housemaid resists the advances of her rich employer,

who eventually marries her. Richardson's work was almost at once satirized by Henry Fielding (1707-1754) in Joseph Andrews (Joseph is depicted as the brother of Richardson's Pamela Andrews) and Tom Jones.

After Fielding, the novel is dominated by the two great figures of Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) and Jane Austen (1775-1817), who typify, respectively, the new regional, historical romanticism and the established, urbane classical views.

Novels depicting extreme behaviour, madness or cruelty, often in historically remote or exotic settings are called Gothic. They are ridiculed by Austen in Northanger Abbey but include one undisputed masterpiece, Frankenstein, by Mary Shelley (1797-1851).

## **Romanticism**

The rise of Romanticism

A movement in philosophy but especially in literature, romanticism is the revolt of the senses or passions against the intellect and of the individual against the consensus. Its first stirrings may be seen in the work of William Blake (1757-1827), and in continental writers such as the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the German playwrights Johann Christoph Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

The publication, in 1798, by the poets William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) of a volume entitled Lyrical Ballads is a significant event in English literary history, though the poems were poorly received and few books sold. The elegant latinisms of Gray are dropped in favour of a kind of English closer to that spoken by real people (supposedly). Actually, the attempts to render the speech of ordinary people are not

wholly convincing. Robert Burns (1759-1796) writes lyric verse in the dialect of lowland Scots (a variety of English). After Shakespeare, Burns is perhaps the most often quoted of writers in English: we sing his Auld Lang Syne every New Year's Eve.

### Later Romanticism

The work of the later romantics John Keats (1795-1821) and his friend Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822; husband of Mary Shelley) is marked by an attempt to make language beautiful, and by an interest in remote history and exotic places. George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824) uses romantic themes, sometimes comically, to explain contemporary events. Romanticism begins as a revolt against established views, but eventually becomes the established outlook. Wordsworth becomes a kind of national monument, while the Victorians make what was at first revolutionary seem familiar, domestic and sentimental.

## **Victorian poetry**

The major poets of the Victorian era are Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) and Robert Browning (1812-1889). Both are prolific and varied, and their work defies easy classification. Tennyson makes extensive use of classical myth and Arthurian legend, and has been praised for the beautiful and musical qualities of his writing.

Browning's chief interest is in people; he uses blank verse in writing dramatic monologues in which the speaker achieves a kind of self-portraiture: his subjects are both historical individuals (Fra Lippo Lippi, Andrea del Sarto) and representative types or caricatures (Mr. Sludge the Medium).

Other Victorian poets of note include Browning's wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) and Christina Rossetti (1830-1894). Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) is notable for his use of what he calls "sprung rhythm"; as in Old English verse syllables are not counted, but there is a pattern of stresses. Hopkins' work was not well-known until very long after his death.

## **The Victorian novel**

The rise of the popular novel

In the 19th century, adult literacy increases markedly: attempts to provide education by the state, and self-help schemes are partly the cause and partly the result of the popularity of the novel. Publication in instalments means that works are affordable for people of modest means. The change in the reading public is reflected in a change in the subjects of novels: the high bourgeois world of Austen gives way to an interest in characters of humble origins. The great novelists write works which in some ways transcend their own period, but which in detail very much explore the preoccupations of their time.

## **Dickens and the Brontës**

Certainly the greatest English novelist of the 19th century, and possibly of all time, is Charles Dickens (1812-1870). The complexity of his best work, the variety of tone, the use of irony and caricature create surface problems for the modern reader, who may not readily persist in reading. But *Great Expectations*, *Bleak House*, *Our Mutual Friend* and *Little Dorrit* are works with which every student should be acquainted.

Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) and her sisters Emily (1818-1848) and Anne (1820-1849) are understandably linked together, but their work differs greatly. Charlotte is notable for several good novels, among which her masterpiece is *Jane Eyre*, in which we see the heroine, after much adversity, achieve happiness on her own terms. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is a strange work, which enjoys almost cult status. Its concerns are more romantic, less contemporary than those of *Jane Eyre* - but its themes of obsessive love and self-destructive passion have proved popular with the 20th century reader.

## **The beginnings of American literature**

The early 19th century sees the emergence of American literature, with the stories of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), the novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64), Herman Melville (1819-91), and Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens; 1835-1910), and the poetry of Walt Whitman (1819-92) and Emily Dickinson (1830-86). Notable works include Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

## **Later Victorian novelists**

After the middle of the century, the novel, as a form, becomes firmly-established: sensational or melodramatic "popular" writing is represented by Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), but the best novelists achieved serious critical acclaim while reaching a wide public, notable authors being Anthony Trollope (1815-82), Wilkie Collins (1824-89), William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-63), George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans; 1819-80) and Thomas Hardy (1840-1928). Among the best novels are Collins's *The Moonstone*, Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, *Adam Bede* and

Middlemarch, and Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *The Return of the Native*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*.

## **Modern literature**

Early 20th century poets

W.B. (William Butler) Yeats (1865-1939) is one of two figures who dominate modern poetry, the other being T.S. (Thomas Stearns) Eliot (1888-1965). Yeats was Irish; Eliot was born in the USA but settled in England, and took UK citizenship in 1927. Yeats uses conventional lyric forms, but explores the connection between modern themes and classical and romantic ideas. Eliot uses elements of conventional forms, within an unconventionally structured whole in his greatest works. Where Yeats is prolific as a poet, Eliot's reputation largely rests on two long and complex works: *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1943).

The work of these two has overshadowed the work of the best late Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian poets, some of whom came to prominence during the First World War. Among these are Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), A.E. Housman (1859-1936), Edward Thomas (1878-1917), Rupert Brooke (1887-1915), Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) and Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918). The most celebrated modern American poet, is Robert Frost (1874-1963), who befriended Edward Thomas before the war of 1914-1918.

## **Early modern writers**

The late Victorian and early modern periods are spanned by two novelists of foreign birth: the American Henry James (1843-1916) and the Pole Joseph Conrad (Josef Korzeniowski; 1857-1924). James relates character to issues

of culture and ethics, but his style can be opaque; Conrad's narratives may resemble adventure stories in incident and setting, but his real concern is with issues of character and morality. The best of their work would include James's *The Portrait of a Lady* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, *Nostromo* and *The Secret Agent*.

Other notable writers of the early part of the century include George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), H.G. Wells (1866-1946), and E.M. Forster (1879-1970). Shaw was an essay-writer, language scholar and critic, but is best-remembered as a playwright. Of his many plays, the best-known is *Pygmalion* (even better known today in its form as the musical *My Fair Lady*). Wells is celebrated as a popularizer of science, but his best novels explore serious social and cultural themes, *The History of Mr. Polly* being perhaps his masterpiece. Forster's novels include *Howard's End*, *A Room with a View* and *A Passage to India*.

## **Joyce and Woolf**

Where these writers show continuity with the Victorian tradition of the novel, more radically modern writing is found in the novels of James Joyce (1882-1941), of Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), and of D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930). Where Joyce and Woolf challenge traditional narrative methods of viewpoint and structure, Lawrence is concerned to explore human relationships more profoundly than his predecessors, attempting to marry the insights of the new psychology with his own acute observation. Working-class characters are presented as serious and dignified; their manners and speech are not objects of ridicule.

Other notable novelists include George Orwell (1903-50), Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966), Graham Greene (1904-1991) and the 1983 Nobel prize-winner, William Golding (1911-1993).

## **Poetry in the later 20th century**

Between the two wars, a revival of romanticism in poetry is associated with the work of W.H. (Wystan Hugh) Auden (1907-73), Louis MacNeice (1907-63) and Cecil Day-Lewis (1904-72). Auden seems to be a major figure on the poetic landscape, but is almost too contemporary to see in perspective. The Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas (1914-53) is notable for strange effects of language, alternating from extreme simplicity to massive overstatement.

Of poets who have achieved celebrity in the second half of the century, evaluation is even more difficult, but writers of note include the American Robert Lowell (1917-77), Philip Larkin (1922-1985), R.S. Thomas (1913-2000), Thom Gunn (1929-2004), Ted Hughes (1930-1998) and the 1995 Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney (b. 1939).

## **Notable writers outside mainstream movements**

Any list of "important" names is bound to be uneven and selective. Identifying broad movements leads to the exclusion of those who do not easily fit into schematic outlines of history. Writers not referred to above, but highly regarded by some readers might include Laurence Sterne (1713-68), author of *Tristram Shandy*, R.L. Stevenson (1850-94) writer of *Kidnapped* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), author of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and novelists such as Arnold Bennett (1867-1931), John Galsworthy (1867-1933) and the Americans F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940), Ernest Hemingway (1898-1961), John Steinbeck (1902-68) and J.D. Salinger (b. 1919). Two works notable

not just for their literary merit but for their articulation of the spirit of the age are Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. The American dramatist Arthur Miller (b. 1915) has received similar acclaim for his play *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Miller is more popular in the UK than his native country, and is familiar to many teachers and students because his work is so often set for study in examinations.

## **Literature and culture**

Literature has a history, and this connects with cultural history more widely. Prose narratives were written in the 16th century, but the novel as we know it could not arise, in the absence of a literate public. The popular and very contemporary medium for narrative in the 16th century is the theatre. The earliest novels reflect a bourgeois view of the world because this is the world of the authors and their readers (working people are depicted, but patronizingly, not from inside knowledge). The growth of literacy in the Victorian era leads to enormous diversification in the subjects and settings of the novel.

## **Recent and future trends**

In recent times the novel has developed different genres such as the thriller, the whodunnit, the pot-boiler, the western and works of science-fiction, horror and the sex-and-shopping novel. Some of these may be brief fashions (the western seems to be dying) while others such as the detective story or science-fiction have survived for well over a century. As the dominant form of narrative in contemporary western popular culture, the novel may have given way to the feature film and television drama. But it has proved surprisingly resilient. As society alters, so the novel may reflect or define this change; many works may be written, but few of them will fulfil this defining

rôle; those which seem to do so now, may not speak to later generations in the same way.

## **Evaluating literature**

The "test of time" may be a cliché, but is a genuine measure of how a work of imagination can transcend cultural boundaries; we should, perhaps, now speak of the "test of time and place", as the best works cross boundaries of both kinds. We may not "like" or "enjoy" works such as *Wüthering Heights*, *Heart of Darkness* or *The Waste Land*, but they are the perfect expression of particular ways of looking at the world; the author has articulated a view which connects with the reader's search for meaning. It is, of course, perfectly possible for a work of imagination to make sense of the world or of experience (or love, or God, or death) while also entertaining or delighting the reader or audience with the detail and eloquence of the work, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* or *Great Expectations*.