

A Brief History of English Literature

For convenience of discussion, historians divided the continuity of English literature into segments of time that are called 'period'. The exact number, dates, and name of these periods vary, but the list below conforms to widespread practice. The list is followed by a brief comment on each period, in chronological order.

- 450-1066 → Old English (or Anglo-saxon) period
- 1066-1500 → Middle English period.
- 1500-1660 → The Renaissance (or Early Modern)
- ① 1558-1603 → Elizabethan Age
 - ② 1603-1625 → Jacobean Age
 - ③ 1625-1649 → Caroline Age
 - ④ 1649-1660 → Commonwealth period (Puritan Interregnum)
- 1660-1785 → Neo-Classical period
- ① 1660-1700 → The Restoration
 - ② 1700-1745 → The Augustan Age
 - ③ 1745-1785 → The age of sensibility (Age of Johnson)
- 1785-1832 → The Romantic period
- 1832-1901 → The Victorian period
- ① 1848-1860 → The pre-Raphaelites
 - ② 1880-1901 → Aestheticism and Decadence
- 1901-1914 → The Edwardian period
- 1910-1936 → The Georgian period
- 1914 → The modern period
- 1945 → The post modern period.

Old English Period

The Old English period, or the Anglo-Saxon period, extended from the invasion of Celtic England by Germanic tribes (the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes) in the first half of the fifth century to the conquest of England in 1066 by the Norman French under the leadership of William the Conqueror. The Anglo Saxons were then converted to Christianity in the 7th century.

English literature started with songs and stories of these three tribes. Its subjects were the sea, the boats, battles, adventures and the love of home. Their poetry reflected their profound emotions and bravery. Accent, alliteration, and sudden break of each line gave their poetry a kind of (Metric) Martial rhythm. The main characteristics of Anglo-Saxon literature are the love of freedom, responsiveness to nature, strong religious convictions, belief in fate, respect to womanhood and a devotion to glory as the ruling motive in every warrior's life.

Beowulf was the first great, heroic folk epic of unknown author. It is a story of about 3000 lines. A brave young man, Beowulf, from Southern Sweden, goes to help Hrothgar, king of Danes and kills a terrible monster Grendel and his mother. Later, he becomes the king of his people and should save his people from a fire-breathing creature. He kills the creature but gets badly wounded and dies. The poem ends with Beowulf's funeral. There is no rhyme but alliteration is used in it.

Renaissance (1500-1660)

The Renaissance Age is divided into four dominant period which are

	The Renaissance
1500-1660	1558-1603 - Elizabethan Age
	1603-1625 - Jacobean Age
	1625-1649 - Caroline Age
	1649-1660 - Commonwealth period

An era that marked by supplementary term such as rebirth and revival was replaced by a description called early modernism.

Elizabethan Age

Queen Elizabethan ruled England from 1558 to 1603 and she steadily loved England and inspiring all her people with her unbounded patriotism which excites Shakespeare and Spenser. Queen Elizabeth was the source of inspiration for all writers of the age. During the Elizabethan age drama made a wonderful leap into maturity. The drama reached the splendid perfection in the hand of Marlowe, Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. Therefore, we call it the golden age of drama. English prose in the hands of Francis Bacon started polished and effective essay. He is also called the father of English essays.

Major writers of this age

(i) Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)

Marlowe is a revolutionary figure in English drama. He was born in shoe maker's family. He obtained his degree in 1593. His works are "The Tamburlaine", Dr Faustus, Jew of Malta, Edward II."

Marlowe has some defect such as lack of unity in plot construction, use of over luxuriance of imagination, and difficult words and violent language. He ignored minor characters in his tragedies.

(ii) William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

Shakespeare is the greatest dramatist and poet in English literature. He wrote 37 long dramas and one hundred and fifty four immortal sonnets. His remarkable dramas are The Comedies of errors, Love's Labour's Lost, King John, Richard II, Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello etc.

Shakespeare was born and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon. At the age of 18, he married Anne Hathaway, with whom he had three children: Susanna, and twins Hamlet and Judith. He touches the human heart and gives pathetic expressions. He gives the picture of sunnier aspect of life. Shakespeare is not of one age and place but all ages and places.

iii) Ben Jonson (1573-1637)

had

His father died before he was born. His mother married a tradesman who cared of his his stepson. After he finished his study, he joined in army. His main work are, Every man in His Humor, The Alchemist, The silent woman, etc. His plot construction is weak and his comedies of humors lack true humor. He did over correction in his dramas.

iv) Edmund Spenser (1552-1599)

Spenser's literary career started with the publication of The Shepherd's Calender. He is the second father of English poetry. He is the son of Renaissance and Reformation. He is best known for his poem, The fairie Queene. He died in extreme poverty on 16th June, 1599.

v) ~~Ben Jonson~~ Francis Bacon (1561-1626)

He is the father of English essays. He studied law at Cambridge. His essays have aphorism, brevity, suggestiveness and rich use of different figures of speech. He wrote A History of the Life and Reign of king Henry II, New Atlantis etc.

- The age has the following Characteristics**
- Great interest in travel, exploration and commerce
 - New form of sonnet was introduced
 - Nationalistic and pathetic feeling
 - Great poetic output and golden age of drama
 - Poetry of freshness, youthful and romantic feeling.
 - New classical influence
 - Essay writing was remarkable and it was established as a genre by Bacon.
 - Period of Shakespeare, Spenser, Bacon, Sidney etc.

Plays written by William Shakespeare.

	Comedies	Histories	Tragedies
①	Allwell that Ends Well	King John	Romeo and Juliet
②	The Comedy of Errors	Richard II	Macbeth
		Richard III	Hamlet
③	Love's Labour's Lost	Henry part 1 IV	Othello
④	The Tempest	Henry IV. part 2	King Lear
⑤	The Merchant of Venice	Henry VI part 1	Julius Caesar
⑥	The Winter's Tale		

Neo-Classical Age (1660-1785)

The writers of this age broke the trends of the Elizabethan Age and started new styles of writing.

Elizabethan writers were highly intette imaginative and spontaneous but the neo-classical or the writers of Neo-classical Age became highly intellectual and reason based. The writer of that age practised logical, argumentative, and reason based writing. Neo-classical writing is full of intellect rather than emotion. The Neo-classical age is the age of prose and plain writing.

The Neo-classical Age is divided into three main periods which are given below:

The Neo-classical Age		
1660-1785	1660-1700	→ The Restoration
	1700-1745	→ The Augustan Age (Age of pope)
	1745-1785	→ The age of sensibility (Johnson)

The original Augustan Age was the brilliant literary period of Virgil, Horace and Ovid under the Roman Emperor Augustus. The leading writer of the time (Such as Alexander pope, Joseph Addison) themselves drew the parallel to the Roman Augustans and deliberately imitated their literary forms and subjects.

Major Writers of the Neo-Classical Age

① John Dryden (1631-1700)

He is the representative figure of the Neo-Classical age. Dryden was the greatest poet, supreme satirist of the Neo-classical Age. He is successful in his heroic tragedies. He cultivated the blank verse tragedies. His major works are: All for Love, The Essay on Dramatic Poesy, Alexander's Feast etc.

② William Congreve (1670-1729)

William Congreve is the supreme master of the comedy of manners. He wrote all his dramas before he was thirty. The Old Bachelor, The Double Dealer, Love for Love are his main works. Congreve was the greatest prose comedy writer of the later Restoration period.

③ John Bunyan (1628-1688)

Bunyan wrote about sixty books. He was a religious man with great respect to the Bible. His books include The Pilgrim's Progress, Grace Abounding, Holy War etc. He wrote realistic novels in simple and vivid language depicting the picture of lower class people.

④ Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

In spite of his bad health, Pope composed outstanding poems. His satire was against corruption and the female sex. He was a critic too. His masterpiece 'Rape of the Lock' is a long poem which pictures the clear artificiality of life. His other works are Epistles, The Dunciad, etc.

⑤ Thomas Gray, William Blake, Robert Burns, Dr Samuel Johnson, William Cowper etc are the major writers of the Neo-Classical Age.

This age has the following characteristics -

- ① Emphasis was laid on correctness
- ② The restoration of drama
- ③ Imitation of classical way of writing.
- ④ Objectivity, detachment on the part of the writer.
- ⑤ Appeal to the intellect rather than as in satire.
- reason.
- ⑥ Directness: avoids the mysterious or obscure.
- ⑦ Age of prose
- ⑧ description of the urban civilization and the higher or aristocratic or rich class
- ⑨ Emphasis on precise form, unified structure, clarity in writing. etc...

⊕ Neo-classical age was also called the "The age of Enlightenment," which emphasized on reason and logic.
emphasized

⊕ The age started with the age of Milton in English literature.

The Romantic Period (1785-1832)

Romanticism is the revolt against pseudo-classicism/Augustan age. The publication of "The Lyrical Ballads (1798)", was the herald of Romanticism. The Augustan age was highly intellectual, rational, artificial style, no place for nature and feelings, dealt with the artificial life of upper class, etc. So, Romanticism revolted against it.

Return to Nature played very important role in changing people to love nature, rejecting nasty crowd of the town. The Medieval revival is a notable trend of this age. Romantic poetry is spontaneous overflow of powerful passions. Love of Supernatural: There is a wonder, mystery and beauty of the universe and nature. Transcendental world is described. A romanticist is a dissatisfied individual, pessimistic, escaping to the past, middle Ages to express Melancholy. Love of Nature is the major theme of this age. Wordsworth is the harbinger of the nature. Romanticism is an important literary movement which began in Western Europe during 17th century and went on till the second half of 18th century.

The women novelists were, Mrs. Anne, Maria, Jane Austen.
This was an age of poetry.

Major writer of this age① William Wordsworth (1770-1856)

His mother died when he was seven. He a natural poet. For him, nature is everything. He treats nature as friends, a lover, a teacher. For him nothing is ugly. He is famous for his sonnet and Lyrical Ballads etc. His works are 'The Prelude', 'The Excursion' etc. He gave unique interpretation of nature.

② Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

He is a poet, critic, and philosopher of romanticism. Coleridge is called the high priest of romanticism for his three great poems - The Ancient Mariner, Kubla Khan, Christabel etc. His poetry is fragmentary. He makes the supernatural look natural.

③ P.B. Shelly (1792-1822)

P.B. Shelly struggled against the human misery. He is a optimist and a reformer regarding the future of mankind. He married twice. He died when he was sailing in a small boat (by drowning). Shelly is one of the best lyricists in English literature. His works are "The odes", 'Ode to West Wind' etc.

④ John Keats (1795-1820)

He was born in London and his father was a stable keeper. His father wanted him to be a doctor but he was interested in literature. He fell violently in love with Fanny Browne and her rejection of his love was one of the consumption and untimely death at the young age of 25. His main works are Endymion, Isabella etc.

Not only these, Lord Byron, Jane Austen and Walter Scott are the major characters/writers of this age.

The general features of the age are given below:

- Worshipping and love of nature.
- Subjective and spontaneous literature
- Women novelists emerged (Austen)
- The poetry of the age adored nature.
- Revolt against pseudo-classicism
- Appreciation of nature, on philosophical as well as aesthetic grounds.
- Rationality, Nationalism, Love of Supernatural etc.

The Victorian Age (1832-1901)

Queen Victoria ruled England from 1837 to 1901. The Victorian was an era of material affluence, political consciousness, industrial and mechanical progress, scientific advancement, educational expansion, empire building and religious tolerance. The Victorian age was a period of peace and prosperity. Education was highly developed in this time. Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* changed the traditional concept. W. J. Long says that this is the age of prose and novel. The novel in this age fills the place, which the drama held in the days of Elizabeth. Immortal novels were written and published in this age. Victorian literature is the writing of realism rather than of romance, not the realism of Zola and Ibsen but deeper realism, which strives to tell the whole truth. Widespread materialism saddened many writers of this age. The Victorian compromise between the rich and the poor was strengthened. Alfred Lord Tennyson and Beatrice Webb tried to have compromise between science and religion. Victorian novelists maintained compromise between realism and romanticism.

Major Writers of the Victorian period

(i) Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809 - 1892)

Tennyson was a representative writer of the Victorian Age. He was a great lyricist. He made a minor observation in nature. He was the third surviving son of the rector, George Tennyson. His main works are, Poem by Two Brothers, The Princess, Idle Tears, The Cup etc.

(ii) Robert Browning (1812 - 1889)

He was born in middle class family. His father was a bank clerk and his mother was a sensitive musical woman. His work are 'Saul', 'Man and Women', 'The Ring and Book' etc.

(iii) Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806 - 1861)

E.B Browning wrote good poems in spite of her poor health. She married Robert Browning without her parents' consent. Her major books are 'The Cry of the Children', Poem Before Congress etc. She was the poetess of humanitarianism and deep pity.

(iv) George Eliot (1819 - 1880)

George Eliot, as a female novelist, wrote calmer novels and stories. She was a psychological novelist. Her novels are serious with moral lesson. She got marriage twice. Her work are 'Adam Bede', Middlemarch etc.

Mathew Arnold

Mathew Arnold started writing poem since his school life. Though he seems to be a bit pessimistic, he has written some famous books such as 'Literature and Dogma', 'New poems', 'On the Study of Celtic literature' etc. He was the master of art and criticism. He was a nature poet.

The General features of this age are

- Great influence of science and scientific method
- The age can be called as the age of idealism.
- There was compromise between royal power and democracy.
- Beginning of realism as literature came very close to daily life.
- This is the age of novel and continuation of romanticism.
- Literature reflected love, truth, justice, brotherhood, etc.
- Reflection of female problem in literature came very close to daily life.

(The Modern Age (1914-1945))

→ The modern age started after the first World War. All the trends of social, economic, political, cultural and literary world of the Victorian age were discarded and new trends were introduced in the arena of writing. Literature of the modern age is governed by realism. It brought about commercialization of art, literature and music. Rapid discoveries of science and technology have developed the field of trade and business. Enormous output of books was another feature of this age. Foreign influence is very strong. The modern age is fertile for equal development of all genres. Science fiction is imaginative narrative based on the scientific development. Frank expression of sex matter in literature can be found. The modern writers do not hesitate to express sex desire, experience and its effect.

The main features of this period are-

- ① Open form and free verse
- ② Break down of social norms and cultural sureties.
- ③ Equal development of all genres
- ④ Prohibited subjects such as sex were frequently treated.
- ⑤ Violation and breaking the established pattern and rules
- ⑥ Reflection of complexity and new technique
- ⑦ 'Make it new' is the modernist slogan
- ⑧ The life style of urban which remained same for countries changed in this period.

Main Writers of the Modern Age

① Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

Rudyard Kipling was born in India when the power and influence of Britain was very strong all over the world. His books indirectly served British Empire in India. His works are "Ballad of East and West", "Mother on mine", "The Feet of the Young Men" etc. He was the laureate of the animal world. He was an imperialist at heart.

② George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)

George Bernard Shaw is the great dramatist of the modern age and second after Shakespeare. He was born in Ireland but lived a long time in England. He tried writing all genres but got a great success in drama and essay. His main books include "Widower's House", "Arms and the Man", "The Apple Cart" etc. He is an unsuccessful novelist and failure critic.

③ William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)

W.B. Yeats is a great poet and dramatist of the modern age who wrote poems for fifty years from 1889 to 1939. His significant works are "The Wandering of Oisín", "The Tower", "New Poems", "Last Poems" etc.

④ D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930)

D.H. Lawrence made traditional form of novel wider and deeper. Lawrence is the novelist of sex and primitive instinct and critic of modern civilization. He is the novelist of unconscious life.

Other contributors of this age are Robert Frost, Wilfred Owen, George Orwell, William Golding etc.

The Postmodern Age (1945 - Present time)

→ The post-modern age started after the Second World War, which overthrew traditional values of the world. The war introduced a number of changes that are reflected in the writing of this age. This age is basically influenced by German philosopher Nietzsche and his philosophy of Nihilism. Nihilism refers to radical and extreme attitude, which denies all traditional moral and social values. It is also influenced by Sigmund Freud and the principle of Karl Marx. The reaction is seen in style of writing through the use of such device and concept. Parody, absurdity, the anti-hero, magic realism, structuralism, feminism, deconstruction etc. Post modern generally refers to the criticism of absolute truth or identities and grand narratives. It is an emerging period. Stream of Consciousness technique is used to disclose the continuous flow of mental events of the characters. Modern man has a sense of alienation even in a crowd because of people lack faith and honesty. Surrealism originated in France in the 1920s and was a development of Dadaism. The post-modern writers use many characters from the lower class or poor class and dominated castes. Gender issues have become burning issues of the present time. Women Empowerment programs and feminist activities have strengthened the voice of feminism.

Some prominent Writers of the Post-Modern Age are -

Bertrand Russell - "The Principles of Mathematics"

Robert Graves "He is the War poet of the Second World War"

Harold Pinter "The Dumb Waiter"

Philip Larkin "A Girl in Winter"

T.S. Eliot "The Waste Land"

W.H. Auden "The Orator"

Roy Fuller "Reign of Sparrow"

The Characteristics of this age are -

→ Stream of consciousness technique

→ Surrealism

→ Sense of alienation

→ Plurality in meaning and continuation of modern age

→ Expression of social matter and heterogeneous literature

→ Writing reflects absurdity and violent outbreak of emotion.

- ⑥ Fragmentation
- ⑦ Meta-fiction
- ⑧ Ironic narrator
- ⑨ focus on exteriority

Difference between modern and postmodern literature.

Modern literature:

- ① focus on the writer
- ② focus on interiority
- ③ Idiosyncratic language
- ④ Rejection of realism
- ⑤ High-brow genres
- ⑥ Unreliable narrator

Postmodern literature

- focus on the reader
- focus on exteriority
- Simple language
- Ambivalence towards realism
- Mixing of high and low-brow genres
- Ironic narrator