

# A Short History of English Literature

## Chapter I. The Anglo-Saxon Period (the earliest time---1066)

1. Social background: the making of England; the invasion of Roman Empire in 4<sup>th</sup> AD ; the attacks of Danish Vikings, etc
2. Literature: *Beowulf*, the earliest literature, the national epic of the Anglo-Saxon, one of the striking features - the use of alliteration

\*epic-----a long narrative poem in elevated style presenting characters of high position in a series of adventures which form an organic whole. The earliest epic: Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

\*alliteration-----In alliterative verse, certain accented words in a line begin with the same consonant sound.

## Chapter II. The Medieval Period (1066---15<sup>th</sup> century)

1. Social background: the Norman conquest under William, Duke of Normandy, the battle of Hastings in 1066; the mark of establishment of feudalism
2. Literature: Langland ; English Ballad; Romance; Chaucer

\*Langland-----“Piers the Plowman” and allegory

\*allegory-----a form of extended metaphor in which objects, persons and actions in a narrative are equated with the meanings that lie outside the narrative itself. It attempts to evoke a dual interest, one in the events, characters and setting presented, and the other in the ideas they're intended to convey or the significance they bear. For example, ideas of patience, purity, and truth are symbolized by the persons who are characters in the story.

\*ballad-----the most important department of English folk literature; a story told in song, usually in 4-line stanzas, with the second and fourth lines rhymed. Of paramount importance are the ballads of Robin Hood.



\*Romance-----the most prevailing kind of literature in feudal England; a long composition, sometimes in verse, sometimes in prose, describing the life and adventures of a noble hero. The romances had nothing to do with the common people. They were composed for the noble, of the noble, and in most cases by the poets patronized by the noble. The romance of King Arthur is comparatively the more important for the history of English literature.

\*Chaucer-----the founder of English poetry; the father of English poetry; introduction of the rhymed stanza of various types from France to

English poetry, instead of the old alliterative verse; the 1<sup>st</sup> great poet who wrote in the English language; making the London dialect the standard for the modern English speech.

\**The Canterbury Tales*-----a picture of the 14<sup>th</sup> century England; beginning with a general prologue; with the influence of Boccaccio's "Decameron".

### Chapter III. English Renaissance (15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century)

1. Social background: Hundred Years' War and civil wars; the weakening of nobility and the rising of bourgeoisie; the new Monarchy; the Reformation and the weakening of the power of church; Enclosure movement and commercial expansion
2. Literature: Renaissance; Humanism; Thomas More; Edmund Spenser; Francis Bacon; drama

\*Renaissance-----The Renaissance marks the transition from the medieval to the modern world; It means rebirth or revival of letters; It is a historical period in which thinkers and scholars made attempts to get rid of those old feudal ideas, to introduce new ideas that expressed the interest of the rising bourgeoisie, and to recover the purity of the early church from the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church. Two features are striking of this movement: thirsting curiosity for the classical literature and the keen interest in the activities of humanity.

\*Humanism-----key-note of the Renaissance; emphasis on the dignity of human beings and the importance of the present life; belief in the right to enjoy the beauty of this life and the ability to perfect himself and to perform wonders.

\*Thomas More and his *Utopia*

\*Edmund Spenser and his *The Faerie Queen*; his reputation known as "the poets' poet"

\*Francis Bacon---the first English essayist, famous for his *Essays*

3. Drama---the highest glory of the English Renaissance with Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare and Ben Jonson

\*Christopher Marlowe---the most gifted of the "university wits", *Doctor Faustus*, blank verse first used in his drama.

\*Ben Jonson---his praise of Shakespeare; "Volpone"

Soul of the Age

The applause! delight! the wonder of our stage!

.....

To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe.

He was not of an age, but for all time!

- \*Shakespeare---his life, his works, his status
- \*His life---born in 1564 in Stratford-on Avon, died in 1616
- \*His works---38 plays, 154 sonnets and 2 long poems

years of experiments/apprenticeship (mainly history plays)  
*Henry VI*  
*Richard III*  
*The Taming of the Shrew*

years of great comedies and mature historical plays

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*  
*The Merchant of Venice*  
*As You Like It*  
*Twelfth Night*

years of greatest tragedies and dark comedies

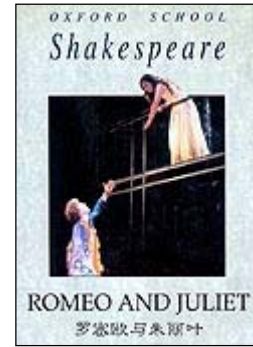
*Hamlet*  
*Othello*  
*King Lear*  
*Macbeth*

years of romantic tragicomedies

*Cymbeline*  
*The Winter's Tale*  
*The Tempest*

sonnet---a poem in 14 lines with rhyme scheme; Rhyme scheme of Shakespearean sonnet: abab cdcd efef gg

status---universally acknowledged to be the summit of the English Renaissance, one of the greatest writers in the world.



#### Chapter IV. The Period of Revolution and Restoration (the 17<sup>th</sup> century)

1. Social background: the clash between the King and Parliament; the Civil War between 1642-1649; Charles I was executed in 1649; the declining of Cromwell's Commonwealth and the compromise with the feudal remnants.
2. Literature: John Milton; John Bunyan; John Dryden; Metaphysical poets

\*Milton---a revolutionary poet, political both in his life and his art; *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, *Samson Agonistes*

\*Bunyan---*The Pilgrim's Progress*, a religious allegory, the spiritual pilgrimage of Christian

\*Dryden---the most distinguished literary figure of the Restoration period; use of heroic couplet in his writing

\*heroic couplet---two successive lines of verse, equal in length and with rhyme.

\*Metaphysical school of poetry-----break away from the convention; simple diction, common speech words and cadences, actual life imagery, argument with the poet's beloved, with god, or with himself; John Donne and Andrew Marvell.

\*John Donne---leading figure of the Metaphysical school of poetry, his conceit

\*Marvel---“To his Coy Mistress”

## Chapter V. The Period of Enlightenment and Classicism (the 18<sup>th</sup> century)

1. Social background: the age of Enlightenment or the age of Reason, a progressive intellectual movement, to enlighten the whole world with the light of modern philosophical and artistic idea, to celebrate reason, equality and science, call for a reference to order, reason and rules.
2. Literature: the school of Classicism; the rise of modern novel; Sentimentalism; Pre-Romanticism ; Sheridan's drama

\*Classicism---All forms of literature should be modeled after the classical works of the ancient Greek and Roman writers, controlled by some fixed laws and rules; Artistic ideals should be order, logic, restrained emotion and accuracy, Addison, Steel and Pope as representative

\*Steel and “The Tattler”; Addison and “The Spectator”

\*Pope---the most important representative of Classical poetry, so perfect in heroic couplet that no one has been able to approach him

\*modern novel---the mid-century predominated by a new realistic novel, Defoe, Swift, Richardson, fielding, Smollett and Sterne as representatives; description of adventures

*Defoe and <i>Robinson Crusoe</i>	Swift and <i>Gulliver's Travel</i>
Richardson and <i>Pamela</i>	Fielding and <i>Tom Jones</i>
Sterne and <i>Tristan Shandy</i>	Smollett and <i>Roderick Random</i>

\*Sentimentalism---By the mid of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, sentimentalism came into being as the result of a bitter discontent among the enlightened people with social reality. Dissatisfied with reason, sentimentalists turned to sentiment, to the human heart. They resorted to the countryside for its material. Sentimentalist poetry marks the midway in the transition from classicism to romanticism.

\*Thomas Gray and “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”

\*Pre-Romanticism---the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; strong protest against the

bondage of classicism, a recognition of the claims of passion and emotion; William Blake and Robert Burns as representatives

\*William Blake--- “The Songs of Innocence” and “The Songs of Experience;” The poems from “The Songs of Innocence” indicate the conditions which make religion a consolation, a prospect of illusory happiness; the poems from “The Songs of Experience” reveal the true nature of religion which brings misery to the poor children.

\*Robert Burns---remembered mainly for his songs written in the Scottish dialect

\*Sheridan---the only important English dramatist in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. *The Rivals* and *The School for Scandal*, the true classics in English comedy

## **Chapter VI. The Romantic Period (the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century)**

1. Social background: two important revolutions---the French Revolution of 1789-1794 and the English Industrial Revolution
2. Literature: The Romantic period is an age of poetry; Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelly and Keats are the major Romantic poets; Prose writers and novelists

\*Romanticism---It designates a literary and philosophical theory which tends to see the individual as the very center of all life and all experience. It also places the individual at the center of art, making literature most valuable as an expression of his or her unique feelings and particular attitudes; Nature is not only the major source of poetic imagery, but also provides the dominant subject matter; Romantics also tend to be nationalistic.

\*lake poets---The poet Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey lived in the lake district. They traversed the same path in politics and in poetry, first inspired by French Revolution, later changed into conservative.

\*Wordsworth---his definition of poetry “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of the powerful feelings” and poetry originates from “emotion recollected in tranquility”; a nature poet; working in collaboration with Coleridge in *Lyrical Ballads*.

\*Coleridge---“Kubla Khan”, “Christabel” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

\*Byron---*Don Juan*, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

\*Shelley---*Prometheus Unbound*, “Ode to the West wind”

\*Keats---his mature and important odes, “ode to a Nightingale”, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

\*prose writers---Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt, Thomas De Quincey and his “Confessions of an English Opium Eater”, Charles Lamb and his “Essays of Elia”

\*Jane Austen---love and marriage as the major themes of her novels; *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, etc.

\*Walter Scott---a romantic historical novelist, *Ivanhoe*

## **Chapter VII. Critical Realistic Period (the mid and late 19<sup>th</sup> century)**

1. Social background: the struggle between workers and capitalists; the Chartist Movement; the Victorian morality
2. Literature: Fiction is the highest achievement with Dickens as its representative.

\*Critical Realism---Sticking to the faithful representation of the 18<sup>th</sup> century realist novel, critical realists carried their duty forward to the criticism of the society and the defence of the mass. They were all concerned about the fate of the common people. Their truthful picture of people’s life and bitter and strong criticism of the society had done much in awakening the public consciousness to the social problem and in the actual improvement of the society.

\*Charles Dickens---*Oliver Twist* about the dehumanizing workhouse system and the dark, criminal underworld life; *David Copperfield* concerned about the debtor’s prison; *A Tale of Two Cities* about French Revolution; As a master story-teller, character-portrayal is the most distinguishing feature of his works.

\*Thackeray---*Vanity Fair* subtitled a novel without hero, a description of the evils of the upper society.

\*Brontë---Charlotte Brontë and her *Jane Eyre*, the struggle for basic rights and equality; Emily Brontë and her *Wuthering Heights*, the passionate love

\*George Elliot and her *Mill on the Floss*

\*poets---Tennyson and Browning; Tennyson is the most representative, if not the greatest, Victorian poet ; *In Memoriam*, *The Idylls of the King*; Browning as the most original poet of his time, his name is often associated with the term “dramatic monologue”

\*dramatic monologue---In a dramatic moment or crisis, the characters are made to talk about their lives, and about their minds and hearts. In “listening” to those one-sided talks, readers can form their own opinions and judgments about the speaker’s personality and about what has really happened.

\*Literary trends at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century---Naturalism; Neo-Romanticism; Aestheticism; Thomas Hardy

\*Naturalism---literature must be true to life, and exactly reproduce real life, including all the details without any selection. Naturalists usually write about the lives of the poor and oppressed, or the “Slum life”.

\*Neo-romanticism---Dissatisfied with the drab and ugly social reality and yet trying to avoid the positive solution of the acute social contradictions, the writers laid emphasis on the invention of exciting adventures and fascinating stories. They led the novel back to story-telling and romance; Robert Stevenson was a representative with “Treasure Island” and “Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”

\*Aestheticism---theory of art-for-art’s sake, art should serve no religious, moral or social end, nor any end except itself; Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater

\*Hardy---Wessex Novels, novels about characters and environment, the description of vicissitudes of people who live in an agricultural setting menaced by the forces of invading capitalism; *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure*; Hardy is often regarded as a transitional writer, There is an apparent nostalgic touch in his description of the simple and beautiful primitive rural life.

## **Chapter VIII. The Modern Period (the 20<sup>th</sup> century)**

1. Social background: the gap between the rich and the poor; the postwar economic dislocation and spiritual disillusion; the rise of all kinds of philosophical ideas---Karl Marx’s scientific socialism, Darwin’s theory of Evolution, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche’s pessimism.
2. Literature: Modernism rises out of skepticism and disillusion of capitalism, takes the irrational philosophy and the theory of psycho-analysis as its theoretical base.

\*realistic novels in the 20<sup>th</sup> century---the continuation of the Victorian tradition; The outstanding figures are John Galsworthy, H. G. Wells, and Arnold Bennett; With the strong swing of leftism in the 1930s, novelists began to turn their attention to the urgent social problems; In the mid-1950s and early 1960s, there appeared “the Angry Young Men”, launching a bitter protest against the outmoded social and political values in their society, Kingsley Amis is the most important.

\*modernism in fiction---The first three decades of this century were golden years of the modernist novels; The theory of the Freudian and Jungian psycho-analysis played an important role; D. H. Lawrence traced the psychological activities in his works *Sons and Lovers*, *Women in Love*, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, *Rainbow*

\*stream-of-consciousness school of novel---James Joyce, Virginia Woolf

\*drama in the 20<sup>th</sup> century---Bernard Shaw is considered to be the best-known English dramatist since Shakespeare. His plays are inspired by social criticism; John Galsworthy carried on this tradition of social criticism; The Irish dramatic movement

\*modernism in drama---the working-class drama and the Theater of Absurd; John Osborne and the “Angry Young Man”; Samuel Beckett and *Waiting for Godot*

\*modernism in poetry---a revolution against the conventional ideas and forms of the Victorian poetry; The poems of Eliot and Yeats , the rise of “modern poetry”