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English literature dates back exceeding five centuries. The literature not only represents authors or writers from almost every part of the world but also it had untapped almost every major genre of writings that one could possibly imagine. In this article on the history of English literature, you'll be getting a glimpse of almost every age of English literature. You will also know about the style of writing of the poets and authors that prevailed back then.

History of English Literature Timeline

Given below is the History of English Literature timeline.

Old Literature (858-1100)

Anglo Saxon

Norman Conquest (A landmark)

Middle Ages (1100-1500)

Renaissance (1500-1660)

Tudor (1485-1603)

Elizabethan (1558-1603)

Jacobian (1603-1625)

Caroline (1625-1649)

Late Renaissance (Puritans) (1625-1660)

Neo-Classical Age (1660-1798)

Restoration Age (1660-1700)

Augustan Literature

Age of Sensibility

19th Century Literature

Romanticism (1798-1837)

Victorian Age (1837-1901)

Edwardian Age

English Literature Since 1901

Modernism (1901-1939)

Post Modernism (1940-21st Century)

In this post, all the major ages are focused on. You'll know about the main characteristics of the age of History of English Literature.

Old Literature (858-1100)

People communicated the poems and literary works orally during the period under consideration. Writing was not given much importance.

The Anglo-Saxons were made up of three tribes who came to England through the North Sea route - the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. The Anglo-Saxon age comprises about 600 years.

Beowulf is one of the most important works of that age. It is an epic poem which throws light on a young warrior in Geatland who fought for his people. It's all about the heroic deeds of the German Warrior which happened apparently in 5th&6th centuries. Beowulf is a 300 line poem and it was probably written 300 years later when 'written texts' came into existence. It was probably completed in the 8th Century.

Norman Conquest: Invasion of the Normans in England in the year 1066. The army consisted of the Norman, Breton and the French which was led by William the Conqueror. They brought the French language to England. French was adopted as the new language for the parliament.

These people were initially sea rovers who inhabited Scandinavia, who later invaded the northern part of France which is until present day known as Normandy. Later they also picked up the French language.

Middle Ages (1100-1500)

The most respected and famed writer of the middle age was Geoffrey Chaucer. He is known as the father-figure in English literature. In the 13th century, the English literature prospered at a distinguished rate. Chaucer introduced the Iambic Pentameter. His greatest works are mostly narratives

like The Canterbury Tales, The House of Fame etc.

Medieval theatre included Mysteries, Miracle and Morality plays. We will be discussing the Miracle and Morality plays only because these two are the ones which are widely discussed upon.

(A) Miracle plays - They are also known as Saints play as they present a real or fictitious account of their life. They are the principal kind of vernacular drama of European Middle Ages. By the 13th century, they became vernacularized.

In miracle plays, the actual story revolves around the main characters and on the other hand, the other characters were short reckoned or undervalued. Comic scenes were also a part of Miracle plays. Moreover, there were devil characters present in those plays. The structure of the play is basically unpleasant.

It is based on the biblical story of the life of the religious persons. The Miracle plays were banned in England because of the teachings of the Roman Catholic. The language of the play shifted to English because that made the play less religious. Moreover, they were performing in town festivals. Most plays were about Saint Nicolas and Virgin Marry.

(B) Morality Plays - In morality plays, the protagonist of the play generally meets various moral attributes through personification. The other characters in the play signify moral qualities and the hero of the play represents mankind and humanity. Supporting characters in the play are personifications of either good or bad. So, moral lessons can be learned from these plays. The hero or the protagonist shows the difference between good and bad.

These type of plays were developed at the later 14th c. It gained more popularity in the 15th c.

Renaissance (1500-1660)

The word Renaissance implies the rebirth of culture and learning. Renaissance was initially started at Italy in the late 14th century. The European scholars and writers found that Renaissance was doing good at Italy. So, at around 1500 they brought the Renaissance literature in England. This age is one of the most important in the History of English Literature.

There are several factors for the coming of Renaissance literature in England. The first primary factor is the introduction of the printing press. It made it possible for the writers to produce written works. Secondly, the 'plague' in England has passed and the hundred years' wars were over. The productivity of people at that time had increased as people lived longer because they

weren't dying or fighting. Moreover, for a century and a half, after Chaucer passed away the English literature became stagnant in England. The standard of literature became low. So, people have to adopt Renaissance which was doing really great in Italy.

Talking about the famous writers, the first person to come on the list is William Shakespeare. Besides him, there are few other writers who gained popularity due to their writings like, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson etc. Shakespeare coined a lot of words by his own. According to scholars, he is responsible for coining around 1700 words. His works are said to be universal for which it got more prevalent. He made the English vocabulary damn rich. A word which we use widely, 'beautiful' was coined by Shakespeare. It's hard to imagine such an indispensable word not being used before him. He also came up with a genre called, 'Tragi-Comedy' which implies the merging through two micro niches, tragedy and comedy. His famous plays are Julius Caesar, Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Macbeth, Merchant of Venice etc.

According to some scholars, Marlowe and Shakespeare were rivals in this field. People also suspected Marlowe to be a secret agent of Queen Elizabeth. One of his most famous work is 'Dr. Faustus', where he talks about the tragical history of the life and death of Doctor Faustus. He also wrote 'The Jew Of Malta' which got popular during that period. He died when he was 29. The third popular dramatist or playwright was Ben Jonson. He is well known for his satirical plays. Some of the famous works of him are Volpone, The Alchemist etc.

Elizabethan Era (1558-1603)- This era was the period of new ideas and new thinking. Various other works like fine arts endured support and assistance from the Queen. Due to the Queen's support and patron, the works of that time came to be known as 'Elizabethan'. This period is generally regarded as the greatest in the history of English literature. The age saw a great flourishing in literature. The poetries and dramas were prospered more, in particular. Three most important and remarkable writers of that period are William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Jonson.

There were three types of Sonnet - Shakespearean Sonnet, Petrarchan Sonnet, and Spenserian Sonnet. Sir Wyatt brought Sonnet from Italy which was later popularized in England. Later, they gave a different style to the sonnets. It was being changed by Shakespeare. He divided the Sonnet into 3 quatrains summed by a couplet. Shakespeare, in his career, wrote 154 sonnets. He dedicated 126 of them to a young man and the others to a woman.

Even though this age produced a lot of prose works, essentially it was an age of poetry. Moreover, the theatre became central to the Elizabethan era. During that era, drama shifted from religious to secular.

The first English comedy was 'Gammer Gurton's Needle' and the first tragedy was 'Gorboduc'. They came in this period. One of the biggest comedy play written at that time was 'Every Man in his Humour'.

Some of the characteristics or features of play are:

- Plays were presented quickly. The actors use their voice, bodies expressively to convey feeling and meaning.
- Plays were generally performed at the time of the afternoon. It is because there were no light facilities available. Special effects were a part of the show.
- Women were not allowed to perform as there was the existence of gender inequality. The males only played as females.
- The Wealthy people bought the best seats. Sometimes they even sat on the stage itself.
- Even the illiterates could understand the play.
- The theatre is also seen as a good mode of business in that period.

Jacobian Era (1603-1625) - Jacobian Era comes just after the Elizabethan era. The two primary contribution of this age in English literature is the Revenge play and Metaphysical poetry. Revenge play signifies the plays where the victim is retaliated or avenged. These type of plays often results in the death of both the murderer and the avenger. These type of plays were extremely popular during the Elizabethan and the Jacobean era. Some of the best writers of plays of this kind are Thomas Kyd, Shakespeare etc.

Secondly, there was the wide popularity of metaphysical poetry. The term 'metaphysical poetry' was coined by Samuel Johnson. This type of poetry is witty and ingenious. They are also highly philosophical. Some of the topics on which metaphysical poems are written are love, existence, life etc. Similie, metaphors, imagery and other literary elements are used in writing these poems.

One of the greatest lyricists of that era was John Donne. He was famous for his unconventional and metaphysical style of poetry. He wrote short sonnets and love poems. Two of his most popular poems are - The Sun Rising and The Canonization.

Caroline Era (1625-1649) - This era coincided with the age of Charles I (1625-1642). During that time, a civil war was fought between the supporters of the king (Cavaliers) and the supporters of the parliament (Roundheads).

Some of the prominent writers of that era are George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Katherine Philips, John Donne etc.

Puritan Age (1625-1660)

The half-century between the years 1625 and 1675 is known as the Puritan age. The age is named 'Puritan Age' because of the Puritan dominance in England for the first time. Furthermore, the greatest literary figures of that time were Puritans. One remarkable figure was John Milton. Some of his popular works are:

- Paradise Lost (1667)
- Paradise Regained (1671)
- On Shakespeare (1632)
- Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce (1643) etc.

Milton became most famous for the poem, Paradise Lost. It was a poem with religious beliefs.

The Puritans closed the Theatre which was given much importance in the Elizabethan era. There was a Civil war during that period. One group of people supported the King (Cavaliers) and the other supported the Parliament (Roundheads). The ones supporting parliament won. So, as a result, Charles I was removed and Oliver Cromwell came into power. To sum up in one line, 'The Puritan age starts with Charles I beheaded and Oliver Cromwell into the rule'. Cromwell built a commonwealth of members which didn't last long. After him, Charles II from France came into power and Restoration began.

Neo-Classical Age (1660-1798)

The word 'Neo-Classical' is merged with the two words 'Neo' and 'Classical'. Neo implies 'new' and classical denotes the 'Roman and Greek classics'.

This era is also known as the era of enlightenment. People in England would

meet at the coffee house and talk about productive things. It started the British tradition of 'afternoon tea'. Popular types of literature include parody, letters, essays, and satire.

People were interested in appearance, not in the being genuine. Having good manners and doing the right thing to the public was essential.

This age is divided into three parts:

- Restoration Period
- Augustan Literature &
- Age of Sensibility

Restoration Period (1660-1700) - The restoration age begins in 1660. In the restoration period, James II was restored to the throne. There was a complete rejection of ideas. People had a different way of living as compared to the other ages. A lot of changes took place during that period.

Monarchy was restored in England. James II, brother of Charles I who was defeated and beheaded returned to England from France. He became the king there.

Most importantly, the Theatre closed down by the Puritans was restored. John Dryden, greatest of all the poets of this age, established heroic couplet in English Poetry. He developed a new prose style that was suited to the practical needs of the age.

Charles II and his followers enjoyed a gay life in France during the exile. Later, when he came to England, he demanded that drama should follow the French style of writing. Establishment of Royal Society, Development of science.

John Dryden's text, 'Absalom and Achitophel' talks about the religious and political conflict. The religious quarrel between the Protestants and the Catholics are also portrayed in his book.

There was the rise of the two political parties - the Whigs and the Tories. The Tories supported the king and the Whigs opposed it. Here are some of the chief characteristics of this period. This age was the beginning of modern prose.

Charles II wanted to establish Catholicism in the country. As the entire country was Protestant it leads to a conflict between the two. Charles II became infamous for this act. As a consequence, this led to a revolution which is known as the 'Bloodless Revolution'. It took place in 1688.

Augustan Literature - The Augustan age was a Roman Empire age. King Augustus was the emperor of that time. Some of the most famous Augustan writers are Virgil, Horace etc. Major poets of that age are Pope and Dryden. And on the other hand, Jonathan Swift was famous for his prose works.

This age is also known as classical age. The first half of the 18th century was marked by the preparation of Industrial revolution. The main social classes were merchants, landowners, and manufacturers. The condition of women was not satisfactory. Sexual harassment, abduction of women, forced marriage took place in the period. The politicians were corrupt too. This is the age of material greed.

John Dryden lived between the Restoration and Augustan age. He wrote various comedies. But the attribute for which he was highly admired was his verse satires. His followers and other small poets valued this writing style.

Alexander Pope was the biggest name of this period. He basically wrote on harmony. The heroic couplet is famous in his poems. One of his famous work is The Canterbury Tales.

Age of Sensibility (1750-1798)- The age of Sensibility is also known as the age of Johnson. Two most famous writers of this period are Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Oliver Goldsmith. Sheridan was a love poet. Most of the literary works of this age talk about human feelings, classicism and Romantic revival.

19th Century Literature (1799 to 1900)

The 19th-century literature is merged with three ages. They are:

- Romanticism (1798-1837)
- Victorian Age (1837-1901)
- Edwardian Age (1901-1910)

Romanticism (1798-1837) - This period was mainly a reaction against the philosophy of Enlightenment period that dominated much of European Philosophy. Individual achievements are highly valued. Many of the Romantic writers believed that people regardless of wealth or social class must be able to appreciate art and literature.

Some of the most famous poets of the period are - John Keats, William Blake,

William Wordsworth, Thomas Grey etc. The works were basically on the depiction of nature. They used personification frequently in the poems. The poets basically tried to bring out their inner feelings.

Victorian Age (1837-1901) - The Victorian era was one of the most important eras in the History of English Literature. Queen Victoria, at the age of 18 ruled England continuously for 64 years until her death. It is one of the longest reigns in the history of England. Many important social and historical changes altered the structure of the nation. The population of the country almost doubled. The British empire expanded exponentially. Technology and industrial progress helped Britain to be one of the most dominant countries in the world.

The Victorian age was a time of great prosperity in the History of English Literature. This period made a lot of changes amongst people. The lower-class became more self-conscious but on the other hand, the middle-class people got more power in them. The rich became vulnerable in the society. Just like the Elizabethan England, The Victorian England saw a great expansion of prosperity, prestige, and culture. Some of the most trending topics of that time are the democracy, feminism, unionization of workers, Marxism, socialism etc.

Due to the industrial revolution, the country saw progress and growth. But along with that poverty and exploitation was also a part of it. The poor were hired for industrial labor at a very low rate.

The Victorian period was a time of contradiction, often referred to as the Victorian Compromise. There were differences between science and religion. Various conflicts arose due to this differences. Secondly, the gap between the rich and the poor widened drastically. The poor started becoming poorer and the rich started becoming more richer. The wealthy or the rich people hired the labors at a very cheap rate.

The Victorian novels depicted almost every perspective of nineteenth-century Victorian life. Though poetry and prose were unquestionably brilliant, it was the novel that conclusively proved to be the Victorians special literary success. Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, and *David Copperfield* are some of the most prominent authors.

Charles Darwin wrote *Origin of the Species* which caused full-scale controversy in Europe. Darwin in his book wrote that the species survive and evolve by natural selection, or in other words, it's the survival of the fittest. This led to a debate among the Victorian people which also led to the alteration of their intellectual and religious life. Another most popular author of the period under consideration was Lord Alfred Tennyson. He wrote *In*

Memoriam which talks about the reflection on the death of his friend.

The Edwardian Age (1901-1910) - After the death of Queen Victoria, Edward VII came into the throne. His throne at England is known as the Edwardian age. It lasted less than a decade. Even though Queen Victoria, a lady was on the throne for the last 64 years, she was unable to do something for the upliftment of women. But in this era, the women status in the society seem to increase. Science and technology were also developed. Wright brothers invented the first airplane during that time.

H.G Wells, Beatrix Potter, Lucy Maud Montgomery, Edith Nesbit were some of the renowned writers of the age.

English Literature Since 1901

Modernism (1901-1939) - Literature from various parts of the world started spreading. New writers were tried to impersonate the glory of British writers. Women at the time were suppressed in the literary sense. They were not allowed to write freely.

Post-Modernism (1940-21st Century) - In post-modernism, basically the history of English Literature of 5 geo-locations are being studied. They are - African, Australian, Canadian, Caribbean and Indian Literature.

(VIDEO)

This was all about the History of English Literature. If you liked it, hit the SHARE button and let others read this. Plus, if you encounter any query, do not forget to comment it down. That's all.

Cheers!

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