

History of English Literature

The history of English Literature starts with the Anglo-Saxons and Germanic settlers in Anglo-Saxon England in the 5th century, c.450. The oldest English literature was in Old English which is the earliest form of English and is a set of Anglo-Frisian dialects. Beowulf is the earliest and most popular work in Old English Literature. As the Normans conquered to England, Middle English replaced the Old English and was used by Geoffrey Chaucer in his famous work, *The Canterbury Tales*. Further, William Shakespeare came to be considered as the most iconic and greatest writer in the history of English Literature as he is revered for his legendary plays and sonnets.

Old English (Anglo-Saxon Period)	450–1066
Middle English Period	1066-1500
The Renaissance	1500-1600
The Neoclassical Period	1600-1785
The Romantic Period	1785-1832
The Victorian Age	1832-1901
The Edwardian Period	1901-1914
The Georgian Period	1910-1936
The Modern Period	Early 20th century
The Postmodern Period	Mid-20th century

Timeline of the History of English Literature

Here is a detailed historical timeline of the History of English Literature from its beginning from the Classical Period to the Post-Modern Age:

Major Periods	Highlights
The Classical Period (1200 BCE-455 BCE)	Homeric or Heroic Period (1200-800 BCE) Classical Greek Period (800-200 BCE) Classical Roman Period (200 BCE-455 BCE) Patristic Period (c.70 CE-455 CE)
The Medieval Period (455 CE-1485 CE)	The Old English (Anglo-Saxon) Period (423-1066 CE) The Middle English Period (c.1066-1450 CE)
The Renaissance and Reformation (1485-1660 CE)	Early Tudor Period (1485-1558) Elizabethan Period (1558-1603) Jacobean Period(1603-1625) Caroline Age (1625-1649) Commonwealth Period/ Puritan Interregnum(1649-1660)
The Enlightenment (Neoclassical) Period (1660-1790 CE)	Restoration Period (1660-1700) The Augustan Age (1700-1750) The Age of Johnson (1750-1790)
The Romantic Period (1790-1830 CE)	Romantic poets & Gothic writings
The Victorian Period and the 19th Century (1832-1901 CE)	Sentimental Novels & Intellectual Movements like Aestheticism and the Decadence.

The Modern Period (1914-1945 CE)	Modernist Writers, Realism, etc.
The Postmodern Period (1945 – onward)	Metafiction, Multiculturalism, Magic Poetry, etc.

The most important 8 periods of English Literature are:

- Old English (Anglo-Saxon Period): 450–1066
- Middle English Period: 1066-1500
- The Renaissance: 1500-1600
- The Neoclassical Period: 1600-1785
- The Romantic Period: 1785-1832
- The Victorian Age: 1832-1901
- The Edwardian Period: 1901-1914
- The Georgian Period: 1910-1936
- The Modern Period: Early 20th century
- The Postmodern Period: Mid-20th century

Summary & Notes on History of English Literature

Looking for history of English Literature notes? We have summarized the long history of English Literature in its important 8 periods. [Let's explore some of these major periods of the English Literature in further detail:](#)

Old English Literature: 5th – 14th Century

The history of English Literature starts with the Germanic tradition of Anglo-Saxon settlers which were around 5th to 11th century AD and the first long narrative poems in the history of English Literature were *Beowulf* and *Widsith*. These two were highly narrative poems of this early period of the history of English Literature. *Beowulf* is considered as the first English Epic poem and some of the other famous works produced during the Old English Literature include, *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *The Wanderer*, *Wife's lament*, *Husband's message*, *The battle of Maldon* etc. Earlier, to understand the temperament of readers, writers would make use of alteration rather than a rhyming

scheme. Moreover, some of the famous writers of old English literature were Cynewulf and Caedmon.

Medieval English Literature: 14th to 15th Century

Also referred to as the Later Middle English Literary Period, the Medieval English Literature comprises of a diverse range of works as the population of England during this time was literate and a considerable portion was also bilingual and trilingual. Geoffrey Chaucer is amongst the highly regarded poets within the period of 1342 to 1400 and was renowned for his courtly love poetry including the famous "*Canterbury Tales*" though it was left incomplete; "*The House of Fame*", and '*The Book of the Duchess*'. He became one of the core political servants in Britain's court. William Langland's famous religious works including "*Piers Plowman*" also deserves a crucial mention as it represents another popular genre of this period of English Literature which was secular and religious prose.

During the era of Medieval English Literature, the most esteemed works also include morality plays, miracle plays and interludes. '*Everyman*' was a noted Morality play of the time and Miracle plays were taken from the Bible and were frequently performed in churches.

Elizabethan Age a.k.a. The Golden Age of English Literature: 16th Century to Early 17th Century)

Bringing a distinctive paradigm shift in the history of English Literature, the Elizabethan Age represents the brilliant century of all the periods and is also known as the Golden Age. Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard (Earl of Surrey) has a massive contribution to this age. Thomas introduced Sonnets to Great Britain and the Earl of Surrey brought the use of blank verse which was later utilised by celebrated Elizabethan writers like Shakespeare, Christopher Marlow, John Milton, to name a few. '*Tottel's Miscellany*' is considered as the first printed book amongst the different poetry works of this period.

The Golden Age in the history of English Literature brought a gallery of authors of genius and literary masterpieces. It was a dynamic age filled with intellectual and religious revolutions and upheavals. As the new humanism surged, there were many significant works like Sir Thomas Hoby's *Castiglione* and Sir Thomas North's *Plutarch*. Edmund Spenser is another prolific names in Golden age who is also known as the

poet's poet. His famous poem in 1579, *'The Shapheardes Calander'* under 89 sonnets got highly popular. Sir Philip Sidney's *'Archadia'*, *'Michel Drayton'*, *'Sir Walter Raleigh'*, *'Ben Johnson'* are some of the important names in the medieval English literature. There was a famous group in the Golden age which was known as the 'University Wits.' This group would include noted alumni writers from the [University of Cambridge](#) and [University of Oxford](#). John Lyly, Christopher Marlow, Thomas Nashe, George Peele were some of the celebrated names under this group.

John Donne also played a greater role in metaphysical poetry and beautiful sonnets of the Elizabethan age. Sir Francis Bacon popularized the scientific method of analysis and wrote many intellectual and analytical essays in this period. Moreover, Literary Dramas have a crucial role to play in making this age Golden. The first comedy play under this age was *'Ralph Roister Doister'* by Nicholas Udall. From *'Hamlet'*, *'King Lear'*, *'Othello'* and *'Julius Ceasar'* to *'A Midsummer Night's Dream'*, *'As You Like It'* and *'Romeo and Juliet'*, William Shakespeare contributed many historical dramas and tragedies as well as romantic plays and comedies to the Golden Age. Notable writers of the Elizabethan era also include John Milton, John Webster, Thomas Kyd, George Peele, Ben Jonson, amongst others.

Restoration Age (17th-18th Century)

Another revolutionary change in the history of English literature was brought forward by the Restoration Age which immensely reflected the political conflict of the late 17th century. John Dryden emerged as one of the prominent literary figures of this age. He wrote a famous heroic poem, *'Astra Radix'* and was also known for *'Mac Flecknoe'*. To attack his contemporaries, he wrote mock poems and wrote *'essay on criticism'* *Oliver Goldsmith's The traveller and the deserted village* was highly popular in this era. Another prominent writer for the Restoration Literature was John Milton, a well-known controversialist who wrote the famous *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. Thomas Gray, William Blake, Robert Burns are unavoidable names whose literary work has been highly acclaimed. The eminent philosopher of this era was John Locke who wrote many essays like 'The Essay Concerning Human Understanding' and most of his works delved deeper into the unravelling the workings of the civil society as well as debate and explorations on the human intelligence.

Concluding the Restoration period of the history of English Literature, the 18th century witnessed the publication of political literature as well as the advent of novels. Robert Harley, Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift were amongst the major political writers of this era. During the mid 18th and late 18th century, novels were introduced in the world.

Daniel Defoe experimented with the prose narrative and wrote a novel called 'Robinson Crusoe'. He was one of the esteemed and prominent writers to introduce novel writing to the literary world. In prose writing, Richard Steel and Jonathan Swift are also some of the popular names in prose writing as they were renowned for their satirical style of writing.

The Romantic Period: From 19th Century

The Romantic age of the history of English literature experimented with the earlier forms of poetry and brought many interesting genres of prose fiction. The key feature of the poetry of this period was the emphasis laid on individual thought and personal feeling. William Blake, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were the brilliant poetry geniuses of this era as they curated glorious works rooted in nature, love, romance as well as contemporary thought. The later Romantics were Shelley, Keats and Byron who carried on the legacy in the 20th century. The novels of this era were written as a form of entertainment to the now literate public and were a stern commentary on many prominent events such as the French Revolution. The Gothic novel is an important invention in prose fiction and some of its prominent writers were Horace Walpole, Matthew Lewis, Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley. On the other hand, Jane Austen stood by the conservation form of prose fiction through popular romantic novels like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Persuasion*, *Northanger Abbey*, to name a few.

20th Century Literature

After the end of the Victorian age, the modern history of English literature began with the beginning of the 20th century. Rudyard Kipling is considered as one of the greatest writers in this century. He was born in India and then moved to Lahore and was a supporter of colonization. His main works include *Kim*, *Life's handicap*, apart from the significant book '*the Jungle Book*'. Some prominent contributions to the 20th-century literature were EM Foster's '*A Passage to India*', H.G Wells, *The Time Machine*, *The Invisible Man*, *First Man on the Moon* etc.

D.H Lawrence has the greatest contribution to this century. James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, William Golding, John Galsworthy, George Bernard Shaw, Harold Pinter, T.S Elliot are some of the prolific names which were popular for their 20th-century dramas. In poetry literature of the 20th century, William Butler Yeats, T.S

Eliot, W.H Auden, Thomas Hardy, G.M Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, are some of the resounding names of poetry landscape in this era of the history of English literature. Some of the prolific war poets include Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon & Wilfred Owen.