

A SHORT HISTORY
OF ENGLISH
LITERATURE



THE ANGLO-SAXON PERIOD (THE EARLIEST TIME – 1066)

- ◆ Social Background:- the making of England; the invasion of Roman Empire in the 4th AD; the attacks of Vikings etc.
- ◆ 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 an alliterative verse, certain accented words in a line begin with the same consonant sound.



THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

(1066 – 15TH CENTURY)

- ◆ Social Background:- the Norman Conquest under William, Duke of Normandy, the battle of Hasting in 1066; the mark of establishment of feudalism.
- ◆ 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.
 - Ballad – The most important department of English folk literature: a story told in song.

- 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.
- Chaucer – The founder of English poetry; the father of English poetry; Introduction of the rhymed stanza of various types in poetry; the first great poet who wrote in the English literature.
- ***The Canterbury Tales*** – A picture of the 14th century England; beginning with a general prologue; with the influence of Boccaccio's ***Decameron***.



ENGLISH RENAISSANCE

(15TH AND 16TH CENTURY)

- ◆ Social Background:- Hundred Years War and Civil Wars; the weakening of nobility and the rising bourgeoisie; the new monarchy; the Reformation and the weakening of the power of church; enclosure movement and commercial expansion.
- ◆ Literature:- Renaissance; Humanism; Thomas More; Edmund Spenser; Francis Bacon; Drama.
- Renaissance – The Renaissance marks the translation from the medieval to the modern world; it means rebirth or revival of letters; it is a historical period. Two striking features of this movement are the thirsting curiosity for the classical literature and the keen interest in the activities of humanity.

- Humanism – keynote of the Renaissance; emphasis on the dignity of human beings and the importance of the present life.
- ▶ Thomas More and his *Utopia*.
- ▶ Edmund Spenser and his *The Faerie Queene*; his reputation known as ‘the poets’ poet’.
- ▶ Francis Bacon – the first English essayist, famous for his *Essays*.
- Drama – The highest glory of the English Renaissance with Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe 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 I 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 – born in 1564 in Stratford on Avon and died in 1616, his work – 38 plays, 154 sonnets and 2 long poems, his status.



- 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 great tragedies and dark comedies.
- ◆ *Hamlet*
- ◆ *Othello*
- ◆ *King Lear*
- ◆ *Macbeth*



- Years of romantic tragic comedies.
- ◆ *Cymbeline*
- ◆ *The Winter's Tale*
- ◆ *The Tempest*
- Sonnet – A poem in a fourteen lines with a rhyme scheme.
- ◆ Rhyme Scheme of Shakespearean Sonnet –
abab cdcd efef gg.



THE PERIOD OF REVOLUTION AND RESTORATION (THE 17TH CENTURY)

- Social Background:- the clash between the king and parliament; the civil war between 1642 – 1649; Charles 1st was executed in 1649; the decline of Cromwell's Commonwealth and the compromise with the feudal remnants.
- Literature:- John Milton: John Bunyan: John Dryden: Metaphysical Poets
- Milton:- a revolutionary poet, political both in life and his art; ***Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, Samson Agonists.***
- Bunyan:- ***The Pilgrim's Progress***, a religious allegory, the spiritual pilgrimage of Christian.



- ▶ 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 storytelling 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.



THE MODERN PERIOD

(THE 20TH CENTURY)

- ◆ 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*.
- ◆ Literature:- Modernism rises out of skepticism and disillusion of capitalism, takes the irrational philosophy and the theory of psychoanalysis as its theoretical base.



- Realistic Novels in the 20th Century – the continuation of the Victorian tradition; the outstanding figures are John Galsworthy, H.G Wells and Arnold Bennett; with in 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 Youngman**, launching a bitter protest against the out moved 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, psychoanalysis played an important role; D.H Lawrence traced the psychological activities in his works ***Sons and Lovers***, ***Women in Love***, ***Lady Chatterley's Lover***.
- Stream of Consciousness School of Novel – James Joyce, Virginia Woolf.



- Drama in 20th 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 Movement*.
- Modernism in Drama – the working classes drama and **The Theatre of Absurd**, John Osborne and **The Angry Youngman**, 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.

