

# The stages of the development of English literature

Abdulaziz Hashem Altahiri

---

**Abstract:** England is one of the countries with a long and ancient history with literature, which is called English literature. The history of English literature returns to more than 5 centuries ago, through which the writers, poets and intellectuals in England have built their nation. This research aims to identify the different aspects of English literature in Modern Age according to the classification of different scientists, and the most important literary figures that represented English society aspects in their poems, novels or plays. It also reviewed some of the most dominant influences on writers, poets, and authors of that era such as: industrial era, World War I and World War II. The most famous books, poems, novels or plays were also listed in an attempt to summarize the most important features of this period starting from the early 19th century till now.

**Keywords:** English literature – Modern age.

---

## I. INTRODUCTION

The study of literature has a great importance in the lives of peoples and nations throughout history. Literature has the ability to help people and individuals to understand the nature of society. Through the knowledge of literature of community new methods to think about the world and consider its different aspects are improvised to identify the different forms of life in different communities.

Literature is one of the most important types of arts, including materials that help in affecting emotions, sensibilities and development of spiritual aspect in humans. Literature is also one of the easiest and simplest ways through which we can study the history and civilization of various nations through the ages. It is also an efficient tool in the process of education and all kinds of different writings as well as artistic communication between peoples and nations of all kinds and throughout the ages. Literature is considered an indicator and evidence of the level of progress or regression in the society compared with other communities. Literature has many different genres. The four main literary genres are poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and drama, with each varying in style, structure, subject matter, and the use of figurative language. It reflects the nationality of the country in which it derives its language such as: Arabic literature, English literature, Greek literature, Latin literature and many more.

This study is an attempt to identify a very important aspect of global literature, which is English literature, including the importance of its study, artistic forms and stages of its development.

### **The research importance:**

1 - Literature is a form of expression of existing reality that exists in society either in the cultural, social or political side. It can reflect the existing fears and conflicts within the community. It can also identify to nature in all its aspects of geographical topography such as rivers, plains and climatic phenomena and their effect of the human mind represented through ideas and beliefs resulting in different behaviors. Therefore literature is considered the mirror of society through which we can know its different beliefs.

2 - Literature is one of the most important means of preserving the language and the linguistic heritage, including the meanings and phrases and different vocabulary.

3- Through the study of literature, the societies can rise from the gaps and failures they encounter in their history. This could be achieved through the ways in which the members of the society are affected by the genres of literature such as: poems, essays, plays novels and different stories.

### **Research Objectives:**

The study of English literature has many benefits and advantages, for example:

1. English literature enables individuals to learn Basic English language skills. These skills include: listening, speaking and writing. Learning any language requires practice, which could be achieved through reading. We can practice the language by learning vocabulary, phrases and different sentences.
2. English literature enables us to know and understand the nature of the English environment and civilization. It reflects the thinking and behavior, cultures and policies of various English societies to benefit other communities from the progress and prosperity that has occurred in English society throughout the ages.

### **Research methodology:**

The historical approach was used to depict some aspects of the history and development of English literature.

### **Theoretical framework:**

It was pointed through this study the importance of studying literature in relation to individuals and communities as well as the usefulness of English literature. Then a definition of English literature will be offered before reviewing the stages of development of English literature.

### **Definition of English Literature:**

English literature can be defined as any literary work written in English language, even if the writer, poet or author carries a nationality other than English nationality.

### **Stages of Evolution of English literature:**

The writers, poets and authors in the English literature rely on several sources, one of which is holy books (the Bible), the second is Greek civilization and the third is Roman civilization.

The English literature benefited from the Roman civilization and the period from the first century BC in the first century AD as the Roman civilization in this period was at the height of its glory and progress.

This was followed by the Greek civilization of the fifth century BC in the third century AD and the integration of Greek civilization and Roman culture, with its legends, myths, events and images, which led to the emergence of many English writers.

The English literature also benefited from the Bible, with its religious stories, morals, sermons and symbols, which directly influenced English society, writers and authors in particular

The development of English literature can be divided into four eras:

#### **First: The middle Ages:**

The middle Ages contained two stages:

##### **1) *The stage of ancient English literature***

It was the period from (450-1066). The English language in this stage was called the Anglo-Saxon language or the Old Gospel. The poems in this period focused on the promoting certain qualities and attributes: such as courage, generosity and other virtuous qualities. The literary works magnified and glorified the heroes present in this period has appeared in the first literary work in English A poem called Beowulf is a poem of bravery and rudeness .<sup>1</sup>

##### **2) *The stage of Middle English literature:***

It is the period from 1100 to 1485. This historic period began when France or the so-called Normans occupied England in 1066. As a result of this occupation, rulers, intellectuals, and upper classes in England began to speak French and English language had become the exclusive language of the lower classes.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Angus Camer on (1983). "Anglo-Saxon literature" in Dictionary of the middle Ages.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Short, (2003) Language and Literature, in A Companion to the Anglo-Norman World, edited Christopher Harper-Bill and Elisabeth van Houts, Woodbridge .

But in the late fourteenth century, England was able to retrieve its native language, but in a new or so called "Middle English" which was a mixture of Latin, French, Old English, and some local dialects. Many writers and authors have appeared in this period such as:

**A ) Sir Thomas Malory :**

He is called Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel in Warwickshire. He was influenced at the time by the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. In that era he was inspired by King Arthur legend and wrote the story of his book "Le Morte d'Arthur" in the 1155 AD.<sup>3</sup>

**B) William Langland :**

William Langland is considered one of the most important poets during the period between 1330 and 1367. He wrote a long poem entitled "Vision " in which he spoke about the poor and destitute classes in English society at the time .

**C) Geoffrey Chaucer:**

This writer appeared in the middle Ages and wrote a collection of purposeful and emotional comic stories. He is one of the greatest English and the most important of his works is the (Canterbury Tales), written by the late 14th century AD.<sup>4</sup>

**D) Thomas More:**

This writer came after (Geoffrey Chaucer) in the period from 1477 to 1535 when he wrote his famous novel (the city of Virtue) or utopia in 1516. This novel has become a reference to humanitarians.

In 1476 English literature had began a new era as a prelude to the Renaissance when he (William Caxton) introduced a printing press to England. This led to a great development in the literary translation from French and Latin to English. Many literary works had been published whether they were educational, fictional or historical.<sup>5</sup>

## II. RENAISSANCE ERA

The Renaissance era of English literature took place in the period between 1500 and 1660. In that era, the moral plays depicted the characters of good and evil after being mere scenes presented by the priests in the squares of churches.

Historians divided this era into many periods of time, most of which symbolized the names of kings such as:

**A) Tudor period :**

This period was influenced by the Greek and Roman civilization and the call for many of their ethics. There was also a divergence from the subordination of the Catholic Church in that period, which led to some strife, conflicts, chaos and instability in England. The literature at that time was based on quotations and translations of Italian and French literature to English. Plays continued and spread at that time to advocate adherence to morality and religion.<sup>6</sup>

**B ) Elizabethan Period :**

This period extended between 1558 and 1603. It was characterized by the existence of new ideas and ways of thinking, and other works that did not exist before such as fine arts. This was motivated by the support of Queen Elizabeth. This period was named after her. It was one of the greatest periods in the history of English literature. Poetic and dramatic novels have flourished which helped the political and economic stability during this period. Literature was free from the constraints imposed on it as the drama became concerned with the worldly aspect and not the religious aspect as it was before. It also enables the theater to present its vision and new ideas and topics. Most of those ideas revolved around the importance of building society and working on its development. There were three types of poetry in that era: love sonnet, the pastoral, and the allegorical epic.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Brian Greenfield, (1986), A New Critical History of Old English Literature (New York: New York University) .

<sup>4</sup> Jackson, WTH , ( 1966 ), Medieval Literature , A History and a Guide, New York.

<sup>5</sup> Gassner, John; Quinn, Edward, (1969), "England, middle ages", The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama .

<sup>6</sup> Bernard, R. ( 1995 ) A Short History of English Literature, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing .

<sup>7</sup> William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman , (1986) , A Handbook to Literature .

The most important writers during that period:

#### **William Shakespeare:**

He deliberately omitted any information or religious, moral, or economic aspects in his works. He only discussed the matters of the future of society in light of current and not past events. The most important works of Shakespeare are: Merchant of Venice, Julius Caesar, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, Antonio and Cleopatra and other plays.

Other authors such as George Peele, Thomas Lodge, Thomas Kyd have been famous for their work, especially the later who presented his famous play "The Spanish Tragedy" in 1587.<sup>8</sup>

The writer and novelist (Christopher Marlow) had also a great influence on literature. He freed the theater of its limitations of rhyme and the rhetorical poetry and used free verse in the introduction of his plays. This was one of the most important reasons that paved the way for Shakespeare to be one of the most important writers and authors on a global level.

As for poetry, the most important poems in English poetry were written during that period of time in 1590. It was by one of the famous poets (Edmund Spenser) named (The Faerie Queene). It consisted in two parts, the first was presented in 1590 and the second was presented in 1596.<sup>9</sup>

#### **C) Jacobean period**

It was during the reign of King James I (1603 – 1625). The beginning of that period was an extension of the Elizabethan era. But chaos and differences had quickly spread due to differences in ideas and opinions between Puritans or so-called purists and this controversy had extended during the reign of King Charles. As a result cynical realism in literary and poetic works had prevailed through the works of (Thomas Middleton) and (Ben Jonson) and the recent work of Shakespeare.

As a result of the control imposed by the purists on the country in 1642, theaters were closed and the civil war arose and continued until General (Oliver Cromwell) seized power in 1653- 1658 and severe restrictions were placed on literary and poetry activity. The closure of theaters had led to a deterioration of English literature. No literary work attracted attention that period except for (John Milton)'s epic "Paradise Lost".<sup>10</sup>

### **III. RESTORATION ERA (THE RETURN OF MONARCHY)**

This era extended from 1660 to 1798 when the Puritan rule ended and the return of the English Parliament in King Charles II period. The highest noble classes have practiced all kinds of immoral and unethical practices, which was reflected on what writers and poets have presented during this period in literary works that call for freedom and moral deviation.

The theaters were re-opened during the reign of King Charles II in 1660. The theater was dominated by two kinds of plays: the heroic comedy and the moral comedy. The best moral comedy was written by William Wycherley. It was called "The Country Wife".<sup>11</sup>

As in the heroic comedy, John Dryden wrote a play titled "The Conquest of Granada", in 1670.<sup>12</sup>

The Restoration era can be divided into two periods:

#### **A) Augustan period:**

It is the period from 1700 to 1750. It was named after the Roman Emperor August. This era was called the era of neo-classic age in English literature. It was a flourishing period. There were many literary works of arts such as: novels, poetry, and essays. One of the most important novels was (Pamela) written by (Samuel Richardson) in 1740.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Craig, Leon Harold, (2003). *Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear*.

<sup>9</sup> Bednarz, James P. (2004). "Marlowe and the English literary scene". In Cheney, Patrick Gerard. *The Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe*.

<sup>10</sup> Blamires, H. A Short History of English Literature, London: Routledge, 1984.

<sup>11</sup> <https://data.bnf.fr/>

<sup>12</sup> David Marriott, Hertfordshire, (1995), *The Works of John Dryden*: Wordsworth Editions.

### **B) Romantic Period :**

One of the most famous English writers of the time in 1750 was (Samuel Johnson ). He had extremist ideas that emerged through his writings and one of his most important achievements was (The dictionary of English language) in 1755. He also wrote various articles such as (human desires) in 1749. <sup>14</sup>

In terms of prose, he had written (Rasselas) in 1759. One of his most famous novels is the (Vicar of Wakefield) in 1766.

As for the most famous poets at that time, one of them is (William Wordsworth) and (Samuel Taylor Coleridge) who wrote a number of sonnets in 1798. <sup>15</sup>

## **IV. THE MODERN ERA IN ENGLISH LITERATURE**

This era extends from 1798 until now and the modern era can be divided into several time periods including:

### **A) The creative Period:**

It extends from 1798 to 1832. This period had witnessed the prosperity and progress in English literature. One of the greatest novels in English literature was written at that time in 1816. Its name was (Waverly) by Sir (Walter Scott).

### **B) The Victorian Period:**

This name of the period was attributed to the Queen Victoria and it extended from 1832 to 1901. It had witnessed many changes as a result of industrial and scientific progress, which influenced most of the English poets and authors. In that time, there was a reliance on symbolism in poetry and prose. Writers were interested in modern techniques such as lighting especially in theater. The topics of literature and poetry have focused on the importance of describing industrial and scientific progress rather than describing landscapes and romantic encounters. <sup>16</sup>

Among the most famous writers of this era is (Charles Dickens), who wrote several novels that have influenced the literary life such as his novel (Tale of Two Cities) and (Bleak House) and (Wuthering heights) , which was written by the famous author "Emily Bronte". <sup>17</sup>

### **B) The Edwardian Period :**

It had extended from 1901- 1914 and was named after the King Edward VII. One of its most famous novelists is (Arnold Bennett) , who had written the story of (The old wives tales) in 1908 .

Novels also known for their realism style were written by the novelist (John Galsworthy), who wrote his novel "Forstyle Saga". It was a novel divided into three parts. <sup>18</sup>

### **C) The modern Period:**

This period extended from 1914 to 1939, where significant changes have affected poetry and English literature as a result of the First World War in 1918. The devastation and destruction that occurred due to the global war resulted in a sense of the end of society and life in general. It appeared clearly in the feelings prevailing through novels and poetry, especially in a poem titled " The Waste land" written by (T.S. Elliot) in 1922.

One of the most famous novelists of this period was (D.H. Lawrence) , who wrote his novel ( women in love ) in 1920 . <sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Muhammad Hamed , (2017) Masterpieces of English Literature , AG Printing & Publishing .

<sup>14</sup> Rogers , Pat (2009). "Johnson, Samuel" . *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* .

<sup>15</sup> The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Literature, ( 1987 ), University Press

<sup>16</sup> [www.marefa.org](http://www.marefa.org), "English Literature," read it on 8-11-2018 .

<sup>17</sup> Abrams, MH, (1986), Anthology of English Literature, New York

<sup>18</sup> Fowler, A , ( 1991 ) . A History of English Literature, Cambridge: Harvard University Press

<sup>19</sup> Thornley, GC, Roberts, G . An , 1995 ), Outline of English Literature, London: Longman

#### **D) The Modern period:**

This period extends from 1939 until now, and the novels after the Second World War revolve around what can be inflicted by human destruction and devastation of mankind as a result of scientific and technological progress and emerged. As a result, some novels had appeared which depend on science fiction and discuss aspects of life in the future. The old method of writing plays had been abandoned, which was composed of five or three chapters.

One of the most famous authors of that period is (John Osborne) , who presented his play (Look back in anger) in 1956.

As for the field of poetry, there have been many poets, for example: the poet (Seamus Heaney) who wrote a poem entitled (Station Island) in 1984.<sup>20</sup>

#### **Research results:**

This study reached several results, including:

- 1 - The study of English literature is one of the ways through which we can understand the English language, including the different concepts and expressions thoroughly as it has a great importance in all areas of life now.
- 2 - English literature enriched the literary life in the world with many novels, plays and poems, which have been used in various fields .
- 3 - By knowing the history of the development of English literature we can understand the nature of ideas and beliefs of English society, some of which may be absent from other societies.
- 4 - The study of English literature allows us to identify significant historical period of the history of the world represented in the history of one of the major countries and political forces over the ages.

#### **Research recommendations:**

- 1- Diversity in the various studies of English literature should be observed so that we can benefit from these studies to the maximum extent possible.
- 2 –The interest in English language as one of the means through which we can study the English history through the study of English literature.
- 3 – Attempting to translate as many books, studies and references as possible that discuss history, development of literature and English society to enable different members of society to understand such aspects and knowledge and especially those people who do not know English.

#### **REFERENCES**

- [1] Angus Cameron (1983). "Anglo-Saxon literature" in Dictionary of the middle Ages.
- [2] Ian Short, (2003) Language and Literature, in A Companion to the Anglo-Norman World, edited Christopher Harper-Bill and Elisabeth van Houts, Woodbridge.
- [3] Stanley Brian Greenfield, (1986), A New Critical History of OldEnglish Literature (New York: New York University).
- [4] Jackson, WTH, (1966), Medieval Literature, A History and a Guide, New York.
- [5] Gassner, John; Quinn, Edward, (1969), "England, middle ages", The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama.
- [6] Bernard, R. (1995) A Short History of English Literature, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- [7] William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman, (1986), A Handbook to Literature.
- [8] Craig, Leon Harold, (2003). Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear.

---

<sup>20</sup>Margaret Drabble, ( 1996) , The Oxford Companion to English Literature: Oxford University Press .

- [9] Bednarz, James P. (2004). "Marlowe and the English literary scene". In Cheney, Patrick Gerard. The Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe .
- [10] Blamires, H. A Short History of English Literature, London: Routledge, 1984.
- [11] <https://data.bnf.fr/> .
- [12] David Marriott, Hertfordshire, (1995) , The Works of John Dryden : Wordsworth Editions.
- [13] Muhammad Hamed, (2017), Masterpieces of English Literature, AG Printing & Publishing.
- [14] Rogers , Pat (2009). "Johnson, Samuel" . Oxford Dictionary of National Biography .
- [15] The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Literature, (1987), University Press.
- [16] [Www.marefa.org](http://www.marefa.org), "English Literature," read it on 8-11-2018.
- [17] Abrams, MH, (1986), Anthology of English Literature, New York.
- [18] Fowler, A, (1991). A History of English Literature, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- [19] Thornley, GC, Roberts, G. An, ( 1995) ), Outline of English Literature, London: Longman
- [20] Margaret Drabble, (1996), The Oxford Companion to English Literature: Oxford University Press.