

been one of the beginnings of the novel, did not get any place in the syllabi of the universities, because she did not satisfy these conditions. Moreover, writers like George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), Currer Bell (Charlotte Bronte) and Ellis Bell (Emile Bronte) even in the nineteenth century, wrote under male pseudonyms to avoid not being read.

The canon is not a static thing. It is continually revised, reformed and rewritten. For instance, in erstwhile British colonies like India and Pakistan, Shakespeare was the major author who formed almost one third of the PG curriculum in the 1950s. With the emergence of contemporary theories, Shakespeare has been decentred for including areas like Indian writing in English, Regional Writings in Translation, and other 'Englishes' such as the Australian, Canadian or Caribbean.

THE FEATURES OF LITERATURE: THE LIBERAL HUMANIST SCHOOL

Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory* summarizes the basic assumptions of good literature, according to the liberal humanists. As a term, liberal humanism refers to approaches to literature from Plato to New Criticism, and signifies an approach that is 'not politically radical' and 'non-theoretical'. The canon formation, at this stage, had a universalizing mission. In the heyday of European colonialism, specifically in its British version, many intellectuals were demanding the establishment of a universal, humanitarian value system. English Studies was doing precisely this in the colonies, as English emerged as a neutral phenomenon. For example, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar held the view that English education was a liberating experience for the dalits in India as it removed the hierarchical 'uppercasteness' of Sanskrit. The features of 'good' or 'canonical' literature may be examined to look at the governing principles involved in the canon formation process.

Based on Peter Barry's analysis, 'good literature is of timeless significance'. As Dr. Samuel Johnson noted of Shakespeare, "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature." Conversely, the statement implies two things: first, good literature is immortal and it gives the 'right' representation of human nature. However, the immortalization of literature was not a natural process, but one that involved a selection based on certain principles. Shakespeare, Milton and Fielding, to name a few, became the poster boys of British literature and were declared Classical authors.

This criterion also means that there exists a universal, as well as permanent idea of the 'good' and the 'bad'. Thus, an English classic is

a classic forever and throughout the globe. What this means is that the western values - Eurocentric, patriarchal, and upper class were also accepted as the norm. The indigenous literatures and lives were evaluated in relation to this criterion, until very recently.

LITERATURES IN ENGLISH

focussing on European culture or history

In the beginning of the twentieth century, literature in English referred to British literature alone. The academic discipline included the study of Latin and Greek classics, besides the dominant texts of English literature were fixed by the process of canon formation. However, in the present context, the phrase refers to the dissemination of English throughout the globe.

spread

During the colonial period, the British in the colonies spread English as the language of knowledge and science. T. B. Macaulay's infamous 1835 Minute on Indian Education says: "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." Thus English was introduced in the colonies for business reasons. However, the people of the various colonies appropriated English in such a way that literatures in English arose there as a medium of protest and resistance. As Caliban puts it in *The Tempest*, "You taught me language; and my profit on't is, I know how to curse."

to take something for our use

In the postcolonial context, there emerged multiple literatures in English: American, Australian, Canadian, Caribbean, African and Indian besides British literature. Language and literature studies now include all these literatures as the syllabi of various universities are framed. The first three referred to the writings of the settlers of the colonies along with that of the natives who were forcibly taught the language by the masters. In the Caribbean, African and Indian context, literature in English referred to the various writings by both the people of the colonies in the past and the postcolonial diaspora in the present.

the spreading of people from one original country to other countries

BRITISH LITERATURE: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In the Indian context, English literature always meant British literature. Till the 1980s, a paper on American literature was the only area that was included in the curriculum of various universities in India. The following is an attempt to condense the history of British literature. M.

6 *The Methodology of Literature*

H. Abrams, following critical consensus, categorizes British literature as follows:

- 450-1066 Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) Period
- 1066-1500 Middle English Period
- 1500-1660 The Renaissance (or Early Modern)
- 1558-1603 Elizabethan Age
- 1603-1625 Jacobean Age
- 1625-1649 Caroline Age
- 1649-1660 Commonwealth Period (or Puritan Interregnum)
- 1660-1785 The Neoclassical Period
- 1660-1700 The Restoration
- 1700-1745 The Augustan Age (or Age of Pope)
- 1745-1785 The Age of Sensibility (or Age of Johnson)
- 1785-1830 The Romantic Period
- 1832-1901 The Victorian Period
- 1901-1914 The Edwardian Period
- 1914- 1939 The Modern Period
- 1940- Postmodern Period

The **Old English Period**, or the **Anglo-Saxon Period**, begins with the invasion of Celtic England by Germanic tribes (the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes) in the first half of the fifth century. The conquest of England in 1066 by the Norman French under the leadership of William the Conqueror marks the end of this phase. With the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, there also happened a conversion of literature from oral to written. *Beowulf*, the Old English epic, was the greatest achievement of the period. Caedmon and Cynewulf wrote poems focusing on Biblical and religious themes. The reign of Alfred the Great in the ninth century was the golden era of literature of this period.

The **Middle English Period** denotes the period from the Norman Conquest of 1066 to 1500. Till 1300, literature was written mainly in the Anglo-Norman dialect, a variant of French, brought to England by the invaders. Some of the important and influential works of this period are Marie de France's *Lais*, Guillaume de Lorris' and Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*, and Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec et Enide* (the first Arthurian romance,) and *Yvain*. However, the

crowning achievements of Middle English were all written during the fourteenth century. Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, written in the East Midland Dialect, was the most significant work of the period. Other notable works of Chaucer were *Troilus and Creseyde* and *The Parliament of Fowles*. William Langland and John Gower, who were contemporaries of Chaucer, wrote two of the classics *Piers the Plowman* and *Confessio Amantis* respectively. The most notable prose work was Thomas Malory's romance *Morte d'Arthur*. It was in this phase that *rhyme royale* was invented as a metrical pattern.

The **Renaissance** in English literature was a phase which began in the early sixteenth century and lasted upto 1660. During this phase, England became a Protestant country in the wake of the Reformation; the medieval Ptolemaic universe was replaced by the modern Copernican one and literature became secular, proclaiming a quest for knowledge. The works of Shakespeare and Milton are the best examples of the humanism which characterized the spirit of the age.

The Elizabethan Age refers to the period of the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603). M. H. Abrams observes that this was a time of rapid development in English commerce, maritime power, and nationalist feeling—the defeat of the Spanish Armada occurred in 1588. This period known as the golden era of drama was made so by William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and Thomas Kyd. The most important poet of this phase was Edmund Spenser who wrote *Prothalamion* and *Epithalamion*, the two great nuptial poems. Wyatt and Surrey, in addition to Sir Philip Sidney also contributed to the development of some prominent genres like the sonnet and the pastoral romance.

relating to marriage

The Jacobean Age indicates the reign of James I (1603-25), who succeeded Queen Elizabeth. The *Essays* of Francis Bacon, written during this phase, became the yardstick of prose writings in later times. John Donne's Sermons and Metaphysical poems, Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and the King James translation of the Bible appeared during this phase. Shakespeare's greatest tragedies – *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* – appeared at this stage, though *Hamlet* (1601) is believed to have been written during the Elizabethan phase. Other significant writers include Ben Jonson, Michael Drayton, Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, John Webster, George Chapman, Thomas Middleton and Philip Massinger. At a time when the literary field was dominated by men, Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam, the Faire Queene of Jewry* was of historical importance as the first published long play by an English woman.

The **Caroline Age** is the reign of Charles I from 1625-49. This was the time of the English Civil War fought between the Cavaliers (the royalists) and the Roundheads (the supporters of Parliament). This was the period of Milton's *Areopagitica* and George Herbert's religious poems. The main prose writers of the era were Robert Burton and Sir Thomas Browne. The Cavalier poets – Richard Lovelace, Sir John Suckling, Thomas Carew and Robert Herrick wrote witty and polished lyrics of courtship and gallantry also.

The **Commonwealth Period** or **Puritan Interregnum**, covers the period from the execution of Charles I in 1649 to the restoration of the Stuart monarchy under Charles II in 1660. During this period, England was under the rule of the Parliament headed by the Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell. The Commonwealth was dissolved with the death of Cromwell in 1658. This period was noted for the closure of theatres since 1642 mainly on moral and religious grounds. Milton's political pamphlets and Thomas Hobbes' political treatise *Leviathan* (1651) constituted the key literary activities of the period. Sir Thomas Browne, Thomas Fuller, Jeremy Taylor, and Izaak Walton were the main prose writers and Henry Vaughan, Edmund Waller, Abraham Cowley, Sir William Davenant, and Andrew Marvell were the chief poets, of the period.

The **Neoclassical Period (1660-1785)** is a name given to three distinctive eras ranging from the restoration of the Stuart monarchy (Charles II) to the English throne in 1660 to the death of Samuel Johnson. The first phase, **the Age of Dryden**, is specified as lasting until 1700. The urbanity, wit, and licentiousness of the life centring on the court, in sharp contrast to the seriousness and sobriety of the earlier Puritan regime, is reflected in much of the literature of this age. With the reopening of the theatres, Sir George Etherege, William Wycherley and William Congreve introduced a distinctive comedy of manners called *Restoration comedy*. Meanwhile, John Dryden with Thomas Otway developed the even more distinctive form of tragedy called the *Heroic Drama*. The main poets of the period other than Dryden who authored *Absalom and Achitophel* and *MacFlecknoe*, were the satirists Samuel Butler and the Earl of Rochester. Notable writers in prose, in addition to the masterly Dryden, include Samuel Pepys, Sir William Temple, John Bunyan, and the philosopher John Locke. Aphra Behn, the first English-woman whose work is considered to be canonical at present, wrote a precursor to the novel titled *Oroonoko*, the tragic story of a noble African slave.

The **Augustan Age (1700-1745)** refers to a period of imitation in English literature, of the original Augustan Age which had geniuses

in literature like Virgil, Horace, and Ovid under the Roman emperor Augustus (27 B.C.-A.D. 14). The leading writers of the time (such as Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift) themselves drew parallels to the Roman Augustans, and deliberately imitated: their literary forms and subjects, their emphasis on social concerns, their ideals of moderation, decorum, and urbanity. Also known as the age of Pope, the period saw the emergence of periodical literature in England by Addison and Steele through *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. It was primarily a period of great satirical literature. Daniel Defoe introduced the form of novel in English with the publication of *Robinson Crusoe*. In the great era of letter-writing, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu excelled as the author of *Letters from Turkey*.

The **Age of Sensibility** denotes the period between the death of Alexander Pope in 1744, and 1785 -- which was one year after the death of Samuel Johnson, and two years before the publication of Robert Burns' *Poems, Chiefly in Scottish Dialect*. The term, 'Age of Sensibility' emphasizes on the emergence, in other writers of the 1740s and later, of new cultural attitudes, theories of literature, and types of poetry. This period also marks a growing sympathy for the Middle Ages, a vogue of *cultural primitivism*, an awakening interest in ballads and other folk literature, a turn from neoclassic 'correctness', and its emphasis on judgment and restraint to an emphasis on instinct and feeling, and the development of a *literature of sensibility*. Dr. Samuel Johnson was the dominant figure in literature along with his literary and intellectual circle, which included Oliver Goldsmith, Edmund Burke, James Boswell, Edward Gibbon and Hester Thrale. These authors represented a culmination of the literary and critical modes of *neoclassicism* and the worldview of the *Enlightenment*. One can trace a transition from Neoclassicism to Romanticism in Thomas Gray who expressed an anti-neoclassic sensibility and set of values in poems like 'An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'. Other poets who showed similar shifts in thought and taste were William Collins, Joseph and Thomas Warton, Christopher Smart, and William Cowper. The publication of *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), by Thomas Percy was probably the most important poetic achievement. This was also the period of the great novelists, some realistic, some satirical and some 'sentimental': Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett, and Laurence Sterne.

The **Romantic Period (1785-1830)** refers to a period in which innovation through imagination superceded the formulaic classical literature; subjectivity in expression replaced the scientific objectivity of the previous period and a turning to the mental and natural

landscapes of creativity substituted the urban spaces of limitation. Influenced by the French Revolution, German philosophers and the need to reject the Enlightenment ideals, Wordsworth published *Lyrical Ballads* -- a new species of poetry in 1798. Major English writers of the period, in addition to Wordsworth, were the poets Samuel Coleridge, Robert Burns, William Blake, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats; the prose writers Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, Thomas De Quincey, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Leigh Hunt; and the novelists Jane Austen, Sir Walter Scott, and Mary Shelley. The span between 1786 and the close of the eighteenth century was that of the *Gothic romances* by William Beckford, Matthew Gregory Lewis, William Godwin, and, above all, Anne Radcliffe.

The **Victorian Period** (1830-1901), more or less, refers to the reign of Queen Victoria. The period was one of tremendous economic growth, the spread of industrialization and the emergence of trade-unionism. In philosophy, the roots of scientific materialism and philosophical determinism emerged during the later Victorian period. The dramatic monologues of Robert Browning, the lyrics of Alfred Tennyson and philosophical poetry of Matthew Arnold formed the core of the Victorian canon. Towards the close of the nineteenth century, the Pre-Raphaelites like D.G. Rossetti, Christina Rossetti and Walter Pater, changed the course of poetry with extremely sensuous descriptions. The key novelists of the era include Charles Dickens (*Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield*), Charlotte Bronte (*Jane Eyre*), Emile Bronte (*Wuthering Heights*), Ann Bronte (*Agnes Grey*), George Eliot (*Adam Bede* and *Silas Mariner*) and Thomas Hardy (*The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*). One of the most important playwrights of the era was Oscar Wilde whose *The Importance of Being Earnest* was a groundbreaking farce. The Victorian prose writers, who questioned the increasing materialism of the age, were Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold.

The **Edwardian Period (1901-1914)** spans the period between the death of Victoria (1901) and the beginning of World War I. The major poets include Thomas Hardy (who gave up writing novels for poetry following the moral charges against *Jude the Obscure*), Alfred Noyes, William Butler Yeats, and Rudyard Kipling. John Galsworthy's realist plays and George Bernard Shaw's social satires were the main achievements in drama. In Ireland, it was the period of the *Celtic Revival* led by Lady Gregory, W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge. The major novelists of the two decades were Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling, and Henry James.

branch of 19th - European language
this was spread widely over western and central Europe

The Modern Period (1914-1939) refers to the period between the beginnings of the two World Wars. It was a period of great experimentation in literature, characterized by stream of consciousness in fiction; fragmentation, symbolism, and Imagism in poetry, besides close reading in criticism. The publication of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915) and *The Waste Land* (1922) by T. S. Eliot was a decisive break from all previous conventions of poetry. The other prominent modernist poets include W. B. Yeats, Wilfred Owen, W. H. Auden, and Stephen Spender. The key novelists of the period were James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence. Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) is considered one of the most technically perfect novels of all times for its employment of stream of consciousness narrative technique and symbolism. Virginia Woolf of the Bloomsbury Group wrote novels like *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, mixing memory, desire and family history. The psychological explorations of the lives of individuals in bourgeois economies form the themes of 'controversial' novels like D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. The Practical Criticism of I.A. Richards paved the way for the later development of American New Criticism. It was during this phase that writers from the colonies achieved recognition as 'English' writers.

The **Postmodern Period** is a name sometimes applied to the era after World War II (1939-45). Post-war poetry was a revolt against the 'high cultural values' of modernism. The New Apocalypse/Neo-romanticism of Dylan Thomas, the Movement poetry of Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis and John Wain and the historically rooted Irish poetry of Seamus Heaney were some of these cultural advancements. With the recent interest in diaspora, performance poets like Benjamin Zephaniah, Inua Ellams, Mickey Lightfoot gained wide popularity. The failure of the welfare state gave birth to the Kitchen Sink Drama of Arnold Wesker and the Angry Young Men movement of John Osborne. The Theatre of the Absurd that explored the meaninglessness of existence in an equally meaningless plot conveyed the disillusionment, scepticism and philosophical nihilism of the postwar generation. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker*, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* are some of these postmodern experiments. Edward Bond's *Lear* and Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* were some of the other important developments in British theatre. The fiction of the period was dominated by diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, and Andrea Levy. The main British novelists who experimented with various styles were William Golding, Graham Greene, John Fowles, Alan Sillitoe, and Julian Barnes.