## Overview of British Literature

* **Old English Literature**

Anglo-Saxon literature (or Old English literature) includes literature written in Old English, from the mid-5th century to the Norman Conquest (1066).

**Genres:** narrative/epic poetry, sermons, religious poetry, Bible translations, chronicles, riddles. The most popular and well-known features of Old English poetry are the **alliterative verse** (e.g., **t**orment **t**ime, **f**rozen **f**etters, **s**ea´s **s**ounding) and **kenning**: a metaphorical phrase expressed in a compound noun (e.g., flood-ways, whale´s home, whale-way = sea/ocean).

**Manuscripts:** Junius Manuscript, the Exeter Book, the Vercelli Book, the Nowell Codex.

**OE poets** = the Scops, usually anonymous. Known were: Caedmon, Bede the Venerable, Alfred the Great, Cynewulf.

The Old English poetry which has received the most attention deals with the Germanic heroic past. The longest and most important is *Beowulf*. It tells the story of the legendary hero Beowulf. The story is set in Scandinavia, in Sweden and Denmark It has achieved national epic status, on the same level as Homer’s *Iliad*.

Other popular works are “The Seafarer,” “The Battle of Maldon,” “The Wife´s Lament,” “The Husband´s Message.”

Example from *Beowulf:*

One night, after a beer

party,

the Danes settled in the hall

for sleep, they knew no

sorrows.

The evil creature, grim and

hungry,

grabbed thirty warriors

and went home laughing.

At dawn, when the Danes

learned

of Grendel strength,

there was great weeping.

The old king sat sadly,

crying for his men.

Bloody

footprints were found.

* **Middle English Literature**

There were three major languages employed: Latin, French and English.

Popular forms: Arthurian legends (e.g., “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”), folk tales, animal fables, dream visions. Verse romances: the matter of Britain, the matter of Troy. French romances were popular for courtly love, elaborated manners and rituals.

Authors: Sir Thomas Malory – *Morte d´Arthur* – the most famous Arthurian legend in English. Geoffrey Chaucer – *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387–1400), *The Book of the Duchess, The House of Fame, The Parlement of Foules*.

Example from “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”:

After the siege and the assault of Troy, when that burg was destroyed and burnt to ashes, and the traitor tried for his treason, the noble Aeneas and his kin sailed forth to become princes and patrons of well-nigh all the Western Isles. Thus Romulus built Rome (and gave to the city his own name, which it bears even to this day), and Ticius turned him to Tuscany, and Langobard raised him up dwellings in Lombardy, and Felix Brutus sailed far over the French flood, and founded the kingdom of Britain, wherein have been war and waste and wonder, and bliss and bale, ofttimes since. And in that kingdom of Britain have been wrought more gallant deeds than in any other, but of all British kings Arthur was the most valiant, as I have heard tell, therefore will I set forth a wondrous adventure that fell out in his time. And if ye will listen to me, but for a little while, I will tell it even as it stands in story stiff and strong, fixed in the letter, as it hath long been known in the land.

* **Beginning of English Drama**

**Scops:** OA poets, professional tribal poets celebrating cultural values by singing epics at great ceremonies and festivities including feasting, mead drinking, harp playing, displaying of trophies. Their possessed roles of court singers, tribal historians, genealogists, teachers, composers, critics, warriors, travellers and reporters. They performed in halls of chieftains and kings, nobleman employed their own scops, other scops travelled from court to court.

Example of scop poetry: “Valhalla”

Now join with me in the cry

That guides the spirits of our fallen heroes

Winging across the Rainbow Bridge

To the doors at the Hall of the Slain.

And shakes the seat of Odin´s throne

And the very foundations of Asgard,

The kingdom of the Gods:

VALHALLA!!VALHALLA!!

**Tropes:** short dialogues inserted into the church mass during the early Middle Ages as a mini-drama.

**Miracles:** medieval religious plays representing legends of saints or Virgin Mary.

**Mysteries:** religious plays representing a scene from the Old and New Testament performed from the 13th to 16th century. They developed from Latin liturgical drama and were represented by trade guilds known as “mysteries.” Preserved in cycles: *York Cycle* - 48 plays representing scheme from the Creation to Doomsday, *Chester Cycle*, *Wakefield Cycle* – includes “The Second Shepherd´s Play.”

**Moralities:** religious plays popular in the 15th and 16th century. They were dramatized allegories in which personified virtues, vices, diseases and temptations struggle for the soul of Man from birth to death. The message is of Christian salvation including comic scenes as well. Examples: *Mankind, Everyman, Castle of Perseverance*.

**Interludes:** short plays performed by small companies of professional actors. They were transition between the morality play and Elizabethan comedy. Example: *The Play of the Weather* by John Heywood.

* **Literature of the Renaissance**

**Poetry:** The Renaissance poetry introduces traditions from other European cultures, especially old Greek and Roman literature. It deals with idealised version of the courtly life and love.

Major Renaissance poetic form: sonnet (sonnet sequence).

Major poets and works: Edmund Spencer – “The Faerie Queene,” Sir Philip Sidney – “Astrophel and Stella,” Sir Thomas Wyatt – deals with romantic love, devotion of the suitor to an unavailable mistress and satire on courtiers:

And wilt thou leave me thus?

Say nay, say nay, for shame,

To save thee from the blame

Of all my grief and grame;

And wilt thou leave me thus?

Say nay, say nay!

And wilt thou leave me thus,

That hath loved thee so long

In wealth and woe among?

And is thy heart so strong

As for to leave me thus?

Say nay, say nay!

And wilt thou leave me thus,

That hath given thee my heart

Never for to depart,

Nother for pain nor smart;

And wilt thou leave me thus?

Say nay, say nay!

And wilt thou leave me thus

And have no more pity

Of him that loveth thee?

Hélas, thy cruelty!

And wilt thou leave me thus?

Say nay, say nay!

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45594/and-wilt-thou-leave-me-thus>)

William Shakespeare – 154 sonnets with a personal theme (iambic pentameter, three quatrains and a couplet, alternate rhyme):

That you were once unkind befriends me now,  
And for that sorrow, which I then did feel,  
Needs must I under my transgression bow,  
Unless my nerves were brass or hammered steel.

For if you were by my unkindness shaken,  
As I by yours, you’ve passed a hell of time;  
And I, a tyrant, have no leisure taken  
To weigh how once I suffered in your crime.

O! that our night of woe might have remembered  
My deepest sense, how hard true sorrow hits,  
And soon to you, as you to me, then tendered  
The humble salve, which wounded bosoms fits!

But that your trespass now becomes a fee;  
Mine ransoms yours, and yours must ransom me.

(<https://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/poems/that-you-were-once-unkind-befriends-me-now/>)

**Drama:** Elizabethan theatre – 1558-1603 (Elizabeth I), Jacobean theatre – 1603-1625 (James I), Caroline theatre – 1625-1649 (Charles I) Major dramatic forms: histories, tragedies, comedies (in blankverse).

**Genres**

**History play**: depicted English or European history.

Examples: Shakespeare: *Richard III, Henry V*, Christopher Marlowe: *Edward II,* George Peele: *Famous Chronicle of King Edward the First*.

**Tragedy:** Marlowe: *The Tragic History of* *Dr. Faustus* and *The Jew of Malta*. John Webster: *The Duchess of Malfi.* Shakespeare (ancient materials put into new forms, study of people in various conflicts): *Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, Othello, King Lear.*

Tragedy of revenge: Thomas Kyd: *The Spanish Tragedy* (a father wants to avenge his son´s death), Shakespeare: *Hamlet* (a son wants to avenge his father´s death):

To be, or not to be, that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles

And by opposing end them. To die—to sleep,

No more; and by a sleep to say we end

The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation

Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;

To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub:

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,

Must give us pause—there's the respect

That makes calamity of so long life.

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,

Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,

The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,

The insolence of office, and the spurns

That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,

When he himself might his quietus make

With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,

To grunt and sweat under a weary life,

But that the dread of something after death,

The undiscovere'd country, from whose bourn

No traveller returns, puzzles the will,

And makes us rather bear those ills we have

Than fly to others that we know not of?

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,

And thus the native hue of resolution

Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,

And enterprises of great pitch and moment

With this regard their currents turn awry

And lose the name of action.

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56965/speech-to-be-or-not-to-be-that-is-the-question>)

**Comedy:** Shakespeare: *The Comedy of Errors, The Taming of the Shrew, The Merry Wives of Windsor, A Midsummer Night´s Dream*. Thomas Dekker: *The Shoemaker's Holiday.* Thomas Middleton: *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*.

* **Beginning of the novel**

The novel as a literary genre emerged at the beginning of the 18th century. It developed as a piece of prose fiction that presented characters in real-life events and situations.

Examples: Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones.*

* **Romanticism**

Emphasis on nature and natural or primitive way of life, critical of civilization, association of human moods with nature, emphasis on imagination, spontaneity, imagination, intuition, instincts, individualism and symbolism. Generation of the Lake poets around Lake District.

1798 – William Wordsworth: *Lyrical Ballads* with a preface by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and beginning with Coleridge´s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” Another poem by Coleridge is “Kubla Khan.” He is also the author of a vampire lesbian story “Christabel.”

William Blake: *The Songs of Innocence, The Songs of Experience*. He had been dissatisfied with the current state of poetry and of contemporary thought. Inspired by his visions with beautiful religious themes and imagery, he was a poet and illustrator.

Example from *The Songs of Experience*:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,

In the forests of the night;

What immortal hand or eye,

Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.

Burnt the fire of thine eyes?

On what wings dare he aspire?

What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,

Could twist the sinews of thy heart?

And when thy heart began to beat,

What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,

In what furnace was thy brain?

What the anvil? what dread grasp,

Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears

And water'd heaven with their tears:

Did he smile his work to see?

Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,

In the forests of the night:

What immortal hand or eye,

Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43687/the-tyger>)

George Gordon, Lord Byron: “Childe Harold´s Pilgrimage,” “Don Juan,” “Manfred,” and “Cain.”

Percy Bysshe Shelley: “Ode to the West Wind,” “The Mask of Anarchy,” “Queen Mab,” and a lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound*.

John Keats: “To a Nightingale,” “On a Grecian Urn,” “Endymion,” “Isabella.”

* **The Gothic Novel:**

Main features – desolate setting, castles, monasteries, graveyards. Gloomy atmosphere, dark, windy, rainy, thunderous weather. Features of mystery, doom, decay, madness and violence. Novels introduce also ghost or other supernatural creatures, at the beginning a lady in distress appeared waiting for a hero to save her. Evil is ultimately destroyed and has beneficial consequences in terms of character development. No one dies unjustly in a true gothic novel.

The English Gothic novel began with Horace Walpole´s *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1765).

Ann Radcliffe: *A Sicilian Romance* (1790)*, The Mysteries of Udolfo* (1794)*, The Italian* (1797). Matthew Lewis: *The Monk* (1796).

Mary Shelley: *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. Robert Louis Stevenson – *The* *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Bram Stoker: *Dracula*.

* **Features of Victorian era:**

Era of Queen Victoria. Industrialism, spread of railways, urbanization, rise of technology, spreading of the British empire and recovery from the Napoleonic wars, materialism, population boom, child labour. New technological inventions: steam engine, phone, and railroad. Poverty and unemployment.

Britain became the world power. The economic success was marked by the middle class. The time became famous for its social conventions, sexuality became social taboo. Puritanism vs. prostitution (1888 Jack the Ripper).

Charles Darwin: *On the Origin of Species* (1859).

The mainstream literature could be defined as critical realism, the main representatives being Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray or George Eliot.

Charles Dickens: *David Copperfield* (1849–50) uses the form of a fictional autobiography, *Great Expectations* (1860–61), *Pickwick Papers* (1836–37)*, Bleak House* (1852–53)*, Oliver Twist, A Christmas Carol, Hard Times* (1854)*, Little Dorrit* (1855–57)*, A Tale of Two Cities*.

William Makepeace Thackeray:*Vanity Fair* (1847–48). George Eliot*:**Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861), *Middlemarch* (1871–72).

Thomas Hardy: wrote about a rural life of fictional Wessex. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *Tess of the d´Urbervilles* (1891), *Jude the Obscure* (1895).

Example of a Victorian poetry: *A Christmas Ghost Story* by Thomas Hardy

South of the Line, inland from far Durban,  
A mouldering soldier lies--your countryman.  
Awry and doubled up are his gray bones,  
And on the breeze his puzzled phantom moans  
Nightly to clear Canopus: "I would know  
By whom and when the All-Earth-gladdening Law  
Of Peace, brought in by that Man Crucified,  
Was ruled to be inept, and set aside?  
And what of logic or of truth appears  
In tacking 'Anno Domini' to the years?  
Near twenty-hundred livened thus have hied,  
But tarries yet the Cause for which He died."

(<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/a-christmas-ghost-story/>)

* **British modernism:**

The technological and social changes at the beginning of the 20th century are called the modernity. Modernist methods: Intentional break with tradition, against established religious, political and social views. Subjective treatment of time and space, things are relative. Experience of alienation, loss and despair. Celebration of inner strength, concerned with sub-conscious. Use of stream of consciousness – human mind is not static, but it is a constant flow of states; and internal monologues. Concentrated on the time of human mind, the difference between objective and subjective time. British modernism was never a movement, only individual artists. Major representatives: James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence

James Joyce (1882–1941): the most influential modernist in prose of the twenties and thirties. *Dubliners* (1914) – a collection of short stories. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) – sexual and imaginative oppression in Ireland, the most realistic work, concentrates on mental development and emotions of a growing up protagonist. *Ulysses* (1922) – takes place in a single day in Dublin in 1904, story based on Homer, banned as pornography. *Finnegan´s Wake* (1939) – a series of drunken dreams, very complex.

Example from Ulysses:

MR LEOPOLD BLOOM ATE WITH RELISH THE INNER ORGANS OF BEASTS and fowls. He liked thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liver slices fried with crustcrumbs, fried hencod's roes. Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine.

Kidneys were in his mind as he moved about the kitchen softly, righting her breakfast things on the humpy tray. Gelid light and air were in the kitchen but out of doors gentle summer morning everywhere. Made him feel a bit peckish.

The coals were reddening.

Another slice of bread and butter: three, four: right. She didn't like her plate full. Right. He turned from the tray, lifted the kettle off the hob and set it sideways on the fire. It sat there, dull and squat, its spout stuck out. Cup of tea soon. Good. Mouth dry. The cat walked stiffly round a leg of the table with tail on high.

-- Mkgnao!

-- O, there you are, Mr Bloom said, turning from the fire.

The cat mewed in answer and stalked again stiffly round a leg of the table, mewing. Just how she stalks over my writing-table. Prr. Scratch my head. Prr.

Mr Bloom watched curiously, kindly, the lithe black form. Clean to see: the gloss of her sleek hide, the white button under the butt of her tail, the green flashing eyes. He bent down to her, his hands on his knees.

-- Milk for the pussens, he said.

-- Mrkgnao! the cat cried.

They call them stupid. They understand what we say better than we understand them. She understands all she wants to. Vindictive too. Wonder what I look like to her. Height of a tower? No, she can jump me.

-- Afraid of the chickens she is, he said mockingly. Afraid of the chookchooks. I never saw such a stupid pussens as the pussens.

Cruel. Her nature. Curious mice never squeal. Seem to like it.

(<http://www.online-literature.com/james_joyce/ulysses/4/>)

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941): a feminist essayist, critic and modernist writer. She developed innovative literary techniques in order to reveal women´s experience and find an alternative to the male-dominated views of reality. *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *The Waves* (1931). Mrs. Dalloway (1925) – formed by a web of thoughts of people during the course of a single day. *Orlando* (1928) – a fantasy novel tracing the career of the androgynous protagonist from a masculine identity during the Elizabethan era to a feminine identity in 1928.

D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930): a famous literary critic and novelist. *Sons and Lovers* (1913) – rewrote the story of Oedipus. *Women in Love* (1920) – stresses a distinction between freedom and control, instinct and will. *Mrs. Chatterley´s Lover* (1927) – was banned as pornographic.

* **Postwar fiction**

Main features of the era:Effects of the WW I – a sense of crisis in English culture, global economic crisis of the 1930s. Rise of fascism, WW II, Spanish Civil War (1936–39).

Major themes in literature: Class division, sexual repression, loss of meaning, inability to communicate.

Graham Greene (1904–91): a novelist, short-story writer, playwright and journalist dealing with moral issues in the context of political settings. *The Power And The Glory* (1940), *The Heart Of The Matter* (1948), *The Quiet American* (1955), *Our Man In Havana* (1958).

William Golding (1911–93): a novelist, received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1983. He revealed the dark sides of people when isolated and pushed into extreme situations, themes of the evil in the world, the fall of men. *Lord of the Flies*.

George Orwell (1903–50): pseudonym of Eric Arthur Blair, a novelist, essayist and critic. *Animal Farm* (1945) – a political satire, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) – a protest against corruption of truth and free speech.

John Fowles (1926–2005): *The Collector* (1963).

Ian McEwan (1948): *The Cement Garden* (1978) – after death of their parents, teenage siblings play their roles.

Anthony Burgess (1917–93): *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) – question whether an evil human being with free will preferable to a good citizen without it.

Angry Young Men: A group of writers dealing with social mobility, usually from the northern working class to the southern middle class: John Braine, John Wain, Alan Sillitoe, Stan Barstow, and David Storey.

* **Postwar drama**

Major playwrights: John Osborne: *Look Back in Anger* (1956) – introduces a working-class hero, a kitchen-sink drama. Arnold Wesker: a politically and socially engaged trilogy *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958), *Roots* (1959), *I´m Talking About Jerusalem* (1960).

The Theatre of the Absurd: the term is derived from an essay by Albert Camus, he defined the human situation as basically meaningless and absurd. It rebels against conventional theatre, it is surreal, illogical, has no clear plot or action, characters are types, dialogues often do not make sense. Language does not work as a means of communication.

Samuel Beckett (1906–89): an Irish novelist, playwright, short story writer, theatre director, poet and translator, awarded the Novel Prize in Literature in 1969. *Waiting for Godot, Endgame, Happy Days, Come and Go*.

Example from *Waiting for Godot*:

ESTRAGON: People are bloody ignorant apes.

(He rises painfully, goes limping to extreme left, halts, gazes into distance off with his hand screening his eyes, turns, goes to extreme right, gazes into distance. Vladimir watches him, then goes and picks up the boot, peers into it, drops it hastily) ... Charming spot. (He turns, advances to front, halts facing auditorium.) Inspiring prospects. (He turns to Vladimir.) Let's go.

VLADIMIR: We can't.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot.

ESTRAGON: (despairingly). Ah! (Pause.) You're sure it was here?

VLADIMIR: He said by the tree. (They look at the tree.) Do you see any others? ESTRAGON: Where are the leaves?

VLADIMIR: It must be dead. He said Saturday. (Pause.) I think.

ESTRAGON: (very insidious). But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? (Pause.) Or Monday? (Pause.) Or Friday?

VLADIMIR: (looking wildly about him, as though the date was inscribed in the landscape). It's not possible!

ESTRAGON: Or Thursday?

VLADIMIR: What'll we do?

ESTRAGON: Let's hang ourselves immediately!

Harold Pinter (1930–2008): a Nobel Prize winner of 2005, his plays based on common, banal situations, deals with a strong conflict between characters struggling for dominance, issues of individual identity, oppressed by social forces. *The Room, The Birthday Party, The Caretaker, The Homecoming*.

Tom Stoppard (1937): born in Gottwaldow as Tomáš Straussler, fled from the Nazists. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Arcadia, Travesties, Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* – about James Joyce, Lenin and Tristan Tzara in Zurich during WW1.

* **Postwar poetry**

The Movement: produced urbane, anti-romantic verse with irony and understatement. D. J. Enright, Donald Davie, John Wain, Roy Fuller, Elizabeth Jennings. Philip Larkin: sense of life´s limitations, awareness of mortality, fear of death, human solitude – *The Less Deceived, The Whitsun Weddings, High Windows*.

Ted Hughes: captures the ferocity, vitality and splendour of the natural world, rooted in his experience as a farmer – *The Hawk in the Rain, Crow*.

Tony Harrison: working-class community, social concerned – *The Loiners, Continuous*.

Craig Raine: Martian school of poetry – startling images, unexpected similes, imaginative transformation – *The Onion, Memory, A Martian Sends a Postcard Home*.

The Belfast Group (Northern Ireland, 1960s): Seamus Heaney – awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995, between a need for creative freedom within itself and a pressure to express the sense of social obligation felt by the poet as citizen; *Death of a Naturalist, Wintering Out, North, Field Work, Seeing Things.*  Paul Muldoon – won the Pulitzer Prize in poetry in 2003; *New Weather, Mule, Hay*.