

TOPIC: BRITISH LITERATURE

The Middle Ages

The oldest literary monument of the Anglo-Saxon period is the old Germanic legend about **Beowulf** (8th century). It is commonly cited as one of the most important works of Old English literature. It is a heroic poem about the strong and courageous pagan hero Beowulf. In the poem, Beowulf comes to the aid of the king of the Danes and slays monsters – Grendel and his mother. Later, he also defeats a dragon, but is fatally wounded in the battle.

During the Middle Ages Roman Catholic Church was strongly criticized by **John Wycliffe** (1330-1384), a professor of Oxford University. With his students he translated the whole Bible into English. He influenced Master John Huss and our Hussite movement.

The Middle Ages scholastic philosophy was under theological influence.



Beowulf

The Renaissance and Humanism

The beginning of Renaissance in literature is marked by **Canterbury Tales** by **Geoffrey Chaucer** (1343?-1400). It is a portrait of 30 pilgrims who travel to Canterbury and each tells 4 stories. In this way we are presented with a vivid picture of the 14th century society.

William Caxton introduced printing to England, which helped spread literature and philosophy.

The Renaissance philosophy turned to Plato and Aristotle philosophy and formed a new philosophical learning – humanism. This movement showed interests in education and social reforms.

Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) was an English lawyer, social philosopher, statesman and noted Renaissance humanist. He wrote **the**



Sir Thomas More

Utopia, a vision of imaginary island with perfectly organized society.

The greatest personality of the English Renaissance is **William Shakespeare**.

17th Century

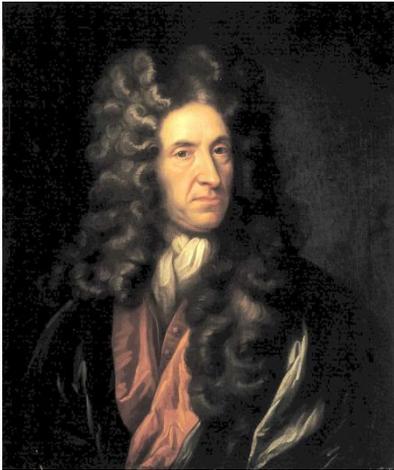
John Milton (1608-1674) is the main figure of this period. He was one of the first who stated in his work that a king who was a tyrant and not worthy of ruling should be legally punished. His masterpiece is **Paradise Lost** which is about the revolt of Satan against Heaven and God, who is presented as despotic and unjust in his treatment of Satan. Satan in his discussions with the fallen angels supports the principles of independence and freedom.



John Milton

With the development of society and economy, journalism, novels and drama developed very much and literature became popular among the middle class.

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) was a sharp critic. He was a dean in Dublin. He wrote satirical pamphlets on all unfair events in British society (e.g. in his *A Modest Proposal* he offers that children of poor Irish people could serve as food for the rich people, which would be convenient for both sides). His most popular work is ***Gulliver's Travels*** – allegory of Lemuel Gulliver's travelling through imaginary countries. He criticizes politics in England, kingdom, corruption, army, bad politicians etc.



Daniel Defoe

Daniel Defoe (1660?-1731) was a politician, trader, traveller, journalist, pamphleteer and spy. He wrote more than five hundred books, pamphlets and journals on various topics (including politics, crime, religion, marriage, psychology and the supernatural). He was also a pioneer of economic journalism. His most famous work is ***Robinson Crusoe***. Robinson, shipwrecked on a lonely island, represents the qualities which the middle class needed in capitalist competition to be successful. *Moll Flanders* is a realistic picture of the life and adventures of a London prostitute.

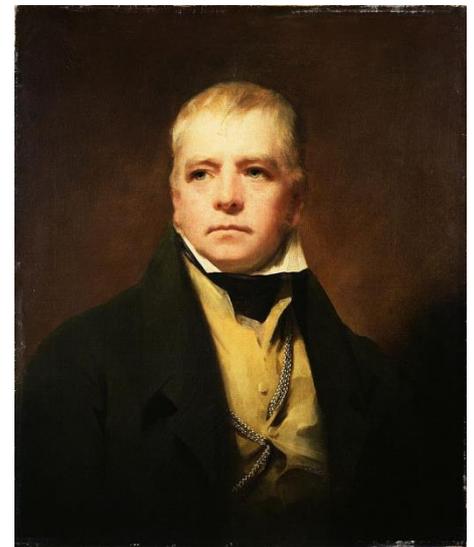
Henry Fielding (1707-1754) was a journalist, lawyer and playwright. He wrote a realistic novel ***Tom Jones***, *History of a Foundling*. There are many characters used to describe the life in the 18th century England. Jones gets wisdom and happiness after many misdeeds, criminal offences and

infidelities. Fielding is considered the founder of the modern English novel.

Romanticism

Towards the end of the 18th century and during the first third of the 19th century, romanticism appears in literature with its emphasis upon emotions and passions rather than on an intellectual attitude. The romantic period is known especially for its poetry.

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), Scottish historical novelist, playwright and poet. He is the founder of the historical novel. He draws the themes for his romantic novels from old folk ballads and medieval romances especially from Scottish history. ***Ivanhoe*** is from the period of Richard the Lionheart.



Sir Walter Scott

The pre-romantic period is represented by **William Blake** (1757-1827), who wrote simple but beautiful poems which came to be appreciated only in last century with the development of modern poetry. His best poems are *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*.

The best English romantic poets are **William Wordsworth** (1770-1850), **Samuel Coleridge** (1772-1834), **Lord George Gordon Byron** (1788-1824), **Percy Bysshe Shelley** (1792-1822) and **John Keats** (1795-1821). Wordsworth and Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads*. Coleridge is the author of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a beautiful ballad about a mariner who shoots an albatross and for this cruel deed the whole ship is cursed. Byron and Shelley represent revolutionary romanticism – unhappy and usually lonely heroes fight for freedom and their fight ends in vain. Lord Byron's main work is ***Childe Harold's Pilgrimage***. The hero travels all over Europe and comments on the

hypocritical society and unfairness in life. Shelley's greatest work is Prometheus Unbound, based on an old Greek legend about Prometheus who steals fire from Olympus to give it to people.



Charles Dickens

Victorian Age(Critical Realism) – 19th Century

The Victorian Age produced great novels criticizing various evils of the society. The best authors of this period are **Emily Brontë** (1818-1848) – Wuthering Heights, **Charlotte Brontë** (1816-1855) – Jane Eyre, both dealing with moral and psychological problems.

Charles Dickens (1812-1870). He created some of the world's best-known fictional characters and is regarded as the greatest novelist of the Victorian era. His works enjoyed unprecedented popularity during his lifetime, and by the twentieth century critics and scholars had recognised him as a literary genius. His novels and short stories enjoy lasting popularity. He described the life of poor people in England in the 19th century. He himself suffered in his childhood and his bitter experience can be found in his works. His major novels are: **David Copperfield, The Pickwick Papers, Great Expectations, Oliver**

Twist.

The First Half of the 20th Century

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), together with D.H.Lawrence, represents the naturalistic trend in literature. He understands hard life of common people, hates the hypocrisy and brutal egoism of the rich. His work is ironical and pessimistic (Tess of the D'Ubervilles, Far from the Madding Crowd, Jude the Obscure).

David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930) was the son of a miner, so he knew well the cruelty and humiliation of the working people. This was shown in many novels (Sons and Lovers). In Lady Chatterley's Lover and Women in Love he analyses sexual relations between a man and a woman.

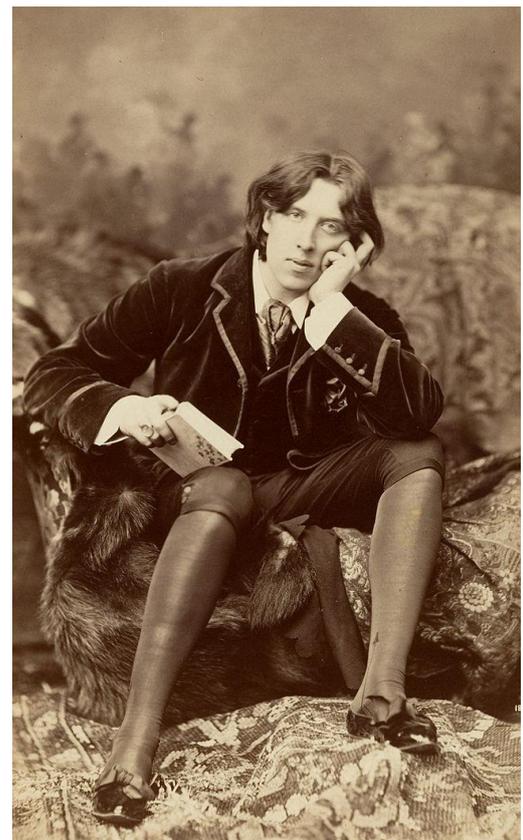
Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was from Dublin. He was criticized by London society and even put to prison for homosexuality. The rest of his life he spent in France. He wrote **The Picture of Dorian Gray**, excellent drama in which he unveils deeper levels of human character.

Other outstanding personalities of this period worth mentioning are:

- **John Galsworthy** (the Nobel Prize winner), was a critical novelist, dramatist and short story writer. He described the decay of the Victorian upper middle class in the Forsyte Saga.
- **Herbert George Wells** invented a new form of scientific romance, a kind of Utopian fiction, which gave birth to modern sci-fi literature. (The Time Machine, The War of the Worlds, The Invisible Man).

During the 20's and 30's some authors tried to reflect the moods and thinking and explore inner aspects of human life.

Virginia Woolf was one of the foremost modernists of the 20th century. She created her heroes from the imaginative impression; people are seen from several different angles. Her main works include **Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse** etc. Woolf suffered from



Oscar Wilde

mental illness throughout her life and committed suicide by drowning in 1941 at the age of 59.

James Joyce is a representative of the modern novel. He was born in Dublin, wrote an experimental prose using the stream of consciousness. His work *Dubliners* is a collection of short stories. His masterpiece is *Ulysses*. It is considered by many people to be one of the greatest novels of the 20th century, although it was not published in Britain and the US until the 1930s because it was thought to be too offensive. It is written in a wide variety of styles, and deals with the events of one day through the experiences of three main characters.

George Bernard Shaw is the most famous personality in drama of this period. He attacked the whole society. He was also from Dublin and was the founder of the Fabian Society, a socialist society of the end of the 19th century. In his plays he criticizes the false morals of the society (*Widower's Houses*, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Pygmalion*). He received the Nobel Prize in 1925.

Contemporary Literature

John Wain (1925 – 1994) was a poet, novelist and critic associated with the literary group "The Movement". For most of his life, Wain worked as a freelance journalist and author, writing and reviewing for newspapers and the radio.

He belonged to a group of authors referred to as „**angry young men**“ who expressed disillusionment and emptiness of intellectuals after WWII. They are angry and dissatisfied with the establishment, criticize snobs and people in power. (*The Young Visitors*, *Hurry On Down*).

Kingsley Amis (1922-1995) was the most famous member of this group. He was a novelist, poet, critic and teacher. He wrote more than 20 novels, six volumes of poetry, a memoir, various short stories, radio and television scripts, along with works of social and literary criticism.

He is world famous for his **Lucky Jim** – the main character Jim Dixon works as a lecturer at one small university, experiencing all possible funny situations, which basically mocks the pseudo-scholarly society at the university.

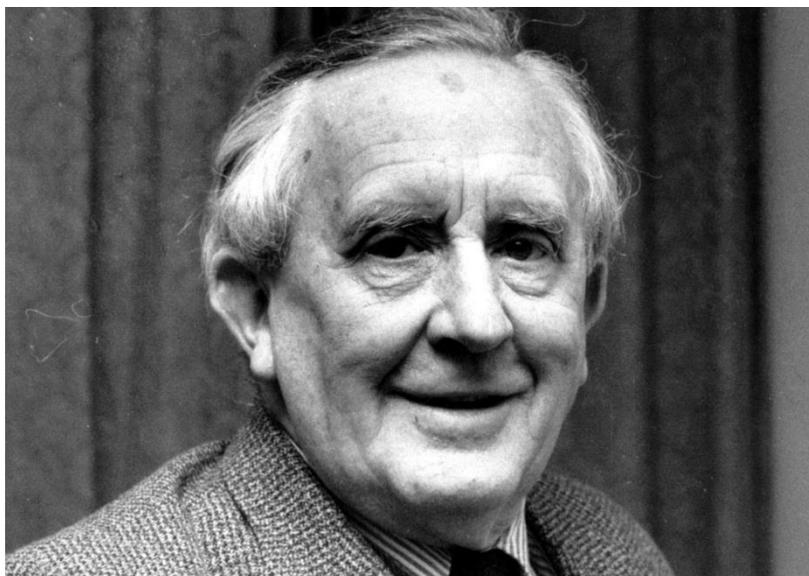
William Golding (1911-1993), was an English novelist, playwright, and poet, a Nobel Prize winner in 1983, he is famous for his **Lord of the Flies**. The story is set in the future, when an air-crash leaves a group of young boys on an island. First, they are happy without their parents and try to form an ideal society, then they form two groups and the end is full of barbarian bestiality.

Other famous contemporary authors are:

J.R.R. Tolkien who based the stories of his fantasy novels on his profound knowledge of old Germanic and Celtic myths. He created a phantasy world of Middle-Earth in his works – **Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings**.

George Orwell wrote excellent allegory novels criticizing totalitarian society (*Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*).

Agatha Christie is the most widely read author in the world. She is the Queen of the detective story and wrote about 70 novels, 20 dramas, 15 short-story books and collections of poems.



J.J.R.R.Tolkien

Arthur C. Clarke is a well-known science fiction writer (*2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Fountains of Paradise*).

Douglas Adams mixes science-fiction with detective story and humorous literature. His books are full of crazy situations and creatures, such as in *The Hitchhiker's guide to the Galaxy*, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, *Life, the Universe and Everything*, *So Long and Thanks for All the Fish*.

Drama was very important in the 60's after staging of *John Osborne's* play *Look Back in Anger*, which represented the beginning of the angry young men movement. It concerns a love triangle involving an intelligent and educated but disaffected young man of working-class origin (Jimmy Porter), his upper-middle-class, impassive wife (Alison), and her haughty best friend (Helena Charles). Jimmy Porter from this play became a prototype of a man who rebels against the hypocritical social order.

Samuel Beckett, a Nobel Prize winner in 1969, born in Dublin, is important both for drama and prose. In his famous absurdist play *Waiting for Godot*, two tramps are waiting for Godot but no one seems to know exactly who he is.

VOCABULARY:

courageous – odvážný

tale - příběh

pilgrim – poutník

vivid – živý

dean – děkan

convenient – vyhovující

misdeed – zlý skutek

infidelities – nevěry

passions – vášně

playwright – dramatik

cruel deed – krutý čin

scholar – učenec

hypocrisy – pokrytectví

humiliation – ponížení

decay – úpadek

mood – nálada

memoir – monografie