# English Poetry

When did "English Literature" begin? Any answer to that question must be problematic, for the very concept of English literature is a construction of literary history, a concept that changed over time. There are no "English" characters in Beowulf, and English scholars and authors had no knowledge of the poem before it was discovered and edited in the nineteenth century. Although written in the language called "Anglo-Saxon," the poem was claimed by Danish and German scholars as their earliest national epic before it came to be thought of as an "Old English" poem. One of the results of the Norman Conquest was that the structure and vocabulary of the English language changed to such an extent that Chaucer, even if he had come across a manuscript of Old English poetry, would have experienced far more difficulty construing the language than with medieval Latin, French, or Italian. If a King Arthur had actually lived, he would have spoken a Celtic language possibly still intelligible to native speakers of Middle Welsh but not to Middle English speakers.

The literary culture of the Middle Ages was far more international than national and was divided more by lines of class and audience than by language. Latin was the language of the Church and of learning. After the eleventh century, French became the dominant language of secular European literary culture. Edward, the Prince of Wales, who took the king of France prisoner at the battle of Poitiers in 1356, had culturally more in common with his royal captive than with the common people of England. And the legendary King Arthur was an international figure. Stories about him and his knights originated in Celtic poems and tales and were adapted and greatly expanded in Latin chronicles and French romances even before Arthur became an English hero.

Chaucer was certainly familiar with poetry that had its roots in the Old English period. He read popular romances in Middle English, most of which derive from more sophisticated French and Italian sources. But when he began writing in the 1360s and 1370s, he turned directly to French and Italian models as well as to classical poets (especially Ovid). English poets in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries looked upon Chaucer and his contemporary John Gower as founders of English literature, as those who made English a language fit for cultivated readers. In the Renaissance, Chaucer was referred to as the "English Homer." Spenser called him the "well of English undefiled."

Nevertheless, Chaucer and his contemporaries Gower, William Langland, and the Gawain poet — all writing in the latter third of the fourteenth century — are heirs to classical and medieval cultures that had been evolving for many centuries. Cultures is put in the plural deliberately, for there is a tendency, even on the part of medievalists, to think of the Middle Ages as a single culture epitomized by the Great Gothic cathedrals in which architecture, art, music, and liturgy seem to join in magnificent expressions of a unified faith — an approach one recent scholar has referred to as "cathedralism." Such a view overlooks the diversity of medieval cultures

and the social, political, religious, economic, and technological changes that took place over this vastly long period.

## Metaphysical Poetry

The greatest of Elizabethan lyric poets is John Donne (1572-1631), whose short love poems are characterized by wit and irony, as he seeks to wrest meaning from experience. The preoccupation with the big questions of love, death and religious faith marks out Donne and his successors who are often called metaphysical poets. The Metaphysical poets were a loose collection of poets who developed a new genre of poetry during the late 16th and early 17th Century. The Metaphysical poets introduced a fresh approach to poetry. They rejected the flowery imagery of their predecessors, such as Spencer. Instead they sought to concentrate on clearly defined topics, often of a religious interest. The poems were also characterized by sharp polaraties and paradoxical imagery. This imagery is often called metaphysical conceit. (This name, coined by Dr. Samuel Johnson in an essay of 1779, was revived and popularized by T.S. Eliot, in an essay of 1921.) After his wife's death, Donne underwent a serious religious conversion, and wrote much fine devotional verse. The best known of the other metaphysicals are George Herbert (1593-1633), Andrew Marvell (1621-1678) and Henry Vaughan (1621-1695).

## Epic poetry

Long narrative poems on heroic subjects mark the best work of classical Greek (Homer's Iliad and Odyssey) and Roman (Virgil's Æneid) poetry. John Milton (1608-1674) who was Cromwell's secretary, set out to write a great biblical epic, unsure whether to write in Latin or English, but settling for the latter in Paradise Lost. John Dryden (1631-1700) also wrote epic poetry, on classical and biblical subjects. Though Dryden's work is little read today it leads to a comic parody of the epic form, or mock-heroic. The best poetry of the mid 18th century is the comic writing of Alexander Pope (1688-1744). Pope is the best-regarded comic writer and satirist of English poetry. Among his many masterpieces, one of the more accessible is The Rape of the Lock (seekers of sensation should note that "rape" here has its archaic sense of "removal by force"; the "lock" is a curl of the heroine's hair). Serious poetry of the period is well represented by the neo-classical Thomas Gray (1716-1771) whose Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard virtually perfects the elegant style favoured at the time.

## Tudor lyric poetry

Modern lyric poetry in English begins in the early 16th century with the work of Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517-1547). Wyatt, who is greatly influenced by the Italian, Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch) introduces the sonnet and a range of short lyrics to English, while Surrey (as he is known) develops unrhymed pentameters (or blank verse) thus inventing the verse form which will be of great use to contemporary dramatists. A flowering of lyric poetry

in the reign of Elizabeth comes with such writers as Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586), Edmund Spenser (1552-1599), Sir Walter Ralegh (1552-1618), Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) and William Shakespeare (1564-1616). The major works of the time are Spenser's Faerie Queene, Sidney's Astrophil and Stella and Shakespeare's sonnets.

## Elizabethan Lyric Poetry

'The Faerie Queene' is the only long Elizabethan poem of the very highest rank, but Spenser, as we have seen, is almost equally conspicuous as a lyric poet. In that respect he was one among a throng of melodists who made the Elizabethan age in many respects the greatest lyric period in the history of English or perhaps of any literature. Still grander, to be sure, by the nature of the two forms, was the Elizabethan achievement in the drama, which we shall consider in the next chapter; but the lyrics have the advantage in sheer delightfulness and, of course, in rapid and direct appeal.

The zest for lyric poetry somewhat artificially inaugurated at Court by Wyatt and Surrey seems to have largely subsided, like any other fad, after some years, but it vigorously revived, in much more genuine fashion, with the taste for other imaginative forms of literature, in the last two decades of Elizabeth's reign. It revived, too, not only among the courtiers but among all classes; in no other form of literature was the diversity of authors so marked; almost every writer of the period who was not purely a man of prose seems to have been gifted with the lyric power.

The qualities which especially distinguish the Elizabethan lyrics are fluency, sweetness, melody, and an enthusiastic joy in life, all spontaneous, direct, and exquisite. Uniting the genuineness of the popular ballad with the finer sense of conscious artistic poetry, these poems possess a charm different, though in an only half definable way, from that of any other lyrics. In subjects they display the usual lyric variety. There are songs of delight in Nature; a multitude of love poems of all moods; many pastorals, in which, generally, the pastoral conventions sit lightly on the genuine poetical feeling; occasional patriotic outbursts; and some reflective and religious poems. In stanza structure the number of forms is unusually great, but in most cases stanzas are internally varied and have a large admixture of short, ringing or musing, lines. The lyrics were published sometimes in collections by single authors, sometimes in the series of anthologies which succeeded to Tottel's 'Miscellany.' Some of these anthologies were books of songs with the accompanying music; for music, brought with all the other cultural influences from Italy and France, was now enthusiastically cultivated, and the soft melody of many of the best Elizabethan lyrics is that of accomplished composers. Many of the lyrics, again, are included as songs in the dramas of the time; and Shakspere's comedies show him nearly as preeminent among the lyric poets as among the playwrights.

Some of the finest of the lyrics are anonymous. Among the best of the known poets are these: George

Gascoigne (about 1530-1577), a courtier and soldier, who bridges the gap between Surrey and Sidney; Sir Edward Dyer (about 1545-1607), a scholar and statesman, author of one perfect lyric, 'My mind to me a kingdom is'; John Lyly (1553-1606), the Euphuist and dramatist; Nicholas Breton (about 1545 to about 1626), a prolific writer in verse and prose and one of the most successful poets of the pastoral style; Robert Southwell (about 1562-1595), a Jesuit intriguer of ardent piety, finally imprisoned, tortured, and executed as a traitor; George Peele (1558 to about 1598), the dramatist; Thomas Lodge (about 1558-1625), poet, novelist, and physician; Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), the dramatist; Thomas Nash (1567-1601), one of the most prolific Elizabethan hack writers; Samuel Daniel (1562-1619), scholar and critic, member in his later years of the royal household of James I; Barnabe Barnes (about 1569-1609); Richard Barnfield (1574-1627); Sir Walter Ralegh (1552-1618), courtier, statesman, explorer, and scholar; Joshua Sylvester (1563-1618), linguist and merchant, known for his translation of the long religious poems of the Frenchman Du Bartas, through which he exercised an influence on Milton; Francis Davison (about 1575 to about 1619), son of a counsellor of Queen Elizabeth, a lawyer; and Thomas Dekker (about 1570 to about 1640), a ne'er-do-weel dramatist and hack-writer of irrepressible and delightful good spirits.

## The Restoration and The Eighteenth Century

The period between 1660 and 1785 was a time of amazing expansion for England — or for "Great Britain," as the nation came to be called after an Act of Union in 1707 joined Scotland to England and Wales. Britain became a world power, an empire on which the sun never set. But it also changed internally. The world seemed different in 1785. A sense of new, expanding possibilities — as well as modern problems — transformed the daily life of the British people, and offered them fresh ways of thinking about their relations to nature and to each other. Hence literature had to adapt to circumstances for which there was no precedent.

Meanwhile, other explorers roamed the earth, where they discovered hitherto unknown countries and ways of life. These encounters with other peoples often proved vicious. The trade and conquests that made European powers like Spain and Portugal immensely rich also brought the scourge of racism and colonial exploitation. In the eighteenth century, Britain's expansion into an empire was fueled by slavery and the slave trade, a source of profit that belied the national self-image as a haven of liberty and turned British people against one another. Rising prosperity at home had been built on inhumanity across the seas. This topic, "Slavery and the Slave Trade in Britain," looks at the experiences of African slaves as well as at British reactions to their suffering and cries for freedom. At the end of the eighteenth century, as many writers joined the abolitionist campaign, a new humanitarian ideal was forged. The modern world invented by the eighteenth century brought suffering along with progress. We still live with its legacies today.

## Romantic Poets

Romanticism was arguably the largest artistic movement of the late 1700s. Its influence was felt across continents and through every artistic discipline into the mid-nineteenth century, and many of its values and beliefs can still be seen in contemporary poetry.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact start of the Romantic movement, as its beginnings can be traced to many events of the time: a surge of interest in folklore in the mid- to late-eighteenth century with the work of the brothers Grimm, reactions against neoclassicism and the Augustan poets in England, and political events and uprisings that fostered nationalistic pride.

Romantic poets cultivated individualism, reverence for the natural world, idealism, physical and emotional passion, and an interest in the mystic and supernatural. Romantics set themselves in opposition to the order and rationality of classical and neoclassical artistic precepts to embrace freedom and revolution in their art and politics. German romantic poets included Fredrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and British poets such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, George Gordon Lord Byron, and John Keats propelled the English Romantic movement. Victor Hugo was a noted French Romantic poet as well, and romanticism

crossed the Atlantic through the work of American poets like Walt Whitman and Edgar Allan Poe. The Romantic era produced many of the stereotypes of poets and poetry that exist to this day (i.e., the poet as a highly tortured and melancholy visionary).

## Characteristics of Romantic Poets

Beauty of the Supernatural: British Romantics believed something existed beyond the physical world. The Spirit world, according to Romantics, had unleashed its power and inspiration to overthrow tyranny in government and in literature. Unlike the American Romantics who wrote of ghosts, demonic cats, and rope-gnawing rats, British Romanticism's treatment of the supernatural excluded horror and the macabre and focused on supernatural energy and beauty.

Championing of the Individual: Revolution in Europe brought to light the importance of the individual. Ordinary people now became the subject of lofty language. British Romanticism attempted to free itself from traditional forms and subjects.

The Importance of Nature: The poet, according to the Romantics, is only at peace when in nature; moreover, while in nature, the poet intervened with the great Universal Mind. Romantic poets made frequent use of personification with nature, ascribing human traits to daffodils, fields, streams, and lakes. Nature, in essence, became emotionally expressive.

The Dangers of Technology: A natural consequence of celebrating nature was a disdain for technology and industrialism.

## Major Early Romantic Poets

William Blake (1757-1827): Blake's poetry dwelt upon his divine vision and rebelled against traditional poetic forms and techniques. He created his own mythological world with man as the central figure. His more famous poems include The Lamb,The Tyger, The Chimney Sweeper, and The Clod and the Pebble. What makes Blake's poem especially attractive for teaching in high school is he often wrote two poems with the same title--one poem negative and one poem positive, excellent for compare and contrast writing.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850): The most famous of the British Romantics, Wordsworth is considered the nature poet. He revolutionized poetic subjects, focusing on ordinary people in rustic settings. He, in addition, wrote about and considered the poet as superior to all other writers. His most famous poems include I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud, We are Seven,and I Travelled Among Unknown Men. Most high school literature textbooks have at least one poem by Wordsworth.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834): Coleridge and Wordsworth are often grouped together as The Lake Poets, and for good reason. Together they are credited as the founders of the Romantic movement. Coleridge's most famous poems, Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Kubla Kahn, and Christabel have a distinct supernatural element and strongly influenced American Romantics such as Poe and Hawthorne.

## Later Romantic Poets

Lord Byron (1788-1824): Lord Byron enjoyed unmatched popularity. Byron's most famous creations are his dark heroes, called Byronic heroes, who, in fact, were not heroes at all, but stood out from ordinary humans as larger than life. The Byronic hero brooded, possessed insatiable appetites and incredible strength, rebelled against societal norms, and forced upon himself exile. Byron's most famous works include Don Juan and Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. Lord Byron is generally reserved for university level literature courses and is rarely found in high school anthologies.

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) : Like all Romantics, Shelley was a radical non conformist. He campaigned for social justice, even marrying the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, an English leader in the women's rights movement. His wife would later write Frankenstein. His most famous poems include Mutability, Ozymandias, and Ode to the West Wind.

John Keats (1795-1821): Perhaps the most popular Later Romantic poet, Keats accomplished great things during his short life. His Ode to a Nightingale, Ode on a Grecian Urn, and Ode on Melancholy

find their way into anthologies throughout the English speaking world. Keats considered contact with poets as a threat to his independence and therefore shunned his contemporaries.

Lyrical Ballads is often used as the beginning point for the Romantic Movement in Britain. When initially writing this work though, William Wordsworth and Samual Taylor Coleridge were probably not thinking of writing a book that would revolutionize poetry; instead, they were trying to earn needed money for a trip to Germany. Later, Wordsworth added a preface that explained the philosophy of trying to write for the common man.

## Conversational Poems

Wordsworth and Coleridge rejected the witty, highly-structured poetry of the eighteenth century. Their aim was not to produce more neoclasssical wriitng, but to write poetry for the common man.Wordsworth said he wished for poetry to be conversational. In the preface to a later edition, he wrote:

"The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement."

Along with establishing a desire for a conversational tone, these these lines from the prologue discuss two areas that would become an important part of the Romantic movement: imagination and nature.

## The Victorian Period

The Victorian Period literally describes the events in the age of Queen Victoria's reign of 1837-1901. The term Victorian has connotations of repression and social conformity, however in the realm of poetry these labels are somewhat misplaced. The Victorian age provided a significant development of poetic ideals such as the increased use of the Sonnet as a poetic form, which was to influence later modern poets. Poets in the Victorian period were to some extent influenced by the Romantic Poets such as Keats, William Blake, Shelley and W.Wordsworth. Wordsworth was Poet Laureate until 1850 so can be viewed as a bridge between the Romantic period and the Victorian period. Wordsworth was succeeded by Lord Tennyson, Queen Victoria's favourite poet.

Victorian Poetry was an important period in the history of poetry, providing the link between the Romantic movement and the modernist movement of the 20th Century. It is not always possible to neatly categorise poets in these broad movements. For example Gerard Manley Hopkins is often cited as an example of a poet who maintained much of the Romantics sensibility in his writings.

Before the Victorian era there were very few famous female poets. In the early nineteenth century writing was still seen as a predominently male preserve. However despite views such as this the Victorian period saw the emergence of many important female poets.

The Bronte sisters were perhaps better known for their romantic novels but their poetry, especially that of Emily Bronte, has received more critical acclaim in recent years. Many have suggested that her works were a reflection of the difficulties women of that period faced. Other significant female poets include Elizabeth Browning and Christina Rossetti. Christina Rossetti in some ways could be viewed as a more typical Victorian poet. Her poetry reflected her deep Anglican faith and frequently pursued themes such as love and faith.

The preeminent poet of the Victorian age was Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Although romantic in subject matter, his poetry was tempered by personal melancholy; in its mixture of social certitude and religious doubt it reflected the age. The poetry of Robert Browning and his wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, was immensely popular, though Elizabeth's was more venerated during their lifetimes. Browning is best remembered for his superb dramatic monologues. Rudyard Kipling, the poet of the empire triumphant, captured the quality of the life of the soldiers of British expansion. Some fine

religious poetry was produced by Francis Thompson, Alice Meynell, Christina Rossetti, and Lionel Johnson.

In the middle of the 19th cent. the so-called Pre-Raphaelites, led by the painter-poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, sought to revive what they judged to be the simple, natural values and techniques of medieval life and art. Their quest for a rich symbolic art led them away, however, from the mainstream. William Morris—designer, inventor, printer, poet, and social philosopher—was the most versatile of the group, which included the poets Christina Rossetti and Coventry Patmore.

Algernon Charles Swinburne began as a Pre-Raphaelite but soon developed his own classically influenced, sometimes florid style. A. E. Housman and Thomas Hardy, Victorian figures who lived on into the 20th cent., share a pessimistic view in their poetry, but Housman's well-constructed verse is rather more superficial. The great innovator among the late Victorian poets was the Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins. The concentration and originality of his imagery, as well as his jolting meter ("sprung rhythm"), had a profound effect on 20th-century poetry.

## The Twentieth Century

Global war is one of the defining features of twentieth-century experience, and the first global war is the subject of one of this period's topics, "Representing the Great War." Masses of dead bodies strewn upon the ground, plumes of poison gas drifting through the air, hundreds of miles of trenches infested with rats—these are but some of the indelible images that have come to be associated with World War I (1914-18). It was a war that unleashed death, loss, and suffering on an unprecedented scale. How did recruiting posters, paintings, memoirs, and memorials represent the war? Was it a heroic occasion, comparable to a sporting event, eliciting displays of manly valor and courage? Or was it an ignominious waste of human life, with little gain to show on either side of the conflict, deserving bitterly ironic treatment? What were the differences between how civilians and soldiers, men and women, painters and poets represented the war? How effective or inadequate were memorials, poems, or memoirs in conveying the enormous scale and horror of the war? These are among the issues explored in this topic about the challenge to writers and artists of representing the unrepresentable.

W.B. (William Butler) Yeats (1865-1939) is one of two figures who dominate modern poetry, the other being T.S. (Thomas Stearns) Eliot (1888-1965). Yeats was Irish; Eliot was born in the USA but settled in England, and took UK citizenship in 1927. Yeats uses conventional lyric forms, but explores the connection between modern themes and classical and romantic ideas. Eliot uses elements of conventional forms, within an unconventionally structured whole in his greatest works. Where Yeats is prolific as a poet, Eliot's reputation largely rests on two long and complex works: The Waste Land (1922) and Four Quartets (1943).

The work of these two has overshadowed the work of the best late Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian poets, some of whom came to prominence during the First World War. Among these are Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), A.E. Housman (1859-1936), Edward Thomas (1878-1917), Rupert Brooke (1887-1915), Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) and Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918). The most celebrated modern American poet, is Robert Frost (1874-1963), who befriended Edward Thomas before the war of 1914-1918.

Between the two wars, a revival of romanticism in poetry is associated with the work of W.H. (Wystan Hugh) Auden (1907-73), Louis MacNeice (1907-63) and Cecil Day-Lewis (1904-72). Auden seems to be a major figure on the poetic landscape, but is almost too contemporary to see in perspective. The Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas (1914-53) is notable for strange effects of language, alternating from extreme simplicity to massive overstatement.

Of poets who have achieved celebrity in the second half of the century, evaluation is even more difficult, but writers of note include the American Robert Lowell (1917-77), Philip Larkin (1922-1985), R.S. Thomas (1913-2000), Thom Gunn (1929-2004), Ted Hughes (1930-1998) and the 1995 Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney (b. 1939).