

HISTORICAL, SOCIAL, RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF ENGLISH LITERATURE FROM ROMANTIC AGE TO TWENTIETH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT:

The history of Britain after the withdrawal of the Roman troops is extremely obscure, but there can be little doubt that for many years the inhabitants were exposed to devastating raids by the Angles and Saxons who belonged to Scandinavia and Northern Germany. Early English history is the record of incessant wars between several small kingdoms in which Britain was divided. This rivalry among the princes has dangerous to peace, and delayed the accomplishment of English unity. The number of separate dynasties established in England, each with its own reputed descent from gods, was very remarkable. These kingdoms maintained their independence, until in the 19th century.

Keywords: *Socio-cultural and politics, romantic age, twentieth century and English literature.*

The Romantic Age

George III (1769-1820): During his reign two very important historical events the American War of Independence, and the French Revolution took place. The American rebelled against the British tyranny in 1775 and declared themselves independent in 1776. After many military defeats, the British acknowledged American Independence in 1783. The French Revolution, which was a mass revolt of the oppressed French people against their king and the privileged upper class of society, began in 1792. In 1792 kingship was abolished in France and Republic proclaimed. In 1796 Napoleon rose to power and then started the Napoleonic Wars with England fighting against the French fleet at the Battle of the Nile. In 1802 there was a treaty of peace between France and Britain. It was however, short-lived, and war was resumed in 1803. In 1804 Napoleon became Emperor. Nelson won another victory over the French at the Battle of Trafalgar in which he lost his life. Napoleon was defeated at the Battle of Leipzig (1813) and banished to Elba. In 1815 he escaped, but was defeated again by the Duke of

Wellington at the Battle of Waterloo (1815), and set to St. Helena where he died in 1821.

In 1786 Warren Hastings, the Governor-General of India, was impeached for his atrocities in India. In the debates in the Parliament regarding the American War of Independence, The French Revolution, and the Impeachment of Warren Hastings, Burke delivered his impassioned and forceful speeches.

The reign of George III is also the most important age in English literature. Some great works by important classical writers--Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1788), Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791), Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1760-1767) were produced in the early part of his reign. It also saw the beginning and flourishing of the Romantic Movement or the Romantic Revival in English literature. In France Rousseau produced his famous *Social Contract* (1762) in which he pleaded for the freedom of man from social and political shackles. He raised the cry of "Back to Nature" In England Parnock's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* revived the interest in folk-lore. The poems of Chatterton, Cowper, Burns and Blake (predecessors of fore-runners of the Romantic movement) appeared in 1770, 1785, 1786 and 1789 respectively. In 1798 Wordsworth and Coleridge published their famous *Lyrical Ballads*, which launched the Romantic era. Most of great poetical work of the great romantic poets Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Scott, Byron, Shelley and Keats were produced during this period. In the field of novel Scott and Jane Austen also wrote during this age, so did Lamb and De Quincey and Hazlitt as essayists and writers of prose

George IV (1820-30) During his reign Catholic Emancipation Bill was passed which meant more religious toleration for the Catholics whose freedom had been curtailed after the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

William IV (1830-37), During his reign the first English Reform Bill was passed in 1832, which

gave suffrage or the right of vote to a larger number of people.

In 1833 slavery was abolished in British colonies. In literature Dickens published his *Pickwick Papers* (1836) and Carlyle his *The French Revolution* (1837).

The Victorian Age

Victoria (1837-1901) When Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837. England had settled down after long domestic and foreign struggles. The long struggle of the Anglo Saxons for personal liberty, which had started with the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215, was now definitely settled, and democracy became the established order of the day. The king and the lords were both stripped of their power and left as figureheads of a past civilization. The House of Commons, which represented the people of England, was the sovereign authority in the country. During the reign of Victoria, a series of new Reform Bills were passed, until suffrage or the right of vote extended to all the adults in England.

On account of the peace that England enjoyed in her foreign relations and the prosperity at home, more attention was paid to social and moral questions. It was felt that though industrialization had made the country rich, her wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few, while a large number of poor people, the factory workers, and laborers lived under horrible conditions. The Government was urged to pass a number of factory laws making the working conditions of the factory workers more congenial. Some of the writers like Dickens wrote with a view to awakening social consciousness to such problems, while others like Carlyle, Ruskin and Arnold deplored the moral, cultural and spiritual degradation of the people on account of their grossly materialistic attitude to life.

On the whole, the Victorian period was one of industrial and colonial development. Railways were built, steamships used, the spirit of philosophic and scientific enquiry was very strong. Darwin's Theory of Evolution as embodied in his *Origin of Species* (1859) created a conflict between religion and science. In the field of literature, a number of great writers flourished e.g., poets like Tennyson, Browning. Arnold: novelists like Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Meredith and Hardy: prose-writers like Carlyle. Ruskin, Macaulay, Arnold, Newman and Pater.

The Twentieth Century

Edward VII (1901-10): After the long and progressive reign of Queen Victoria, a period of peace and plenty when the British Empire seemed to be at the peak of its power and security, the reign of Edward VII witnessed the appearance of certain disturbing factors. British imperialism awakened the jealousy of a number of European nations. Germany demanded her "larger place in the sun," and began warlike preparations. France and Italy also tried to enlarge their empires. Japan, which defeated Russia in 1904, began to have an ambition of spreading her empire over the whole of Asia. All these factors disturbed England which had been the sole master of the major portion of the world.

Another disturbing factor was the restlessness of the common people who wanted not slow social reforms, but immediate and revolutionary reforms in society. In order to meet such demand, old age pension came into operation in 1909, and many other facilities were given to the poorer section of the society. George V (1910-36): During his reign the First World War began in 1914,

In the beginning, Germany conquered a number of European Countries, but ultimately she was defeated by the Allies England, France and America. The war ended in 1919 with the peace Conference in Paris. After the war there was development of new political movements in Europe, Communism was established in Russia, Fascism in Italy and National Socialism in Germany.

During the reign of George V science and technology made a huge advance. Einstein put forward his Theory of Relativity, psycho-analysis threw light on the unconscious mind. Radio, aeronautics, sound recording and television developed rapidly during this period. The chief writers of this period are D.H. Lawrence, Somerset Maugham, Henry James, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Hopkins, E.M. Forster, Bernard Shaw, H. G Wells, Arnold Bennett, Kipling, Galsworthy, W.B. Yeats, Virginia Woolf and T. H. Huxley.

Edward VIII (Jan-Dec.1936): abdicated in favor of his brother George VI (1936-52). In 1939 the Second World War broke out. Again Germany overran a number of European countries, Allies-- England, France and Russia. Germany was defeated in the war ended in Asia also. After the War many of the British colonies like India, Pakistan, Burma, Ceylon, became independent.

Elizabeth II (1952): The chief feature of the post-war period is the existence of cold war between

Russia and the Western democracies--England, U.S.A. and France. The growth of communism in the East (with a communist state established in China), competition in the invention and testing of new nuclear weapons, and space travel, the fear of the Third World War which may destroy the whole fabric of Western civilization, provide and uncomfortable background to the modern English literature.

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