

A brief Overview of English Poetry and its Beginnings

by A. Afsheen Sardar

The spread of Anglo-Saxon, and later on English was one of the most significant elements in shaping the future of English poetry, and it took several centuries in molding a national identity amongst all the cultural and linguistic influences which the country underwent. The first fragment of English Literature is known as Caedmon's hymn. Beowulf also belongs to this period of old English poetry. This is categorized as the only long epic poem. The common feature which all old poems share is their verse form, a double line with a break in the middle (the Caesura, from the Latin) this gives the verse its distinctive rhythm. It is interesting to observe that after the French conquests, the warriors started to settle down and the subject of love took precedence over it. Until the Norman Conquest there is hardly any love poetry in English Literature. Another figure which cannot be ignored is Bede, known as the venerable Bede; he wrote many books, mostly about the Bible; he is remembered also for this 'History of the English Church and People written in Latin and completed in 731. Alferic is also one of the great pioneers in old English prose. One of the themes of old English Literature is security, both for the individual and the society. Usually poems in the

olden days were narrated from generation to generation long before they became written literature.

The Three Major Periods

The three periods that stand out in early English history are from the beginnings of the Roman occupation to the Norman conquest. This includes the Literature of Celtic, Latin and Anglo-Saxon tongues. The second leads from the Norman conquest to the times of Henry the Eighth, embracing the literature of the Norman-French, the Latin and Anglo-Saxon; the gradual evolution of the Anglo-Saxon into English; and the literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The third period includes the Reformation, and the golden age of Elizabethan literature, followed by the Restoration, Revolution, and the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Other divisions are called Old English, Early English, and Middle English. The latter was used by Geoffrey Chaucer.

The Medieval Period

Geoffrey Chaucer

He was a slightly younger contemporary of John Gower. Born around 1330, Gower was a near contemporary of Langland. His *Confessio Amantis* is one of the key poems of the period. Geoffrey was one of the main figures of Middle English Poetry. The period can be summarized as one of history between classical antiquity and

the Italian Renaissance. Along with the society of the time, Chaucer shared a European world view dominated by the Catholicism. During this period, changes in the English language were taking place. Latin and Greek were regarded as the perfect languages and borrowings from these languages were seen to be to the advantage of English. On the other hand, Anglo Saxon words had started to be given preference over foreign ones.

During this time, Spencer was praised by Caxton in his printed edition of *The Canterbury Tales*, as in their works, they used rehabilitated archaic words instead of borrowing from Latin. There are many aspects to the *Canterbury Tales*, both religious and secular. The time is spring (April), when the world comes alive again. The people are from all walks of life and it is interesting to note that through the characters introduced in the *Canterbury Tales* Spencer is trying to break free from the rigid rules and notions of society. For example, the Nun is more interested in love than religion. Spencer was regarded as the one who introduced the golden age of English Literature.

The Change

With the age of Prose, Poetry and Drama, we see a transition in the themes which once dominated every piece of writing. *From heroic chivalry we see the shift in themes now based more on human weaknesses and emotions.* John Gower and William Langland cannot

be ignored when we talk about the change which was appearing in English Poetry. Gower's most famous work, 'Confessio Amantis' introduces the theme of love. Langland, in 'Piers Plowman', uses the dream vision form to write a long series of dream stories. The change in Medieval Literature questions its society and urges the people to think about the times they live in and sketches the vision of a fast-changing society. The main form of writing during this time was poetry. Influenced by Chaucer, two writers in Scotland, Robert Henryson and William Dunbar, produced some major poetry. The major event of the fifteenth century was the invention of printing; it gave poetry a whole new perspective. Last, but not least, John Skelton was a poet belonging to this time, with a unique sense of expression. His works exhibit humor and a different view on the values of his time.

The Renaissance and the Elizabethan Period (1485-1660)

The period of the Renaissance can also be defined as a revival of antiquity in literature. This was a time of great change which affected the thinking of the masses. Henry the Eighth took on a new role as 'the defender of the faith' and England became Protestant. The humanist way of thinking was gaining popularity; this was a period of re growth and reformation. The literature before this period was dominated by religious values, but after the reformation the search

for individual expression and meaning took over. Literature now explored the geography of the human soul. *It is interesting to follow the subtle changes in literature from the times of Chaucer till the period of the Renaissance.* This promised that a lot of change was yet to come. This was a time when reason dictated writing and age-old practices were now being questioned for their authenticity. Great names who have contributed a great deal to literature are as follows: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Webster, and Johnson are just a few of them. So many great names were trying to answer and quench the thirst of the masses who wanted to know what is man, what is life for, questions which had never been asked before. The period of the Renaissance did not completely break free from the beliefs of the Medieval times. The virtues of chivalry, the lover and the man of learning were all combined into one to produce a great Sonnet sequence, 'Astrophel and Stella,' composed by Sir Philip Sydney. The most direct influence on the English Renaissance was a love sonnet by the Italian Francesco Petrarca. It was translated into English by Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Horward. The ever popular themes were the ever-changing times, mutability, and infidelity which are reflected in Byatt's work.

I find no peace and all my war is done,

I fear and hope, I burn and freeze like ice;

(Sir Thomas Wyatt, I Find No Peace)

Spencer, who was much inspired by Chaucer in the 'Faerie Queen' (1590-96) brings together English myth and adulation of the monarch to praise and criticize the regime at the same time. Here, Spencer also celebrates the court of Elizabeth the First. The 'Canterbury Tales' is yet another masterpiece. Here, Spencer has brilliantly made all the pilgrims come alive in his descriptions of them. Epithalamion (1595-96) is also one of Spencer's masterpieces. The last line of Epithalamion embodies the transience that we have seen emerging: one day becomes eternity. Spencer is seen as one of the great poets of the Renaissance.

The Age of Metaphysical Poets

Samuel Johnson introduced the term 'metaphysical'. How does one define metaphysical? The term was meant to have negative connotations. Johnson attacked the poets' lack of feeling, their learning and the surprising range of images and comparisons they used. John Donne and George Herbert are the most significant of these poets. Both these two poets were experimenters both in poetic form and subject matter. They reflect in their poetry the intellectual and spiritual changes of a society which wanted to change, but the time just wasn't right for such a change to be accepted. The poetry of Donne is late Elizabethan, its feeling often very close to that of Chapman. It is important to be acquainted with the fact that both Donne and Herbert were church-going men, and the balance, and

conflict, between religion, doubt and secular reality which was a reflection of their own experiences. It is interesting to note how poetry had changed and was still changing from the time of the Renaissance up till now. Donne and Herbert both were interested in exploring the realms of astronomy, science and geography. In Donne's 'Coy Mistress', he describes his mistress as his new found land; he imagines the Sun going round the Earth, but finds no greater joy than being with his mistress in the confines of his bedroom. In 'The Flea', Donne is trying to persuade his lover to sleep with him by informing her that such a deed would be no worse than a flea sucking on her blood. Donne's scope and depth both in form and emotion is a poetic achievement which has been admired in the twentieth century. His direct address to the Sun,

Busy old fools, unruly Sun,

Why dost thou thus,

Through windows, and through curtains call on us?

(The Sun Rising)

According to T.S Eliot, something happened to the minds of the common masses from the time of Donne and Herbert and how they differed to the poets of the restoration and after. A thought to Donne was an experience. There was a rift between the intellectual and reflective poet. Another mentionable name of this time is of Henry Vaughan; his poetry borders on the mystical and talks about love.

Vaughan describes himself as a convert to Herbert. The only metaphysical poet who covers the early and later parts of the seventeenth century is Andrew Marvell. His poetry ranged from political to rational. Marvell's seductive address to his Coy Mistress brings back the favorite renaissance theme of love. He presents one of the most memorable images,

Had we but, world enough, and time,

This coyness Lady, were no crime,

But at my back I always hear

Times winged chariot hurrying near.

(To his Coy Mistress)

The Metaphysical poets urged the masses to view the world with a different perspective. Their contribution to poetry cannot be ignored and their writing style greatly influenced the poets of the twentieth century.

Restoration to Romanticism (1660-1789)

This period celebrates and enjoys the work of Milton. Milton's was the last great liberal intelligence of the English Renaissance. His work teaches the values of tolerance, freedom and self-determination, expressed by Shakespeare, Hooker and Donne. Milton's work is greatly admired for its unique style. One of his sonnets is best known, with its last line:

They also serve who only stand and wait.

(On his blindness)

Milton gave a new touch to the epics which were a continuous narration celebrating heroic figures of history and tradition. *Paradise Lost* is an epic which displays the brilliant style of Milton. So much is happening in it, such as the description of the tree of life, 'high eminent, blooming ambrosial fruit....'. This alone could initiate an explanation of several pages. Restoration Literature is characterized by skepticism and experiment. A continuation of the Renaissance, during this period new discoveries and scientific experiments are evident. Milton's 'Death, be not proud' has also acquired much fame as it is one of his best religious sonnets. Milton has a unique way to address an issue like death; he condemns death and his anger at death being proud for no reason comes out very strongly in the sonnet.

And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

(Death, be not proud)

Every age can be viewed as transitional, merging the old with the new. In the restoration period the transition of literature from old and mundane to contradictory has been rather stark.

The Romantic Period (1789-1832)

It is believed that the Romantic period began with the publication of the lyrical ballads by Wordsworth and Coleridge. Keats, Byron, and

Shelly were also prominent figures of this time. It is interesting to note the shift in the themes of the poems which were composed during this period. Blake is one of the early romantic poets; Blake had a very individual view of the world. His ideas are a contrast to the Augustan period. During this period, the middle class emerged and this was the age of industrialization. Blake saw this danger and expresses it in one of his poems, 'London'. Wordsworth writes frequently about nature and about ordinary people. Coleridge's poetry is more about the extraordinary world. The Renaissance and Restoration was an age of thinking, where every notion was under scrutiny and every theory was questioned for its effectiveness. In contrast, the age of Romanticism preferred feelings, intuition and the heart in comparison to reasoning, intellect and the head. There are numerous differences in the classical writer and the writer belonging to the age of Romanticism. During this age the Child was seen as sacred and was only corrupted when the child came in contact with the world. Classical writers are more concerned with society, whereas romantics are more in tune with their soul and what is happening within.

The romantic period emerged because after the revolution there seemed to be an imbalance; the simplicity of life was disappearing. The poetry belonging to this period is also seen as the poetry of revolution. Things and people had become more sophisticated. Byron

is seen as one of the great poets of this time. The traditional canon of this period was particularly male, but today many female writers have taken up post romanticism. Themes of the Romantic age are still celebrated and the reader never tires from matters of the heart. We, in some sense or the other, are very much influenced by the Romantic period and its ideology.

Keats like many other poets belonging to this age wrote long, incomplete fragments of a larger version. A main theme of Keat's poetry is the conflict between the everyday world and eternity. One of his best known works admired for its extensive praise for nature is 'Ode to a Nightingale'. We see the development of poetry from Renaissance to restoration where all concepts were questioned and then Romantic poetry, where it took a new form of describing things in a leisurely fashion with a dreamlike touch. Romantic poets can be classified as poets of change, but they knew the dangers of the modern world. During this period, prose writing developed and subjects of everyday life were central.

Victorian Period (1832-1900)

The nineteenth century

The Victorian era was a period of great political, social and economic change. The transition of poetry from the romantic to the Victorian age is quite distinct. The major poets of this period were Alfred Lord Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Browning, and Gerald

Manley Hopkins. Tennyson was, to some degree, the Spenser of the new age and his *Idylls of the Kings* can be read as a Victorian version of *The Faerie Queen*, that is as a poem that sets out to provide a mythological foundation to the idea of empire. Tennyson's view of nature is quite different from that of Wordsworth.

Nature red in tooth and clay.

(In Memoriam)

He explains nature in its most horrific form and not as a source of solace or inspiration. Tennyson's poetry has a melancholic touch to it which makes it stand apart from the romantic period. The Brownings spent much of their time out of England and explored European models and matter in much of their poetry. Robert Browning's great innovation was the dramatic monologue, which he used to its full extent in his long novel in verse, *The Ring and the Book*. Elizabeth Barrett Browning is perhaps best remembered for *Sonnets from the Portuguese* but her long poem *Aurora Leigh* is one of the classics of 19th century feminist literature. Matthew Arnold was much influenced by Wordsworth, though his poem *Dover Beach* is often considered a precursor of the modernist revolution. Hopkins wrote in relative obscurity and his work was not published until after his death. His unusual style (involving what he called "sprung rhythm" and heavy reliance on rhyme and alliteration) had a considerable influence on many of the poets of the 1940s.

Throughout the century extreme creative energy went into modulations of genres. Victorian poets can be regarded as returning to their cultural inheritance in order to draw strength from it to meet new challenges. Themes of sensuality also thrived during this period. Victorian poetry, to a great extent, can be seen as Romantic, but it was rather suppressed; the Victorian poets believed in approaching matters more subtly.

The Twentieth Century (1900-45)

The twentieth century begins much before the end of the nineteenth century. With the publication of Darwin's theory of natural selection, the existence of God was being questioned. The development of poetry from the era of Donne when poetry was much influenced by religion to a period where religion itself was under strict scrutiny is very interesting. Isolation and alienation, together with experimental forms of expression dominated serious Literature. Poets like Thomas Hardy, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden dominated the scene during this period. In this century, the public was more literate than they had ever been in any other age. This century was more culturally and intellectually influenced. There was immense change to the language of poetry during this period. In the Victorian age, poetic diction was different from everyday language, but the modern era showed that poetry was rather close to the idioms of everyday speech. The theme of 'Modernism' was being introduced into poetry. T.S. Eliot and Pound were bringing modernism into poetry.

By the end of the Second World War, we see that the poetic trend was bordering on nostalgia and later on with emptiness. Eliot's 'Four Quartets' was the major poetic achievement of this war period. In the years after 1945 many poets still wrote following the traditional conventions of the Romantic age.

In the late 1970s, Craig Raine came to be known as the leader of the Martian school of poetry. Women poets were also having a great influence. Poets like Sylvia Plath have tended to mix emotions with humor, giving her poetry a light touch.

The present day poetry

As the eras evolved, so did the future of poetry. No more were the poets afraid to voice their sentiments. Poetry was being brought down to earth from high-flown Romanticism. This notion was most strongly realized in the works of Donald Davie, D.J. Enright and D.J. Jennings. The theme of cultural differences was emerging. Writers like Ben Okri, born in Nigeria, Grace Nicholas and Benjamin Zephaniah were giving poetry a new meaning. The struggles of the minorities were being highlighted in their poems. These poets were bringing new rhythms and performance styles to the stage of poetry. 'As A African,' by Benjamin Zephaniah is brilliantly written. This poem helps me understand how the minorities have suffered at the hands of the powerful. I feel the poet understands their ordeal and wants to join their cause in accomplishing freedom.

The central idea is that minorities are usually oppressed by the majority and people who command authority. **The poem connotes the fact that the minority should not let go of their heritage; it is their only hope for survival.** They should be proud of their roots. Freedom can be accomplished if people are willing to work together and be tolerant of each other's cultural diversity.

For me, this poem is a strong reminder of the values which our culture have long been forgotten. The answer to freedom is not abandoning our cultural heritage as a weak nation, but holding on to it. As individuals, we may not be heard, but as a combined force we will be able to fight the injustices of the social system. This poem is an effort to unite all the oppressed masses. It serves as a common ground where the oppressed can unite and fight for freedom. This poem gives voice to the unheard, hope to the suppressed, strength to the weak. As an individual I feel there is hope for me.

It is difficult to understand what poetry is. It is food for the soul. It is expression in its purest form. Poetry revives the spirit and soothes the mind. Poetry is not only about romanticism, but also highlights social and cultural issues to raise awareness. It is interesting to see the shift in the themes of poetry in different periods. Poetry today does not have one definition but has found many ways and forms of expression.

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