

B.A. Part - I  
Sub - English (Hons)  
Paper - I

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Topic :- History of English Literature : A Short Note - I

English literature is one of the richest literatures in the world. It has vitality, rich variety and continuity. As literature is the reflection of society, the various changes which have come about in the English society from the earliest to the modern times have left their stamp on English literature. When we study the history of English literature, we find that it has passed through certain definite phases, each having marked characteristics. These phases may be termed as 'Ages' or 'periods' which are named either after the central literary figure or the important rulers of England, literary movements or termed by literary historians.

Historians have divided the continuity of English literature into periods to analyse their basic features. It is also necessary for study purposes. Historians generally vary with their ideas regarding exact dates, number and names of these periods but mostly divide the time line of English literature into eight major periods.

## Periods of English Literature

- 1) 450 - 1066 :- Old English or Anglo-Saxon Period
- 2) 1066 - 1500 :- Middle English Period
- 3) 1500 - 1660 :- The Renaissance
  - 1500 - 1558 :- Early Renaissance
  - 1558 - 1603 :- Elizabethan Age
  - 1603 - 1625 :- Jacobean Age
  - 1625 - 1649 :- Caroline Age
  - 1649 - 1660 :- Commonwealth Period or Puritan Age
- 4) 1660 - 1785 :- The Neoclassical Period
  - 1660 - 1700 :- Restoration Period / Age of Dryden
  - 1700 - 1745 :- Augustan Age or / Age of Pope
  - 1745 - 1785 :- The Age of Sensibility / Age of Johnson
- 5) 1785 - 1832 :- The Romantic Period
- 6) 1832 - 1901 :- The Victorian Period
  - 1848 - 1860 :- The Pre Raphael (D. or. Rossetti)
  - 1880 - 1901 :- Aestheticism and Decadence
- 7) ~~Modern~~ 1901 - 1945 :- Modern Age
- 8) 1945 - :- Post modern Age

## 1. Anglo-Saxon Period (Old English Period)

Anglo-Saxon literature (or Old English literature) encompasses literature written in Anglo-Saxon during the 600 year Anglo-Saxon period of Britain, from the mid 5<sup>th</sup> century to the Norman conquest of 1066. Originally the name 'Anglo-Saxon' denotes two of the three Germanic tribes — Jutes, Angles, and Saxons — who in the middle of the fifth century left their homes on the shore of the North sea and the Baltic to conquer and colonize distant Britain. Before Anglo-Saxons, Britain was under the rule of Roman kings who withdrew their armies in the early fifth century because they were needed back home to defend the crumbling centre of the Empire.

The Anglo-Saxons also brought their own religious beliefs, but the arrival of Saint Augustine in 597 converted most of the country to Christianity. The literature of this period falls naturally into two divisions — Pagan, and Christian. The former represents the poetry which the Anglo-Saxons brought with them in the form of oral sagas — the crude material out of which literature was slowly developed on English soil. The latter ~~is~~ represents the writings developed under teaching of the monks, after the old pagan religion had vanished but while it still retained its hold on the life and language of people.

In general two great schools of Christian influence came to England, and speedily put an end to the frightful wars that had waged continually among the various petty kingdoms of Anglo-Saxons. The first of these, under the leadership of St. Augustine, came from Rome. It spread

in the south and centre of England, especially in Kingdom of Essex. It founded schools and partially educated the rough people, but it produced no lasting literature. The other, under the leadership of the Saint Aidan, came from Ireland which country had been for centuries a center of religion and education for all western Europe. The monks of the school labored chiefly in Northumbria and to their influence we owe all that is best in Anglo-Saxon literature. The three greatest names are — Bede, Caedmon, and Cynewulf

- Bede — Ecclesiastical History of the English People
- Caedmon — Paraphrase
- Cynewulf — The Christ, Juliana, The fates of Apostles, and Elene, The Wanderer, Andreas, The Phoenix etc

Source — W. J. Long: History of English literature  
— Wikipedia  
— www.Enotes.com