UNIT 1: INTRODUCING ENGLISH POETRY

UNIT STRUCTURE

1.1 Learning Objectives

1.2 Introduction

1.3 A Brief History of English Poetry

1.4 English Poetry in the Twentieth Century

1.5 Let us Sum up

1.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

1.7 Further Reading

1.8 Model Questions

1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- trace the beginning of English poetry
- explain the various kinds of poetic style
- discuss the chief English poets and their works
- grasp an idea of English poetic tradition in the twentieth century

1.2 INTRODUCTION

In almost all languages of the world, verse came before prose. Poetry is considered more powerful than verse because of the words a poem uses are often metaphors and they go beyond their meanings in the dictionary. Even though poetry began with religion, it accommodated all worldy concerns as it grew, from verse to poetic form and from them to philosophy of life. A poet chooses the best words and their best order and he gives them his personal meaning derived from his own experience of life and the world. You will find below an account of English poetry and a few significant examples which will show you what the above statements mean.

A brief overview of the developments in English poetry through the centuries is an important beginning point for learners of English literature. This section

aims to acquaint students with the major periods of English poetry and the major poets of each age. Important terms and names of poets and poems are highlighted and the learner is encouraged to further read up on these areas. A glossary of poetic forms and techniques is included at the end of this section as a ready-reference for the learners.

1.3 A BRIEF HISTORY OF ENGLISH POETRY

Like most literatures, English literature too has its origins in poetry. Thus the history of literature in English from the earliest point almost inadvertently becomes a history of poetry. The history of literature in English begins with the arrival of the Saxons to England around c.450. The Saxons were a group of Germanic tribes which settled in large parts of Britain and formed part of the merged group of Anglo-Saxons who eventually organised the first united Kingdom of England.

The earliest known English poem is a hymn on creation believed to be composed by Caedmon (cc. 658–680), who was, according to legend, an illiterate herdsman who was magically given the powers of poetry. This is generally considered as the beginning of Anglo-Saxon Poetry also known as Old English Poetry.

The poetry of this period is very difficult to date or to arrange in a chronological manner as there are many competing claims with regard to their compositions. However, most Anglo-Saxon poetry is categorised by the manuscripts in which they survive, rather than its date of composition. The most important are the four great surviving manuscripts of the late 10th and early 11th centuries, known as the *Caedmon* manuscript, the *Vercelli* Book, the *Exeter* Book, and the *Beowulf* manuscript which includes the most famous epic poem "Beowulf."

"Beowulf" is probably the greatest known Anglo-Saxon poem and is considered the first great work of English literature. The estimated date of the composition of this great epic range from AD 608 to AD 1000.

While the poetry that has survived is limited in volume, *Beowulf* is the only heroic epic to have survived in its entirety and others mostly in fragments such

as *The Dream of the Rood*, *The Battle of Brunaburh, The Battle of Maldon, Widsith, Waldere*. Other genres include much religious verse, from devotional works to biblical paraphrase that included elegies such as *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Ruin*; among other writings such as riddles and proverbs.

With the exception of the Rhyming Poem, Anglo-Saxon poetry depended mostly on alliterative verse for its structure.

England witnessed the Norman Conquest in 1066 and from around 1111 the Anglo-Saxon language rapidly diminished as a written literary language. The Normans were from a place called Normandy in France and thus they spoke predominantly Norman, and this became the standard language of the courts and the aristocracy. As the invaders integrated, their language and literature mingled with that of the natives and the dialect of the upper classes became Anglo-Norman and thus Anglo-Saxon gradually transformed into Middle English.

The Middle English period did not produce much works of literature in the language as it was Anglo-Norman or Latin that was preferred for high culture, however English literature still did survive and a few important works show the development of the language. **Layamon** wrote his *Brut* just before the 13th century and it was based on Wace's 12th century Anglo-Norman epic of the same name. Layamon's language is recognisably Middle English, though it still had a strong Anglo-Saxon influence. Many other works from this period included a variety of romances and lyrics that have been preserved as evidence of popular culture. With time, the English language regained prestige, and in 1362 it replaced French and Latin in Parliament and courts of law.

The 14th century witnessed major works of English literature and these are widely read and these included the most famous English poet of the Middle Ages, **Geoffrey Chaucer**. His works included the most famous *The Canterbury Tales.* His other important works include *The Book of the Duchess*, *Parliament of Fowls*, *Troilus and Criseyde* etc. Other important works from this age include the so-called Pearl Poet's *Pearl*, *Patience*, *Cleanness*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; Langland's *Piers Plowman*; Gower's *Confessio Amantis* etc.

The Renaissance is a very important period in the history of European thinking, culture and literature as there was an emphasis on new ways of learning-combined with a return to the study of classical antiquity. England is said to have witnessed the Renaissance from about 1509 till the Restoration in 1660.

The introduction of the printing machine by William Caxton in 1474 helped rapidly disseminate new or recently rediscovered writers and thinkers. Caxton also printed the works of Chaucer and Gower and these books helped establish the idea of a native poetic tradition. In addition, the writings of English humanists like Thomas More (*Utopia)* helped bring the ideas and attitudes associated with the new learning to an English audience.

The early years of the 16th century did not produce much poetry of note. The most significant English poet of this period was **Thomas Wyatt** who was among the first poets to write sonnets in English.

It is with what is known as the Elizabethan Period (1558 to 1603) that English poetry really came into being during the Renaissance. There was a rapid development of poetry and many themes and verse forms were adapted from other European traditions and Classical Literature.

Songs were a popular genre in the Elizabethan Period and many poets, including **Thomas Nashe**, **Robert Southwell** and **Thomas Campion**, were probably the greatest songwriters of the age. The songs remain important due to the borrowing of classical forms from European tradition by the practitioners.

Most of the songs were printed in anthologies such as **Tottel's** *Miscellany* of 1557, also called *Songs and Sonnets,* which was the most famous anthology.

Elizabethan poems and plays were often written in iambic meters, based on a metrical foot of two syllables, one unstressed and one stressed. However, much metrical experimentation took place during the period, and many of the songs, in particular, departed widely from the iambic norm.

The gradual strengthening of Elizabeth's power produced a court appreciative of poetry and the arts in general. This led to the emergence of a Courtly Poetry tradition aimed at and set in idealised versions of the Court. **Edmund Spenser**'s *The Faerie Queene* and **Philip Sidney**'s *Arcadia* are examples of poetry in this tradition. Sidney's *Arcadia* and Spenser's *Shephearde's Calender* are also important as they introduced the Classical

Pastoral form in an English context. Love was a major theme in the courtly tradition and it can be found in the sonnets of **William Shakespeare** and the poetry of **Walter Raleigh** among others.



LET US KNOW

Spenserian stanza: The unit of Edmund Spenser's long poem "The Faerie Queene", consisting of eight iambic-pentameter lines and a final alexandrine, with a rhyme scheme of ABABBCBCC. Later uses of this stanza form include John Keats' "The Eve of St. Agnes," Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Adonais," and Alfred Lord Tennyson's "The Lotos-Eaters."

The influence of classicism on Elizabethan poetry can be seen in poetry like *Shephearde's Calender,* plays such as Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and in the many metrical and verse experiments employed during the age that were borrowed from classical forms. Mythology and classicism remained favourite themes for poets to exploit. Examples include Shakespeare's' *"Venus and Adonis",* Christopher Marlowe's "*Hero and Leander*" etc. Translations of classical poetry also became popular and prevalent and the versions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* by Arthur Golding (1565–67) and George Chapman's translations of Homer's *Iliad* (1611) and *Odyssey* (c.1615) are among the outstanding examples.

English Renaissance Poetry after the Elizabethan Period progressed in many ways with the two important strains being Metaphysical Poetry and the Cavalier Poets.

The Metaphysical poets emerged in the early part of the 17th century and the most famous practitioner of this form of poetry was John Donne and they wrote in a particularly peculiar way with wit and complexity. This group of poets includes Andrew Marvell, Henry Vaughan, Richard Crashaw and George Herbert amongst others. The student must note that metaphysical poetry enjoys the status and importance it does today due to the restoration of interest in it in the Victorian age and in the 20th Century particularly due to the efforts of T.S Eliot.

The Cavalier poets differed from the metaphysical in their style which was more refined and elegant than the metaphysical poets. The most famous name amongst them is Ben Jonson and included others such as Thomas Carew and Richard Lovelace.They are now widely considered the forerunners of the literary trend in the Augustan Age.

Paradise Lost, a story of fallen pride, was the first major poem to appear in England after the Restoration and its author John Milton is one of the most important poets of that age and in the history of English poetry.

Satire emerged as an important form during this age and all major poets of this age flourished in this genre. These include John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Johnson and Samuel Butler.

The 18th century is called the Augustan age because of the importance given to the classical world particularly during the reign of Augustus. Poets of this period sought to emulate the high polished style of the Romans in their poetry. Translations and imitations of Greek and Latin verse were prevalent. John Dryden translated many works of Virgil, and Pope produced versions of the two Homeric epics. Horace and Juvenal were also widely translated and imitated.

The end of the 18th century witnessed a move away from strict Augustan forms and ways in poetry and the subjective feelings and emotions of the poets were reflected in their poetry. The poets of this period include Thomas Gray, Oliver Goldsmith, Robert Burns and George Crabbe. These poets are considered the precursors to the Romantic poets especially due to their treatment of nature.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What marks the beginning of Old English Poetry?

Q2. Name the most important poem of the Anglo-Saxon period.

Q3. Who was Geoffrey Chaucer?

Q4. Who was the popular song writer in the Elizabethan age?

Q5. What is Courtly Poetry tradition?

Q6. Who were the Metaphysical poets?

Q7. Name the Cavalier poets.

Q8. What are the characteristics of poetry in the 18th century?

The Romantic Movement had at its backdrop a turbulent political scenario of the late 18th century with revolutions in France and America and others and it led to the development of a particular kind of poetry known as Romantic poetry. English Romanticism is believed to have begun in 1798 with the publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads.*The major poets besides these two were William Blake, PB Shelley, Lord Byron and John Keats.

Romantic poetry stressed upon the subjective feelings and expressions of the individual and paid a lot of importance to nature and the imagination. They were against the strict ideals of the 18th century poetry and sought to compose in a simple uncomplicated language.

In the Victorian age, great political, social and economic change combined with rapid economic expansion due to industrialisation and mechanisation characterises the Victorian Age. The Victorian poets were much influenced by their Romantic predecessors in their scepticism and interest in the mysterious but differed in terms of their more scientific convictions as compared to the Romantics' stress upon spirituality. The major Victorian poets were Lord Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Matthew Arnold and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Tennyson was known for his rich imagery and rhythmic quality ("The Lady of Shallot", "Charge of the Light Brigade") while Browning's greatest innovation was the **dramatic monologue** ("My Last Duchess", "Porphyria's Lover")**.** Elizabeth Barrett Browning remains an important figure in 19th century feminist literature.



LET US KNOW

Dramatic monologue: A poem in which an imagined speaker addresses a silent listener, usually not the reader. Examples include Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess", T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and Ai's "Killing Floor." A lyric may also be addressed to someone, but it is short and songlike and may appear to address either the reader or the poet.

Matthew Arnold inherited qualities of the Romantics and was much influenced by Wordsworth, although his poem "Dover Beach" is seen as anticipating Modernism. Hopkins wrote in relative obscurity and his work was not published until after his death but subsequently influenced many poets of the 1940s. Also worthy of mention here amongst the Victorian poets are the siblings Christina Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti who belonged to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood which was primarily an arts movement.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q9. Which work led to the beginning of English Romanticism?

Q10. What are the features of Romantic Poetry?

Q11. In what context do the Victorian poets differ from the Romantic poets?

1.4 ENGLISH POETRY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Thomas Hardy and William Butler Yeats wrote on the cusp of the Victorian and the Modernist periods. While the former was a traditionalist in terms of technique, Yeats adapted to changing times by moving from traditional opulence and ornamentation to remarkable brevity.

The poetry of A.E. Housman struck a chord in the readers of war-sick England, with its lyrical and melancholy elicitation of doomed youth living in the countryside ("A Shropshire Lad"). The distinct, beautiful yet simple imagery of his poetry caught the fancy of the composers of that period who by setting it to music ensured its continued popularity.

Published in a series of five anthologies called *Georgian Poetry* by Harold Monro and edited by Edward Marsh, the Georgian Poets- Edmund Blunden, Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves, D. H. Lawrence, Walter de la Mare and Siegfried Sassoon- wrote poetry that was sentimental, Romantic and decadent. Brooke and Sassoon went on to join the ranks of Isaac Rosenberg, Edward Thomas, Wilfred Owen, May Cannan and Rudyard Kipling in writing war

poems, which, though socially relevant, never really experimented much with technique.

The American-born Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, H.D. and Ezra Pound were *avant garde* poets who spent a good part of their writing career in Europe. With Pound on the forefront, the Imagists- D. H. Lawrence, Richard Aldington, T.E. Hulme, F. S. Flint, Ford Madox Ford, Allen Upward and John Cournos- moved away from the sentimentality and traditional techniques (Romantic and Victorian) of their Georgian contemporaries towards a Classical style which was direct in its presentation and economic in its language. These Imagists experimented with free verse. Eliot's "The Waste Land" made him a sort of role model for other modernist poets of his time.



LET US KNOW

Free verse: Non-metrical, non-rhyming lines that closely follow the natural rhythms of speech. A regular pattern of sound or rhythm may emerge in free-verse lines, but the poet does not adhere to a metrical plan in their composition. Matthew Arnold and Walt Whitman explored the possibilities of non-metrical poetry in the 19th century. Since the early 20th century, the majority of published lyric poetry has been written in free verse. See the work of William Carlos Williams, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

The 1930s were dominated by W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day-Lewis and Louis MacNeice who were politically active on the Left front. They wrote of socio-economic injustice in their poetry which in their style, sought to move away from the towering shadow of Eliot. David Gascoyne, Hugh Sykes Davies, George Barker, and Philip O'Connor were Surrealist poets who turned to French models for inspiration. Such writing relied on automatism- the poet gave up conscious control of his/her thoughts, and then put down -rapidly, without interrupting the stream of thought or vision, whatever came to mind.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q12. Who were the Georgian poets? What did they write?

Q13. Who were the Imagists?

Q14. What is Surrealist poetry?

They were succeeded by the New Romantic poets-Dylan Thomas, George Barker, W. S. Graham, Kathleen Raine, Henry Treece and J. F. Hendry- who viewed themselves as up in arms against the *New Country* classicist style of poets led by Michael Roberts. Gerard Manley Hopkins, Arthur Rimbaud and Hart Crane were their role models instead.

The Movement - a term coined by the literary editor of *The Spectator* in 1954 to describe a particular group of poets who sought to highlight the importance of English poetry over and above modernist verse. The Movement included Philip Larkin, Elizabeth Jennings, D. J. Enright, Kingsley Amis, Thom Gunn and Donald Davie whose poetry was essentially English in character in the sense that it was simple, intense in content and traditional, conventional and decorous in form. There is nostalgia over Britain's pastoral past and a lament over its present urban character in the poems of this group.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q15. Who were called the Movement poets?



1.5 LET US SUM UP

After you have finished reading the unit, you are acquainted with the history of English poetry in brief. The unit introduces you to the various poetic traditions since its beginning to the twentieth century. You are now familiar with the different kinds of poetry like metaphysical poetry, romantic poetry, etc. As a whole, you are able to discuss the history of English poetry since its inception to the present.

1.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1 : The earliest known English poem is a hymn on creation believed to be composed by Caedmon (cc. 658–680), who was, according to legend, an illiterate herdsman who was magically given the powers of poetry. This is generally taken as marking the beginning of Anglo-Saxon Poetry also known as Old English Poetry.

Ans to Q2 : "Beowulf" is probably the greatest known Anglo-Saxon poem.

Ans to Q3 : Geoffrey Chaucer was the most famous English poet of the Middle Ages. His works included the most famous "The Canterbury Tales". His other important works include "The Book of the Duchess", "Parliament of Fowls", "Troilus and Criseyde", etc. Other important works from this age include the so-called Pearl Poet's "Pearl", "Patience", "Cleanness", and "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"; Langland's Piers the Plowman; Gower's "Confessio Amantis", etc.

Ans to Q4 : Thomas Campion was probably the greatest songwriter of the Elizabethan age.

Ans to Q5 : The gradual strengthening Elizabeth's power produced a court appreciative of poetry and the arts in general. This led to the emergence of a Courtly Poetry tradition aimed at and set in idealised versions of the Court. Edmund Spenser's "The Faerie Queene" and Philip Sidney's "Arcadia" are examples of poetry of this tradition.

Ans to Q6 : Andrew Marvell, Henry Vaughan, Richard Crashaw and George Herbert amongst others.

Ans to Q7 : Ben Jonson, Thomas Carew and Richard Lovelace.

Ans to Q8 : Poets of this period sought to emulate the high polished style of the Romans in their poetry. Translations and imitations of Greek and Latin verse were prevalent.

Ans to Q9 : English Romanticism is believed to have begun in 1798 with the publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*.

Ans to Q10 : Romantic poetry stressed upon the subjective feelings and expressions of the individual and paid a lot of importance to nature and the imagination. They were against the strict ideals of the 18th century poetry and sought to compose in a simple uncomplicated language.

Ans to Q11 : The Victorian poets differed in terms of their more scientific convictions as compared to the Romantics' stress upon spirituality.

Ans to Q12 : Edmund Blunden, Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves, D. H. Lawrence, Walter de la Mare and Siegfried Sassoon were the Georgian poets who wrote poetry that was sentimental, Romantic and decadent.

Ans to Q13 : D. H. Lawrence, Richard Aldington, T. E. Hulme, F. S. Flint, Ford Madox Ford, Allen Upward and John Cournos were the Imagists. They moved away from the sentimentality and traditional techniques (Romantic and Victorian) of their Georgian contemporaries towards a Classical style which was direct in its presentation and economic in its language. These Imagists experimented with free verse.

Ans to Q14 : Such writing relied on automatism- the poet gave up conscious control of his/her thoughts, and then put down -rapidly, without interrupting the stream of thought or vision, whatever came to mind.

Ans to Q15 : The Movement included Philip Larkin, Elizabeth Jennings, D. J. Enright, Kingsley Amis, Thom Gunn and Donald Davie whose poetry was essentially English in character in the sense that it was simple, intense in content and traditional, conventional and decorous in form. There is nostalgia over Britain's pastoral past and a lament over its present urban character in the poems of this group.



1.7 FURTHER READING

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9. Sanders, Andrew. *The Short Oxford History of English Literature.*

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1.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Write a note on Romantic poetry.

Q2. "The history of literature in English from the earliest point almost inadvertently becomes a history of poetry." Discuss.

Q3. What are characteristics of metaphysical poetry?

Q4. Who was Geoffrey Chaucer? What were his major works?

Q5. Write short notes:

a. Imagist poets

b. Cavalier poets

c. English Poetry in the Renaissance

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