

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH – UP TO THE 19TH CENTURY

Literature written in the English language is one of the largest in the world. It started over 1000 years ago with Anglo-Saxon poems, for example the famous story of Beowulf. Today, books in English are written not only in **Great Britain** but in many other countries. There are famous English language writers from **the USA, Canada, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, India, the Caribbean, Nigeria, South Africa, and other places**. There are millions of books in English and thousands of new ones are published every year. Many English books and writers are known all over the world. Here are some of the most famous English-language writers of all time.

William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare is the **most famous writer of all time**. His **plays** are performed all over the world. His **sonnets** are recited in many classrooms. Many people believe that he is not only the most famous but also the greatest writer who has ever lived.

William Shakespeare was born in **1564** in **Stratford-upon-Avon**. We don't know very much about his life. His father was a glove maker and young William probably went to a grammar school in Stratford. When he was eighteen years old, he married **Anne Hathaway** who was eight years older than him. After some time, Shakespeare went to London and worked there as an **actor** and as a **writer**. He left his wife in Stratford. His plays were very successful and he soon became quite rich. He spent the last five years of his life in Stratford where he bought a large house. He died on **23 April 1616** at the age of 52.

William Shakespeare wrote poems and plays. He wrote different kinds of plays: **tragedies, comedies, historical plays, and romances**. The theatre where Shakespeare's plays were performed was called **The Globe**. It burnt down in 1613 but it was quickly rebuilt. In 1642, all theatres in England were closed and the building of The Globe was demolished in 1644. The theater **was built again in the 20th century** and was officially opened by the Queen in 1997. If you visit London, you can watch one of Shakespeare's plays there.

Romeo and Juliet

One of Shakespeare's most famous plays is Romeo and Juliet. It is a **tragedy**. It takes place in **Verona** in Italy. There are two rich and powerful families that hate each other. **The Capulets** have a young daughter, **Juliet**. She is just 14 years old. The other family, **the Montagues**, have a son called **Romeo**. The two young people fall in love with each other but their parents **don't want them to get married**. Julia's cousin **Tybalt** kills Romeo's friend **Mercutio**. Romeo is angry and kills Tybalt. Romeo has to leave Verona but before he goes, he secretly marries Juliet. They want to meet again and escape together. Julie pretends to be dead to get to Romeo. But Romeo thinks that she has really died and **kills himself**. When Juliet wakes up and sees Romeo that Romeo is dead, she **kills herself too**. The families of Capulets and Montagues finally become friends again.

Hamlet

Hamlet is the most famous play of all time. It is a **tragedy** which takes place in **Denmark**. Hamlet is a young prince whose father died a short time ago. At the beginning of the play, Hamlet sees a **ghost of his father**. The ghost tells him that he was murdered by Hamlet's mother **Gertrude** and by **Claudius**, the dead king's brother. The ghost tells Hamlet to kill Claudius but not to hurt his mother. Hamlet doesn't know what to do. He is very sad. He doesn't know if he should believe the ghost or not. He pretends to be mad, but maybe he really became mad. We don't know. When Hamlet finds out that the ghost was telling the truth, he **kills Polonius**, Claudius's counselor and the father of Hamlet's ex-girlfriend, **Ophelia**. When Ophelia finds out, she kills herself. At the end, there is **a fight between Hamlet and Polonius's son Laertes**. They kill each other and Hamlet also kills Claudius. Gertrude drinks poison by mistake. The only major character that survive's is Hamlet's friend **Horatio**. Horatio wants to kill himself too but Hamlet tells him that he has to live on and tell people the truth.

Macbeth

Macbeth is Shakespeare's shortest **tragedy**. Macbeth is a **Scottish general**. He is a very good fighter and **king Duncan** really likes him. One day, Macbeth sees **three witches**. They tell him that he will become the king of Scotland. Macbeth doesn't know what to do. He tells his wife about it. She tells him to **kill Duncan** and Macbeth does it. He becomes the king of Scotland but he also becomes very

unhappy. He is a murderer now and his life has lost its meaning. He becomes a tyrant and people don't like him. In the end, he is **killed by Macduff**.

Othello

Othello is a **tragedy** which takes place in **Venice and Cyprus**. Othello is a **black general** who works for the Republic of Venice. He is a **good soldier** and a **good man** but he is **very jealous**. He falls in love with **Desdemona**, a beautiful girl from Venice. They get married but some people envy them and they don't like Othello because he is black. The worst of these people is **Iago**. He is Othello's assistant but he hates him. Iago doesn't know what true love is. He lies to Othello about Desdemona and makes him more and more jealous. Othello believes Iago and thinks that Desdemona has a lover. He **becomes angry and kills her** but then he finds out that it wasn't true. He is extremely sad and **kills himself**.

King Lear

King Lear is a **tragedy**. Lear is an old king and he wants to retire. He has **three daughters – Regan, Goneril, and Cordelia**. The first two are evil but Cordelia is good. He asks them how much they love him. Cordelia doesn't want to lie so she tells him that she loves him just as much as a daughter should love her father. Lear **thinks that she doesn't love** him enough and **tells her to go away**. Regan and Goneril tell him that they love him more than they love their husbands and he gives each of them half of his kingdom. They are then very bad to him. He sees that he has made a mistake and wants Cordelia back. Unfortunately, it is too late and **Cordelia dies** at the end of the play.

Midsummer Night's Dream

Midsummer Night's Dream is a **comedy**. It takes place in **Athens** and in a **magic forest** near Athens. It is mainly **about love**. There are a lot of fantasy creatures in the comedy.

Daniel Defoe

Daniel Defoe was a famous English writer who lived **in the 17th and 18th** centuries. He was born Daniel Foe but he started calling himself Defoe because he thought it sounded more gentlemanly. He worked as a **spy** and he spent some time in prison.

Defoe's most famous book is **Robinson Crusoe**. It is a novel about a man named Robinson Crusoe **whose ship is destroyed** in a storm. He is the only man who survives. He **gets to an island and he lives there**. He has to learn how to do everything – how to build a house, how to grow plants, how to hunt animals, and so on. He is very clever and so he becomes the master of the island.

Robinson finds out that his island is sometimes visited by **cannibals**. One day, a man escapes from them. Robinson helps him and teaches him English and other things. He calls him **Friday** because they met on a Friday. In the end, an English ship arrives. Robinson **returns to England** and takes Friday with him.

The story is based on **the life of a real man** called **Alexander Selkirk**. Selkirk told his story to Defoe but Defoe changed it a lot to make it more interesting for readers. For example, Selkirk stayed on his island for about 4 years. In Defoe's book, Robinson spends more than 28 years on his island. On Selkirk's island, there were no cannibals and it was located in the Pacific, not in the Carribean.

Daniel Defoe wrote some other books, for example **Moll Flanders**. It is about Moll Flanders, a thief and prostitute.

Jonathan Swift

Jonathan Swift was an Irish writer. He wrote mostly **satires**. His most famous book is a novel called **Gulliver's Travels**. The hero of the book is captain Lemuel Gulliver, who visits various strange countries. In Book One, he meets the **Lilliputians**, who are only about 15 centimetres tall. In Book II, he travels to a place called Brobdingnag. The people who live there are **giants**. In the last book, Gulliver visits a country ruled by **intelligent horses**.

Jane Austen

Jane Austen is one of the most famous English novelists. She didn't spend much time in school but her father had a **large library** and the children could read a lot of books. When she was young, she spent a lot of her time reading, helping her parents, playing the piano, going to the church and meeting her neighbours. Although her books are about **love and marriage**, she has never married.

Jane Austen's most famous book is *Pride and Prejudice*. It is the story of the **Bennet family**. The Bennets have five daughters. They are very different from each other and they all want to get married. The main character is **Elizabeth**, the second eldest daughter. She has a complicated relationship with the handsome and rich but very proud **Mr Darcy**. In the end, they **get married**.

Other books by Jane Austen are for example *Emma*, *Mansfield Park*, or *Northanger Abbey*.

Walter Scott

Walter Scott was a famous Scottish novelist, poet, historian and biographer. He is most famous for his **historical novels**. He took his stories from **Scottish** and from **English history**. One of his most popular novels is *Ivanhoe*. It is a historical romance that takes place in **12th century England**. Ivanhoe is young knight who goes through many adventures and marries beautiful Rowena in the end. He meets some famous historical characters, for example **Richard the Lionheart**, and some famous legendary characters, for example **Robin Hood**.

Mary Shelley

Mary Shelley was a famous English writer. Her husband, **Percy Shelley**, was also a writer. One day in 1816, they were in Switzerland. There were some other people with them, for example the famous poet **George Gordon Byron**. The weather was very bad and they had to stay inside. Byron said that each of them should write a **horror story**. Mary Shelley wrote one of the most famous horror stories of all time: *Frankenstein*.

Frankenstein is a **short novel**. It is a story about a **brilliant scientist** called Victor Frankenstein. Frankenstein **makes a monster** from parts of dead bodies and brings it to life. The monster doesn't want to be bad but people hate him and so he starts hating them too. He starts killing Victor Frankenstein's friends and in the end he kills Elizabeth, a girl that Victor wanted to marry. The monster escapes and travels to the **North Pole**. Victor wants to catch it but he dies. The monster **disappears in the land of snow and ice**.

There have been many **movies** about this story. Sometimes, people think that Frankenstein is the name of the monster. They are wrong. In the original book, Frankenstein is the scientist, and not the monster. The monster doesn't have any name in the book.

Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe is one of the most famous American writers. He lived in the **19th century** and he is famous for his poems and horror stories. People also usually remember that he **married his cousin** when she was only 13 years old and that he had **problems with alcohol**.

Poe is one of the fathers of the **short story**. Some of his short stories are really frightening. In a story called *The Black Cat*, a man has a cat named Pluto. He loves it but then he becomes an alcoholic and kills it. He gets another cat who is very similar to the first one. He wants to kill it too and when his wife tries to stop him, he kills the wife. He puts the wife's body behind a brick wall. But the cat gets there too and when the police come, they hear it and find the dead body.

Poe's most famous poem is called *The Raven*. It is about 100 verses long and it tells the story of a man who is visited by a raven on a December midnight. The man asks the raven various questions and the bird always answers with '**never more**'. The last question that the man asks him is if he will ever see his dead lover **Lenore** again.

Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens was probably the most popular English-language writer in the **19th century**. He had a very hard life. His family was very poor and **his father had to go to prison** because he had borrowed money and he

could not pay it back. Charles was twelve years old at that time. He had to stop studying and start **working in a factory**. When his father returned from prison, he could return to school. However, when he was fifteen, he had to stop studying again and start **working as an office boy** to help his family with money. Later, he became a **newspaper reporter** and then a very famous and successful **writer**.

One of Dickens's most famous novels is **Oliver Twist**. It is about a poor child without parents who has to live in the streets. The book was extremely popular in Britain as well as in America. Dickens continued writing novels and he became a literary star. In 1842, he and his wife **visited America**. Dickens was welcomed as a celebrity there.

In 1843, Dickens published one of his most famous shorter works, **Christmas Carol**. Its main character is **Ebenezer Scrooge**, a rich old man who hates Christmas and doesn't care about other people. With the help of three **ghosts**, he finds the Christmas spirit and becomes a good person.

Another popular book by Dickens is **David Copperfield**. Although it is probably not Dickens's best novel, it was his personal favourite. It is probably Dickens's **most autobiographical book**. David Copperfield is a poor boy who has to work hard to become successful and happy.

Many people, for example Vladimir Nabokov, think that Dickens's best novel is **Bleak House**.

Mark Twain

Mark Twain was an American **humorist, journalist** and **writer**. His real name was Samuel Langhorne Clemens. When he was twenty-one years old, he became a **pilot of a steamboat on the Mississippi**. He loved his career because it was exciting and well-paid. He wrote about it in a book called **Life on the Mississippi**.

Twain's most famous books are probably **The Adventures of Tom Sawyer** and **Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**. Ernest Hemingway once wrote: "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called **Huckleberry Finn**." The book tells the story of a young boy called **Huckleberry Finn** who escapes from his bad father and travels down the Mississippi river with a runaway slave called **Jim**.

Lewis Carroll

Lewis Carroll is one of the most famous writers for children of all time. His real name was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson and he was a professor of mathematics. He **loved children** and he became friends with the children of his neighbour, Henry Liddell. They were three girls – Alice, They spent many hours with Carroll, sitting on his couch while he told them fantastic stories about dream worlds. He also drew illustrations for these stories. One day, he told them a story of Alice's adventures underground. Alice Liddell liked it very much and when they returned home, she asked him to write it down for her. The book was published as **Alice's Adventures in Wonderland** in 1865. It became very successful. Carroll wrote some more stories and in 1871 published **Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There**.

Robert Louis Stevenson

Robert Louis Stevenson was a Scottish writer of adventure stories. **The Treasure Island** (1883) is a **pirate adventure story**. It is a book for children but adults can enjoy it too. **Long John Silver**, one of the main characters in the book, is one of the most famous fictional pirates of all time.

Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886) is a novella about good and evil. The story is told by Gabriel Utterson, a London lawyer and a friend of Dr. Henry Jekyll. Dr. Jekyll is a respectable man, but he sometimes changes into a bad person called Mr. Hyde. Mr. Hyde does terrible things and is wanted by the police for murder. In the end, Dr. Jekyll kills himself, but the body found at his house is the body of Mr Hyde.

Joseph Conrad

Joseph Conrad was a **Polish** writer who wrote all his books **in English**. He was a **sailor** and visited many countries, for example India, Singapore and Australia. His most famous book, **Heart of Darkness**, is based on his own experiences. It is a novella that describes a British man's journey into the **heart of Africa**. The man's name is Charlie Marlow and he travels up the **Congo River**. He is looking for **Mr Kurtz**, a European trader.

When he meets him, he sees that Kurtz had gone mad and became a bloody tyrant. He wants to bring him back but Kurtz dies on the way to Europe. Kurtz's last words are **"The horror! The Horror!"**

Herman Melville

Herman Melville is one of the most famous American writers. He is best known for his **novels of the sea**. He worked as a sailor and used his experiences in his books. Melville's most famous novel is **Moby-Dick**. It is the story of **Captain Ahab** who wants to kill a **white whale** called Moby-Dick because it destroyed his previous ship. The book didn't sell very well but today many people think that it is his masterpiece and one of the greatest American novels.

Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde was a famous Irish decadent author. He wrote **poems, a novel, fairy tales, plays**, and other things. He was famous for his **clever sentences** and his **extravagant lifestyle**. He was a **homosexual**. At that time, homosexuality was illegal. When Wilde's affairs with another man were discovered, he was **sent to prison**. He spent there **two years**. When he got out, he was a physically and psychologically broken man and he died very soon.

Oscar Wilde wrote only one novel, **The Picture of Dorian Gray**. It is a story of a **beautiful but selfish young man**. He has got his own portrait painted by his friend Basil Hallward. The portrait changes with time and becomes ugly but Dorian stays young and beautiful. He becomes more and more evil – he even kills a man. He starts hating himself and the portrait. One day, he takes a knife and attacks the portrait. The next day, his servants find a **beautiful portrait** and the dead body of an **ugly old man** next to it.

Oscar Wilde's plays are mostly **comedies**. The most famous ones is probably **The Importance of Being Earnest**. Wilde's fairy tales are usually **sad**. Some of the most famous ones were published in a book called **The Happy Prince and Other Tales**.

H. G. Wells

H. G. Wells is one of the most famous **science fiction** writers of all time. He is one of the fathers of this genre. He studied **biology and other sciences** and he used his knowledge in his books.

Wells's first novel was **The Time Machine**. The hero of this story travels to the future. He finds out that there are two kinds of people on Earth. **Eloi**, who are nice but weak, and **Morlocks**, who are ugly and evil. Morlocks live underground and hunt Eloi for food.

Another famous book by H. G. Wells is **The War of the Worlds**. It is a story about a war between the **Mars and the Earth**. Martians are stronger than people and they invade our planet. In the end, they are killed by Earth's microbes.

The overview is largely based on the following sources:

- http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/people/william_Shakespeare
- <http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/about-us/history-of-the-globe/original-globe>
- <http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/about-us/history-of-the-globe/rebuilding-the-globe>
- <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-19562787>
- <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Daniel-Defoe>
- <https://www.notablebiographies.com/An-Ba/Austen-Jane.html>
- <https://www.biography.com/people/jane-austen-9192819>
- <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jane-Austen>
- <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sir-Walter-Scott-1st-Baronet>
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ivanhoe-novel-by-Scott>
- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivanhoe>
- https://www.nationalgeographic.com/archaeology-and-history/magazine/2017/07-08/birth_of_Frankenstein_Mary_Shelley/
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Frankenstein>
- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frankenstein>
- <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edgar-Allan-Poe>
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Black_Cat_\(short_story\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Black_Cat_(short_story))
- <https://www.biography.com/people/charles-dickens-9274087>
- <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Dickens-British-novelist>
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Oliver-Twist-novel-by-Dickens>
- <https://www.biography.com/people/mark-twain-9512564>

- <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mark-Twain>
- <https://www.biography.com/people/lewis-carroll-9239598>
- <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lewis-Carroll>
- <https://www.biography.com/people/robert-louis-stevenson-9494571>
- <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Louis-Stevenson>
- <https://www.biography.com/people/joseph-conrad-9255343>
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Heart-of-Darkness>
- <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Conrad>
- <https://www.biography.com/people/herman-melville-9405239>
- <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Herman-Melville>
- <https://www.britannica.com/biography/H-G-Wells>
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Time-Machine>
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-War-of-the-Worlds-novel-by-Wells>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_War_of_the_Worlds
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Picture-of-Dorian-Gray-novel-by-Wilde>
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Picture-of-Dorian-Gray-novel-by-Wilde>