

# Backgrounds to English Literature

By

Maysa A. Shukri

Assistant Professor,  
English Department,  
College of Arts,  
Al-Mustanseriah University

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## Foreword

This essay was mainly written with the students of the English departments in our universities in mind. After having taught in different English departments at different colleges for over thirty seven years now, my judgment is that the students enter and finish their four years in college and are never given a comprehensive knowledge about the backgrounds of the literature they study which is English literature. They are also not given any idea as to how to make connections with world literature. In fact they are not made aware of the historical fact that not only Western classical literature but also Eastern classical literature and the Mesopotamian literature in particular, are connected with the English literature they study.

Hopefully, this essay will illuminate and pave the way for creating enough curiosity in the readers to dig deeper for more detailed information in general. The essay may also serve as the raw material for a course syllabus with the same title, i.e. “Backgrounds to English Literature” to be given to undergraduate or postgraduate students of English literature.

## A Historical Background

It is a well known fact that literature is in part a source of beauty and entertainment for all civilized men, and in part a record of the ideas and customs and the special visions and feelings of the people who create it.

It is also known that great art is timeless in the sense that it speaks to men of all times regardless of the many barriers of language, religion, and culture. Going way back into the history of man, great civilizations did exist, East and West, to produce great art that affected the world and played part in enhancing cultures that exist up to the present times.

Civilization in the East was already old when the first Europeans rose out of barbarism. Sumeria around 4500 B.C., Egypt five hundred years later, Babylonia and Assyria about 2100 B.C., all reached cultural maturity centuries before the Greeks appeared. These civilizations converged in Greece and became the solid foundation for the Greek civilization from which all western civilizations evolved.

Three other great nations of the ancient East have survived to our day with national and religious ideals substantially unchanged for twenty five centuries and these are the Chinese, the Hindus, and also the Hebrews.

The experiences of the Chinese and the Hindus have marked similarities in that China and India have each known an almost changeless civilization during two thousand years. These civilizations are securely based on a national religion and an ethical code that reflect a national soul at peace with itself.

China's two great religions, Taoism and Confucianism, date back to the meeting of their rival founders Lao-Tzu and Confucius, toward the end of the sixth century B.C. Perhaps what the Chinese contributed most to the world at large is their imaginative literature and that especially through poetry and by expressing their wonder at the beauty and immensity of the natural world in their poetry they fulfilled their need of religion. Their pictorial language has also, to this day, appealed to the eye as well as the ear.

Indian culture rivals the Chinese in its antiquity. A developed civilization flourished in the Indus Valley of northeastern India at least three thousand years before Christ. But then many invaders and different groups of people played part in making the modern Indian culture which is an amalgamation of the many different cultural groups.

It is Buddhism and Hinduism alongside with Islam that shaped the literature of the Indian people. Indian literature is the embodiment of a philosophy and a way of life complimentary, in a way, to that of the West, especially in its epic literature. India's greatest folk epic, The Mahabharata, dating from perhaps 1000 B.C., is now the longest poem in the world (100,000 couplets).

Less ancient than the Chinese and Hindu cultures, yet older than any in the West, is the culture of the Hebrews which dates for over three thousand years. It was Moses who brought the religion of Judaism, embodied in The Old Testament. He compiled the first five books of the Bible (the so-called Torah of the Jews). Judaism began as it has remained, a monotheism, i.e. a religion of one God.

Judaism was followed by two of the greatest religions of the world: Christianity and Islam. With the birth of Christ a new trend and a new authority

emerged to all corners of the world. The birth of Christ also marks, historically, the separation between the dates B.C. (before his birth) and A.D. (after his birth).

Thus, the church emerged from the collapse of the Roman Empire as the one universally accepted centre of authority. Christianity, made the sole and official religion of the state by the emperor Theodosius (the great emperor of Rome 379-395) in 395, had gradually developed as organized hierarchy. A basic doctrine, that the bishop of Rome was the heir to the power of Peter, the disciple whom Christ had appointed His successor, resulted in the acceptance of the Pope as head of the church, at least in the West, and that is before the coming of Protestantism in the sixteenth century. Conversion by the church of the various “barbarian” tribes accompanied the development of its dogma, so that in the Middle Ages the people of Europe and their various rulers came to be Christians.

The Middle Ages in Europe (roughly from 300 to 1350 A.D.) constituted that long era of transition between the civilization of imperial Rome and the complicated modern world which has been developing for the past five hundred years. Thus a new system of life was established after the collapse of the older system amid the ruins of the classical world of Greece and Rome. And, it is in these last five to seven centuries that one can roam freely to dig for the origins of the literary forms that developed in English literature.

It is to be remembered that the term “Middle Ages” can only apply to the world of Western Europe. China, India, Persia, and the Muslim world in general would not be concerned with them. In fact it is in these same centuries that the Muslim civilizations were undergoing a true renaissance of arts and letters. The

contributions of the Muslims to sciences alone put them far ahead of European cultures in an intellectual sense.

The great factor in a versatile culture in Eastern lands was the Muslim religion, whose influence from the seventh to the fifteenth centuries was enormous. Prophet Mohammed (Peace be upon him) (570-632) built a world of immense energy in the history of religions, and The Holy Quran will always be one of the most important religious documents. The teachings of Islam, along with the schools of oriental thought, specifically from Persia and India, resulted in a great civilization for which vivid Abbasid Baghdad became the symbol and the world centre. “In the knowledge of the world and the knowledge of mankind, to say nothing of intellectual range and elasticity, the Muslim world was far ahead of the Christian world until the dawn of the thirteenth century.”<sup>1</sup>

For at least five centuries, i.e. from the eighth till the end of the twelfth centuries, the Middle East never dropped below the artistic and intellectual standards of Greece and Rome. In fact, in many ways, it was ahead of Greece (as will be presented later).

The Europe of the Middle Ages came to be in direct contact with the Arab world through the Crusades, which began about 1100 A.D. But before that, and especially in the time of Harun Al-Rashid, nearly two centuries after the appearance of Islam, the Arab world was at its prime, or what can be called its “golden age”.

After the Middle Ages and after the victorious capturing of Constantinople in 1453 by the Ottoman Turks, and after the Arabs conquered many territories even up to north European Spain, the fall of Granada back into the hands of the Spaniards in 1492 can mark the end of their influence

historically. Nevertheless, contact between the East and the West never ceased to exist up to the present.

## II

### Influences on English Literature

It is the Greek and the Roman civilizations that had the direct effect in developing the European civilizations and that is what history books deal with. In all aspects of life whether the literary, the scientific, the philosophical, or the critical, they all go to the Greek origins when dealing with European cultures. And since English literature is part of these cultures, it is the Greek literary world that is mainly followed in tracing the origins of the literary genres or types. Thus, when dividing the history of the English language into three periods: the Old English period (roughly the first one thousand years A.D.), the Middle English period (roughly the next five hundred years), and the Modern English (the last five hundred years), one is always given the example of the Greek literary works that helped to form the different literary types. These types are poetry, drama, and fiction; more generally divided as poetry and prose and this is in reference to their linguistic arrangement.

In the literatures of all nations, whether Eastern or Western, poetry comes first for the simple reason that the poetic output of man comes spontaneously as a gift or an ability that does not need so much education or the ability to read and write while prose does. This is why the great Greek tragedies and comedies and much earlier than these, the Gilgamesh epic of Sumeria (completed about 2000 B.C.), came to us in the language of poetry.

Going back to English literature, with the knowledge that the world of literature concerns all humanity and is influenced by good literature from the

whole world, Eastern or Western, old and new, one can trace the influences that helped to enhance better productions and more comprehensive works.

Thus, the backgrounds to English literature can easily be grouped according to subject matter, form, elements, language, and above all genres. This is what the next section will try to do, keeping in mind again, that the origin and the age of the works are of great importance in bringing about the similarities and harmony between the one and the other.

### III

#### Divisions of the Basic Types of Literature

Perhaps the grouping of the background to English literature can best be done by beginning with the most distant past and the type of literature that covers the works of distant nations. This applies also to distant literary forms like the myth and the epic.

The following divisions give the basic literary types:

#### I. Mythical Literature

The study of myths has always been part of the English literary world up to the modern times. The origin is always that of the Greeks. Mythology, as it was whether to the Greeks, the Romans, or the Mesopotamians before them, was a religion as well as a source of explaining the natural order that governs earth and man. Many are the myths that are concerned with the creation of the universe: the heavens, the earth, gods, man, animals, and plants. Myths frequently describe the establishment of the natural order which governs earth and man. The origins of customs related to such important phases of the life cycle as birth, marriage and death, are also the subjects of myths.

Eastern mythology (mainly Sumerian and Babylonian of Mesopotamia) and Western mythology (mainly Greek and Roman) share many similarities. They all believed in gods of their own making to worship and also used the same gods to explain the forces of the universe.

The Sumerian pantheon was exceedingly numerous. It is explained in the Encyclopedia Britannica that:

Up to the end of Mesopotamian civilization the long lists of the Sumerian gods continued to be copied, and hymns to ancient gods in the Sumerian language continued to be sung in temples. None of the old gods was deliberately discarded. Yet, as in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium, when the two national states of Babylonia and Assyria arose, decided changes in emphasis and attention took place. Two young gods, Marduk of Babylon and Ashshur (Ashur) of Assyria, came to occupy the foreground and the older gods receded, still prominent and worshiped but seen less and less as primary sources of power. The major figures beside Marduk and Ashur were in later time Marduk's son Nabu of Borsippa, god of the scribal and secretary in the assembly of the gods. The older gods remained: An, Enlil, Ea (Enki)<sup>2</sup>, Sin (Nanna), Shamash (Uta), Adad (Ishkur) and Ishtar (Inanna).<sup>3</sup>

To the Greeks, it is their fear of the unknown that lead them to invent personalities like themselves to represent these forces, gods in human form with whom they could deal through worship and ritual. The earliest formal picture of Greek belief came from Hesiod, the eighth-century poet, who lived in a time when poets were still considered seers of the tribe. Quoted by Warnock and Anderson, Hesiod wrote,

In the beginning there was Chaos, out of which came Earth and Heaven with love as the ruling principle of creation. Love Shaped matter into Titans, male and female, with and instinctive affinity and the power of further creation. These unruly Titans, predecessors of the gods, seen to personify the mighty convolutions of the physical world as it took shape. Kronos, the greatest of these, ruled Heaven and Earth with Rea, sister-queen, and had three daughters and three sons. The last of the children, Zeus (Jupiter)<sup>4</sup>

eventually overthrew Kronos, imprisoned all of the Titans under the Earth except his friend Prometheus, and began with his brothers and sisters the rule of the gods from their throne on Mount Olympus in northern Thessaly.

As leader of the victorious gods, Zeus became ruler of the Earth. To his brother Poseidon (Neptune) he assigned the sea, and to Hades (Pluto) the underworld of departed spirits. Of his three sisters, Hestia (Vesta) became the goddess of the hearth, Demeter (Ceres), the goddess of agriculture, and Hera (Juno) the goddess of womanhood. Zeus married Hera and had by her the children Ares (Mars), god of war, and Hephaestos (Vulcan), the god of fire. But the affairs of Zeus with other ladies were notorious in the halls of Olympus and won him not simply the wrath of shrewish Hera, but also a considerable family: the twins Apollo (Apollo), eventually god of the sun and the arts, and Artemis (Diana), virgin goddess of the moon, the hunt, and maidenhood; Aphrodite (Venus), capricious goddess of love and beauty; Hermes (Mercury), wily messenger of the gods; and Dionysus (Bacchus), the youthful god of wine and physical joy. To these was added Athena (Minerva), goddess of wisdom, who sprang fully grown from the brain of Zeus.

To these were added a galaxy of lesser deities: Eros (Cupid), the mischievous son of Venus; Pan, the piper god of woods and fields; the nine muses presiding over the arts and sciences from their haunts on Mount Helicon and Mount Olympus; the four Winds; the nymphs and satyrs of the woods; the punishing Furies of the underworlds; and the graceful watch nymphs.<sup>5</sup>

Around these personalities grew up a host of charming myths that revealed the rich resources of Greek imagination and which inspired the Western literary world in creating beautiful and functional literary works from their times to ours. Practically, all literary forms, whether poetry, drama, or fiction, make use of the so many myths that open new realms and add beauty and entertainment to the readers.

One of the best examples for the use of myth, to mention it only as an illustration, is that of Daedalus and Icarus in James Joyce's novel A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man<sup>6</sup>. In fact the whole novel gains its strength and beauty

from this myth of the great artificer who becomes the symbol for the artist's freedom that the hero, Stephen Dedalus, seeks in liberating himself from the limitations of family, church (catholic), and country (Ireland).

Finally, in this world of mythology, one traces certain traces common in both Eastern and Western myths. Just as in Mesopotamia, the Babylonian and the later groups copied the Sumerians in their deities with the difference of giving them different names: Ishtar becomes Inanna, so did the Western Romans in copying the Greeks. Nearly all the gods are the same of the Greeks but with Latin names. Zeus became Jupiter, Poseidon Neptune, Aphrodite Venus, etc.

The world of mythology proves that humanity is the same and that it defies the boundaries of time.

## II. Epic Literature

As a literary genre, the epic combines many elements:

It is a long poem in elevated style presenting characters of high position in a series of adventures which form an organic whole through their relation to a central figure of heroic proportions and through their development of episodes important to the history of a nation or race.<sup>7</sup>

The epic marks the earliest literary form historically. Before the Greeks, who first settled in Greece (900 B.C. to 800 B.C.), civilization in the East was already old, not simply China and India but the flexible valleys of the Euphrates, the Tigris and the Nile, which had produced great cultures as early as 3500 B.C.

In all these civilizations, epics shared common characteristics:

(1) The hero is a figure of heroic stature, of national or international importance, and of great historical or legendary significance; (2) The setting is vast in scope, covering great nations, the world, or the universe; (3) The action consists of deeds of great valor or requiring superhuman courage; (4) Supernatural forces - gods, angels, and demons – interest themselves in the action and intervene from time to time; (5) A style of sustained elevation and grand simplicity is used; and (6) The epic poet recounts the deeds of his heroes with objectivity.<sup>8</sup>

Epics can be either folk epics that have no certain authorship or art epics that are of single geniuses who give each its structure and expression. In world literature, there are two epics that stand out as landmarks beginning with the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh (around 2000 B.C.), the Greek Iliad and Odyssey of Homer (8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.), the Roman Aeneid of Virgil (published two years after his death in 19 B.C.), the East Indian Mahabharata (1000 B.C.), and the old English Beowulf, to mention only the major ones.

The epic of Gilgamesh is the earliest epic to deal with man's search for immortality, a theme that is repeated in Homer's epics and especially in The Odyssey. In his heroic search and adventures, Gilgamesh proved to himself that the greatness of man is not in living physically for ever to be immortal, but in leaving great deeds behind.

The epic, as E. M. Tillyard says, "is a national epic before anything else since its presence in a nation's culture is a proof of the greatness of that nation's culture and its heroic past"<sup>9</sup>. It has been proved<sup>10</sup> that Homer, having been one of the best story-tellers of his time, must have known the epic of Gilgamesh which had survived five centuries earlier and was transferred to the Greek Language from the old Babylonian era of the fourteenth century B.C.

The similarity between the two epics, the Iliad and Gilgamesh, is clear in the characters of the heroes and in their being the sons of goddesses and this also shows that the Greek pantheon is influenced by the old Mesopotamian pantheon. The losing of the friends of the heroes, Patroklos for Achilles and Ankido for Gilgamesh, is also very effective and very thematic in both epics.

The similarity between Gilgamesh and The Odyssey is even more obvious. The Odyssey is about the adventures of Odysseus in his search for immortality. The structure of both epics is similar in that they both depend on three pillars: the identity of the heroic protagonist, his adventures and the dangers that go with them, and the final coming back to the mother land and enjoying the pleasures of living for the day. Thus, they bring about the idea that flourished later in the West, i.e. that of the Carpe dieme theme “Seize the day” as popularized by Horace, the great Roman poet.

In the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance there was a great mass of literature verging on the epic in form and purpose. Perhaps the best example of a Renaissance English epic is John Milton’s Paradise Lost, which conforms to the strict conventions and characteristics of epic literature mentioned above.

### III. Religious Literature

The basic three revealed religions of the world played a major part in the history of man, past and present. These religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These spread all over the world starting from the tenth century B.C. with the Jewish religion down to the time of Christ with which begins the Christian calendar A.D. to the coming of our prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him). These three religions are noted to be monotheists, i.e. to have each a one God,

and each to have its own founder, known as prophets or messengers of God: Moses for the Jews, Christ for the Christians, and Muhammad for the Muslims.

With the coming of these religions the conception of religion changed from that of the ancient world of deities to a world governed by one great powerful God and they also added richness and moral values which directed the life of man. The holy books that played part are The Old and The New Testaments which form The Bible, and The Holy Quran which is the “Word of Allah” who established it in heaven and revealed it to His messenger, Muhammad.

The Hebrew Bible was written in sections by many individuals between the tenth and fifth centuries B.C. By 400 B.C. the first five books, or Torah, had come as the word of God given to Moses.

The Hebrew Bible is of thirty nine books divided by Jewish tradition into three sections: the Law, five books of folklore, national history, and religious code; the Prophets, consisting of twenty nine books or sermons, rhapsodies and later history; and the Writings, a miscellaneous collection of thirteen books of hymns (Psalms), epigrams and adages (Proverbs), drama (Job), love poetry (the song of songs), short stories (Ruth, Esther, Daniel), and essays (Ecclesiastes). These books covered a wide variety of literary forms and subject matter. “It was a Christian divine, John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople in the fourth century A.D. who gave the name “Biblia”, meaning “Books” to these books of the Jews.”<sup>11</sup>

The New Testament is of twenty seven books. The first book of Matthew was probably written somewhere between the years 65 and 68 A.D. It was followed by three other books: Mark, Luke, and John. These four books are called the Gospels. These, with the rest of the books and The Old Testament,

form the basis of the Christian faith. Its teachings and values ruled man's conduct and his relationship with humanity and the world ever since its creation. There is no way to eliminate the influence of Christianity on literature in the West. Nearly all literary forms were developed under religious Christian inspiration. Many of the sagas, romances, and novellas have their origins from stories from The Bible. Drama itself came to being in England out of religious miracle and morality plays in the Middle Ages. So, the scope of the influence of Christianity on English literature is limitless. It stands as the core of all the literary changes.

Coming to Islam, it is The Holy Quran that stands as the fountain-head of the Islamic doctrines. The Holy Quran is the first important body of Arabic prose accepted as the "Word of Allah", established in heaven, and revealed to His Messenger, Muhammad. It consists of one hundred and fourteen chapters (suras) of varying lengths.

The Holy Quran came into being during the active years of Muhammad's Message, between 610 and 632 A.D. After his death and in 650 A.D., Caliph Othman sanctioned an authorized version that stands as a remarkable religious source of authority and that has remained intact to the present day. The Holy Quran is the greatest authority source, and reference for the morals, laws, theological doctrines, and social ethics and behavior of the Muslim world.

The literary influence of The Holy Quran is of tremendous range in creating a full picture of the Islamic oriental world with all its magical nobility, sympathy, and majesty. Its imagery is the imagery of the desert, of the lonely places of body and soul, and of the unsophisticated and pastoral and rural scenes. "It entertains the promise of an idyllic....existence for the Faithful after the great Day of Judgment. By its words billions have lived and died".<sup>12</sup>

#### IV. Dramatic Literature

Drama in the West was invented by the Greeks as a national development of their religious rituals, and throughout the great period of their golden age. It retained a religious meaning that shaped its special character.

It is worth mentioning here that Greek literature bears a close relationship to the periods of Greek history.

The epic period of Homer and Hesiod (down to 700 B.C.) portrays the ideals of the Heroic Age of invasion and colonization. The Lyric period (700 – 480 B.C.) associated with poets from islands in the Aegean, expresses the maturing of Hellenic culture. The Golden period (480-338 B.C.) belongs to Athens in her eighty-year control of the city-states, to the Athenian playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes and the Athenian historians Herodotus and Thucydides. The Hellenistic period (338-146 B.C.) of Menander and Theocritus. The scene moves from Athens to Alexandria in Egypt reflecting the sophistication and dissemination of Greek culture.<sup>13</sup>

It was the festival of Dionysus, youthful god of wine and physical joy, that produced drama in sixth century Athens. How the choral songs praising the god became tragedies and comedies, it is not well known. Perhaps the myth of the god gradually provided the narrative ingredient for drama and the chorus honoured the god through presenting themselves as his followers. In impersonation they contributed the fundamental ingredient of drama: characterization. Dialogue, the literary ingredient of drama, was also introduced as a way of communicating between the leader of the chorus itself developing eventually into having a second actor and then a third and so on. In time, other features were added to contribute to a single composite art: music, costumes, dancing and other features that enriched the atmosphere of the religious occasion. The performances took place in great open-air amphitheaters of which

the ruins of the fourth century theatre of Dionysus in Athens carved out of the south cliff of the Acropolis, stands out as an example.

It is mentioned that “New tragedies were produced only once a year, at the March festival of the god, and comedies usually at the festival in January”.<sup>14</sup>

Of the many names of Greek playwrights of the Golden Age, four have survived in complete works. Aeschylus (c. 525-456 B.C.) was the first with his Suppliant Women. But the greater play is Prometheus Bound and the more perfect play the Orestia trilogy. His religious stories formed the plot material of Greek tragedy.

In the work of Sophocles (c. 495-406 B.C.) religious problems were gradually subordinated to the human drama and the actors on the stage began to loom larger than the chorus below. He made each of his plays a self-contained and more ambitious unit. Sophocles’s plays come closer to our understanding of drama. His Oedipus the King and Antigone are generally considered the high points of the ancient theater.

The playwright who carried the humanitarian aspects even further was Euripides (c. 480-407 B.C.) who is considered to be the psychologist among the tragedians. In his Iphigenia at Aulis and Hippolytus he reduces his characters to ordinary people. His objective view of traditional material makes Euripides seem the most readable of all playwrights today.

Aristophanes (c. 446-386 B.C.) was the biting comedian of the Greek theatre. His plays reflect the liberation from the conventional decorum that took place during the festival to Dionysus. In The Clouds, his masterpiece, he attacks what he thought to be the root of social decay and that is the educational system.

As a summery, one finds that the dramatic literature of Greece does show the warm humanity of its art and philosophy. Here, it has been said that “If

Greece was the mother of the West, Rome was its stern and vigorous father".<sup>15</sup> Rome followed Greece by about four hundred years. Unlike Greece which is a land surrounded by the sea, Rome was always under the threat of surrounding enemies. So the genius of Rome lay in the engineering skill with which it built an empire and the discipline of law by which it ruled it. Even the society and religion were tougher for the Romans. Thus, literature came late to Rome, and then as a deliberate importation from the Greeks.

English drama had a religious starting point also but this time it was Christianity. The influence of Greece and Rome can be dismissed here for a while and a new drama emerged as early as the tenth century. The earlier form of medieval drama came in the thirteenth or fourteenth century. It clustered around incidents from the Bible – miracles or the lives of saints – that is why they were called miracle plays. The plays were first staged inside the church, then on floats or pageants which moved about through the towns.

During the later decades of the fifteenth century another type of play emerged, the morality plays. These were written not only by the clergy but also by laymen. In the Renaissance (the sixteenth century) elements were borrowed from the moralities, from miracle plays, from folk drama, and from classical drama to achieve from this complex blend a modern English drama which was far advanced beyond anything produced in the dramatic field during the Middle Ages.

Starting with Shakespeare (1564-1616) and the wealth of drama that he introduced to world literature – thirty six plays: tragedies, comedies, and histories – and going upwards to modern times, English drama has been thriving ever since.

## V. Fictional Literature

Story telling is as old as man. From earliest times people gathered with each other around fires or formed circles and listened to one of them telling stories. Of course it was oral art at the beginning. Then with the different religions and the different cultures, many fictional forms developed reflecting the type of people, their language habits, their traditions and the different aspects of their cultures. Epic literature and mythical literature are part of the fictional literature but each has its own history. Even religious literature is full of stories dealing with all purposes of life. Many of these stories are ideal in their forms to give perfect examples of modern short stories. The story of Joseph in The Holy Quran serves as such an example. <sup>16</sup>

Tracing the fictional forms in English literature with the exceptions of the myth and the epic, which have been given enough discussion earlier, the oldest forms are legends, sagas, romances, tales, novellas, novels and short stories.

The early epic tradition was first expressed in the true heroic style of Beowulf from the eighth or ninth century. Then came the sagas that are of Icelandic origin but given as part of the tradition that came to England with the Nordic people. These mixed with the medieval romances that came from France, produced a host of beautiful and magical stories, flavoured with chivalric backgrounds. Mallory's Morte D'Arthur (1471) known as King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table will always be the memorable example. Nobody in the Western world does not know the story of Lancelot and Guinevere. Such a medieval romance glorifies the world in which we live, with its hopes and aspirations, its dreams, its desires, its disappointments, and its successes. Beside such romances which were not fully accepted by the church, there were other "moral" romances like Sir Gawain and the Green Knight of the fourteenth

century. With romances came the tales, in verse or in prose. The best known in verse is Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales (late fourteenth century), the first great work to have been written in the English language, near the end of its middle period.

Novellas also were written (the word is Italian in origin) and the one work that should not be forgotten here is the Spaniard Cervantes's work Don Quixote (1605). It is, on the surface, an uproarious comic novel but deeply it is a satirical one playing on the code of chivalry.

This leads to the longest narrative form in English, the novel, which was first presented in the eighteenth century. For many reasons the novel was late in coming: to read a long work in prose needed educated people who could read, large printing facilities, well developed language, and highly sophisticated techniques. There were many attempts in writing novels in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but the real novels, according to critics, were the ones that were written in the eighteenth century. Richardson's Pamela (1740) is said to be the first novel but perhaps Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719) is the more acceptable one. Then came Swift's Gulliver's Travels (1726), the greatest satirical novel, and Fielding's Tom Jones (1749). Along with Smolett and Sterne, there were many other novelists who populated the scene and by the time the nineteenth century was reached, the novel came to be the major literary form. With names like Jane Austen, Sir Walter Scott, The Bronte Sisters, Charles Dickens who is named the father of the English novel, Thackeray, George Elliot, and Thomas Hardy, to mention only the major ones, hundreds of novels started to be written. In the twentieth century the number of novelists is limitless. American novels populated the scene by that time also.

The newest fictional form, the short story, had already taken its place in the literary scene starting in the nineteenth century onwards. Other Europeans, French, Spanish, Italian, generally excelled in the art of fiction especially in the twentieth century.

Oriental tales had their share in influencing European literature since the beginning of the eighteenth century. One of the most influential is the Thousand and One Nights, known in English as The Arabian Nights Entertainment, which existed from the tenth century. It is a work that belongs to the Muslim world, mostly of Arab, Persian, and even of ancient Indian origin.

The Arabian Nights was first introduced to Europe through the French translation in 12 volumes (1704-1717) by Antoine Galland and was an enormous success from the beginning. This great collection comprises direct, fast-moving narratives of the greatest variety, clearly drawn from many levels of society. Some are adventurous, some are supernatural, some are bawdy, some are romantic and some are satirical. All in all, they constitute the most celebrated single collection of popular fiction in the history of literature.

It is important to notice that The Arabian Nights had a direct influence on the literature of nineteenth century England especially in its method of narration, imagery, and romanticism. Writers like the Bronte sisters in fiction and Tennyson in poetry exhibit this influence clearly.

The world of fiction will always be the richest, the most varied, the most realistic, the deepest, and, perhaps, the most entertaining.

## VI. Lyrical Literature

Lyricism is present practically in every form of literature. It is as old as man and wherever it is found, it adds melody, emotion, and a touch of

subjectivity to whatever form it goes into. A lyric to the early Greeks was “the expression of the emotion of a single singer accompanied by a lyre”.<sup>17</sup> Later, the conception of lyric came to mean the individual and personal emotion of the poet. For thousands of years in every literature of the world, the lyric has been different things to different people at different times. This means that there is freedom and mobility in poetic expression regardless of its age or historical background.

Ancient civilizations believed in the accompaniment of the lyre in reciting poetry and adding melodious tunes to its beauty. The Sumerian lyre is one of the most important relics left from the Mesopotamian world. It was imitated in Egypt and then transferred to the Greeks. The Greeks were famed for their lyrics. Poets like Sapho, Anacreon, and Theocritus founded the tradition of lyrical and pastoral poetry. For the Romans, Ovid (43 B.C. – 17 A.D.) was one of the most charming poets of endless faculty and bright grace.

The history of the lyric in English literature starts almost with the beginning. Many lyrics were found from the time of the old English period and the epic Beowulf has passages of lyric quality. Chaucer in the Middle English period wrote a fair body of lyrics. Then came the sonnets of Petrarch. By the sixteenth century a large body of English lyrics was written and poets as Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare gave it a full bloom. Cowley introduced the irregular ode followed by Dryden. The noblest poetry came in the Romantic revival of the nineteenth century with the odes of Gray, Collins, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. Burns gave it a new power. Coleridge and Wordsworth made it the basis of romanticism and Byron, Shelley, and Keats molded it to perfection. It was also given expression in America by poets like Poe, Emerson, and Longfellow. Then in Victorian England the greatest poets like Tennyson, Browning, Rossetti,

William Morris, and Swinburne, were the greatest lyricists. Up to the twentieth century, the most poetic expression came to be the lyric.

Within the lyric type, numerous sub-classifications come like hymns, sonnets, songs, ballads, odes and elegies. Although these differ in manner and form, they do keep the basic qualities of the lyric: imaginative, melodious, emotional and subjective.

### Conclusion

The previous survey has tried to cover all the important types of literature: the mythical, the epical, the religious, the dramatic, the fictional, and the lyrical. It tells us that the backgrounds of literature, from the earliest times to the present times, bring humanity together and show that man is one, old and new, Eastern and Western, pagan, Jew, Christian, or Muslim. It also tells us that English literature is influenced by all these backgrounds and exhibits them in the most effective and perfect way.

## Notes

1. R. Warnock and G.K. Anderson (eds.). The World in Literature, Vol. I. Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company. 1950. p.11:19.
2. The names in brackets here are the Babylonian names for the same Sumerian gods.
3. Encyclopedia Britannica. Vol. 2. Chicago: William Benton Publisher. 1965. p.977
4. The names in brackets here are the Roman names for the same Greek gods.
5. R. Warnock and G.K. Anderson (eds.). The World in Literature, Vol. I. Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company. 1950. p.I:88.
6. James Joyce. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. London: Heinmann Educational Books. 1975.
7. C. Hugh Holman, ed. A Handbook to Literature. New York: The Odyssey Press. 1960. pp.174-5
8. Ibid. p. 175
9. As quoted by Salman Al-Wasiti in his essay “The Iraqi Epic of Gilgamesh and its Pioneering Role in World Epic Literature”. Al-Mustanseriah Literary Review, Vol. 8, 1984.
10. See Salman D. Al-Wasiti in his essay “The Iraqi Epic of Gilgamesh and its Pioneering Role in World Epic Literature”. Al-Mustanseriah Literary Review, Vol. 8, 1984.
11. R. Warnock and G.K. Anderson (eds.). The World in Literature, Vol. I. Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company. 1950. p.I:72.
12. Ibid. p. 11:25
13. Ibid. p. I:97
14. Ibid. p. I:99
15. Ibid. p. I:317

16. See Maysa A. Shukri's essay, "The Story of Joseph in The Holy Quran as a Model Short Story". Al-Mustanseriah Literary Review, Vol. 41, 2002.
17. C. Hugh Holman, ed. A Handbook to Literature. New York: The Odyssey Press. 1960. p. 269.

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