The Path of British Literature’s Evolution

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Abstract

Literature is an essential component of culture, focusing on the evolving trends and future possibilities within a society. Moreover, literature is the manifestation of the specific history and the societal context in which it exists. British literature has a long history with various changes that profoundly reflect the development of British cultural and social backgrounds in different periods, as well as the cultural, social, and economic development of Britain at different times. This article attempts to study British literature across different periods to trace the evolution of British literature on a timeline and to reveal its correlation with the social and economic environment. Furthermore, through the study of literature, we can pinpoint the stimuli behind Great Britain's development and the society's internal influence on the evolution of British literature. This essay aims to stimulate readers to reconsider the profound implications of British literature within specific historical contexts.

Keywords
British literature, different periods, mutual correlation, socio-economic environment, literature evolution

1. Introduction

Literature is a deep reflection of a country's social background and ideology. It also incorporates the insights of its author (Chengye Shi, 2023). The study of literature can therefore contribute to our understanding of a country's history and society. British literature started in the 14th century and presented a great development in the 20th century, which is attributed to the transformations of the UK society. Hence, we can discern a close intrinsic connection and mutual influence between English literature and its social environment. As English literature came into being in the course of the development of English history, it reflected its social background and at the same time influenced the development of English history in the form of letters.

2. British literature in different periods

2.1 Renaissance

The British literature before the Renaissance was very single and limited to religions. The rise of Christianity in the West symbolizes the end of antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages. The long Middle Ages was the era of "God's" rule over mankind, spanning nearly a thousand years. When Christianity became the "state religion" of Rome in 393 A.D., the West entered the dark ages of the "church and state" theocracy. The people were enslaved by both religious and state authority. As a result, under the historical conditions of the formation and establishment of the feudal system and feudal state in the Middle Ages, medieval literature highlighted one of the basic ideas of the literary heritage of the peoples—patriotism, and heroism. Besides from these, the British literature in this period also emerged the literature and literary phenomena of specific classes. Taking Selected Readings in English and American Literature as an example, this book introduced many works from the Medieval and they usually took the subject matter of
knights. And the poets celebrated knightly adventures and heroic deeds in the form of narrative poems and prose, featuring knightly adventures, trials, encounters with demonic giants, and beautiful lovers. In general, chivalric literature is loosely structured, and divided into chapters, and the language is simple and straightforward in terms of form. However, after the 14th century, capitalism developed rapidly. The city emerged and the urban bourgeoisie came into being, the British literature also became active. In the Renaissance, human consciousness began to awaken, and some progressive-minded people got involved in this campaign. The core of the Renaissance or its characteristics lies in the spirit of humanism, the core of which is to propose a human-centered rather than a god-centered approach and to affirm the value and dignity of human beings. Therefore, British literature in this period was mostly centered on this theme, including human sensibility, human beliefs, human sexuality, and human worldview. The works of this period mostly demanded a break with the feudal theocracy and a break with feudal asceticism and broke the blockade of the feudal system on the human spirit and even the physical body. For example, Sir Philip Sidney wrote many poems with the characteristics of the Renaissance such as *Astrophil and Stella*:

From this poem, we can clearly find that the dynamics of love are described vividly. The changes of men's minds in love: passion - anxiety - questioning - reverie - self-contradiction. Married women in love with true love in the change of anxiety - rejection - miss - struggle - break free. This represented the characters in the Renaissance intimately. Another example is *Hamlet*, written by William Shakespeare. In this works, the humanism is obvious like “ What a masterpiece of humanity! What a noble reason! ” On top of that, there are so many acts using the “To be, or not to be” speeches, which express humanism and his deliberations of the liberation of humanity in Renaissance (Vanessa Lim, 2019).

In a word, during the Renaissance, British literature was filled with humanism, the pursuit of contemporary happiness, and the anxious desire to break the bandage of religion.

### 2.2 In the 17th century

In essence, the Renaissance was a campaign only in very limited fields and its influence was small. Even though the literature has changed and innovated, it’s just a little. However, from the 17th century, British literature has a great change. In this period, England made the transition from feudal to capitalist society with unprecedented strengthening of royal power. The old nobility killed each other in the Wars of the Roses; the bourgeoisie and the new nobility wanted to keep the peace in order to facilitate economic development. The autocracy relied firstly on the new nobility, from whom the magistrates were mostly chosen, and secondly on the new urban bourgeoisie, including artisanal workshop owners, merchants, and bankers. Changes in British society directly influenced the development of English literature. The literature showed characteristics of the periodicity of ideological content, diversity of writing forms, and philosophy of literature (Chen Defeng, 2010).

First of all, since English literature in the 17th century was subject to direct intervention by the crown, it demanded unity of thought and opposed division and fragmentation. Therefore, most of the literary works of this period revolved around the emotions and social and national responsibilities of the protagonists, and most of them glorified the idea of centralization of power. In addition, the literary forms of this period were more diverse, including poetry, prose, opera, etc. The language is also more exquisite, noble, and elegant, which is also closely related to the cultural trend of fashion and fun at the court at that time. Thirdly, the literature of the time was also closely associated with society's change. Many literary scholars combined literature with the philosophy born in this period and created many philosophical literary works.

One of the most famous literature is John Milton, and his works like *Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained* expressed his strong dislike of authoritarianism and a desire for freedom as well as changes in his thought in the later stages. For instance, this change can be seen in the following sentences: “To aspire is to rule, and even when you get to hell, ruling it is better than serving in heaven.” “From the small, you can see the big, look at the morning to know the day.”

His piece not only integrates a wealth of elements of religion but also presents the social background at that time, which motivates readers to figure out the correlations between society and the book and encourages them to consider the impact of religious faith on the literature.

### 2.3 In the British Civil War, the Stuart Dynasty Restoration

British literature developed during the period of the British Civil War, the Stuart Dynasty Restoration. In this period, English literature yet changed in some respects. The main reasons for the British civil war are politics and religion and economy. On the one hand, after the 17th century, the capitalism was more and more prevalent and Britain's self-
sufficient feudal agricultural economy had disintegrated, feudal land management had been transformed into capitalist management, and a new aristocracy with close ties to capitalism had been differentiated from the feudal aristocratic landowners to become an important force in the bourgeois revolution. On the other hand, following the development of capitalism, British politics became very turbulent. The competition between the king and the parliament was extremely violent. Stuart’s father and son lived an extravagant life, spent a lot of money, and were in poor financial condition, thus often requiring the consent of Parliament to levy taxes. Parliament had long complained about the royal prerogative, and now had the leverage to undermine the king’s power. However, Stuart was reluctant and decided to uphold his power by the way of suppressing the parliament.

Moreover, religious reasons are a factor that cannot be ignored. Since Henry VIII’s Reformation, the English state religion became a tool of the king to maintain feudal rule. The state religion was contrary to bourgeois puritanism. Therefore, in the second half of the 16th century, the "disobedient" proposed to remove the Catholic remnants from the state religion, and their ideas were called "Puritanism", and these people were called "Puritans". These people were called "Puritans. The Puritans proposed new doctrines, rituals, and organizational principles that were different from those of the English state religion in order to oppose the spiritual yoke of feudal rule. As a result, the Puritans were repeatedly persecuted by the feudal rulers.

From the literary side, it also followed this trend. Also in this spell, John Banyan was celebrated poet whose poem——The Pilgrim's Progress, tells the story of a resilient Christian who embarks on a long, thorny journey in search of eternal life, leaving behind an earthly world full of dangers, temptations and disasters, only to be greeted by his sinful soul in the high heavens to show the complex English society during the Restoration of the dynasty, it shows Bunyan's view of the society at that time and the dilemma faced by Christianity at that time—on the one hand, the devotion to Puritanism, and on the other hand, the sinking and degradation of the secular world.

2.4 In the 18th century

When England developed gradually and moved into the 18th century, its society changed a lot in many aspects. From an economic perspective, the Industrial Revolution turned 18th century England upside down. The Industrial Revolution led to the invention and use of the steam engine, which greatly increased productivity, the development of the commodity economy, the gradual transformation of manual workshops into large machine factories, and the emergence of two opposing classes, the industrial bourgeoisie, and the industrial proletariat. Socially, the Industrial Revolution has greatly improved people's lives, but it was only in relative terms. The oppression of workers by the bourgeoisie and the loss of the peasants' means of production etc. intensified the contradictions between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. From the cultural aspect, England in the 18th century took place a series of big events. Among them, The Enlightenment and the Continental Study Tour, and so on have largely promoted the development of British literature. Although the Continental Study Tour was aimed to extend the royalty’s power monopoly and it was limited to the royalty, but with the coming of The Industrial Revolution, this condition switched. Many children of the middle class and the average working class are also joining the Mainland Study Tours, and it’s becoming gradually civilianized, which greatly improved the literature (Ran Qunchao, 2014). It promoted the spread of European ideas in England, dealt a heavy blow to English feudalism, and provided the conditions for the later Enlightenment. In The Enlightenment, England emerged a new literary form—romanticism. Although the era was dominated by Rationalism, all the literature and thoughts which are contrary to it were criticized as other, or expressed by some negative words like gothic, romantic, and so on. Thereby, romanticism was opposed to Rationalism. Nevertheless, Romanticism still made progress at that time.

The Romanticism was divided into two categories, including Passive Romanticism, and Active Romanticism. Passive Romanticism were passive avoidance, opposed to the status quo, stayed in the past and lead people to look backward. The most famous representatives were William Wordsworth (1770-1850) Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) and Robert Southey (1774-1843) who expressed their disgust for the industrial and urban civilization of capitalism, eulogized the patriarchal rural life and nature, and enjoyed depicting mysterious and exotic scenes. Coleridge’s masterpiece is The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. This work totally embodied the importance of imagination as well as his exploration of the problem of sin and punishment in life. What’s more, he combined the universal pantheistic idea of the universe with Christian thought to promote benevolence and the Christian idea of atonement. Southey’s poems were full of mystery and were inferior to Wordsworth and Coleridge in both thought and art. He was also a royal man of letters. His long poem The Vision of Judgment sings the praises of George III, pleases the English royal family, and is ridiculed by Byron. By contrast, Active Romanticism was a progressive trend that dared to face up to
reality and criticized the darkness of society, it led people to look forward and Byron, Shelley, Keats, and Jane Austen were the icons of it. “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” is the most popular sentence in Ode to the West Wind written by Shelley, and it expresses his hatred for the corrupt forces, his ardent hope and firm belief that the struggle will be won in the end, and revealed the law that new things will replace old things eventually (Chen Jiawei, 2019).

Romanticism has a great association with The Enlightenment, but the connection is not simply one of opposition or inheritance, but both. It is opposed to the Enlightenment's superstition about the power of reason and inherited from their progressive stance on the social and even political level.

2.5 In the Victorian era

The Victorian era was usually defined from 1837 to 1901, i.e. The reign of Queen Victoria (Alexandrina Victoria). “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” Just like this paragraph illustrated in A Tale of Two Cities (Charles Dickens, 2015), the Great Britain in the Victorian era was both the best city and the worst city. Economically, the Victorian era was considered to be the culmination of the Industrial Revolution in England and the heyday of the British economy, which at that time accounted for 70% of the world's economy. The Victorian era was also the most prosperous period of the Second Industrial Revolution when electricity was used to great effect. The wave of scientific inventions was surging, and the Victorians believed in scientific progress and were full of optimism and confidence in the Industrial Revolution. In addition, the advent of steamboats led to unprecedented prosperity in transportation and trade and the rapid development of the regional economy with railroad transportation running from east to west and from north to south. Nonetheless, the Industrial Revolution triggered a lot of grave social issues. The wealth gap between workers and capitalists is unbridgeable. Capitalists continuously accumulated primitive wealth and exploited workers while the working-class people found it hard to maintain a subsistence level (Xiayi Gan, 2023). A Tale of Two Cities truly reflects the sharp social contradictions and class struggles between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and is full of humanitarian colours, which make people feel extremely emotional shocked (Yang Leun, 2023). Famous novelists including the critical realist Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontë sisters, Mrs. Goskell (1810-1865) and Trollope came into being(1815-1882). On the one hand, they re-invigorated the realism of the 18th century; on the other hand, they shouldered the responsibility of criticizing society and defending the interests of the people. Despite they possessed different perspectives and styles, their common feature was their concern for the lives and destinies of the general public. They were all deeply indignant about the inhumane social mechanism, degenerate social morality, the prevalence of money worship and widespread poverty and injustice, and the ruthless oppression of the bourgeoisie. The realistic portrayal of people's lives and the relentless criticism of social systems in their works have awakened public awareness of social problems and social development. They use every character in their novels to represent the lives and spiritual states of all classes in England, leaving readers to reflect on the profound impact of socio-economic development on people at that time (Zhang Jingbo, 2019).

Overall, the Victorian era was a long and complicated epoch, and its literature can be varied, under uncertain circumstances, British literature has developed in the twists and turns.

3. Conclusion

On balance, through the study and the brief analysis of British literature, the advancement history of the literature is obvious, and it goes without saying that.

Britain’s economy and politics facilitated its development, in the meanwhile, they also hindered it from going forward. The economy lays the foundation for it, politics is the centralized expression of the economy, and culture mirrors finance and politics. Now that literature is an indispensable part of culture, it also shows economy and politics. We can learn about Britain’s evolution from the 14th century to the 19th century via its literature in that time. Moreover, we can envisage this British literature’s future according to its former history. Likewise, we can study other countries’ literature to find their footprints of development. Eventually, we will have a better and deeper understanding of their histories.

References

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