

**UNIT : 1****THE PURPOSE AND METHODS OF STUDYING  
THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE****: STRUCTURE :**

- 1.0 Objectives**
- 1.1 Introduction**
- 1.2 The Purpose of Studying the History of English Literature**
  - 1.2.1. Historical and Political Events**
  - 1.2.2. Authors**
  - 1.2.3. The Study of Author's Best Works**
  - 1.2.4. Various Literary Epochs**
  - 1.2.5. Language and Style**
  - 1.2.6. Literary Movements**
  - 1.2.7. Literature as an Art**
  - 1.2.8. Various Literary Developments**
- 1.3 The Methods of Studying the History of English Literature**
  - 1.3.1. Biographical Method**
  - 1.3.2. Historical Method**
  - 1.3.3. Literary Method**
  - 1.3.4. Linguistic Method**
- 1.4 Let Us Sum Up**
- 1.5 Key Words**
- 1.6 Books Suggested**

**Answers**

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**1.0 OBJECTIVES**

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1. The main objectives of this unit are:
2. To discuss in detail the importance of studying the history of English literature,
3. To discuss the aims of studying the history of English literature,

4. To expose you to the various aspects of the history of English literature,
5. To discuss in detail the importance of studying the history of English literature through various methods,
6. To acquaint you with the various methods of studying the history of English literature.

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## **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

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English literature is one of most widely read bodies of literature. It has produced a great number of writers. The way English literature has developed over the course of time is phenomenal in the sense that every writer had a considerable influence on the literature written and produced in the English language. English literature has seen some of greatest minds of literature like Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Swift, Wordsworth, Dickens, Eliot etc. who enriched English literature with their writing and made it one of the most widely read bodies of literature in the world. English literature as we see it today is an outcome of the hundreds of years of literary labour of hundreds of writers. It has undergone some serious transformations over the years. Because of its vastness and abundant output, we have a rich and varied history of English literature. In this unit, we shall discuss about the importance of studying the history of English literature and why one has to study the history of this great body of literature. We shall also look at various methods that can be used to study the history of English literature.

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## **1.2 THE PURPOSE OF STUDYING THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE**

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Literature has always remained an integral part of human existence. It has been serving as a rich source of entertainment to readers since hundreds of centuries. Literature in fact has a very fundamental role to play in human lives in the sense that it influences our lives in so many ways. It is a part of our cultural heritage and can enrich our lives in all sorts of ways. Literature has the unique ability of leading us intellectually and emotionally. It deepens our understanding of history, society and each of our lives. We cannot even think of a life without any kind of reading or literature since reading is a significant part of our lives. Literature and reading have become popular means of recreation and acquiring knowledge today. An increasing number of people are turning to literature to find solace from the busy and competitive world of the day. Literature even has answers to our most complex of questions. Even in the present technological age of computers and smartphones, literature has not ceased to be significant. It is increasingly becoming popular among people. Literature is also a form of art for those who are interested

in it. The present chapter will deal with the purpose and importance of studying the history of English Literature.

The literature produced in the English language is very vast since English is a global language. Almost every nation of the world produces literature in English, and it is read by millions of people every day across the globe. English Literature is the widest body of literature in the world. Thousands of books are published every year in every nation in the English language. It has a great literary tradition, and English Literature is one the most studied subjects in the world at present. The study of English literature allows students to develop new ideas and ethical standpoints. It provides a new way of thinking about the world. The study of English literature gives an opportunity to the readers to compare their cultures with the culture of the English nations. But why should one study the history of English literature? What is the purpose of studying English literature and its history? What is the object in studying this literature? These are some of the important questions that crop up in our minds, and in this section, we shall will try to answer these questions.

### **1.2.1. Historical and Political Events**

History or politics has always influenced literature. Literature, in fact, is a reflection of contemporary historical or political environment. The history of England has always been the history of great and significant transformations. Right from the very beginning, the English nation has had a rich history. The study of the history of English literature allows the reader or student to know more about the major historical and political events that took place during a particular age or period. The literature produced in a particular age has generally been termed based on the name of the reigning monarch. The Elizabethan age is called so because Queen Elizabeth was the reigning monarch during that period and the literature published during Queen Elizabeth's reign comes under the Elizabethan age of literature. This acquaints the readers or students with the historical and political background of the age. Additionally, the historical or political background of a period has its influence on the literature of the age. Every author writes under the shadow of his or her nation's history or politics. Historical and social conditions of the age have its effects on the writings of an author. Thus, the study of the history of English literature makes it easy for the readers or students to know more about the prevalent historical, social or political conditions of the period, and the ways in which it influenced the literature of the age. The readers will be able to derive more meaning from studying the literature of the age when they study it under the lights of the contemporary historical or political environment of the age. So, while studying literature of the Elizabethan

age, the readers will be able to see how Elizabethan age being an age of peace and exploration influenced the literature of the age. While studying the literature of the romantic period, the readers will be able to find why romantics turned to nature in the age of industrial revolution and how social conditions of the day finds expression in the literature of a particular period.

### **1.2.2. Authors**

In studying the history of English literature, the readers will come across various authors. Every age has produced a great number of writers, each different from the other. The study of the history of English literature allows the readers to explore the lives of different authors and the ways in which he wrote. The history of English literature also provides the biographical information about the author, based on which the readers can examine the author's work in relation to his life. An author writes under the shadow of not only his or her nation's history or politics but also under the shadow of his own personal life. The kind of life an author has lived influences his writings in numerous ways. His writings are shaped by his own personal experience of the world. Thus, studying the biographical information of the author through the history of English literature allows the readers to explore the lives of authors, their personal experiences of the world around them and its impacts on their writings. The readers find it easy to relate and examine the author's work with his own life and thought. It is only through the biographical study of the author that the readers would be able to know how the author's thoughts and experiences are reflected in his works. The study of the history of English literature makes it easy to know how a particular author lived and worked, how he met success or failure, how he influenced his age and how his age influenced him.

### **1.2.3. The Study of Author's Best Works**

The study of the history of English literature not only familiarize the readers with the biographical information about the author but also with the best literary works written and produced by that particular author. Every author has written great literature, and the study of the history of English literature allows the readers to confront the best literary works produced by the author. The readers can critically know about the literary works of every author and also about the importance of that particular work in the canon of English literature. Every great literary work has influenced literature in so many ways. By studying the history of English literature, the readers would be able to see the place of a particular literary work in the canon of English literature, and also how that piece of

literature influenced the literature of the later ages. Thus, the history of English literature acquaints the readers with the best literary works of authors and their importance in the canon of English literature. The readers can also know about the years in which those great literary works were published. By knowing when Shakespeare's great tragedies were first staged and published, the readers can feel a sense of surprise to the genius of Shakespeare. Shakespeare had talked about many fields which were not even in existence in those times like botany. Studying the history and reading the great works of literature acquaints the readers with the great literary geniuses that authors were. Thus, studying the history of English literature becomes very important in the sense that it familiarizes readers with the best works of literature in every epoch, and the literary value those works carry.

#### **1.2.4. Various Literary Epochs**

The history of English literature is divided in various ages or periods. These ages have been named based on the name of the reigning monarch of England or the major writer of that age. The history of English literature has been divided in these ages for the sake of convenience so that the readers could distinguish easily between the authors and their works. The study of the history of English literature enables the readers to study these different ages in comparison to one another, showing what each gained from preceding epoch, and how each aided in the development of a national literature. Such a study of the history of English literature allows the readers to distinguish between different ages. The readers can see the difference between the characteristics of different ages. They can easily notice the difference between the literature of the Elizabethan age from the literature of the Victorian age. This categorization enables an easy study of the literature produced. The ages also make it easy for the readers to study the authors belonging to the same era since the authors belonging to the same era almost share their characteristics with one another. The readers can easily discern the difference between the authors of different ages. A thorough historical study of the various literary epochs also tells us about the dominant modes of literary writing in different ages. Elizabethan age was known chiefly for its drama whereas the Victorian age was known primarily because of its novels. The romantic age was known for its poetry whereas the Victorian age and the Enlightenment age were known for the progress and development in their prose writings.

### 1.2.5. Language and Style

Language is one the most important aspects of studying the history of English literature. It has constantly evolved over centuries. How we and modern-day authors use the English language today was not the case with how Elizabethans used it. English language was written very differently in those years. English language was in the initial stages in those times. The language of Chaucer and Langland has become obsolete today since it is not used anymore. Even the spellings and meanings of some words have evolved over the years in the sense that they didn't mean in those days what it means today. 'You' was 'thou' or 'thee' in those days; 'your' was 'thy' or 'thine'. The study of the history of English literature tells us how English language has evolved from the days of Geoffrey Chaucer to the modern-day English language. Chaucer begins his *Canterbury Tales* with 'whan' and not the modern day 'when'. Shakespeare was the greatest writer English literature has ever seen. But his contribution is not only limited to the English literature but also extends to the English language. He had greatly influenced not only the theatre, films, poets and novelists but also the English language, with words that we use every day. Shakespeare had a considerable influence on the English language in the sense that he has enriched the English language by introducing thousands of new words through his dramas. How George Bernard Shaw used English language was very much different from how Shakespeare used it. There is an obvious difference between the language of the two great dramatists of the English language, and this shows how English language has undergone tremendous transformations over the centuries in the writings of numerous writers. A thorough study familiarizes the readers with these transformations. Such a study also enables the readers to notice the difference between the writing styles of two different authors of the same era. Every author has a unique style of writing. Chaucer used to write in rhyme royal whereas other poets of his age wrote in a relatively different style. Shakespeare was the master of unrhymed iambic pentameter, also called the blank verse whereas other dramatists of his age could not match the linguistic genius of Shakespeare chiefly because of employing a different style of writing. The writing style of *Beowulf* differs considerably from that of Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). The language of Shakespeare's four great tragedies differs significantly from the language used by George Bernard Shaw and Harold Pinter in their plays. Thus, it is only through the study of the history of English literature that we can discern this difference in the language used by various authors.

### **1.2.6. Literary Movements**

Literary movements are a way to divide literature into categories of similar features. The writers belonging to a particular literary movement share literary features with one another. There is a stark similarity between the works of authors belonging to the same literary movement since they believe in the same literary ideology. They have same style of writing. There is a recurring theme in their works since most of their works have the same focal point which means to say that they talk about same things, and upheld same ideals. The study of the history of English literature reveals how different literary movements evolved over different time periods. The study helps the readers in understanding how and when a particular literary movement came into existence, who were the chief writers of that movement, how it differed from the preceding literary movements and how it influenced the succeeding ones. Thus, through the study of the history of English literature, the readers can understand how ‘Cavalier Poets’ differed from ‘Metaphysical Poets’ and ‘Lake Poets’; how ‘Scottish Chaucerians’ differed from the ‘University Wits’; how ‘Romanticism’ differed from ‘Realism’; how ‘Modernism’ differed from ‘Postmodernism’ etc. Such a study of English literature enables the readers to trace the progress and development of various literary styles of writing. It also reveals a lot about the subject matter around which the literature of a particular literary movement was centred. Thus, the study of the history of English literature becomes very important in the sense that it reveals a lot more about various literary developments over the centuries. Thus, the study of the history of English literature acquaints the readers with the prevailing literary ideologies of every era. The readers can distinguish between one set of authors from the other based on the ideologies they believed in and the features of their works. The history of English literature also tells the readers about which literary movements came first and which later. It also makes it easy for the readers to recognize how Richard Lovelace and William Davenant (the Cavalier Poets) differed from John Donne, George Herbert and Andrew Marvell (the Metaphysical Poets) based on their subject matter and style of writing. So, studying the history of English literature tells the readers a great deal about various literary movements, how the writers’ belief in a particular literary ideology influenced their work and their place in the canon of English literature, how they differed from other writers, how their work influenced the literature coming in later decades etc.

### **1.2.7. Literature as an Art**

Literature is also an art, art in words. It has an artistic quality. Art in general is a reflection of some truth and beauty which are in the world. In

this sense, literature also reflects earthly truth and beauty. In art in general, it has to be perfect in order to reflect the worldly truth and beauty. Any imperfection in the use of colours or shades fails the purpose of art. Literature also in this sense has to be perfect in terms of using accurate words and phrases to convey the truth and beauty. The history of English literature enables the readers to see how writers in different ages use literature to reflect the universal truth and beauty. It tells us how Shakespeare's literary art differs from that of Milton's, Dryden's and Wordsworth's. Different writers employ different techniques to reflect the universal truth and beauty, and the study of the history of English literature acquaints the readers with the literary techniques of these different writers.

### **1.2.8. Various Literary Developments**

The literature that we see today is a result of the numerous literary transformations that took place over the centuries. There is no similarity between the twenty first century literature and the literature of Shakespeare or Milton's age. It has constantly evolved over the course of time and it is still evolving. What we see today is totally different from what it was in the sixteenth or seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, and all this is a result of the numerous literary transformations and developments that took place during the course of time. The history of English literature plays an important role in letting the readers know about these significant literary developments. On reading it the readers would be able to notice how literature has evolved over time. In the sixteenth century literature verse (poetry) was the dominant mode of literary expression. Dramatists of the Elizabethan age and even later ones used to write in verse form and their drama was called verse drama. Prose was never the medium of literary expression. But it was in the eighteenth century that prose rose to prominence when writers began to write more and more in the prose medium. The writers of the Victorian age also used prose as a medium of literary expression, and it was in this age that novel rose to prominence. The Theatre of the Absurd that came in the twentieth century was a also a breakaway from the literature of earlier times. The science fiction that emerged in the novels of H. G. Wells was also a remarkable shift in the field of literature in the sense that never ever before literature had incorporated the elements of science to tell a story. The social realism that took birth in the literature of Victorian age was also a major literary shift in the sense that literature had begun to discuss the issues of contemporary English society for the first time. Social issues of the day found expression in the novels of Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Elizabeth Gaskell and many other literary artists of the time.

The One-Act Play that developed in later centuries is also a major literary development. Thus, the study of the history of English literature acquaints the readers with great literary developments that changed the face of literature. On reading the history of English literature the readers come to know how literature has evolved over the course of time, and when and how different literary genres came into existence.

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### **1.3 THE METHODS OF STUDYING THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE**

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The body of literature produced in the English language is very large. English literature is one of the widest areas of literature at present. It has a very rich history. English literature as we see it today is a result of numerous transformations that took place over the course of centuries. It has constantly evolved and acquired new shapes with every writer rising to the literary scene. English language and literature have witnessed the growth and dominance of some of the biggest stars of literature. It is one of the richest bodies of literatures available to readers at present. It was flourishing even in the age in which the majority of people were illiterate. Because of its richness and abundance, it is very essential to study it in a systematic and organized way. A number of history books of English literature are available in the market at present which follows a certain way of going about the history of English literature. But we as readers also have to follow certain basic methods to understand the history of English literature in a better way. A clear methodical study is required to understand the history of literature produced in the English language. In this chapter, we shall talk about some of the basic and most important methods of studying the history of English literature.

#### **1.3.1. Biographical Method**

English literature has witnessed the rise of a great number of authors. It is remarkable because of its literary richness and abundant output. English literature has produced some of the greatest writers. The literary contributions of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton, Dryden, Wordsworth and many others still remain unparalleled. The literary contributions of such numerous writers have enriched literature produced in the English language. Every writer had a tremendous influence on the English literary tradition. Studying the lives of these great authors in chronological order is very important. Every history book on English literature discusses at some length the lives of major and minor writers. Such a study would give an overview of how an author lived his or her life and based on this we as readers can draw inferences about how an author's life influenced his or her writing. Thus, it becomes very

important to study the life of authors to better understand the history of English literature and their work.

The study of the life of an author provides the readers with an opportunity to analyse and understand that author's work in relation to his life. The study of the biography of an author is very important to understand his contribution and place in the canon of literature. Every literary work is the product of the life of its author. Charles Dickens dealt with child labour in his novels because he himself had worked in factories to support his family when he was very young. His novels also dealt with Debtors Prison because his father was imprisoned due to heavy debt. Every age had its own political and historical challenges. This political and historical environment of the age had a considerable influence on the writings of the authors. The authors lived their lives under the shadow of the contemporary political and historical environment. Thus, it becomes very important to study the lives of different authors to understand their literary output.

Studying the history of English literature keeping in mind the biography of the author is very important. Dr Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81) is a famous work comprising short biographies and critical appraisals of 52 poets. The work was remarkable not only for its critical commentaries on the 52 poets but also for giving short biographies of those poets. This emphasized the reading of biographical information as well to support one's interpretation of the literature of the author and the age.

The biographical information about various authors also enables the readers to develop an understanding of who came first and who came later. Generally, in any age, in history books of English literature, the discussion starts with major writers first and minor writers later. Any discussion on the Elizabethan age in history books begins with a discussion on Shakespeare and his works first and then we move on to other writers. Philip Sidney, Ben Jonson, Thomas Kyd and many others come later in history books even though they were born before Shakespeare, and thus in such cases, the biographical reading plays a major role in acquainting the readers with who came first and who came later based on the dates and years of their birth. It is noteworthy that Philip Sidney, John Lyly, Thomas Kyd, Walter Raleigh and many others came before Shakespeare. The biographical information also acquaints the readers with who died first and who later. Wordsworth and Coleridge are the two senior romantic poets who came before Byron and Keats and popularised romantic poetry. But both Byron and Keats lived a short life and died before Wordsworth and Coleridge living lives of only thirty-six and twenty-five years respectively. It is the biographical information that

tells us that Wordsworth died twenty-nine years after Keats' death. Thus, the biographical information helps the readers in understanding the lives of different authors and also how each differed from the other in terms of duration and quality of life.

Thus, the biographical method is an effective way to understand the history of English literature in the sense that it allows the readers to get familiarized with the works of different authors and study it in relation to their lives. Some critics were also of the opinion that the biographical component should never be underestimated when studying and analysing the works of an author since it provides the background for such a study. Biographical criticism plays a major role in the interpretation of the works of any author. It was in fact a significant mode of literary inquiry throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the studies of Charles Dickens, F. Scott Fitzgerald, among others. Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81) was possibly the first thorough-going exercise in biographical criticism. Thus, following the great tradition set by Dr Samuel Johnson, it is important that we as readers study the biography of different authors to better understand the history of English literature.

### **1.3.2. Historical Method**

The historical method is the most common method of studying the history of English literature. It is in fact one of the most widely used methods. It provides a panoramic view of how English literature progressed from time to time. The historical method gives the readers a detailed scenario of how literature developed amidst the socio-political and historical environment of different ages. It acquaints the readers with the social, political and historical conditions of different periods and allows them to study the literary works in the light of these socio-political and historical conditions.

The historical method of studying the history of English literature plays a very significant role in familiarizing the readers with the overall contemporary environment of different ages or periods. The historical method acquaints the readers with the major political and historical events of the age. The political and historical events were said to have considerable influence on the writings of the age. It was believed by critics and scholars that the political and historical environment of the age had a tremendous influence on the writings of the authors of that age. What happened in the society and the parliament of the nation had a sudden and considerable impact on what the writer was writing. In other words, the writers wrote under the shadow of contemporary society, politics and history in the sense that their writing was significantly influenced by the changes that took place in society, politics and history.

The historical method exposes the readers to the prevalent socio-political and historical environment of the age.

The study of the history of English literature through the historical method is very fundamental in the sense that the readers would be able to understand the historical context more efficiently. The study of Elizabethan literature would begin with the study of how England as a nation developed in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The Elizabethan age was the age known for settlement and expansion. The British empire grew quickly under the reign of Queen Elizabeth. It was perhaps the most remarkable epoch for the expansion of both mental and geographical horizons. A totally different kind of English society was emerging in England under the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and this was very much reflected in the literature produced in the age. The political and historical events that took place in the Elizabethan period had a significant and considerable influence on the literature of the age. For the first time in the history of English literature, literature was flourishing and becoming increasingly popular. The political expansion had a direct impact on the literature of the age due to which it was increasingly becoming popular. The plethora of great writers that emerged and wrote in the period of the reign of Queen Elizabeth was primarily the result of the great and positive political and historical environment of the age. Dryden was also of the same opinion as he attributed the success of Shakespeare and Fletcher 'to the genius of the age and nation in which they lived.' The industrial revolution that happened in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had significantly influenced the literature produced in those times. It can be very clearly seen that the novels of Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray and Elizabeth Gaskell were tremendously influenced by the political and historical events that took place in Victorian England. The works of female writers such as Jane Austen, George Eliot and Bronte sisters were highly influenced by and based on contemporary society. Thus, the historical method allows the readers to acquaint themselves with the political and historical background of every age and then study the works of different authors under the light of the prevalent historical and political environment.

Dr Samuel Johnson is known for his insistence on the historical approach for studying the works of an author and the history of English literature. According to him, Literature is not written to a fixed pattern but is conditioned by the writer's age and environment. Johnson for the first time makes the historical aspect an essential principle of literary criticism when he said, 'to judge rightly of an author, we must transport ourselves to his time, and examine what were the wants of his contemporaries, and what were his means of supplying them. That which is easy at one time

was difficult at another.’ The historical estimate, for Johnson, is an important factor in the real estimate of an author. His *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81) is based on a careful study of the times in which those 52 poets lived. Thus, the historical method would enable the readers to efficiently understand the context in which the authors lived and wrote. It provides readers with an adequate background to study and analyse the works of the authors of every age. Through the historical method, the readers would be able to better understand the times in which the authors lived and consequently wrote. Thus, the historical method provides adequate background to the readers to study the history of English literature.

Though it is quite normal, studying the history of English literature through the historical method would develop into readers an understanding of how literature progressed from time to time. Literature has always undergone considerable changes right from its time of beginning. It has constantly evolved over time in terms of language, style, form and content. The literature produced in the present age is very much different from what was written in the days of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton. Their style of writing significantly differed from how it is written today. The style of writing adopted by George Bernard Shaw was very much different from the style of writing employed by the great William Shakespeare. It is through the historical method that we as readers can get the idea of how literature has developed from the times of Chaucer through Shakespeare and Milton to the present-day modern writers. The historical method also allows the readers to familiarise themselves with the various literary developments like prose, novel, prose drama, realistic novel, theatre of absurd, kitchen sink drama etc. It plays a very crucial role in acquainting the readers with such major literary developments that took place throughout. Thus, the historical method proves to be a very fundamental method to study the history of English literature.

### **1.3.3. Literary Method**

The literary method has to be an obvious selection since we are concerned with the study of English literature and its history. It is an important method in the sense that it exposes the readers to the literary aspect of the history of English literature. Through the use of this method, the readers would be able to see and understand the way different writers in the history of English literature used to write. The literary method plays a very significant role in developing ‘literary critique’ in the minds of readers. The readers through the use of the literary method would be able to understand the unique art of writing adopted by different authors.

The literary method is one of the most important methods of studying the history of English literature because it exposes the readers to the plethora

of literary writing. The canon of English literature has been enriched by the literary contributions of hundreds of writers. All these writers had a very unique way of writing. Some of them were even considered the masters of certain styles of writing. Shakespeare is considered as the great master of blank verse even though it was invented by Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey. Shakespeare practised blank verse to perfection which none could match. Chaucer used to write most of his poems in the 'Rhyme Royal' stanza form. The curtail sonnet was a form invented by Gerald Manley Hopkins. The Pre-Raphaelites had their own way of writing poetry. The writings of Wordsworth and Coleridge differed significantly from those of their predecessors. So, almost every author had a unique way of writing. The study of the history of English literature through the literary method acquaints the readers with such different ways of writing adopted by different authors. The literary method plays a very fundamental role in exposing readers to popular forms of English writing. The literary method also plays a very significant role in acquainting the readers with how English literature has evolved over time in terms of its content and subject matter. The early English literature was either focused on the historical accounts of kings, queens or princes. Some of Shakespeare's works deal with the stories of such characters taken from historical accounts. He referred to *Holinshed's Chronicles* for the historical accounts for some of his great tragedies. Christopher Marlowe, Edmund Spenser and George Daniel also used *Holinshed's Chronicles* as a primary source for their works. The early English literature was also highly based on biblical stories including works such as *Piers Plowman* by William Langland, *The Merchant of Venice* by Shakespeare, *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan and many others. But with the passage of time, there occurred a shift in writing a different kind of content. The periodical in the hands of Addison and Steele began focusing on presenting the daily lives of English people. The poetry of Wordsworth and other romantics began talking about mother nature. The novels in the hands of Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray and Elizabeth Gaskell began portraying Victorian society and its evils. The psychological novels of Jane Austen inaugurated a different kind of subject writing. What appeared in the science fiction novels of H. G. Wells was unprecedented in the history of English literature. The emergence of 'the Theatre of Absurd' in the mid-twentieth century was a new turn in content writing in the history of English literature. The literary method thus plays a very significant role in acquainting the readers with the plethora of developments that took place in the history of English literature in terms of its content and subject matter. The readers would be able to better understand how literary content or subject matter

has undergone substantial transformations over time in the history of English literature.

#### **1.3.4. Linguistic Method**

Language is the most fundamental aspect of any literature. The body of literature produced in the English language is substantial. It has been enriched by the writings of hundreds of authors who used language differently. The English language has considerably evolved from the earliest of times. The study of the history of English literature through the linguistic method allows the readers to see and understand how the English language has evolved over a period of time. The linguistic method brings to the attention of the readers the various ways in which the English language has transformed. The readers can well acquaint themselves with such linguistic developments and transformations through the use of the linguistic method.

The linguistic method plays a pivotal role in letting the readers know about how the English language was used differently by different authors. Not just what is written but how it is written is also important. The linguistic method of studying the history of English literature reveals to us that the English language was used in a different way in earlier periods. How we use the English language today was not the case with the authors in the Old English Period. Much of the language used in the Old English Period stands obsolete today. The English language used by Chaucer and Langland was very much different from how later day authors used it. The vocabulary and the spellings of words were also very different in the early periods: 'you' was 'thou' or 'thee' and 'your' was 'thy' or 'thine'. Shakespeare also enriched the English language with his genius in the sense that he had considerable influence on the English language. He made substantial contributions to the development of the English language. The linguistic method acquaints the readers with the various ways in which the English language has been used. How Shakespeare used it was very much different from how G. B. Shaw used it. How Milton used it was very much different from how Wordsworth and Coleridge used it. The language in prose used by Charles Dickens and other essayists was very much different from the language used by twentieth-century prose writers. Thus, the linguistic method of studying the history of English literature plays a significant role in allowing the readers to explore the ways in which the English language was used over a period of time. The English language has undergone tremendous transformations from the times of Chaucer through Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth to Dickens, Shaw and other modern-day authors, and the linguistic method acquaints the readers with such developments and

transformations. The linguistic method thus plays a fundamental role in the study of the history of English literature.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS-1**

**Answer the following questions:**

1. Why is it important to study the history of English literature? Discuss in brief.

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2. Define and discuss in brief the various methods used to study the history of English literature.

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**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS-2**

**Fill in the blanks with given options in the brackets:**

1. Literature has always remained an integral part of human..... [existence/clothing]
2. History or politics has always influenced ..... [food-habits/literature]
3. Dr Samuel Johnson has been known for his work “.....”. [The Lives of the Poets/Volpone]
4. The English language used by Chaucer and Langland was ..... from how later day authors used it. [same/different]
5. The ..... method of studying the history of English literature reveals to us that the English language was used in a different way in earlier periods. [linguistic/pictorial]

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**1.4 LET US SUM UP**

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English literature is one of the widest literatures of the world. It is written in almost every country and thus it becomes very important to study its history to get an idea of how literature of the English language has grown and developed over the course of time. It is a fact that right from its very

beginning to the present time English literature has evolved in terms of language, style, form and content. Because of being written and published in a number of countries, the body of English literature is very large, and thus, it becomes very important for the readers and students to trace the development of English literature. Studying the history of English literature acquaints the readers or students with the various developments that took place in the realm of English literature. It also allows them to get familiar with the political, social and cultural history of the English nation. Thus, the history of English literature plays an important role in letting the readers or students know about the various ways in which English literature has evolved. As discussed above, English literature is a vast subject. It has a rich history. It has produced a great number of writers including some literary geniuses like Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, John Milton, John Dryden, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, John Keats, Charles Dickens, H. G. Wells, G. B. Shaw and many others. Because of its substantial body of literature, English literature has a rich and varied history. It has been enriched by the writings of numerous writers. Because of its vastness and abundant output, it is a daunting task to study the history of English literature. Therefore, certain methods have to be adopted to study the history of such a substantial body of literature. The four methods discussed above namely biographical, historical, literary and linguistic are the most basic and important methods to study and understand the history of English literature in a better way.

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### **1.5 KEY WORDS**

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- Daunting: seeming difficult to deal with in prospect; intimidating.
- Linguistics: the scientific study of language and its structure, including the study of grammar, syntax, and phonetics.
- Biography: an account of someone's life written by someone else.
- Substantial: concerning the essentials of something.
- Transformation: a process by which one figure, expression, or function is converted into another one of similar value.

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### **1.6 BOOKS SUGGESTED**

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1. History of English Literature by Legouis and Cazamian.
2. A Critical History of English Literature (Vol- I) by David Daiches.
3. An Introduction to the Study of English Literature by W. H. Hudson.

4. The Palgrave Guide to English Literature and Its Contexts by Peter Widdowson.
5. The Short Oxford History of English Literature by Andrew Sanders.
6. A Brief History of English Literature by John Peck and Martin Coyle.
7. History of English Literature by Edward Albert
8. A Short History of English Literature by Ifor Evans

### **ANSWERS**

1. Existence
2. Literature
3. The Lives of the Poets
4. Different
5. linguistic