

Literary Periods of British & American Literature

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The Literature Network

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Periods of British Literature:

450-1066: Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) Period

1066-1500: Middle English Period

1500-1660: The Renaissance

1558-1603: Elizabethan Age

1603-1625: Jacobean Age

1625-1649: Caroline Age

1649-1660: Commonwealth Period (or Puritan Interregnum)

1660-1785: The Neoclassical Period

1660-1700: The Restoration

1700-1745: The Augustan Age (or Age of Pope)

1745-1785: The Age of Sensibility (or Age of Johnson)

1785-1830: The Romantic Period

1832-1901: The Victorian Period

1848-1860: The Pre-Raphaelites

1880-1901: Aestheticism and Decadence

1901-1914: The Edwardian Period

1910-1936: The Georgian Period

1914-1945: The Modern Period

1945-present: Postmodern Period

The **Old English Period** or the **Anglo-Saxon Period** refers to the literature produced from the invasion of Celtic England by Germanic tribes in the first half of the fifth century to the conquest of England in 1066 by William the Conqueror.

During the **Old English Period**, written literature began to develop from oral tradition, and in the eighth century poetry written in the vernacular Anglo-Saxon (also known as Old English) appeared. One of the most well-known eighth century Old English pieces of literature is *Beowulf*, a great Germanic epic poem. Two poets of the Old English Period who wrote on biblical and religious themes were Caedmon and Cynewulf.

The **Middle English Period** consists of the literature produced in the four and a half centuries between the Norman Conquest of 1066 and about 1500, when the standard literary language, derived from the dialect of the London area, became recognizable as "modern English."

Prior to the second half of the fourteenth century, vernacular literature consisted primarily of religious writings. The second half of the fourteenth century produced the first great age of secular literature. The most widely known of these writings are Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*.

While the English Renaissance began with the ascent of the House of Tudor to the English throne in 1485, the **English Literary Renaissance** began with English humanists such as Sir Thomas More and Sir Thomas Wyatt.

In addition, the **English Literary Renaissance** consists of four subsets: The **Elizabethan Age**, the **Jacobean Age**, the **Caroline Age**, and the **Commonwealth Period** (which is also known as the **Puritan Interregnum**).

The **Elizabethan Age** of English Literature coincides with the reign of Elizabeth I, 1558 - 1603. During this time, medieval tradition was blended with Renaissance optimism. Lyric poetry, prose, and drama were the major styles of literature that flowered during the Elizabethan Age. Some important writers of the Elizabethan Age include William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Edmund Spenser, Sir Walter Raleigh, and Ben Jonson.

The **Jacobean Age** of English Literature coincides with the reign of James I, 1603 - 1625. During this time the literature became sophisticated, sombre, and conscious of social abuse and rivalry. The Jacobean Age produced rich prose and drama as well as the King James translation of the Bible. Shakespeare and Jonson wrote during the Jacobean Age, as well as John Donne, Francis Bacon, and Thomas Middleton.

The **Caroline Age** of English Literature coincides with the reign of Charles I, 1625 - 1649. The writers of this age wrote with refinement and elegance. This era produced a circle of poets known as the "Cavalier Poets" and the dramatists of this age were the last to write in the Elizabethan tradition.

The **Commonwealth Period**, also known as the **Puritan Interregnum**, of English Literature includes the literature produced during the time of Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell. This period produced the political writings of John Milton, Thomas Hobbes' political treatise Leviathan, and the prose of Andrew Marvell. In September of 1642, the Puritans closed theatres on moral and religious grounds. For the next eighteen years the theatres remained closed, accounting for the lack of drama produced during this time period.

The **Neoclassical Period** of English literature (1660 - 1785) was much influenced by contemporary French literature, which was in the midst of its greatest age. The literature of this time is known for its use of philosophy, reason, skepticism, wit, and refinement. The **Neoclassical Period** also marks the first great age of English literary criticism.

Much like the **English Literary Renaissance**, the **Neoclassical Period** can be divided into three subsets: the **Restoration**, the **Augustan Age**, and the **Age of Sensibility**.

The **Restoration**, 1660 - 1700, is marked by the restoration of the monarchy and the triumph of reason and tolerance over religious and political passion. The **Restoration** produced an abundance of prose and poetry and the distinctive comedy of manners known as Restoration comedy. It was during the **Restoration** that John Milton published Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained. Other major writers of the era include John Dryden, John Wilmot 2nd Earl of Rochester, and John Locke.

The English **Augustan Age** derives its name from the brilliant literary period of Vergil and Ovid under the Roman emperor Augustus (27 B.C. - A.D. 14). In English literature, the **Augustan Age**, 1700 - 1745, refers to literature with the predominant characteristics of refinement, clarity, elegance, and balance of judgement. Well-known writers of the **Augustan Age** include Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, and Daniel Defoe. A significant contribution of this time period included the release of the first English novels by Defoe, and the "novel of character," Pamela, by Samuel Richardson in 1740.

During the **Age of Sensibility**, literature reflected the worldview of Enlightenment and began to emphasize instinct and feeling, rather than judgment and restraint. A growing sympathy for the Middle Ages during the **Age of Sensibility** sparked an interest in medieval ballads and folk literature. Another name for this period is the **Age of Johnson** because the dominant authors of this period were Samuel Johnson and his literary and intellectual circle. This period also produced some of the greatest early novels of the English language, including Richardson's Clarissa (1748) and Henry Fielding's Tom Jones (1749).

The **Romantic Period** of English literature began in the late 18th century and lasted until approximately 1832. In general, Romantic literature can be characterized by its personal nature, its strong use of feeling, its abundant use of symbolism, and its exploration of nature and the supernatural. In addition, the writings of the Romantics were considered innovative based on their belief that literature should be

spontaneous, imaginative, personal, and free. The **Romantic Period** produced a wealth of authors including Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Jane Austen, and Lord Byron.

It was during the **Romantic Period** that *Gothic literature* was born. Traits of *Gothic literature* are dark and gloomy settings and characters and situations that are fantastic, grotesque, wild, savage, mysterious, and often melodramatic. Two of the most famous Gothic novelists are Anne Radcliffe and Mary Shelley.

The **Victorian Period** of English literature began with the accession of Queen Victoria to the throne in 1837, and lasted until her death in 1901. Because the **Victorian Period** of English literature spans over six decades, the year 1870 is often used to divide the era into "early Victorian" and "late Victorian." In general, Victorian literature deals with the issues and problems of the day. Some contemporary issues that the Victorians dealt with include the social, economic, religious, and intellectual issues and problems surrounding the Industrial Revolution, growing class tensions, the early feminist movement, pressures toward political and social reform, and the impact of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution on philosophy and religion. Some of the most recognized authors of the Victorian era include Alfred Lord Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, her husband Robert, Matthew Arnold, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy.

Within the **Victorian Period**, two other literary movements, that of **The Pre-Raphaelites** (1848-1860) and the movement of **Aestheticism and Decadence** (1880-1900), gained prominence.

In 1848, a group of English artists, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti, formed the "Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood." It was the aim of this group to return painting to a style of truthfulness, simplicity, and religious devotion that had reigned prior to Raphael and the high Italian Renaissance. Rossetti and his literary circle, which included his sister Christina, incorporated these ideals into their literature, and the result was that of the literary **Pre-Raphaelites**.

The **Aestheticism and Decadence** movement of English literature grew out of the French movement of the same name. The authors of this movement encouraged experimentation and held the view that art is totally opposed "natural" norms of morality. This style of literature opposed the dominance of scientific thinking and defied the hostility of society to any art that was not useful or did not teach moral values. It was from the movement of **Aestheticism and Decadence** that the phrase *art for art's sake* emerged. A well-known author of the English **Aestheticism and Decadence** movement is Oscar Wilde.

The **Edwardian Period** is named for King Edward VII and spans the time from Queen Victoria's death (1901) to the beginning of World War I (1914). During this time, the British Empire was at its height and the wealthy lived lives of materialistic luxury. However, four fifths of the English population lived in squalor. The writings of the **Edwardian Period** reflect and comment on these social conditions. For example, writers such as George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells attacked social injustice and the selfishness of the upper classes. Other writers of the time include William Butler Yeats, Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, Henry James, and E.M. Forster.

The **Georgian Period** refers to the period of British Literature that is named for the reign of George V (1910-36). Many writers of the **Edwardian Period** continued to write during the **Georgian Period**. This era also produced a group of poets known as the *Georgian poets*. These writers, now regarded as minor poets, were published in four anthologies entitled *Georgian Poetry*, published by Edward Marsh between 1912 and 1922. Georgian poetry tends to focus on rural subject matter and is traditional in technique and form.

The **Modern Period** applies to British literature written since the beginning of World War I in 1914. The authors of the **Modern Period** have experimented with subject matter, form, and style and have produced achievements in all literary genres. Poets of the period include Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, and Seamus Heaney. Novelists include James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf. Dramatists include Noel Coward and Samuel Beckett.

Following World War II (1939-1945), the **Postmodern Period** of British Literature developed. *Postmodernism* blends literary genres and styles and attempts to break free of modernist forms.

While the British literary scene at the turn of the new millennium is crowded and varied, the authors still fall into the categories of *modernism* and *postmodernism*. However, with the passage of time the Modern era may be reorganized and expanded.

Periods of American Literature:

1607-1776: Colonial Period

1765-1790: The Revolutionary Age

1775-1828: The Early National Period

1828-1865: The Romantic Period (Also known as: The American Renaissance or The Age of Transcendentalism)

1865-1900: The Realistic Period

1900-1914: The Naturalistic Period

1914-1939: American Modernist Period

1920s: Jazz Age, Harlem Renaissance

1920s, 1930s: The "Lost Generation"

1939-present: The Contemporary Period

1950s: Beat Writers

1960s, 1970s: Counterculture

In addition, American Literature recognizes works of:

African-American Writers

Native American Writers

Asian-American Writers

The **Colonial Period** of American Literature spans the time between the founding of the first settlement at Jamestown to the outbreak of the Revolution. The writings of this time centered on religious, practical, or historical themes. The most influential writers of the **Colonial Period** include John Winthrop, Cotton Mather, Benjamin Franklin, and Anne Bradstreet.

During the **Revolutionary Age**, 1765-1790, some of the greatest documents of American history were authored. In 1776, Thomas Paine authored Common Sense and Thomas Jefferson wrote The Declaration of Independence. In 1781, The Articles of Confederation were ratified. Between 1787 and 1788, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay wrote The Federalist Papers. Finally, in 1787, The Constitution of the United States was drafted and in 1789 it was ratified.

The **Early National Period** of American Literature saw the beginnings of literature that could be truly identified as "American". The writers of this new American literature wrote in the English style, but the settings, themes, and characters were authentically American. In addition, poets of this time wrote poetry that was relatively independent of English precursors. Three of the most recognized writers of this time are Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and Edgar Allan Poe.

The period 1828-1865 in American Literature is commonly identified as the **Romantic Period in America**, but may also be referred to as the **American Renaissance** or the **Age of Transcendentalism**. The writers of this period produced works of originality and excellence that helped shape the ideas, ideals, and literary aims of many American writers. Writers of the **American Romantic Period** include Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman.

Following the Civil War, American Literature entered into the **Realistic Period**. The major form of literature produced in this era was *realistic fiction*. Unlike romantic fiction, realistic fiction aims to represent life as it really is and make the reader believe that the characters actually might exist and the situations might actually happen. In order to have this effect on the reader, realistic fiction focuses on the ordinary and commonplace. The major writers of the **Realistic Period** include Mark Twain, Henry James, Bret Harte, and Kate Chopin.

The years 1900-1914 mark American Literature's **Naturalistic Period**. Naturalism claims to give an even more accurate depiction of life than realism. In accordance with a post-Darwinian thesis, naturalistic writers hold that the characters of their works are merely higher-order animals whose character and behavior is entirely based upon heredity and environment. Naturalistic writings try to present subjects with scientific objectivity. These writings are often frank, crude, and tragic. Stephen Crane, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser are the most studied American Naturalists.

Between 1914 and 1939, American Literature entered into a phase which is still referred to as "**The Beginnings of Modern Literature**". Like their British counterparts, the American Modernists experimented with subject matter, form, and style and produced achievements in all literary genres. Some well-known American Modernist Poets include Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and E.E. Cummings. Included among American Modernist Prose Writers are Edith Wharton, Sinclair Lewis, and Willa Cather.

The **American Modernist Period** also produced many other writers that are considered to be writers of **Modernist Period Subclasses**. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald is considered a writer of **The Jazz Age**, Langston Hughes and W.E.B. DuBois writers of **The Harlem Renaissance**, and Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Ernest Hemingway writers of **The Lost Generation**.

The Great Depression marked the end of the **American Modernist Period**, and writers such as William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, and Eugene O'Neill dealt with the social and political issues of the time in their literary works.

1939 marked the beginning of the **Contemporary Period** of American Literature. This period includes an abundance of important American literary figures spanning from World War II into the New Millennium. These writers include, but are not limited to, Eudora Welty, John Updike, Kurt Vonnegut, Sylvia Plath, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Zora Neal Hurston, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou.

During the 1950s, a vigorous anti-establishment, and anti-traditional literary movement emerged. The main writers of this movement, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, are called **Beat Writers**. Much writing of the 1960s and 1970s, referred to as **Counterculture Writing**, continued the literary ideals of the **Beat Movement**, but in a more extreme and fevered manner.

Currently, the contemporary American literary scene is crowded and varied. With the passage of time the Contemporary Period may be reorganized and/or expanded. In the future will writers such as Anne Rice, John Grisham, or Amy Tan be included in the canon of American Literature? We will just have to wait and see.