

World Literature Periods

Early Periods of Literature

These periods are spans of time in which literature shared intellectual, linguistic, religious, and artistic influences. In the Western tradition, the early periods of literary history are roughly as follows below:

A. THE CLASSICAL PERIOD (1200 BCE - 455 CE)

1. **HOMERIC or HEROIC PERIOD (1200-800 BCE)**
Greek legends are passed along orally, including Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. This is a chaotic period of warrior-prince wandering sea-traders, and fierce pirates.
2. **CLASSICAL GREEK PERIOD (800-200 BCE)**
Greek writers and philosophers such as Gorgias, Aesop, Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Euripides, and Sophocles. The fifth century (499-400 BCE) in particular is renowned as The Golden Age of Greece. This is the sophisticated period of the polis, or individual City-State, and early democracy. Some of the world's finest art, poetry, drama, architecture, and philosophy originate in Athens.
3. **CLASSICAL ROMAN PERIOD (200 BCE-455 CE)**
Greece's culture gives way to Roman power when Rome conquers Greece in 146 CE. The Roman Republic was traditionally founded in 509 BCE, but it is limited in size until later. Playwrights of this time include Plautus and Terence. After nearly 500 years as a Republic, Rome slides into dictatorship under Julius Caesar and finally into a monarchial empire under Caesar Augustus in 27 CE. This later period is known as the Roman Imperial period. Roman writers include Ovid, Horace, and Virgil. Roman philosophers include Marcus Aurelius and Lucretius. Roman rhetoricians include Cicero and Quintilian.
4. **PATRISTIC PERIOD (c. 70 CE-455 CE)** Early Christian writings appear such as Saint Augustine, Tertullian, Saint Cyprian, Saint Ambrose and Saint Jerome. This is the period in which Saint Jerome first compiles the Bible, when Christianity spread across Europe, and the Roman Empire suffered its dying convulsions. In this period, barbarians attack Rome in 410 CE and the city finally falls to them completely in 455 CE.

B. THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD (455 CE-1485 CE)

1. **THE OLD ENGLISH (ANGLO-SAXON) PERIOD (428-1066)** The so-called "Dark Ages" (455 CE - 799 CE) occur when Rome falls and barbarian tribes move into Europe. Franks, Ostrogoths, Lombards, and Goths settle in the ruins of Europe and the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes migrate to Britain, displacing native Celts into Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. Early Old English poems such as *Beowulf*, *The Wanderer*, and *The Seafarer* originate sometime late in the Anglo-Saxon period. The Carolingian Renaissance (800- 850 CE) emerges in Europe. In central Europe, texts include early medieval grammars, encyclopedias, etc. In northern Europe, this time period marks the setting of Viking sagas.
2. **THE MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD (c. 1066-1450 CE)** In 1066, Norman French armies invade and conquer England under William I. This marks the end of the Anglo- Saxon hierarchy and the emergence of the Twelfth Century Renaissance (c. 1100-1200 CE). French chivalric romances--such as works by Chretien de Troyes--and French fables--such as the works of Marie de France and *Jeun de Meun*--spread in popularity. Abelard and other humanists produce great scholastic and theological works.

LATE OR "HIGH" MEDIEVAL PERIOD (c. 1200-1485 CE): This often tumultuous period is marked by the Middle English writings of Geoffrey Chaucer, the "Gawain" or "Pearl" Poet, the Wakefield Master, and William Langland. Other writers include Italian and French authors like Boccaccio, Petrarch, Dante, and Christine de Pisan.

C. THE RENAISSANCE AND REFORMATION (c. 1485-1660 CE)

The Renaissance takes place in the late 15th, 16th, and early 17th century in Britain, but somewhat earlier in Italy and the southern Europe, somewhat later in northern Europe.

1. **EARLY TUDOR PERIOD** (1485-1558): The War of the Roses ends in England with Henry Tudor (Henry VII) claiming the throne. Martin Luther's split with Rome marks the emergence of Protestantism, followed by Henry VIII's Anglican schism, which creates the first Protestant church in England. Edmond Spenser is a sample poet.
2. **ELIZABETHAN PERIOD** (1558-1603): Queen Elizabeth saves England from both Spanish invasion and internal squabbles at home. Her reign is marked by the early works of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Kydd, and Sidney.
3. **JACOBEAN PERIOD** (1603-1625): Shakespeare's later work, Aemilia Lanyer, Ben Jonson, and John Donne.
4. **CAROLINE AGE** (1625-1649): John Milton, George Herbert, Robert Herrick, the "Sons of Ben" and others write during the reign of Charles I and his Cavaliers (The Cavalier Poets).
5. **COMMONWEALTH PERIOD OR PURITAN INTERREGNUM** (1649-1660): Under Cromwell's Puritan dictatorship, John Milton continues to write, but we also find writers like Andrew Marvell and Sir Thomas Browne.

Later Periods of Literature

These periods are spans of time in which literature shared intellectual, linguistic, religious, and artistic influences. In the Western tradition, the later periods of literary history are roughly as follows below:

D. THE ENLIGHTENMENT (NEOCLASSICAL) PERIOD (C. 1660-1790)

"Neoclassical" refers to the increased influence of Classical literature upon these centuries. The Neoclassical Period is also called the "Enlightenment" due to the increased reverence for logic and disdain for superstition. The period is marked by the rise of Deism, intellectual backlash against earlier Puritanism, and America's revolution against England.

1. **RESTORATION PERIOD** (c. 1660-1700): This period marks the British king's restoration to the throne after a long period of Puritan domination in England. Its symptoms include the dominance of French and Classical influences on poetry and drama. Sample writers include John Dryden, John Lock, Sir William Temple, and Samuel Pepys, and Aphra Behn in England. Abroad, representative authors include Jean Racine and Molière.
2. **THE AUGUSTAN AGE** (c. 1700-1750): This period is marked by the imitation of Virgil and Horace's literature in English letters. The principal English writers include Addison, Steele, Swift, and Alexander Pope. Abroad, Voltaire is the dominant French writer.
3. **THE AGE OF JOHNSON** (c. 1750-1790): This period marks the transition toward the upcoming Romanticism though the period is still largely Neoclassical. Major writers include Dr. Samuel Johnson, Boswell, and Edward Gibbon who represent the Neoclassical tendencies, while writers like Robert Burns, Thomas Gray, Cowper, and Crabbe show movement away from the Neoclassical ideal. In America, this period is called the Colonial Period. It includes colonial and revolutionary writers like Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine.

E. ROMANTIC PERIOD (c. 1790-1830)

Romantic poets write about nature, imagination, and individuality in England. Some Romantics include Coleridge, Blake, Keats, and Shelley in Britain and Johann von Goethe in Germany. In America, this period is called the Transcendental Period. Transcendentalists include Emerson and Thoreau. Gothic writings, (c. 1790-1890) overlap with the Romantic and Victorian periods. Writers of Gothic novels (the precursor to horror novels) include Mary Shelley, Radcliffe, Monk Lewis, and Victorians like Bram Stoker in Britain. In America, Gothic writers include Poe and Hawthorne.

F. VICTORIAN PERIOD And The 19th Century (c. 1832-1901)

Writing during the period of Queen Victoria's reign includes sentimental novels. British writers include Elizabeth Browning, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Robert Browning, Charles Dickens, the Brontë sisters, and Jane Austen. Pre- Raphaelites, like the Rossettis and William Morris, idealize and long for the morality of the medieval world. The end of the Victorian Period is marked by intellectual movements of Asceticism and "the Decadence" in the writings of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. In America, Naturalist writers like Stephen Crane flourish, as do early free verse poets like Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson.

G. MODERN PERIOD (c. 1914-1945)

In Britain, modernist writers include W. B. Yeats, Seamus Heaney, Dylan Thomas, W. H. Auden, Virginia Woolf, and Wilfred Owen. In America, the modernist period includes Robert Frost and Flannery O'Connor as well as the famous writers of The Lost Generation (also called the writers of The Jazz Age, 1914-1929) such as Hemingway, Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner. "The Harlem Renaissance" marks the rise of black writers such as Baldwin and Ellison. Realism is the dominant fashion, but the disillusionment with the World Wars lead to new experimentation.

H. POSTMODERN PERIOD (c. 1945 onward)

T. S. Eliot, Morrison, Shaw, Beckett, Stoppard, Fowles, Calvino, Ginsberg, Pynchon, and other modern writers, poets, and playwrights experiment with metafiction and fragmented poetry. Multiculturalism leads to increasing canonization of non-Caucasian writers such as Langston Hughes, Sandra Cisneros, and Zora Neal Hurston. Magic Realists such as Gabriel García Márquez, Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier, Günter Grass, and Salman Rushdie flourish with surrealistic writings embroidered in the conventions of realism.

American Literature Periods

A. NATIVE AMERICAN

Much of the literature of this period is mythological. Most of Native American myths were written long before Europeans settled in North America. Like most cultural myths, these myths examine the creation, the nature of gods, and the natural world. Non-mythological writings of Native Americans often examine the relationship between Native American society and early European settlers and, later, the effect of United States' political policies on Native American culture. N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Silko, and Louis Erdrich are all contemporary Native American writers that utilize Native American themes and experiences in their work.

B. PURITAIN (1472-1750)

Most of this is histories, journals, personal poems, sermons, and diaries. The literature is either utilitarian, very personal, or religious: it focused on daily life, settlement, moral attitudes, and the authority of the Bible and the Church. We call it *Puritan* because the majority of the writers during this period were strongly influenced by Puritan ideals and values, especially the concept of predestination and sin. "Puritan" began as an insult by traditional Anglicans to those who criticized or wished to "purify" the Church of England. Jonathan Edwards, William Bradford, and Ann Bradstreet are authors of this period. This period still influences American concepts about God, money, and America as the "promised land."

C. ENLIGHTENMENT/REVOLUTIONARY (1750-1800)

Called the *Enlightenment* period due to the influence of science and logic, this period is marked in US literature by political writings and diverged from the religious focus of the Puritan era. Genres included political documents, speeches, and letters. There is a lack of emphasis and dependence on the Bible and more use of common sense (logic) and science. Writings expanded the truths found in the Bible and did not necessarily divorce from the idea of God and spirituality. The writings were often meant to explore the ideas of liberty, patriotism, government, nationalism, and American character. Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and Thomas Paine are all examples of authors of this period. The notions of liberty, freedom, independence, and rights that were discussed and debated at this time are still part of the American culture and political system.

D. ROMANTICISM (1800-1840)

Romanticism is a literary and artistic movement of the nineteenth century that arose in reaction against eighteenth-century Neoclassicism and the political focus of the Enlightenment. Placing a premium on fancy, imagination, emotion, nature, individuality, human intuition, and exotica, it moved from personal and political documents to entertaining ones, which gave rise to short stories, poetry, and novels. Purely American topics were introduced such as frontier life, manifest destiny, and individualism. Romantic elements can be found in the works of American writers as diverse as Cooper, Poe, Thoreau, Emerson, Dickinson, Hawthorne, and Melville. Romanticism is particularly evident in the works of the New England Transcendentalists.

1. **TRANSCENDENTALISM (1840-1855):** *Transcendentalism* is an American literary and philosophical movement of the nineteenth century. The Transcendentalists, who were based in New England, believed that intuition and the individual conscience “transcend” experience and thus are better guides to truth than are the senses and logical reason. Influenced by Romanticism, the Transcendentalists respect the individual spirit and the natural world, believing that divinity is present everywhere, in nature and in each person. The Transcendentalists include Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, W.H. Channing, Margaret Fuller, and Elizabeth Peabody. The anti-Transcendentalist (Hawthorne and Melville) rebelled against the philosophy that man is basically good. A third group, the Fireside poets, wrote about more practical aspects of life such as dying and patriotism.
2. **GOTHIC:** Writers like Poe and Hawthorne responded to the optimistic vision of the romantics with a darker vision. The industrial revolution brought ideas that the "old ways" of doing things are now irrelevant and out of this came the exploration of the supernatural, being at the mercy of forces beyond human control, and the nature of good and evil. It is out of the gothic writers that the contemporary genre of horror springs.

F. REALISM (1865-1915)

Realism is the presentation in art of the details of actual life. Realism began during the nineteenth century and stressed the actual as opposed to the imagined or the fanciful. The Realists tried to write truthfully and objectively about ordinary characters in ordinary situations. They reacted against *Romanticism*, rejecting heroic, adventurous, unusual, or unfamiliar subjects. American realism grew from the work of local-color writers such as Bret Harte and Sarah Orne Jewett and is evident in the writings of major figures such as Mark Twain and Henry James.

1. **NATURALISM:** An outgrowth of *Realism*, *Naturalism* is a literary movement among novelists at the end of the nineteenth century and during the early decades of the twentieth century. The Naturalists tended to view people as hapless victims of immutable natural laws and the effects of heredity and environment on people helpless to change their situations. Early exponents of Naturalism include Stephen Crane, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser.
2. **REGIONALISM:** Another outgrowth of *Realism*, *Regionalism* in literature is the tendency among certain authors to write about specific geographical areas. Regional writers like Willa Cather and William Faulkner, present the distinct culture of an area, including its speech, customs, beliefs, and history. Local-color writing may be considered a type of Regionalism, but Regionalists, like the southern writers of the 1920's, usually go beyond mere presentation of cultural idiosyncrasies and attempt, instead, a sophisticated sociological or anthropological treatment of the culture of a region.

G. MODERN (1915-1946)

The authors during this period raised all the great questions of life, but offered no answers. Because Modernism came about during an age of disillusionment, confusion, and major societal change, this period reacted to two world wars, the Great Depression, and African

American and Women suffrage. Writers often examined self-definition and new opportunity. In addition, because of the emancipation of slaves in the late 19th century and the adoption of the 14th and 15th amendments, race became a more pronounced aspect of literature: prejudice and stereotypes were often explored, even if only with a minor character. Also, because of the women's suffrage movement and the adoption of the 19th amendment, gender roles were often explored. Faulkner, Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Frost are all examples.

1. **IMAGISM (1912-1927)** *Imagism* was a literary movement that flourished between 1912 and 1927. Led by Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, the Imagist poets rejected nineteenth-century poetic forms and language. Instead, they wrote short poems that used ordinary language and free verse to create sharp, exact, concentrated pictures.
2. **HARLEM RENAISSANCE.** Part of the Modern Age, The *Harlem Renaissance*, which occurred during the 1920's, was a time of African American artistic creativity centered in Harlem, in New York City. Writers of the Harlem Renaissance include Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, and Arna Bontemps.

H. CONTEMPORARY (1946-present)

No clear philosophy identifies the present span of literature, but like the Modernist movement, often explores personal experience and social change. Writers like J.D. Salinger, Beat Poet Jack Kerouac, John Updike, Flannery O'Connor, Sylvia Plath, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. represent the span of contemporary styles and works.

1. **POST-MODERNISM:** Writers of post-modernism often utilize absurd plots, lyrical style, elaborate symbolism, and narrative digression or fragmentation. Notable Post-modern writers include Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon, Cormac McCarthy,