

# Periods of English Literature

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## I. The Medieval Period (455 CE-1485)

### 1. THE OLD ENGLISH (ANGLO-SAXON) PERIOD (428-1066)

The so-called "Dark Ages" (455 CE -799 CE) occurred after Rome fell and barbarian tribes moved into Europe. Franks, Ostrogoths, Lombards, and Goths settled in the ruins of Europe, and the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes migrated to Britain displacing native Celts into Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. Early Old English poems such as *Beowulf*, *The Wanderer*, and *The Seafarer* originated sometime late in the Anglo-Saxon period. The Carolingian Renaissance (800- 850 CE) emerged 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 (1066-1450)

In 1066, Norman French armies invaded and conquered 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 produced great scholastic and theological works.

Late or "High" Medieval Period (1200-1485): 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.

## II. The Renaissance and Reformation (1485-1660)

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

### 1. Early Tudor Period (1485-1558)

The War of the Roses ended 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 created the first Protestant church in England. Edmund Spenser is a sample poet.

### 2. Elizabethan Period (1558-1603)

Queen Elizabeth saved England from both Spanish invasion and internal squabbles at home. Her reign is marked by the early works of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Kyd, and Sidney.

### 3. Jacobean Period (1603-1625)

Shakespeare's later work include Aemilia Lanyer, Ben Jonson, and John Donne.

### 4. Caroline Age (1625-1649)

John Milton, George Herbert, Robert Herrick, the "Sons of Ben" and others wrote during the reign of Charles I and his Cavaliers.

### 5. Commonwealth Period/Puritan Interregnum (1649-1660)

Under Cromwell's Puritan dictatorship, John Milton continued to write, but we also find writers like Andrew Marvell and Sir Thomas Browne.

## III. The Enlightenment (Neoclassical) Period (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 (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 Locke, Sir William Temple, and Samuel Pepys, and Aphra Behn in England. Abroad, representative authors include Jean Racine and Molière.

### 2. The Augustan Age (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 was the dominant French writer.

### 3. The Age of Johnson (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.

## IV. The Romantic Period (1790-1830)

Romantic poets wrote about nature, imagination, and individuality in England. Some Romantics include Coleridge, Blake, Keats, and Shelley in Britain and Johann von Goethe in Germany. Jane Austen also wrote at this time, though she is typically not categorized with the male Romantic poets. In America, this period is mirrored in the Transcendental Period from about 1830-1850. Transcendentalists include Emerson and Thoreau.

Gothic writings (1790-1890) overlap with the Romantic and Victorian periods. Writers of Gothic novels (the precursor to horror novels) include Radcliffe, "Monk" Lewis, and Victorians like Bram Stoker in Britain. In America, Gothic writers include Poe and Hawthorne.

## V. The Victorian Period and the 19th Century (1832-1901)

Writings from the period of Queen Victoria's reign include sentimental novels. British writers include Elizabeth Browning, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Robert Browning, Charles Dickens, and the Brontë sisters. Pre-Raphaelites, like the Rossetti siblings and William Morris, idealize and long for the morality of the medieval world.

The end of the Victorian Period is marked by the intellectual movements of Aestheticism and "the Decadence" in the writings of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. In America, Naturalist writers like Stephen Crane flourished, as did early free verse poets like Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson.

## VI. The Modern Period (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, Stein, 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.

## VII. The Postmodern Period (1945 - onward)

T. S. Eliot, Morrison, Shaw, Beckett, Stoppard, Fowles, Calvino, Ginsberg, Pynchon, and other modern writers, poets, and playwrights experimented with metafiction and fragmented poetry. Multiculturalism

led to an 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 flourished with surrealistic writings embroidered in the conventions of realism.