

Literary Periods of British Literature

For ease of study, literary scholars divide British into segments referred to as "periods." While the exact number, dates, and names of these periods vary, the following lists conform to widespread acceptance. Following the tables, in chronological order, is a brief description of each period and major writers within it.

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 judgment. 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.

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