ERAS OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Old English Period, c.450-1066

Characteristics

It begins with the invasion of Celtic England by Germanic tribes (Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Frisians) c.450 and lasts until the conquest of England by the Norman-French William the Conqueror in 1066.  
Writing of this time was primarily religious verse or prose.

Major Writers or Works  
Poetry:  
Beowulf, The Wanderer, The Seafarer, Deor.

Prose:  
Writings of Alfred the Great.

Middle English Period, 1066-1500

Characteristics

After the Norman invasion, there were linguistic, social, and cultural changes and also changes in the literature.  
In the 15th century, literature aimed at a popular audience grew.  
A range of genres emerged, including chivalric romances, secular and religious songs, folk ballads, drama, morality and miracle plays.

Major Writers or Works  
Poetry:  
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Dream of the Rood, William Langland's Piers Plowman, lyrics such as "The Cuckoo Song" ("Summer is icumen in").

Prose:  
Sir Thomas Malory's Morte D'Arthur, Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe's The Book of Margery Kempe.

Drama:  
The Second Play of the Shepherds, Everyman.

The Renaissance (Also called The Early Modern Period), 1500-1660

Characteristics

The Renaissance (meaning "rebirth") is used broadly to refer to the flourishing of literature, painting, sculpture, architecture, and learning in general that began in Italy in the 14th century.  
The Renaissance period in British literature spans the years 1500 to 1660 and is usually divided into five subsections: Early Tudor, Elizabethan, Jacobean, Caroline, Commonwealth (or Puritan Interregnum).

Major Writers or Works  
For literary works in this period, see entries in the Early Tudor, Elizabethan, Jacobean, Caroline, and Commonwealth periods.

The Renaissance, 1500-1660 Early Tudor Period, 1500-1558

Characteristics

The Early Tudor period is the first phase of the Renaissance period.

This period is known for its poetry and nonfiction prose.

English literature's first dramatic comedy, Ralph Roister Doister, was first performed in 1553.

Major Writers or Works  
Poetry:  
John Skelton, Henrty Howard, The Earl of Surrey, Sir Thomas Wyatt.

Prose:  
Sir Thomas More's Utopia, Sir Thomas Elyot.

Drama: John Heywood, Nicholas Udall, Ralph Roister Doister.

The Renaissance, 1500-1660 Elizabethan Age, 1558-1603

Characteristics

The second era of the Renaissance period in British literature, spanning the reign of Elizabeth I.  
The Elizabethan era was a period marked by developments in English commerce, nationalism, exploration, and maritime power.  
It is considered a great age in literary history, particularly for drama.

Major Writers or Works

Poetry:  
Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser's The Faerie Queen, Elizabeth I, William Shakespeare.

Prose:  
Francis Bacon, Sir Walter Raleigh.

Drama:  
Christopher Marlowe's The Jew of Malta, William Shakespeare, Thomas Kydd's The Spanish Tragedy.

The Renaissance, 1500-1660 Jacobean Age, 1603-1625

Characteristics

The third era of the Renaissance period in British literature defined by the reign of James I.  
In this era, there were significant writings in prose, including the King James Bible.

Drama and poetry also flourished.  
Major Writers or Works

Poetry:  
John Donne, George Chapman, Lady Mary Wroth.

Prose:  
Francis Bacon, Robert Burton.

Drama:  
William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, John Webster, John Fletcher, Thomas Middleton, George Chapman.

The Renaissance, 1500-1660 Caroline Age, 1625-1649

Characteristics

The Caroline Age marks the period of the English Civil War between the supporters of the King (called Cavaliers) and the supporters of Parliament (called the Roundheads).

Literature of this period featured poetry, nonfiction prose, and the Cavalier Poets, who were associated with the court and wrote poems of gallantry and courtship.

Major Writers or Works

Poetry:  
John Milton, George Herbert. Cavalier Poets (Richard Lovelace, Sir John Suckling, Thomas Carew, and Robert Herrick).

Prose:  
Robert Burton, Sir Thomas Browne.

Drama:  
Philip Massinger, John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore.

The Renaissance, 1500-1660 Commonwealth (or Puritan Interregnum), 1649-1658

Characteristics

In this era, England was ruled by Parliament and, Oliver Cromwell and then briefly by his son, Richard, until 1859.  
Theatres were closed on moral and religious grounds. While drama did not flourish, significant examples of nonfiction prose and poetry were written during this period.

Major Writers or Works

Poetry:  
John Milton, Andrew Marvell, Henry Vaughan, Edmund Waller, Abraham Cowley, Katherine Philips.

Prose:  
Thomas Hobbes's Leviathan, Sir Thomas Browne, Izaak Walton, Thomas Fuller, Jeremy Taylor.

Neoclassical Period, 1660-1785  
Characteristics  
The Neoclassical period is often divided into three sub-areas: the Restoration era, the Augustan age, and the Age of Sensibility.  
Major Writers or Works

For literary works in this period, see entries in the Restoration Era, the Augustan Age, and the Age of Sensibility.

Neoclassical Period, 1660-1785 The Restoration Era, 1660-1700

Characteristics

The Restoration era begins with the crowning of Charles II and the restoration of the Stuart line in 1660 and ends around 1700.  
After the Puritan ban on theatres was lifted, theatre came back into prominence.  
Drama of this period frequently focused upon the aristocracy and the life of the court and is characterized by its use of urbanity, wit, and licentious plot lines.  
Major Writers or Works

Poetry:  
John Milton's Paradise Lost, John Dryden, Samuel Butler.

Prose:  
Samuel Pepys' Diary, John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, John Dryden, Isaac Newton's Principles of Mathematics.

Novels:  
Aphra Behn's Oroonoko.

Drama:  
Sir George Etherege, William Congreve's The Way of the World, Aphra Behn's The Rover.

Neoclassical Period, 1660-1785 The Augustan Era, 1700-1745

Characteristics

Many writers in this period identified themselves with writers in the age of the Roman Emperor Augustus.  
Augustan writers imitated the literary forms of Horace, Virgil, and Ovid and drew upon the perceived order, decorum, moderation, civility, and wit of these writers.  
Major Writers or Works

Poetry:  
Alexander Pope, John Gay, Jonathan Swift.

Prose:  
Richard Steele, Joseph Addison, Alexander Pope, Eliza Haywood, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.

Novels:  
Samuel Richardson's Pamela, Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels.

Drama:  
Henry Fielding, John Gay's The Beggar's Opera.

Neoclassical Period, 1660-1785 The Age of Sensibility, 1744-1785 (alt. ending dates 1789 or 1798)

Characteristics

The Age of Sensibility anticipates the Romantic period.  
In contrast to the Augustan era, the Age of Sensibility focused upon instinct, feeling, imagination, and sometimes the sublime.  
New cultural attitudes and new theories of literature emerged at this time.

The novel became an increasingly popular and prevalent form.  
Major Writers or Works

Poetry:  
Thomas Gray, William Collins, Christopher Smart, William Cowper, Anne Finch, Mary Leapor.

Prose:  
Samuel Johnson's essays and Dictionary, Edmund Burke, James Boswell.

Novels:  
Samuel Richardson, Tobias Smollet, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne, Frances Burney.

Drama:  
Oliver Goldsmith's She Stoops to Conquer Richard Brinsley Sheridan's The School for Scandal.

The Romantic Period, 1785-1837 (alt. Start dates are 1789 or 1798)

Characteristics

Many writers in the Romantic period emphasized feeling and imagination and looked toward nature for insight into the divine.  
The individual and his or her subjective experiences and expressions of those experiences were highly valued.  
Many scholars see the artistic and aesthetic freedoms in romanticism in contrast to the ideals of neoclassicism.  
In addition to a wealth of poetry, the Romantic period featured significant innovations in the novel form, including the Gothic novel.  
Major Writers or Works

Poetry:  
Robert Burns, William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, P.B. Shelley, John Keats, Helen Maria Williams, Anna Laetitia Barbauld.

Prose:  
Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Prince's The History of Mary Prince, Charles Lamb, Dorothy Wordsworth.

Novels:  
Jane Austen, Sir Walter Scott, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, Matthew Gregory Lewis's The Monk, Ann Radcliffe.

Drama:  
Joanna Baillie.

The Victorian Period, 1837-1901

Characteristics

Early Victorian literature is that written before 1870.  
Late Victorian literature is that written after 1870.  
Varied in form, style and content, Victorian literature reflects a changing social, political, economic, and cultural climate.  
Industrialization, urbanization, technological advances, and economic and political changes are just a few of the forces reflected in Victorian literature.  
Recurrent issues include poverty, class, gender, philosophy, and religious issues.  
Major Writers or Works

Poetry:  
Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Prose:  
Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Florence Nightingale, Frances Power Cobbe, Charles Darwin.

Novels:  
Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Anthony Trollope, William Makepeace Thackeray, Elizabeth Gaskell.

Drama:  
Tom Taylor, Gilbert and Sullivan, H.J. Byron.

Pre-Raphaelitism, 1848-1850s

Characteristics

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was formed by a group of visual artists who attempted to return painting to the simplicity and truthfulness of art before the High Renaissance.  
Major Writers or Works

Poetry:  
Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," William Morris, Charles Algernon Swinburne.

Aestheticism (Aesthetic Movement), 1880-1900

Characteristics

Aestheticism is a literary and visual art movement in late nineteenth-century Europe.  
Centered on a belief in "art for art's sake," aestheticism believed that art was not meant to serve moral or didactic or purpose; art's value was in its beauty.  
Major Writers or Works

Poetry:  
Charles Algernon Swinburne, Oscar Wilde, Lionel Johnson Arthur Symons.

Prose:  
Charles Algernon Swinburne, Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater.

Novels:  
Charles Algernon Swinburne, Oscar Wilde.

Drama:  
Charles Algernon Swinburne, Oscar Wilde.

Decadence, 1880-1900

Characteristics

Writers perceived in this ancient literature high refinement with an element of impending decay. They felt this to be an appropriate reflection of European society.  
Decadence was concerned with unconventional artistic forms and ideas. Followers often led unconventional lives.  
Major Writers or Works

Poetry:  
Ernest Dowson, Arthur Symons, Lionel Johnson.

Prose:  
Oscar Wilde.

Novels:  
Oscar Wilde.

Drama:  
Oscar Wilde.

Edwardian Period, 1901- 1910

Characteristics

A period of British literature named by the reign of Edward VII and referring to literature published after the Victorian period and before WWI.  
The Edwardian period is not characterized by a consistent style or theme or genre; the term generally refers to a historical period rather than a literary style.  
Major Writers or Works

Poetry:  
William Butler Yeats, Rudyard Kipling.

Prose:  
Arnold Bennett, Ford Madox Ford, Alfred Noyes.

Novels:  
Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, Henry James, H.G. Wells, Ford Madox Ford, James Galsworthy.

Drama:  
George Bernard Shaw, John M. Synge, William Butler Yeats, James Barrie.

Modern Period, 1914-1939

Characteristics

A period in British and American literature spanning the years between WWI and WWII.  
Works in this period reflect the changing social, political, and cultural climate and are diverse, experimental, and nontraditional.  
Major Writers or Works

Poetry:  
Wilfred Owen, W.H Auden, A.E. Housman, T.S. Eliot, Marianne Moore.

Prose:  
Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, T.S. Eliot.

Novels:  
Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Evelyn Waugh, D.H Lawrence.

Drama:  
Sean O'Casey, William Butler Yeats, George Bernard Shaw.

Postmodern/Contemporary Period, 1939-present

Characteristics

In British and American literature, the postmodern period refers to literature written after WWII.The postmodern period reflects anxieties concerning, and reactions to, life in the 20th century.  
Postmodern works are often highly experimental and anti-conventional.  
Major Writers or Works

Poetry:  
Edith Sitwell, Dylan Thomas, Louis MacNeice, Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes, Stevie Smith, Seamus Heaney, Eavan Boland.

Prose:  
George Orwell, Jeanette Winterson, Martin Amis.

Novels:  
George Orwell, William Golding, Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, Graham Greene, John Fowles, Iris Murdoch, Ian McEwan, A.S. Byatt, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul.

Drama:  
Samuel Beckett, Noel Coward, Tom Stoppard, Harold Pinter, Caryl Churchill.