



Old English (Anglo-Saxon) Period (450–1066)

The term Anglo-Saxon comes from two Germanic tribes: the Angles and the Saxons. This period of literature dates back to their invasion (along with the Jutes) of Celtic England circa 450. The era ends in 1066 when Norman France, under William, conquered England.

Much of the first half of this period—prior to the seventh century, at least—had oral literature. A lot of the prose during this time was a translation of something else or otherwise legal, medical, or religious in nature; however, some works, such as *Beowulf* and those by period poets Caedmon and Cynewulf, are important.

Middle English Period (1066–1500)

The Middle English period sees a huge transition in the language, culture, and lifestyle of England and results in what we can recognize today as a form of “modern” (recognizable) English. The era extends to around 1500. As with the [Old English period](#), much of the Middle English writings were religious in nature; however, from about 1350 onward, secular literature began to rise. This period is home to the likes of [Chaucer](#), Thomas Malory, and Robert Henryson. Notable works include "Piers Plowman" and "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight."

The Renaissance (1500–1660)

Recently, critics and literary historians have begun to call this the “Early Modern” period, but here we retain the historically familiar term “Renaissance.” This period is often subdivided into four parts, including the Elizabethan Age (1558–1603), the Jacobean Age (1603–1625), the Caroline Age (1625–1649), and the Commonwealth Period (1649–1660).

The Elizabethan Age was the golden age of English drama. Some of its noteworthy figures include Christopher Marlowe, Francis Bacon, Edmund Spenser, Sir Walter Raleigh, and, of course, William Shakespeare. The Jacobean Age is named for the reign of James I. It includes the works of John Donne, Shakespeare, Michael Drayton, John Webster, Elizabeth Cary, Ben Jonson, and Lady Mary Wroth. The King James translation of the Bible also appeared during the Jacobean Age. The Caroline Age covers the reign of Charles I (“Carolus”). John Milton, Robert Burton, and George Herbert are some of the notable figures.

Finally, the Commonwealth Period was so named for the period between the end of the English Civil War and the restoration of the Stuart monarchy. This is the time when Oliver Cromwell, a Puritan, led Parliament, who ruled the nation. At this time, public theaters were closed (for nearly two decades) to prevent public assembly and to combat moral and religious transgressions. John Milton and Thomas Hobbes’ political writings appeared and, while drama suffered, prose writers such as Thomas Fuller, Abraham Cowley, and Andrew Marvell published prolifically.

The Neoclassical Period (1600–1785)

The Neoclassical period is also subdivided into ages, including The Restoration (1660–1700), The Augustan Age (1700–1745), and The Age of Sensibility (1745–1785). The Restoration period sees some response to the puritanical age, especially in the theater. Restoration comedies (comedies of manner) developed during this time under the talent of playwrights like William Congreve and John Dryden. Satire, too, became quite popular, as evidenced by the success of Samuel Butler. Other notable writers of the age include Aphra Behn, John Bunyan, and John Locke.

The Augustan Age was the time of Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, who imitated those first Augustans and even drew parallels between themselves and the first set. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, a poet, was prolific at this time and noted for challenging stereotypically female roles. Daniel Defoe was also popular.

The Age of Sensibility (sometimes referred to as the Age of Johnson) was the time of Edmund Burke, Edward Gibbon, Hester Lynch Thrale, James Boswell, and, of course, Samuel Johnson. Ideas such as neoclassicism, a critical and literary mode, and the Enlightenment, a particular worldview shared by many intellectuals, were championed during this age. Novelists to explore include Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, Tobias Smollett, and Laurence Sterne as well as the poets William Cowper and Thomas Percy.

The Romantic Period (1785–1832)

The beginning date for the Romantic period is often debated. Some claim it is 1785, immediately following the Age of Sensibility. Others say it began in 1789 with the start of the [French Revolution](#), and still others believe that 1798, the publication year for William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s book *Lyrical Ballads* is its true beginning.

The time period ends with the passage of the Reform Bill (which signaled the Victorian Era) and with the death of Sir Walter Scott. American literature has its own [Romantic period](#), but typically when one speaks of Romanticism, one is referring to this great and diverse age of British literature, perhaps the most popular and well-known of all literary ages.

This era includes the works of such juggernauts as Wordsworth, Coleridge, William Blake, Lord Byron, John Keats, Charles Lamb, Mary Wollstonecraft, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Thomas De Quincey, [Jane Austen](#), and [Mary Shelley](#). There is also a minor period, also quite popular (between 1786–1800), called the [Gothic era](#). Writers of note for this period include Matthew Lewis, Anne Radcliffe, and William Beckford.

The Victorian Period (1832–1901)

This period is named for the reign of Queen Victoria, who ascended to the throne in 1837, and it lasts until her death in 1901. It was a time of great social, religious, intellectual, and economic issues, heralded by the passage of the Reform Bill, which expanded voting rights. The period has often been divided into “Early” (1832–1848), “Mid” (1848–1870) and “Late” (1870–1901) periods or into two phases, that of the Pre-Raphaelites (1848–1860) and that of Aestheticism and Decadence (1880–1901).

The Victorian period is in strong contention with the Romantic period for being the most popular, influential, and prolific period in all of English (and world) literature. Poets of this time include Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Matthew Arnold, among others. Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, and Walter Pater were advancing the essay form at this time. Finally, prose fiction truly found its place under the auspices of Charles Dickens, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), Anthony Trollope, Thomas Hardy, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Samuel Butler.

The Edwardian Period (1901–1914)

This period is named for King Edward VII and covers the period between Victoria’s death and the outbreak of World War I. Although a short period (and a short reign for Edward VII), the era includes incredible classic novelists such as Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, Rudyard Kipling, H.G. Wells, and Henry James (who was born in America but spent most of his writing career in England); notable poets such as Alfred Noyes and [William Butler Yeats](#); and dramatists such as James Barrie, George Bernard Shaw, and John Galsworthy.

The Georgian Period (1910–1936)

The Georgian period usually refers to the reign of George V (1910–1936) but sometimes also includes the reigns of the four successive Georges from 1714–1830. Here, we refer to the former description as it applies chronologically and covers, for example, the Georgian poets, such as Ralph Hodgson, John Masefield, W.H. Davies, and Rupert Brooke.

Georgian poetry today is typically considered to be the works of minor poets anthologized by Edward Marsh. The themes and subject matter tended to be rural or pastoral in nature, treated delicately and traditionally rather than with passion (like was found in the previous periods) or with experimentation (as would be seen in the upcoming modern period).

The Modern Period (1914–?)

The modern period traditionally applies to works written after the start of [World War I](#). Common features include bold experimentation with subject matter, style, and form, encompassing narrative, verse, and drama. W.B. Yeats' words, "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold," are often referred to when describing the core tenet or "feeling" of modernist concerns.

Some of the most notable writers of this period include the novelists James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley, D.H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, Dorothy Richardson, Graham Greene, E.M. Forster, and Doris Lessing; the poets W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Seamus Heaney, Wilfred Owens, Dylan Thomas, and Robert Graves; and the dramatists Tom Stoppard, George Bernard Shaw, Samuel Beckett, Frank McGuinness, Harold Pinter, and Caryl Churchill.

New Criticism also appeared at this time, led by the likes of [Woolf](#), Eliot, William Empson, and others, which reinvigorated literary criticism in general. It is difficult to say whether modernism has ended, though we know that postmodernism has developed after and from it; for now, the genre remains ongoing.

The Postmodern Period (1945–?)

The postmodern period begins about the time that World War II ended. Many believe it is a direct response to modernism. Some say the period ended about 1990, but it is likely too soon to declare this period closed. Poststructuralist literary theory and criticism developed during this time. Some notable writers of the period include [Samuel Beckett](#), Joseph Heller, Anthony Burgess, John Fowles, Penelope M. Lively, and Iain Banks. Many postmodern authors wrote during the modern period as well.