

## Brief Synopses of Literary Periods

### Renaissance – from The Literature Network (28 May 2019)

Several threads can be said to tie the entire European Renaissance together across the three centuries which it spanned. The steady rise of nationalism, coupled with the first flourishing of democracy, were traits common to the entire Continent. The first inklings of a middle class began to gain power in the cities, as trade and commerce became full enterprises in their own right. With the fear of contagion, a distant bad memory, and people eager to get out of their homes and see more of the world, international and even global trade began to surge forward. Along with products and wealth, ideas also spread from one nation to another. Fashions in Venice soon became the fashions in Paris and eventually London. Speaking of the British Islands, the well-known practice of young privileged men “touring” the continent first began during the Renaissance. The ideas these travelers brought back to their homelands would influence culture, government, literature and fashion for many years thereafter. Until the Renaissance, Britain was regarded as something of a wilderness, lacking culture and refinement. Even the English language was disdained. The preeminent English philosopher Thomas More published his *Utopia* in Latin, and a vernacular English translation did appear until decades afterward.

The single greatest innovation of the Renaissance era was the printing press, put into service around 1440 by Johannes Gutenberg. Rudimentary presses had existed for a long time, but Gutenberg’s design maximized printing efficiency in a way that changed the world of arts, letters, and ideas forever. His greatest innovation was a means to rapidly produce movable typesets, meaning that new sheets of text could be set in place and printed with far less effort than had previously been the case. The revolutionized printing press allowed for the fast and relatively cheap reproduction of work. Certainly it is no coincidence that literacy rates saw a measurable uptick in the decades following the press’s invention. The religious upheaval known as the Protestant Reformation would not have been possible without the capacity to make many copies of a document quickly and with minimal effort. Martin Luther’s famous “95 Theses” spread like wildfire through Continental Europe thanks to the newfound ease of reproduction. Even more so than easy reproduction, printing changed the whole social economics of reading and learning. No longer was literature a rarefied, privileged domain. The effect of having readily available literature was almost inconceivably profound in its democratization of the written word. Another overlooked aspect of this innovation is the effect that it had on the act of reading. Previously, one document was read aloud to a group of people. In the oral tradition, biblical or humorous stories were memorized and then passed down. Thanks to the sudden increase in printed material, communal reading and the oral tradition gradually gave way to silent, individual reading. At the time, silent reading was considered something of a novelty, and there were even those who looked upon the practice with

suspicion. Nevertheless, the image of the individual engaged with the text on a solitary journey of interpretation is a quintessential Renaissance image.

Every nation in Western Europe experienced its own incarnation of the Renaissance. In different nations, even different cities within the same nation, the manifestations of Renaissance art and thought were unique. Whereas in one region, architecture might be the most obvious outlet for new creative energies, in other regions literature might take the most prominent position. At every locale, however, the rebirth of passion and creativity had undeniably world-altering effects. Although the Italian Renaissance is most familiar to students, the literary output of Renaissance England rivals anything else of the period. Spanning the years 1500-1660, the English Renaissance produced some of the greatest works of literature the world has known. The spirit of optimism, unlimited potential, and the stoic English character all coalesced to generate literature of the first order. At the same time, England graduated from an overlooked “barbarian” nation to a seat of commercial power and influence. This power naturally translated into a literature that was bold, sweeping, innovative, and trend-setting. Poets experimented with form, and dramatists revived and reinvented the classical traditions of the Greeks and Romans.

The dominant forms of English literature during the Renaissance were the poem and the drama. Among the many varieties of poetry one might have found in sixteenth century England were the lyric, the elegy, the tragedy, and the pastoral. Near the close of the English Renaissance, John Milton composed his epic *Paradise Lost*, widely considered the grandest poem in the language. Conventions played a large part in how particular poetic styles were manifested. Expectations about style, subject matter, tone, and even plot details were well-established for each poetic genre. Even the specific occasion demanded a particular form of poetry, and these tried and true conventions were tacitly understood by all. Not infrequently, poetry of the era was intended to be accompanied by music. In any case, the general consensus among critics is that the chief aim of English Renaissance verse was to encapsulate beauty and truth in words. English poetry of the period was ostentatious, repetitious, and often betrayed a subtle wit. One attribute that tended to set English letters apart from the Continent was the willingness to intermix different genres into a sort of hodgepodge, experimental affair. This pastiche style is exemplified in Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queen*, a long poem which mingled elements of romance, tragedy, epic and pastoral into an entertaining and still cohesive whole.

English court life and the opinions of noble patrons had a profound influence on the direction of the arts. Being close to the king or queen was desirable, but also dangerous. The literature reveals that courtiers were exceedingly clever with their use of language, employing double meanings and sly wit to protect their own interests. The verbal duels one might have overheard in the court naturally found their way into the poetry and drama of the time. The nuanced

communication style of Shakespeare's vivid characters, for example, had its genesis in the court of the English royalty.

In the area of drama, no one matched William Shakespeare in terms of variety, profundity, and exquisite use of language. His subject matter ran the gamut, from classical Greco-Roman stories to contemporary tales of unrequited love. Shakespeare is known for his ability to shift between comedy and tragedy, from complex character study to light-hearted farce. He is likewise highly regarded for the exquisite formal structure which all of his plays demonstrate. This goes beyond just acts and scenes, but encompasses the emotional and psychological arc of the action in the drama. More than anyone else, he elevated the English language to a level of sumptuousness that previous generations would not have thought possible. In particular, Shakespeare's sonnets display a verbal pyrotechnics seldom seen even today, with images layered one on top of another in a kind of sensory collage. Strangely enough, very few details of the playwright's life are known today. His uncertain biography has led to numerous conspiracy theories, even to the point of questioning whether he was in fact a single person. One of the profound difficulties in ascribing authorship to any piece of literature from so long ago is that copyright, in the modern sense of the term, did not exist. A writer simply did not own his or her own words, an inconceivable state of affairs

The theatre in Renaissance England steadily evolved from a village festival attraction to a bona fide cultural institution. During the Middle Ages, troops of vagabond actors would perform morality plays, essentially live-action sermons, to delighted provincial audiences. In 1567, the Red Lion was erected on the outskirts of London, one of the first commercial playhouses. From the very beginning, the theater had its detractors. Locals despised the crowd and the noise that the popular houses attracted, and the pubs and brothels that inevitably cropped up nearby. Many saw the theater as an invitation to laziness, with children abandoning their studies and laborers leaving work to see the plays. Others found the subject matter distasteful and wicked. The Puritans, in particular, aimed their barbs directly at the Elizabethan stage. The intensely conservative offshoot of Protestantism, the Puritans feared that the cross-dressing and playacting one found at the theater would lead to sexual corruption among the general populace.

One of the greatest stumbling blocks for artists and writers during the English Renaissance was the ever-present need to somehow eke a living out of their craft. The system of patronage was one means by which talented and creative individuals sustained themselves. A patron was an independently wealthy noble person who had a taste for the finer things, and lavished money and attention on artists who catered to that taste. In some cases, the patron surrounded themselves with poets and dramatists as a mere pretence. On the other hand, many patrons had a deep and genuine appreciation for artistic creation. From the point of view of the starving artist who reaped the benefits of such generosity, it did not really matter either way. The freedom to pursue

one's craft to the utmost would certainly have been a blessing in sixteenth century England. Original manuscripts which have survived the ravages of time bear witness to the importance of securing the blessings of a wealthy patron. Typically such works are dedicated to the patron who provided the funds for its production. Or, the writer may be seeking the good favor of a patron who has yet to loosen their purse strings. There are even accounts of a single piece of literature being reproduced and dedicated to several potential patrons, a kind of wide net approach that demonstrates the business savvy required of the Renaissance artists. In the majority of cases, artists had to give much of their time to a career in some other more lucrative field and only pursue their craft as a sort of hobby. Four hundred years have done little to change that unfortunate reality.

The unbounded optimism and humanist spirit of the Renaissance could not go on forever. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the quest for human perfection had given way to decadence, cynicism, and an introversion which would stifle creativity for a long time to come. In England, the rise of Puritanism, itself an offshoot of Renaissance philosophy, put the brakes on the pursuit of knowledge and aesthetic endeavors. Another factor leading to the end of the English Renaissance was the failure of Queen Elizabeth to produce an heir. All of England adored their Queen, yet she was literally the end of a line. The power vacuum she left behind was immense, and set the stage for shocking violence and intrigue. In a nation fraught with such political uncertainty, the arts invariably suffered a decline.

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## The Age of Enlightenment – From The British Library (28 May 2019)

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- Themes: [Politics and religion](#), [Language and ideas](#)
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**The Enlightenment's emphasis on reason shaped philosophical, political and scientific discourse from the late 17th to the early 19th century. Matthew White traces the Enlightenment back to its roots in the aftermath of the Civil War, and forward to its effects on the present day.**

The Enlightenment – the great ‘Age of Reason’ – is defined as the period of rigorous scientific, political and philosophical discourse that characterised European society during the ‘long’ 18th century: from the late 17th century to the ending of the [Napoleonic Wars](#) in 1815. This was a period of huge change in thought and reason, which (in the words of historian Roy Porter) was ‘decisive in the making of modernity’.<sup>[1]</sup> Centuries of custom and tradition were brushed aside in favour of [exploration](#), [individualism](#), tolerance and [scientific endeavour](#), which, in tandem with developments in [industry](#) and [politics](#), witnessed the emergence of the ‘modern world’.

### **The emergence of ‘reason’**

The roots of the Enlightenment can be found in the turmoil of the [English Civil Wars](#). With the re-establishment of a largely unchanged autocratic monarchy, first with the restoration of [Charles II](#) in 1660 and then the [ascendancy of James II](#) in 1685, leading political thinkers began to reappraise how society and politics could (and should) be better structured. Movements for political change resulted in the Glorious Revolution of 1688/89, when William and Mary were installed on the throne as part of the new Protestant settlement.

The ancient civilisations of Greece and Rome were revered by enlightened thinkers, who viewed these communities as potential models for how modern society could be organised.<sup>[2]</sup> Many commentators of the late 17th century were eager to achieve a clean break from what they saw as centuries of political tyranny, in favour of personal freedoms and happiness centred on the individual. Chief among these thinkers was philosopher and physician [John Locke](#), whose *Two Treatises of Government* (published in 1689) advocated a separation of church and state, religious toleration, the right to property ownership and a contractual obligation on governments to recognise the innate ‘rights’ of the people.

Locke believed that reason and human consciousness were the gateways to contentment and liberty, and he demolished the notion that human knowledge was somehow pre-programmed and mystical. Locke’s ideas reflected the earlier

but equally influential works of Thomas Hobbes, which similarly advocated new social contracts between the state and civil society as the key to unlocking personal happiness for all.

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This growth of 'natural philosophy' (the term 'science' was only coined later in the 18th century) was underpinned by the application of rational thought and reason to scientific enquiry; first espoused by [Francis Bacon](#) in the early 1600s, this approach built on the earlier work of [Copernicus](#) and [Galileo](#) dating from the [medieval period](#). Scientific experimentation (with instrumentation) was used to shed new light on nature and to challenge superstitious interpretations of the living world, much of which had been deduced from uncritical readings of historical texts.



## Romanticism – from The Literature Network

The burst of creative activity at the opening of the 19th century has but one parallel in English literary history, namely, the somewhat similar flowering out of the national genius in the time of Elizabeth and the first two Stuart kings. The later age gave birth to no supreme poets, like Shakespeare and Milton. It produced no *Hamlet* and no *Paradise Lost*; but it offers a greater number of important writers, a higher average of excellence, and a wider range and variety of literary work than any preceding era. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, Byron, Shelley, and Keats are all great names; while Southey, Landor, Moore, Lamb, and De Quincey would be noteworthy figures at any period, and deserve a fuller mention than can be here accorded them. But in so crowded a generation, selection becomes increasingly needful, and in the present chapter, accordingly, the emphasis will be laid upon the first-named group as not only the most important, but the most representative of the various tendencies of their time.

The conditions of literary work in this century have been almost unduly stimulating. The rapid advance in population, wealth, education, and the means of communication has vastly increased the number of readers. Every one who has any thing to say can say it in print, and is sure of some sort of a hearing. A special feature of the time is the multiplication of periodicals. The great London dailies, like the *Times* and the *Morning Post*, which were started during the last quarter of the 18th century, were something quite new in journalism. The first of the modern reviews, the *Edinburgh*, was established in 1802, as the organ of the Whig party in Scotland. This was followed by the *London Quarterly*, in 1808, and by *Blackwood's Magazine*, in 1817, both in the Tory interest. The first editor of the *Edinburgh* was Francis Jeffrey, who assembled about him a distinguished corps of contributors, including the versatile Henry Brougham, afterward a great parliamentary orator and lord chancellor of England, and the Rev. Sydney Smith, whose witty sayings are still current. The first editor of the *Quarterly* was William Gifford, a satirist, who wrote the *Baviad* and *Mæviad* ridicule of literary affectations. He was succeeded in 1824 by John Gibson Lockhart, the son-in-law of Walter Scott, and the author of an excellent *Life of Scott*. *Blackwood's* was edited by John Wilson, Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Edinburgh, who, under the pen-name of "Christopher North," contributed to his magazine a series of brilliant imaginary dialogues between famous characters of the day, entitled *Noctes Ambrosianæ*, because they were supposed to take place at Ambrose's tavern in Edinburgh. These papers were full of a profuse, headlong eloquence, of humor, literary criticism, and personalities interspersed with songs expressive of a roystering and convivial Toryism and an uproarious contempt for Whigs and cockneys. These reviews and magazines, and others which sprang up beside them, became the *nuclei* about which the wit and scholarship of both parties gathered. Political controversy under the Regency and the reign of George IV. was thus carried on more regularly by permanent

organs, and no longer so largely by privateering, in the shape of pamphlets, like Swift's *Public Spirit of the Allies*, Johnson's *Taxation No Tyranny*, and Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Nor did politics by any means usurp the columns of the reviews. Literature, art, science, the whole circle of human effort and achievement passed under review. *Blackwood's*, *Fraser's*, and the other monthlies published stories, poetry, criticism, and correspondence—every thing, in short, which enters into the make-up of our magazines to-day, except illustrations.

Two main influences, of foreign origin, have left their trace in the English writers of the first thirty years of the 19th century, the one communicated by contact with the new German literature of the latter half of the 18th century, and in particular with the writings of Goethe, Schiller, and Kant; the other springing from the events of the French Revolution. The influence of German upon English literature in the 19th century was more intellectual and less formal than that of the Italian in the 16th and of the French in the 18th. In other words, the German writers furnished the English with ideas and ways of feeling rather than with models of style. Goethe and Schiller did not become subjects for literary imitation as Molière, Racine, and Boileau had become in Pope's time. It was reserved for a later generation and for Thomas Carlyle to domesticate the diction of German prose. But the nature and extent of this influence can, perhaps, best be noted when we come to take up the authors of the time one by one.

The excitement caused by the French Revolution was something more obvious and immediate. When the Bastille fell, in 1789, the enthusiasm among the friends of liberty and human progress in England was hardly less intense than in France. It was the dawn of a new day; the shackles were stricken from the slave; all men were free and all men were brothers, and radical young England sent up a shout that echoed the roar of the Paris mob.



## Victorian Period – from The University of Adelaide (28 May 2019)

Victorian literature is that produced during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) or the Victorian era. It forms a link and transition between the writers of the romantic period and the very different literature of the 20th century. The 19th century is often regarded as a high point in British literature as well as in other countries such as France, the United States and Russia. Books, and novels in particular, became ubiquitous, and the "Victorian novelist" created a legacy of works with continuing appeal. Many novels were published in serial form, along with short stories and poetry, in such literary magazines as *Household Words*.

### *The Novel*

The 19th century saw the novel become the leading form of literature in English. The works by pre-Victorian writers such as Jane Austen and Walter Scott had perfected both closely-observed social satire and adventure stories. Victorian novels tend to be idealized portraits of difficult lives in which hard work, perseverance, love and luck win out in the end; virtue would be rewarded and wrongdoers are suitably punished. They tended to be of an improving nature with a central moral lesson at heart, mixed with a heavy dose of sentiment. While this formula was the basis for much of earlier Victorian fiction, the situation became more complex as the century progressed.

Charles Dickens was extraordinarily popular in his day, with his characters taking on a life of their own beyond the page, and he remains one of the most popular authors of this era. His first real novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, written at only twenty-five, was an overnight success, and all his subsequent works sold extremely well. He worked diligently and prolifically to produce entertaining writing the public wanted, but also to offer commentary on social challenges of the era. The comedy of his first novel has a satirical edge which pervades his writings. These deal with the plight of the poor and oppressed and end with a ghost story cut short by his death. The slow trend in his fiction towards darker themes is mirrored in much of the writing of the century, and literature after his death in 1870 is notably different from that at the start of the era.

William Makepeace Thackeray [1811-1863] was Dickens's great rival at the time. With a similar style but a slightly more detached, acerbic and barbed satirical view of his characters, he also tended to depict situations of a more middle class flavour than Dickens. He is best known for his novel *Vanity Fair*, which is also an example of a form popular in Victorian literature: the historical novel, in which very recent history is depicted.

By contrast, the novels of Anthony Trollope [1815-1882] are light of touch, pleasant, amusing, and thoroughly healthy. They make no attempt to sound the depths of character or either to propound or solve problems.

Away from the big cities and the literary society, Haworth in West Yorkshire held a powerhouse of novel writing: the home of the Brontë family. Anne, Charlotte and Emily Brontë had time in their short lives to produce masterpieces of fiction although these were not immediately appreciated by Victorian critics. *Wuthering Heights*, Emily's only work, in particular has violence, passion, the supernatural, heightened emotion and emotional distance, an unusual mix for any novel but particularly at this time. It is a prime example of Gothic Romanticism from a woman's point of view during this period of time, examining class, myth, and gender.

Another important writer of the period was George Eliot, the pseudonym of Mary Ann Evans, who wished to write novels which would be taken seriously rather than the romances which women of the time were supposed to write.

### *Poetry*

After the upheavals of the romantic period, Poetry became somewhat institutionalised in the Victorian era; Alfred Tennyson held the poet laureateship for over forty years. Some poetry, highly regarded at the time, such as *Invictus*, is now seen as jingoistic and bombastic but poetry could also be a powerful voice of criticism, as with Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*, a fierce attack on a military blunder.

Comic verse abounded in the Victorian era, fueled by an insatiable demand for content from literary magazines. Magazines such as *Punch and Fun* teemed with humorous invention and were aimed at a well-educated readership. The most famous collection of Victorian comic verse is the *Bab Ballads*.

Husband and wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning conducted their love affair through verse and produced many tender and passionate poems. Both Matthew Arnold and Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote poems which sit somewhere in between the exultation of nature of the romantic Poetry and the Georgian Poetry of the early 20th century. Arnold's works hearken forward to some of the themes of these later poets while Hopkins drew inspiration from verse forms of Old English poetry such as *Beowulf*.

The reclaiming of the past was a major part of Victorian literature, with an interest in both classical literature but also the medieval literature of England. The Victorians loved the heroic, chivalrous stories of knights of old and they hoped to regain some of that noble, courtly behaviour and impress it upon the

people both at home and in the wider empire. The best example of this is Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* which blended the stories of King Arthur, particularly those by Thomas Malory, with contemporary concerns and ideas. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood also drew on myth and folklore for their art with Dante Gabriel Rossetti contemporaneously regarded as the chief poet amongst them.

## Realism – from The Literature Network (28 May 2019)

Realism coincided with Victorianism yet was a distinct collection of aesthetic principles in its own right. The realist novel was heavily informed by journalistic techniques, such as objectivity and fidelity to the facts of the matter. It is not a coincidence that many of the better-known novelists of the time had concurrent occupations in the publishing industry. The idea of novel-writing as a “report” grew out of this marriage between literature and journalism. Another fair comparison would be to think of the realist novel as an early form of docudrama, in which fictional persons and events are intended to seamlessly reproduce the real world. The Victorian Period saw growing concern with the plight of the less fortunate in society, and the realistic novel likewise turned its attention on subjects that beforehand would not have warranted notice. The balancing act that the upwardly mobile middle class had to perform in order to retain their position in the world was a typical subject for realistic novels. There arose a subgenre of Realism called Social Realism, which in hindsight can be interpreted as Marxist and socialist ideas set forth in literature.

Advances in the field of human psychology also fed into the preoccupation with representing the inner workings of the mind, and the delicate play of emotions. William James, brother of novelist Henry James, was a gargantuan figure in the early history of human psychology. One can imagine that their conversations proved highly influential in Henry’s creative development. Psychologists were just beginning to understand that human consciousness was far more complicated and various than had previously been considered. Debates about nature versus nurture were as popular then as they are today. More than anything, the understanding that in the human mind there are very few absolutes was critical for the realist sensibility. To put it another way, Realism embraced the concept that people were neither completely good or completely bad, but somewhere on a spectrum.

The overriding concern of all realist fiction is with character. Specifically, novelists struggled to create intricate and layered characters who, as much as possible, felt as though they could be flesh and blood creatures. Much of this effect was achieved through internal monologues and a keen understanding of human psychology. Not surprisingly, the field of psychology was in the process of evolving from metaphysical quackery into a bona fide scientific pursuit. Students of the human mind were beginning to realize that an individual is composed of a network of motivations, interests, desires, and fears. How these forces interact and sometimes do battle with each other plays a large part in the development of personality. Realism, at its highest level, attempts to lay these internal struggles bare for all to see. In other words, most of the “action” of the realist novel is internalized. Changes in mood, in perceptions, in opinions and ideas constitute turning points or climaxes.

## Modernism – from Britannica (28 May 2019)

Modernism, in the arts, a radical break with the past and the concurrent search for new forms of expression. Modernism fostered a period of experimentation in the arts from the late 19th to the mid-20th century, particularly in the years following [World War I](#).

In an era characterized by [industrialization](#), rapid [social change](#), and advances in [science](#) and the [social sciences](#) (e.g., Freudian theory), Modernists felt a growing alienation incompatible with Victorian [morality](#), optimism, and convention. New ideas in psychology, [philosophy](#), and political theory kindled a search for new modes of expression.

### Modernism in Literature

The Modernist impulse is fueled in various literatures by industrialization and [urbanization](#) and by the search for an authentic response to a much-changed world. Although prewar works by [Henry James](#), [Joseph Conrad](#), and other writers are considered Modernist, Modernism as a literary movement is typically associated with the period after World War I. The enormity of the war had undermined humankind's faith in the foundations of Western society and [culture](#), and postwar Modernist literature reflected a sense of disillusionment and fragmentation. A primary theme of [T.S. Eliot](#)'s long poem [The Waste Land](#) (1922), a [seminal](#) Modernist work, is the search for redemption and renewal in a sterile and spiritually empty landscape. With its fragmentary images and obscure [allusions](#), the poem is typical of Modernism in requiring the reader to take an active role in interpreting the text.

The publication of the Irish writer [James Joyce](#)'s [Ulysses](#) in 1922 was a landmark event in the development of Modernist literature. Dense, lengthy, and controversial, the [novel](#) details the events of one day in the life of three Dubliners through a technique known as [stream of consciousness](#), which commonly ignores orderly sentence structure and incorporates fragments of thought in an attempt to capture the flow of characters' mental processes. Portions of the book were considered obscene, and *Ulysses* was banned for many years in English-speaking countries. Other European and American Modernist authors whose works rejected chronological and narrative [continuity](#) include [Virginia Woolf](#), [Marcel Proust](#), [Gertrude Stein](#), and [William Faulkner](#).

The term Modernism is also used to refer to literary movements other than the European and American movement of the early to mid-20th century. In Latin

American literature, [Modernismo](#) arose in the late 19th century in the works of [Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera](#) and [José Martí](#). The movement, which continued into the early 20th century, reached its peak in the [poetry](#) of [Rubén Darío](#). (See also [American literature](#); [Latin American literature](#).)