Major Periods of English & American Literature

AN OVERVIEW
What is meant by “period”?

- A period is a dominant mode, style, or type of literature within a specific historical context.
- A period is usually indicative of the controlling philosophical perspective of the time.
- As such, periods are not generally confined to the literature of the time; rather, their characteristics can be seen in other art forms as well as non-literary texts.
- Dates are approximations.
Old English (450-1066)

- Few surviving texts with little in common.
- Language closer to modern German than modern English.
- Frequently reflect non-English influence.
- \textit{Beowulf}, “The Wanderer”
Middle English (1066-1500)

- Works frequently of a religiously didactic content.
- Written for performance at court or for festivals.
- Geoffrey Chaucer (*The Canterbury Tales*)
  “The Cuckoo’s Song”, mystery plays
Influence of Aristotle, Ovid, and other Greco-Roman thinkers, as well as science and exploration.

Primarily texts for public performance (plays, masques) and some books of poetry.

William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Francis Bacon, John Fletcher, Francis Beaumont.
Neoclassical Period
(Enlightenment/Age of Reason)

England 1660-1785    America 1750-1800

- Reaction to the expansiveness of the Renaissance in the direction of order and restraint.
- Developed in France (Moliere, Rousseau, Voltaire).
- Emphasized classical ideals of rationality and control (human nature is constant through time).
- Art should reflect the universal commonality of human nature. (“All men are created equal.”)
- Reason is emphasized as the highest faculty (Deism).
Writing should be well structured, emotion should be controlled, and emphasize qualities like wit.


Romantic Period

England 1785-1830       America 1800-1860

- Reaction against the scientific rationality of Neoclassicism and the Industrial Revolution.
- Developed in Germany (Kant, Goethe).
- Emphasized individuality, intuition, imagination, idealism, nature (as opposed to society & social order).
- Elevation of the common man (folklore, myth).
- Mystery and the supernatural.
American Transcendentalism (Romantic philosophy)

- Named for the core belief that our spiritual nature transcends rationality and religious doctrine; thus, it is found in intuition.
- Developed in New England, influenced by Eastern philosophy.
- Pro-suffrage & abolitionist.
Victorian Period (England 1832-1901)

- Named for the reign of Queen Victoria, Britain’s longest reigning monarch.
- Period of stability and prosperity for Britain.
- British society extremely class conscious.
- Literature seen as a bridge between Romanticism and Modernism.
- Generally emphasized realistic portrayals of common people, sometimes to promote social change.
- Some writers continue to explore gothic themes begun in Romantic Period.
Realistic Period (America 1860-1914)

- Reaction against Romantic values (Civil War).
- Developed in France (Balzac, Flaubert, Zola).
- Emphasized the commonplace and ordinary (as opposed to the romanticized individual).
- Sought to depict life as it was, not idealized.
- Mark Twain (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*), Ambrose Bierce (“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”), William Dean Howells (*A Modern Instance*), Theodore Dreiser (*Sister Carrie*).
Realistic Period (cont.)

Naturalism – hyper-realism

- Named for the belief that man is simply a higher order animal, and thus under the same natural constraints and limitations as other animals.
- Controlled by heredity and environment.
Edwardian Period (England 1901-1914)

- Named for King Edward.
- Some see as a continuation of Victorian Period; however, the status quo is increasingly threatened.
- Distinction between literature and popular fiction.
- Joseph Conrad (*Lord Jim, Heart of Darkness*), H.G. Wells (*War of the Worlds*), E.M. Forster (*A Room with a View, A Passage to India*), George Bernard Shaw (*Major Barbara*), A.C. Bradley (*Shakespearean Tragedy*).
Modern Period (1914-1945)

- Reaction against the values which led to WWI.
- Influenced by Schopenhauer (“negation of the will”), Nietzsche (Beyond Good and Evil), Kierkegaard (Fear and Trembling), as well as Darwin and Marx.
- If previous values are invalid, art is a tool to establish new values (Pound: “Make it new”).
- Writers experiment with form.
- Form and content reflect the confusion and vicissitudes of modern life.
- Expositions and resolutions are omitted; themes are implied rather than stated.
Modern Period (cont.)

Poetry:
Fiction:

Post-Modern Period (1945-?)

- Critical dispute over whether an actual period or a renewal and continuation Modernism post-WWII.
- Influenced by Freud, Sartre, Camus, Derrida, and Foucault.
- Deconstruction: Text has no inherent meaning; meaning derives from the tension between the text’s ambiguities and contradictions revealed upon close reading.
- Some believe it leads directly to the counter-cultural revolution of the 1960s.
Post-Modern Period (cont.)

Samuel Beckett (Waiting for Godot), Gabriel Garcia Marques (One Hundred Years of Solitude), William Burroughs (Naked Lunch), J.D. Salinger (A Catcher in the Rye), Kurt Vonnegut (Slaughterhouse Five), Thomas Pynchon (Gravity’s Rainbow), John Updike (Rabbit Run), Phillip Roth (Portnoy’s Complaint, American Pastoral), J.M. Coetzee (Life & Times of Michael K), Joyce Carol Oates (“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”), Margaret Atwood (The Handmaiden’s Tale), Cormac McCarthy (Blood Meridian), Allen Ginsberg (Howl and Other Poems), Charles Bukowski (The Last Night of the Earth Poems).