

*Susanne George Bloomfield*  
*American Literature*



# *Literary Periods for Dummies\**

*(\* The dates as well as influences of these literary periods are approximate and vary widely depending upon the sources.)*

## *Classical Period (1200 BC-410)*



- ⌘ The period in which Greek and Roman literature flourished.
- ⌘ The works of Aeschylus, Dante, Homer, Ovid, and other classical writers generally displayed clarity, harmony, restraint, rationality, balance, unity, simplicity, chasteness, decorum, respect for tradition, conservatism, maturity, and good sense.
- ⌘ Preferred communication among people rather than personal self expression.
- ⌘ Unity around central ideas influenced everything from architecture to intellectual thought.
- ⌘ Restraint of passion and objectivity, emphasis on the common or general attributes of the community rather than the individual.

## Medieval Period (410-1500)



- ✧ Marked by the disintegration of classical Greco-Roman culture with the Fall of the Roman Empire.
- ✧ Linked with **feudalism**, guildhouses, monasticism and Catholicism.
- ✧ Much of Medieval literature is **anonymous**.
- ✧ Early books were **handcopied** and lavishly illustrated by monks on vellum, made from calf's skin, or parchment, made from lamb's skin.
- ✧ Courtly Love created an interest in the **Medieval Romance**, featuring knights, kings, ladies in distress, and **heroic quests** (Le Morte d'Arthur), where the protagonist sets out on a journey to accomplish a goal,

encountering numerous adventures along the way that attempt to impede him.

- ✧ Medieval **religious drama** began in the churches but became secularized; folk dramas (Robin Hood) were performed at festivals.
- ✧ The characters, plots, and setting of **Allegories** often conveyed the religious, moral, political, and personal ideals of the time.

## The Renaissance (1500-1660)



- ✧ The Renaissance was an **Age of Compromise**, a gradual break from medievalism. This period consisted of the Early Tudor Age (155-1557), the Elizabethan Age (1558-1603), the Jacobean Age (1603-1625), and the Caroline Age (1625-1642).
- ✧ Revival of **Classical** literature and scholarship, building up of libraries, preserving old manuscripts, studying Greek, Latin. Classical authors were moral guides; history gave examples of ethical living.
- ✧ **Humanist** view of the world that places humankind in the center. Believed in the **fully-realized man** through education in the Humanities; comprehensive Education stressed wholeness of human personality.

- ☞ Concerned with the dignity of man and **Individualism**. Took themselves seriously, believed their ideas worth recording. Wrote letters, diaries, autobiographies.
- ☞ Introduction of **printing** led to a commercial market for literature fueled by a revitalized university life, patronage of the arts, and the opportunity for individuals to rise economically and politically.
- ☞ Cultivation of the **fine arts**, creation of new social, political, and economic institutions, and expansion of science and philosophy after the barbarism of the Dark Ages.
- ☞ Importance of **Present life**, not Afterlife. Protestantism gave optimistic view of Mankind, Free Will.
- ☞ **Metaphysical** poets used conceits to bring into startling juxtaposition the contradictions of life, placing emphasis on subtleties of thought rather than conventional form.

## *Neoclassicism/Enlightenment (1660-1798)*



- ☞ Began with the **Restoration** of the Stuarts in 1660 and reflected the reaction against Puritanism.
- ☞ Believed in art as **Imitation**, or mirror of life. Adherence to the form and spirit of great writers of antiquity who seemed most completely to exemplify truth to human nature. Literature was meant to instruct the reader.
- ☞ Compulsion for **Order**, logic, accuracy, restrained emotion, "correctness," good taste, "decorum," good sense. They believed in strict rules for literature and exacting allegiance in everything from religion to manners to dress.
- ☞ Appeal to the **Intellect** rather than emotions. Sober rationalism, profoundly moral. They emphasized the power of the mind and turned to the Roman past for models. In the 18th century, "nature" meant human nature and the natural, rational order of the universe.
- ☞ They believed that there was a continuous **struggle between reason and passion**, and that passion threatened health, politics, and the individual, thus forming an obstacle to clear understanding.
- ☞ Sense of obligation to **Society**. Neoclassicists believed in the superior importance of the social group and shared opinion. The classical past was a symbol of stability. Public life and the general good was more important than the individual.

## Sentimentalism (1740-1900s)



- ☞ The period in American history most commonly associated with sentimentalism is the mid-nineteenth century, making its way from England in the form of the seduction narrative. Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1794) became America's first bestseller.
- ☞ The most influential expression of beliefs that shaped American life in the years before the Civil War. The combined sales of ALL works by Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, and Whitman in the 1850s did not equal the sales of ONE of the more popular sentimental novels.
- ☞ Even during the Progressive Era of the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, the "muckrakers" used a sentimental appeal to feeling in order to bring about social and economic reform (Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, 1905).
- ☞ Sentimentalism was written for edification's sake, not for art, and had a mission: instruction and the implantation of virtue.
- ☞ Also called **Domestic Fiction**, it was obsessed with the nature of **Power**. Women had to remain subservient for they lacked the material means of escape or opposition. Powerlessness became a source of strength (the meek will inherit the earth).
- ☞ **Compassion** was the primary emotional goal of sentimental narration, and it existed in relation to suffering, making that the primary subject matter of sentimental fiction.
- ☞ One charge leveled against sentimental fiction was that it was escapist and divorced from human experience, yet these works never offer escape, but teach readers that the only way to overcome tyranny is through self-discipline and overcoming the desire to rebel. Often tears and prayers are the heroine's only recourse to injustice.
- ☞ Another charge against Domestic Fiction is its concern with **Trivialities**; however, women writers of the 19th century governed only one small corner of the universe and had to use this as the basis for their fulfillment. Thus, the making of tea was not a household task, but a religious ceremony like holy communion.
- ☞ Sentimentalism employed many common **Conventions** and **Motifs**: seduction and/or persecuted innocence; melancholy, mourning, and death; an intense concern with marriage; a belief in the primacy of the family; letters as a narrative device; tears, swoons, and fainting; in interest in mesmerism and spiritualism; suicide; orphanhood; garden and woodland settings; humanitarianism.



## Romanticism (1798-1870)



- ✧ Marked by a reaction against neoclassic restraint, order, intellect, and obligation to society.
- ✧ Emphasizes **feeling** and emotions, not reason. True Knowledge comes from the heart, not the head. Value of inner, rather than outer experience. Romanticism attempted to humanize mankind after the rigidity of the Neoclassics. Obsessed with the importance of love.
- ✧ **Liberation** from tradition, authority. Suspicion of social institutions. Freedom from formal restraints and rules of literature, such as conventional poetic diction and strict poetic forms.
- ✧ **Children** have superior insight and wisdom.

Innocence, not experience has the greatest value.

- ✧ Importance of **individual**. The greatest authority was within the self, rather than society. What all human beings share was uniqueness. Enthusiasm for ordinary people or the common man. The "alienated hero."
- ✧ High value attached to **creative imagination** and originality. Newness has more importance. Faith in genius.
- ✧ Look to **nature** for Truth. Emphasis on simple, commonplace, natural. Nature was not only intrinsically beautiful, but serves as a spiritual source. Nostalgia for a simpler way of being.

## American Transcendentalism (1836-1860)



- ✧ The **American Renaissance**, the philosophic and literary movement, centered in New England during the 19C. An idealistic philosophy, Transcendentalism took its name and many of its ideas from Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*.
- ✧ A reaction against scientific rationalism, it relied upon **intuition** as the only way to comprehend reality in a world where every natural fact embodies a spiritual truth. Everything in man's world is a microcosm of the universe. The basic statements of Transcendental belief are

found in Emerson's essay "Nature" and in his lecture "The Transcendentalist."

- ✧ The writings of the Transcendentalists (Emerson, Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, Fuller, Theodore Parker, Orestes Brownson, Elizabeth Peabody, et al) and those

of their contemporaries Whitman, Melville, and Hawthorne, for whom they prepared the ground, represent the first flowering of the American tradition.

- ☞ Transcendentalists began as dissatisfied with but developed into repudiation of the entire established order, making them leaders and spokesmen of **reform** in church state and society, contributing to the Abolitionist movement, feminism, and communitarian experiments like Brook Farm and Fruitlands.
- ☞ It is impossible to assign a specific set of doctrinal beliefs as common to the whole group. As James Freeman Clarke said, "We are called like-minded because no two of us think alike." However, some of the most commonly held principles include the following beliefs:

- Man has ideas that come not through the five senses or the powers of reasoning, but are either the result of direct revelation from God, his immediate inspiration, or his immanent presence in the spiritual world. It exulted **intuition over reason or sensory knowledge**.
- The essential unity of all things are ordered by a Supreme Mind or **Over-Soul**, an all-pervading power for goodness from which all things come and of which all things are a part. It is this belief in the divinity of man that allowed Transcendentalists to disregard external authority and tradition. Thus, "Trust Thyself" became their motto.
- The **innate worth of the individual** was a logical spiritual extension of the political principles set forth in the Declaration of Independence. Thus, the greatest emphasis should be placed on individual reform rather than social action. They prized individual expression over the restraints of law and custom.
- Although not consistent churchgoers, they were deeply **religious**, and represented God on earth as His agents trying to live in His image. By heightening their awareness of the beauties of nature, including human nature, instead of accumulating knowledge or acquiring possessions, they could live the good life.

## *American Realism (1865-1900)*



- ☞ **Vast changes** occurred in America after the Civil War: the end of the frontier era of the American West; the influx of immigrants and emigrants; the urbanization and industrialization
- ☞ Views of Darwin, Marx, Spencer, Comte, the growth of education, and the rising middle class altered the nation's perceptions.

- ❧ The mass-circulation magazine paid for by advertising (as well as the 1891 International Copyright Act) created an enormous audience for authors.
- ❧ Realists were concerned with a faithful representation of life.
- ❧ Believed in the **Mimetic Theory**, convinced that if they reflected the surface of life accurately, they would also reflect it truthfully. However, they turned away from models of the past and embraced examples of the present. Many consider it the ultimate middle-class art, for it finds its subject matter in bourgeois life and manners, with surface details and common actions constituting the chief subject matter.
- ❧ Realism was a direct reaction against romantic fantasy and its heightened passion, a coming down to earth from the clouds and the acceptance of all of human experience as subject matter.
- ❧ **Verisimilitude** (the appearance or semblance of truth and actuality) of detail derived from first-hand observation and documentation.
- ❧ The Realists chose a single life as a subject because it was **representative** of mankind. They had a great concern for the effect of action on character and a tendency to explore the psychology of their protagonists. The democratic ideals of the realists tended to make them also value the individual and praise characterization as the center of the novel.
- ❧ An objective rather than subjective or idealistic view of human nature and experience. The **Doctrine of Objectivity** of the Realists asserted that the artist should base his writing on careful and unbiased first-hand observation. The ideal point of view for the realist was the "completely **withdrawn third-person narrator**, one who may be unobtrusively omniscient" and omnipresent.
- ❧ Thematically, the Realists opposed the **Ideal vs. Real**. They denied the idealism of the Romantic age and placed their belief in something more immediately verified by the senses. Other themes included the contrasts of **Innocence vs. Experience** as well as **Appearance vs. Reality**.

## *Naturalism (1890-1914)*



- ❧ A literary movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Naturalism was an extension of Realism.
- ❧ The Naturalists were similar to realists in their fidelity to the details of contemporary life, honest and objective, even **documentary**, in the presentation of his material.
- ❧ However, the Naturalists differed in their choice of which realistic details to select and in their **Attitude** toward them. The Naturalistic view of mankind was that of animals in the natural world, responding to environmental forces and internal stresses and drives over which they

had no control or even a full understanding.

- ☞ Their works tended to emphasize either a **Biological Determinism** (an emphasis on the animal nature of human beings, particularly their heredity, portraying them as animals engaged in the endless and brutal struggle for survival) or a **Socioeconomic Determinism** (portraying them as victims of environmental forces and the products of social and economic factors). Occasionally, Chance played a major part and mankind was seen as the victim of "destiny" or "Fate." Therefore, man was considered largely **Devoid of Free Will**. Life, the naturalists believed, was a vicious trap, a cruel game.
- ☞ Characters were derived from the **Lower-middle or Lower Classes**--the poor, the uneducated, the unsophisticated, the unheroic. However, even the least significant human being could feel, strive and suffer powerfully.
- ☞ An underlying theme of most Naturalistic works is the **Tragic Incompleteness of Life**, usually symbolized by a circular journey, with the protagonist returning to the starting point with little gained or understood despite his movement through time and space
- ☞ The **Social Consequences** of the Industrial Revolution, with its rapid shift from a predominantly rural lifestyle to an urban, industrial society, also influenced the Naturalists. The hardships of the working classes in the urban slums became favorite themes in analyzing the human condition. In place of middle class realities, the naturalists presented the fringes of society: the criminal, the fallen, the down-and-out.
- ☞ Naturalism was also a response to the revolution in thought of modern science and politics: Issac Newton--theory of mechanistic determinism, implying that nature's laws were not subject to God's intervention (theory of gravity); Charles Darwin--*The Origin of the Species* (theory of evolution); and Karl Marx--*Communist Manifesto*
- ☞ **Slice of Life**: A term used to describe the unselective and non-evaluative presentation of a segment of life in its unordered totality, which was considered one of the objectives of the naturalists.
- ☞ **Pessimistic Determinism**: Essence of naturalism that expresses resignation and despair at man's powerlessness against a mechanistic universe.

## Modernism (1914-1945)



- ☞ Modernism is a term that includes a number of tendencies in the arts that were important in the first half of the twentieth century (Existentialism, Symbolism, Imagism, Primitivism, Expressionism).
- ☞ In many respects, it reacted against the tenants of Realism and Naturalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.
- ☞ Although scholars do not agree, most date the Modernist period from the beginning of the World War I (1914) until the end of World War II (1945) and includes the Roaring Twenties, the economic Depression of the Thirties as well as the



catastrophic years of the two world wars. Others consider 1910 and 1965 as the inclusive dates.

- ⌘ Preoccupation with the **Nature of Consciousness and Perception**, centering on the experimental examination of the inner self.
- ⌘ It elevates the **Individual** and the inner being over the social human being and prefers the unconscious to the self-conscious. However, writers turned inward for their subject matter and expressed bitter cynicism reflecting a sense of **Alienation, Loss, and Despair**.
- ⌘ The psychology of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung as well as the anthropology of Sir James Frazer influenced Modernist writers, especially in their awareness of and emphasis on the workings of the unconscious mind.
- ⌘ A quest for **New Forms** and a strong, conscious break with traditional forms and techniques.
- ⌘ Protested against the nature of modern society and a direct **Attack upon the Contemporary Social Order** and its fundamental institutions. The horror of a world war was an inescapable demonstration of this diminishment of individual identity, and the corruption and immorality in both public government and private enterprise further disillusioned them.
- ⌘ A massive disillusionment and a spiritual confrontation with **Emptiness**.

## ***Existentialism (1927-1970s)***



imposed upon him from without.

- ⌘ Existentialists insist upon the individual as the source of all value and must choose for himself what he must do and what standards to accept or reject. Thus, people should not deceive themselves into thinking that they must act in a certain way or play certain roles.
- ⌘ This emphasis on man's awareness of his situation often creates intense anxiety, discomfort, and loneliness. Man's mind cannot discern any meaning for his existence in the universe. When he abandons his illusions, he finds himself horrified by the **Absurdity** of the human condition.

- ⌘ Existentialism, usually associated with Jean-Paul Sartre, centers on the **Uniqueness and Isolation** of the individual in a **universe indifferent and even hostile** to man, regarding human existence as unexplainable, but emphasizing man's freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of his acts.
- ⌘ Existentialists assume that man and things "exist," but that these things have no meaning for us until we act upon them to create meaning. Man is totally free, but he is wholly responsible for what he makes of himself. He cannot escape **Responsibility** for his character or his deeds by claiming they are predetermined or beyond his control to resist, not can he justify what he does in terms of standards

- ✧ Although existentialism often results in a belief that nothing exists or can be understood, resulting in feelings of hopelessness, it also asserts the possibility of improvement. Man's situation is subject to change if men can agree or if a single man **Acts with Conviction** in contradiction to accepted principles and makes alterations within himself. Existentialists give priority to sincerity and creativity in moral life, and sometimes appear to regard any decision as justified if it is made in perfect honesty and with absolute inner conviction. (Critics point out that this provides little guidance to practical choices.)
- ✧ The question of the **existence of God**, according to Sartre, is irrelevant, because even if He does exist, he does not reveal to man the meaning of their lives. Thus man must create his own morality. Honesty with oneself is the major ideal common to all existential thinking. Christian existentialists agree that man can never know God's purpose, but they affirm that it exists and man must make a "leap of faith."

## ***Post-Modernism (1945- Present)***



- ✧ Postmodern has been applied to much contemporary writing, especially **experimental** forms.
- ✧ A reaction to the assumed certainty of scientific or objective efforts to explain reality.
- ✧ Recognizes that reality is not simply mirrored in human understanding, but how the mind tries to understand its own particular and personal reality.
- ✧ **Interpretation** is everything. The way we understand the world is relative, depending on our culture, position, class, gender, age, time period, or beliefs.
- ✧ Tendency toward historical discontinuity, **alienation**, social individualism, existentialism, and the individual in isolation.
- ✧ Social issues align with feminist and ethnic groups and erodes class distinctions.
- ✧ Prefers concrete experience over abstract principles; there is no universal truth.
- ✧ Texts interweave elaborate symbols and traditional forms give way to the denial of them, such as the antinovel.
- ✧ Mixing of fiction and fantasy with nonfiction blurs the lines of reality for readers.
- ✧ Metafiction, flash fiction, magic realism, and graphic novels redefine and blur the distinction between literary genres.
- ✧ Emphasizes fragmented forms, discontinuous narratives, and random-seeming collages of different materials.
- ✧ Rejects boundaries between high and low forms of art.
- ✧ Emphasizes impressionism and subjectivity, on HOW seeing takes place, rather than on WHAT is perceived, such as stream-of-consciousness writing.
- ✧ Works range from Capote's *In Cold Blood* to Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* to the Beat poets and the stories of Bradbury, Vonnegut, and Kesey.

*Dates and some definitions from Handbook to Literature by Harmon & Holman (2009)*