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| **Why we study literature** |

***Overview of British Literature***

What's the point of studying literature? What's the point of studying art? We should probably talk about that so that you understand why you're doing this. In theory, literature reflects the values of its time, so that might be why it's important. It's a cultural artifact - we can analyze the people who created it and the people who consumed it. It's a window into a different world that might reveal truths that anthropology or historical stuff might miss. If we're studying art that our own time has produced, hopefully it can tell us something that we didn't previously realize about ourselves. It might not be something flattering, but hopefully it will tell us something.

With this in mind - that literature reflects and refracts the culture that it comes from - studying it might be helped by having a basic grasp of different dominant literary periods and times when writers were writing stuff. Because if you're able to quickly situate a text in a certain period, it can give you basically an easy interpretive in - how does the author you're studying play next to the tropes of his time and how does he reject them? How does he use them? Is he looking backward? Is he looking forward? Is he creating the next movement? These are some easy questions you can ask that can really help you figure out what you're working on, how to proceed, and help you situate your thoughts in a more general progression of literary thinking as we go along.

Before we do our rundown, we're going to give a few caveats (because nothing is complete without telling you that all of this might be wrong):

1. We're only talking about **Western literary tradition** here, primarily embodied in works from England, works from the United States. Other cultures obviously have their own histories and their own literatures that are very worth studying. Unfortunately, they're beyond our scope in this class, so I'm not going to muddy the waters by going into that too much in this overview. You should study that - you should not ignore cultures besides England and the United States, but in this course, we unfortunately can't go there.
2. A lot of the periods you'll see might be familiar for you if you've studied any kind of art, philosophy, history, politics, anything like that. Just makes sense because, like literature, all of these other disciplines reflect their time, so they're kind of catch-all categories for speaking about dominant cultural trends. For instance, we can talk about Renaissance literature, we can talk about Renaissance art, we can talk about Renaissance politics, and we're referring to the same era in all three cases.
3. You should keep in mind that we can talk about culture in broad swaths - we can do that all day long, and it's helpful for academic purposes. It doesn't always do every writer or every work justice. There are subtleties. There's overlap between these categories. Our survey's not going to account for that. Exact dates for these eras are kind of imprecise, kind of subjective. People just say, 'Oh, this is when the next thing starts,' and that might not be totally representative of an author that was writing at a bridge time area. But we've noted that basically every author will be responding in some way to the prevailing trends of their time - they're going to be aware of it. They might be rejecting it. They might be going along with it, but they're going to be aware of it, and that's the important thing. We're not going to say that every author is the same, but we're saying that every author is at least responding to some of the same things if they are in a certain time period or come from a certain culture.

**The Medieval Period (~600 - ~1500)**

So with all that out of the way, we are going to go on with our historical survey. We're going to start with the Medieval Period, which is around 600 AD to 1500 AD.

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| Medieval Period Dates |
| The Medieval Period |

This looks like a huge amount of time, right? You probably think this whole lesson could be on that. Unfortunately, that is not true. This is when the Western literary tradition is really finding its feet. The Anglo-Saxon people are kind of getting going. Technology that propagates writing - like the printing press - is not yet invented. And so, when you think about that, it's probably not super surprising that there's not all that much notable works of art from that time or, at least, works of art that we now have access to. They either didn't get written or have been lost in the annals of time.
It doesn't mean there's nothing worth reading from that time, obviously, or else I wouldn't have made a segment on it. One of the most important pieces of English literature from this time is the epic poem ***Beowulf***. Many experts think was written sometime between the eighth and ninth century - again, because it was so long ago, nobody really knows. The story features the titular hero Beowulf confronting a monster named Grendel and then Grendel's mother and then a dragon. It is considered to be the first major work of English literature that exists. This is written in Old English, which is not anything that anyone should be expected to understand, but it is a predecessor to our current language.
Another important medieval author is **Geoffrey Chaucer**, who writes *The Canterbury Tales*. This is a collection of stories - some kind of pious, some kind of raunchy - told by pilgrims who were traveling to a cathedral. It's a favorite of people who study literature - they love this stuff. It's full of things - styles, forms - that come to fruition much later. Chaucer was really a pioneer in a lot of ways.

Though works of the Medieval Period are all over the place in content and purpose, there's a few important things you want to keep in mind. The first thing is that, unsurprisingly for the time period, a lot of the works, including *The Canterbury Tales*, are written within a **religious context**, which means that they're really driven by religious motivations in a lot of cases. Second is that **anonymity** is a thing that you find a lot in these works. We don't know who wrote *Beowulf* - that's one example of it. And this is because writers often didn't really want to credit themselves for creating a story - they saw themselves more as retellers than as creators (which is much different than the way that we see authors today). The third thing is that although technically these are works of English literature, much of the literature of medieval times is written in either totally incomprehensible Old English, like I mentioned before with *Beowulf*, or slightly less incomprehensible Middle English (you can read that, but it's hard). It kind of seems foreign to modern readers, and it can be hard to really access it. There's translations, so if you want to get going with it, that's a way to start.

**The Renaissance (16th and 17th centuries)**

Next we move into the Renaissance, which is 16th and 17th centuries. Its name means 'rebirth,' and that implies basically what the Renaissance was all about, which is a flourishing of arts and other culture that swept across Europe between the 14th and 17th centuries. The reason why we start that timeline a bit later in England, the 16th and 17th, is because England caught the bug pretty late, but did some fantastic things once it got there. There's prominent writers like **Christopher Marlowe**, **Francis Bacon** and even **William Shakespeare** - he counts as a Renaissance writer - he's right in that time period. They were really writing a lot during this period, and a lot of what they wrote is really considered fundamental to how we see English literature today. Certainly Shakespeare is the father of a lot of genres and a lot of the way we think about literature now.

In the Renaissance, we first see writers really start to think about their position in the world independently of religious motivations (which is what we saw in the Medieval Period). Renaissance creators value the dignity of man and the joys of society much more than their predecessors; this is known as **humanism** - this is a huge deal in the Renaissance, not just in literature.

They also are embracing **literature as an art form** - it's not just a practical way to transmit stories. It's not a way to praise God. It's a real way to make art and communicate something different, something higher, something more important than what they've been trying to communicate before.

Unsurprisingly, the first major work of literary criticism, which is Philip Sidney's *The Defence of Poesy* (which is just a fancy word for poetry), was created during this time. As we get more consciousness of literature as art, we also get the beginning of criticizing that art. That's no coincidence.

The Renaissance also gave birth to the Protestant Reformation as religious folks began to question objectionable doctrines by the Roman Catholic Church. Criticism and the creation of something new was a crucial mark of this period, both in religion with the Reformation and in the works of art.

This was all helped along by the invention of the **printing press**, which makes it a whole lot easier to transmit ideas in writing and to transmit works of art once they've been created. That's a huge deal in the development of English literature.

**The Enlightenment (18th century)**

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| **Common themes of the Enlightenment Period** |

Next we've got the Enlightenment, which is 18th century, and the creators of the Renaissance had begun to critique the practices of their medieval predecessors. Their followers didn't think they'd done nearly enough, so the Enlightenment people are really into strict **science, logic, intellectual discourse** - really breaking things down into, 'Does this make sense?' and not having any kinds of just blind faith and becoming a real scientific people.

Enlightenment authors we remember are usually people who challenged some aspect of society that we previously thought was a given or set down a real systemic approach to how they thought society and government should be run. They either did this in fiction or a lot of them did this in the form of essays.

This gives us things like Voltaire's *Candide*, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication on the Rights of Women*. And we're going to give American writers a shout-out even though this is primarily a British course - Ben Franklin wrote *Poor Richard's Almanac*. Even the Declaration of Independence is kind of part of this trend towards real rationality. Even the American colonists' rebellion against Britain can kind of be seen as a playing out of Enlightenment ideals in terms of fair governance and whatnot. This is all part of the same thing - this idea that the world should be rational and that if something isn't rational, we should fix it and make it so.

**Romanticism (early 19th century)**

Next we get Romanticism, which is totally a backlash against that. This is early 19th century. Romantics are just like, 'No, we don't care about logic and rationality and all of this stuff. We are more into **nature**, **emotions**.' Both positive and negative emotions - you just want to be feeling something. You don't want to be this cold, scientific thing sitting in a lab analyzing your feelings.

When it comes to the Romantic period, the key literary figures you want to keep in mind are poets, like **William Wordsworth**, **Samuel Taylor Coleridge**, **William Blake** and **John Keats**. They write these ballads and odes that are full of reverence of nature, descriptions of internal moods. Novelists at this time begin to emerge, like **Jane Austen** and the **Bronte sisters**.

Even people (mini shout-out to America) that you think of as transcendentalist writers like **Herman Melville**, **Henry David Thoreau** and **Walt Whitman** - these are all kind of part of this era in terms of their nature worship, their interest in the individual as important rather than the Enlightenment thinkers who were more looking at society as a whole and how to optimize, how to rationalize.

Visual art flourished during this time as well - if you think of any kind of famous landscape painting, it's most likely going to be of the Romantic era, again, because they were super into nature at this time.

**Victorianism (late 19th century)**

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| **The novel comes to the forefront in Victorianism** |

Moving right along, we've got Victorianism in the late 19th century. It's kind of a bridge between Romantic literature and Modernism of the 20th century. The Victorian period - a lot of critics think it's really the height of literature in England. It's really when **the novel** becomes front and center. The novel becomes really important during this time. We've got people like **Charles Dickens**, **George Eliot**, who really get into perfecting this as a form, whereas before it might have been seen as a bit of a subservient form to poetry in a way. Poetry was always the height of literature - novels were a bit trashy for a while.

**Romance**, in the sense of love, not in the sense of Romantic literature, was a key trope of Victorian literature, as is **hard work** and **virtue** - the idea that good people get good outcomes and bad people are punished. That's a huge thing in Victorian lit. We might even consider Victorian lit as a real major turning point in the development of what we see now as familiar story structure that you can just go to a movie and see today. That's really set down during Victorian times - the familiar progression from beginning to middle to end because like I said, the novel really comes to prominence then, and novels are what movies are based on.

**Modernism (early 20th century)**

Like I said, it's a bridge from Romantic to Modernism, so next we get Modernism - this is early 20th century. Through the development of literary history, we can see writers start to become a bit more **self-conscious** about their works, about what it means to be writing, what it means to choose a certain form over another - this is happening all throughout.

But the Modernists really take this idea as far as it will go, and they create these works that are really designed to ruminate on their own position as works of art - this is '**art for art's sake**' idea of aestheticism. We're really thinking about why we make art and what does it mean. It also tends to reflect on what Modernist authors thought was a really **fractured**, **frightening situation** in the modern world, which is not a coincidence because they're writing right after World War I, which was a hugely traumatic thing happening in Europe.

More so than any generation before them, including the Enlightenment thinkers who were really rigid, rational kind of people, Modernists just question the world around them. Unlike their Enlightenment comrades, they think that you can see what's wrong with the world, but you might not be able to fix it. As such, they end up being very **cynical**. They use a lot of irony. They end up not really solving things but pointing out problems.

The real two pillars of Modernist lit are widely considered to be the T.S. Eliot poem *The Waste Land* (which I feel like its title kind of says it all about what this movement's about) and James Joyce's crazy novel *Ulysses*. Some other major Modernist texts would be Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and also *To the Lighthouse*, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, W.B. Yeats' *The Second Coming* - these are all really important Modernist works.

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| Important Modernist Works |
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| **Important Modernist works** |

**Postmodernism (late 20th century and beyond)**

Next, of course, we get Postmodernism, and now we're almost coming to the end, I promise. If Modernists broke from their Victorian forebearers, it only makes sense that Postmodernists are going to reject their Modernist parents. But in many ways, Postmodernism is kind of an amplification of Modernist thought in certain ways. Because subjectivity, the idea that nothing is certain and everything depends on perspective, is built right in to the premise of Postmodernism. It's difficult to nail down exactly what they say because they're kind of pointing out that things can mean anything - there isn't any kind of unified truth.
The easiest way to look at this division between Modernists and Postmodernists is to think about it like this: to Modernists, they saw that the world was broken. They saw that things didn't make sense anymore, and they tried to show how things didn't make sense. Postmodernists kind of think that there's no world to break. If Modernists think the world has lost meaning, Postmodernists think there is no inherent meaning to lose, essentially. The point is that things are subjective. The point is that there's no central truth. They see reality as a whole bunch of subjective social contrasts. What's really important to them is this idea of **deconstruction** - this idea that you can look at a work and see all of the inherent contradictions within it and all of the structures that we take for granted that you can actually see as appearing in work after work after work.
Probably because they're more current (and because they're more in touch with prevailing thought), postmodern authors might sound familiar. We've got people like **Kurt Vonnegut**, **Hunter S. Thompson**, **Thomas Pynchon**, **Philip K. Dick**. Even more recent people like **Bret Easton Ellis** and **David Foster Wallace**. These are all influenced heavily by postmodern thought. Really any literary work that's released in the past half-century has probably got some postmodern element. You might even be able to look through *Harry Potter* and find something postmodern. I don't know. I haven't tried.
Because of that, it might seem like a movement that can last forever - if all meaning is removed, where can you go from there? Critics have definitely said this - they've been proclaiming the death of literature forever (to them, we're in like 'post-postmodernism'). But hindsight's always 20/20, it's kind of tough to classify things right now. Certainly, I'm not going to rule it out - that in a bit we're going to have a new name for this era, and it's not going to be, 'Literature was Dead and the Internet Took Over.' But with the evolution of literary periods, you can only really classify it after it's happened. So who knows what we're in right now, but we'll probably find out. If you want to decide what literature goes next, you should probably get to writing that novel.