



# THE PERIODS OF BRITISH LITERATURE





# Introduction:



- The following is an overview of major periods in British literature.
- Please take notes on the timeline provided to you.



# Timeline of British Literary History



Old English  
(450-1066)



Middle English  
(1066-1500)

Renaissance  
(1500-1660)



Neoclassical  
(1600-1785)



Romantic  
(1785-1832)

OLIVER TWIST



Victorian  
(1832-1901)



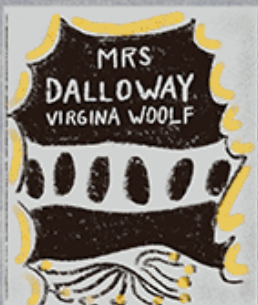
Edwardian  
(1901-1914)

Georgian Poetry

VOL. I

Georgian  
(1910-1936)

MRS  
DALLOWAY  
VIRGINIA WOOLF



Modern  
(1914-1945)



Postmodern  
(1945-present)

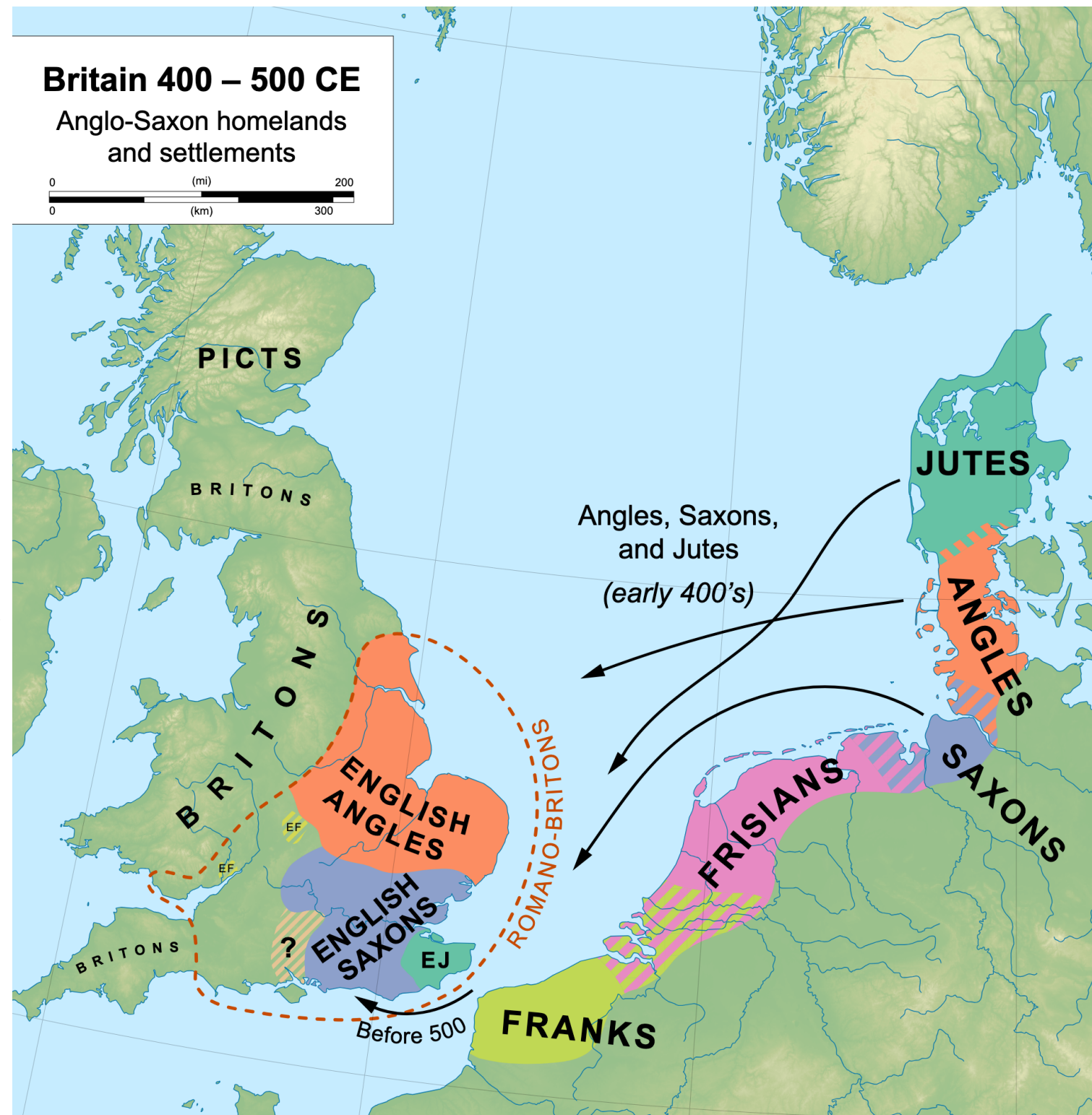


# Old English (Anglo-Saxon) Period (450-1066)

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The years after the Romans left England are also known as the Dark Ages. This is majorly due to the absence of any substantial historical record for this time. Nevertheless, it was a crucial period where a new English identity and language emerged.

As soon as the Romans retreated from Britain, all the tribes they had repressed and controlled began to raid and attack the island. These invaders were Irish from the West, Picts from the North, and the Germanic tribes (Angles, Saxons, and Jutes) from the East. By the year 500 CE, the Anglo Saxons had invaded most parts of Britain. **Therefore, the time period from 410 CE to 1066 CE is known as the Anglo Saxon period.**





# SOCIETY AND RELIGION IN THE ANGLO SAXON PERIOD

- **The Anglo Saxons practiced paganism and worshipped multiple deities such as Norse, Woden, Thunor, etc.** The Anglo Saxon society was a rich society where loyalty was the single most important virtue. Marriages used to be political and practical affairs.
- **The Anglo-Saxon invaders brought with them a tradition of oral poetry.** Because nothing was written down before the conversion to Christianity, we have only circumstantial evidence of what poetry must have been like. Literacy was mainly restricted to servants of the church, and so it is natural that the bulk of Old english literature deals with religious subjects and is mostly drawn from Latin sources.





**Christianization** of the pagan Anglo Saxon society began during the 6th century. It was in 597 CE that Augustine was sent by Pope Gregory to lead the mission of christianization in the south of England and became the first archbishop of Canterbury. On the other hand, the Celtic monks christianized northern England and Scotland. **Christianization of England during the Anglo Saxon period had the following consequences:**

- There had been no books before Christianity. Books were written because the written word was significant to the Church and the services relied upon the reading of the Holy Scriptures. **Therefore, the written word was introduced to the otherwise oral tradition of the Anglo Saxons.**
- The Runic alphabets of the Germanic tribes gradually replaced the Roman alphabets.
- Majority of the written literature was in Latin as it was the language of the Roman Church.
- The Anglo Saxon England gained presence and visibility in the mainstream Western European culture due to Latin.



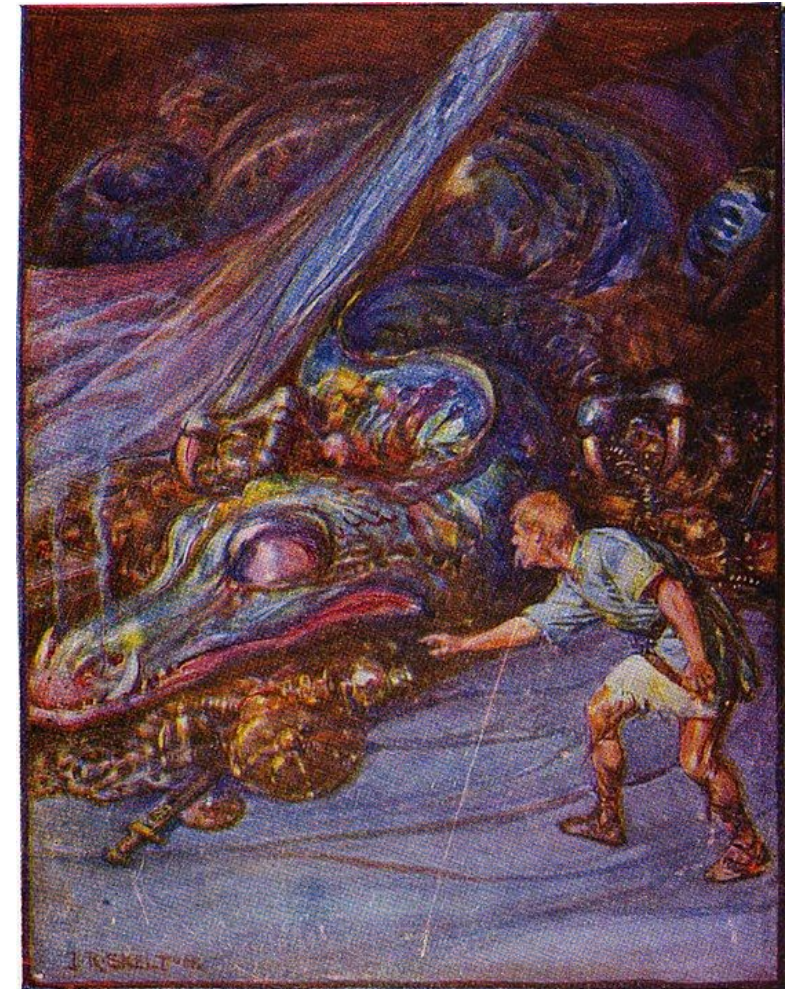


The Vikings raided and attacked England in the year 793 CE of the Anglo Saxon period. Interestingly, they only raided and attacked monasteries as they were guarded by unarmed monks and were vulnerable but rich targets, during this time all the monasteries and libraries housing rich Anglo Saxon literature got destroyed.

During this time of the Anglo Saxon period, monasteries were revived and English learning was encouraged. All the four volumes of Old English verses belong to this period.

These four volumes are:

- The Junius Manuscript
- The Beowulf Manuscript
- The Vercelli Book
- The Exeter Book



## Characteristics of Anglo Saxon poetry and prose

**Anglo Saxon literature is dominated by either heroic or epic poetry written in alliterative verses, or religious poetry with heroic elements in it.** While prose did not exist until the reign of King Alfred, Anglo Saxon heroic and religious poetry were prevalent in the period.



# Heroic Poetry

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The most important heroic poetry belonging to the Anglo Saxon period is **Beowulf**. It is the only complete epic poem in an ancient Germanic language and the only narrative poem that so effectively narrates the Heroic Age of the Germanic tribes. It combines the heroic idealism seamlessly with somber fatalism.

The first section of the poem deals with Beowulf assisting King Hrothgar of Denmark against the monster called Grendel and its mother. After successfully slaying the monster and its mother, Beowulf is celebrated and awarded with laurels. In the second section of the poem, Beowulf, who now has been the King of the Geats, encounters a fire breathing dragon. He valiantly and successfully kills the dragon but unfortunately succumbs to his wounds. Beowulf exhibits all characteristics of an ideal hero- he is valiant, fierce, stoic, generous and while dying, wishes nothing but the people to remember him. **All these factors make this seminal poem an ideal and perhaps the only example of a heroic epic belonging to the Anglo Saxon period.**



**Heroic Poetry is “a long narrative poem celebrating the great deeds of one or more legendary heroes, in a grand ceremonious style. The hero, usually protected by or even descended from gods, performs superhuman exploits in battle or in marvellous voyages, often saving or founding a nation...” [The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, 2001, p 82].**



# Middle English Period (Anglo Norman)/ (1066-1500)

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The Norman conquest of England in 1066 CE is popularly considered as a political, social, cultural and literary landmark that distinctly separates the Anglo-Saxon literature or the Old English literature from the Anglo-Norman or the Middle English literature.

**Understanding Anglo Norman period in English literature requires a clear knowledge about the statuses of languages in England during the medieval ages.**

With the arrival of the Norman French, Anglo Norman England became a country of four languages. **Latin** retained its position as the international language of learning, history, theology, and science. Although it was no more written in England, it was the common language of communication among foreign nationalities, and was also used in universities. During the Anglo Norman period, **Norman French** became the language of the court and aristocracy while **English** was spoken by majority of the masses. Eventually, to better interact with the English population, an increasing amount of nobility became bilingual. Additionally, there also existed **Celtic** speaking groups in Ireland, Wales, Brittany, and Cornwall.



# Status of English during the Anglo-Norman period

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With the arrival of the Norman French, English no longer remained the language of the court or that of the aristocracy. It was replaced by the Norman French, which also became the literary language of aristocracy and court. **The Anglo-Saxon language, which was at this stage developing into middle English, became the language of the general people or of the lower classes.** It was only by the fourteenth century that the status of English language improved and took over French as the major literary language.

- **The English literature during this time was being written in regional dialects. With time, as English began to replace French as the dominant language of court, culture, and literature, it was the dialect of London that was used.**

## ANGLO-NORMAN PERIOD

Anglo-Norman literature emerged after the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. It combined elements of French and English languages, cultures, and literary traditions. Key works include the epic poem "The Song of Roland" and the "Romance of Tristan." Anglo-Norman literature influenced English literature by introducing new themes, styles, and poetic forms. It played a significant role in the development of medieval romance and courtly love.



The recovery of an English poetic style after the Norman conquest of 1066 was a slow process which took almost until 14th century. Till then, there was no great poet and individual decent poetry was scattered throughout the years. There was no sudden revolution of sensibilities and taste and obliteration of the Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse altogether. It was a rather slow process and the alliterative poetry did not fade all of a sudden. **English poetry of the Middle ages began to slowly adapt and imitate from the French literature.** At the same time the English language was also undergoing significant changes in its vocabulary as well flexibility. The possibilities of English rhyme would have been extremely restricted without the French element in the English language.

The oral tradition that was popular among the masses was not impacted by the Norman conquest and the arrival of the French aristocracy. **One of the significant changes in the Anglo Saxon literature was that its alliterative verse tradition was replaced by the French rhymed verses, and it was not till the 14th century that the alliterative poetry revived and regained popularity.**

**The heroic age that was so particular to the Anglo Saxon period no longer existed as it was replaced by the new courtly sophistication, ideals and manners. With the middle ages, Europe no longer remained a heroic society as it used to be. It had transitioned into a feudal society with its own protocols regarding honor and service. It had a different literary patronage, social conditions, and relations between the opposite genders.**



# Characteristics

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- The most significant shift in language occurs at this time.
- Anglo-Norman period or the medieval period in English literature saw the decline of heroic poetry.
- Alliteration was simplified to suit the common population of England.
- English Romance and courtly love tradition developed during this period.
- Rhymed verses were also introduced to English poetry
- *(The concept of courtly love first began with the love lyrics of Provence in southern France. Courtly love was one of the most important and revolutionary elements in European literature and sensibility. Earlier, love between a man and a woman was perceived simply as physical passion, or as affection, or as madness. However, with the love poetry of the troubadours, the concept of love was renewed. To them, love was an act of service of a slave towards his master without any external influence. In poems dealing with courtly love, a knight served the mistress of his choice and readily suffered all hardships and indignity for her sake. The lady occupied all his thoughts. )*



Another important feature of romances about courtly love was that the lovers were never husband and wife. A husband was never a lover of his wife. **Thus, the courtly love tradition was an idealization of adultery.** The notion of love was linked to the institution of marriage only after the sixteenth and seventeenth century poets introduced the idea in domestic lives.

## **The Age of Chaucer 1340 to 1400: History & Social Background**

- **Fourteen-century English literature and society were impacted by three major historical events - The Hundred Years' War, the Peasant's Revolt, and the Black Death.**
- The 14th-century English literature is popularly known as the Age of Chaucer. This is because Geoffrey Chaucer was the greatest and most resourceful poet of his time, so much so that he was regarded as **the founder of English verse** by John Dryden (1631-1700). Popularly known as the **founder of modern English** and the **Father of English literature**, it was because of Chaucer that the middle English became a respectable medium for literature. Besides coining various words such as bribe, femininity, plumage, etc, he also **invented Rime Royal, a seven-line iambic pentameter stanza.**



# Major works:

## Geoffrey Chaucer (The Book of the Duchess, The Canterbury Tales)

Almost everyone familiar with Western literature has heard of *The Canterbury Tales*, and even read one or more of them in school. One of the first major works written in English, *Canterbury Tales* tells the story of 30 different people from all walks of medieval society who are going on a religious pilgrimage together.





# Renaissance (1550-1660)

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**“So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.” These two lines, the closing couplet of William Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 (“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”), make one of the boldest boasts in poetry—about poetry.**

**The English Renaissance can be hard to date precisely,** but for most scholars, it begins with the rise of the Tudor Dynasty (1485–1603) and reaches **its cultural summit during the 45-year reign of the final Tudor monarch, the charismatic Elizabeth I (1558–1603).** The period extends into the reigns of the Stuarts, King James I (1603–25) and perhaps that of Charles I (1625–49). The Renaissance firmly ends once those tensions boil over into a distinctly different period of revolutionary change and a succession of nation-shaking events: the series of civil wars between Parliamentarians and Royalists, the execution of Charles I, the interregnum of republican-led governments, and the **restoration of the monarchy in 1660.**





**The term *Renaissance*, deriving from the French for “rebirth”. As we enter the 15th century and the Renaissance, much of this gradually changed. There was a revived interest in studies that focused not on religion, but on what it means to be human. The Church remained a power in society and continued to hold a dominant position in people's everyday lives, but its position when it came to defining the truth about existence was weakened. The study of humanity became a priority. Scholars, artists, and scientists took up the challenge of understanding man's existence and the universe, based on empirical research. This intellectual movement – humanism – emphasised man's ability to decide and think for himself, and there was a strong belief in the intellectual capacity of the human mind. It was believed that man had the ability to sort out whatever intellectual and moral obstacles came in his way.**

(Humanism, or Renaissance humanism, was an intellectual movement that celebrated the advancement of humanity, with a renewed interest in the classical Roman and Greek world as its basis.)





# Elizabethan literature in the English Renaissance period

## William Shakespear (Shakespeare's humanism)

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Elizabethan literature in the English Renaissance period refers to the works produced during the reign of **Queen Elizabeth I**. In this period, writers such as Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Roger Ascham, and William Shakespeare flourished. The Elizabethan age saw the rise of poetry, such as sonnets. **It was a golden age of drama, and it inspired a wide variety of prose.**

We find the greatest evidence of his Renaissance identity in Shakespeare's constant investigation of the human soul. **Throughout his plays, he explores the question 'What is a human being?', and he investigates this question through fully developed characters who possess knowledge and wit, doubt and fear, and who are capable of self-expression and the practice of individual freedom.** Watching his plays, we can easily relate to Ophelia's distress, Hamlet's anguish, and the ever-lasting love between Romeo and Juliet. We see their short-comings and their strengths, we follow them in their struggles against the world and the universe, and we feel for them in their tragic deaths.

**1564-1616**





# Neo-Classical period (The Enlightenment)- (1600-1785)

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This period goes by the names "the Enlightenment," "the Age of Reason," and "the Neo-Classical Age."

There was a great turning away from religion as primary way of life.

England now turned its attention to politics and scientific/logical analysis & reason.

Belief had been based on authority; restoration brought the scientific method (scientific method - beliefs should be proven through repeated experiments);

## NEOCLASSIC NOTED AUTHORS

- John Locke
- John Milton (*Paradise Lost*)
- Alexander Pope (*Essay on Man*)
- Jonathon Swift (*Gulliver's Travels*)
- Henry Fielding (*Tom Jones*)
- Daniel Defoe (*Robinson Crusoe*)
- Jane Austen (*Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*, *Pride and Prejudice*)



Characteristic	Explanation
Order and structure	Neo-classical texts tended to have a strict formal structure. This deviated from the looser structures of the Renaissance period.
Discussion of social issues	In comparison to the previous period of the Renaissance which focused on the individual, social issues were frequently explored in neo-classicism. This mirrored the social revolutions that were happening across Europe at the time. People were fighting for better living and working conditions and wished to see this reflected in their literature.
Flawed characters	Neo-classicism took the Renaissance's interest in humanism and modernised it. Renaissance literature viewed humans as inherently morally good, whereas neo-classical works saw humans as much more flawed and nuanced, just as capable of doing bad as doing good.
Borrowing from antiquity	A defining feature of neo-classicism is its borrowing from the works of Ancient Greece and Rome. Genres, techniques, and themes were all taken from this period and used in neo-classicism in a modern context.
An emphasis on logic and rationality	Thematically, neo-classical literature focused heavily on portraying logical and sensible viewpoints. Neo-classicist authors <b>rationalised</b> things in their work, focusing on what is knowable rather than what isn't, like religion and spirituality.



# Frequently Asked Questions about Neo-Classical Period

## **What is neo-classical theory?**

Neo-classical theory promoted rationale and logic above all else, discouraging high emotions and chaos.

## **What are neo-classical elements?**

Elements of neo-classical literature include borrowing from antiquity, strict formal structures, and questioning social norms.

## **Who is a neo-classical artist?**

Jonathan Swift is an important figure of the neo-classical period.

## **What is the difference between classical and neo-classical theory?**

Classical works refers to works produced during the eras of Ancient Greece and Rome, whereas neo-classical works are later texts that tried to re-produce elements from these eras in a modern context.

## **When was the neo-classical period?**

The neo-classical period lasted from the early 1600s until the end of the 1700s.



**What periods did the neo-classical movement borrow from?**

Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome.

**What is an example of a neo-classical novel?**

*Gulliver's Travels.*

**What kind of structure did neo-classical works have?**

Strict and formal.

**Who are two key neo-classical poets?**

Alexander Pope and John Dryden.

**Who was an important writer of neo-classical novels?**

Jonathan Swift.

**What literary device was common in neo-classical poetry?**

Heroic couplets.



## Neo-classical age poetry

Neo-classical poetry shared many characteristics with the general literature of the period. It borrowed forms and techniques from Ancient Greek and Roman poetry, as well as addressing more wide-ranging social issues. Neo-classical **poets** also adopted very strict formal structures.

Alexander Pope (1688-1744) and John Dryden (1631-1700) were two central **poets** of this era. Below are some common characteristics of neo-classical poetry.

- Measured formal structure.
- Lack of lyricism and romantic imagery.
- Rational and logical viewpoints.
- References to antiquity.
- Biblical allusions.
- A moral lesson behind the poem.

## Solitude

Happy the man, whose wish and care  
A few paternal acres bound,  
Content to breathe his native air  
In his own ground.

Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,  
Whose flocks supply him with attire;  
Whose trees in summer yield shade,  
In winter, fire.

Blest, who can unconcern'dly find  
Hours, days, and years, slide soft away  
In health of body, peace of mind,  
Quiet by day.

Sound sleep by night; study and ease  
Together mixed; sweet recreation,  
And innocence, which most does please  
With meditation.

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;  
Thus unlamented let me die;  
Steal from the world, and not a stone  
Tell where I lie.

*Alexander Pope*



# Romantic Period (1785-1832)

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**Often the term Romantic literature, particularly poetry, evokes the connotation of nature poetry.**

Although nature is an important component in much Romantic literature, Romanticism is much more than recording the beauties of the natural world.

And Romanticism is certainly not what modern readers usually think of when we hear the words romance and romantic; Romanticism does not refer to romantic love.

**Romanticism grew from a profound change in the way people in the Western world perceived their place and purpose in life.** Events such as the American Revolution in 1776, the French Revolution in 1789, and the Industrial Revolution restructured society and the way individuals viewed themselves and their relationship to each other and to the social order.





## Characteristics of Romanticism

Creative and self-contained - often references the classics but can mostly be read without prior knowledge.

Subjective, stemming from the emotions of the author - multiple and varied interpretations can be made.

Often simple language, the language of the people.

Makes use of a range of **rhyme** schemes and meters.



## Romanticism: characteristics

In his preface to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth summed up his view of what poetry should be: 'the **spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings**'. This is a great way to sum up Romanticism – feelings take centre stage, and there are no rules! The Romantics explored the supernatural and the legendary and blurred the lines between the real and the weird. Have a look at a couple of quotes to get your head around it.

**I wandered lonely as a cloud**

**That floats on high o'er vales and hills,**

**When all at once I saw a crowd,**

**A host, of golden daffodils**

**- William Wordsworth, 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' (1802)**

Look at the devices Wordsworth uses here – He compares himself to a cloud, making himself into a part of nature. He also compares the daffodils to a crowd, **personifying** them – by using these two techniques, Wordsworth asks questions about **humanity's place in the world** and celebrates the sense of belonging and wonder of being in nature. This is typical of Wordsworth – although all the Romantic poets wrote about nature, Wordsworth was the most devoted to it.

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- **Poetry:** The first generation of Romantic poets includes **William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge**, and **William Wordsworth**. The second generation of Romantic poets includes **Lord Byron**, Percy B Shelley and **John Keats**. These poets contributed significantly to the English literary canon. Some of their most important works include Lyrical Ballads (1798), Songs of Innocence and Experience (1794), **She Walks in Beauty** (1814), **Ozymandias** (1818), **Ode** to Autumn (1819). Scottish poets too, produced romantic poetry, such as **Robert Burns** A Red, Red Rose (1794) . The figure of the Byronic hero was established in works by Lord Byron, particularly the epic poem, Don Juan (1819).
- **Prose:** The Romantic **novel** was a product of this period. **Mary Shelley** produced **Frankenstein** (1818), which had Romantic influences and also expressed a fascination with gothicism, galvanism, and electricity. **Jane Austen**'s works too, criticised the institution of marriage and sensibility. The Scottish novelist Sir Walter Scott produced the immensely popular Ivanhoe (1819), and the historical **novel** Rob Roy (1817).

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# Frequently Asked Questions about Romanticism

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## **What does Romanticism mean in literature?**

Romanticism in literature refers to the literary movement between 1785 and 1832 that saw an explosion of sensual and emotional poetry.

## **When was Romanticism?**

The Romanticism movement was between the years of 1785 and 1832.

## **What are the 5 characteristics of Romanticism?**

5 characteristics of Romanticism are:

- Emotive language
- Use of the imagination
- Appeal to the senses
- Love of the natural world
- Focus on art for the sake of art

## **What is the main idea of Romanticism?**

The main idea of Romanticism is the move away from objective and logical poetry to subjective and emotional poetry.

Romanticism is a reaction against many facets of Neoclassicism. The following chart lists contrasting views of Neoclassicism and Romanticism.

<b>Neoclassicism</b>	<b>Romanticism</b>
use and imitation of literary traditions from ancient Greece and Rome	use and imitation of literary traditions from the Middle Ages (including the medieval romance)
beauty in structure and order	beauty in organic, natural forms
art from applying order to nature	art from inspiration
heroic couplets	lyric poetry
focus on external people and events	focus on self-expression of the artist
Great Chain of Being	democracy
reason	mysticism
Reason leads to spiritual revelation	Nature leads to spiritual revelation
urban (glorifies civilization and technological progress)	rural (sees the evils of civilization and technological progress)
values wit and sophistication	values primitive, simple people
Human nature needs artificial restraints of society	Restraints of society result in tyranny and oppression
the head	the heart