

Overview of English Literature

Overview of English Literature

A concise, organized guide for quick reference and deeper study

1. Chronological Framework

Period	Approx. Dates	Key Characteristics	Representative Authors & Works
Old English (Anglo-Saxon)	c. 450? 1066	Oral tradition, heroic epics, alliterative verse; Christian influence emerges	Beowulf (anonymous), The Dream of the Rood
Middle English	1066? 1500	Norman French impact, rise of courtly love, allegory, religious drama	Geoffrey Chaucer – <i>The Canterbury Tales</i> ; William Langland – <i>Piers Plowman</i>
Renaissance / Early Modern	1500? 1660	Humanism, exploration of individualism, sonnet form, drama flourishes	William Shakespeare – <i>Hamlet</i> , <i>Sonnet 18</i> ; Christopher Marlowe – <i>Doctor Faustus</i> ; John Donne – metaphysical poetry
Restoration & 18th Century	1660? 1800	Satire, rationalism, rise of the novel, Enlightenment ideals	John Dryden – <i>Absalom and Achitophel</i> ; Alexander Pope – <i>The Rape of the Lock</i> ; Samuel Richardson – <i>Pamela</i> ; Jane Austen – <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>
Romanticism	1798? 1837	Emotion, nature, the sublime, rebellion against industrialization	William Wordsworth – <i>Lines Composed...</i> ; Samuel Taylor Coleridge – <i>The Rime of the Ancient Mariner</i> ; Mary Shelley – <i>Frankenstein</i>
Victorian	1837? 1901	Moral seriousness, social critique, realism, Gothic elements	Charles Dickens – <i>Great Expectations</i> ; Thomas Hardy – <i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i> ; The Brontë sisters – <i>Wuthering Heights</i> , <i>Jane Eyre</i>

Overview of English Literature

Period	Approx. Dates	Key Characteristics	Representative Authors & Works
Modernism	1900? 1945	Fragmentation, stream of consciousness, experimentation, disillusionment after WWI	James Joyce – <i>Ulysses</i> ; Virginia Woolf – <i>Mrs Dalloway</i> ; T.S. Eliot – <i>The Waste Land</i>
Postmodern & Contemporary	1945? present	Metafiction, intertextuality, multicultural voices, digital media	Samuel Beckett – <i>Waiting for Godot</i> ; Salman Rushdie – <i>Midnight's Children</i> ; Zadie Smith – <i>White Teeth</i> ; Margaret Atwood – <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>

2. Major Genres & Forms

Genre	Defining Features	Notable Periods & Examples
Epic / Heroic Poetry	Long narrative, elevated diction, heroic deeds	Old English (<i>Beowulf</i>), Middle English (<i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i>)
Lyric Poetry	Personal emotion, compact form, musicality	Renaissance (Petrarchan sonnet), Romantic (Wordsworth)
Drama	Dialogue-driven, performed on stage; includes tragedy, comedy, history	Elizabethan (Shakespeare), Restoration (Dryden), Modern (Beckett)
Novel	Prose narrative, focus on character development & social context	18th century (Austen), Victorian (Dickens), Modernist (Joyce)
Short Story	Concise prose, single incident or theme	Victorian (Doyle), Modernist (Chekhov)