

Summary of Literary Periods, Concepts, and Authors

In This Chapter

Overview

A Few Major Concepts or
"Isms"

Literary Timeline

Featured Authors on
Released Exams

OVERVIEW

Literature might be thought of as the creative measure of history. Great writers, poets, and playwrights mold their sense of life and the events of their time (their own histories) into works of art. It seems impossible to disconnect most literary works from their historical context, but the themes that make their work universal and enduring perhaps do transcend time in that they speak to people of all time, ensuring us that we are all part of something much larger than simply the here and now.

When you look at the literary concepts below and study the timeline, you will see that shifts in literary theory or tradition are often precipitated by major events in history, most notably wars. The ways that history is linked to literature are endless, and this chapter only hints at some of them.

This chapter is not here for you to memorize. In fact there are rarely questions on the exam that expect you to know particular literary periods and their characteristics. However, it will not hurt you

to have a sense of how literature (particularly Western literature) has evolved over time. And this timeline and the representative authors will help you determine a reading list for your study.

A FEW MAJOR CONCEPTS OR "ISMS"

The following list is given in chronological order.

Romanticism (mid-19th century)

- Valued feeling over reason
- Valued the individual, but recognized the alienation of the individual
- Literature characterized by elements of the supernatural, appreciation for the beauty of nature, personal introspection

Transcendentalism (mid-19th century)

- An offshoot of American Romanticism led by Bronson Alcott, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Favored self-reliance and non-conformism
- Sought to see the sublime in the ordinary
- Believed that to transcend was to reach beyond ordinary experience—self perfection was an aim

Realism (mid- to late 19th century)

- Pre- and post-Civil war
- Writers rejected sentimentality, wanted to represent true life experience, including the way people really acted and spoke
- Shunned flowery diction and romanticism
- The rise of the women's movement also significant

Regionalism (19th century)

- Extension of Realism
- Focus on local setting, customs, and dialects

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Naturalism (19th century)

- Extension of Realism
- Themes are darker: crime, poverty, prejudice, etc.
- Naturalist writers tried to understand scientific or psychological reasons behind behavior

Imagism (early 20th century)

- Movement in poetry that favored the use of images as the things themselves
- Motto: "The natural object is always the adequate symbol."
- Willingness to play with forms
- Most notable poets: Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams

The Lost Generation (1914–)

- The Lost Generation is the phrase coined by writer Gertrude Stein and later made popular by Ernest Hemingway
- Referred to the generation who lost fathers, husbands, sons and brothers in World War I and who felt aimless and without foundation
- Many of the lost were disillusioned by traditional American values and became expatriates, who chose to leave the United States for Europe, Mexico, and elsewhere. (Paris was an especially favored destination.)

The Harlem Renaissance (1920s)

- The explosion of African American visual art, dance, music, and literature in the 1920s, primarily centered in Harlem, New York
- Poet Langston Hughes is often seen as the symbol of the period.

Modernism (1918–1945)

- The prolific period between the end of World War I and the end of World War II
- Other historical context:
 - ▶ *The industrial revolution and the age of machines*
 - ▶ *Mass immigration to the United States*
 - ▶ *Women's rights (19th amendment)*
 - ▶ *The Great Depression*
- Alienation and the loss of the individual to the machine are major themes.

Post Modernism (1945–)

- Begins with detonation of atom bombs in Japan to end World War II
- Key markers:
 - ▶ *Post-apocalyptic themes*
 - ▶ *Satire*
 - ▶ *The absurd*
 - ▶ *Anti-heroes*
 - ▶ *The rise of multiculturalism and diverse voices*
- Themes:
 - ▶ *Alienation due to race, gender, and sexual orientation*
 - ▶ *Intolerance*
 - ▶ *Political and social oppression*

The Beat Movement (1950s)

- Led by poet Allen Ginsberg and novelist Jack Kerouac
- Rejected mainstream American values and embraced nonconformity and Eastern philosophy
- The forefather of the 1960s counter-culture movement (Hippie Movement)

Gonzo Journalism (1970–)

- Named by Hunter S. Thompson in 1970
- Refers to a new kind of journalism where the writer can be part of the story, blending fact and fiction

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Magical Realism (1960's–)

- Magical or supernatural elements appear in otherwise realistic circumstances
- First considered an element of painting
- Mostly associated with Latin American writers, especially Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Carlos Fuentes, and Isabel Allende

Creative Nonfiction (late 20th and early 21st century)

- A genre that blends elements of literature with nonfiction
- Includes memoir, travel and place essays, personal narratives, etc.

LITERARY TIMELINE

Literary timelines are readily available to literature students. The value of a timeline is to show literary works in a historical context and in relationship to other works. The timeline below is not inclusive, but shows some of the major writers of each literary period. Consult Chapter 4 for lists of works cited on the AP Lit exam.

800–400 BCE**World Literature**

Greek writers: Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*

Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*

Euripedes, *Medea*

250 BCE–150 CE**World Literature**

Roman writers: Vergil, *The Aeneid*

Horace, poet and satirist

Ovid, lyrical poet

450–1066

World Literature

Haiku poetry in Japan

British Literature (Anglo Saxon Period)

Beowulf

1066–1500

World Literature

Italian writers: Petrarch: sonnets

Dante Alighieri: *The Divine Comedy*

Boccaccio: *The Decameron*

British Literature (Middle English Period)

Geoffrey Chaucer: *Canterbury Tales*

German Johannes Gutenberg invents the printing press

1500–1660: The Renaissance

World Literature

Miguel de Cervantes, Spanish writer: *Don Quixote*

British Literature

Shakespeare

Christopher Marlow: *Dr. Faustus*

Ben Jonson, known for satirical plays and lyric poetry

John Donne, known for metaphysical conceits

Edmund Spenser: *The Faerie Queen*

Andrew Marvell: *To His Coy Mistress*

John Milton: *Paradise Lost*

1660–1785: The Neoclassical Period

World Literature

Molière, French, *Tartuffe*

450–1066**World Literature**

Haiku poetry in Japan

British Literature (Anglo Saxon Period)

Beowulf

1066–1500**World Literature**

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John Donne, known for metaphysical conceits

Edmund Spenser: *The Faerie Queen*

Andrew Marvell: *To His Coy Mistress*

John Milton: *Paradise Lost*

1660–1785: The Neoclassical Period**World Literature**

Molière, French, *Tartuffe*

Voltaire, French, *Candide*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, French writer and philosopher

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, German writer

British Literature

Alexander Pope, British poet

Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*

Jonathan Swift: *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Modest Proposal*

Samuel Johnson

The rise of the novel

American Literature (Puritan/Colonial Period)

Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (sermon)

Anne Bradstreet, poet

Puritan writing was God centered, plain in style, instructive in purpose.

1750–1800:**American Literature****(The Age of Reason/Revolutionary Literature)**

Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine: *Common Sense*

Benjamin Franklin

African-American poet Phillis Wheatley, *Poetry on Various Subjects*

Period recognized by emerging nationalism; characterized by persuasive, philosophical writing: speeches, pamphlets, and the beginnings of newspapers in America.

1785–1830: The Romantic Period/Romanticism**British Literature**

William Blake, William Wordsworth

Samuel Taylor Coleridge: *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Jane Austen
Lord Byron
Percy Bysshe Shelley
John Keats
Alfred Lord Tennyson
Mary Shelley: *Frankenstein*

American Literature

Washington Irving: *Rip Van Winkle*
William Cullen Bryant: *Thanatopsis*
James Fenimore Cooper: *The Last of the Mohicans*
Nathaniel Hawthorne (often included in this period), see below.

1832–1901: The Victorian Period

World Literature

Henrik Ibsen, Norwegian dramatist: *A Doll's House*
Victor Hugo, French: *Les Misérables*
Gustave Flaubert, French: *Madame Bovary*

British Literature

Robert Browning, poet
Elizabeth Barrett Browning, poet
Charles Dickens: *Great Expectations*
Charlotte Brontë: *Jane Eyre*
Emily Brontë: *Wuthering Heights*
William Makepeace Thackeray: *Vanity Fair*
George Eliot, a.k.a. Marian Evans: *Middlemarch*

American Literature

Henry James
Frederick Douglass: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*

Jane Austen
 Lord Byron
 Percy Bysshe Shelley
 John Keats
 Alfred Lord Tennyson
 Mary Shelley: *Frankenstein*

American Literature

Washington Irving: *Rip Van Winkle*
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 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, poet
 Charles Dickens: *Great Expectations*
 Charlotte Brontë: *Jane Eyre*
 Emily Brontë: *Wuthering Heights*
 William Makepeace Thackeray: *Vanity Fair*
 George Eliot, a.k.a. Marian Evans: *Middlemarch*

American Literature

Henry James
 Frederick Douglass: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*

Harriet Jacobs: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*
 Paul Laurence Dunbar: *Lyrics of a Lowly Life*

1840–1860: American Renaissance**Transcendentalism and American Gothic (dark romantics)**

Emily Dickinson, poet
 Walt Whitman: *Leaves of Grass*
 Nathaniel Hawthorne: *The Scarlet Letter*
 Herman Melville: *Moby Dick*
 Edgar Allan Poe, poems and short stories

Transcendentalist Writers

Ralph Waldo Emerson, essays and aphorisms
 Henry David Thoreau: *Walden*
 Bronson Alcott
 Margaret Fuller, first major feminist writer

1855–1900: American Realism/Regionalism

Mark Twain (born Samuel Clemens): *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
 Bret Harte: regional writer
 Stephen Crane: *The Red Badge of Courage*
 Kate Chopin: *The Awakening*
 Charlotte Perkins Gilman: *The Yellow Wallpaper*

1901–1914**British (Edwardian Period)**

Joseph Conrad, Polish/British author: *Heart of Darkness*

American (Naturalism)

Theodore Dreiser, novelist: *Sister Carrie* (1900)
 W.E.B. Du Bois, sociologist and author: *The Souls of Black Folk*

Jack London, novelist: *The Call of the Wild*

Edith Wharton, novelist: *Ethan Frome*

1919–1945

Modernism

World Literature

Albert Camus, French writer: *The Stranger*

British Literature

George Orwell (born Eric Blair): *Animal Farm* and *1984*

American Literature

John Steinbeck, Nobel Prize novelist: *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*

Zora Neale Hurston, novelist: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Langston Hughes, poet

Tennessee Williams, playwright: *The Glass Menagerie*

1950– : Post Modernism

British Literature

William Golding, British author: *Lord of the Flies*

American Literature

(Note: Ethnicities are listed below only to show the range of diversity in literature in this period.)

J.D. Salinger, novelist: *The Catcher in the Rye*

Ralph Ellison, African American novelist: *Invisible Man*

Arthur Miller, playwright: *The Crucible* and *Death of a Salesman*

Ray Bradbury, science fiction writer: *Fahrenheit 451*

Eugene O'Neill, playwright: *Long Day's Journey Into Night*

Jack Kerouac, Beat writer: *On the Road*

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Joseph H

John Kno

Ken Kese

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Jack Kerouac, Beat writer: *On the Road*

Elie Wiesel, Romanian-American writer: *Night*

Joseph Heller, novelist: *Catch 22* (1961)

John Knowles, novelist: *A Separate Peace*

Ken Kesey, American author: *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

Sylvia Plath, known mostly for poetry (1932–63): *The Bell
 Jar* (1963)

Chaim Potok, Jewish-American novelist: *The Chosen*

Maya Angelou, African-American author: *I Know Why the
 Caged Bird Sings*

Toni Morrison, African-American Nobel Prize novelist:
The Bluest Eye

Rudolfo Anaya, Mexican-American writer: *Bless Me, Ultima*

Maxine Hong Kingston, Asian-American writer: *The Woman
 Warrior*

Alice Walker, African-American writer: *The Color Purple*

August Wilson, African-American, Pulitzer Prize winning
 playwright: *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*

Sandra Cisneros, Hispanic-American writer: *The House on
 Mango Street*

Louise Erdrich, Native American writer: *Love Medicine*

Amy Tan, Asian-American novelist: *The Joy Luck Club*

FEATURED AUTHORS

This list below is from the *2008 Course Description* as published by the College Board. The purpose of this list is to suggest the broad range of authors that can be considered for study in an AP Lit course. Use this list in combination with the timeline above and the list of literary works in Chapter 4 to create a reading list for yourself. Remember, it is far better to know five or six works in depth, than to have a cursory knowledge of more.