

Classic Literature: How Can You Tell?

By this time in your academic career, most of you have heard time and again that certain books are considered “good” literature and certain books are not. This can be very confusing because many of the **novels** you read, those by Stephen King, for example, are very entertaining. However, many teachers would not allow you to write a book report on one of these novels. Their response is usually along these lines: “You need to read serious literature—something considered a classic.”

What exactly does this mean? Does it mean a novel must be at least three inches thick to be considered a classic? Must it be difficult to read? Is it always sad or depressing? Finding an answer is no easy task.

On December 10, 1950, William Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. In his acceptance speech, he offered what many people feel is the true definition of a classic work of literature. He said:

...the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about....

He must learn them again...the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed—love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice. Until he does so, he labors under a curse. He writes not of love but of lust, of defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, of victories without hope and, worst of all, without pity or compassion.... He writes not of the heart but of the glands.

More simply put, Faulkner says that classic literature is not written to give momentary sensations—like the fright you get in watching the many editions of *Friday the 13th*. Instead, truly classic works speak about decisions and experiences human beings must face throughout time—falling in love, going to war, dealing with loss and death. In other words, they deal with universal **themes** and ideas. A classic novel or poem has meaning for an educated lawyer in 17th century England and for a teenage Floridian entering her senior year of high school in 1999.



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Think back through your years of English classes. Which novels did you read? Which ones did you especially enjoy? What makes these novels so memorable to you?

As you read through the literature assigned to you this year, think of Faulkner's definition of a classic. Try to determine which works are about universal themes and truths and "the human heart in conflict with itself." Gradually, you will come to an understanding of the definition of a true classic.

Fiction and Nonfiction: Which Is It?

Fiction is writing based on imagination. Short stories and novels are fiction because someone created the **characters** and the plots from their imagination. Often fiction will be about the lives and loves of ordinary people. Great fiction allows us to experience other lives as if we were living those lives.

British literature played a major part in the development of the novel. Writers such as Laurence Sterne, Henry Fielding, and Jane Austen wrote novels which were quite popular with the public. Jane Austen's books are still widely read today. Several of her novels have been turned into successful movies, including *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma*. In fact, the film *Clueless* was based on Jane Austen's novel, *Emma*.

Sometimes fiction may seem to be based on things that have really happened because the writer has used careful detail to make the story believable. This is true of Jane Austen's novels. Other novels and stories, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, are more fantastical. Nevertheless, they are both classified as fiction because they are works of the writer's imagination.



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Nonfiction is based on true stories. Newspaper accounts of events that happen each day and biographies are examples of nonfiction.

Much of the history of England has been revealed to us through nonfiction. Julius Caesar kept a personal journal of his travels and conquests of what is now modern-day France and England. It is

with these accounts that English history became recorded. *A History of the English Church and People* by the Venerable Bede provides the primary source for information about the people living in Britain from the time Rome was in control through the successful invasion of the Anglo-Saxons and the years of their domination. Other nonfiction works that have been valuable to historians include diaries, essays, and journals.

Poetry: Combining Fiction and Nonfiction

Much of what we call fiction and nonfiction is **prose**. In other words, it is written in a style that uses paragraphs, instead of separating individual lines, and does not intentionally use rhymes. Poetry, on the other hand, is how many stories and ideas have been transmitted across the centuries. The storytellers of the past used poetic forms such as the **ballad** and the **epic poem** because the rhymes and the rhythms made them easier to remember and because much of the populace could neither read nor write.

It is difficult to classify the old folk ballads and epic poems as either fiction or nonfiction. Many of these works are based on the activities of real people, such as the legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood. However, as the stories of these heroes are handed down from one generation to the next, the exact details often change. Therefore such accounts are considered fictional.

We can learn much about the history of England from both prose and poetry and from fiction and nonfiction. For example, we can gain much insight about the strength and courage of the English people from the speeches of Winston Churchill and from Alfred, Lord Tennyson's fictionalized poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade."

The Anglo-Saxon Period: Age of Legends and Heroes 449-1100

Here in the United States, we know exactly when our country was born. However, this is not true in England. England is a very old country, not a relatively new one like the United States. For this reason, much of England's early history was not written down. The first written history



Roman General Julius Caesar

came in 55 B.C., when the Roman General Julius Caesar invaded the largest of the British Isles. He recorded the events of the invasion and described the civilization he found: one with a long history of war.

Prior to the Romans' arrival, small bands of warriors constantly fought for authority among themselves. None of them were strong enough to hold power for long or to unite these early inhabitants into one nation. These tribal civilizations were overrun by a people called the Celts. It is the Celtic

civilization that Caesar encountered and later drove to the west and the north. The particular tribe that greeted the Romans were called the Britons, and it is from them that Great Britain takes its name.

The Romans occupied Britain for nearly 400 years. They withdrew in order to defend their own city of Rome, which was under attack from European invaders. The Celts again took over but never as a unified nation. The Celts were again overrun by Germanic invaders that included the Angles and Saxons. Although the date assigned to this invasion is 449 A.D., several decades passed before the Anglo-Saxons were firmly in control of Britain.

One of the Celtic chiefs defeated by the Angles and Saxons was Arthur, who became famous through legends of his kingdom called Camelot. The new invaders organized the country, which they called Angle-land, into seven kingdoms. These seven kingdoms were powerful enough to successfully defend themselves against the Viking invaders from Denmark.

In 1066, Britain was again invaded successfully. Warriors from France, called the Normans, defeated the Anglo-Saxons at the Battle of Hastings. This was the last time that an invading army defeated Britain. The successful Norman king became known as William the Conqueror, and he was crowned on Christmas Day of 1066. William united England, paving the way for the eventual establishment of Parliament, the democratic assembly which governs England to this day.

It is not surprising that England's early literature included accounts of battles and glorified brave warriors as heroes. Most of these heroic accounts are preserved in various types of poetry. The Celts's poetry was enjoyed as stories told by a special group of individuals known as bards. The bards recited their tales, mostly about the adventures of their tribe. These tales were not written down, so bards became the historians of their respective tribes. They would pass their tales and the history these tales contained down to their successors, and many of the legends survived in this way.

The Anglo-Saxons: Singing Their Stories



The Anglo-Saxons also preserved their legends in poetry. Most often used was the *epic poem*. These epics were recited by poet-singers called *scops*, whose chant-like recitations were accompanied by the music of a harp.

The most important piece of literature to come from the Anglo-Saxons was the epic poem *Beowulf*. Many historians consider this epic to be the first major work in English literature. Nothing is known about the poet who wrote *Beowulf*. Scholars believe that the poem was composed sometime in the 8th century and written down about 200 years later.

The poem tells the story of Beowulf, a great war chief, who fought and killed a terrible monster named Grendel and then died killing the monster's mother after she came to seek revenge for the death of her son. The prologue or introduction of the poem relates the history of the place where Grendel attacked. In it you will read about Scyld, King of the Danes.

Beowulf was written in Old English, a language very different from the English we speak today. The tale has been translated many times throughout the years, and it is somewhat challenging to read.

The Medieval Period: Continuing the Oral Tradition 1100-1485

When William the Conqueror brought an end to the Anglo-Saxon period in English history, what is known as the medieval period began. Like the Anglo-Saxons, the medieval English passed stories and legends from one generation to the next through stories and songs. One of the most popular forms for doing this was the ballad.



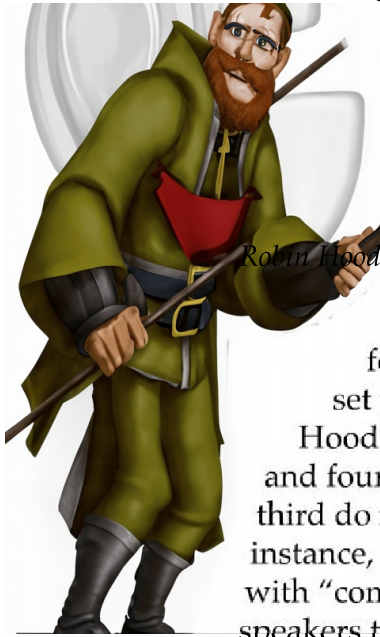
Ballads were especially popular among the countryfolk and commoners. Often, ballads were about ordinary people who had met with great tragedy or who had achieved fame as heroes. Shipwrecks, war, and unfulfilled love were also popular subjects for ballads.

Ballads were passed on and preserved by traveling singer-actors called minstrels. The songs were handed down from generation to generation and even from country to country. For this reason, the words were often changed or lost, and more than one version of a ballad often exists. It was not until the 18th century that these ballads were written down.

The ballad shares several characteristics with the epic. First, both originated in oral tradition. In addition, the ballad, like the epic, begins in the middle of a situation: *in medias res*. Finally, both the epic and the ballad glorify character traits and values important to the time period. Both forms also allow us a glimpse at folk customs and traditions.



The first inhabitants of England were warriors. Since it was essential to fight well in order to survive, the qualities needed to do this were important to them. The heroes of their legends and tales are strong, brave, and very skilled as fighters.



Few people could read during this time. Therefore, the literature was mostly passed by word of mouth. Epic poems and ballads are the major forms of literature from this time in British history.

As you read the ballads and poems in this unit, you will notice that the early poetic forms frequently use rhyme. The rhymes are in a set pattern. For instance in the ballad of “Robin Hood and Allen-a-Dale,” you can see that the second and fourth lines of each **stanza** rhyme, but the first and third do not. Sometimes the rhyme may not be exact. For instance, in the sixth stanza “son” is not an exact rhyme with “come.” However, they sound enough alike for the speakers to be able to use them.

Poets today often do not use rhyme. However, song writers and lyricists still depend on rhymes. Rap music, especially, makes use of rhyme and rhythm. Its roots can be found in the older poetic forms.

One of the most popular stories of the medieval period in English history was the legend of Robin Hood. No one is really sure whether or not Robin Hood actually existed. However, in all the stories about him, he is the champion of the common folk. It seems only fitting that stories about him be told in the literary form most popular with them: the ballad.

The Renaissance: The Awakening of the English Heart and Mind 1485-1660

The period following the Norman Conquest of England is referred to as the Medieval Period or Middle Ages. During this time, the most powerful force in the country was the Catholic Church. Many forms of art were discouraged because these forms did not meet with the church's approval.



King Henry VIII

A renewed interest in art and learning had begun to spread throughout Europe during the 14th century, especially in Italy. This new interest, called the Renaissance, spread to England during the next century. There were several reasons for this growth. First, the Protestant Reformation had begun in Northern Germany and was spreading across Northern Europe. Also, a long series of wars, the Wars of the Roses, ended. The new peace gave English citizens the chance to turn their time and interest to learning and the arts. Perhaps more importantly, Henry VIII became king. Henry VIII was an educated and artistic man who placed importance on education and the arts. He led England into the Protestant movement in 1534 when he broke his allegiance to the Catholic Church, which would not annul his 18-year marriage to Catherine of Aragon. He then declared himself head of the Church of England, or Anglican Church. With the power of the church broken, interest turned to more secular or nonreligious art forms and areas of study.

The English Renaissance reached its peak under Queen Elizabeth I, Henry VIII's youngest daughter by his second wife. Elizabeth was so instrumental to this new spirit that her reign is referred to as the Elizabethan Age. Under Elizabeth, the arts flourished and England became a world power, defeating the Spanish Armada and colonizing the newly discovered western world.

More than any other art form, literature flourished during the English Renaissance. This new literature reflected the relaxed attitude toward a number of subjects. None was more obvious than the changing attitude toward love.



During the Middle Ages, the concept of courtly love was popular in literature. Courtly love was platonic: this meant that although a man might have strong feelings for a woman, he would never act on those feelings. Women were placed on pedestals to be worshipped from afar. Writers of the Renaissance examined all forms of love —passionate love between men and women being one of their favorites.

The favorite form of expressing these feelings was the **sonnet**, a poetic form borrowed from Italy. Sonnets are difficult to write because they require an exact number of lines, an exact number of syllables, and an exact rhythm and **rhyme scheme**. Two kinds of sonnets are the English (Shakespearean) Sonnet and the Italian (Petrarchan) Sonnet.

The difference between the two is in the rhyming patterns and in the structure of the poem. The English Sonnet usually consists of three quatrains, or verses with four lines, followed by a couplet, a verse with two lines. A couplet usually comments on the ideas contained in the preceding 12 lines. The Italian Sonnet usually has a verse of eight lines followed by a verse of six lines. The verses are not necessarily separated from each other, but the rhyme scheme may change with each verse.

The English (Shakespearean) Sonnet	The Italian (Petrarchan) Sonnet
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> usually a 14-line lyric poem consisting of three quatrains (verses with four lines), followed by a couplet (verse with two lines) the couplet usually commenting on the ideas contained in the preceding 12 lines usually rhyming <i>abab cdcd efef gg</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> usually a 14-line lyric poem consisting of an octave (verse of eight lines), followed by a sestet (verse of six lines) the octave stating a theme or asking a question and the sestet commenting on or answering the question usually the octave rhyming <i>abbaabba</i> and the sestet rhyming <i>cdecde</i>

Despite the difficulty in writing sonnets, nearly every English poet composed them. The following will help you become familiar with the sonnet form and with how poets used them to express their ideas about love.

A *theme* popularized in Renaissance love poetry was *carpe diem*, a Latin phrase meaning “seize the day.” The philosophy behind these poems was that we should enjoy each moment to the fullest. Most of these poems were addressed to young women and were narrated by young men. The meaning of these poems is obvious: let us love each other now because old age and death come quickly. Often these poems could be quite humorous.

Following is an example of a sonnet.

Sonnet 30

by Edmund Spenser

My love is like to ice, and I to fire;	a
How come it then that this her cold so great	b
Is not dissolved through my so hot desire,	a
but harder grows the more I her entreat?	b
Or how comes it that my exceeding heat	b
Is not delayed by her heart-frozen cold:	c
But that I burn much more in boiling sweat,	b
And feel my flames augmented manifold?	c
What more miraculous thing may be told	c
That fire which all things melts, should harden ice:	d
And ice which is congealed with senseless cold,	c
Should kindle fire by wonderful device.	d
Such is the pow’r of love in gentle mind,	e
That it can alter all the course of kind. ¹	e

1. kind: nature

When analyzing a sonnet, we use letters of the alphabet to indicate the rhyming pattern. The first line (a) rhymes with the third line. The second line (b) rhymes with the fourth line, and so on. The last two lines are known as a couplet because they rhyme with each other.

In addition to rhyming, this sonnet also uses symbolism. The symbols are fire for a passionate love and ice for feelings which are much more subdued, if they exist at all. As you read the following sonnets notice the symbolism, as well as the imagery and rhyme.

Neoclassicism: Literature of the Restoration and the Enlightenment 1660-1798



As the Renaissance declined, England experienced great turmoil. Elizabeth's successor James I and his son, Charles I, were extravagant. In addition, they believed in the divine right of kings. This was a belief that the English monarch was God's agent on Earth and received his right to rule through God himself. Charles I proved so unpopular that in 1642, the English Civil War began.

The Civil War was waged between the supporters of the king, referred to as Royalists, and the supporters of Parliament led by Oliver Cromwell.

Cromwell was a Puritan and an excellent military leader. His army defeated the Royalists in 1645. Charles I was beheaded in 1649. Cromwell became head of the English Commonwealth. When he died in 1658, his son Richard was unable to continue the leadership shown by his father. Parliament then invited Charles II, the son of the executed king, back to the throne. Charles II was succeeded by his brother, James II. Their reigns are referred to as the *Restoration*.

James II followed in his grandfather's footsteps, failing to recognize the limits the new Parliament had set on the king. He was sent into exile. His daughter Mary and her husband, William of Orange, replaced him. This overthrow of James II is referred to as the Glorious Revolution. Parliament had upheld the rule of the people over the divine right of kings, and a new way of thinking began. This period was known as the *Enlightenment*.

The Enlightenment led to *Rationalism*, a philosophy that believes reason is much more important than imagination. Science was popular during this time. As a result, new machines were invented which led to the Industrial Revolution. These inventions changed England from a farming society into an industrial one.

The literature produced during the Restoration and the Enlightenment reflected these events. The literary style popular then was referred to as **Neoclassicism**, which means “new classicism.” This style valued the logic, sophisticated wit, and emotional restraint found in the literature of ancient Rome.

The Restoration Comedy: Making Fun of the Human Character

Charles II reopened the theaters which had been closed under the Puritan rule of Oliver Cromwell. Restoration comedies, influenced by the French “comedy of manners,” flourished. These **dramatic** plays made fun of the artificial manners and the sophistication of English society. The dialogue of the Restoration comedy was very witty, and the **plot** was usually about a young man who lives for pleasure and sexual conquest of a beautiful, witty, pleasure-loving woman. These plays appealed primarily to the class of people that were from the educated, elite society.

The Restoration comedy was a result of the sense of humor Charles II brought with him back to the throne. It also reflects a certain outlook at humankind—at the weaknesses and the parts of human character that make us imperfect and laughable.

One of the most popular writers of the Restoration comedy was Sir George Etherege. His play *The Man of Mode* is an excellent example of this style of writing. The following dialogue between a lady and her maid comes from *The Man of Mode*.

MRS. LOVEIT: Pert.

PERT: Madam?

MRS. LOVEIT: I hate myself. I look so ill today.

PERT: Hate the wicked cause on't, that base man Mr. Dorimant, who makes you torment and vex yourself continually.

MRS. LOVEIT: He is to blame, indeed.

PERT: To blame to be two days without sending, writing, or coming near you, contrary to his oath and covenant! 'Twas

to much purpose to make him swear! I'll lay my life there's not an article but he has broken....Tis impossible for a man of his inconstant temper to forbear, I'm sure.

MRS. LOVEIT: I know he is a devil, but he has something of the angel yet undefaced in him, which makes him so charming and agreeable that I must love him, be he never so wicked.

PERT: I little thought, Madam, to see your spirit tamed to this degree, who banished poor Mr. Lackwit but for taking up another lady's fan in your presence.

MRS. LOVEIT: My knowing of such odious fools contributes to the making of me love Dorimant the better.

PERT: Your knowing of Mr. Dorimant, in my mind, should rather make you hate all mankind.

MRS. LOVEIT: So it does, besides himself.

PERT: Pray, what excuse does he make in his letter?

MRS. LOVEIT: He has had business.

PERT: Business in general terms would not have been a current¹ excuse for another. A modish man is always very busy when he is in a pursuit of a new mistress.

MRS. LOVEIT: Some fop has bribed you to rail at him. He had business; I will believe it, and will forgive him.

PERT: You may forgive him anything, but I shall never forgive him his turning me into ridicule, as I hear he does.

MRS. LOVEIT: I perceive you are of the number of those fools his wit has made his enemies.

PERT: I am of the number of those he's pleased to rally, Madam, and if we may believe Mr. Wagfan and Mr. Caperwell, he sometimes makes merry with yourself too, among his laughing companions.

1. current: valid

MRS. LOVEIT: Blockheads are as malicious to witty men as ugly women to the handsome; 'tis their interest, and they make it their business to defame 'em.

PERT: I wish Mr. Dorimant would not make it his business to defame you.

MRS. LOVEIT: Should he, I had rather be made infamous by him than owe my reputation to the dull discretion of those fops you talk of.

Today movies and television are the media most often used to make fun of social and cultural manners. Think of a program that uses comedy to point out the silly and useless things we do on a regular basis. Often, these comedies point out our reliance on set morals and our love of trendy “gadgets.” For example, in the movie *Clueless*, high school students use cellular phones to talk to each other, even when they are walking side by side. This points out how our culture has carried this trend to ridiculous levels.

The 18th Century: The Rise of Prose

The writers of the Enlightenment emphasized common sense, simplicity, control of emotions, and balance. Many writers pointed out the weaknesses inherent in human nature and gave moral instructions. The literature reflects the feeling of the times: use of the intelligence was all important. Even when laughing, you needed to think about why you were doing so.

The reading public expanded steadily throughout the 18th century. Newspapers and magazines began to be widely read. Novels gained in popularity as well. Stories, novels, essays, and articles are all written in *prose*, which does not rhyme nor does it have a specific rhythm as poetry does. While many still wrote in verse, prose became a more common way of getting ideas across to others.

The literature of this period was concerned with civilization and social relationships. It was quite often satiric and critical in nature. **Satire** is usually humorous, but the humor is not merely slapstick. Instead there is an important message under the satire.

Irony is an important tool of the satirist. Irony means to say something which is quite different from what one really means. The purpose of irony is not to hide the real meaning but to show the meaning in an artistic manner. On the other hand, satire is used to ridicule or criticize the faults of individuals or groups. Satire may be humorous; however, its purpose is not only to make others laugh but also to correct the flaws and shortcomings it points out.

One of the most powerful satirists was Jonathan Swift, who wrote the famous book *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift felt great pity for the oppressed peasants of Ireland and disgust for the wealthy English landlords who were largely responsible for the poverty and downtrodden lives of these peasants. Instead of saying what he felt outright, however, Swift used satire and irony to point out the callous attitudes of the English landlords towards their poorer tenants. This famous essay is called "A Modest Proposal."

Following is an excerpt from “A Modest Proposal”:

I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection.

I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout¹.... I grant this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children.

1. fricassee...ragout: types of meat stews

The Age of Romanticism: The Emergence of the Individual 1778-1832

The end of the 18th century was, in many ways, the Age of Revolution. The American Revolution was a success and, after many years of conflict, the French Revolution came to a successful conclusion. These events caught the imagination of a new group of thinkers and writers who came to be known as the Romantics during the movement called **Romanticism**.



William Wordsworth

The Romantic Age in England officially began in 1798 with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*. This short collection of poems was written and edited by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

These two poets led a literary revolution. Both were strong believers in the rights of ordinary people.

Wordsworth, especially, tried to create poetry that would appeal to common folk. His verse speaks of individual experiences and feelings.

Wordsworth often wrote about how the natural world can offer spiritual insights, and his poetry was written in easy to understand

language. Coleridge was more interested in the individual imagination. He wrote poems that involved mysterious and often supernatural experiences.

The ideas expressed in *Lyrical Ballads* contrasted strongly with the neoclassical poetry of The Enlightenment. The Romantics rebelled against the emotional restraint of rational thinking. They turned their backs on the world of science. As a group, they were horrified by the evils brought on by the Industrial Age. The Romantics believed the most profound human experiences were to be found in the study of and interaction with nature.

Wordsworth and Coleridge influenced three of the most famous poets in British literature: Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats. These three young men are referred to as the later Romantics. Their poetry most fully expresses Romantic ideals: individual



Lord Byron

expression, belief in absolute truth and beauty, reverence for nature, and love of individual differences and freedom.

One of the poetic forms popularized by the Romantic writers is the **ode**, a long, **lyric poem** written to honor someone or something. Poets have written odes since the days of the Greeks, but Romantic poets perfected the personal ode, which often contemplated an outward scene and applied it to either a personal emotional problem or a generally human one.

All of us have a touch of the Romantic inside us. As we grow older, we tend to be most selective in how we remember people and events from our past. Therefore, we are doing exactly what Shelley, Byron, Keats, and Wordsworth were doing.

The Romantics were idealistic. They believed in the goodness of common people and in strong principles of democracy. Although many of the Romantic writers were social reformers, they tended to write about how things should be, not as they were. Childhood was a frequent topic of the Romantics. They saw this period of a person's life as the most blessed of all times. Romantic literature is very imaginative and emotional. It is all about feeling rather than logic.

The Victorian Era: An Age of Reform 1832-1901

Victoria became queen of England in 1837 when she was just 18. She ruled for 63 years, the longest reign in British history. It is not surprising then that, like Queen Elizabeth I, the time period of her reign took her name. Victoria was a remarkable woman. She had very high moral standards and firmly believed in marriage and family. For this reason, people often think of Victorian manners and customs as stuffy and prudish. However, under Queen Victoria, England became the most powerful nation in the world. The Industrial Revolution reached its peak, changing England from a farming culture to a city-based industrial one. The British Empire reached its greatest limit, including Canada, Australia, India, and Pakistan.

Such drastic changes over such a short period of time had a strong effect on the citizens of the British Empire and on its writers. A change in the thoughts and sentiments of England at this time can be clearly traced through its literature.

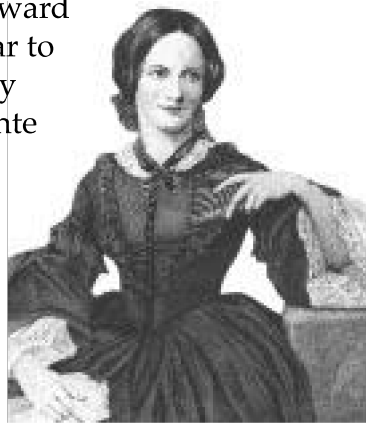
The length of the Victorian Age resulted in several different movements in literature. All were a direct result of the changing world in which the writers lived. The early Victorians turned their heads from the ugliness of industrial life and focused on ideal love and family relationships. Then, writers embraced **Realism**, hoping to recreate the evils of industrial society in an attempt to change them. They wrote about the world as it really was, hoping to shock their readers into action. The later Victorians reacted to the scientific discoveries and inventions that made headlines on almost a daily basis. Their philosophy and their writing emphasized the laws of science. They believed human behavior could be defined by these laws and much of the writing of this time reflected this **tone**.



Period 1: The Romantic Victorians

The first movement in Victorian literature was a result of the rapid growth of cities. Farmers left their fields and flocked to the cities, seeking work at newly formed factories. The owners of these factories grew rich. However, the workers found themselves living in horrible slums and working long hours for little money. Friendship, family, and love became even more important to these people as the outside world became harder. Much of the literature of this time reflects this interest. Many of the poems and stories are optimistic, showing these relationships as they should be at that time. However, some are not. Several writers offered insights into the dark side of love—jealousy, revenge, retribution.

The period of Victorian literature that leaned toward the romantic produced many novels very similar to the Gothic Romance. *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte and *Jane Eyre* by her sister Charlotte Bronte are fine examples of this genre. Both of these novels involve mysterious, often dangerous circumstances and show the dark turn that passionate love can often take.



Charlotte Bronte

A novel is a long piece of imaginative writing about *characters*, or fictional people, and what happens to them. The “what happens” is the *plot*. For instance, the main character of the novel, *Jane Eyre*, is a penniless orphan named Jane Eyre who grows up and becomes a governess for the daughter of a mysterious man named Mr. Rochester. Jane is not pretty, but she is intelligent and independent, and Mr. Rochester falls in love with her. On the day they are about to be married, Jane learns that Mr. Rochester has an insane wife whom he keeps in the attic. This is just part of the complicated and surprising plot that has kept readers fascinated for more than 150 years.



Alfred, Lord Tennyson

A strong interest in romantic legends of the past can be seen in one of the Victorian Era's most beloved poets, Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Tennyson retells the story of King Arthur in a series of 12 **narrative** poems entitled *Idylls of the King*. He also wrote poems that referred to a number of mythological people and creatures.

Like the writers of the Romantic Age, these Victorians' work was unfailingly optimistic. Also, much of their intent was escape from the ugliness of life in the industrialized cities of England.

Romantic love between a man and a woman is always a popular topic for poetry. One of the most famous collections of such poems was written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning to her husband Robert Browning. Her collection was entitled *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. The title comes from Robert Browning's affectionate name for Elizabeth. Because of her dark hair and eyes, he referred to her as "my little Portuguese." The poem "Sonnet 43" is perhaps the most famous of the sonnets written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poems describe the type of love and devotion Queen Victoria firmly believed in herself. The Queen's own marriage to Prince Albert was one of the more successful royal matches in British history. After his death, she remained in mourning for him the rest of her life.

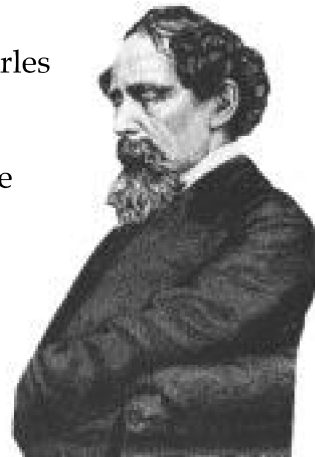
Period 2: Realism

The second generation of Victorian writers took a different position. While their predecessors hoped to provide escape from urban life, these writers wanted to do just the opposite. In hope of calling attention to the country's poor and disabled, poets, novelists, and essayists attempted to portray life as it really was at that time. This literature was called *Realism*.

Writers of Realism were deeply interested in making life better for their fellow man. Although their work often contained optimistic endings and messages, writers of Realism exposed the poverty and oppression in which much of the country lived.

One of the most outspoken of these writers was Charles Dickens. Dickens remains one of the most popular Victorian writers, even today. His name is so closely associated with the Victorian novel that many people credit him with its invention.

Setting, or time and place, is very important in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens' novel *A Tale of Two Cities* takes place during the French Revolution and discussed the horrible conditions in France that led to the Revolution. The novel's title—the reference to “two” cities helps to convey Dickens's message. He wanted to point out that the poor city dwellers of London were ready for revolution, just as the people of Paris had been ready.



Charles Dickens

Another notable aspect of all Dickens' writing is *tone*, the feeling created by the writing and the attitude of the writer towards the topic. This is evident in the fourth paragraph of the excerpt on pages 85-86. Notice the words and the feelings that are underneath them: darkness, heavy, cold, dirt, sickness, terrible, grinding, wretched, and hunger. These words create an atmosphere of oppression, and the tone is serious and somber, especially compared to the more playful passage before it.

Period 3: Naturalism

The scientific discoveries occurring during the Industrial Revolution had their impact on the way Victorian people thought. Long-accepted religious beliefs were often shaken by theories based on nature and scientific law. The moral code that had, for so long, been the mainstay of British society no longer worked with the rising middle and lower classes. As a result, many later Victorian writers turned their talents inward. Many searched for values and strength to replace the unquestioned faith of their ancestors.

The movement associated with these new writers was called **Naturalism**. The followers of Naturalism were very interested in science. They looked to the laws of science in order to explain human behaviors. Since religious faith cannot be explained by scientific law, many Naturalists rejected religious faith of any kind. Others maintained their faith but found themselves constantly questioning the foundations of this faith. These writers were concerned with man's isolation and the quickness with which youth, beauty, and fame could pass.

One of the best known Naturalist writers of the Victorian Age is Thomas Hardy. Hardy wrote 14 novels during the first part of his long writing career. These novels include *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure*, and *The Return of the Native*. These novels brought Hardy both praise and criticism because Hardy's characters were taken from all levels of society and showed all forms of morality. In his later years, Hardy turned to poetry. As do his novels, his poems concentrate on the unfairness of life. At the heart of his work is the belief that we do live in an indifferent universe. However, according to Hardy, people can make the world a better place if we so choose.

As the Victorian Age drew to an end, many of the later writers explored how life is filled with irony. For example, Thomas Hardy's poem "The Man He Killed" points out that simply being born in a particular place and time made two men enemies who would otherwise be friends.

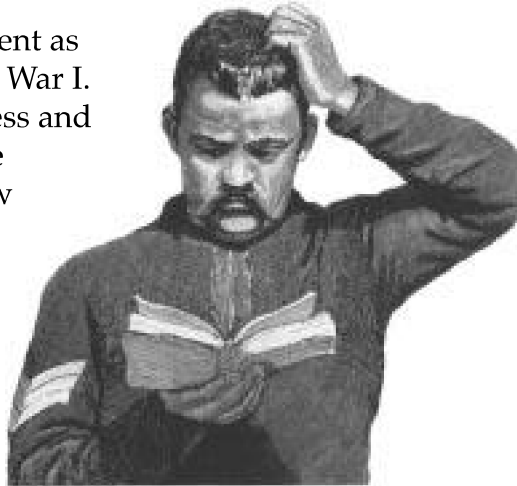
Our lives are filled with irony. We are often in the wrong place at the wrong time; we often make a decision that has life-long consequences; we tend to judge people on externals, to accept or reject them based on the clothes they wear or the music to which they listen. We then find these people are friends we thought enemies or enemies we thought friends.

Modernism: Entry into the 20th Century 1901-1950

Queen Victoria died in 1901, bringing an end to Victorian England. During the next 10 years, England was ruled by Victoria's son, Edward VII. This period is referred to as the Edwardian Age. The literary style of the Edwardian Age was very similar to that of the latter part of the Victorian Era.

The style known as **Modernism** began to emerge in 1910. Followers of Modernism wanted to experiment. They believed they should develop a new literature for the new age. Poets began to write free verse, discarding the traditional poetic forms. Emotion was important to Modernist poets, and they used strong images and symbols to help convey these emotions. Fiction writers were influenced by the work of psychologists Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Authors such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Joseph Conrad used stream of consciousness in their work. Stream of consciousness attempts to recreate the way human thought jumps from thought to thought and back and forth through time. The early Modern Age was filled with excitement and enthusiasm for literature and for life.

These feelings turned to disillusionment as England entered and survived World War I. Many writers' work reflected bitterness and cynicism as they contemplated on the horrors of modern warfare. Many saw the world as it appeared in the aftermath of battle: stripped of life and broken. Others turned from social concerns to inward, private matters, exploring their loss of faith in God, mankind, and themselves.



Read the two poems that follow.

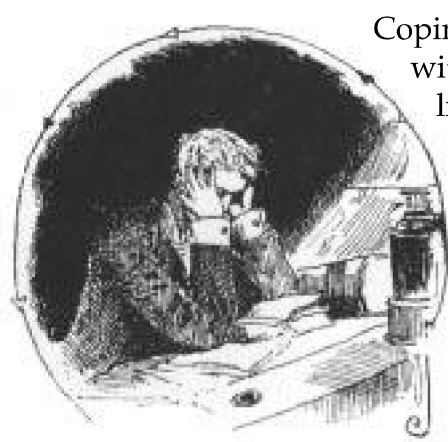
The first was written by Wilfred Owen. Owen participated in World War I and was killed one week before the armistice was signed. Owen is often considered the best of the poets who wrote about World War I. His verse in no way glorifies the experience. According to his own words, he wrote about the "Pity of War."

Contemporary British Literature: Combining New and Old Influences 1950-Present

The latter part of the 20th century has been a difficult time for England. World War II took a heavy toll on the country. England was the only European power left to oppose Hitler. The Germans staged heavy bombing strikes on English industrial cities, and the loss of property and lives was staggering. Although England and her allies were eventually victorious, the country was nearly bankrupt and its war debt enormous. England also lost its position as an empire. Peacefully, England withdrew from her colonies, which became independent nations.

Within the country, the English people were redefining themselves as well. The heroic efforts of the entire country against the Nazis had drawn citizens closer together. The old class barriers weakened, although they never disappeared altogether. Other barriers sprang up as people from England's former colonies, many of them of other races, began migrating into the country. The enormity of the war debt resulted in one economic crisis after the other and affected all social classes and economic levels. In response, the government began a number of social welfare programs. Even though the size and influence of the upper class decreased tremendously, the old distinctions, along with some new ones, were still there.

England also endured falling from her position as the major Western power. The United States moved into this position. Because of the opportunities presented in the United States, England lost a number of its top scientists and engineers. In addition, a number of important artists and entertainers immigrated to the United States from England.



Coping with turmoil within and loss of stature without is reflected in contemporary British literature. In the tradition of the Romantics and the Victorians, a number of contemporary British writers have used their work as a way to work for improved social conditions. A group of fiction writers, referred to as the Angry Young Men, wrote about the evils of middle class values and strong, centralized authority.

The influence of the changing face of English society is also seen in the many regional and ethnic writers producing work in contemporary England.

Contemporary British literature has not, however, abandoned the courage and strength of thought that has so long been a part of the English character. This determination helped them through the dark times of the two world wars, and it is exhibited in the work of today's writers.

Throughout your study of British literature, you have read about several movements. These movements all have a philosophy behind them. As you read each writer's selections, you are learning about the writer's beliefs and views about the world and life in general. Some of these you agree with; others you disagree with. If you are like most people, you find a bit of thought in each one that makes sense and a bit that does not.

You, like the contemporary writers we have studied in this unit, are influenced by all those people who have lived before you. Your ideas have been formed by a great deal of history and your personal philosophy will continue to develop as you grow older.

Contemporary British literature moves forward and looks at the past. It strongly reflects the influence of other cultures immigrating into the country. In addition, the isolation and emptiness prevalent in Modernism continue to influence today's writers. However, influence exists also from the past. British writers continue to work for social change and to show the courage so characteristic of the English people.

Golding captured the spirit of contemporary British literature when he described the *theme*, or underlying purpose, of his book as follows: "The theme is an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature. The moral is that the shape of a society must depend on the ethical nature of the individual and not on any political system however apparently logical or respectable." In this book, Ralph is the character who represents rationality and civilization. He begins as the boys' leader, but in the end he is unable to calm the fears or control the wildness of the other boys, and the result is murder.

Following is an excerpt, or short section, from *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. *Lord of the Flies* is a novel which was first published in 1954. The story is about a group of boys who become stranded on a desert island.

The plot follows their descent into savagery. Critics called it “a parable for our times.”

The story in this excerpt is told from Ralph’s **point of view**. In other words, we see the events through his eyes, and we are told what he thinks. In this section, we do not know what any of the other characters think. We can only guess their thoughts by their actions.

The excerpt begins just after some of the boys have gone on a pig hunt and let their smoke-signal fire go out, thereby missing an opportunity for rescue.

1. improvisation: making up behavior on the spur of the moment
2. jeeringly: mocking