



Appendix D: Periods in English Language Literature

Worldview analysis of a work of literature begins with an understanding of the work's context. This invariably requires some knowledge of the period in which the work was written, and what ideas or movements influenced its composition. This appendix provides an overview of the history of English language literature.

Major Periods in English Language Literature

In the broadest terms, English language literature has undergone six major periods or movements since ancient times. They are usually described as follows (with very rough dates in parentheses):

- **Medieval** (500 – 1500 A.D.), beginning with the fall of Rome and continuing until the Renaissance;
- **Renaissance** (1500 – 1660), ending with the Restoration of Charles II;
- **Neo-classical** (1660 – 1800), beginning with the Restoration and continuing through the end of the revolutionary period, when it was known as the “Age of Enlightenment”;
- **Romantic** (1800 – 1865), beginning in the last decades of the 18th century and continuing through the middle of the 19th;
- **Realist** (1840 – 1914), beginning in England with the accession of Queen Victoria and in America after the Civil War, and continuing up to WWI; and
- **Modern** (1900 – 1945), running from the turn of the twentieth century to the end of WWII.

Each of these labels reflects a system of broad assumptions about the world that was more or less generally accepted by thinkers of the period. Familiarity with these assumptions can help you place the books you read in the proper historical and philosophical context – a key first step in worldview analysis. If you know what characteristics generally apply to works of Realism, for example, you'll have a clue about Mark Twain's attitude toward his subject even before you read *Huckleberry Finn*.

Two Important Cautions

Thinking in terms of literary periods is a powerful way to understand an author's world view. However, it is not as simple as it sounds at first. Two main cautions are necessary:

Sub-periods

Within each literary period, there are variations that allow for the identification of distinct movements. *Elizabethan*, for example, is a special category of late *Renaissance* literature that includes William Shakespeare but excludes Thomas More, while the label *Victorian* corresponds to a particular kind of 19th century English *Realism* that includes Charles

Dickens but not Mark Twain. It is helpful to remember that categorizing something is itself a work of interpretation, and there are as many ways to do it as there are interpreters. This guide will stick to the broadest and most generally agreed upon labels.

Overlap

New literary periods don't begin and end all at once, of course. Assumptions and conventions change gradually and unevenly, depending upon time, place and personality. The governing ideas of one period often linger long into the next, informing and shaping its development. This means that it is sometimes difficult to assign definitive dates to a particular period. For example, we can date the beginning of the Victorian period very specifically: 1837, when Victoria rose to the throne of England. It is more difficult to say exactly when Realism became the dominant mode of English literature.

Also, the fact that an author lived in a particular period doesn't necessarily mean his work bows to the conventions of that period. Literary history is full of examples of authors whose work foreshadowed future developments, or hearkened back to days gone by. Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, for example, though written in the Victorian period, has much in common with works of the Romantic period which came before. By the same token, the works of Jane Austen seem to foreshadow the Victorian age, even though they were written during the height of Romanticism.

In the end, it is best to use your understanding of literary periods as a collection of "hints" about the world view assumptions of great authors. It can be a great way quickly to explain the differences between Jack London and Nathaniel Hawthorne, for example, and pave the way for deeper study of their individual careers.

Sources

Reference texts such as the Norton Anthologies are excellent sources for information on literary periods and worldviews. In addition, they contain sizable excerpts from important works in each period. In many cases, texts are included in their entirety. In our view these volumes are worth owning as they provide an invaluable survey of Western literature.

The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 5th ed. (New York: Norton, 1986)

The Norton Anthology of American Literature, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1985)

How To Use This Appendix:

This appendix is designed to prepare you for world view analysis by providing a summary of assumptions and themes common to literary works from each of the periods mentioned above. In addition, we have created a list of notable authors from each period and some of their most important works. Please note that the lists are not intended to be exhaustive. Authors and works have been included in order to illustrate and provide examples of the worldviews in question. For this reason, too, we have included some works of poetry and philosophy as well as fiction. Finally, we have provided space for you to add to this list as you discover other titles that help you present worldview issues in your own classroom.

As with all lists, it is necessary to understand the purpose of this appendix before you dive in and begin assigning books. Some booklists are created for the purpose of saying, “Here’s a list of books that are good for you. You can feel perfectly safe assigning any of these books to your student, regardless of his age or experience.”

This is **not** that kind of list.

The titles on this list have been chosen because they represent (to one degree or another) major worldview trends in Western thought. They are included because they will provide your students with the opportunity to engage with worldviews other than their own. You may find the content of some of these titles disturbing or offensive – in many cases, their first readers felt the same way.

This is especially true of the modernist period, which arose because authors felt disconnected from traditional morality and traditional world views. As a result, you will find little support for traditional morality in modernist literature! Do not expect to find it – do not be surprised if you find the opposite instead. If you are looking to Ernest Hemingway to encourage and support your students in a Christian way of thinking, you are looking in the wrong place.

If, however, your student is ready to try his hand at interpretation of the world’s most influential literature and to practice taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, the books in this appendix are just what you need!

I. Medieval Literature (500-1500)

Anglo-Saxon (500-1066)

The term “Anglo-Saxon” applies to literature produced between the invasion of Celtic England by Germanic tribes in the fifth century and the conquest of England in 1066 by William the Conqueror. This literature is heavily based on the tradition of oral storytelling, and includes epic poems such as *Beowulf*. Thematically, Anglo-Saxon literature often addressed the *heroic ideal*, which was a picture of kingly behavior that reflected the basic political and social relationship of Anglo-Saxon society: the bond between a king and his warriors. The heroic ideal involved responsibility, leadership, loyalty, generosity and, above all, skill in battle. Anglo-Saxon literature existed in part to praise the heroic virtues of its kings and so secure their eternal fame.

Anglo-Saxon England was Christianized in the 7th century, and from that date its literature became overwhelmingly Christian in its subject matter. Interestingly enough, however, it still retained its concern for the heroic ideal, and the result was a mingling of Christian and pagan elements. Biblical figures like Moses, Jesus and even God the Father often appeared as Beowulf-like heroes, performing mighty deeds.

Authors: Anglo-Saxon Literature

Anonymous

The Dream of the Rood (seventh century)

Beowulf (eighth century)

The Battle of Maldon (tenth century)

Caedmon

Hymn (seventh century)

Middle English (1066 -1500)

The Norman conquest of England in 1066 marks a significant change in the development of English literature. Where Anglo-Saxon literature had been written by and for the aristocracy (that is, kings and their households), Middle English literature was popular literature, written by and for people of the lower classes.

This change had a significant effect on the subject matter of Middle English literature. Its heroes, for example, were not the idealized kings of the Anglo-Saxon period; instead, they were real human protagonists who not only fought but also laughed, cried, played games, and above all, fell in and out of love. The situations of ordinary life played a much larger part in Middle English literature than they had before 1066.

Despite its new directions, Middle English literature continued to reflect the centrality of Christianity in the medieval world. Virtually all works, whether sacred or secular, dealt with issues such as personal salvation and the institutional church. Even the courtly love tales which were popular throughout the medieval period were told from within the framework of Christian doctrines such as sin, self-sacrifice and piety.

