Movements in Literature

Keep in mind that the names given to these periods and/or movements in literature were not necessarily used during that period or by the artists in that movement. We call a movement or period by a particular name because a critic has named it so, or because the major writer/poet of that time period or movement coined the term or named the movement.

Renaissance/ Early-Modern Period
The Renaissance, also known as "Il Rinascimento" (in Italian), was an influential cultural movement which brought about a period of scientific revolution, religious reform and artistic transformation, at the dawn of modern European history. It marks the transitional period between the end of the Middle Ages and the start of the Modern Age. The Renaissance is usually considered to have originated in the 14th century in northern Italy and begun in the late 15th century in northern Europe. The term Rebirth (Rinascita), to indicate the flourishing of artistic and scientific activities starting in Italy in the mid-1300's is used in two ways. First, it means rediscovery of ancient classical texts and learning and their applications in the arts and sciences. Second, it means that the results of these intellectual activities created a revitalization of European culture in general. Thus it is possible to speak of the Renaissance in two different but meaningful ways: A rebirth of classical learning and knowledge through the rediscovery of ancient texts, and also a rebirth of European culture in general. The Renaissance has no set starting point or place. It happened gradually at different places at different times and there are no defined dates or places for when the Middle Ages ended. The starting place of the Renaissance is almost universally ascribed to Central Italy, especially the city of Florence.

Artists of the Renaissance in Literature: Boccaccio, Petrarch, Dante, Erasmus, Shakespeare, More, Marlowe, Machiavelli, Rabelais

Enlightenment/Age of Reason
the 18th century in European philosophy, and is often thought of as part of a larger period which includes the Age of Reason. The term also more specifically refers to a historical intellectual movement, "The Enlightenment." This movement advocated rationality as a means to establish an authoritative system of ethics, aesthetics, and knowledge. The intellectual leaders of this movement regarded themselves as courageous and elite, and regarded their purpose as leading the world toward progress and out of a long period of doubtful tradition, full of irrationality, superstition, and tyranny (which they believed began during a historical period they called the "Dark Ages"). This movement also provided a framework for the American and French Revolutions, the Latin American independence movement, the Polish Constitution of May 3 as well as leading to the rise of capitalism and the birth of socialism. It is matched by the high baroque and classical eras in music, and the neo-classical period in the arts, and receives contemporary application in the unity of science movement which includes logical positivism.
Another important movement in 18th century philosophy, which was closely related to it, was characterized by a focus on belief and piety. Some of its proponents attempted to use rationalism to demonstrate the existence of a supreme being. In this period, piety and belief were integral parts in the exploration of natural philosophy and ethics in addition to political theories of the age. However, prominent Enlightenment philosophers such as Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau questioned and attacked the existing institutions of both Church and State. The 18th century also saw a continued rise of empirical philosophical ideas, and their application to political economy, government and sciences such as physics, chemistry and biology. According to scholarly opinion, the Age of Reason preceded the Enlightenment (if it is thought of as a short period), and the Renaissance and Reformation preceded it (if it is thought of as a long period). Furthermore, Romanticism followed the Enlightenment.

Artists of the Age of Reason/Enlightenment in Literature: Benjamin Franklin, Voltaire, Thomas Jefferson, Diderot, Spinoza, Thomas Paine

**Romanticism**

an artistic and intellectual movement in the history of ideas that originated in late 18th century Western Europe. It stressed strong emotion (which now might include trepidation, awe, and horror as aesthetic experiences), the individual imagination as a critical authority (which permitted freedom within or from classical notions of form in art), and overturning of previous social conventions, particularly the position of the aristocracy. There was a strong element of historical and natural inevitability in its ideas, stressing the importance of "nature" in art and language and the experience of sublimity through a connection with nature. An influence upon the Romantic movement by the ideologies and events of the French Revolution is thought to have characterized the movement. Romanticism is also noted for its elevation of the achievements of what it perceived as heroic individuals and artists. It followed the Enlightenment period and was in part inspired by a revolt against aristocratic social and political norms from the previous period, as well as seeing itself as the fulfillment of the promise of that age. Romanticism strongly valued exotic locations and the distant past. Old poetical forms, such as the ballad, were revalued, ruins were sentimentalized as iconic of the action of Nature on the works of man, and mythic and legendary material which would previously have been seen as "low" culture became a common basis for works of "high" art and literature.

Artists of Romanticism in Literature: Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Blake, Keats, Tennyson, Longfellow, Browning.

**American Transcendentalism**

A philosophical and literary movement that flourished in New England from about 1836 to 1860. It originated among a small group of intellectuals who were reacting against the orthodoxy of Calvinism and the rationalism of the Unitarian Church, developing instead their own faith centering on the divinity of humanity and the natural world. Transcendentalism derived some of its basic idealistic concepts from romantic German philosophy, notably that of Immanuel Kant, and from such English authors as Carlyle, Coleridge, and Wordsworth. Its
mystical aspects were partly influenced by Indian and Chinese religious teachings. Although transcendentalism was never a rigorously systematic philosophy, it had some basic tenets that were generally shared by its adherents. The beliefs that God is immanent in each person and in nature and that individual intuition is the highest source of knowledge led to an optimistic emphasis on individualism, self-reliance, and rejection of traditional authority. The Dial, edited by Margaret Fuller, was the primary literary arm of the movement. The journal discussed questions of theology and philosophy; it contained papers on art, music, and literature, especially German literature; translations from ancient “Oriental Scriptures”; original modern “scriptures” in the form of Alcott’s Orphic Sayings; and finally, a good deal of verse. Primarily a movement seeking a new spiritual and intellectual vitality, transcendentalism had a great impact on American literature, not only on the writings of the group’s members, but on such diverse authors as Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman. Transcendentalism also informed some of the ideas that the Women’s Suffrage Movement, anti-slavery/abolitionist movements, and utopian/social experiment movements espoused later.

Artists of Transcendentalism: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Susan B. Anthony, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson (slightly).

**Realism/Naturalism**

Realism in art and literature is the depiction of fact or reality, rather than imaginary subjects. It was also a mid 19th century cultural movement that had its roots in France. In the visual arts and literature, realism is a mid-19th century movement, which started in France as a reaction to the idealism of Romanticism. The realists were influenced by Charles Darwin’s discoveries in The Origin of Species. Naturalism is a movement in theater, film, and literature that seeks to replicate a believable everyday reality, as opposed to such movements as Romanticism or Surrealism, in which subjects may receive highly symbolic, idealistic, or even supernatural treatment. Naturalistic writers were influenced by the evolution theory of Charles Darwin. They believed that one’s heredity and surroundings decide one’s character. Whereas realism seeks only to describe subjects as they really are, naturalism also attempts to determine "scientifically" the underlying forces (i.e. the environment or heredity) influencing these subjects' actions. They are both opposed to romanticism, in which subjects may receive highly symbolic, idealistic, or even supernatural treatment. Naturalistic works often include uncouth or sordid subject matter and a sense of pessimism.

Artists of Realism/Naturalism in Literature: Bertolt Brecht, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Rebecca Harding Davis, Edith Wharton, Henry James, Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, Willa Cather.

**Modernism**

Modernist literature was at its height from 1900 to 1940, and it attempted to move from the bonds of realist literature to introduce concepts as disjointed timelines. Modernism was distinguished by emancipatory metanarrative. In the
wake of modernism, and post-enlightenment, metanarratives tended to be emancipatory, whereas beforehand this was not a definite. Contemporary metanarratives were failing with World War I, the rise of trade unionism, and a general discontent. Something had to perform a unifying function, and this was the point when culture became politically important. Modernist literature is defined by its move away from Romanticism, venturing into subject matter that is traditionally mundane. Modernist Literature often features a marked pessimism, a clear rejection of the optimism apparent in Victorian literature. In fact, "a common motif in modernist fiction is that of an alienated individual--a dysfunctional individual trying in vain to make sense of a predominantly urban and fragmented society". However, many modernist works like T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land are marked by the absence of a central, heroic figure; in rejecting the solipsism of Romantics like Shelley and Byron, these works reject the subject of Cartesian dualism and collapse narrative and narrator into a collection of disjointed fragments and overlapping voices. Modernist literature goes beyond the limitations of the realist novel with its concern for larger factors such as social or historical change; this is largely demonstrated in "stream of consciousness" writing. Modernism as a literary movement is seen, in large part, as a reaction to the emergence of city life as a central force in society.


**Post-Modernism**

The literature which arose as a series of styles and ideas in the post-World War II period which reacted against the perceived norms of modernist literature has been termed postmodern literature, even as it extended many of the fundamental techniques and assumptions of modern literature (see modernism, postmodernism). Both modern and postmodern literature represent a break from 19th century realism, in which a story was told from an objective or omniscient point of view. In character development, both modern and postmodern literature explore subjectivism, turning from external reality to examine inner states of consciousness, in many cases drawing on modernist examples in the stream of consciousness styles of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. In addition, both modern and postmodern literature explore fragmentariness in narrative- and character-construction. Characteristic of post-modern writings are self-consciously deconstructed narratives and self-reflexive narrators. Like all stylistic eras, no definite dates exist for the rise and fall of postmodernism's popularity. The 1941 death of Irish novelist James Joyce, one of modernism's last and biggest giants, is sometimes used as a rough boundary for postmodernism's start. Literature of this era does not set itself against modern literature as much as it develops and extends the style, making it self-conscious and ironic. In such literature, one finds a shift in the role of the "inner narrative of the self," from the self at war with itself to the self as arbiter, pointing to the phenomenological roots of postmodern thought.