Literary Movements and Periods

Literature constantly evolves as new movements emerge to speak to the concerns of different groups of people and historical periods.

Absurd, literature of the (c. 1930–1970): A movement, primarily in the theater, that responded to the seeming illogicality and purposelessness of human life in works marked by a lack of clear narrative, understandable psychological motives, or emotional catharsis. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is one of the most celebrated works in the theater of the absurd.

Aestheticism (c. 1835–1910): A late-19th-century movement that believed in art as an end in itself. Aesthetes such as Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater rejected the view that art had to posses a higher moral or political value and believed instead in "art for art's sake."

Angry Young Men (1950s–1980s): A group of male British writers who created visceral plays and fiction at odds with the political establishment and a self-satisfied middle class. John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1957) is one of the seminal works of this movement.

Beat Generation (1950s–1960s): A group of American writers in the 1950s and 1960s who sought release and illumination though a bohemian counterculture of sex, drugs, and Zen Buddhism. Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac (*On The Road*) and Allen Ginsberg (*Howl*) gained fame by giving readings in coffeehouses, often accompanied by jazz music.

Bloomsbury Group (c. 1906–1930s): An informal group of friends and lovers, including Clive Bell, E. M. Forster, Roger Fry, Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, and John Maynard Keynes, who lived in the Bloomsbury section of London in the early 20th century and who had a considerable liberalizing influence on British culture.

Commedia dell'arte (1500s–1700s): Improvisational comedy first developed in Renaissance Italy that involved stock characters and centered around a set scenario. The elements of farce and buffoonery in commedia dell'arte, as well as its standard characters and plot intrigues, have had a tremendous influence on Western comedy, and can still be seen in contemporary drama and television sitcoms.

Dadaism (1916–1922): An avant-garde movement that began in response to the devastation of World War I. Based in Paris and led by the poet Tristan Tzara, the Dadaists produced nihilistic and antilogical prose, poetry, and art, and rejected the traditions, rules, and ideals of prewar Europe.

Enlightenment (c. 1660–1790): An intellectual movement in France and other parts of Europe that emphasized the importance of reason, progress, and liberty. The Enlightenment, sometimes called the Age of Reason, is primarily associated with nonfiction writing, such as essays and philosophical treatises. Major Enlightenment writers include Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, René Descartes.

Elizabethan era (c. 1558–1603): A flourishing period in English literature, particularly drama, that coincided with the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and included writers such as Francis Bacon, Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, Sir Philip Sidney, and Edmund Spenser.

Gothic fiction (c. 1764–1820): A genre of late-18th-century literature that featured brooding, mysterious settings and plots and set the stage for what we now call "horror stories." Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto,* set inside a medieval castle, was the first major Gothic novel. Later, the term "Gothic" grew to include any work that attempted to create an atmosphere of terror or the unknown, such as Edgar Allan Poe's short stories.

Harlem Renaissance (c. 1918–1930): A flowering of African-American literature, art, and music during the 1920s in New York City. W. E. B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* anticipated the movement, which included Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro,* Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* and the poetry of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen.

Lost Generation (c. 1918–1930s): A term used to describe the generation of writers, many of them soldiers that came to maturity during World War I. Notable members of this group include F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, and Ernest Hemingway, whose novel *The Sun Also Rises* embodies the Lost Generation's sense of disillusionment.

Magic realism (c. 1935–present): A style of writing, popularized by Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Günter Grass, and others, that combines realism with moments of dream-like fantasy within a single prose narrative.

Metaphysical poets (c. 1633–1680): A group of 17th-century poets who combined direct language with ingenious images, paradoxes, and conceits. John Donne and Andrew Marvell are the best known poets of this school.

Middle English (c. 1066–1500): The transitional period between Anglo-Saxon and modern English. The cultural upheaval that followed the Norman Conquest of England, in 1066, saw a flowering of secular literature, including ballads, chivalric romances, allegorical poems, and a variety of religious plays. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is the most celebrated work of this period.

Modernism (1890s–1940s): A literary and artistic movement that provided a radical breaks with traditional modes of Western art, thought, religion, social conventions, and morality. Major themes of this period include the attack on notions of hierarchy; experimentation in new forms of narrative, such as stream of consciousness; doubt about the existence of knowable, objective reality; attention to alternative viewpoints and modes of thinking; and self-referentiality as a means of drawing attention to the relationships between artist and audience, and form and content.

- High modernism (1920s): Generally considered the golden age of modernist literature, this period saw the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses,* T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land,* Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway,* and Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time.*

Naturalism (c. 1865–1900): A literary movement that used detailed realism to suggest that social conditions, heredity, and environment had inescapable force in shaping human character. Leading writers in the movement include Émile Zola, Theodore Dreiser, and Stephen Crane.

Neoclassicism (c. 1660–1798): A literary movement, inspired by the rediscovery of classical works of ancient Greece and Rome that emphasized balance, restraint, and order. Neoclassicism roughly coincided with the Enlightenment, which espoused reason over passion. Notable neoclassical writers include Edmund Burke, John Dryden, Samuel Johnson, Alexander Pope, and Jonathan Swift.

Nouveau Roman ("New Novel") (c. 1955–1970): A French movement, led by Alain Robbe-Grillet, that dispensed with traditional elements of the novel, such as plot and character, in favor of neutrally recording the experience of sensations and things.

Postcolonial literature (c. 1950s–present): Literature by and about people from former European colonies, primarily in Africa, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean. This literature aims both to expand the traditional canon of Western literature and to challenge Eurocentric assumptions about literature, especially through examination of questions of otherness, identity, and race. Prominent postcolonial works include Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart,* V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas,* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children.* Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) provided an important theoretical basis for understanding postcolonial literature.

Postmodernism (c. 1945–present): A notoriously ambiguous term, especially as it refers to literature, postmodernism can be seen as a response to the elitism of high modernism as well as to the horrors of World War II. Postmodern literature is characterized by a disjointed, fragmented pastiche of high and low culture that reflects the absence of tradition and structure in a world driven by technology and consumerism. Julian Barnes, Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, Salman Rushdie, and Kurt Vonnegut are among many who are considered postmodern authors.

Pre-Raphaelites (c. 1848–1870): The literary arm of an artistic movement that drew inspiration from Italian artists working before Raphael (1483–1520). The Pre-Raphaelites combined sensuousness and religiosity through archaic poetic forms and medieval settings. William Morris, Christina Rossetti, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Charles Swinburne were leading poets in the movement.

Realism (c. 1830–1900): A loose term that can refer to any work that aims at honest portrayal over sensationalism, exaggeration, or melodrama. Technically, realism refers to a late-19th-century literary movement—primarily French, English, and American—that aimed at accurate detailed portrayal of ordinary, contemporary life. Many of the 19th century's greatest novelists,

such as Honoré de Balzac, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Gustave Flaubert, and Leo Tolstoy, are classified as realists. Naturalism (see above) can be seen as an intensification of realism.

Romanticism (c. 1798–1832): A literary and artistic movement that reacted against the restraint and universalism of the Enlightenment. The Romantics celebrated spontaneity, imagination, subjectivity, and the purity of nature. Notable English Romantic writers include Jane Austen, William Blake, Lord Byron, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and William Wordsworth. Prominent figures in the American Romantic movement include Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, William Cullen Bryant, and John Greenleaf Whittier.

***Sturm und Drang* (1770s):** German for "storm and stress," this brief German literary movement advocated passionate individuality in the face of Neoclassical rationalism and restraint. Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is the most enduring work of this movement, which greatly influenced the Romantic movement (*see above*).

Surrealism (1920s–1930s): An avant-garde movement, based primarily in France, that sought to break down the boundaries between rational and irrational, conscious and unconscious, through a variety of literary and artistic experiments. The surrealist poets, such as André Breton and Paul Eluard, were not as successful as their artist counterparts, who included Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, and René Magritte.

Symbolists (1870s–1890s): A group of French poets who reacted against realism with a poetry of suggestion based on private symbols, and experimented with new poetic forms such as free verse and the prose poem. The symbolists—Stéphane Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, and Paul Verlaine are the most well known—were influenced by Charles Baudelaire. In turn, they had a seminal influence on the modernist poetry of the early 20th century.

Transcendentalism (c. 1835–1860): An American philosophical and spiritual movement, based in New England, that focused on the primacy of the individual conscience and rejected materialism in favor of closer communion with nature. Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* are famous transcendentalist works.

Victorian era (c. 1832–1901): The period of English history between the passage of the first Reform Bill (1832) and the death of Queen Victoria (reigned 1837–1901). Though remembered for strict social, political, and sexual conservatism and frequent clashes between religion and science, the period also saw prolific literary activity and significant social reform and criticism. Notable Victorian novelists include the Brontë sisters, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, and Thomas Hardy, while prominent poets include Matthew Arnold; Robert Browning; Elizabeth Barrett Browning; Gerard Manley Hopkins; Alfred, Lord Tennyson; and Christina Rossetti. Notable Victorian nonfiction writers include Walter Pater, John Ruskin, and Charles Darwin, who penned the famous *On the Origin of Species* (1859).

Literary theory and literary criticism are interpretive tools that help us think more deeply and insightfully about the literature that we read. Over time, different schools of literary criticism have developed, each with its own approaches to the act of reading.

Schools of Interpretation

Cambridge School (1920s–1930s): A group of scholars at Cambridge University who rejected historical and biographical analysis of texts in favor of close readings of the texts themselves.

Chicago School (1950s): A group, formed at the University of Chicago in the 1950s, that drew on Aristotle's distinctions between the various elements within a narrative to analyze the relation between form and structure. *Critics and Criticisms: Ancient and Modern* (1952) is the major work of the Chicago School.

Deconstruction (1967–present): A philosophical approach to reading, first advanced by Jacques Derrida that attacks the assumption that a text has a single, stable meaning. Derrida suggests that all interpretation of a text simply constitutes further texts, which means there is no "outside the text" at all. Therefore, it is impossible for a text to have stable meaning. The practice of deconstruction involves identifying the contradictions within a text's claim to have a single, stable meaning, and showing that a text can be taken to mean a variety of things that differ significantly from what it purports to mean.

Feminist criticism (1960s–present): An umbrella term for a number of different critical approaches that seek to distinguish the human experience from the male experience. Feminist critics draw attention to the ways in which patriarchal social structures have marginalized women and male authors have exploited women in their portrayal of them. Although feminist criticism dates as far back as Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) and had some significant advocates in the early 20th century, such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, it did not gain widespread recognition as a theoretical and political movement until the 1960s and 1970s.

Psychoanalytic criticism: Any form of criticism that draws on psychoanalysis, the practice of analyzing the role of unconscious psychological drives and impulses in shaping human behavior or artistic production. The three main schools of psychoanalysis are named for the three leading figures in developing psychoanalytic theory: Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Jacques Lacan.

- Freudian criticism (c. 1900–present): The view of art as the imagined fulfillment of wishes that reality denies. According to Freud, artists sublimate their desires and translate their imagined wishes into art. We, as an audience, respond to the sublimated wishes that we share with the artist. Working from this view, an artist's biography becomes a useful tool in interpreting his or her work. "Freudian criticism" is also used as a term to describe the analysis of Freudian images within a work of art.

- Jungian criticism (1920s–present): A school of criticism that draws on Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, a reservoir of common thoughts and experiences that all cultures share. Jung holds that literature is an expression of the main themes of

the collective unconscious, and critics often invoke his work in discussions of literary archetypes.

- Lacanian criticism (c. 1977–present): Criticism based on Jacques Lacan's view that the unconscious, and our perception of ourselves, is shaped in the "symbolic" order of language rather than in the "imaginary" order of prelinguistic thought. Lacan is famous in literary circles for his influential reading of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter."

Marxist criticism: An umbrella term for a number of critical approaches to literature that draw inspiration from the social and economic theories of Karl Marx. Marx maintained that material production, or economics, ultimately determines the course of history, and in turn influences social structures.These social structures, Marx argued, are held in place by the dominant ideology, which serves to reinforce the interests of the ruling class. Marxist criticism approaches literature as a struggle with social realities and ideologies.

- **Frankfurt School (c. 1923–1970):** A group of German Marxist thinkers associated with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. These thinkers applied the principles of Marxism to a wide range of social phenomena, including literature. Major members of the Frankfurt School include Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas.

New Criticism (1930s–1960s): Coined in John Crowe Ransom's *The New Criticism* (1941), this approach discourages the use of history and biography in interpreting a literary work. Instead, it encourages readers to discover the meaning of a work through a detailed analysis of the text itself. This approach was popular in the middle of the 20th century, especially in the United States, but has since fallen out of favor.

New Historicism (1980s–present): An approach that breaks down distinctions between "literature" and "historical context" by examining the contemporary production and reception of literary texts, including the dominant social, political, and moral movements of the time. Stephen Greenblatt is a leader in this field, which joins the careful textual analysis of New Criticism with a dynamic model of historical research.

New Humanism (c. 1910–1933): An American movement, led by Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, that embraced conservative literary and moral values and advocated a return to humanistic education.

Post-structuralism (1960s–1970s): A movement that comprised, among other things, Deconstruction, Lacanian criticism, and the later works of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. It criticized structuralism for its claims to scientific objectivity, including its assumption that the system of signs in which language operates was stable.

Queer theory (1980s–present): A "constructivist" (as opposed to "essentialist") approach to gender and sexuality that asserts that gender roles and sexual identity are social constructions rather than an essential, inescapable part of our nature. Queer theory consequently studies literary texts with an eye to the ways in which different authors in different eras construct sexual

and gender identity. Queer theory draws on certain branches of feminist criticism and traces its roots to the first volume of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1976).

Russian Formalism (1915–1929): A school that attempted a scientific analysis of the formal literary devices used in a text. The Stalinist authorities criticized and silenced the Formalists, but Western critics rediscovered their work in the 1960s. Ultimately, the Russian Formalists had significant influence on structuralism and Marxist criticism.

Structuralism (1950s–1960s): An intellectual movement that made significant contributions not only to literary criticism but also to philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and history. Structuralist literary critics, such as Roland Barthes, read texts as an interrelated system of signs that refer to one another rather than to an external "meaning" that is fixed either by author or reader. Structuralist literary theory draws on the work of the Russian Formalists, as well as the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and C. S. Peirce.

Literary Terms and Theories

Literary theory is notorious for its complex and somewhat inaccessible jargon. The following list defines some of the more commonly encountered terms in the field.

Anxiety of influence: A theory that the critic Harold Bloom put forth in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973). Bloom uses Freud's idea of the Oedipus complex (*see below*) to suggest that poets, plagued by anxiety that they have nothing new to say, struggle against the influence of earlier generations of poets. Bloom suggests that poets find their distinctive voices in an act of misprision, or misreading, of earlier influences, thus refiguring the poetic tradition. Although Bloom presents his thesis as a theory of poetry, it can be applied to other arts as well.

Canon: A group of literary works commonly regarded as central or authoritative to the literary tradition. For example, many critics concur that the Western canon—the central literary works of Western civilization—includes the writings of Homer, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and the like. A canon is an evolving entity, as works are added or subtracted as their perceived value shifts over time. For example, the fiction of W. Somerset Maugham was central to the canon during the middle of the 20th century but is read less frequently today. In recent decades, the idea of an authoritative canon has come under attack, especially from feminist and postcolonial critics, who see the canon as a tyranny of dead white males that marginalizes less mainstream voices.

Death of the author: A post-structuralist theory, first advanced by Roland Barthes, that suggests that the reader, not the author, creates the meaning of a text. Ultimately, the very idea of an author is a fiction invented by the reader.

Diachronic/synchronic: Terms that Ferdinand de Saussure used to describe two different approaches to language. The diachronic approach looks at language as a historical process and examines the ways in which it has changed over time. The synchronic approach looks at language at a particular moment in time, without reference to history. Saussure's structuralist

approach is synchronic, for it studies language as a system of interrelated signs that have no reference to anything (such as history) outside of the system.

Dialogic/monologic: Terms that the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin used to distinguish works that are controlled by a single, authorial voice (monologic) from works in which no single voice predominates (dialogic or polyphonic). Bakhtin takes Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky as examples of monologic and dialogic writing, respectively.

Diegesis/Mimesis: Terms that Aristotle first used to distinguish "telling" (diegesis) from "showing" (mimesis). In a play, for instance, most of the action is mimetic, but moments in which a character recounts what has happened offstage are diegetic.

Discourse: A post-structuralist term for the wider social and intellectual context in which communication takes place. The implication is that the meaning of works is as dependent on their surrounding context as it is on the content of the works themselves.

Exegesis: An explanation of a text that clarifies difficult passages and analyzes its contemporary relevance or application.

Explication: A close reading of a text that identifies and explains the figurative language and forms within the work.

Hermeneutics: The study of textual interpretation and of the way in which a text communicates meaning.

Intertextuality: The various relationships a text may have with other texts, through allusions, borrowing of formal or thematic elements, or simply by reference to traditional literary forms. The term is important to structuralist and poststructuralist critics, who argue that texts relate primarily to one another and not to an external reality.

Linguistics: The scientific study of language, encompassing, among other things, the study of syntax, semantics, and the evolution of language.

Logocentrism: The desire for an ultimate guarantee of meaning, whether God, Truth, Reason, or something else. Jacques Derrida criticizes the bulk of Western philosophy as being based on a logocentric "metaphysics of presence," which insists on the presence of some such ultimate guarantee. The main goal of deconstruction is to undermine this belief.

Metalanguage: A technical language that explains and interprets the properties of ordinary language. For example, the vocabulary of literary criticism is a metalanguage that explains the ordinary language of literature. Post-structuralist critics argue that there is no such thing as a metalanguage; rather, they assert, all language is on an even plane and therefore there is no essential difference between literature and criticism.

Metanarrative: A larger framework within which we understand historical processes. For instance, a Marxist metanarrative sees history primarily as a history of changing material

circumstances and class struggle. Post-structuralist critics draw our attention to the ways in which assumed met narratives can be used as tools of political domination.

Mimesis:*See*diegesis/mimesis,*above.*

Monologic:*See*dialogic/monologic,*above.*

Narratology: The study of narrative, encompassing the different kinds of narrative voices, forms of narrative, and possibilities of narrative analysis.

Oedipus complex: Sigmund Freud's theory that a male child feels unconscious jealousy toward his father and lust for his mother. The name comes from Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex,* in which the main character unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother. Freud applies this theory in an influential reading of Hamlet, in which he sees Hamlet as struggling with his admiration of Claudius, who fulfilled Hamlet's own desire of murdering Hamlet's father and marrying his mother.

Semantics: The branch of linguistics that studies the meanings of words.

Semiotics or semiology: Terms for the study of sign systems and the ways in which communication functions through conventions in sign systems. Semiotics is central to structuralist linguistics.

Sign/signifier/signified: Terms fundamental to Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralism linguistics. A sign is a basic unit of meaning—a word, picture, or hand gesture, for instance, that conveys some meaning. A signifier is the perceptible aspect of a sign (e.g., the word "car") while the signified is the conceptual aspect of a sign (e.g., the concept of a car). A referent is a physical object to which a sign system refers (e.g., the physical car itself).