

Neoclassical Period Authors (1660-1790)

The Neoclassical period in English literature spans from the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 to around 1790. This era was characterized by an emphasis on reason, order, and formal rules. Writers looked to classical models from ancient Greece and Rome, valuing clarity, restraint, and intellectual wit. The period saw the rise of satire, the essay, and literary criticism as major forms, as well as the development of the novel as a new literary genre.

John Dryden (1631-1700)

Life

John Dryden was born in Aldwincle, Northamptonshire, to a family with Puritan leanings and landed gentry connections. He was educated at Westminster School under the renowned headmaster Dr. Richard Busby and later at Trinity College, Cambridge. After university, he moved to London and began his literary career. Initially supporting the Commonwealth, Dryden later became a royalist and converted to Catholicism in 1686 during the reign of James II. This conversion cost him his position as Poet Laureate after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 when the Protestant William and Mary came to power. Despite this setback, he continued writing prolifically until his death in 1700. He was buried in Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner.

Works

- **Absalom and Achitophel:** A political satire in verse
- **Mac Flecknoe:** A mock-heroic satire attacking playwright Thomas Shadwell

- **All for Love:** A tragedy based on the story of Antony and Cleopatra
- **Marriage à la Mode:** A comedy of manners
- **Annus Mirabilis:** A poem commemorating the events of 1666
- **Essay of Dramatic Poesy:** An important work of literary criticism
- **Fables Ancient and Modern:** Adaptations of works by Homer, Ovid, Boccaccio, and Chaucer

Contribution to English Literature

- Established the heroic couplet as the dominant poetic form for the Neoclassical period
- Developed English literary criticism as a serious discipline
- Refined English prose style, emphasizing clarity and precision
- Pioneered the mock-heroic as a satirical form
- Transformed English drama by adapting classical models
- Served as a bridge between the Renaissance and Neoclassical periods
- Influenced the development of political satire in English literature

Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

Life

Alexander Pope was born in London to Catholic parents at a time when Catholics faced significant legal restrictions in England. His education was largely self-directed due to these restrictions, though he did receive some formal schooling. A childhood illness (possibly Pott's disease) left him with a curved spine, stunted growth (he never grew beyond 4'6"), and chronic health problems. Despite these challenges, Pope became one of the most successful and celebrated poets of his age. He lived primarily at his villa in Twickenham, where he created an elaborate garden

that reflected his aesthetic principles. His translations of Homer made him financially independent, unusual for a poet of his time. Pope never married but maintained close friendships with many leading intellectual and literary figures.

Works

- **The Rape of the Lock:** A mock-epic satirizing high society
- **An Essay on Criticism:** A poem outlining literary principles
- **An Essay on Man:** A philosophical poem exploring human nature and ethics
- **The Dunciad:** A satirical attack on poor writers and critics
- **Translations of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey**
- **Moral Essays:** A series of verse epistles on ethical themes
- **Imitations of Horace:** Adaptations of classical satires

Contribution to English Literature

- Perfected the heroic couplet, demonstrating its capacity for wit, satire, and philosophical reflection
- Established the mock-epic as a major literary form
- Created some of the most quotable lines in English literature
- Developed satire as a refined art form
- Demonstrated how classical forms could address contemporary issues
- Influenced English poetic diction and style for generations
- Combined intellectual substance with formal elegance

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745)

Life

Jonathan Swift was born in Dublin to English parents. His father died before his birth, and his mother returned to England, leaving him in the care of his uncle. He was educated at Kilkenny College and Trinity College, Dublin. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688, Swift moved to England and became secretary to the diplomat Sir William Temple. He was ordained as a priest in the Church of Ireland in 1695 and eventually became Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin. Though he spent much of his career in Ireland, Swift was deeply involved in English politics and literary life. He never married but had close relationships with two women: Esther Johnson ("Stella") and Esther Vanhomrigh ("Vanessa"). In his later years, Swift suffered from Ménière's disease, which caused vertigo and deafness. His mental faculties declined in his final years, and he died in 1745, leaving much of his fortune to found a hospital for the mentally ill.

Works

- **Gulliver's Travels:** A satirical novel following Lemuel Gulliver's voyages to fantastic lands
- **A Modest Proposal:** A satirical essay suggesting that the Irish poor sell their children as food
- **A Tale of a Tub:** A satire on religious excesses
- **The Battle of the Books:** A mock-heroic satire on the quarrel between ancient and modern learning
- **Drapier's Letters:** Political pamphlets opposing a currency scheme in Ireland
- **Journal to Stella:** Personal letters revealing his private thoughts
- **Poems** including "A Description of a City Shower" and "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift"

Contribution to English Literature

- Mastered satirical prose, using it to address serious social and political issues
- Developed a plain, direct prose style that influenced generations of writers
- Created complex, multilayered irony as a literary technique
- Used fantasy and allegory to critique contemporary society
- Pioneered political journalism in its modern form
- Demonstrated how literature could function as political intervention
- Influenced the development of the novel as a literary form

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

Life

Samuel Johnson was born in Lichfield, Staffordshire, the son of a bookseller. He was educated at Lichfield Grammar School and briefly attended Pembroke College, Oxford, but financial difficulties forced him to leave without a degree. After unsuccessful attempts at teaching and running a school, Johnson moved to London in 1737 to pursue a literary career. He struggled for many years, taking various writing jobs and living in poverty. His fortunes improved with the publication of his Dictionary in 1755, which brought him fame and a government pension in 1762. Johnson suffered from poor health throughout his life, including depression, and had unusual physical mannerisms that some scholars believe may have been Tourette's syndrome. He was the center of a distinguished literary circle and the subject of James Boswell's famous biography, "The Life of Samuel Johnson," which preserved his conversation and character for posterity. Johnson never had children but formed a household with his friend Mrs. Hester Thrale and her family in his later years.

Works

- **A Dictionary of the English Language:** The first comprehensive English dictionary
- **The Rambler** and **The Idler:** Series of essays on moral and literary subjects
- **Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia:** A philosophical tale
- **The Lives of the Poets:** Biographical and critical prefaces to the works of English poets
- **A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland:** A travel narrative
- **Poems** including "London" and "The Vanity of Human Wishes"
- **Edition of Shakespeare's plays** with critical notes

Contribution to English Literature

- Created the first comprehensive English dictionary, standardizing spelling and usage
- Established literary biography as a serious genre
- Developed literary criticism based on moral and psychological insights
- Perfected the periodical essay as a literary form
- Demonstrated how classical forms could express personal experience
- Championed clear, vigorous prose style
- Influenced the development of the English novel

Daniel Defoe (c. 1660-1731)

Life

Daniel Defoe was born in London, the son of a tallow chandler (candle maker). He was educated at a Dissenting academy, as his Presbyterian family was excluded from Anglican universities. Defoe had a remarkably varied career—he worked as a merchant, a tile manufacturer, a journalist, a pamphleteer, a secret agent, and a novelist. His business ventures repeatedly ended in bankruptcy. He was imprisoned for seditious libel in 1703 after publishing a satirical pamphlet, "The Shortest Way with the Dissenters." While in prison, he began working as a political agent for Robert Harley, later Earl of Oxford. Defoe was extraordinarily prolific, writing on subjects ranging from politics and religion to economics and travel. Despite his literary success, he died in hiding from his creditors.

Works

- **Robinson Crusoe:** A novel about a shipwrecked sailor who survives on a deserted island
- **Moll Flanders:** A novel following the adventures of a woman who becomes a thief and prostitute
- **A Journal of the Plague Year:** A historical fiction account of London's 1665 plague
- **Roxana:** A novel about a woman who uses her beauty to advance socially
- **Captain Singleton:** A novel about piracy and adventure
- **Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain:** A travel and social commentary
- **The Complete English Tradesman:** A business manual

Contribution to English Literature

- Pioneered the English novel with realistic, first-person narratives

- Developed techniques for creating psychological realism in fiction
- Created complex, morally ambiguous characters
- Used fiction to explore social issues and marginalized perspectives
- Established journalism as a powerful literary and political medium
- Demonstrated how plain, direct prose could create compelling narratives
- Influenced the development of adventure and survival literature

Henry Fielding (1707-1754)

Life

Henry Fielding was born at Sharpham Park, Somerset, to an aristocratic family. He was educated at Eton College and studied classics at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands. Initially, he pursued a career as a playwright, but the Licensing Act of 1737, which imposed government censorship on theaters, ended this path. Fielding then studied law and was called to the bar in 1740. He became a magistrate in 1748 and worked to reform London's criminal justice system, establishing the city's first professional police force, the Bow Street Runners. His personal life was marked by tragedy—his beloved first wife, Charlotte Cradock, died in 1744, and his own health deteriorated due to gout and other ailments. Seeking a healthier climate, he traveled to Portugal in 1754 but died in Lisbon shortly after his arrival.

Works

- **Tom Jones:** His masterpiece, a comic epic in prose following the adventures of a foundling
- **Joseph Andrews:** A novel originally conceived as a parody of Samuel Richardson's "Pamela"
- **Amelia:** A novel examining marriage and social injustice

- **Shamela:** A satirical attack on Richardson's "Pamela"
- **Jonathan Wild:** A satirical biography of a famous criminal
- **The Covent-Garden Journal:** A periodical containing essays and reports on criminal cases
- **An Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers:** A treatise on crime and punishment

Contribution to English Literature

- Developed the comic epic in prose, combining classical epic structure with realistic characters
- Created the novel of social criticism, using humor to expose hypocrisy and injustice
- Established the omniscient narrator technique in fiction
- Pioneered self-conscious narrative techniques that drew attention to the artifice of fiction
- Used fiction to advocate for legal and social reforms
- Combined entertainment with moral purpose in narrative
- Influenced the development of the picaresque and bildungsroman traditions in the novel