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English Literature encompasses a vast range of works written in the English language, spanning various genres, styles, and historical periods. It reflects the evolution of language, culture, and society, showcasing the creativity and intellectual pursuits of its writers. From the epic poetry of the Anglo-Saxon era to contemporary novels, English Literature offers insights into human experiences, emotions, and societal changes. This timeline traces the significant milestones in the development of English Literature, highlighting key figures, movements, and works that have shaped its landscape over the centuries.Creation Time:2025-02-26 Famous British Authors Timeline Timeline Description: The list below highlights a number of prominent British authors, from the early Middle Ages through today. They were responsible for some of the best poems, plays and novels in British history, from the beginning of British literature through today. 7 Beowulf Poet(7th to 11th centuries) The unknown Beowulf Poet produced one of the greatest surviving works of the early Middle Ages. This poem tells the story of the hero, Beowulf, and his fight with the monster, Grendel. 1343 Geoffrey Chaucer Geoffrey Chaucer wrote the Canterbury Tales between 1387 and his death in 1400. This is one of the first works written in Middle English, rather than Latin. 1564 William Shakespeare Shakespeare is the best known poet and playwright of the Elizabethan era. Some 37 plays survive. His works remain popular in both theatrical productions and films today. 1770 William Wordsworth Wordsworth is closely connected to the development of romanticism. Romanticism is a poetic movement that connected their work to nature and emotion. Wordsworth was Poet Laureate of Britain from 1843 to his death in 1850. 1775 Jane Austen Jane Austen was an unmarried woman in early 19th century Britain when she began writing her novels. She did not achieve fame in her lifetime, but is today one of the most famous British authors. 1812 Charles Dickens The Victorian novelist is responsible for many of the stories and characters closely linked to 19th century Britain, including A Christmas Carol and A Tale of Two Cities. Dickens vividly described the impoverished conditions of 19th century Britain. 1819 George Eliot Writing as George Eliot, Mary Ann Evans became quite famous as the author of a number of novels, including Middlemarch. Her works are noted for their social commentary. 1816 The Bronte Sisters(1816 to 1820) The three Bronte sisters, Charlotte, Emily and Anne, all produced works of noted passion and excitement, including Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre. They, like George Eliot, published under male pseudonyms. 1840 Thomas Hardy Thomas Hardy was a younger contemporary of Dickens, producing novels set in the Victorian countryside, rather than the city. Hardy's novels brought romance to the countryside. 1879 E.M. Forster E.M. Forster's work focused on the English middle class, particularly their relationships with other countries, including Italy and India. Forster's novels move out of the Victorian era and into the Edwardian, bringing up some of the questions of life in the 20th century. 1890 Agatha Christie Agatha Christie wrote some 66 mystery novels, and created two of the best-known detectives in literature, Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot. Televised adaptations of her work remain popular today. 1892 J. R. R. Tolkein J. R. R. Tolkein is perhaps the best-known fantasy author in British history, responsible for the Lord of the Rings series. Tolkein's work has been voted the best of the millennium by readers. 1893 Wilfred Owen While short-lived, Wilfred Owen produced some of the most moving poems of World War I, expressing the horror and devastation of war. Owen died a week before the end of the war. 1903 Evelyn Waugh Waugh's novels reflect his Oxford education, particularly Brideshead Revisited. He was also a noted book reviewer and journalist during his career. 1965 J.K. Rowling J.K. Rowling changed the face of children and young adult literature with her Harry Potter series. She is the most famous British author alive today. Famous British Authors Timeline So many classics to read! Where to start? Check out our reading lists for suggestions.If you want better knowledge of literary classics, what should you read? How do famous works that you might pick up fit chronologically with important historical dates and with each other?Here is the beginning of my shortlist of authors and representative works that are often chosen as literary landmarks. They have at least one of several factors that makes them classic:Best expression of important ideas of a particular era.Great example of style and literary innovations from a particular era.A great author’s best or most typical work.Treasured by readers over many years.An aesthetic marvel.This list will take me a while to finish! I’ll begin with a list of American works, including important historical dates for each era. I will comment on some listings, but not on all. Over time, I will add to the list. Eventually I hope to cover English literature as well.Links to Suggested Reading Lists and Significant Historical DatesMake a choice and dig in to some great literature.AMERICAN LITERATUREEarly Colonial Era: 1600sFederal Era: 1700sAmerican Romantic Era/Antebellum Era: 1800-1860sGilded Age: 1865-1914American Modernist Literature: 1915-1945ENGLISH LITERATUREOld English Literature: 450 A.D. – 1066Middle Ages English Literature–Medieval: 1066-1485English Renaissance Literature Part I: Tudor Era 1435-1603English Renaissance Literature II: Jacobean-Puritan Era 1603-1660Restoration and Eighteenth Century English Literature: 1660-1789English Romantic and Regency Literature: 1789-1832English Victorian Literature: 1832-1901Check back later. More reading lists and timelines to come. . . . Kandinski’s Improvisation 27-Garden of Love. This image was printed on the postcard commemorating the Armory Show of 1913, the art show that introduced Modern Art to the American public.1914: WW I begins (Archduke Ferdinand assassinated) 1917: Russian Revolution breaks out; U. S. enters WW I 1918: Armistice declared in WW I (stopping the fighting) 1920: 19th Amendment to Constitution gives women right to vote; 18th amendment prohibiting manufacture, sale, and importation of alcoholic drinks goes into effect (Prohibition) 1925: Scopes Tennessee Evolution trial (debating whether schools can teach evolution). 1927: Charles Lindbergh flies solo across the Atlantic 1929: Stock Market crashes, beginning the Great Depression 1933: Prohibition Repealed 1936: Spanish Civil War begins 1939: Hitler invades Czechoslovakia and Poland (starts WW II) 1941: Japan attacks Pearl Harbor (beginning U.S. involvement in WW II) 1945: Germany and Japan surrender; WW II over.American Literature from 1914-1945: Some HighlightsThe first half of the twentieth century is an extremely rich period for American letters. Whatever I list here will only scratch the surface. But I have tried to include a sampling of the most famous and characteristic works of the most-discussed writers, a great start for anyone who wants to capture the flavor of American Modernist Literature.For an introduction to the characteristics of American Modernist Literature, see this post.PoetryYou can find most of these poems online to read for free. Try searching Poetryfoundation.org and Poets.org to find and check out the titles.The Monongahela River Valley, Pennsylvania. Painting by American artist John Kane showcases Modernist interest in primitive and folk styles. 1931.Edgar Lee Masters. Spoon River Anthology (1915)This work is a series of short free verse poems written from the points of view of various residents of the small Midwestern town of Spoon River. The catch: all the poems’ speakers are dead. In just a few short lines, Masters shows how each individual would sum up their lives, revealing the sins, sorrow, and frustrations they hid from others while alive.Most of the characters were based on real people whom Masters knew in Lewistown, Illinois, where he grew up. Not surprisingly, the locals banned the book when Masters published it, unhappy with Spoon River’s cynical picture of people they recognized, not to mention its jaundiced view of life in small towns. In our day, however, according to an article in Humanities magazine, Lewistown celebrates the work penned by their famous resident. You can read about how Lewistown celebrates Spoon River here. And indeed, for Modernist-lovers, Spoon River is something to celebrate, since it was inspirational for much work to come, including Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio. This work also captures the cramped unhappy lives of small town Americans, but in the form of fiction rather than poetry.Masters’s work was a favorite of many of my students. I think you will enjoy sampling some of the many poems from the volume.Ezra Pound, Various works (listed below).Ezra Pound is now as famous for his fascism as for his poetry. As a supporter of Mussolini in WW II, he was imprisoned in 1945 by American soldiers, and subsequently confined to St. Elizabeth’s Hospital for the Insane in Washington DC until 1958.One may disagree vehemently with Pound’s politics, as I do, and yet acknowledge a great debt to him for helping develop the startlingly new aesthetic principles that led to a revolution in poetry writing in the 20th century. Beyond theorizing, Pound actively championed many of 20th century’s greatest Modernist American writers, including T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Williams, H.D., Hemingway, and Moore. For a sampling of his own work, see the following:“A Retrospect” and “A Few Don’ts” (1918, 1913)These two brief excerpts from his writings summarize the principles he and his colleagues thought should govern a new kind of poetry to suit the Modern age. You can read “A Retrospect” and “A Few Don’ts” here.“In a Station of the Metro” (an Imagist poem, 1913).“To Whistler, American,” (1912) (famous line: “You and Abe Lincoln from that mass of dolts / Show us there’s chance at least of winning through”)’ “The Rest” (1913;) “A Pact” (1913).This set of poems shares one of Pound’s favorite themes: Americans are not refined or educated enough to appreciate great art. “A Pact” explains his longtime quarrel with Walt Whitman, who celebrated democracy and wrote about, and for, the common person, the opposite of what Pound believed in.“Portrait d’Une Femme” (1912). In this poem, a woman is critiqued for her lack of original thoughts, testifying to the modernist’s worship for originality and authenticity both in character and in mind.T. S. Eliot. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” (1915); “The Hollow Men,” (1925); The Waste Land (1922); “Burnt Norton,” 1936.T. S. Eliot in 1923*For the quintessential High Modernist expression of 20th century angst, turn to poet T. S. Eliot. In the first two famous and fairly accessible poems listed here, Eliot explores the shallow meaninglessness of human life, especially within the newly impersonal mechanized culture of the early 20th century. Want to wade deeper? Head next for THE landmark poem of High Literary Modernism, The Waste Land. In addition to a dose of angst-ridden Modernist confusion, Eliot also gives us some of the most unforgettable images and beautiful, musical sounds of any poem ever written, worth experiencing even if his view of life rubs you the wrong way.In later life, Eliot turned from this view of reality as a meaningless flux of sensation to the idea that within time’s endless parade of change, people can indeed perceive a meaningful Eternal reality, or Logos, an enduring goodness beneath surface realities. He explores that idea in “Burnt Norton.”H.D. (Hilda Doolittle). “Mid-Day,” (1916); “Oread,” (1914); “Leda,” (1919) ; “Helen,” (1924)Once his girlfriend then later a member of Ezra Pound’s literary circle, H.D. strove to practice many of his precepts for writing modern poetry. She became one of the most accomplished and widely recognized Imagist writers. In Imagist poems, emotions are conveyed through means of vivid pictures, without long verbal explanations or abstract language. This brief sample of H.D.’s works brings you some of the most famous Imagist poems of the era. These works also showcase the Modernist interest in classical mythology.Amy Lowell. “The Captured Goddess,” (1914); “Madonna of the Evening Flowers,” (1919); “Meeting-House Hill,” (1925); “Summer Night Piece,” (1925).Another practitioner of Imagism, Lowell championed this method of poetry-writing through her work, and by giving talks on the Imagist method of writing poetry. She became so well-known for her ideas that Ezra Pound started calling Imagism “Amy-gism.” I find her poems lovely, less impenetrable than some other high modernist work. In this sample, Lowell’s feminism can also be seen clearly.William Carlos Williams. Just plunge in and sample! But to cover some of the more well-known poems, read: “The Young Housewife,” (1916); “Queen-Anne’s Lace,” (1921); “The Widow’s Lament in Springtime,” (1921); “The Red Wheel Barrow,” (1923); “This is Just to Say,” (1934), and ABOVE ALL: “Spring and All” (1923).William Carlos Williams. Passport photo.When very young, I saw little to admire in Williams’s work, which is written in the plainest language possible, focusing on the most mundane and ordinary objects, like red wagons, plums in a bowl, and wild carrot sprouting in a field. But now, understanding his aesthetic aims, and having experienced more of what life is really like, how I love his work!In his 1923 book Spring and All, Williams contends that older-style poetry functions only to distance people from a direct experience of actual life. Older poetry perpetuates what he called “the beautiful illusion,” abstract fantasies about the meaning of life that keep actual authentic experiences at arms’ length from readers.His own work, on the other hand, uses the Imagination to bring himself, and therefore readers, to fully see and experience the exact moment they are living in: “To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force – the imagination.” This poetic quest seems prescient now, when medical science has shown us all the benefits of “Mindfulness,” a set of practices to help people be fully present in the “now,” accepting the sense impressions, emotions, and thoughts of each immediate moment.Williams pushed back against his High Modernist friends Pound and Eliot when they criticized Americans for being unfit readers, or subjects for, great poetry. Like Walt Whitman, Pound found every-day-ness to be the most magnificent material for poetry, and Americans his favored audience.“Spring and All” (the poem) is Williams’s answer to Eliot’s The Waste Land, which mourns the death of Western culture. Williams’s answer to The Waste Land’s view is that culture is not dead, it’s merely sleeping and developing, just as plants hibernate in the winter, but are still in the process of being reborn.Most of my students really liked reading Williams. Try some for yourself, approaching each work with an open and present mind.Robert Frost. So Many! Try “Mending Wall” (1914); “Home Burial” (1914); “After Apple-Picking” (1914); “The Oven Bird” (1916); “Birches” (1916); “Desert Places” (1936); “Design” (1922); and “Neither Out Far Nor In Deep” (1936). Also take a fresh look at “The Road Not Taken” (1916), because chances are, someone has given you the wrong interpretation.Everyone has heard of Robert Frost, and most have read some of his works somewhere along their way. Many of his poems are written in traditional forms, such as blank verse (5 iambic units that don’t rhyme, like Shakespeare’s plays), or sonnet form, or other kinds of traditionally structured poems. The language is simple and plain. Topics are about the everyday world, especially people and things around Frost’s New Hampshire farm, where he lived from 1901-09.However, don’t assume from his poetry’s simple “old-fashioned” surface that Frost is not a thoroughgoing Modernist. The theme of almost every poem is our unending lack of certainty about ultimate truths, despite our human tendency to jump to easy platitudes and explanations for all the phenomena of life.In “The Road Not Taken,” for instance, the speaker claims that his life has changed because he chose to walk the path that very few people had trod—“the road less traveled.” But what the poem actually says is that the paths were, in reality, almost exactly the same—neither had been traveled more heavily than the other. And though in the future the speaker knows he will be claiming to people that his choice of one path was significant in his life, there is no way to know whether his choice made any difference at all. Certainty is sought but undercut by the nebulousness of life and chance—a common theme in many of Frost’s poems.Approach Frost’s poems with the idea that in one way or another, most question human certainty, and you may be seeing a new Robert Frost than you have noticed before.Claude McKay, “If We Must Die” (1919); “America” (1921).Born in Jamaica, Claude McKay came to America in 1912 in youth, eventually publishing poems about the experience of being Black in America during the first years of 20th century. “If We Must Die,” along with his 1922 book of poetry Harlem Shadows, is considered to have launched the Harlem Renaissance in literature, which was a flourishing of literary expression by African American writers in the 1920s and 30s. As McKay does in these two poems, many Harlem Renaissance writers fearlessly attacked problems of racial discrimination and anti-race violence, including lynching. McKay wrote powerfully of these themes and of others, often by using traditional poetic forms, such as the two sonnets listed here.Langston Hughes, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921); “Mother to Son” (1922), “I, Too” (1925); “Madam and Her Madam” (1943); “Harlem” (1951).A prolific and innovative writer, Hughes was a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance. Though his themes were often similar to McKay’s, his style was quite different. Rather than choosing traditional poetic forms, he innovated his own poetic form, inspired by free-verse writers like Whitman, incorporating cadences with jazz rhythms. Many of the poems feature all different kinds of characters as speakers, fashioned by Hughes to represent different types of African American folk. Both charming and powerful, Hughes’s poems are approachable, poignant, and meaningful, often proving to be favorites of my students.Wallace Stevens, “Sunday Morning” (1915); “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” (1923); “The Snow Man” (1931); “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock” (1931); “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (1931).Stevens was a rare kind of person, a success both in business and in literature. He was an insurance executive for a company based in Hartford, Connecticut, eventually becoming a vice president, and a Pulitzer prize winning poet. His poetry is thoughtful, intellectual, spare, but with vivid imagery.His poetry is not transparent upon first reading; rather it teases the mind and rewards multiple re-readings. I just love it, even though I don’t understand all of it. I am nonetheless enchanted with the way his poems expand my mind and heighten my awareness of every moment of life.A good starting place for reading Stevens: approach the poems while keeping in mind a couple of his major themes. He did not believe in an afterlife, and his poetry often considers how people can get the very most out of the life we do have, by heightening our notice and enjoyment of every moment. He celebrated both sensual and intellectual pleasures.He also treasured the mind’s ability to consider experience from myriad points of view, within many different contexts and purposes. “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” is a great example of this idea. How many ways can YOU look at a blackbird? Check out Stevens’s poem to see how both the tangible blackbird and the IDEA of “blackbird” can play different roles in the way a mind thinks.Marianne Moore, “Poetry” (1921); “The Mind is an Enchanting Thing” (1944)Poet Marianne Moore. 1935*Like Stevens, Moore was a very intellectual poet—some would say, a “poet’s poet” because of her interest in unusual poetic techniques that most untrained readers would miss. (For instance, “Poetry” is structured around how many syllables are in each line, rather than in traditional poetic meter. For explanations of traditional meter, see this post.) However, you don’t have to catch all the technical fireworks to enjoy what she has to say about how the mind works, and what role poetry has to play in even an ordinary person’s life.Edna St. Vincent Millay, “Recuerdo” (1922); “I Should Have Loved You Presently” (1922); [“I being born a woman”] (1923); “I Too beneath Your Moon, Almighty Sex” (1939).A multi-talented writer, Millay became known as a symbol of the liberated independent modern woman of the 1920s and 30s. Typically she wrote using traditional forms of poetry, such as the sonnet, as shown in this sample of her work. In many of her poems she sets out to claim her right as a woman to full sexual expression and to play equal roles to men in love relationships.e. e. cummings, “in Just- “(1920); “somewhere I have never travelled, gladly beyond” (1931); “anyone lived on a pretty how town” (1940).Poet e. e. cummings personifies non-conformity—that’s why he declined to use capital letters or follow ordinary punctuation rules. His poetry is highly original, charming, and usually critical of narrow conformity in the modern mechanized age. (Check out “anyone lived in a pretty how town” for an example.) I had a friend once who told me she got through a long-term debilitating illness by reading cummings. Students often love his work; I had one student who had struggled with reading a lot of the poetry in the class, but she fell in love with cummings’s love poem “somewhere I have never travelled” and ended up writing a spectacular analysis of the work. Maybe you will fall in love with it too!Libido of the Forest by Paul Klee. 1917*FictionSherwood Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio (1919). Read the whole book, or get a taste by reading these selections: “Grotesques” (introduction), “Hands,” “Mother,” and “Adventure.”Anderson was inspired by Masters’s book of poems Spoon River Anthology, in which the story of a whole town’s residents was revealed piece by piece in a series of poems from the point of view of many different people. Anderson applied the same idea to his innovative series of short stories, each featuring a different resident in the small town of Winesburg, Ohio, based on the real Ohio town of Clyde. Together these individual fragments make up a total picture of small town life at the beginning of the twentieth century.Like Masters, Anderson focused on the way small town living led to repressed desires and unfulfilled dreams for most of its denizens. As a result, people gradually become so narrowly focused on one unfulfilled longing that they become caricatures of their former selves, which Anderson describes as “grotesques.”Anderson’s themes and dark view of small town America inspired writers who followed him, such as William Faulkner, who met Anderson when he was living in New Orleans.Ernest Hemingway. Big Two-Hearted River (1925), The Sun Also Rises (1926), A Farewell to Arms (1929), “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” (1936); For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940).Hemingway with the people who became his characters in The Sun Also Rises.The lean, mean, flat, reportorial style that Hemingway invented has been immensely influential on today’s writing, which largely eschews complex grammar and sticks to short, punchy sentences and everyday vocabulary. This bald style can seem like an affectation, or just become dull, but when Hemingway does it—well, it’s art. You just have to read it to see.Of the works listed here, The Sun Also Rises is my favorite. Somehow, in this first novel, he took a story where not much happens, with characters almost slavishly copied from real people he knew, and turned it into a symbol of how so many people’s lives were derailed by their experiences in WW I.Read The Sun Also Rises slowly, because the minimal style asks readers to fill in many blanks, and you won’t want to miss how ordinary objects become freighted symbols and emotional motifs. For instance: how can an empty glass and a drunken woman getting in to a limousine just wrench your heart out? Don’t know, but read the book and see Hemingway at work. If you like The Sun Also Rises, try some of the others. You may not agree with his point of view on some things—I certainly don’t—but when I read Hemingway, I know I’m in the presence of one of the greats. Give it a try.F. Scott Fitzgerald. The Great Gatsby (1925), “Babylon Revisited” (1931) and Tender is the Night (1934).Everyone knows about The Great Gatsby; if you haven’t read it, you’ve probably seen one of the movie versions. Even so, I suggest you read it again, this time keeping in mind that Gatsby is a modernist work of literature. What does that mean? For one thing, expect the story to be presented in fragments, from multiple points of view, with no central authority to assure readers which person sees the whole truth. While Nick Carraway as narrator is mostly a trustworthy observer, even he is circumscribed by his own values and preconceptions, and hampered by the fact that we can never glimpse more than a fragment of anyone else’s life or mind.Tender is the Night is more highly regarded now than in Fitzgerald’s day. The story is about how glamorous people often have inner identities that are precarious. Rosemary, a young actress, is dazzled by the “golden” rich folk she meets at the French Riviera. She falls in love with the beautiful life lived by Dick Diver, his lovely wife, and his group of friends, not seeing that it’s all a carefully constructed façade. The novel probes the tenuousness of love and career success, and what factors can lead to everything falling apart.Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel: A Story of the Buried Life (1929).North Carolina writer Thomas Wolfe’s work is not widely read today, which is why I call him “The Forgotten Modernist.” But my oh my, true aficionados of the American written word are missing out in not acquainting themselves with Wolfe’s prolix, idiosyncratic, dense, lyrical style of written outcry. Wolfe bucked the Modernist trend toward tight minimalist prose; instead he pours out line after line of heartbroken protest at the unfairness of life crossed with the un-killable dream that leads him forward from his childhood and youth.Look Homeward Angel is an autobiographical novel, a fictionalized description of (and a howl of protest against) his growing-up years in Asheville, North Carolina, a wannabe writer trapped in a town and a family too small to hold his dreams and ambitions. Nor is he the only person in town who is cramped and distorted by its narrow ways.Wolfe’s descriptions of people and their characteristic manner and conversation is especially gifted. Individuals and their tragic circumstances come alive on the page—for me, alone worth reading through Wolfe’s lava-like flow of language. This may not be to your taste, but give it a try—I know of no other writing quite like this production by a raw uninhibited genius.William Faulkner. “Barn Burning” (1939); Light in August (1932); The Sound and the Fury (1929); Absalom, Absalom (1936); As I Lay Dying (1930); “A Rose for Emily” (1930).William Faulkner. By Carl Van Vechten*Hemingway and Fitzgerald were two of the greatest novelists from this era (although Fitzgerald’s problems with alcohol and his wife’s mental illness kept him from being as productive as he might have been).The third truly great modernist fiction writer was William Faulkner. He is one of my favorite writers of all time.Reading Faulkner is not easy, since many of his works are written as streams of consciousness from many different characters’ points of view. Readers enter the consciousness of dozens of different characters, most of the denizens of his fictional Yoknapatawpha County, based on the country around today’s Oxford, Mississippi (his home town).Faulkner’s narrators don’t usually signal when he shifts from one person’s mind to another, so readers must learn to be alert. But with care, you can catch on, and then be rewarded with the chance to do something we can never do in real life: inhabit the mind of another person.Light in August is easier to read than the others listed here, so I recommend starting with that, and with a couple of his short stories, keeping in mind that he is fascinated by how differently people think, and how hard it is to understand the motivations of another human. He is also fascinated in documenting the way people become bound and disabled by growing up in dysfunctional families and unenlightened cultures. This last theme is still relevant to issues people are struggling with today, problems of racial and class prejudice, as well as fears that cultural values are breaking down.Faulkner’s characters come from every walk of life, from rich and happy to rich and unhappy to the poorest of the poor. They go through every rotten thing that people can go through, and do every rotten thing that people can do to other people. Yet, paradoxically, I always find his work uplifting in the end, since somewhere, there can always be found some goodness, some human dignity, some hope for humanity in the future. Besides Hemingway, I think Faulkner has had more influence than any other writer on today’s best fiction.Zora Neale Hurston. Eatonville Anthology (1926), Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), “The Gilded Six-Bits,” 1933, and any other short story she wrote.Zora Neale HurstonOnce a prominent member of the group of Harlem Renaissance writers, Hurston’s work was forgotten in the 1950s and 60s, but was later rediscovered by writer Alice Walker. Hurston was a trained folklorist as well as a writer. Eatonville Anthology is a collection of vignettes about the residents of the African American town in Florida where Hurston lived until age 13; the tales are a blend of fiction and folklore, capturing authentic dialect. I find all of Hurston’s work a treat to read because of her rich humor, her nuanced observations, and her love for people; it is also very moving to read, because of her empathy for human trouble and striving.John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath (1939).This is Steinbeck’s famous, thoroughly-researched novel about the plight of the Okies who were run out of Oklahoma’s “Dust Bowl” during the drought in the 1930s. Run off their farms by inability to harvest crops and pay their mortgages, the Joads and their neighbors head to California in search of new land to farm, and instead find only huge labor camps of migrant workers who compete for scarce jobs at subsistence wages. In this powerful story urging and celebrating unity in the face of disaster, Steinbeck makes no secret of his protest against the inhumanity spawned by a faceless capitalist system. The novel makes the case for humane treatment of every American worker.Richard Wright, “The Boy Who Was Almost a Man” (1939), Native Son (1940).Richard Wright’s work explains through vivid fiction how America’s 1930s culture of oppression and discrimination created sad and inescapable destinies for African Americans. In the short story “The Boy Who Was Almost a Man,” 18-year-old Dave is treated by family and white employers like a young boy. Forced to drudge endlessly in the fields and turn over his meager pay to his mother, he dreams of owning a gun so people will respect him. Native Son’s Bigger Thomas lives a poor life on Chicago’s south side when he manages to get a chauffeur’s job with a rich white family. Their expectations of him are impossible for him to interpret, so that he feels forced into committing a terrible crime.Richard Wright*DramaSusan Glaspell, “Trifles” (1916).As co-founder of the experimental theater The Provincetown Players, Glaspell had a huge influence on innovation in American theater, helping to usher in successful serious American drama, such as those written by Eugene O’Neill. “Trifles,” a one-act play, is a murder mystery as well as an indictment of patriarchal culture. The men in the play think their methodical but blunderbuss methods will uncover the evidence to prove that Minnie Wright murdered her husband while “the little ladies” stand by. However, it’s the women, with their more nuanced understanding of Minnie and the clues she leaves, who uncover the true situation and make decisions on behalf of real justice.Thornton Wilder, Our Town, 1938.Described by Wilder at “Meta-theater,” this experimental-style play tells the story of small town Grover’s Corner, New Hampshire in a series of widely-spaced vignettes. The play calls attention to the fact that it IS a play, using few props or backdrops, making the Stage Manager a character who speaks directly to the audience, and featuring a dead woman appearing from her grave to speak in the third act.Eugene O’Neill, The Iceman Cometh (1939); Long Day’s Journey into Night (1940).Eugene O’Neill is probably America’s first major dramatist. His plays probe the guilt and sorrow that lurk just behind the brave and innocent faces so many people strive to hide behind. In performance, the plays are powerful and emotional.The Iceman Cometh focuses on longtime patrons of Harry Hope’s saloon, who talk endlessly of pipe dreams they will never act on, but that they use to disguise past guilts. Long Day’s Journey into Night features an aging actor, his wife, and two adult sons. In one long day, each member of the family probes their grief and guilt over their loss of each individual’s dream for their lives. They spend much of the play blaming each other, but come at the end to face the separate addictions and psychological problems that have taken over their lives.Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie (1944).Another of America’s foremost playwrights, Williams became famous for this play based on autobiographical memories. The play features Tom Wingfield, an aspiring poet, and his memory of one evening with his mother, former southern belle Amanda, and his pathologically shy sister, Laura, who wears a brace on her leg.Mother Amanda tries to push both her children to improve their circumstances, but the children can’t or won’t respond as she hopes. At the time of the incident shown in the play, Wingfield is toiling at a job in a warehouse to help support his mother and sister, his father having left the family years before. At his mother’s insistence, he brings home a potential suitor for Laura; but of course, things go wrong.Modernists were not shy about portraying angst and alienation. “The Scream” by Edvard Munch*Another “Scream”? Screenshot from Trailer for 1962 film of O’Neill’s “Long Day’s Journey into Night.” Katherine Hepburn and Ralph Richardson.Suggestions for the Reading List?Do you find yourself screaming because your favorite American Modernist work is missing from this list? Leave a comment on our post about American Modernism here!(FYI: Comments held for moderation.)Link to Index of Literary Classics Timelines*Photo Credits:Garden of Love by Wassily Kandinski [Public domain], via Wikimedia CommonsMonongahela River Valley, Pittsburgh by John Kane, 1917. Metropolitan Museum of Art [CC0], via Wikimedia Commons.T. S. Eliot. By Lady Ottoline Morrell [Public domain or Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.William Carlos Williams. By unknown (believed to be passport photograph) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.Marianne Moore. By George Platt Lynes [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.Libido of the Forest by Paul Klee, 1917. Paul Klee [CC0], via Wikimedia Commons.Hemingway and Friends. Photo Credit on this post.William Faulkner. Photo Credit on this post.Zora Neale Hurston. By Florida Memory – Portrait of Zora Neale Hurston: Eatonville, Florida, Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.Richard Wright. By Carl Van Vechten [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.The Scream. By Edvard Munch [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.Long Day’s Journey into Night film trailer. Trailer distributed by Embassy Pictures [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. Beautiful English landscape painted in late Renaissance.In compiling this list of late English Renaissance Literature from 1603-1660, we continue to present the picks and remarks from our experts on Medieval and Early Modern literature, David E. Miller and Adam. For more about these literature lovers, see English Renaissance Literature I here, and Middle Ages English Literature (Medieval): 1066-1485, here.I, MJ, also have many favorites among this rich list of great literature from the Renaissance, so you will also find some “MJ” comments here too.English Renaissance Literature is covered in two different pages on our site:I: Tudor-Sixteenth Century, 1485-1603, HEREII: Jacobian-Puritan-Early Seventeenth Century, 1603-1660, THIS PAGEINDEX to Literary Timelines and Reading Lists from other ErasFree Online Sources of Renaissance Literature:Project GutenbergLuminariumSearch online by title for other sources.Enjoy this tour of great and famous English literature of the Renaissance. Thanks, David and Adam, for sharing your expertise and love of literature!Significant Historical Dates:1603-1625: James on the throne, known as “Jacobean” era. 1605: Gunpowder Plot to blow up Parliament is foiled, Guy Fawkes apprehended; Cervantes publishes Don Quixote. 1611: King James Bible published. 1616: Shakespeare dies. 1617: Ben Jonson named first poet laureate of England. 1620: American Pilgrims sail for America in the Mayflower and land at Plymouth Rock. 1630: Large Group of Puritans led by John Winthrop sails for America. 1642: English Civil War between Royalists and Puritans begins; Puritan Parliament bans the theater. 1649: Puritan Parliament sentences Charles I to death; Charles I beheaded. 1660: Charles II restored to English throne after years of rule by Puritan-dominated Parliament.English Renaissance Literature II: Jacobean / Early Seventeenth Century, 1603-1660King James I of England. English School, unknown painter. The Jacobean era is named for King James, “Jacobus” being the Latin word for “James.”The Bible (King James Version), 1611; David’s pickDavid remarks:“The Renaissance was a time marked by an incredible amount of translation from other languages into English—pagan literature from antiquity, Greek philosophy, Roman history, and contemporaneous works of poetry and prose from continental Europe.“One of the largest undertakings, however, occurred during the reign of King James I (1603-1625). A new translation of the Bible, called The King James Version, began in 1604 and was completed in 1611 by a team of 47 scholars under the sponsorship of the king himself.“This was not the first translation of the scriptures into English. There had been many inspired by the Protestant Reformation. However, the King James Version has had the most lasting impact on the English language.“Admired for its grand, dignified, Latinate style, the King James Version was conceived primarily for the serious occasions of public reading. Many phrases familiar to us today have their origins in the Renaissance idiom, such as ‘Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you…’ or ‘I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth much fruit…’“You’ll encounter some of the most memorable lines from the King James Bible in Genesis, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Isaiah, the Gospels, Acts, Romans, and Revelations.”Ben Jonson, Dramas: Volpone, 1606; The Alchemist, 1610; Bartholomew Fair, 1614; Poems from Epigrams, 1616: “To My Book,” “On My First Son,” “On Gut,” “To Penshurst,” “Song: To Celia”Ben Jonson, dramatist and poet. By Abraham van Blyenberch.David remarks,“As England’s unofficial poet laureate, Ben Jonson is now credited with inventing the vocation of the professional author. It might be unusual to think of a time when authors weren’t supposed to have published works, but during the Renaissance the circulation of a single manuscript among a small, elite coterie was more esteemed than having one’s poetry and plays in print.“Therefore, in 1616, when Jonson published his own Works, he was doing something very strange indeed. But unlike any other writer in the seventeenth century, Jonson produced outstanding works in all the literary genres of the time—plays, court masques, poetry, and prose.“Jonson’s poetry inspired the poets of Charles I’s court who are now known posthumously as the ‘Sons of Ben.’ I recommend reading ‘To My Book,’ ‘On My First Son,’ ‘On Gut,’ ‘To Penshurst,’ and ‘Song: To Celia.’ His best plays are the city comedies Volpone (1605-6) and The Alchemist (1610), each of which make great use of the stage as a physical space and as an idea in the abstract.”Adam remarks,“One of my professors said that Christopher Marlowe focuses on huge personalities and sweeping histories and says everything’s meaningless, whereas Jonson focuses on everyday things and says everything’s meaningless. Very helpful distinction between the two Renaissance playwrights!“In drama, Jonson excelled largely at comedy, unlike Shakespeare, who could do it all, from comedy to tragedy to history. Reading Shakespeare and Jonson side by side made me realize how much romantic relationships interest Shakespeare, more so than Jonson. Jonson seems to have a more consistently pessimistic view of people than Shakespeare. But like Shakespeare, he’s also very funny.”John Donne, from Songs and Sonnets, 1633 (written earlier): “The Sun Rising,” “The Canonization,” The Bait,” “The Flea,” “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” Elegy 19,” “To His Mistress Going to Bed,” from Holy Sonnets, 1633 (written earlier): 1, 5, 10, and 14. (David’s picks).John DonneDavid remarks,“If you want to read poetry that is weird, arresting, and at times profane, then John Donne is for you. As a young man, Jack Donne was a rake, spirited lover, and penned lyrics that were both shockingly erotic and incorporated strange metaphors known as ‘conceits.’“It may be hard to believe that this same young man would later become Dr. Donne, the dean of St. Paul’s, going on to write brilliant sermons and devotional poetry that earned him national distinction. Erotic poems like ‘The Sun Rising’ and “Elegy 19: To His Mistress Going to Bed’ make a great contrast when read alongside his stirring Holy Sonnets, the most famous of which are Sonnets 1, 5, 10, and 14.”Adam remarks,“I think Jonson famously said of Donne that he deserved hanging for ‘not keeping of accent’ (that is, for not keeping an even meter in his poems). By the way, Jonson also remarked of Spenser that he ‘writ no language.’”MJ remarks,I love reading John Donne’s poetry, and Adam’s remark puts me in mind of one of the reasons why: Donne’s restless intellect kept him from sticking too closely to any pre-set form or accepted cultural concept; his poems are always pushing and pulling against both meter and common ideas.Thus, whether focused on love or religion, Donne’s poetry is startling, witty, intense, and smart. I like being in touch with a smart and original mind. Several poems on David’s list are among my top 100 favorite poems ever, including “The Sun Rising” and Holy Sonnet 14, “Batter My Heart, three-person’d God.”In addition to David’s list, I strongly recommend reading “Meditation XVII from Devotions on Emergent Occasions” (1624), which includes this famous passage:No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were; any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.Other Donne poems I love include “Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star” and “The Good Morrow.”(Click here for more on how and why Donne experimented with meter in his devotional poems, by Roz Kaveney.)Mary Wroth, Pamphilia to Amphilanthus, 1621 (David’s pick)Lady Mary Wroth.David remarks:“When Virginia Woolf remarked in ‘A Room of One’s Own’ (1929) that ‘it would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare,’ she insisted perhaps too strongly that the Renaissance was only an age of men’s writing.“Recent scholarship has uncovered, and in some cases, rediscovered many women writers during the Renaissance period. Writers like Mary Herbert, Elizabeth Carey, Amelia Lanyer, Katherine Phillips, and Lady Elinor Davies are now found in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century anthologies of literature, and their respective works taught alongside Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton.“I think the strongest female voice of the period is Mary Wroth. Her father, Sir Robert Sidney, was a poet, and both her uncle Sir Philip Sidney, and her Aunt Mary (Sidney) Herbert, were poets and literary patrons. It is no surprise that a person from such an eminent literary family would be the first woman to write a sonnet sequence in English.“Clearly inspired by her uncle Sir Philip Sidney’s poetry, Pamphilia to Amphilanthus is a sequence of poems written from a woman who is ‘all-loving’ to a man who is a ‘lover of two.’ Though inspired by Sidney, Pamphilia and Amphilanthus is nonetheless impressive in its own right for its technical virtuosity.“It also exhibits a fresh and engaging reversal of Petrarchan roles; instead of a lovelorn man expressing longing for a woman, in these poems, a woman articulates her desire and the man becomes the desired one.”Metaphysical Poets: George Herbert, “The Altar,” “Easter Wings,” and “Prayer (I); Henry Vaughn, “A Song to Amoret”; Richard Crashaw’s “The Flaming Heart.” (David’s Picks).David remarks:“Inspired by the poetry of John Donne, these lyricists primarily wrote love and devotional poetry, marked by its wit and its use of strange and original conceits.George Herbert, from The Temple (1633): “The Altar,” “Redemption,” “Easter,” “Easter Wings,” “Virtue,” “The Pulley,” “Love (3), “Discipline.” (MJ’s Picks)MJ remarks:Several of gentle George Herbert’s works are among my all-time favorite poems. Herbert was an Anglican clergyman, who prepared for a career in the court and town among sophisticated people, but ended up serving a small country parish. The poems in The Temple express the many sides of his relationship with God, both love and struggle.Herbert wrote in a variety of forms, even in a variety of shapes on the page; the poems seem simple on the surface and often read like little allegories with characters like Time, Love, and Death. But most poems have a clever twist that deepens the meaning and renders the situation quite poignant. I urge you to give them a try.For more on Herbert, check out this post that compares him to another devotional poet who wrote two centuries later, Gerard Manley Hopkins.Cavalier Poets: Robert Herrick’s “Delight in Disorder” and “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time”; Thomas Carew’s (pronounced Carrey) “A Rapture”; Sir John Suckling’s “Song” and “Out Upon It”; Richard Lovelace’s “To Lucasta, Going to the Wars” and “To Althea, from Prison”; and Edmund Waller’s “The Story of Pheobus and Daphne Applied” and “Song.” (David’s picks).David remarks:“The Cavalier Poets were lyric poets who wrote frothy and elegant love poetry during the reign of Charles I (1625-49). Like Ben Jonson (who was a considerable influence on them), they abandoned the sonnet form for the twelve-liner and other lyric forms. The list above is a good sampling of cavalier poetry.”John Milton, Paradise Lost, 1667/1674, David’s pickYoung John MiltonNote: A great source for reading Milton’s works free online: Dartmouth’s The John Milton Reading Room David remarks:“If the sixteenth century is the age of Shakespeare, then the seventeenth century is the age of Milton, whose Paradise Lost is the supreme achievement of that era.“Milton began by writing poetry in the 1630s before participating in the so-called pamphlet wars in the 1640s, speaking in favor of such controversial subjects as companionate marriage (‘Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce,’ 1643), the freedom of the press (‘Areopagitica,’ 1644), and the regicide of Charles I (‘The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates,’ 1649).“Milton’s early poetry includes ‘On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity’ (1629), the companion poems ‘L’Allegro’ and ‘Il Penseroso’ (1631), a drama in verse called Comus; or, A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle (1634), and his much-celebrated pastoral elegy ‘Lycidas’ (1637).“During his time, Milton revived many sixteenth-century genres (like the pastoral, the sonnet, and the epic), many of which had fallen out of favor in the seventeenth century. As for the sonnet form, Milton was able to put it to new uses other than detailing the drama of unrequited love and intense devotion.“Instead, Milton wrote sonnets praising his political heroes (‘To The Lord General Cromwell, May 1652,’ 1694), exposing horrendous injustices of his day (‘On the Late Massacre of the Piedmont,’ 1673), and exploring deeply private topics like life as a widower (‘Methought I Saw My Late Espoused Saint,’ 1673).“In Paradise Lost Milton regained the epic form. Called the ‘story of all things,’ Milton retells the opening books of Genesis but with a difference. He makes intelligible characters, worlds, and situations of which most could never imagine.“Satan is presented to us sympathetically as the tragic hero of the poem, his face physically altered by the deep marks of God’s lightning from the war in heaven. But he is nonetheless obdurate pride incarnate. In Adam and Eve, we have a portrait of domestic bliss and devotion. They are naive, curious, their minds easily excitable, perhaps totally unprepared to face a foe like Satan.“We encounter others as well: Uriel, regent of the Sun; the haughty warrior, Gabriel; Michael, the commander of God’s army; and Raphael, whom God sends to instruct Adam and Eve in the mysteries of his kingdom. Milton wrote Paradise Lost to ‘justify the ways of God to men.’ He conceived of his project as an epic to end all epics, its purpose to represent our original and natural state as free people, even after the fall.”Advice for Reading Paradise LostLate Victorian illustration of Paradise Lost by Gustave Doré shows a brooding Satan planning Eve’s downfall.David continues:“Although dense, learned, and highly allusive, Paradise Lost is easy to take in strides. And Milton does help his reader by providing summaries at the beginning of each book. To get a feel for the epic, start by reading Books 1 and 2, which introduces the reader to Satan and the other fallen angels as they build a parliament in hell, called Pandemonium (one of many words Milton coined), and plot their revenge against God.Next, read Book 4 where you’ll meet Adam and Eve, and which ends with a fascinating confrontation between Satan and the archangel Gabriel. The War in heaven, which precedes the creation of the Garden of Eden, is recounted in Book 6 and is absolutely spectacular. Book 9 is the climax: it contains Satan’s moment of tragic recognition and his successful temptation of Eve.If you enjoy Paradise Lost you can read its sequel, Paradise Regained (1671), about Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness as well as Milton’s final work, Samson Agonistes (1671), a drama in verse about the story of the biblical judge, Samson.Andrew Marvell, “To His Coy Mistress,” “Damon the Mower,” “The Mower’s Song,” “The Garden” (all written ca. 1650-52). (MJ Picks).Andrew Marvell was a friend of Milton’s, mostly sympathetic to the Puritan cause. Educated at Cambridge, he worked in a variety of capacities, including private tutor, joint secretary of Latin along with Milton for Cromwell’s government, and later, a Member of Parliament.Marvell’s poems, which I find lovely to read, often present debates between aspects of human life that are hard to reconcile. “To His Coy Mistress” is a famous seduction poem, in which the speaker tries to persuade the lady, who prefers a long courtship, to succumb more quickly by arguing that time is passing so fast that age or death could overtake them before their love is consummated.“Damon the Mower” and “The Mower’s Song” lament the pain of unrequited love. Both poems focus on a mower going about his work while suffering and philosophizing on his unsuccessful love for Juliana.In “The Garden,” Marvell switches gears to meditate on what peace can be found when people turn from their drive to achieve and simply spend time in a garden: “How could such sweet and wholesome hours / Be reckoned but with herbs and flowers?”The PastoralMarvell’s poems offer many examples in the pastoral genre, which was popular throughout the Renaissance. Pastorals often paint pretty, make-believe situation featuring shepherds and shepherdesses living a quiet and beautiful life in the country, where life is so much simpler and elemental than in the town or court.Shepherds engage in singing or piping contests or attempt to seduce shepherdesses; writers may speak through the shepherds to make sly or satirical comments on current affairs at court while they engage in playful banter. Renaissance readers, enmeshed in political struggles within their city or lives at court, were captivated by a world that seemed prettier and simpler than their own.Adam remarks,“The pastoral genre (and Marvell wrote in others, of course) seems particularly important in the Renaissance, perhaps because the age was interested in drawing a line between itself and a classical past. [The Pastoral was a popular genre in ancient Rome, with the poet Virgil as a major practitioner.] “The pastoral is highly mannered, something the seventeenth century sometimes seems to love.”Interior of a London Coffeehouse in the 17th century by an unknown painter. English Renaissance Literature is as lively and varied as the patrons of the shop.Make a selection from our list and enjoy Reading the Renaissance!Renaissance Part I: Tudor-Sixteenth Century, 1485-1603INDEX to Literary Timelines and Reading Lists from other ErasPhoto Credits:17th Century English Landscape by Jacques d’Arthois [Public Domain] via Wikimedia CommonsKing James, English School, Unknown painter. [Public Domain] via Wikimedia CommonsBen Jonson painting After Abraham van Blijenberch [Public domain] via Wikimedia CommonsLady Mary Wroth Attributed to John de Critz [Public domain] via Wikimedia CommonsJohn Donne. [Public domain], via Wikimedia CommonsJohn Milton. By Unknown 17th century artist [Public domain], via Wikimedia CommonsDore illustration of Paradise Lost. 1886. [Public Domain {{PD-US-expired}}] via Wikimedia Commons17th Century Coffeehouse Unknown painter [Public domain {{PD-US-expired}}] via Wikimedia Commons