

Tour: History of our Literature

Writers respond not only to the context of their own time and experiences in their lives, but also to the kinds of literature that came before them. Sometimes they exalted their precursors, sometimes the esteem of what went before caused anxiety, and sometimes they were repulsed by what was considered literary before their own time.

In this tour, you will be introduced to resources available on Great Writers Inspire which are arranged here in chronological order. Can you find links between the different eras? Or is history just one thing after another?

Firstly, watch [Dr Francis Leneghan's discussion of Old English poem Beowulf](#) [1]. This is an ideal starting point since not only is Beowulf one of the earliest poems we know of, but because, as Leneghan tells us, the term 'author' does not convey the same static quality in the Anglo-Saxon period as it does in the modern day. Check out 2:25-2:32 to hear Leneghan speak the opening lines of the extraordinary poem, or 6:27-7:01 to hear the section in which Hrothgar's poet praises Beowulf by comparing him to the valiant men of old.

Jumping ahead several centuries, we come to William Shakespeare whose historical importance surely can't be understated. However, there is controversy over the authorship of some of his best known works. Kate O'Connor gives her opinion in [the short essay 'Why Shakespeare was Shakespeare'](#) [2], and shows us that another important Renaissance dramatist, Christopher Marlowe, had some issues with the spelling of his own name!

By the 18th century, issues of value in culture were becoming ever more important as readers, critics and writers tried to sort out the distinction between 'great' writing and other less valuable kinds. Abigail Williams provides details of this intriguing context in [an essay on 'High and Low Culture'](#) [3], from which you can seek out the different kinds of texts from our ebook selections.

The Victorian era was clearly important to the development of literature as we know it; the influence of [Dickens](#) [4], [Wilde](#) [5] and many others can still be felt in our own culture. Charlotte Barrett provides [a list of some important Victorian dates](#) [6] which suggest some of the context to other materials including writing by women and writing influenced by science.

Much has been written of the [First World War](#) [7], but perhaps the most poignant way to explore the devastation is to read poetry written by [a soldier who died one week before Armistice Day](#) [8]. Owen's [Collected Poems](#) [9] is available from the Oxford Text Archive, via this website.

[Dr Rebecca Beasley](#) introduces [Ezra Pound](#) [10] in this video as the figure who 'really made modernism happen'. In learning about Pound, we learn about the innovation of the modernist movement.

Finally, [Dominic Davies](#) introduces us to two terms [11] that are relevant to more recent literature, 'contemporary' and 'postcolonial'. In considering some of the problems with these terms, we can look back at

the terms we use to describe other kinds of literature to see whether they do in fact fit. Who is great? What is a writer?

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