

Aphra Behn (1640 - 1689)



Behn was the first professional woman writer in English literature, best known for her plays and her novel 'Oroonoko'.

Aphra Johnson was born near Canterbury in 1640. She is thought to have spent some of her youth in Dutch Guiana in the West Indies. In 1664 she married Johan Behn, a merchant of Dutch or German parentage, but the marriage is not thought to have lasted very long. She is known to have acted as a British spy in Antwerp in 1666. Imprisonment for debt led her to write for an income.

Behn wrote a series of successful plays. Her first, 'The Forc'd Marriage' was produced in 1671. 'The Rover' (1681), her most successful, was produced in two parts and included in its cast Nell Gwyn, mistress of King Charles II. Among Behn's sources was the Italian *commedia dell'arte* (improvised comedy), which she used in her farce 'The Emperor of the Moon' (1687), forerunner of the modern-day pantomime.

Behn's novel 'Oroonoko' (1688) was the story of an enslaved African prince and is now considered a foundation stone in the development of the English novel. As well as plays and prose Behn wrote poetry and translated works from French and Latin. In her time she was a celebrity, unusual for her independence as a professional writer and her concern for equality between the sexes. Behn died on 16 April 1689 and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Jane Austen (1775 - 1817)

Jane Austen was an English novelist whose books, set amongst the English middle and upper classes, are notable for their wit, social observation and insights into the lives of early 19th century women.

Jane Austen was born on 16 December 1775 in the village of Steventon in Hampshire. She was one of eight children of a clergyman and grew up in a close-knit family. She began to write as a teenager. In 1801 the family moved to Bath. After the death of Jane's father in 1805 Jane, her sister Cassandra and their mother moved several times eventually settling in Chawton, near Steventon.

Jane's brother Henry helped her negotiate with a publisher and her first novel, 'Sense and Sensibility', appeared in 1811. Her next novel 'Pride and Prejudice', which she described as her "own darling child" received highly favourable reviews. 'Mansfield Park' was published in 1814, then 'Emma' in 1816. 'Emma' was dedicated to the Prince Regent, an admirer of her work. All of Jane Austen's novels were published anonymously.



In 1816, Jane began to suffer from ill-health, probably due to Addison's disease. She travelled to Winchester to receive treatment, and died there on 18 July 1817. Two more novels, 'Persuasion' and 'Northanger Abbey' were published posthumously and a final novel was left incomplete.

Mary Shelley (1797-1851)

Mary Shelley was born in London in 1797, the daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, two radical writers. Her mother died when she was only ten days old. In 1816 she married Percy Bysshe Shelley, then unknown, and they lived in Italy until Shelley's death in 1822. The idea for Frankenstein came to her when she was staying on Lake Geneva in 1816 but was not published for two years. She wrote several other novels and contributed to the Westminster Review. She died in February 1851."



It is quite difficult to believe that a young girl of 18 years old would be the author of a book that would become the first monster film, creation film, bionic film, horror film, publicly banned film, and the first of many Frankenstein films. But we must give this young girl credit for her literary talent and active imagination. Mary Shelley is responsible for many fine literary works of art but none are as famous as Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus published in 1818. The tale Shelley tells is of a young Dr. Frankenstein who tries to create a living being but instead creates a monster.

There are many interesting theories on the reasons why Shelley wrote Frankenstein. The book was started while vacationing at Lake Geneva with her husband Percy, Lord Byron, and John Polidari. Lord Byron challenged the group to write a ghost story. Mary was slow to come up with an idea for her story but after she had the following "waking" nightmare she began to write the famous Frankenstein novel that would take her almost 2 years to publish.

Mary now had the basis of her story and went on to complete the novel in the spring of 1817 and have it published January 1, 1818. Frankenstein can be read with many different view points in mind. Was Mary simply writing of the nightmare she had in Lake Geneva or was she writing about the fears she had about child birth. At the time she wrote Frankenstein she had lost one child and had a 6 month old to care for. Frankenstein can be viewed as a reflection of Mary's fears of having a deformed child or a child she could not love.

Elizabeth Gaskell (1810 - 1865)

Gaskell was a Victorian novelist, also notable for her biography of her friend Charlotte Brontë.

Elizabeth Stevenson was born in London on 29 September 1810, the daughter of a Unitarian minister. After her mother's early death, she was raised by an aunt who lived in Knutsford in Cheshire. In 1832 she married William Gaskell, also a Unitarian minister, and they settled in the industrial city of Manchester.

Motherhood and the obligations of a minister's wife kept her busy. However, the death of her only son inspired her to write her first novel, 'Mary Barton', which was published anonymously in 1848. It was an immediate success, winning the praise of Charles Dickens and Thomas Carlyle.



Dickens invited her to contribute to his magazine, 'Household Words', where her next major work, Cranford, appeared in 1853. 'North and South' was published the following year. Gaskell's work brought her many friends, including the novelist Charlotte Brontë. When Charlotte died in 1855, her father, Patrick Brontë, asked Gaskell to write her biography. The Life of Charlotte Brontë (1857) was written with admiration and covered a huge quantity of firsthand material with great narrative skill.

Gaskell died on 12 November 1865, leaving her longest work, 'Wives and Daughters' incomplete.

The Brontë Sisters (1818-1855)



Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë were sisters and writers whose novels have become classics

Charlotte was born on 21 April 1816, Emily on 30 July 1818 and Anne on 17 January 1820 all in Thornton, Yorkshire. They had two sisters, both of whom died in childhood and a brother, Branwell. Their father, Patrick, was an Anglican clergyman who was appointed as the rector of the village of Haworth, on the Yorkshire moors. After the death of their mother in 1821, their Aunt Elizabeth came to look after the family.

All three sisters attended different schools at various times as well as being taught at home. The Brontë children were often left alone together in their isolated home and all began to write stories at an early age.

All three sisters were employed at various times as teachers and governesses. In 1842, Charlotte and Emily went to Brussels to improve their French, but had to return home early after the death of their aunt Elizabeth. Charlotte returned to Brussels an English teacher in 1843-1844. By 1845, the family were back together at Haworth. By this stage, Branwell was addicted to drink and drugs.

In May 1846, the sisters published at their own expense a volume of poetry. This was the first use of their pseudonyms Currer (Charlotte), Ellis (Emily) and Acton (Anne) Bell. They all went on to publish novels, with differing levels of success.

Anne's 'Agnes Grey' and Charlotte's 'Jane Eyre' were published in 1847. 'Jane Eyre' was one of the year's best sellers. Anne's second novel, 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall' and Emily's 'Wuthering Heights' were both published in 1848. 'The Tenant' sold well, but 'Wuthering Heights' did not.

Branwell died of tuberculosis in September 1848. Emily died of the same disease on 19 December 1848 and Anne on 28 May 1849.

Left alone with her father, Charlotte continued to write. She was by now a well-known author and visited London a number of times. 'Shirley' was published in 1849 and 'Villette' in 1853. In 1854, Charlotte married her father's curate, Arthur Nicholls. She died of tuberculosis on 31 March 1855.

George Eliot (1819-1880)



George Eliot was the pen name of Mary Ann Evans, one of the leading English novelists of the 19th century. Her novels, most famously 'Middlemarch', are celebrated for their realism and psychological insights.

George Eliot was born on 22 November 1819 in rural Warwickshire. When her mother died in 1836, Eliot left school to help run her father's household. In 1841, she moved with her father to Coventry and lived with him until his death in 1849. Eliot then travelled in Europe, eventually settling in London.

In 1850, Eliot began contributing to the 'Westminster Review', a leading journal for philosophical radicals, and later became its editor. She was now at the centre of a literary circle through which she met George Henry Lewes, with whom she lived until his death in 1878. Lewes was married and their relationship caused a scandal. Eliot was shunned by friends and family.

Lewes encouraged Eliot to write. In 1856, she began 'Scenes of Clerical Life', stories about the people of her native Warwickshire, which were published in 'Blackwood's Magazine'. Her first novel, 'Adam Bede', followed in 1859 and was a great success. She used a male pen name to ensure her works were taken seriously in an era when female authors were usually associated with romantic novels.

Her other novels include 'The Mill on the Floss' (1860), 'Silas Marner' (1861), 'Romola' (1863), 'Middlemarch' (1872) and 'Daniel Deronda' (1876). The popularity of Eliot's novels brought social acceptance, and Lewes and Eliot's home became a meeting place for writers and intellectuals.

After Lewes' death Eliot married a friend, John Cross, who was 20 years her junior. She died on 22 December 1880 and was buried in Highgate Cemetery in north London.

Virginia Woolf (1882 – 1941)



Virginia Woolf was born in 1882 in London, England. She was not given a formal education and benefited from observing her father's writing abilities. Virginia's mother died when she was thirteen. This caused the first of several mental breakdowns Virginia would have throughout her life.

Virginia Woolf started to work as a tutor at Morley College in 1904 and wrote reviews for some books. Her reviews were published in the "Times Literary Supplement". In 1905 she started meeting with friends to discuss literary and artistic topics. This group of people would later become known as the Bloomsbury Group. Virginia Woolf also became a member of the People's Suffrage Federation and of the Women's Co-operative Guild. In 1912, Virginia married Leonard Woolf who was a writer. One year later, Virginia suffered a severe mental breakdown. Her husband helped her to live through it.

In 1915, her first novel "The Voyage Out" was published. Both Virginia and her husband were very interested in literature. Together they founded the Hogarth Press in 1917. The novel "Night and Day" appeared in 1919 and in 1922 "Jacob's Room" was published. In 1925 followed "Mrs. Dalloway", "To the Lighthouse" (1927) and in "The Waves" (1931). Virginia Woolf also published a series of non-fiction books. "A Room of One's Own", appeared in 1929. This book would become an important book in the history of feminism. In her book "Three Guineas", Virginia Woolf once again covered the theme of women's liberation.

In 1941, Virginia completed her novel "Between the Acts". This would become her last novel. Throughout her life, Virginia Woolf battled depression. On March 28, 1941 she committed suicide by drowning herself. In her life she had published over 500 essays and about ten novels. Virginia Woolf did not use the traditional writing styles of her time. During her lifetime, Virginia had become a leader in the modernist literary movement.