In 1994, Harold Bloom published a study of what is commonly called the **canon**: a list of authors who are generally acknowledged to be important due to the quality, innovation and influence of their writing.

Some of the most influential amongst this group are:

- Geoffrey Chaucer
- Edmund Spenser
- William Shakespeare
- John Donne
- John Milton
- John Dryden
- Alexander Pope
- Samuel Johnson
- William Blake
- William Wordsworth
- Jane Austen
- Lord Byron
- Alfred, Lord Tennyson
- Charles Dickens
- George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans)
- Joseph Conrad
- James Joyce
- T S Eliot

When we talk about Literature, we divide it into periods to make it more manageable:

**Anglo-Saxon:**

Writing from this period is quite difficult to read nowadays, thanks to the changes in the forms of writing that have taken place over the years. **Runes** bear little resemblance to the writing that we use today.

**Medieval:**

- The change from **Old English** to **Middle English** was complete by the end of the 13th century - French vocabulary and a simplified grammar were becoming more prevalent than the Germanic dialect that was previously so important.
Renaissance:

- *Middle English* became *Early Modern English*
- This was a time of exuberance, influenced by the storytellers of Italy and France. There was an interest in Classical learning and literature, a new vocabulary and an experimental style.

SPENSER

SHAKESPEARE

DONNE

MILTON
The Canon of English Literature

Neo-classical:

- This was a period of formal rules of regularity, order and proportion of form. The literature was emotionally restrained, elegant and witty. It very much followed the Classical model.

DRYDEN

POPE

JOHNSON
Romantic:

- Writers in this period reacted strongly against the formality of the previous period. Writing adopted ordinary speech and took the form of personal and subjective accounts of experiences.
Modernist:

- This was a period of social promise and threat in equal measure. The writing of the time, as always, reflected this.
The Canon of English Literature

Questions

What do you notice about this group of writers? Who seems to be missing?

Do you agree with the idea of some writers being more important than others? Why?

Who should choose who is in the ‘canon’?

Task

Choose one of the following writers and find out about them. You should aim to find out:

- when they lived
- what they wrote
- why they might be considered to be important.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Virginia Woolf</th>
<th>Seamus Heaney</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary Wollstonecraft</td>
<td>Philip Larkin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aphra Behn</td>
<td>Oscar Wilde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily Bronte</td>
<td>George Orwell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Shelley</td>
<td>Robert Browning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>