

# SPANISH LITERATURE FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY

## INTRODUCTION

Spanish literature has followed the movements and mindsets of European literature. Yet it has developed some features of its own that have proved to be very influential on the literatures from other countries.

Medieval Spanish literature mainly consists both of '*romances*', whose epic tone is salient, and of poems dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

The start and flourishing of chivalric romances, such as *Amadís de Gaula*, dates back from the Renaissance during which humanists like Luis Vives prevailed.

The Golden Age of Spanish literature is a rich period, if any, for at that time two major works were written: *Lazarillo de Tormes*, the original model for picaresque novels, and *Don Quijote*, the story of a medieval man born in a world already imbued with capitalism, a mad man with a passion for chivalric novels. It was also the time of the Baroque, when plays abounded in intricate plots, like those of Lope de Vega, or were pregnant with metaphysics, like those of Calderón de la Barca.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century authors focused more on the society and its customs, hence the name of the major movement: the *costumbrista* literature (i.e. customs-oriented literature).

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Spanish literature is marked, on the one hand, by movements such as naturalism, romanticism and *costumbrismo* and, on the other hand, by the generation of '98's question about Spanish identity.

In the course of 20<sup>th</sup> century, several movements followed one another : the generation of '27's poetry (including the works of Federico García Lorca, who also wrote plays, and those of Miguel Hernández, who witnessed the fights during the war), the works by authors deeply impressed and affected by the war, franquism, and the feeling of absurdity/

The present-day Spanish literature is characterised by the postmodern issues addressed in individualism, scepticism, irony, and parody.

This lecture aims to provide students with an overview of Spanish literature from the Middle Ages to the 21st century. It will furthermore focus on a few works considered as representative of 4 major periods: *The poem of the Cid* for the Middle Ages, three Baroque works for the Spanish Golden Age, two contemporaneous works. For a better understanding of the texts a trilingual anthology is available.

# I. PRESENTATION OF THE IMPORTANT EPOCHS AND MOVEMENTS OF SPANISH LITERATURE FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE 21TH CENTURY.

TIME		MOVEMENTS	MAIN FEATURES	AUTHORS	WORKS
11 <sup>th</sup> c.		<b>Middle Ages</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Oral features are prevailing</li> <li>2. Most works are anonymous</li> <li>3. The works abound with religious references</li> <li>4. The works often serve didactical purposes</li> <li>5. Verse prevails over prose</li> </ol>	Gonzalo de Berceo Arcipreste de Hita Don Juan Manuel Jorge Manrique Fernando de Rojas	<i><u>Poema de Mio Cid (anónimo)</u></i> <i>Romancero (anónimo)</i> <i>Los Milagros de Nuestra Señora</i> <i>El Libro de Buen Amor</i> <i>El conde Lucanor</i> <i>Coplas a la muerte de su padre</i> <i>La Celestina</i>
12 <sup>th</sup> c.					
13 <sup>th</sup> c.					
14 <sup>th</sup> c.					
15 <sup>th</sup> c.					
16 <sup>th</sup> c.	<b>GOLDEN AGE (~1530 - 1681)</b>	<b>Renaissance</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>The movement stems from Italian Humanism</b></li> <li>2. Shift from theocentrism to anthropocentrism</li> <li>3. The Ancient Greece and the Antique Rome are extolled</li> <li>4. The works comply with classical standards</li> <li>5. Religious mind: Reform and Counter-Reform</li> <li>6. Onymous works prevail</li> <li>7. Poems and narratives are prevailing</li> </ol>	Garcilaso de la Vega San Juan de la Cruz Santa Teresa de Jesús  Juan de Valdés Lope de Rueda	<i>Soneto, Odas, Elegías</i> <i>Cántico espiritual</i> <i>Vivo sin vivir en mí</i> <i><u>El Lazarillo de Tormes (anónimo)</u></i> <i>Diálogo de la Lengua</i> <i>Los engaños</i>
17 <sup>th</sup> c.		<b>Baroque</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. This <b>typical Spanish movement</b> originates in a spiritual, social and political crisis</li> <li>2. The works are imbued with gravity, thoughtfulness and pessimism</li> <li>3. The movement concerns all major genres</li> <li>4. The movement forsakes classical standards</li> <li>5. The works (esp. poetic works) are rather demanding and impenetrable</li> <li>6. Spanish comedy is prevailing</li> </ol>	Luis de Góngora Miguel de Cervantes Francisco de Quevedo Baltasar Gracián Lope de Vega Calderón de la Barca Tirso de Molina	<i>Soledades</i> <i><u>El Quijote</u>, Novelas ejemplares</i> <i>La vida del Buscón</i> <i>El Criticón</i> <i>Fuenteovejuna</i> <i>La vida es sueño</i> <i><u>El burlador de Sevilla</u></i>
18 <sup>th</sup> c.		<b>Neoclassicism-Illustration</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>This movement originally appears in France and spreads across Europe</b></li> <li>2. The resort to Rationality becomes prevailing</li> <li>3. Imaginative writing almost disappears as a genre</li> <li>4. The works often serve didactical purposes</li> <li>5. Prose and essays prevail</li> </ol>	Juan Meléndez Valdés José Cadalso Benito Jerónimo Feijoo Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos Leandro Fdez de Moratín	<i>Églogas</i> <i>Cartas marruecas</i> <i>Cartas eruditas y curiosas</i> <i>Informe sobre la ley agraria</i>  <i>El sí de las niñas</i>

19 <sup>th</sup> c.	1 <sup>st</sup> half of the century	<b>Romanticism</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>This movement originates from Germany (Sturm und Drang)</b></li> <li>2. Authors express their feelings and sentiments</li> <li>3. Life is perceived as a tragedy</li> <li>4. Imagination prevails</li> <li>5. The movement concerns all major genres</li> <li>6. A whole range of noticeable subgenres in prose appears: <i>costumbrismo</i> (genre focusing on traditions and customs), novels, journalism, doctrinal writing</li> </ol>	José de Espronceda Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer Mariano José de Larra José Zorrilla Duque de Rivas	<u><i>El estudiante de Salamanca</i></u> <i>Rimas</i>  <i>El casarse pronto y mal</i> <i>Don Juan Tenorio</i> <i>Don Álvaro o la fuerza del sino</i>
	2 <sup>nd</sup> half of the century	<b>Realism</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. This movement originates in France</li> <li>2. Literature reflects reality</li> <li>3. Novels are prevailing</li> <li>4. The movement ends with the current called naturalism</li> </ol>	Pedro A. de Alarcón Leopoldo Alas, Clarín Benito Pérez Galdós Emilia Pardo Bazán Vicente Blasco Ibáñez	<i>El sombrero de tres picos</i> <u><i>La Regenta</i></u> <i>Fortunata y Jacinta</i> <i>La Tribuna</i> <i>La barraca</i>
20 <sup>th</sup> - 21 <sup>st</sup> c.	Movements prior to the Spanish Civil War	<b>Generation '98 (1890s)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A typically Spanish movement</li> <li>2. Critical view on the socio-political context</li> <li>3. Content matters more than form</li> <li>4. The authors claim to write for a larger readership</li> </ol>	Miguel de Unamuno Pío Baroja Azorín Ramón del Valle-Inclán	<i>Niebla</i> <i>El árbol de la ciencia</i> <i>La Voluntad</i> <i>Luces de Bohemia</i>
		<b>Commercial theatre</b>	A bourgeois, ideology free play-writing movement	Jacinto Benavente	<i>Los intereses creados</i>
		<b>Modernism (1900s)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. This movement is mostly a European movement: symbolism and parnassianism (France) ; pre-raphaelites and d'annunzianism (Italy)The authors eschew issues</li> <li>2. Form matters more than content</li> <li>3. The authors claim to write for a smaller readership</li> </ol>	Rubén Darío Antonio Machado Francisco Villaespesa Eduardo Marquina	<i>Azul</i> <i>Campos de Castilla</i> <i>Doña María de Padilla</i> <i>La ermita, la fuente y el río</i>
		<b>Novacentismo (1910s) 19th-centurism</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. This movement is imbued with Europeanism</li> <li>2. The authors champion the "Art for Art's sake" principle and claim that a work is nice as long as it is well written</li> <li>3. The authors support political liberalism and favour objectivity</li> </ol>	Juan Ramón Jiménez José d'Ortega y Gasset	<i>Arias tristes</i> <i>España invertebrada</i>
		<b>Avant-guardism (1910-1920)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A short-lived movement</li> <li>2. The movement breaks with previous literary movements</li> </ol>	Ramón G. de la Serna	<i>Automuribundia</i>
		<b>Generation '27 (1920-1930)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. This <b>Spanish movement</b> is made up of poets.</li> <li>2. The movement was formed to commemorate the anniversary of Gongora's death</li> <li>3. Mezcla entre las formas populares y las cultas</li> <li>4. Mixture of popular and learned forms</li> <li>5. The authors champion the "Art for Art's sake" principle</li> </ol>	Luis Cernuda Pedro Salinas Vicente Aleixandre Jorge Guillén Rafael Alberti Federico García Lorca	<i>Desolación de la quimera</i> <i>Presagios</i> <i>Pasión de la tierra</i> <i>Cántico</i> <i>Marinero en tierra, El adefesio</i> <u><i>Romancero gitano, La casa de Bernarda Alba</i></u>

<b>Movements after the Spanish Civil War</b>	<b>Embedded Literature (1940-1950)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Expression of conformism with the context</li> <li>2. Literature concerned with personal matters</li> <li>3. Pervious to all genres</li> </ol>	Luis Rosales Camilo José Cela Carmen Laforet	<i>Retablo de Navidad</i> <i>La familia de Pascal Duarte</i> <i>Nada</i>
	<b>Disembedded Literature (1950-1962)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Uncompromising, socially conscious literature</li> <li>2. Content matters more than form</li> <li>3. Literature seen/used as a means of protest and struggle</li> </ol>	Blas de Otero Luis Martín Santos Laura Olmo	<i>Pido la paz y la palabra</i> <i>Tiempo de silencio</i> <i>La camisa</i>
	<b>Experimental Literature (1962-1975)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Literature mostly concerned with personal matters</li> <li>2. Form matters above all</li> <li>3. Introducing new techniques from aboard</li> </ol>	Pere Gimferrer Miguel Delibes Fernando Arrabal	<i>Anda al mar</i> <i>Cinco horas con Mario</i> <i>El cementerio de automóviles</i>
	<b>Contemporary Literature (1975-...)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Following suit with previous movements</li> <li>2. Literature mostly concerned with humanity</li> <li>3. Returning to classical themes and techniques</li> </ol>	Blanca Andreu Antonio Soler Francisco Nieva	<i>El sueño oscuro</i> <u><i>El camino de los ingleses</i></u> <i>El combate de Ópalos</i>

## II. MIDDLE AGES : *Poema de Mio Cid*, anonymous

*The Poem of the Cid* is the oldest Spanish epic poem preserved. It's based on the true story of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, known as El Cid, and it takes place during the Spanish Reconquest. It's the first known extensive narrative work of the Spanish literature written in a Romance language, and it was composed around 1200. The poem is composed of 3735 verses of variable extension, it is divided into three *Cantares* (Songs) but the work is structured in two general stages: survival and rehabilitation.

*The Poem of the Cid* revolves around the topic of the restoration of lost honor, which will be a greater honor than the one lost.

First song: After being accused of stealing, Cid is banished by the King from Castile and leaves his daughters and wife at home to begin his military campaign to restore his honor.

Second song: Cid conquers Valencia and his daughters are wed to the Infants of Carrión, even though Cid doesn't trust them.

Third song: The Infants of Carrión leave Cid's daughters beaten in the middle of the country. He asks the King for a trial against the Infants and he wins. His daughters are promised then to two Spanish Princes, the Infants of Navarre and Aragón.

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**Commentary: The *Poema de Mio Cid* is different from the French epic (*La Chanson de Roland*) in three aspects:**

- The Cid is shown as the perfect example of patience and balance: he doesn't rush into battles and prefers to think things through before acting.
- Cid begins the tale being only a liege lord (a noble man of the lowest status) but his battles and Conquests help him overcome his humble beginnings, gaining him riches and honor and even a title as Lord of Valencia. The promise of his daughters to the Infants of Navarre and Aragon indicates an almost royal dignity. The gain of status through the arms, especially in areas next to the borders with the Moors, is a recurring theme.
- The hero is presented as being human: he's thrown off the horse in several occasions, and he even errs a couple of hits; far from being a loss of honor, this narrative strategy gives power to the winnings of the Cid. Supernatural elements are absent.
- In conclusion, it's important to note the plausibility of his adventures.

## III. GOLDEN AGE: two novels and a play, three Baroque works

### 1. Contextualization:

The Spanish Golden Age spanned from the end of the 16th century to almost the whole 17th century. The period owes its name to the splendour of the Spanish culture of a time yet deeply affected by a political crisis and economic stagnation. The Spanish Baroque therefore makes part of the European movement of Baroque, although its characteristic pessimism sets it somehow apart. Many literary works from that time typically feature a wanderer as the main character, a *pícaro* (i.e. pilgrim, wandering knight), who makes encounters in places such as inns, gaols, country houses, and who usually defends the line of the Council of Trent. Contrast is a recurrent motive: the lines between reality and fiction, sleep and wakefulness, doubt and confidence are constantly blurred.

### 2. *El Lazarillo de Tormes*, anonymous

This work published in 1554 tells the story of Lázaro de Tormes, a town crier, from his birth in a village near Salamanca to the time when he had his trade in Toledo. The book is divided into a prologue and seven treatises.

[Trailer El Lazarillo de Tormes – English version](#)

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## Commentary: Lazarillo as the first picaresque novel.

The characteristics of the picaresque novel are:

- The main character is a **rascal** with a very low social status, an ideal counterpoint to the chivalrous knights of the Renaissance. He wants to gain a higher status but to do so he has to use illegitimate procedures like cons and lies.
- **False autobiography structure:** These novels are always written in first-person narrative, as if the main characters were writing about his own adventures. He plays a double role in the narration: actor and narrator.
- **Determinism:** Even though the rascal's aim is to better his social position, he always fails. This is why the structure of the picaresque novel is always open, there's no possible evolution for the story.
- **Moralizing and pessimistic ideology:** Every picaresque novel is narrated from a final perspective of disillusion; it could serve as an example of how deviant behavior is always punished, no matter what happens.
- **Satiric intention and itinerant structure:** Society is heavily critiqued in the picaresque novel as the rascal moves through the different social planes, working for an archetype of each social class. The rascal is a privileged spectator who is able to see the hypocrisy of each of his bosses.
- **Realism** and even **naturalism** when describing some of the most disagreeable aspects of society.

### 3. *El Quijote*, Miguel de Cervantes

#### [Trailer Don Quixote – English version](#)

Don Quixote is a middle-aged gentleman from the region of La Mancha in central Spain. Obsessed with the chivalrous ideals touted in books he has read, he decides to take up his lance and sword to defend the helpless and destroy the wicked. After a first failed adventure, he sets out on a second one with a somewhat befuddled laborer named Sancho Panza. On his horse, Rocinante, a barn nag well past his prime, Don Quixote rides the roads of Spain in search of glory and grand adventure. He gives up food, shelter, and comfort, all in the name of a pleasant woman, Dulcinea del Toboso, whom he envisions as a princess.

On his second expedition, Don Quixote acts out against what he perceives as threats to his knighthood or to the world. Along the way, the simple Sancho plays the straight man to Don Quixote, trying his best to correct his master's outlandish fantasies. Two of Don Quixote's friends, the priest and the barber, come to drag him home. Believing that he is under the force of an enchantment, he accompanies them, thus ending his second expedition and the First Part of the novel.

In the Second Part of the novel, as the two embark on their journey, Sancho lies to Don Quixote, telling him that an evil enchanter has transformed Dulcinea into a peasant girl. Undoing this enchantment, in which even Sancho comes to believe, becomes Don Quixote's chief goal.

Don Quixote meets a Duke and Duchess who conspire to play tricks on him. Under the watch of the Duke and Duchess, Don Quixote and Sancho undertake several adventures. Finally, Don Quixote sets out again on his journey, but his demise comes quickly. Shortly after his arrival in Barcelona, the Knight of the White Moon—actually an old friend in disguise—vanquishes him.

In the end, the beaten and battered Don Quixote forswears all the chivalric truths he followed so fervently and dies from a fever. With his death, knights-errant become extinct.

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## Commentary

The first part displays features common with the works from the Renaissance: Byzantine novels (numerous adventures, the stories of minor characters are intertwined with that of the main character, allusions to mythology, etc.) and parodies of chivalric romance.

The second part is far more baroque in the sense that it is more pessimistic and introspective. More dialogues and more in-depth portrayals of characters can be also found. The author seems to have started taking really account of the characters and their evolution: Sancho resembles more and more Quixote while Quixote resembles more and more Sancho.

#### 4. *El burlador de Sevilla*, Tirso de Molina

[Extract from the play in Spanish](#)

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**Commentary:** *The Trickster of Seville* is a baroque work *par excellence* for 3 main reasons:

Don Juan is a baroque character, completely outrageous, challenging all authorities, claiming total freedom, fearing neither God nor man.

A constant feature is a tensed duality, for example between profanity and sacredness, between being and seeming.

Finally, the work clearly serves a religious purpose, since friar Tirso wants to show whether immorality, rebellion, recklessness and excessive self-confidence lead.

Through Tirso's version, Don Juan became a universal figure, comparable to Hamlet and Don Quixote. In the 17th century the Don Juan story was incorporated into the repertoire of strolling Italian players who carried the legend to France (Moliere's *Le Festin de Pierre*, 1665). By the 19th century many foreign versions of the Don Juan existed.

Some of these musical and literary works include Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*, produced in 1787, Lord Byron's satiric poem *Don Juan* (1819-24), and George Bernard Shaw's drama *Man and Superman* (performed in 1907), including the 2 well-known third act, "Don Juan in Hell".

#### IV. CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE: two contemporaneous works with two points in common.

Both of them were awarded the Nadal Prize and are good examples of European intertextuality, because *The divine comedy* and Dante's character Beatrice are their first source of inspiration.

##### 1. *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes*, Lucía Etxebarria

***Beatriz and the Heavenly Bodies*** explores the life and loves of Bea, a young Spanish woman. At the beginning of the novel, Bea is 22 years old and returning to her native Madrid after spending 4 years studying in Edinburgh. She leaves behind her loving but needy girlfriend, Cat, and her distant and occasional lover, Ralph. For Bea, returning to Madrid means to get together with her best friend Monica, who she is in love with and who has been involved in some tragic events. This is her chance to find out what happened to Monica and to decide whether to end her relationship with Cat. Monica is highly promiscuous and is sleeping with Coco to guarantee her supply of drugs. Coco and Monica draw Bea into their world, and Bea goes along with all their plans. Soon, things beginning to take a violent turn.

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**Commentary:**

- Novel which contains a symbolism inspired by the *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri, and deals with the evolution of a bisexual feeling in which the author finds herself.
- Feminist and woman-centered elements can be found in a number of Etxebarria's works.
- Work typical of what is called "Generación media" and "Generación X"

## 2. *El Camino de los Ingleses*, Antonio Soler

The novel depicts the life of teenager Miguelito Dávila, who, after suffering from kidney disease and spending some time at the hospital, has learned such classic poetry as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and dreams of leaving his job at a hardware store and pursuing his dream of becoming a poet.

One summer, he hangs out with his childhood friends Babirusa, Paco Frontón and Moratalla, until he meets a girl called Luli, who becomes his Beatriz, and the two start dating. Luli would love to become a professional dancer, and is best friends with "La cuerpo", who fancies Miguelito's posh friend Paco. The two couples spend time together swimming, and gradually they experiment with other distractions. Miguelito meets later an older teacher, who is interested in his talent, and begins an affair with her around the same time that Cardona, an older and apparently richer man, starts courting Luli with the promise of helping her career as a dancer.

[Trailer in Spanish](#)

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### **Commentary: a crude realism**

The characters in *El camino de los Ingleses*, heroes of some Picaresque sort, are stuck in an age between adolescence and adulthood, at a stage where change is permanent, in a difficult time when dreams can never come true and when daily life is always more fraught with uncertainty.

With acuteness and irony Antonio Soler depicts what makes their world: first romances, sex, conflicts, disconcertedness, and friendship. Such are indeed the settings of the play of their existence as a group of friends who, torn between adolescence and adulthood, struggle in a fight between innocence and maturity and who, dreaming of a chimeric future, attempt to elude vagrancy and insipidity.