

3 Unheard Voices in the Birth of the Novel



Stepping in

1 Power comes from being seen and heard, but, throughout history, women have been silenced and pushed to the margins, excluded from controlling the narrative. Consider the birth of the novel and answer the following questions.

1. Can you name any women novelists who were writing at the same time as Defoe and Swift?
2. What does this information suggest to you about women's role in literary history?
3. Imagine you lived during the time of Defoe and Swift and had a story to tell. What challenges do you think you might face as a woman trying to share your voice?

Digging

Aphra Behn (1640-1689) was a 17th-century writer. She was the author of 19 plays, 13 novels, and numerous letters, translations, and poems. She was the first woman in England to make a living from writing and became a key figure in Restoration drama. Behn was also an advocate for women's rights, especially their freedom to choose marriage on their own terms. Despite her success, she faced criticism for being a woman writer and for her bold use of language.



↑ Aphra Behn (ca. 1670), oil on canvas, New Haven, The Yale Centre for British Art at Yale University.

WRITING Lab

2 Imagine Aphra Behn's novels and ideas were placed in a time capsule to be discovered centuries later. Your task is to curate the contents of this time capsule by researching Behn's work and then creating a time capsule record.

STEP 1: Research Aphra Behn's work

- Find the titles of her most famous novels.
- Identify key themes and topics she explored in her writing;
- Understand the historical and social context in which she wrote;
- Reflect on the significance of her work as a trailblazing woman novelist in the 17th century.

STEP 2: Create a time capsule record

Include the following:

- *Letter to the Future*: Write a short letter (100–150 words) explaining why Aphra Behn's work deserves to be remembered. What makes her contribution to literature timeless?
- *Artifact Descriptions*: Choose three "artifacts" that represent key aspects of her work (e.g., a novel title, a theme like freedom, a historical event) and write a brief explanation (2–3 sentences each) of why they belong in the time capsule.

