

LECTURE 14. The main trends in the English literature of the period.

Periods in the English literature of the 20th century

Plan: 20th Century English Literature Characteristics

Realism and Decadence.

The development of the socialist ideas in England and their influence on the literature.

Scientific fiction. Herbert Wales, Agatha Christie, R. Kipling, O. Wilde, B. Shaw.

Twentieth century British literature marks the advent of new ways of looking at the world with comprehending, interacting and reconstructing literary sensibility. Modernistic point of view along with elements like experimentation and individualism were introduced in it. Focus on pluralism, quest for the self, lack of faith, fragmentation, alienation and much more found its reconstructed ways into its gamut. It is also called as modern literature and is reflective of the political upheavals, social unrest, and domestic crisis in addition to racial discrimination, political protests, the Gay Rights movement, the Feminist movement and so on. Significant contribution has been made in the field of novel, drama and poetry. A lot of scope is given to man's psychological problems and the concept of consciousness in relation to time. The approach that the modern literature adopts is realistic as opposed to the idealistic. Almost everything from within the human nature is embraced within its vast confines. There is also a faithful rendering of the modern society devoid of common values and virtues, and gripped by elements of disappointment, dejection, depression, disillusionment, disease and death. The writers of this period revolted against the existing order and reacted against existing pretensions. They opted for a more intense, more democratic and pluralistic mode of expression.

Poetry in the early 20th cent. was typified by the conventional romanticism of such poets as John Masefield, Alfred Noyes, and Walter de la Mare and by the experiments of the imagists, notably Hilda Doolittle (H. D.), Richard Aldington, Herbert Read, and D. H. Lawrence. The finest poet of the period was Yeats, whose poetry fused romantic vision with contemporary political and aesthetic concerns. Though the 19th-century tradition of the novel lived on in the work of Arnold Bennett, William Henry Hudson, and John Galsworthy, new writers like Henry James, H. G. Wells, and Joseph Conrad expressed the skepticism and alienation that were to become features of post-Victorian sensibility.

World War I shook England to the core. As social mores were shaken, so too were artistic conventions. The work of war poets like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, the latter killed in the war (as were Rupert Brooke and Isaac Rosenberg), was particularly influential. Ford Madox Ford's landmark tetralogy, *Parade's End*, is perhaps the finest depiction of the war and its effects. The new era called for new forms, typified by the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, first

published in 1918, and of T. S. Eliot, whose long poem *The Waste Land* (1922) was a watershed in both American and English literary history. Its difficulty, formal invention, and bleak antiromanticism were to influence poets for decades.

Equally important was the novel *Ulysses*, also published in 1922, by the expatriate Irishman James Joyce. Although his books were controversial because of their freedom of language and content, Joyce's revolutions in narrative form, the treatment of time, and nearly all other techniques of the novel made him a master to be studied, but only intermittently copied. Though more conventional in form, the novels of D. H. Lawrence were equally challenging to convention; he was the first to champion both the primitive and the supercivilized urges of men and women.

Sensitivity and psychological subtlety mark the superb novels of Virginia Woolf, who, like Dorothy Richardson, experimented with the interior forms of narration. Woolf was the center of the brilliant Bloomsbury group, which included the novelist E. M. Forster, the biographer Lytton Strachey, and many important English intellectuals of the early 20th cent. Aldous Huxley and Evelyn Waugh satirized the group and the period, while Katharine Mansfield and Elizabeth Bowen captured their flavor in fiction.

Moved by the Great Depression, the rise of fascism, and English policies of appeasement, many writers and intellectuals sought solutions in the politics of the left—or the right. Wyndham Lewis satirized what he thought was the total dissolution of culture in *Apes of Gods* (1930). George Orwell fought with the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. The experience left him profoundly disillusioned with Communism, a feeling he eloquently expressed in such works as *Animal Farm* (1946) and *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949). The poets W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Stephen Spender, and C. Day Lewis all proclaimed their leftist respective political commitments, but the pressing demands of World War II superseded these long-term ideals.

The year 1922 marked a significant change in the relationship between Great Britain and Ireland, with the setting up of the Irish Free State in the predominantly Catholic South, while the predominantly Protestant Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom. This separation also leads to questions as to what extent Irish writing prior to 1922 should be treated as a colonial literature. There are also those who question whether the literature of Northern Ireland is Irish or British. Nationalist movements in Britain, especially in Wales and Scotland, also significantly influenced writers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The transformation of the British Empire into a Commonwealth of Nations has given rise to the concept of British and Commonwealth literature used for literary prizes such as the Booker Prize. Questions of identity have been raised, notably in 1994 when James Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late* became the first (and only, as of 2012) Scottish novel to win the Booker Prize. Simon Jenkins, a columnist for *The Times*, called the award "literary vandalism." In his acceptance speech, Kelman

countered the criticism and decried its basis as suspect, making the case for the culture and language of "indigenous" people outside of London. "...the gist of the argument amounts to the following, that vernaculars, patois, slangs, dialects, gutter-languages etc. might well have a place in the realms of comedy (and the frequent references to Billy Connolly or Rab C. Nesbitt substantiate this) but they are inferior linguistic forms and have no place in literature. And a priori any writer who engages in the use of such so-called language is not really engaged in literature at all."

Irish poetry and prose has redefined itself against British literature, and moves to political independence in Scotland are leading to a redefinition of the relationship between English literature and other literatures that have historically been defined in association with it.

By the end of the twentieth century further political devolution had taken place in the UK, and both Scotland and Wales now have their own parliaments, together with more control over their internal matters, though far from full independence.

Modernism and cultural revivals: 1901–1945

The first section of Wyndham Lewis' Manifesto, *Blast 1*, 1914

From around 1910 the Modernist movement began to influence British literature. While their Victorian predecessors had usually been happy to cater to mainstream middle-class taste, 20th-century writers often felt alienated from it, so responded by writing more intellectually challenging works or by pushing the boundaries of acceptable content.

Vorticism was a short-lived modernist movement in British art and poetry of the early 20th century,^[239] based in London but international in make-up and ambition. The movement was announced in 1914 in the first issue of *BLAST*, which contained its manifesto. It was co-founded and edited by Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957), the English painter and author. His novels include *Tarr* (1918) and the trilogy *The Human Age* (1928 and 1955) set in the afterworld.

In the late 19th century and early 20th century, Welsh literature began to reflect the way the Welsh language was increasingly becoming a political symbol. Two important literary nationalists were Saunders Lewis (1893–1985) and Kate Roberts (1891–1985), both of whom began publishing in the 1920s. Saunders Lewis was above all a dramatist. His earliest published play was *Blodeuwedd* (The woman of flowers) (1923–25, revised 1948). Other notable plays include *Buchedd Garmon* (The life of Germanus) (radio play, 1936) and several others after the war. Lewis also published two novels, *Monica* (1930) and *Merch Gwern Hywel* (The daughter of Gwern Hywel) (1964) and two collections of poems. In addition he was a historian, literary critic, and a founder of the Welsh National Party in 1925 (later known as Plaid Cymru). Kate Roberts' first volume of short stories, *O gors y bryniau* ("From the

swamp of the hills"), appeared in 1925 but perhaps her most successful book of short stories is *Te yn y grug* ("Tea in the heather") (1959), a series of stories about children. As well as short stories Roberts also wrote novels, perhaps her most famous being *Traed mewn cyffion* ("Feet in chains") (1936) which reflected the hard life of a slate quarrying family. Kate Roberts' and Saunders Lewis's careers continued after World War II and they both were among the foremost Welsh-language authors of the twentieth century.

Two Victorian poets who published little in the 19th century, Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) and Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89), have since come to be regarded as major poets. While Hardy first established his reputation the late 19th century with novels, he also wrote poetry throughout his career. However he did not publish his first collection until 1898, so that he tends to be treated as a 20th-century poet. Hardy lived well into the third decade of the twentieth century, an important transitional figure between the Victorian era and the 20th century, but because of the adverse criticism of his last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, in 1895, from that time Hardy concentrated on publishing poetry.^[240] Gerard Manley Hopkins's *Poems* were posthumously published in 1918 by Robert Bridges (1844–1930, Poet Laureate from 1913). Hopkins' poem "The Wreck of the Deutschland", written in 1875, first introduced what Hopkins called "sprung rhythm."^[241] As well as developing new rhythmic effects, Hopkins "was also very interested in ways of rejuvenating poetic language" and frequently "employed compound and unusual word combinations".^[242] Several twentieth-century poets, including W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, and American Charles Wright, "turned to his work for its inventiveness and rich aural patterning".^[242]

Free verse and other stylistic innovations came to the forefront in this era, with which T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were especially associated. T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) was born American, migrated to England in 1914, at the age of 25, and was naturalised as a British subject in 1927 at the age of 39. He was "arguably the most important English-language poet of the 20th century." He produced some of the best-known poems in the English language, including "The Waste Land" (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1935–1942).^[244] He is also known for his seven plays, particularly *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935). He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948. Eliot's friend Ezra Pound (1885–1972), an American expatriate, made important contributions of British literature during his residence in London. He was responsible for the publication in 1915 of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", but more important was the major editing that he did on the "The Waste Land".

The Georgian poets like Rupert Brooke, Walter de la Mare (1873–1956), John Masefield (1878–1967, Poet Laureate from 1930) maintained a more conservative approach to poetry by combining romanticism, sentimentality and hedonism,

sandwiched as they were between the Victorian era, with its strict classicism, and Modernism, with its strident rejection of pure aestheticism. Edward Thomas (1878–1917) is sometimes treated as another Georgian poet.^[247]

A duality of character in the literature of Scotland came to be characterised as Caledonian Antisyzygy—a self-imposed critical discourse about how to forge a model of homogeneous national Scottish culture out of a heterogeneous patchwork of language communities and national loyalties.^[248] In the early 20th century in Scotland, a renaissance in the use of Lowland Scots occurred, its most vocal figure being Hugh MacDiarmid whose *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), is widely regarded as one of the most important long poems in 20th-century Scottish literature. Other contemporaries were Douglas Young, Sydney Goodsir Smith, Robert Garioch and Robert McLellan. The revival produced verse and other literature, including the plays for which Robert McLellan is best known

James Pittendrigh Macgillivray (1856–1938) and Lewis Spence (1874–1955) looked back to what they regarded as a Golden Age of Middle Scots literature, partly as a political gesture to revive the style that prevailed when Scotland was a sovereign nation under the Stuarts. Such experimentation with archaising language for poetic effect did not found a new direction for literature in Scots, but their willingness to play with Mediaeval poetic language had an influence by stimulating debate and stimulating new ways of experimenting with Scots as a literary language.

A somewhat diminished tradition of vernacular Ulster Scots poetry survived into the 20th century in the work of poets such as Adam Lynn, author of the 1911 collection *Random Rhymes frae Cullybackey*, John Stevenson (died 1932), writing as "Pat M'Carty", and John Clifford (1900–1983) from East Antrim.

With the revival of Cornish there have been newer works written in the language. In the first half of the 20th century poetry was the focus of literary production in Cornish. The epic poem *Trystan hag Isolt* by A. S. D. Smith (1883–1950) reworked the Tristan and Iseult legend. Peggy Pollard's 1941 play *Beunans Alysaryn* was modelled on the 16th-century saints' plays. John Hobson Matthews wrote several poems, such as the patriotic "Can Wlascar Agam Mamvro" ("Patriotic Song of our Motherland"). Robert Morton Nance (1873–1959) created a body of verse, such as "Nyns yu Marow Myghtern Arthur" ("King Arthur is not Dead").

In the 1930s the Auden Group, sometimes called simply the *Thirties poets*, was an important group of politically left-wing writers, that included W. H. Auden (1907–73), Louis MacNeice (1907–63), Cecil Day-Lewis (1904–72, Poet Laureate from 1968), and Stephen Spender (1909–95). Auden was a major poet who had a similar influence on subsequent poets as W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot had had on earlier generations.^[253] Others associated with this group were novelist and playwright Christopher Isherwood (1904–86), and sometimes, novelist Edward Upward (1903–2009), and poet and novelist Rex Warner (1905–86).

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