

Introducció a la literatura anglesa

Andrew Monnickendam (coordinador)

Joan Curbet Soler

Felicity Hand

Sara Martín Alegre

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Material docent de la UOC



Universitat Oberta
de Catalunya

www.uoc.edu

**Andrew Monnickendam**

Professor titular de Literatura Anglesa a la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

**Joan Curbet Soler**

Màster en Literatura Anglesa per la University of Leeds el 1993 i doctor en Filologia Anglesa per la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona el 1996. Fa classes a la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona i publica i fa recerca sobre literatura anglesa. Els seus camps de recerca són el Renaixement anglès i les interrelacions entre poesia, filosofia i religió europees des de l'edat mitjana fins a la Il·lustració.

**Felicity Hand**

Professora d'Estudis Culturals i Postcolonials Britànics a la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

**Sara Martín Alegre**

Professora del Departament de Filologia Anglesa de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona des de 1991. El 1996 es va doctorar per aquest departament en Literatura Anglesa. Els seus camps de recerca són les ficcions populars, la literatura contemporània, el gòtic, el cinema i la literatura.

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Introduction

As general editor, I would like to set out the aims, objectives and content of this course. In preparing *Introduction to English Literature* the authors faced two major problems: What material should they include? How should it be presented?

This course has been written by four specialists in literature in English who are actively involved in teaching the subject. The difficulties of trying to compress an enormous amount of literature into a meaningful teaching course are compounded by problems of focus: Where should we begin? Where should each module conclude? Which literary genres should it include, or possibly exclude?

The authors decided that this course should provide its readers with an overview of English literature, starting at the Renaissance and concluding in 1990. This might initially seem an impossible task, but we felt that, as most of our prospective students would be taking a general humanities or Catalan Philology degree, to concentrate on just one area might produce a more in-depth knowledge of that particular area, but only at the expense of excluding other, equally important areas, which was something we believed would not be consistent with the aims of a degrees.

In this introductory course, therefore, rather than having to face the dilemma of whether to concentrate solely on the Renaissance or the nineteenth century or contemporary writing, we have included them all. If this leaves some readers dissatisfied, we hope that using the bibliography and other indications we have given, they will be encouraged to continue their study of English literature beyond the narrow limits of this course. This would be a major achievement. At the same time, we believe that the study of literature must engage students in considering the parameters of the society in which we live. Accordingly, we have dedicated three of the five modules to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The course is divided into five modules with the following titles: The Renaissance, The Restoration and the Augustan Era, Romanticism and the Nineteenth Century, Late Nineteenth Century to 1945, and Post-War English Literature 1945-1990.

Each module is divided into several sections, and begins with a brief historical account which will serve to contextualise the literature we shall be discussing. After each section you will find one or two exercises, which you are encouraged to answer. Although these exercises require close and attentive reading, you should try, in formulating your answers, to express

and communicate to the consultor your own thoughts and opinions. It is the combination of attentive reading, coherent reasoning and an exchange of views with the consultor which we believe to be the most solid foundation on which to build up the skills necessary for academic achievement. It is during this process of communication, rather than during an exam, that students should articulate their opinions, doubts and questions.

We have also supplied information on a limited number of books, articles and web-sites which should be consulted. There are so many publications on English literature that what we have provided represents only the tiniest selection. It is highly probable, therefore, that many major books with which you are familiar do not appear here. This should not be seen as a sign of preference on our part, but simply as the inevitable result of having to choose from a thousand titles on one particular subject.

Literary studies has undergone a profound renovation in the last twenty years. It is obvious that the nature of these changes cannot be adequately discussed here, but, realising their importance, we cannot ignore them, nor is it desirable to do so if we believe our task to be a meaningful one, especially as what has been challenged is the very essence of literature and the way it is taught.

When we study a particular literature, we study a selection of texts, which is referred to as the canon. Although the English literary canon has been gradually modified, it has remained fairly stable, consisting mostly of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, the great novelists of the nineteenth century, and modernism. Since a canon is selective, there must clearly be a great deal that is not selected, and is therefore excluded or silenced.

During the past twenty years, the whole question of the canon has been fervently debated and it is now generally accepted that the English literary canon excluded, to varying degrees, women's literature, many genres, and the literature of other places, in particular the ex-colonies of the British Empire.

The other major revolution in literary studies has been the growing importance of critical theory, which has adapted and adopted a whole host of influences from other disciplines, such as feminism, psychoanalysis, Marxism and post-Marxism, linguistics, historiography, philosophy, and so on: literature has become a highly eclectic discipline.

As authors, we therefore face a dilemma: given the importance of theory in modern literary studies, we cannot exclude it; given the obvious limitations of space, we cannot include it. Therefore, we have decided to adopt a position which will enable the student to obtain an overall view of English literature but which, at the same time, will hopefully motivate students to go more deeply into the issues that these literary texts have suggested to them.

Objectives

In studying this *Introduction to English Literature*, students will:

1. Have a detailed description of all the major genres of English literature from the Renaissance down to 1990.
2. Learn to situate the literary texts analysed in this course in their cultural, social and historical context in order to see how literature interacts with society.
3. Learn to formulate their own opinions in their answers to the exercises in a meaningful way, without feeling obliged to supply the "right" answer.
4. Be encouraged to continue the study of English Literature using the bibliography and other indications given in this course.

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Joan Curbet Soler

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3. The Metaphysical Poets
4. The Poetry of John Milton (1608-1674)
5. The development of drama, from Shakespeare to the Restoration

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Joan Curbet Soler

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3. Augustan prose (1710-1730): Defoe and Swift
4. The evolution of the novel: Richardson and Fielding
5. Further developments in novel and drama (1750-1780)

Module 3

Romanticism and the Nineteenth Century

Andrew Monnickendam

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3. From Romanticism to the Victorian Age
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Felicity Hand

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Module 5

Post-War English Literature 1945-1990

Sara Martín Alegre

1. Literature 1945-1990: cultural context
2. The English Novel 1945-1990
3. Drama in England 1945-1990
4. English Poetry 1945-1990

Bibliography

1) Many of the **texts** discussed in *Introduction to English Literature*, especially the novels of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are available in cheap paperback editions. The major publishers are Penguin, Oxford and Wordsworth.

2) There are numerous **anthologies** of literary texts, such as *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*: volume 1 covers the period from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, and volume 2 covers the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The publisher Blackwell has produced some more specialised anthologies based on more modern selection criteria, of which six have been published so far.

3) There are many series of **literary handbooks**. Cambridge University Press has published a series of "Companions", which are particularly good on the area of the Renaissance.

4) A reliable, traditional **history of English literature** is that published by Penguin books in seven volumes, starting with Chaucer and concluding with the modern age. A more modern alternative is the Routledge *The Literary History of England* (in four volumes); Routledge also publishes a one-volume *A Short History of English Literature* by Harry Blamires.

5) Literary studies has developed its own **specialised language**, which can, at times, confuse readers. To overcome this problem, a useful reference book such as Martin Gray's *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* is recommended. Routledge publishes a series entitled "The New Critical Idiom", which discusses literary polemics in a concise, straightforward manner. Among the volumes published are *Metre, Rhythm and Verse* by Philip Hobsbaum and *Romanticism* by Aidan Day.

6) Internet users are fully aware that the number of sites is increasing rapidly, and that information gathered one day may indicate a source no longer available the next. We would simply advise students to use reliable search tools such as <http://www.yahoo.com/Arts/Humanities/Literature>, where you can search by theme, or <http://www.altavista.com/>, where you can track down information by reference to specific names or topics.

The Renaissance

Joan Curbet Soler

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Introduction

The English Renaissance: historical context

The English Renaissance came to its apogee in the second part of the sixteenth century, when the Catholic countries of the Continent were entering their Baroque periods. English culture, however, was still adapting the European models of Renaissance idealism and humanism under the reign of the "Virgin Queen", **Elizabeth I** (1558-1603). Her father, **Henry VIII**, who had been responsible for the religious separation from Rome, had actively furthered the development of Italianist influences and of humanism within his court, but it was in the Elizabethan period that these trends found their full expression.

After the attempt to restore Catholicism brought about by **Mary Tudor**, Elizabeth became the head of the Church of England, just as her father had been. All through her reign she managed to maintain a delicate balance between the different factions of the Anglican Church, which was doctrinally quite flexible and allowed different theological approaches to coexist within it.

In the domain of international politics, Elizabeth tended to favour the Protestant minorities that fought against their Catholic rulers, both in France and in the Low Countries. Partly as a consequence of this, the relationship with Spain quickly turned to enmity. Felipe II responded to the repeated English attacks on his navy with an attempt to conquer England, which ended with the destruction of the Invincible Armada in 1588 at the hands of the English Navy.

The reasons for this war were not only religious, of course: the main bone of contention was the growing domination of the Atlantic Ocean by the British in their exploration and exploitation of the colonies. These were the years of the early development of the **British Empire**, which was carried out by private trading companies: the Russia Company (1600), the India Company (1600) and then the Virginia Company (1606).

The general prosperity of the period, in economic terms, was capitalised on by the middle classes, the bourgeoisie and private investors, many of whom backed the great colonial enterprises. The level of education was high, thanks in part to the work of the **grammar schools**, where students from the middle classes were able to get a solid classical education. In spite of this, illiteracy increased, due to the hard living conditions for the poorer sections of the population, while the Crown actually supported the tradesmen and conferred titles on the wealthiest among them.

At the beginning of the following century, these tendencies were counterbalanced by the aristocratic tastes of the Stuart kings, **James I** (1603-1628) and **Charles I** (1628-1649). The Church of England remained under the control of the Crown, but the Stuarts were a dynasty of Catholic origin and had strongly opposed the Tudors. The Jacobean court was very ritualistic and solemn; it favoured the old nobility against the interests of Parliament, which were also those of the great tradesmen. Under James I, and later on under Charles I, Parliament became a merely consultative body and was called for the last time in 1628. From that year until 1640, Charles tried to establish his authority as an absolute monarch.

A direct consequence of the tensions between the king and the dominant commercial groups (which were also in alliance with radical Protestant sects) was the **Civil War**, which began in 1642. It lasted until 1652, though the monarchy suffered its most spectacular defeats in 1649 at the hands of the New Model Army led by **Oliver Cromwell**. It was in that year that Charles I was beheaded; symbolically, the regicide was indicative of the extreme conviction of the revolutionaries.

In 1653 **Parliament** was reinstated, with full legislative authority, under the supervision of Oliver Cromwell. Now England was officially a **Republic**, and the Church of England, traditionally moderate in its doctrinal positions, became more open to the many sects and religious groups which had given support to the revolution.

The demands of these groups and the pressure they exerted on Parliament, however, soon made the new situation very difficult to control (there was, moreover, an impressive proliferation of religious and political literature, in very different ideological directions). In practice, it became impossible to satisfy many of the groups that had overthrown the king. The only way to guarantee stability and the predominance of England was to establish a new consensus that would lead to the **return of the monarchy**, though under new conditions which would prevent any absolutist tendency. The consequence of the revolution, in practical terms, was that the **middle classes** came to dominate the political scene: this was an irreversible fact, which was to become even more pronounced during the following century, even in the field of literature.

In 1660 there was again a Stuart king in Britain: the **Restoration** had begun, with the return of the alliance between the Crown and the legislative institutions. In terms of culture, this meant a return to the classical tastes of the early Stuarts. In terms of political organization, however, Parliament retained legislative power. The attempts of **Charles II**, and later on of his heir, **James II**, to distance themselves from Parliament and restore some Catholic

Recommended Reading

Dubrow, H.; Strier, R. (1988). *The Historical Renaissance*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

positions in England were brought to an end with their destitution in 1688. The end of this century, and the whole of the next, were to witness an expansion and consolidation of **democracy** in England.

Objectives

In studying this module, students will:

1. Learn to relate the poetry and drama of the English Renaissance to the political and cultural conditions of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
2. Make a first, selective reading of the poetry and drama of this period.
3. Learn to situate the work of William Shakespeare in its social and cultural context.
4. Gain insight into the concept of *metaphysical poetry* and the significance of this particular poetic tendency.
5. Learn to appreciate the ideological and aesthetic importance of John Milton's poetry within English literature.

1. Culture and Poetry in the Elizabethan Court(1579-1603)

From the beginning of her reign in 1558, Queen Elizabeth's capacity as ruler and head of state had to be defended not only against anti-Tudor groups, but also against some radical Protestant sectors that questioned her capacity on the grounds of her sex.

Poetry in the Elizabethan Court: chronology

1558 Elizabeth I accedes to the throne
 1579 Edmund Spenser, *The Shepheardes Calender*
 1589 Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Books I-II
 1591 Sir Philip Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella* (posthumous)
 1593 Michael Drayton, *Idea*
 1594 Michael Drayton, *Idea's Mirrour*
 1595 Edmund Spenser, *Amoretti/Epithalamion*
 1595 Philip Sidney, *Defence of Poetry* (posthumous)
 1602 Samuel Daniel, *A Defence of Rhyme*
 1603 Death of Elizabeth I



Queen Elizabeth was highly admired by the English, both for her gifts as a stateswoman and for her culture and intelligence.
 Oil on canvas (detail), by Ranelegh Barret after an original of Robert Peake, 18th century (private collection).

Even figures such as the Scots reformer **John Knox**, who might have been expected to favour her Protestant rule against Catholic factions, wrote of the impossibility of justifying the position of a woman as head of state. In support of his views he invoked not only the Bible, but also the authority of the classics, who, he felt, would have been scandalized if they had seen "the whole world transformed into Amazonia" (the land of the Amazons or woman warriors).

Elizabeth's reaction to the initial resistance to her rule was to foster a symbolic projection of herself that was based on the argument of exceptionality promoted by the moderate Protestants who had supported the rule of her father, Henry VIII. From early on she played on her image as an extraordinary being, a divinely ordained exception, at once female and more than female, capable of being fully male whenever the occasion required.

In all military matters, she tended to assume this masculine persona from the beginning, even to the extent of wearing masculine clothing, as in her speech to the English troops gathered at Tilbury before their naval confrontation with the Spanish Armada (in 1588), when she appeared carrying a truncheon and wearing a silver cuirass. On that occasion, as on many others afterwards, she deliberately violated gender conventions so as to play on the image initially

John Knox (1514-1572)

Protestant minister, founder of the Presbyterian Church, which has no hierarchies and is totally democratic. According to Calvinist doctrine, the Church is a single body, whose only head is Christ and whose members are all equal.

foisted on her by adversaries such as Knox himself: the image of the Amazon or woman warrior, who remains female even as she assumes a pose even more aggressive than that of a male soldier.

Elizabeth's image of uniqueness, deliberately assumed and manipulated, allowed her to use a series of symbolic identities that, while underlining the singularity of her situation, guaranteed her full control over the political contexts in which she operated.

Depending on the necessities of the moment, she could appear as the Amazon Queen, as Astraea or, once past childbearing age, as the Phoenix –also devoid of sexual identification.

This emphasis on her femininity at court was directly proportional to her assumed masculinity as a military leader. The conflation of the two roles, or their separate representation in public pageantry and in courtly scenifications and homages, were part of a complex mechanism of self-promotion that, in every case, underlined Elizabeth's personal control and authority in all the contexts of her rule.

One effect of this strategy was the proliferation, during the latter decades of Elizabeth's reign, of public and private scenifications and shows in honour of the Queen, which were to lead to the revival of a medievalising courtly environment, with the absolute ruler at its centre. Elizabeth thus came to be the centre of a complex environment composed of many different factions, which, while recognizing her as absolute ruler, would try to use these public ceremonies and celebrations to further their interests and expand their sphere of influence.

The cultivation of personal relationships between courtiers and Queen was an essential part of this medievalising environment, and she encouraged it. If this close contact offered good opportunities to the different factions around royalty, it also gave the female ruler an excellent means of exercising direct control over her subjects.

The **work of the courtier-poets**, who lived and worked in direct contact with the Queen, must be understood as being part of that enormous performance. It shares in the ideological structures of the regime, sometimes as an attempt to modify it, sometimes as an attempt to preserve it.

Queen Elizabeth

Queen Elizabeth would tend to assume other symbolic or idealised identities that were far more gendered, and much more feminine: in the environment of the court and its daily activity, where much depended on her direct, personal control of the activities of the noblemen and those around her, she would appear as Cynthia or Sylvia, as Eliza the Shepherdess, or as Titania or Gloriana the Faery Queen, the role attributed to her in Spenser's extensive allegorical poem.

1.1. Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586)

Foremost among the group is the figure of Sir Philip Sidney. He moved in the circle of the Puritan Earl of Leicester, who was on relatively good terms with the Queen –even though she was always careful to keep him at a distance– and the radical Protestant group surrounding him.

Sidney worked, both as a soldier and as a diplomat, to further the alliance with the great Protestant countries of Europe: his Calvinist allegiance led him in 1579 to openly oppose the Queen's plan to marry a prince from the Catholic powers (Henri d'Alencon, the Duke of Anjou). The marriage never took place, and it is even possible that Elizabeth herself never seriously considered it. Yet her response to Sidney's open objection was a refusal to grant him any kind of official appointment. In practice, this implied an exile from court; the poet was forced to retire from the court, and abandon any ambition to further his position or status.

1.1.1. Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*

It is against the background of all this conflict at court, and specifically of the poet's self-imposed exile in 1582, that Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* (published in 1591) was composed.

This work is an important event, for it signals the adaptation into English not of the sonnet form as such (which had been in circulation since the reign of Henry VIII), but of an entire narrative structure for the sonnet sequence, following the model of Petrarch.

Petrarchism always tends to absolute idealisation, turning the female beloved into an angelic figure, and describing love as an individual feeling, presented only from the perspective of an isolated male speaker.

Yet, in the case of Sidney's poems, there is no mistaking the distinctly courtly environment that the poems depict as the context for the story of Astrophel's love. Here, love is seen not only as an inner, subjective phenomenon –although this is certainly one of the themes of the collection– but also as a social phenomenon that is determined and conditioned, in its development if not in its birth, by the environment in which it occurs.

Astrophel, the speaker, loves a married woman; and the main reason for the impossibility of their union is the marital status and responsibilities of the female character, Stella. In an extremely bold move, Sidney reproduces the very words of this female character in the poems, allowing her to speak and



Sir Philip Sidney. Portrait by an unknown artist, 17th century (London, National Portrait Gallery).

Sir Philip Sidney

Sir Philip Sidney was seen by his contemporaries as the perfect image of the courtier-poet.

even, on one occasion, admit to the fact that "honour" prevents her from acquiescing to the desires of her admirer. This is the first clearly female voice to be heard in the history of English Renaissance poetry.

As a result of these social pressures, Astrophel's situation remains fundamentally Petrarchan, at least as far as his subjectivity is concerned: he is forced to love in silence and in isolation, while his beloved remains out of reach, far above him (even in social terms). The solitude of the lover allows him to idealise Stella, to see her as a model of virtue, and her beauty (she is a blonde, dark-eyed, elegant lady, as befits the Renaissance canons of beauty) as a manifestation of her inner worth and spiritual superiority. Yet Sidney manages to introduce another interesting and realistic element into this idealism: at the end of several of the sonnets, and often in the final couplet, the speaker reveals his physical desire for the lady, admitting also the strength of sexuality in his love.

Stella may appear as a "goddess", as a living example of virtue (in Neo-Platonic terms), yet, in the end, the speaker also acknowledges the importance of her purely physical presence, of her body and the kisses he desires:

"Then since (dear life) you fain would have me peace,
And I, mad with delight, want wit to cease,
Stop you my mouth with still still kissing me." (81: 12-14)

Sir Philip Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*.

Because of its adaptation of Petrarchism and also because of its innovative nature, *Astrophel and Stella* is one of the most important collections of poetry of its time.

Activity

1.1. Read sonnet V from *Astrophel and Stella* by Sir Philip Sidney and write a commentary, using the questions below as a guide.

"It is most true, that eyes are formed to serve
The inward light, and that the heavenly part
Ought to be king, from whose rules who do swerve,
Rebels to nature, strive for their own smart.
It is most true, what we call Cupid's dart
An image is, which for ourselves we carve,
And, fools, adore in temple of our heart,
Till that good god make church and churchman starve;
True, that true beauty virtue is indeed,
Whereof this beauty can be but a shade,
Which elements with mortal mixture breed;
True, that on earth we are but pilgrims made,
And should in soul up to our country move;
True, and yet true that I must Stella love."

- How do you interpret the first stanza of this poem? What is the conflict that is being delineated here? And what is the meaning of the expression "the inward light" (line 2)?
- What is the significance of Sidney's use of the topic of the "religion of love" in the second and third stanzas?
- What is the role of the final couplet in this sonnet, and to what extent is it representative of the English sonnet form?

1.1.2. Sidney's *Defence of Poetry*

Sidney must also be remembered as the author of the *Defence of Poetry* (composed in 1579-80), which argues for the validity of secular, humanistic writing in an effort to reconcile this tradition with Christian morality.

The educational programme of the *Defence* is generally based on classical concepts, continually revealing the influence of Renaissance humanism on the author's thought. For instance, it defines the poet's main gift in Platonic fashion as the capacity to create images through the use of mere words:

"Poesy therefore is an art of imitation... a representing, counterfeiting, and figuring forth to speak metaphorically. A speaking picture, with this end to teach and delight."

Sir Philip Sidney, *Defence of Poetry*.

It is precisely this capacity to embody abstract concepts in images that distinguishes the poet from the philosopher:

"Whatsoever the philosopher saith should be done, he gives a perfect picture of it in someone by whom he presupposeth it was done, so as he coupleth the general notion with the particular example."

Sir Philip Sidney, *Defence of Poetry*.

One of the figures of speech that is most praised by Sidney in his discussion of poetry is *prosopopoeia*, the attribution of human characteristics to non-human entities. Sidney sees the poet as a maker and a teacher, who is able to use his "speaking pictures" "not only to make a Cyrus, which had been but a particular excellency, but to bestow a Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyruses".

The *Defence* was very important in its own time: it was the first sustained attempt to justify the composition of secular poetry, in its many variants, in a Protestant state. And it prepared the ground for the writing of the great Protestant epic, which, as it turned out, was to be composed not by Sidney, but by Edmund Spenser.

1.2. Edmund Spenser (1522?-1599)

The poetic output of Edmund Spenser is permeated, from beginning to end, by the influence and imagery of the court. Elizabeth herself, in the shape of Gloriana or Belphebe, is at the centre of *The Faerie Queene*, probably the most complex and successful work of propaganda for the regime (and also the greatest allegorical poem in English). That this should be the case in the work of an author who spent most of his life far from the court is, in itself, proof of the efficiency of the imagery through which Elizabeth promoted her self-representation.

1.2.1. Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender*

The Shepheardes Calender, published in 1579, is a collection of pastoral eclogues, highly representative of the Italianist and classical fashions current in English poetry at the time. Here the poet can only be a "shepherd" –and of course there are implications of a didactic purpose in this term, as in the whole of the *Calender*– if he is working under the rule of the best of Shepherdesses, to whom his poem –metaphorically seen as a lamb in this next quotation– is an offering:

"Pan may be proud, that ever he begot
Such a Bellibone,
And Syrinx rejoyce, that ever was her lot
To beare such an one.
Soone as my younglings cryen for the dam,
To her will I offer a milkwhite Lamb:
Shee is my goddesse plaine,
And I her shepherds swayne..." (Aprill: 91-98)

Edmund Spenser, *The Shepheardes Calender*.

By presenting the Queen as the offspring of Pan and Syrinx, the poet is insisting on her uniqueness, for she is not only, symbolically, the offspring of the gods, but also "without spotte", that is, virginally pure.

1.2.2. Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*

It was in the years he spent in Ireland that the first two books of *The Faerie Queene* (1589) were planned and composed. Just as Spenser was trying to establish more firmly his position as a gentleman, he was also continuing to integrate the inheritance of Reformed doctrine and Renaissance humanism into the complex structure of his allegory.

The poem is strictly allegorical: its characters are not to be taken as representations of individual human beings, but as embodiments of abstract qualities and ideas, and their adventures are to be seen as exemplifying an educational content.

The tribulations of the Knight of the Red Crosse in the first Book, for instance, retrieve the medieval theme of the quest for personal virtue and improvement. The whole of the book insists on the knight's progress as being the result of personal effort; and since he stands for the Christian soul in search of salvation, it is evident that Spenser allows, in moderate Protestant fashion, for some form of participation by man in his own justification before God.

But it is in his treatment of sexuality that Spenser is most innovative, working towards a reconciliation between the humanist and Protestant perspectives on human love.

Remember

Pan is a divinity belonging to Greek mythology, the god of rural life and a lover of dancing, music, woods and springs.

The **Syrinx** is a wind instrument of the Ancient Greeks, one variant of which is the panpipes.



Frontispiece of one of the first editions of *The Faerie Queene's* Second Book.

The content of *The Faerie Queen*

The content of *The Faerie Queene* is far from being monolithic. Any poem as long and convoluted as this (several hundred pages in any edition) will inevitably contain inconsistencies and inner contradictions; but it would be a mistake to see any such signs of incoherence in the doctrinal basis of the work.

Most of Book III is centered, quite significantly, on the adventures of a female knight named Britomart, who is the very embodiment of chastity. Britomart's quest leads her to an encounter with the knight Artegall, and of their union are born the ancestors of the Faerie Queen, Elizabeth I. In this way Spenser manages to weave the Queen herself into the allegorical fabric of his poem, and to link her person to the Protestant conception of chastity: her virginity makes her, in fact, a contemporary Britomart, and she appears as a constant referent throughout this Book.

The poem as a whole, however, progresses towards a specific vindication of love within marriage. The 1590 edition culminates, in fact, with a description of the erotic encounter between the newly married Amoret and Scudamour, a passage which can be seen as a first formulation –still in a very abstract language– of the theme that Spenser was to explore in detail in his sonnet sequence, the *Amoretti*.

1.2.3. Spenser's *Amoretti*

There is in the *Amoretti* (1595) a reworking of Petrarchan tradition that develops in an entirely new direction; and Spenser, being a committed Protestant but not a radical Puritan, was perhaps the best person to do this.

Amoretti

It contains 88 sonnets and is believed to reflect the course of his love and courtship of Elizabeth Boyle, in celebration of his second marriage in 1594.

The conflict narrated in traditional Petrarchan poetry had its origin in the impossibility of bridging the chasm between a potentially sinful love and religious devotion, both of these being experienced in solitude by a male speaker. Spenser is able to solve this problem by organizing his sequence of poems into a narrative of reciprocal love that is closed and culminated by marriage (in the final poem of the collection, entitled *Epithalamion*).

The Protestant vindication of married life made possible a redemptive re-reading of Petrarchism, including its metaphoric transformation of the female beloved into a saintly figure. The same transformation occurs in the first part of the *Amoretti* ("for my sweet Saint some service will I find..."), but later on in the collection we see that the poet finally legitimates eroticism

Edmund Spenser

The poet thus directly inscribes himself in the chain of production of the symbolic representations of Elizabeth, and finds his own distinguished role as her subject. He did not remain long in court, however: from 1580 he established himself in Ireland, working as a secretary for the English authorities there.



Edmund Spenser
17th century engraving (Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional).

by placing it within the confines of marriage. There are several poems which prepare this by creating a remarkable fusion of religious motives and elements of profane poetry:

"Most glorious Lord of life that on this day,
 Didst make thy triumph upon death and sin [...]
 Grant that we for whom thou diddest dye
 Being with thy deare blood clene washt from sin,
 May live for ever in felicity [...]
 And for thy sake that all lyke deare didst buy,
 With love may one another entertaine.
 So let us love, deare love, lyke as we ought,
 Love is the lesson which the Lord us taught." (68: 1-2, 6-8, 11-14)

Edmund Spenser, *Amoretti*.

Here love itself is seen as being continuous with religious practice and consistent with it; reciprocity itself is justified, in the final couplet, on the basis of Christian doctrine (the context of this sonnet is the celebration of Easter).

Some of Spenser's **final sonnets**, and even some parts of his *Epithalamion*, are more explicitly erotic, thus distancing him further from other Elizabethan sonneteers, and opening the way for the innovative work of John Donne and the metaphysical poets.

1.3. Other sonneteers: Samuel Daniel (1563-1619) and Michael Drayton (1563-1631)

Among the other sonneteers of the period we have to mention **Samuel Daniel**, who, from our perspective, is perhaps more important as a critic than as a practising poet: he was one of the first to advocate a plain, almost colloquial style in his *A Defence of Rhyme* (1602). On the other hand, the intellectual influence of Neo-Platonism, which is also very present in Sidney and Spenser, informs much of the lyrical work of **Michael Drayton**, especially his *Idea's Mirrour* (1594), though in fact Drayton was also well-known as the author of several narrative poems of historical and epic content, such as *Piers Gaveston* (1592), and later on a monumental poem on the geography of England, the *Polyolbion* (1622).

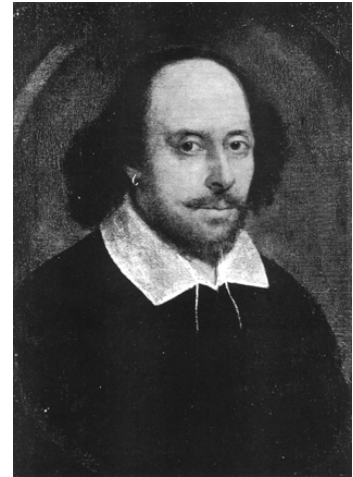
Among the sonneteers who lived and worked at some distance from the court we could also include the most important of all Elizabethan authors: **William Shakespeare**. However, even though his collection of sonnets offers some memorable innovations on the Petrarchan paradigms (introducing a notable tone of scepticism, and an acute awareness of the destructive nature of time), the fact is that Shakespeare's best verse was written to be staged in dramatic form. It is, therefore, to a description of his career as a dramatist (and of the cultural significance of drama under Elizabeth) that we shall now turn.

2. William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

For most of today's visitors, **Stratford-on-Avon** (Shakespeare's birthplace, a small town in Warwickshire) is two different things. First and foremost, it is the place where tourists can pay their respects to the English National Bard, especially in Shakespeare's own house and in that of his wife (Anne Hathaway), which have been partially remodeled as museums. Secondly, it is the centre of operations of the **Royal Shakespeare Company**, the most important dramatic institution in Great Britain.

Selected chronology

1564 Birth of William Shakespeare
 1586 Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great*
 1588 Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*
 1590 Shakespeare starts to work as an actor
 1591-93 *Henry VI*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Comedy of Errors*
 1594-95 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*
 1595-98 *Richard III*, *Henry IV* (2 parts), *Henry V*
 1598-1600 *Much Ado about Nothing*, *The Merchant of Venice*
 1601-05 *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*
 1606 *Antony and Cleopatra*
 1607-10 *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*
 1616 Death of William Shakespeare



W. Shakespeare. Portrait by an unknown artist (London, National Portrait Gallery).

And we could add that it is also a curious shopping centre, where the tourist can find all kinds of objects, souvenirs and memorabilia connected with William Shakespeare and his work. In the mid-sixteenth century, however, when Shakespeare was born there, Stratford was just a small, unimportant town that was only slowly beginning to expand.

William Shakespeare was born in 1564; some forty years, then, after the religious reformation that brought about the schism between England and Rome. Religious life throughout the country had been transformed by that doctrinal change: the monarchy had assumed the highest authority in the new Church of England, and the monastic orders had been totally eradicated. Almost all sacraments had been suppressed –with the exception of baptism and marriage– and most of the population had had some difficulty in accepting these radical changes.

But in terms of social structure there had not been any great changes since the last years of the reign of Henry VIII. Queen Elizabeth I now held absolute power of decision over Parliament; and her circle was composed of a shifting number of courtiers, who included the so-called "gentlemen", a position occupied by the wealthiest tradesmen and, especially, the magistrates and members of the administration.

We have already discussed Elizabeth's court in some detail; for now, let us say that, beyond the already mentioned circles, the most abundant class was, needless to say, the poorest: peasants, workers and servants. The most active social group was still the bourgeoisie, which had developed so much under Henry VIII: an influential middle class, composed mostly of tradesmen and merchants, which in time would come to be the fundamental centre of English society, and whose influence was beginning to be felt in rural areas such as Stratford.

2.1. Some biographical aspects

The glove-maker John Shakespeare, William's father, belonged to the middle class. Little is known about him apart from his trade, his marriage to Mary Arden around 1557, and his links to the Town House of Stratford. According to some scholars, he may have had strong Catholic inclinations, yet, whatever the case, his religion does not seem to have left any serious imprint on his son, in whose work there is no serious discussion of the central matters of faith.

In this sense, Shakespeare's work seems to be genuinely representative of its historical moment, since, after the abolition of Catholicism and the imposition of Protestantism in its Anglican version, a general indifference towards religious matters seems to have spread amongst part of the English population.

As a child, Shakespeare went to his county Grammar School. And even though some years afterwards he would be accused by **Ben Jonson** of knowing little Latin and even less Greek, it is certain that he must have acquired a familiarity with classical languages as a schoolboy. The grammar school pupils had to learn several fragments of Latin and Greek poetry, and were taught to produce their own fragments of Latin verse. It was a very demanding educational system, which was nevertheless available to a great number of children from the emerging middle classes.

There is a notorious lack of information about Shakespeare's early youth. We only know that at the age of eighteen he married Anne Hathaway, who was twenty-six at the time and who gave him a daughter, Susanna, after six months of marriage. In that particular context it was quite usual for a young couple to consummate their union before marriage. In general, they were allowed to cohabit as long as they had confirmed their intention of marrying before two witnesses; the actual marriage would be the later confirmation of the commitment. Yet this seeming freedom was counterbalanced by severe

More information

For more information on Ben Jonson, see section 5.2 of this module.

The parents' right

The parents' right to choose husbands for their daughters is a subject that is discussed in detail in some of Shakespeare's most successful works, such as *Romeo and Juliet*.

restrictions, especially in the case of the eldest daughters of middle-class families, whose husbands were almost invariably chosen by their parents and not by themselves.

2.2. Shakespeare and the theatre

We do not know for certain exactly when Shakespeare's relationship with the theatre began. It is known that he moved to London between 1587 and 1590, where he soon began to work as an actor.

His rise to fame must have been spectacular, for by 1591 he had already staged some of his own works as an author: the trilogy *Henry VI*, the Roman tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, *Richard III*, and even perhaps his first comedies (*The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*). But in that same year all the theatres were closed because of the plague, and they were not to reopen in the whole of the following year: the presence of a mixed audience belonging to all social classes made them a perfect site of contagion.

It is difficult for us, as we are about to enter the twenty-first century, to imagine a situation where theatrical performance was the main form of public entertainment. This was the case, though, in Elizabethan England, although the performances had to take place in circumstances that were far more complex than those we know today.

We have to bear in mind that there were no actresses at that time: female roles were played by young boys, which was obviously a great responsibility, since these roles could be extremely important for the development of the plot (we need only think of characters such as Juliet or Lady Macbeth). Drama was a profitable business, as long as the tastes of the audience (which encompassed lower, middle and upper classes) were satisfied; it is understandable, therefore, that there should have been such fierce competition between the different companies.

This is, then, the context for which Shakespeare writes almost the whole of his dramatic production (with the probable exception of his last two plays, which seem to require some more complex stagecraft, and which seem to fit the taste of the Jacobean court). Most of the impact of each play would depend on its very verbal construction, and on its delivery by the actors. The decasyllabic line (without rhyme) that Shakespeare uses allows both for the incorporation of the rhythms of colloquial language, but also and for a more complex display of rhetoric and figural language. This was also the kind of verse that was being mostly used in drama by the authors who dominated the London scene at the beginning of the decade, among whom it is necessary to point out the figure of **Christopher Marlowe** (1564-1593). If we see him, from our perspective, as Shakespeare's immediate predecessor, Marlowe seems to announce the nihilism and the spiritual doubts that will be the prerogative of some Shakespearian tragic characters. In his greatest tragedies, such as

Theatres in London

At the end of the 16th century there were eight theatres in London, one for every forty thousand inhabitants, a proportion that would be totally inconceivable for us today.

Female roles

Shakespeare often played on the confusion of roles or the costumes of his female characters, played by boy actors. Wearing sumptuous dresses, the boys would act the part of women and even, paradoxically, disguise themselves as men. It is common in Shakespeare's works for female lovers to dress up as men in order to be with their beloved. Obviously, this device was only possible because there were no women actors.

Tamburlaine the Great (1586) or *The Jew of Malta* (1589), Marlowe concentrates on the notion of individual destiny, and of the self-destructive tendencies of those who are truly ambitious. Marlowe's style is often energetic and heavily rhythmic, and his speciality is, above all, the monologue, which allows the central characters to meditate on the uniqueness and the paradoxes of their own fate, thus emphasizing their extreme individuality. Among Marlowe's plays stands *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (1588), where the theme of the Faustian pact with the devil makes its appearance in European literature (it will be taken up, more than two centuries later, by Goethe). But most of the best characteristics of the Marlovian tragedies will be better developed by Shakespeare himself, as we shall immediately see.

2.3. Early plays: *Romeo and Juliet*, a tragedy

In 1594, Shakespeare joined the newly founded **Lord Chamberlain's Company** as an actor and playwright. This company had been formed by **Richard Burbage**, who was beginning to be widely known as a tragic actor. Burbage and his associates wanted Shakespeare as an actor, but above all they wanted him as a purveyor of texts for the stage, which could be a valuable asset in their rivalry with other companies. It was during this period that *Romeo and Juliet* was written and staged for the first time.

Romeo and Juliet has to be acknowledged as one of the most important of Shakespeare's early plays, since it shows a strong awareness both of the limits and of the possibilities of language.

The first encounter between the lovers in the garden of the Capulets is one of the key moments in the whole of the English Renaissance. It is there that Juliet expresses her disappointment with the fact that language should carry such a heavy burden of prejudice and ideology within it, shaping the opinions and feelings of whoever uses it. Against this, she wishes for a complete linguistic innocence, so as to be able to love Romeo without being influenced by the weight of names:



The Elizabethan theatre The Swan. Sketch by J. de Witt, c. 1597 (London, The British Council).

Theatres in openair sites

The theatres, with only a few exceptions, were built in open-air sites. The plays had to be performed during the day, and if the fictional action took place at night, some torches would be lit to give the impression of artificial light. There was no change in the stage decoration between acts: as soon as the actors finished a scene, they were replaced by those who had to speak in the next scene. The decoration would be limited to curtains and carpets, the colour of which might perhaps be adapted to the mood of the play.

"Juliet (to Romeo): Tis but thy name that is my enemy;
 Thou art thyself, though not a Montague,
 What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
 Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
 belonging to a man. O be some other name!
 What's in a name? That which we call a rose
 By any other name would smell as sweet..." (II, ii, 38-44)

William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*.

This awareness of the nature of language allows Romeo and Juliet to remain supremely distanced from the violent conventions of Verona, and to attempt to build a private universe of their own, away from all the conventionalities that their context seeks to impose on them: an attempt that, of course, will ultimately condemn them to death. This is, chronologically, the first of the great Shakespearean tragedies.

Activity

2.1. Read William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and write a commentary, using the following questions as a guide.

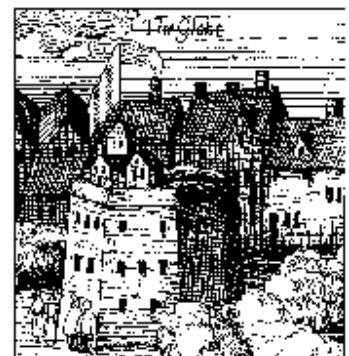
- a) At the beginning of the play, Romeo is in love with Rosaline, not with Juliet. Discuss the main changes you can see in his language and in the way he expresses himself between Acts I and II, i.e. before and after he has met Juliet.
- b) Juliet's first monologue in Act II, scene II, and part of the dialogue that follows, dwells on two topics: first, the unreliability, or untruthfulness, of words and promises, and second, the names "Romeo" and "Montague". What is the relationship between these two themes, as presented by the lovers in this scene?
- c) Discuss the deaths of Tybalt and Paris in Act III: why are these characters killed, and how are these killings significant in terms of plot and content?
- d) Now discuss the monologues delivered by Capulet and Paris in Act IV, scene III (Juliet's simulation of death). Could we say that the concept of death is presented here almost in a series of metaphysical conceits? And how might we relate these conceits to other references to death that have occurred throughout the play?
- e) Perhaps paradoxically, there are many references to light and stars in the final scene of Act V. What is their function? Can you relate them to Romeo's initial monologue in Act II, scene II?

2.4. Historical tragedies, comedies and "problem plays"

All through these first years, Shakespeare went on combining the composition of historical tragedies with that of lighter plays, taking his subjects from medieval English chronicles or Italian collections of novellas in the tradition of the *Decameron*.

The Lord Chamberlain's Company thus included both tragic and comic works in its repertoire and enjoyed a growing success as the decade progressed, thanks to the popular impact of Shakespeare's works. In 1598, they were able to perform in a newly built London theatre, **The Globe**, which they had financed themselves.

In terms of his progress as an author, the second half of the 1590s brought a deepening of Shakespeare's exploration of the domains of historical tragedy and comedy, sometimes in very unexpected directions.



Engraving (detail), *Londinum florentissima Britanniae urbs*, by Claes Jansz Visscher, c. 1625.

2.4.1. Historical tragedies

This genre is touched upon in *Richard II* and, especially, in the two-part *Henry IV*, which displays a greater virtuosity in combining the solemn tones of tragedy with the bawdier tones of popular farce.

In *Henry IV* the aim of the dramatist is to present the "education of a prince". The main character is not so much the king as his son and heir to the throne, Hal, who spends most of his youth not in the court, but in the inns and brothels in the company of the vulgar but vital Sir John Falstaff.

Falstaff could stand as a typical example of a character who comes to dominate a particular work almost in spite of its author. Shakespeare obviously indulges himself in the comic parts of the play, giving Falstaff every opportunity to ridicule the momentous themes of honour and military dignity that pervade the solemn scenes.

Falstaff's later exile, at the end of *Henry IV*, was doubtlessly lamented by the audiences of the period, as it is by modern readers. Falstaff's humorous and exuberant form of expression, praising the pleasures of physicality and friendship and satirising the great metaphysical concepts, is always immediately enjoyable, as in his famous demolition of the notion of "honour":

"*Falstaff*. Can honour set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery then? No. What is honour? A word. What is in that word honour? What is that honour? Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died a Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. 'Tis insensible, then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it. Honour is a mere scutcheon-and so ends my catechism."

William Shakespeare, *Henry IV*.

The Globe

The Globe was the most famous of the Elizabethan theatres. The form of these theatres, including The Globe, was somewhat reminiscent of the inns where the players often put on their performances. So accustomed were they to the surroundings of the inn that they could not conceive of any other architectural design for their theatres. The Globe could accommodate 1,200 spectators. It was destroyed by fire in 1613.

2.4.2. Comedies and "problem plays"

The comedies that Shakespeare produced during this period show him already at the peak of his powers. *Much Ado about Nothing* and *The Merchant of Venice*, both published in 1600, can be seen as representative of his two different approaches to the comic genre.

Much Ado about Nothing is almost an exercise in dramatic refinement, staging the paradoxes of the "war of the sexes" between male and female characters, while *The Merchant of Venice* is extremely daring in its mixture of romantic comedy and darker, almost tragic connotations in the figure of Shylock, the Jew: a villain, doubtless, for Shakespeare, but a figure that can be vindicated today as being himself a victim of anti-semitism, and yet retaining some dignity in his thirst for vengeance against those that have humiliated him.

The experimentation in the modes of comedy, already evident here, was to intensify in the following years: there is a growing complexity in the plays that followed, as if Shakespeare were testing the boundaries between the different genres.

The next comedies, in fact, have been classified as "**problem plays**" by some critics, owing to the presence of tragic or problematic elements in them and the marked ambiguity of their endings.

There is, in any case, a darker tone in these plays: Shakespeare is now interested in the conflicts between ideology and personal life, or between the individual and institutions, as becomes evident, especially, in *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well that Ends Well*, and later on in *Troilus and Cressida*. These works are especially attractive for present-day, or post-modernist, stagings: Shakespeare deliberately refuses to give a clear key to his own position or opinion, and confronts the audience with vital questions about ideologies and life without offering any general or philosophical answers to them.

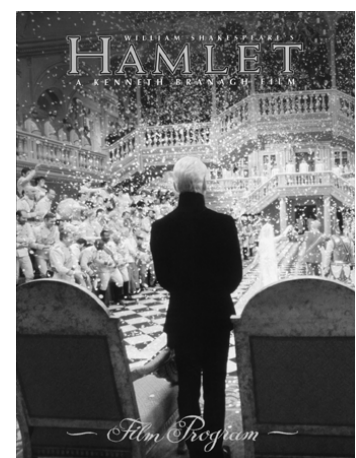
2.5. The great tragedies

The final years of the Elizabethan period, and the first of the Jacobean era (the reign of James I, from 1603 onwards), were the years when Shakespeare composed his great tragedies.

In these works the questioning of institutions and conventions, both moral and social, that began within the limits of the "problem plays" is carried to the limit, and Shakespeare's language becomes more varied and complex than ever.

This is especially evident in the case of *Hamlet* (1601), where the doubt of the protagonist extends beyond his personal situation to embrace his whole social environment and the central questions of the dignity of man and his place in the cosmos. Shakespeare achieves this, in part, by prolonging the indecision of his protagonist, the prince of Denmark. The ghost of Hamlet's father has entrusted him with the task of killing his uncle, who has usurped the throne through fratricide, marrying Hamlet's mother in the process.

The resolution is delayed while Hamlet's simulated madness gives him licence to criticise the whole world of the court around him from a detached and nihilistic perspective. This **nihilism** pervades the whole of the play, and it is interesting to see how Hamlet would like it to pervade even his vision of the afterlife, thus allowing him to commit suicide without remorse.



Poster from the film *Hamlet* (1996) by the English actor and director Kenneth Branagh. Branagh has made several films of Shakespeare's plays, including *Othello*, *Much Ado about Nothing* and a free adaptation of *The Winter's Tale* entitled *In The Bleak Midwinter*. All these films have been very well received by the public, which goes to show the timelessness of Shakespeare's works.

"*Hamlet*: To be, or not be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them.
To die, to sleep; [...]
To sleep, perchance to dream-ay, there's the rub:
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause-there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life." (III, i, 56-60, 65-69)

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*.

The sense of existential despair that lies at the core of *Hamlet* reappears in *Othello*, where the famous jealousy of the protagonist serves as a basis for questioning the social and conventional nature of love. It is especially evident in *King Lear*, which we could perhaps take as the most extreme representation of nihilism in this period, and even in the whole history of English literature. The story of the king who divides his kingdom and leaves it to his two eldest daughters as an inheritance, only to be abandoned and forsaken by them as his lands fall into war, is told with a concentration of pathetic moments and elements that has no parallel in the rest of Shakespeare's production.

The questioning of the belief that man was at the centre of the universe, and the sense of spiritual doubt that had been introduced into English culture by the abrupt religious Reformation and the rapid diffusion of new scientific and cosmological conceptions, find in *King Lear* a definitive dramatic form: there is perhaps no other work of the period where the dignity of man is so radically questioned.

Some of the scenes showing the extremes of Lear's madness were cut when the play was staged in the following centuries: for instance, the moment when Lear believes he is passing judgment on his daughters, while he is merely addressing some empty chairs. The final catastrophe (the death of Lear's youngest and faithful daughter) eliminates all possibility of regeneration or renewal, forcing the audience to confront the remaining sense of existential emptiness.

After this extreme example of tragic virtuosity, Shakespeare produced a much more economical presentation of destructive ambition in *Macbeth* (1604), one of his shortest plays, but also one of the most direct and intense, with all the elements concentrated in the rise to power of the protagonist and his de-humanised wife.

Antony and Cleopatra (1606) closes this period of Shakespearean plenitude, in a final presentation of absolute passion that was almost offensive to the tastes of audiences in the next century. The poet John Dryden was to go to the extreme of rewriting it to suit Neo-classical standards of taste during the Restoration.

2.6. Shakespeare's last period: the return to the comedy

The last period in Shakespeare's production is characterised by a return to the domain of comedy, though with a growing presence of magic and symbolic elements. These works are obviously less oriented towards a general audience than those that precede them, as befitted the elitist tastes of the new Stuart regime, and of course this is no coincidence: the Lord Chamberlain's Company had been renamed the **King's Men** to show their support of the new monarch.

In these plays Shakespeare introduces the topics of change and evolution through time, not presenting them from a sorrowful perspective, but rather working from an initial situation of alienation or conflict towards a final conclusion of harmony and plenitude.

These works are often classified as "**romances**", both because they contain elements of fantasy and because they tend to exemplify the reconciliation between generations: this is Shakespeare's maturity, in terms both of style and of perspective. His exploration of conflict comes to an end, and now these plays seem to signal a much more benevolent approach to the complexity of life.

This is the case of *Cymbeline*, and especially of *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* (both from 1607-10). The reader, perhaps more than the audience, will sense an authorial presence and control that had never been so evident in earlier plays. In *The Winter's Tale* we find Time itself, turned into an allegorical personification, as a figure in the action, supervising the troubles and the final reunion of the characters. In *The Tempest* it is the central character himself, Prospero, who controls the action throughout, causing the shipwreck that will bring the authorities of Milan to his deserted island and restore his position.

This control over the action has led to Prospero's being seen as an image of Shakespeare himself, manipulating the action on stage for the last time, before finally abandoning the world of literature and fiction. The moment when Prospero abandons his magic, leaving aside all "charms" in order to become a mere human person, seems to suggest Shakespeare's own renunciation of his gifts as a poet:

"Now my charms are all o'erthrown,
and what strength I have's mine own..." (V, ii, 1-2)

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*.

The cycle of Shakespeare's work is closed here. Ten years after *The Tempest* he made a final contribution to the historical tragedy **Henry VIII** (mostly written by John Fletcher). After a period of retirement, he died in Stratford-on-Avon in 1616 as a respected gentleman and without having supervised the publication of his works, as if he had become supremely distanced from them.

The importance of Shakespeare's work was not fully appreciated in his own time. It was not until the Restoration that he began to be seen as an author who could perhaps rival the great dramatists of antiquity; and it was only much later, at the height of the Romantic movement in the early nineteenth century, that Shakespeare finally acquired his supreme status in the canon of English literature.

3. The Metaphysical Poets

During the Jacobean period, and right up to the Civil War, English poetry, especially lyric poetry, acquired a very idiosyncratic form.

Selected chronology

1633 John Donne, *Poems* (posthumous)
 1633 George Herbert, *The Temple* (posthumous)
 1642 Beginning of the Civil War
 1646 Richard Crashaw, *Steps to the Temple*
 1649 Regicide of Charles I
 1650 Henry Vaughan, *Silex Scintillans I*
 1653 Restoration of Parliament under Oliver Cromwell
 1655 Henry Vaughan, *Silex Scintillans II*
 1667-72 Main works of Thomas Traherne
 1681 Andrew Marvell, *Miscellaneous Poems* (posthumous)



John Donne. Portrait by an unknown artist, 17th century (London, National Gallery).

Now the main influence was no longer that of Petrarch and the Italian poets. Lyricists still had a basic set of classical references and topics, but they used it as a basis for the display of verbal and imaginative virtuosity. The classical patterns were abandoned in favour of a deeper exploration of the complexities of personal feeling. This exploration was not limited by any normative rules of composition or style. One of the reasons for the interest that this poetry (known as "metaphysical" poetry) has had, and continues to have for present-day readers, is its sense of directness and intensity.

Metaphysical poetry

The term "metaphysical poetry" was coined by eighteenth-century critics not because of the religious content of the poems, but in ironic reference to their conceptual complexity.

The main accusation levelled against the metaphysical poets in later centuries was their excessive imaginative virtuosity, their exaggerated "wit", which sometimes makes for difficult reading.

The metaphorical repertoire of the early Renaissance was now widened to include all sorts of imagery drawn not only from lyrical convention but also from the worlds of science, astrology and geography. To a certain extent, this was a direct reflection of the intellectual range of the poets themselves, who belonged to the world of the Church or diplomacy. Yet, at the same time, their diction could also be immediate and direct, even crude, with room for colloquialism and everyday language. In one sense, this is a dense form of lyric poetry that requires the reader to use his imagination and culture. On the other hand, it is also spontaneous and passionate, and therefore more vivid than the conventional forms used by the Elizabethan sonneteers.

John Donne

John Donne studied law at Lincoln's Inn. He was ordained a minister and studied theology at Cambridge. After a period as Reader in Divinity at Lincoln's Inn, he was appointed Dean of Saint Paul's Cathedral in London. Andrew Marvell was John Milton's secretary.

The key device of these poets is the *conceit*: In fact, a conceit is nothing more than a metaphor, but a metaphor that, instead of being conventional and self-explanatory, links two very different conceptual domains. Moreover, it was not used in an isolated fashion, as topical metaphors were, but was taken as the basis for an entire poem, or for a large part of it, and would be explored in different directions, extended, and sometimes inverted before the end of the poem.

It is a device that is often associated with the exaggerated and extreme tone of the lyrics. *Hyperbole*, or extreme idealisation, is also typical of the intense nature of the images used in this poetry.

The feeling of love

Through the conceit the feeling of love can be explained by a scientific reference, or religious doubts by a botanical image.

In one of his *Hymns*, for instance, John Donne compares his own sick body, examined by doctors, to a map being studied by geographers. The various parts of this figural image of the world are explored in their historical and even theological connotations.

It is no coincidence that this group of poets should have remained relatively forgotten until they were vindicated by T. S. Eliot and other modernist authors of the twentieth century.

3.1. John Donne (1573-1631)

John Donne is the most representative member of the group, and perhaps the most original in his imaginative games. It is easy to see two very different thematic areas in his best poetry, corresponding to two different periods of his life: secular works and religious works.

3.1.1. Secular works

The poems compiled in *Songs and Sonnets* (the first part of his posthumous collection, 1633) are mostly secular in theme, as befits his early career as a courtier.

These works are centered mostly on the subject of love, and yet they are extraordinarily innovative compared to the poems of Sidney or Spenser. The innovation lies sometimes in their expressive, direct, almost colloquial tone, and sometimes in the originality of the point of view.

In *Break of Day*, for instance, Donne adopts the point of view of the woman who is abandoned by her male lover at dawn, and begins to build a poem with her very direct questions:

"Why should we rise because there's light?
Did we lie down because 'twas night?" (3-4)

John Donne, *Break of Day*.

Donne is a very resourceful lyricist: often, his strategy involves building a long conceit on an original and unexpected metaphor. This is particularly notable in the territory of erotic poetry. In *The Flea*, for instance, the tiny insect that has bitten both the speaker and his beloved becomes the bridal bed where their blood is mixed, and where their essences are joined despite her reluctance. In *The Good Morrow* the ennobling power of love can turn a single room into a world, with the lovers becoming hemispheres, encompassing in themselves the whole of humanity:

"True plain hearts do in the faces rest;
Where shall we find two better hemispheres
Without sharp north, without declining West?" (16-18)

John Donne, *The Good Morrow*.

Of course, Donne is here invoking the humanist notion of the dignity of man, who is the template and measure of all things on earth.

3.1.2. Religious works

In his religious work, written in later years after his appointment as Dean of Saint Paul's, these tendencies are not attenuated, but rather taken to an extreme.

The material experience of human love, which had been celebrated in the first part of his work, becomes a metaphor for the operations of divine grace, the action of God on men. Several passages in the *Hymns*, and especially in the *Holy Sonnets* (1626-36), can be read as an exploration of the paradoxical nature of God's love, which is seen, in strict coherence with the Augustinian and Lutheran tradition, as an unpredictable and uncontrollable force. Here, it is the human aspiration to divine grace that is presented in terms of physical desire, with the speaker adopting the role of a woman, while God himself is represented as her furious male lover:

"Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you enthrall mee, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee." (14: 12-14)

John Donne, *Holy Sonnets*.

The Pauline and Augustinian roots of Donne's thought led him to explore the paradox of grace. Since God's love was essentially impossible to explain, it could not be adequately represented by the metaphor of love between husband and wife. Indeed, it escaped the limits of that metaphor and turned

into an image of unconstrained sexuality, almost dangerously free from any rule. Thus, Donne's language in his religious verse is also extremely aggressive and imaginative. It forces the reader to confront the paradoxes of grace by adopting a form of expression that tends, in strict Protestant terms, to individualise that experience and describe it in terms of material reality. This is a key example of a daring metaphoric repertoire put at the service of a will to give expression to religious experience.

But in general, and in spite of this tendency, sexuality and devotional practice are not seen by Donne as part of the same experience. Human love between man and woman is not integrated in the religious vision, nor reconciled to it, as it was in Spenser's work. We have to wait until Milton's *Paradise Lost* for a recuperation of that approach.

The religious poetry of the other metaphysical poets tends to follow a slightly different direction, also displaying imaginative virtuosity but using a simpler, more accessible language, clear syntax and a greater economy of means. The metaphors and conceits remain, though, extremely daring, as is characteristic of this particular moment in English verse.

Activity

3.1. Read the following two poems by John Donne and write a commentary, using the questions below as a guide.

The Sunne Rising

"Busy old fool, unruly sun,
 Why dost thou thus,
 Through windows and through curtains call on us?
 Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run?
 Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide
 Late schoolboys and sour prentices,
 Go tell court huntsmen that the King will ride,
 Call country ants to harvest offices;
 Love, all alike, no season knows nor clime,
 Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.

Thy beams, so reverend and strong
 Why shouldst thou think?
 I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink,
 But that I would not lose her sight so long;
 If her eyes have not blinded thine,
 Look, and tomorrow late, tell me,
 Whether both th' Indias of spice and mine
 Be where thou leftst them, or lie here with me.
 Ask for those kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,
 And thou shalt hear, All here in one bed lay.

She is all states, and all princes I,
 Nothing else is.
 Princes do but play us; compared to this,
 All honor's mimic, all wealth alchemy.
 Thou, sun, art half as happy as we,
 In that the world's contracted thus;
 Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be
 To warm the world, that's done in warming us.
 Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;
 This bed thy center is, these walls thy sphere."

The Flea

"Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deniest me is;
Me it sucked first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead,
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pampered swells with one blood made of two,
And this, alas, is more than we would do.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, nay more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed and marriage temple is;
Though parents grudge, and you, we are met,
And cloistered in these living walls of jet.
Though use make you apt to kill me
Let not to that, self-murder added be,
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
Find'st not thy self nor me the weaker now;
Tis true; then learn how false fears be:
Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me,
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee."

- Try to identify the conceit or conceits in the above poems.
- Discuss the personification and the colloquialisms that Donne uses in the first stanza of *The Sunne Rising*. What is their effect in relation to the whole of the poem?
- What is the attitude towards sexuality expressed in these two poems? To what extent could it be contrasted with the concept of love underlying the work of sonneteers such as Philip Sidney or Edmund Spenser?

3.2. George Herbert (1593-1633)

The work of George Herbert, which he himself compiled in his collection *The Temple* (1633), is the best example of genuinely Protestant poetry.

The whole of his work concentrates on the theme of the soul's relationship with God. This relationship is purely personal, independent of any mediatory or external intervention. In Herbert, as in Luther, the soul is always solitary and individualised, and has to examine for itself the progress of its relations with the transcendent without any outside intervention. Consequently, Herbert draws a detailed picture of his own subjective religiosity, moving from an initial state of doubt and fear to the joyful acceptance of divine grace.



George Herbert at Bemerton (detail) by W. Dyce, 19th century (London, Guildhall Gallery).

But this must be read as the exact opposite of the Catholic mysticism of Saint John of the Cross, for example. Herbert's poetry does not rely so much on complex visual elements, nor does it proceed by accumulating images;

instead, it appeals to the reader's intelligence. The reader has to follow the development of the metaphor the poet is using, usually only one per poem, which is slowly explored, and which is presented with a sense of deep but restrained emotion.

On other occasions, it is not a central conceit but a group of metaphors that is offered to the reader, but each following the other in a smooth and very clear succession. This is what occurs, for instance, in *The Employment*, when, in one moment of despair, the poet feels his total uselessness in the eyes of God:

"All things are busy: only I
Neither bring honey with the bees,
Nor flowers to make that, nor the husbandry
To water these.
I am no link of thy great chain,
But all my company is a weed." (16-21)

George Herbert, *The Employment*.

The only difficult reference here (and not even so for the seventeenth century readers) is the mention of God's "great chain", which designates the whole, interlinked order of creation. It is no coincidence, therefore, that one of the most interesting features of Herbert's poetry should be his vindication of a simple, non-rhetorical style. Even when he makes use of conceits rather than of simple images, it is because he knows that, in both cases, the expressive value of these figures of speech is limited. They are only tools in the effort to express something that is inexpressible: the feeling of grace, and of trust in the might of God.

Herbert is aware of the limits of language, and on occasions actually formulates a principle of "plainness" in poetry. The feeling of faith has to be conveyed directly and austere without relying on an abundance of images, he maintains, almost as if emulating the iconoclasm of the Anglican Church.

This principle is most clearly expounded in the sonnet *Jordan*:

"I envy no man's nightingale or spring;
Nor let them punish me with loss of rhyme
Who plainly say, *My Lord, My King*."

Thus, Herbert sets the tone for a characteristically Anglican form of poetry that is restrained and "plain", yet intellectually engaging. Among the younger poets that he influenced directly we must mention **Thomas Traherne** (1636-1674) and especially Henry Vaughan, to whom we will now turn. It must be also mentioned that outside this group remains the figure of **Richard Crashaw** (1612-1649), a Catholic author, whose poetic practice, occasionally evocative of Continental figures such as Santa Teresa de Jesus, places him in a position of aesthetic isolation in this essentially Protestant context.

Thomas Traherne

Thomas Traherne was the author of *Poems of Felicity*. He succeeds less well in his poetry, which has a refreshing exuberance but often lacks discipline, and is at its best when he gives poetic form to the ideas expressed in his prose works, specially in *Centuries of Meditation*.

3.3. Henry Vaughan (1621-1695)

Henry Vaughan was a doctor and man of letters who introduced some new approaches to religious poetry. Though nowhere near as influential as his two predecessors, he goes beyond them in the scope that he gives to his overtly mystical visions (as in his poem *The World*), taking the term "mystical" in the sense it has had in the Catholic tradition.

He is, moreover, the first author to celebrate childhood as a privileged period of life, in poems such as *The Retreat*, an approach that was to be recovered, two centuries later, by William Wordsworth.

Children have a special spiritual sensibility because for them the moment of birth, of creation, is still recent. Vaughan describes his early prayers as an act of remembrance, when, being so young, he could still see...

"... a white, celestial thought:
When yet I had not walked above
A mile or two from my first love,
And looking back, at that short space
Could see a glimpse of His bright face." (6-10)

Henry Vaughan, *The Retreat*.

3.4. Andrew Marvell (1621-1678)

Andrew Marvell is another significant member of this group, of the same age as Vaughan, yet working in a different direction.

If we compare him to the other poets in this section, he appears almost as a classicist. He is far more controlled in his use of imagery, and far less interested in the complexities of the subjective feeling of faith. He is closer to the style of Donne's erotic poetry than to Herbert's confessionism, but with an added consciousness of the vanity and fragility of life.

Apart from his political poetry, which tends to exalt the Cromwellians and the republicans against the monarchists, his lyrical poems tend to concentrate on two thematic areas:



Andrew Marvell. Portrait by an unknown artist, c. 1655-1660 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

1) On the one hand, the exaltation of sexuality and of the enjoyment of the body against the ravages of time, under the classic *carpe diem* motif (*To his Coy Mistress*, *Nymph Complaining of the Death of her Fawn*);

2) On the other hand, the consideration of the world of nature and of humanity's place in it, which ultimately leads him, again, to the consideration of death.

Marvell's central image is always the Garden: not nature untamed, but the image of man within it, often in the process of re-arranging it (in his cycle of *Mower* poems). These gardens have strong biblical connotations: they are always images of the original Garden of Eden, and in them, just as in the book of Genesis, Marvell's speakers discover their own sexuality and, through it, their own temporality and mortality.

Marvell is especially adept at conveying sexual connotations through metaphor; yet sexual desire is always menaced by the destructive force of time. This consciousness of death, directly inherited from Catullus, links Marvell to the Spanish Baroque poets, such as Francisco de Quevedo or Góngora, but his sense of measure and control can be related to the classicist tendencies of the "cavalier" poets operating in the circles of the Stuart court.

Our next section will begin by taking a look at this group and clarifying their connection with the culminating poetic production of all this period: the work of **John Milton**.

Activity

3.2. Read the poem *The Mower's Song* by Andrew Marvell and write a commentary, using the questions below as a guide.

"My mind was once the true survey
of all these meadows fresh and gay,
And in the greenness of the grass
Did see its hopes as in a glass;
When Juliana came, and she,

What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me.

But these, while I with sorrow pine,
Grew more luxuriant still and fine,
That not one blade of grass you spied
But had a flower on either side;
When Juliana came, and she,

What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me.

Unthankful meadows, could you so
A fellowship so true forego,
And in your gaudy May-games meet,
While I lay trodden under feet?
When Juliana came, and she,

What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me.

But what you in compassion ought
Shall now by my revenge be wrought,
And flowers, and grass, and I, and all,

Will in one common ruin fall;
For Juliana comes, and she,
What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me.

And thus ye meadows, which have been
Companions of my thoughts more green,
Shall now the heraldry become
With which I shall adorn my tomb.
For Juliana comes, and she,
What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me."

- a) What is the relationship between the speaker's subjectivity and nature, as described in the first stanza?
- b) What are the effects of love on the speaker and on his surrounding environment, according to stanzas 1-3?
- c) What is, in your opinion, the main subject of this poem? And, finally, can you identify any reference to the biblical Fall from Eden in stanza 4? What role does it play at that precise moment in the poem?

4. The Poetry of John Milton (1608-1674)

The importance of John Milton's work is difficult to explain if we situate ourselves outside the tradition of English poetry. It does not have the international importance of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, nor even of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, yet it is perhaps the most important chapter in English verse before Romanticism.

Selected chronology of Milton's works

1608 Birth of John Milton
1629 *Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity*
1634 *Comus (A Masque)*
1637 *Lycidas*
1667 *Paradise Lost*
1671 *Paradise Regained*
Samson Agonistes
1674 Death of John Milton



John Milton. Portrait by an unknown artist, c. 1629 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

There are two main reasons for this:

1) On the one hand, it can be seen as the greatest artistic expression of the Renaissance and Reformation, giving form to the concepts of love and freedom that had been put in circulation by the process of religious change and by humanism.

2) On the other hand, it can be seen as pointing the way towards Neo-classicism, offering, in *Paradise Lost*, an epic poem that seeks to rival the works of Homer and Virgil.

4.1. English poetry before John Milton

In order to appreciate the importance of *Paradise Lost*, we need to place it in its context; first of all, in the context of the English poetry that immediately preceded it.

From Donne and Herbert onwards, English poetry seems to have evolved towards a growing classicism. The verse of the courtier-poets who operated around the Stuart kings seems not even to take into account the innovative work of the Metaphysicals.

The tastes of the court tended much more towards simple and elegant ornamentation, and the poets who worked for the court adapted their voices to the modes of gentle and gallant praise that were put in circulation in the texts of the masques and royal entertainments. The relationship of the poets to the courtiers and noblemen who surrounded the kings was one of subservience and economic dependence. The praise of the lords and ladies

that these authors incorporated in their verse is clichéd and repetitive, with constant references to the beauty, magnanimity and elegance of the patron or patroness.

Among the best of these authors we must mention **Ben Jonson**, **Thomas Carew**, **Richard Lovelace** and **John Suckling**. It is significant that all of them, except for Suckling, also wrote entertainments for the Stuart court.

This is purely ornamental poetry; there is no attempt to give it a personal tone. The models are always those of Latin laudatory poetry, using topics of beauty inherited from Ovid or Catullus.

To be the subject of such poems, however, was not to be depersonalized; rather, it was a sign of belonging to the refined, courtly and classicist circle that fostered this kind of poetry.

4.2. Early poetry

The early poems of John Milton were in part a response to this state of affairs. Milton's father had destined him for the Anglican Church, and the young poet was a student at Cambridge when he wrote his masque *Comus* (1634), in the style of the courtly entertainments of the time, for his own patron, Lord Bridgewater.

The same classicist bent can be seen in all of the poems that Milton wrote during his youth, from his *Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity* (1629) to his sonnets.

The *Ode* itself, for instance, relies not on metaphorical variety, but rather on the accumulation of topics in a very tight and rigid stanzaic structure, with a heavy latinising syntax. This is the aspect of Milton's work that has been most controversial in later centuries: the quality of his language, which tends to follow the rhythms and phrasing of Latin rather than of English, and which remains always too solemn and even pompous.

Thomas Addison

The Augustan essayist admitted that "our language sunk under him [John Milton]".

Yet this rigidity turns into solemnity in the blank verse that Milton uses in his epic poetry: unconstrained by rhyme, and sustained in the decasyllabic line, he is able to deploy his classical rhythms freely and with greater syntactic and rhythmic variety.

4.3. Classic works

The classicist tendency had a counterpart in Milton's own professional life; from 1654, having supported the English revolution against the Stuarts, he acted as secretary to **Oliver Cromwell** and was in charge of the translation of official texts into Latin.

Before this, though, Milton had actively participated in the process which led to the English revolution by composing several treatises in favour of divorce (*The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, 1642), freedom of the press (*Aeropagitica*, 1644), and in justification of the execution of Charles I (*Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio*, 1651).

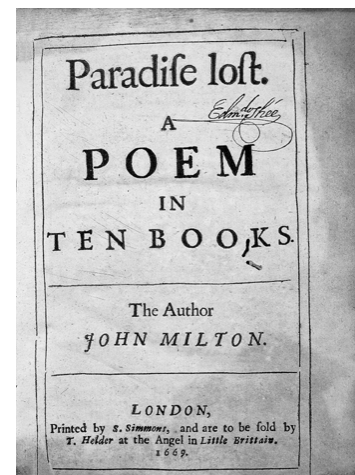
He established his own credentials, therefore, as one of the intellectual authorities behind Cromwell and the Revolution. During this period, however, he had been steadily losing his sight, so that from 1651 he had to carry out his work as secretary in a state of blindness.

Of course, Milton's career suffered a spectacular downfall during the Restoration. After the return of the monarchy he disappeared from the public scene and, from that moment onwards, most of his effort went into completing his epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667).

4.4. Epic poetry: *Paradise Lost*

The very theme of this work is a sign of its ambition: it narrates the Fall of Adam and Eve and the introduction of sin into the world, shortly after the creation of man.

But Milton was trying (as the first lines state) to do "things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme", which was essential if he was to equal the great poets of Antiquity. After all, the epic, being the noblest poetical subject, required the highest theme. It soon becomes evident, though, that this extended retelling of the first book of Genesis is especially appropriate for the poetic formulation of some of the author's own personal and doctrinal obsessions. It is quite possible that the voice of Satan, the strongest character in the poem, contains overtones of Milton's own sense of wounded dignity at his forced retirement during the Restoration. Satan's exhortation to the demons against God, after his own Fall from grace (Book I, 105-11), retains a sense of dignity that the poet himself might have identified with:



Frontispiece of the first edition of *Paradise Lost*.

Paradise Lost

Paradise lost is made up of several books written in blank verse, with a sum total of more than 13,000 lines.

"What though the field be lost?
 All is not lost; the unconquerable Will,
 And study of revenge, immortal hate,
 And courage never to submit or yield:
 And what is else not to be overcome.
 That Glory never shall his wrath or might
 Extort from me."

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*.

But it would be wrong to conclude that Milton was, as William Blake put it more than a century later, "of the devil's party". This was a romantic misreading, which chose to see Satan as the hero of the poem rather than as a villain, and to epitomise him as the archetype of solitary and idealistic rebellion against tyranny. In spite of the dignity that Milton lends to Satan, such an interpretation would surely have horrified him. His main intention (and his importance) lies elsewhere.

To begin with, and to link up with our discussion of the previous poets, we need to appreciate that *Paradise Lost* is the culminating moment in the evolution of love poetry since the Henrician Reformation. The Protestant emphasis on mutuality, which had led to the cancellation of Petrarchism (and therefore of the lyrics of unrequited love) at the hands of Edmund Spenser, is here subjected to a detailed exploration in the figures of Adam and Eve.

Adam, for instance, confesses to the archangel Raphael, in Book IV, the strength of sexual desire within his divinely sanctioned union to Eve:

"Transported I behold,
 Transported touch; here passion first I felt,
 Commotion strange, in all enjoyments else
 Superiour and unmov'd, here onely weake
 Against the charm of Beauties powerful glance."

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*.

What is being described here is not only desire, but its fulfilment. It is the act of touching the body that is celebrated ("Transported I behold / Transported touch"), and it is clearly specified that it is in that moment that passion is born ("here passion first I felt, / Commotion strange"). The archangel himself, in his answer to Adam, legitimises these feelings, allowing him to proceed towards a full idealisation of married life.

We are thus witnessing a recovery of the Spenserian conception of chastity as married love: a Protestant conception of mutual love within marriage, taken as a basis for the celebration of eroticism.

But, of course, this approach to sexuality cannot be fully understood without placing it in the context of the whole theological intent of *Paradise Lost*.

This vindication of the materiality and specificity of the body, and its subsequent endowment with idealistic overtones, is at one with Milton's insistence on the pre-eminence of individuality and selfhood over necessity and constraint.

One of the main traditions of interpretation of the poem –the tradition of critics such as Christopher Hill– reads it as a defence of the concept of free will against the rigidity of Calvinism, and thus against the concept of predestination.

It is now generally accepted that Milton's main aim in writing the poem was to make a sustained critique of the central tenet of Calvinism, the notion of **predestination**. Following the interpretive tradition of Arminianism, he tried to reconcile the concept of divine omnipotence with the notion of human freedom. Milton's God is aware of the history of humanity before that history begins, yet he does not intervene in it directly, but lets Adam and Eve decide their fate for themselves. For the poet, the need to emphasize the fact that his characters have "free will" was not only a question of literary coherence; it was one of the bases of his own religious and political position, which of course had to be reflected in the text.

In certain passages of *Paradise Lost* the reader will find situations where God knows what will happen, but carefully keeps this information to himself so as not to interfere in his servants' decisions. In these passages, Milton shows us that his characters are able to think for themselves: they are never influenced by God's foreknowledge of what they will do or say.

God is represented as knowing what will happen, but what is important is the fact that Adam, Eve and Satan think and act according to their own reason and will. Thus, Eve is created because Adam has freely asked for a companion (Book IV); and the Son offers his life to redeem humanity because he freely decides to do so (Book III). Nothing in the poem happens merely because it is pre-ordained.

Hence the importance of monologue in *Paradise Lost*: it is by presenting the characters' thoughts in long speeches that Milton shows them in the process of making decisions.

One such situation arises in Book IX (lines 411-14), when Satan, in the form of the serpent, is looking for Eve in the garden. He eventually finds her and spies on her for a time. The sight of her has a beneficent influence on him, and for a moment:

"[...] the evil One stood
From his own evil, and for the time remained
Stupidly good, of enmity disarmed,
Of guile, of hate, of envy, of revenge."

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*.

Here, for a brief moment, Satan is clearly unable to do anything evil. If he had remained in that state, he would have been unable to cause the Fall. Of course, Milton has to show very clearly that Satan had the possibility to act otherwise than he actually did; if he did not, then the Fall of man would seem inevitable, and thus pre-ordained. But Satan immediately reacts against his own feelings ("the hot hell which always in him burns... soon ended his delight"). Soon he is driven only by one of his worst passions: envy ("more he sees / of pleasure not for him ordained"), which "his thoughts / of mischief, gratulating, thus excites". Satan wilfully rejects the beneficent influence that could have saved him: thus, he condemns himself to do "evil" deeds (and the next one will be the Fall of man itself).

Of course, what is happening here can be easily understood without any reference to concepts such as "grace". However, if we take this notion into account, we can see how important the **concept of freedom** is for Milton. Satan's is a perversion of thought as well as of action: in this poem, both devil and man are, in the poet's words, "sufficient to have stood, yet free to fall".

These concepts can therefore be seen as the ultimate formulation of the humanist concept of man's dignity and freedom. At the same time, we need to place them in the context of the anti-monarchic tendencies advocated by the Cromwellians.

Milton's sympathy for the revolutionary thought that fostered the Revolution informs the work throughout, from the insistence on the characters' own freedom to the final formulation of the concept of the "fortunate fall" in the last three books.

It is in these final pages, once the figures of Adam and Eve are about to be expelled from Paradise, that the whole ideological motivation for the composition of the poem is revealed: man is now condemned to fend for himself, yet there is something very valuable to be obtained from his new situation. What man obtains through his own effort and determination is far more precious, and more valuable, than what he merely receives passively and without effort (as in Paradise). Humanity must now confront death, yet it is against this limitation that its greatness and strength of will can be fully measured.

The situation of worldly creation, after the Fall, reveals a new plan for man, more trying, but also full of a new potential.

This is the concept of "**felix culpa**": the Fall has made man subject to death, yet it has freed him to seek fulfillment through his own effort. These were the first literary formulations of an ethic of work and individual effort that was to be adopted by the middle classes, and that reveals the anti-aristocratic tendencies of Milton and, beyond him, of the English Revolution.

Activity

4.1. Read verses 745-792 from Book IX *Paradise Lost* by John Milton and write a commentary, using the questions below as a guide.
(Eve is about to eat the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge.)

Eve: "Great are thy virtues, doubtless, best of fruits,
Thought kept from man, and worthy to be admired,
Whose taste, too long forborne, at first assay
Gave elocution to the mute, and taught
The tongue not made for speech to speak thy praise:
Thy praise he also who forbids thy use,
Conceals not from us, naming thee the Tree
Of Knowledge, knowledge both of good and evil;
Forbids us then to taste, but his forbidding
Commends thee more, while it infers the good
By thee communicated, and our want:
For good unknown, sure is not had, or had
And yet unknown, is as not had at all.
In plain then, what forbids he but to know,
Forbids us good, forbids us to be wise?
Such prohibitions bind not. But if death
Bind us with after-bands, what profits then
Our inward freedom? In the day we eat
Of this fair fruit, our doom is, we shall die.
How dies the serpent? He hath eat'n and lives,
And knows, and speaks, and reasons, and discerns,
Irrational till then. For us alone
Was death invented? Or to us denied
This intellectual food, for beasts reserved?
For beasts it seems: yet that one beast which first
Hath tasted, envies not, but brings with joy
The good befall'n him, author unsuspect,
Friendly to man, far from deceit or guile.
What fear I then, rather what know to fear
Under this ignorance of good and evil,
of God or death, of law or penalty?
Here grows the cure of all, this fruit divine,
Fair to the eye, inviting to the taste,
Of virtue to make wise: what hinders then
To reach, and feed at once both body and mind?"
So saying, her rash hand in evil hour
Forth reaching to the fruit, she plucked, she ate:
Earth felt the wound, and nature from her seat
Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe,
The guilty serpent, and well might, for Eve
Intent now wholly on her taste, naught else
Regarded, such delight till then, as seemed,
In fruit she never tasted, whether true
Or fancied so, through expectation high
Of knowledge, nor was Godhead from her thought.
Greedily she engorged without restraint,
And knew not eating death." (IX, 745-792)

- a) Into how many parts, in your opinion, could Eve's monologue be divided? What is the reason for the text being structured in these different parts?
- b) To what extent is this text representative of John Milton's opinions on the subject of free will? Could the text, moreover, be linked in any way to his political position during the English Revolution?

c) How would you interpret/paraphrase the last line?

4.5. Other long poems

Milton's career as a poet is closed by two other long poems: *Paradise Regained* (1671), where Satan confronts the Son of God, Jesus Christ, in a rewriting of the scenes of the temptation in the desert, and, finally, the dramatic poem *Samson Agonistes* (1671), which again takes a biblical theme as its basis, but which is perhaps the most personal of all of Milton's works.

From the viewpoint of the present-day reader perhaps a reading of Milton's poetry should begin with this, his last work: the disappointed tones of Samson, defeated and blind, allow some of Milton's best lyrical moments, and at the same time they convey a sense of his own political disappointment at the end of his life.

After him, English poetry was to enter a period of greater neutrality and austerity of expression, avoiding a personalized style: the Augustan, Neo-classical taste began its long period of predominance.

More information

See also "The Restoration and the Augustan Era".

5. The development of drama, from Shakespeare to the Restoration

The later plays of Shakespeare already indicate a shift in taste, compared with his earlier works. They are far less aimed at the popular sections of his audience, and they make greater use of scenographic elements, thus requiring much more elaborate stage productions.

If this is so, it is in part because the new dynasty, the Stuarts, had introduced a different taste, a different way of presenting themselves to the public, and also a different conception of drama as a representation of power. Above all, this involved a new sense of elitism, and a growing distinction between "higher" and "lower" forms of drama. The capacity to please both the more and the less literate members of the audience in the same play (as Shakespeare had done so well) was to become increasingly rare, as dramatists began to specialise in different styles for different audiences, basing their prestige on the work they produced for courtly audiences rather than on what they wrote for the general public.

The Stuarts brought theatrical representation into the court itself. The pageants that had played such an important part under the Elizabethan regime were maintained, but they were accompanied by private entertainments, written and produced (with expensive scenery and equipment) to be performed only once or twice at court, before the king.



James I (1603-1625).

5.1. Private entertainments: the masque

A "masque" was a short entertainment written specifically for a very small and exclusive audience, consisting of the royal family and a select group of courtiers, who would often take part in the actual performance.

The masque always included a minor conflict, which was presented in the **antemasque** (the first part of the play). The characters involved in this conflict used comic language and a low register, and their parts were usually written in prose. Immediately after this, the masque proper would introduce a much more select and elevated form of language, just as the grotesque or disruptive elements presented in the antemasque disappeared or were subdued. The masque always offered a celebration of the king's power and beneficence, either by presenting allegorical entities or mythological characters acting in his name, or through the direct and personal participation of members of the royal family.

The complementarity of masque and antemasque set up a pattern of contrast between *sermo gravis* and *sermo humilis*, between the high style of courtly celebration and the comic, "low" language that threatened the values of the celebration. In its very form, then, the masque was dialogical, establishing an intercourse between different kinds of language.

As the genre developed through the early 17th century, the antemasque grew in strength and scope, incorporating lower and much less literary forms of language. Among the practitioners of this genre, one of the most prominent was Ben Jonson.

5.2. Ben Jonson (1572-1637)

In many of Jonson's later masques, the antemasque came to be the dominant element. This is the case, for instance, in *The Gypsies Metamorphos'd*, which was presented to James I, his family and his court in 1621. This text is an excellent example of the use of carnivalesque elements in a work that was written specifically for a courtly audience. The plot itself introduces an interesting negotiation between the "high" and the "low": the long antemasque introduces a group of gypsies, who tell the royal family's fortune, and then proceed to steal some trifles from the audience to demonstrate their skill as thieves. In the end, the gypsies are magically transformed into courtiers simply because of the presence of the king, and it all ends, of course, in the common praise of James, as the final songs and dances fill the stage.

This is only one example of the kind of work that Ben Jonson prepared for the court. But besides this aspect of his career, he must probably be regarded as the most complete dramatist of this whole period apart from Shakespeare himself.

Jonson was perceived by his audience and colleagues as a classicist and a humanist, far better qualified and stylistically more refined than the author of *Hamlet* or *King Lear*. This is perhaps surprising to our tastes, but it is indicative of the turn towards classicism in the theatre of the time.

Jonson does not tend to use complex characters with their own inner development, as Shakespeare does. Rather, he uses archetypes or, as they were called then, **humours**. His comedy *Every Man in his Humour*, for instance, is entirely based on the comic interaction not between fully constructed individuals, but between different human types. These types correspond to the "humours" that the medicine of the period used to classify human psychological dispositions (melancholic, choleric, bawdy, etc.); each humour is embodied in one character, which is then contrasted with the others.



Ben Jonson. Portrait by Abraham van Blyenberch, 17th century (London, National Portrait Gallery).

Ben Jonson

Although a friend of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson was his rival on the stage. He was more famous than Shakespeare, in his time, and enjoyed greater prestige.

Another good example of the Jonsonian comedy is *Volpone*, which takes up the classical theme of greed, but with an emphasis on the archetypal nature of the characters, as their very names (Volpone, the "fox"; Corbaccio, the "raven", etc.) suggest.

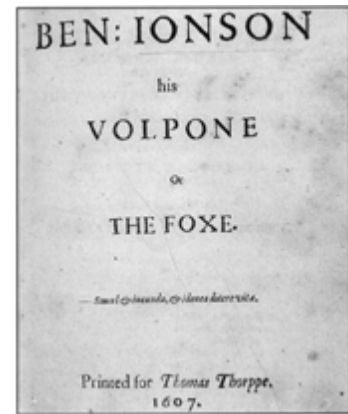
Jonson was also the author of several Roman tragedies (*Sejanus, his Fall*, or *Catiline*), which prefigure the Neo-classical taste that was to dominate the English scene after the Restoration.

5.3. Other Jacobean dramatists: Cyril Tourneur (1575-1626) and John Webster (c. 1580-c. 1634)

Beyond Jonson, Jacobean tragedy quickly developed a tendency towards the gruesome and the sensational. A growing moral scepticism began to emerge, not only on the part of the authors, but also on that of the audience. The most famous dramatists of this time are those that combine the presentation of moral horror (usually in the form of assassinations, and occasionally of incestuous passions) with a fast pace and an explicit insistence on violence.

Among the most important practitioners of this tendency are **Cyril Tourneur**, with *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *The Atheist's Tragedy*, two works that can be taken almost as case studies of immorality, and **John Webster**, the author of *The White Devil*, a play that has recently been vindicated by feminist criticism on account of its rigorous presentation of the female murderer within a rigid patriarchal society.

It is significant, though, that the dramatists that came to the fore just before the Civil War, such as **John Ford** or **James Shirley**, were already much more interested in implementing the classical rules than in satisfying the tastes of a popular audience. In the work of these two authors, the sense of decorum that was to be characteristic of Neo-classical drama was already beginning to assert itself.



Frontispiece of the 1607 edition of Ben Jonson's *Volpone*.

Specimen answers

For each set of questions, we have provided one specimen answer, which is meant to guide and orientate you. In no way is it intended to be the definitive answer. You are encouraged to form your own views and write your commentary on the basis of the material you have been given, and then to maintain a steady and ongoing contact with your tutor.

1.1.

a) The main statement that the speaker makes in the first quatrain concerns the Renaissance belief in the primacy of the soul over the body. For Astrophel, the basic motivation of human nature should be the care of the soul, its education and training in the practice of metaphysical contemplation. The reference to the eyes in the first line is far from being arbitrary: the first stages of contemplation are based on the work of the eyes, on the vision of physical beauty, from which the intellect will proceed upwards, in successive stages of elevation. After all, our senses, and foremost among them the sense of sight, are only servants to our soul ("Eyes are formed to serve / that inward light"), so nothing could be more "unnatural" than to let them take precedence over it. Implicitly, then, by stating all these commonplaces of Renaissance Neo-Platonism, the speaker is accusing himself of being unfaithful to them because of his love for Stella; this becomes clear in the final quatrain ("True, and yet true that I must Stella love").

b) It is no coincidence that Sidney should here describe love as a form of religious cult. He is obviously manipulating the convention of the "religion of love" in order to emphasise the absolute devotion of Astrophel to his beloved Stella. This was a typical feature of the poetry of the period: the beloved was always seen as being spiritually superior to the lover, and as inhabiting a higher level of virtue, close to sanctity. But there is more to it than the manipulation of a topic: the kind of adoration, as of an icon, described in the second stanza ("an image is, which for ourselves we carve / and fools, adore in temple of our heart") parallels closely the religious use of images that was attacked by the English Reformation. Therefore, the speaker is implicitly criticising his own idolisation of a human being (the beloved) and admitting that he is misusing his own intellectual capacity in attributing a religious value to his subjective experience of love. "Cupid's dart", then, might not be any kind of arrow but an image that has been partially created by the lover, and which he has allowed to take possession of his heart, preventing his progress in spiritual contemplation. The speaker reminds himself, in the very next stanza, of the need to follow the most orthodox religious wisdom ("True, that on earth we are but pilgrims made..."), and, therefore, not to put his trust in false saints.

c) This sonnet does not end in doubt or in a situation of uncertainty, as Petrarch's poems usually did; it ends with an explicit negation of any reconciliation between will and reason: "True, and yet true that I must Stella love". Regardless of the dictates of reason, the will must have its way, and the speaker must keep on loving. There is, thus, a pre-eminence of desire at the end of the poem, as the couplet serves to close the discussion. The English sonnet form, being closed by a couplet, tends to privilege closure in a way that Italian or Spanish sonnets, with their alternating rhymes, do not. As a consequence, the final lines of an English sonnet will tend to be, as in this case, more sententious and conclusive than in the continental tradition.

2.1.

a) By structuring the first dialogue between the lovers as a sonnet, Shakespeare puts their language in the context of the Petrarchist poetry of the period, which had the sonnet as its basic means of expression. The metaphor that is used through this dialogue ("If I profane with my unworshipped hand / This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this: / My lips, two gentle pilgrims...") could easily be found in the Petrarchist repertoire of the period: Romeo describes himself as a pilgrim approaching a shrine, in an attitude of prayer. The difference between the use of this image and the tradition is, however, enormous, in this case; the "saint" (Juliet) has a voice of her own, and can answer her devotee with an intelligent twist upon the image he is using ("Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much / which mannerly devotion shows in this...").

Already here we can see the innovative force of the play: Petrarchism had expressed the individual experience of the lover, while the beloved remained above him, in a superior spiritual position. With this first conversation between Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare has abolished that situation, allowing for a dialogue that is carried out by two voices, and which has a correspondence in the physical contact between them, made evident in the kiss which closes this first dialogue ("Move not, while my prayer's effect I take").

b) In *Romeo and Juliet*, poetic language tends to operate in a direction that was completely opposed to the poetic fashion of the late sixteenth century: Shakespeare conveys the experience of a shared love, seen from the perspective both of the lover

and of the beloved. Both protagonists try to use images that express the mutuality of their feelings; thus Romeo, when describing his first encounter with Juliet to the friar (Act II, scene X): "I have been feasting with mine enemy, Where on a sudden one hath wounded me / that's by me wounded. Both our remedies / Within thy help and holy physic lies"). Such an emphasis on the mutuality of love is even more memorable in the dialogues between Romeo and Juliet. For it is there that the use of images is carried out by the two voices; each of the members of the couple plays with them and is answered by the other. This does not only occur in specific moments of dialogue, but also in the recurring use of images throughout the play: especially in the metaphors or comparisons related to light: Romeo compares Juliet with the sun at the beginning of their second encounter, and develops a long conceit by imagining what would occur if her eyes were to replace the stars; onwards in the play (Act III, scene II) she imagines him as a constellation of stars in the heavens, unconsciously playing on the same connotations that he had used before... and in the final scene (Act V, scene II), in Juliet's tomb, Romeo finally sees "a feast of light". The metaphor is transformed every time each of the lovers uses it; but each of them uses a basis that is shared: the lover, or the beloved, as a source of light, which also has its basis on the shared experience of love. Throughout the play, then, Shakespeare works towards the construction of a common language, beyond the experience and the expression of individual love.

c) At the beginning of Act II, scene II, and even before she sees Romeo, Juliet seems to be questioning his very name: why is he called Romeo (and, thus, by implication, Montague?): "Oh, Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?" Juliet knows that names are arbitrary: they do not necessarily involve any valid information about that which they designate, as in the very case of "Montague", which should refer to an enemy, and that, already here, designates her beloved. At the same time she is learning, therefore, that words are dangerous: they carry several connotations that cannot be erased from them, and which have direct (and, in the case of Verona, deadly) effects on reality. Against this, she wishes for a complete linguistic innocence, so as to be able to love Romeo without being influenced by the weight of names: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any name would smell as sweet." Interestingly, Romeo is immediately ready to abandon his own name, and to follow Juliet in this critique of the dangerous prejudices that comes with language itself: "I will be no more a Montague". This awareness of the nature of language allows Romeo and Juliet to remain supremely distanced from the violent conventions of Verona, and to attempt to build a private universe of their own, independently of the social and linguistic world that surrounds them; an attempt, however, which will ultimately be unsuccessful.

d) The language of Friar Lawrence is detached, abstract and rational. It often takes the form of moral sayings or of general statements about nature or about human behaviour ("There's naught so vile that on the earth doth live / But to the earth some especial good doth give... Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied / and vice is sometimes by action dignified"). For him, love is something that is potentially dangerous: a feeling that is not easily controlled, and which could easily lead to sin and to destruction. Friar Lawrence seems to embody the distance from emotions, the search for inner harmony against the confusion of the external world. It is because of this awareness of the need for inner harmony that he tries to bring peace to Verona by marrying Romeo and Juliet, and thus ending the enmity of Capulets and Montagues.

3.1.

a) The tone of the first stanza is obviously meant to shock the reader, in a fashion that is quite characteristic of Donne. Against the ornamental rhetoric of Petrarchism or the decorativism of the classicist poets, the speaker here dares to address the sun directly, in colloquial terms, almost mockingly, personifying it as an "old fool" as its light appears through the curtains of the room where he is laying with his beloved: "Busy old foole, unruly sun, / Why dost thou thus / Through curtains and through windows call on us?" On the one hand, the voice that speaks here appears to the reader as vital, immediate and irreverent, much more spontaneous than almost any of its contemporaries (though of course it is a very contrived "spontaneity"), less as a literary persona than as an ordinary, though learned, man. But immediately, as the first stanza proceeds onwards, the humanistic content of this strategy becomes clear: if the speaker can address the sun in such an irreverent way, it is because he sees himself as being almost as important, in the cosmological order, as the sun itself. In the chain of being that spans the universe, it is man who sets the measure of all things; and therefore human beings should be free to follow their own will, independently of the movement of the stars. The lovers are free to follow the dictates of their passion, and therefore would want to supersede even the daily movements of the sun, which change night into day ("Must to thy motion lovers' seasons run?"). The human will should accept no more rules, cosmological or otherwise, than the ones it sets for itself, for man is, as the following stanzas of the poem go on to prove figuratively, the centre of the universe.

b) The key conceit in this poem is developed in the second and third stanzas. Its first sign appears to be, in fact, a hyperbolic magnification of the speaker and his beloved,

which retroactively explains the familiar, irreverent tone with which he has addressed the sun at the start of the poem. The speaker relativizes the might of the sunbeams, asserting his simple capacity to blink his eyes against them, as if he was far more powerful than the sun itself ("I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink") and at the same time he presents the eyes of his beloved as belittling the sunlight itself ("If her eyes have not blinded thine"). In the final stanza, this movement of magnification culminates as the room where the lovers have laid is directly equated with the whole of the world, and thus turned into a micro-cosmos in itself. As the poet addresses the sun once more, it becomes clear that now its function of warming the earth will be fulfilled merely by warming the room where the speaker and his beloved are ("Since thy duties be / to warm the world, that's done in warming us"), just as the bed itself, the site of physical love, appears to be the centre of its influence, and therefore of the figurative "universe" which is the room ("This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere"). The main conceit here, which gives its form to all of the poem, is directly based on the humanistic belief in the dignity of humankind and its central role in creation: since the speaker is a man, and therefore the measure of all things, he can address the sun as a servant, and make effective his essential role in the order of creation by presenting his very bed as the central place in it, and himself and his beloved as representatives of all humanity ("She is all states, / And all princes, I; / Nothing else is."). The humanist belief in the hierarchical position of man in the cosmos has been subjectivized and turned into an image that celebrates, in hyperbolic fashion, the joy of the speaker and his beloved lying in their bed as the day comes.

c) Quite obviously, the concept of love that is at work here is the absolute opposite of the distanced, spiritual perspective of Petrarchism. The speaker and his beloved are in bed, and far from perceiving their situation as shameful, they are presented as exemplifying the elevated status of humanity in nature and its central place in the universe. While Petrarchism was based on the experience of unfulfilled love, on the social and spiritual distance between lover and beloved, here the couple (probably not married, since this poem seems to derive ultimately from the tradition of the *alba*, the poems in which the adulterous lover leaves the married lady at the break of day), lying together as the morning comes, after a night of erotic fulfilment, are presented as representative of the dignity of humankind.

3.2.

a) The first stanza states the existence of a continuity between the speaker's mind and his surrounding environment ("My mind was once the survey / of all these meadows fresh and gay"), but it also places that continuity in the past, as something that cannot be recovered. Nature was not only his working place, it actually responded to him; the environment mirrored his thoughts ("And in the greenness of the grass / did see its thoughts as in a glass"); and we should take into account here the pun on the word "green", playing on the double meaning of "young" as well as the colour, and thus suggesting the virginal, pure quality of that environment. The speaker and the natural world around him were joyfully linked, enjoying an empathic harmony, in a state of pure innocence. The entry of love into that environment is here seen as a disrupting force, which has broken the original innocence of the speaker ("She... / what I do to the grass / does to my thoughts and me"). The beloved not only disturbs the speaker's purity, she actually destroys or alters his thoughts (his reason), metaphorically "mowing" them, just as he literally mows the grass. The implications are clear: love and sexuality are an overwhelming force, which occur in nature and are part of it, but which inevitably place man outside of the unconscious innocence of nature, which he can only fully enjoy in childhood, or in a state of ignorance.

b) The description of nature in the first two stanzas is notably lacking in detail ("all those meadows fresh and gay"), highlighting its newness and purity rather than any other physical quality. The arrival of the beloved, however, introduces a new form of comparison between the speaker and the grass, showing that he is subject to destruction just as nature is: love is, for the speaker, the "scythe" that uproots him just as he uproots the grass. Note, moreover, the sexual pun implicit in the description of the grass in the second stanza ("Not a blade of grass you spied / but had a flower on either side"); the discovery of love implies the discovery of man's participation in the cycle of reproduction and, therefore, of his own exposure to time and death. As a consequence of this, the speaker's original relationship with the natural world cannot be recovered, and this becomes quite evident in stanza 3: he is still a part of nature, but he now knows that he shares in its temporality and mortality; he will always remain in his beloved meadows, but he is aware that he will do so when his body is buried in the ground ("while I lay trodden under feet"). And therefore, the "lilies", which are traditionally an image of purity, and therefore of youth and innocence, turn finally into an emblem of death ("Ye lilies... / Shall now the heraldry become / With which I shall adorn my tomb").

c) This poem is obviously a meditation on the nature of unrequited love, emphasizing its absorbing and destructive nature. The speaker here is the victim of an obsession

which occupies his mind and removes him from his natural environment, bringing him into the world of temporality and death. As such, the connotations of the text already place it firmly in the context of seventeenth-century culture, where the notions of sexuality and sin, and therefore also of death, were closely linked. However, the subtle reference to the Fall in the third stanza ("and flowers and grass, and I and all / shall in one common ruin fall") takes the poem to another level of meaning. The term "fall" in English, and especially in the poetry of this period, inevitably carries connotations of the original Fall from Eden (which Milton was to put into verse in his *Paradise Lost*); the rest of the textual elements in the poem contribute to produce a reading of the poem in the light of this reference. For, in fact, the text retells the situation of male subjectivity, placed in a solitary and harmonious natural environment, as it discovers woman and, through her, sexuality (just as in the original Garden of Eden), and, through this double discovery, is brought into the domain of death and time. The poem thus suggests that the original consequences of the biblical Fall are re-enacted in the experience of love between every man and woman. The complaint of the male speaker here, however, lends a slightly misogynistic tone to the text, placing all the responsibility for this subjective fall on the figure of Juliana, the beloved.

4.1.

a) In this monologue, Eve begins by praising the power of the fruit ("Great are thy powers, doubtless, best of fruits..."), and then goes on to justify her action rationally. For her, happiness is not truly enjoyed without knowledge ("Good unknown, sure is not had, or had / and yet unknown, is as not had at all"). Then she doubts again, and remembers that anyone who eats the fruit is destined to die ("If death / bind us with after-bands, what profits then / our inward freedom?"). Here she realises that she is about to commit a tragic error. Yet, again she uses logic, and again she comes to the wrong conclusion: she thinks that, since the serpent has eaten the fruit and gained knowledge, the fruit can only have beneficial effects on human beings (who are superior to beasts): "How dies the serpent? He hath eat'n and lives... For us alone / was death invented? or to us denied / This intellectual food?"). Therefore, she finally decides to take it ("What hinders then / to reach, and feed at once body and mind?"). Milton had to introduce this complex monologue in order to make it clear that, in spite of Satan's powers of persuasion, Eve could have acted otherwise if she had chosen to. She is free to withstand temptation, yet she deceives herself and falls into it. Eve is, as the different parts of her monologue show, quite capable of using reason, and it is only through misuse of reason, by actually convincing herself to take the fruit, that she comes to sin, and to bring about the Fall.

b) The very existence of this monologue is proof of Milton's determination to insist on the "free will" of his characters (and, by extension, of all humanity, since Adam and Eve are the parents of all human civilisation). For Milton, no act of love or obedience has any meaning unless it is done willingly. In this respect, his text mirrors his political position during the years of the Revolution, when he took the side of Cromwell, and thus of Parliament, against monarchic authority. Still, the authority of God is presented, in the poem, as worthy of all respect. Milton seeks to emphasise the essential freedom of human beings, but this does not mean that he is on the side of Satan, or against the poetic representation of God that he includes in his own poem, as the Romantic poets would have it. It has to be pointed out, moreover, that the intellectual freedom on which the poet insists so much is not equal for male and female.

c) Line 792 could be paraphrased as "She did not know that she was eating death" or as "She did not know all-devouring death as she ate". In either case, it is clear that Eve is bringing death into the world through this first act of disobedience. Note that if we take the second interpretation, the text allows us to see death in personified form, whereas if we choose the first one, it is Eve who is eating, or tasting, death as she bites the fruit. The two images, in fact, coalesce into one, and both must be taken into account in any reading of this line. Milton is offering us a paradox in order to highlight the paradoxical condition of this climactic moment when humanity grows in knowledge precisely by not knowing, or not measuring, the full consequences of its actions, and by failing to recognise its own destruction ("And *knew not* eating death").

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The Restoration and the Augustan Era

Joan Curbet Soler

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Universitat Oberta
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Introduction

The Augustan Era: historical context

From 1660 onwards, the Restoration was carried out amidst great tension between the Stuart kings, **Charles II** and **James II**, and Parliament. In spite of their support for some new legislation (such as the *Habeas Corpus Act* of 1679, which made it illegal to arrest anyone without a court order), the Stuarts' pro-Catholic sympathies and their lack of faith in representative government complicated the return of the monarchy, until the matter was settled by the overthrow of James II in 1688.

This was the **Glorious Revolution**, so called in contrast to the revolution of 1640, which resulted in a long civil war. This time, a Protestant prince from the Low Countries, **William III of Orange**, was placed on the throne, and from him onwards, the rights of succession were settled on the female descendants of the Stuart family, who were unambiguously Protestant. This effectively sealed the alliance between the Church of England and its official head, the ruling king or queen; an alliance that has remained stable until today.

Queen Anne came to the throne in 1702. She was also the heir of the Scottish royal family, and through the Act of Union of 1707 Scotland and England were effectively united, to form **Great Britain**.

The reign of Anne signalled the beginning of what, in cultural terms, is known as the **Augustan Era**, in reference to the apogee of the Roman empire: for this was the period of greatest economic and political development that England had known since the Elizabethan era. This was due, in part, to the strengthening of **Parliament**, which limited still further the power of the monarchy and helped democratise English culture.

The Augustan period was characterised by a close convergence of interests between the landed aristocracy and the growing bourgeoisie, which through the Restoration had steadily come to occupy centre stage in political and cultural life.

The political differences between these two dominant social groups were decided in Parliament. The **Tories** represented the interests of the landed aristocracy, while the **Whigs** stood for the political influence of the bourgeoisie. As we shall see, the political opinions of the writers of this period usually had some bearing on their aesthetic choices.



Session of Parliament on 22nd February 1723, by N. Lancret (1690-1743) (Paris, Musée du Louvre).

Whigs and Tories

These two political parties have dominated Parliament throughout the political history of England, even up to the present.

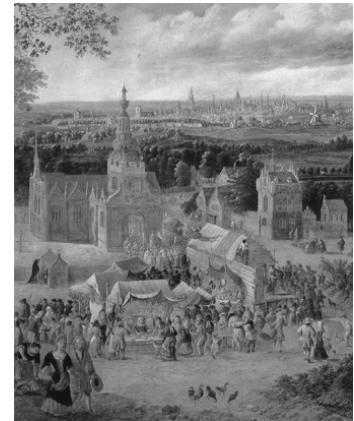
The English aristocracy of this period was, despite its claims to privilege, far more tolerant and open than the nobility of France or Spain. The landed noblemen paid their rent, and did not exact any tribute from the poor or the peasants on their estates. In fact, their main asset was not merely the land they owned, but also the livestock they kept on it. The proliferation of enclosures for sheep often drove the poor off the land and into the cities, where new opportunities were arising.

The convergence of the interests of the landed nobility with those of the bourgeoisie is understandable if we bear in mind the situation created by the Restoration at the end of the seventeenth century. Land ownership did not depend on social rank, but on the ability to buy land; and the aristocrats themselves did not hesitate to promote the produce of their own estates. Social privilege was open to the higher bourgeoisie, just as it was to the nobility, and the main object of the latter was to secure their position of privilege through blood rather than through work.

This was the state of affairs that dominated British politics throughout the reigns of the first two Hanoverian kings, **George I** (1714-27) and **George II** (1727-60). Throughout this period, the monarchy was to remain in a distanced position of neutrality, while the **British Empire** consolidated its international dominance, with its newly obtained control of Canada and its pressure over India, which it was to rule from 1773 onwards.

In England and Scotland, conditions grew more and more propitious for the development of free enterprise. The novel was to be, in part, the epic genre of social mobility, in some cases even showing inter-class marriages as harmonising and resolving social conflict.

It is perhaps significant that **Adam Smith's** *Wealth of Nations*, the theoretical basis of **modern liberalism**, should have been published in 1776, at the end of the period we are discussing, provoking only moderate debate between spokesmen of the middle classes and the nobility, while at the same time France was heading towards a violent confrontation between these same two dominant social groups.



The Outskirts of London. Oil on canvas (detail), by Jean Griffer (1652-1718) (Turin, Galleria Sabauda).

Expansion of city life

The great migratory movements, together with the growth in population (from six to eight million by the end of the century), brought about a renewal and a spectacular expansion of **city life**. London went from half a million inhabitants in 1710 to 900,000 in 1790. In spite of the miserable situation of the lower classes and the illiterate, the general impression is one of extraordinary prosperity.

Pamela (1740)

Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela* (1740) is an example of how the novel can be used to show new customs, and also the possibility of inter-class marriage.

Objectives

In studying this module, students will:

1. Become familiar with the specific cultural and social contexts of the Augustan period.
2. Learn to define the term *Neo-classicism* and to explain its importance in defining the literature of this period.
3. Learn about the origins and evolution of the English novel.
4. Learn to recognise the characteristic features of Augustan poetry.
5. Become familiar with the particular situation of poetry and prose in the context of the eighteenth century, and their evolution towards the aesthetics of Romanticism.

1. The Augustan Era (1680-1780): cultural context

The culture of the eighteenth century, which as twentieth-century readers we tend to see as the age of the Enlightenment, was governed in the English context by the principles of classicism, which had been established in the Restoration. At the same time, it laid the foundations for the dominance of the bourgeoisie, in the economic and political spheres, at a unique moment of social and economic development.

The steady reliance of the intellectual elite on the postulates of a Neo-classical aesthetics can be seen not only in the postulates of literary theory or in drama, but also in the practice of poetry and, as the century progresses, in the new literary genre that was beginning to emerge to satisfy the demands of a growing audience: the **novel**.

The intellectual circles, writing in the periodicals or in self-financed publications, celebrated the growing commercial vitality of the big cities and the international importance of England in the world economy. The vast colonial enterprise of the British Empire seemed to suggest that the country was reaching its "Golden Age", which is why the eighteenth century designated itself the **Augustan Age**, in reference to the most prosperous period of the Roman Empire.

This very designation shows the optimism with which the intellectuals contemplated the development of English culture and civilisation.

1.1. Periodicals, magazines and prose essays

The spectacular growth of the middle classes, and the consequent expansion of literacy, paved the way for the growth of journalism and the proliferation of public discussion on political and public affairs. The sense of kinship, even among rival social groups, and their better access to education, laid the foundations for a new expansion of literary publishing; and specifically, for the diffusion of periodicals.



End of term in Dr. Clayton's school in Salford, by A. Devis (1711-1787) (London, Christie's Gallery).

Public Schools

The grammar schools, which in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had guaranteed the learning of Latin by the middle classes, were replaced, from the beginning of the century, by the **public schools**, where the translation of Latin authors such as Virgil or Horace was a typical everyday exercise. The sons of the bourgeoisie were to have easy access to all this culture, providing them with an educational basis close to that of the aristocracy.

When we speak of eighteenth-century periodicals, however, we must not think in terms of today's newspapers: these publications were often written entirely by one person, who took full responsibility for the contents. Most issues contained only one essay, written by the publisher, on matters of public interest, politics or morality.

This was a major phenomenon and one that lasted for most of the century. Many of the essays of the lexicographer and critic **Samuel Johnson** first appeared in the pages of the periodicals he himself published: *The Rambler* (from 1750 to 1752) and *The Idler* (between 1758 and 1760).

Towards the end of the century, the periodicals were superseded by **magazines**, which usually contained a number of features, including **serialisations of novels**. By that time, the periodicals had already established a stylistic model for English prose, which is the same one we find in the novels of the period, from Fielding onwards.

This was undoubtedly one of the major events of the century in terms of literary culture: it represented the practice of prose writing on a level that did not attempt to be "high literature", but which allowed for a general and open debate on public matters. The literary style of the century was thus established: the **prose of the essays** (and, as we have already said, that of the novel from Henry Fielding onwards) was polished and elegant, with a syntax sometimes reminiscent of the classical education of its authors, but always avoiding an excessively "literary" style, aiming for readability and clarity rather than for complexity and virtuosity.

The writers of the periodicals avoided colloquialism and the spoken idiom, which would be considered a "low style" according to classical precepts. They aimed instead for a "middle style" that was urbane and moderate, clear and accessible, with a sense of order and rational organisation, always addressing the reader in the second person, allowing him room for opinion and treating him as an equal.

It is a prose that shuns excess and that seeks to attend not so much to individual opinions as to the **voice of common sense**. What matters is not so much subjective truths as general truths, "commonly acknowledged" or "natural" truths.

The spread of moral and political debate (among the literate classes, that is) created a sense of shared citizenship and cultural progress that had its philosophical counterpart in the **new ways of thinking** about teaching and ethics.

The first issue of *The Tatler*

The first issue of *The Tatler*, containing only essays by **Thomas Addison**, appeared in 1709, while 1711 saw the first edition of *The Spectator*, written and published by **Joseph Steele**.

More information

For more information on Samuel Johnson, see subsection 2.4 of this module.

The concept of humanity promoted by the Neo-classicists, and still more by the pedagogues, was essentially progressive and positive. In general terms (and with the exceptions that we shall point out), the literature of the period was clearly optimistic. It displays a sense of contentment and mutual understanding between author and audience that is difficult to find, in such a widespread form, in other periods.

The Augustan citizen, whether of the middle class or of the lower nobility, is typically open, learned and tolerant. He is also assumed to have had a basic classical education. As we have already said, the cultural framework of the period is that of **Neo-classicism**, which privileges the notions of moderation, nature and order, in an attempt to create a climate of civilised serenity.

1.2. Philosophical principles

Not only the literary theories, but also the main philosophical influences of the late 17th and 18th centuries tended to remind writers (poets, dramatists, philosophers) of the need to work within certain limits. Thus, **John Locke** in the first chapter of his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690), wrote:

"Were the capacities of our understandings well considered,... and the horizon that sets the bounds between the enlightened and dark parts of things, men would perhaps... acquiesce in the avowed ignorance of the one, and employ their thoughts and discourse with more advantage and satisfaction in the other."

John Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*.

And in *An Essay on Criticism* (1716), **Alexander Pope** recommended: "Be sure of yourself and your depth...". The author who was most aware of his own limitations was therefore the one most likely to produce works of real value.

This sense of boundaries also affected the notions of style. In drama criticism we find an insistence on the importance of the **Aristotelian unities** of action, place and time, which in practice hindered the normal development of drama after Dryden. In poetry, as in drama, there was a strict notion of *decorum* to be respected: the choice of the right words for each situation or genre.

This choice implied careful attention to the distinction between the high style of the epic and tragedy, on the one hand, and the moderate or "middle" styles of lyric poetry and comedy, on the other. At the same time, this classical bent emphasised the importance of generalisation. Neo-classical authors were not interested in individuals but in **archetypes**; their concern was not to describe specific persons and their evolution through time, but to draw "just representations of general nature" (Johnson), as indeed authors such as Fielding were to do in the field of the novel.

The Neo-classicists' concept of **Nature** must be understood in its most practical and immediate sense. The "nature" of things is their **reality**, what these things *are*; and if we are talking about the natural landscape, it will be better and more enjoyable to the extent that it has been arranged and organised by man. The very rules of art require us not to copy from nature, but rather to improve on it.

The following passage from Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* shows this quite clearly:

"Those rules of old discovered, not devised,
Are nature still, but nature methodized:
Nature, like liberty, is but restrained
By the same laws which first herself ordained."

Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*.

It is quite clear that nature, for the Augustan sensibility, is the basis of human action and art, but that it is only enjoyable or useful to the extent that it is "normativized", or submitted to rules and rational organisation. This **rationalism** is itself to be seen as "natural", for the reason of man belongs to "these laws which first herself ordained".

Note that this rationalistic and optimistic creed is stated here in a clear, explicit language, the personification of nature at the end being the only figure of language. In fact, this passage could be taken as an example of the poetic stylistics of the period, which we shall now discuss more closely.

2. Augustan poetry (1680-1770)

The eighteenth century is seen from our perspective as the **Age of Reason**. From our post-romantic point of view, therefore, it may not look like the best of periods for poetry. If Augustan verse does not please the taste of late twentieth-century readers, it is perhaps not because of its reliance on good sense and reasonability, but mainly because of the normative bent of Neo-classicism.

Selected chronology

1687 John Dryden, *The Hind and the Panther*
 1712 Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*
 1726-30 James Thomson, *The Seasons*
 1730 Jonathan Swift, *Poems*
 1734 Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*
 1740 John Dyer, *The Ruins of Rome*
 1749 Samuel Johnson, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*
 1750 Thomas Gray, *Elegy written in a Country Churchyard*
 1757 John Dyer, *The Fleece*



Alexander Pope. Portrait attributed to C. Jervas (London, National Portrait Gallery).

In prose, the dominant taste tended to establish, as we have seen, a common ground of moderation and accessibility, avoiding the extremes of colloquialism and solemnity. In verse, there was a similar tendency; the dominant classical taste forced the poet to remain always at a safe distance from an oral style, and close to the imitation of the classics, which were seen, as the periodical *Guardian* (86th issue) put it, as "fountains of good sense and eloquence".

This eloquence corresponded to a refinement and selection of language. "Polish" and "elegance" are the terms most commonly found in the critical treatises of the age. In the preface to his translation of the *Iliad* (1715), Alexander Pope recommended a "gracious and dignified simplicity... between ostentation and rusticity", as an ideal of style.

The poetry of the period thus lost contact with the popular, oral tradition, and adopted a very selective model of diction, avoiding originality and complex imagination in favour of **clarity** and **elegance**. Nevertheless, the Augustan ideals of rationality, and of concern for the common welfare of society, prevented the writers of verse from falling into the extremes of academicism and linguistic complexity.

The main aim of the best poets of the period was didactic as well as aesthetic, or to put it even more clearly, they could not separate the aesthetic elements from their **didactic function**. The goal was the fulfilment of Horatian poetics: to teach through pleasure. A distinctive product of the age was the **essay in verse**, composed in a moderate, fluent and rational style. Poetry was seen as an educational tool rather than as an imaginative genre; what mattered was the natural "truth" of its content, as long as it was expressed in a memorable form.

2.1. John Dryden (1631-1700)

At the end of the seventeenth century, the poetic scene was dominated by the towering figure of John Dryden, who did not in fact live to see the eighteenth century, but whose work defined its aesthetics. As we pointed out at the end of the previous chapter, his adaptations of Shakespeare to classical rules (such as *All for Love or The World Well Lost* in 1677, in which he adapted the story of *Antony and Cleopatra* to the Aristotelian unities) and his strict reliance on Latin poetry as a model (even in his long poems of Biblical inspiration, such as *Absalom and Achitophel*) set the tone for most of the verse that was to be produced after him. Dryden's influence is spread not only through his own work, but also through his translations of Horace and Ovid; even the critical studies he wrote on these were seen as essential as models of critical prose.

After Dryden, poetry tended to remain limited by the normative constraints that he had followed – a far cry from the imaginative virtuosity of poetry before the English Revolution.

Now the language of verse hovered between the serious, solemn and latinising tendency of lyric poetry (always with strict moderation in the use of imagery, and a tendency towards the rewriting of classical topics) and the "middle style" that was considered appropriate for didactic and educational verse. Following the classical tradition, the most respected poetic genre was the epic, but in general the Augustan poets stayed away from it; they admired the work of **Milton** and canonised him, but they did not follow his example. As for lyric poetry, it was to remain imitative rather than tending to personal expression; there is always a sense of moderation in the imagery it uses, and it tends to emphasise reason and order, even while describing individual feelings.

It is significant that two of the best poets of the eighteenth century (Swift and Johnson) should have been, first and foremost, writers of prose. The third, at once the best of the three and the most representative of this state of affairs, was Alexander Pope.

"True Wit"

"True Wit", true cleverness in expression, is, again in the words of Alexander Pope, "what oft (often) was thought, but ne'er so well expressed".



John Dryden. Portrait by G. Kneller, 1693 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

John Dryden

John Dryden also produced some exemplary translations of the classics (Theocritus, Horace, Ovid and Homer). Many of these translations were accompanied by critical studies, which are indispensable for analysing the English prose of the Restoration period.

2.2. Alexander Pope (1688-1774)

Alexander Pope was a man of leisure and great culture. Although a Catholic, he was a Tory and was accustomed to the patronage of courtly nobility. He knew that he was writing for a cultivated audience, and his best verse is based on references to classical topics, which he compares to his own contemporary English context.

2.2.1. Pope's imitations

Pope usually wrote **imitations** (*imitatio*), which, in the classical models of rhetoric, did not mean "copies", but rather "adaptations". For instance, he took Virgil's *Eclogues* as a basis of his own *Pastorals* (1709), but he organised the topics in his own way, incorporating references to Milton, and describing a clearly English countryside.

The verse letter *Eloise to Abelard*, an imitation of the Ovidian heroic epistle, serves to illustrate the difference between Pope's language of love and that used by the Romantics. Here, the passion of love is:

"Still as the sea, ere winds were taught to blow,
Or moving spirit bade the waters flow;
Soft as the slumbers of a saint forgiven,
And mild as opening gleams of promis'd heav'n..." (253-56)

Alexander Pope, *Eloise to Abelard*.

This is clearly the language of passion, but it is expressed through topics rather than through a group of inspired or original images. Moreover, it flows in controlled cadences, thanks to the use of the **heroic couplet**, which lends all these compositions a tone of order and control rather than of freedom. These characteristics, which are typical of Pope, are much better suited to his two other favourite genres: the openly **didactic verse treatise** and the **mock-heroic**.

2.2.2. Pope's mock-heroic

Among the mock-heroic, we have to mention *The Rape of the Lock* (1712), a comic poem that ridicules the fashionable society of the day, with all its exaggerated notions of elegance and deportment.

The protagonists of the poem are two families known to Pope; the action is the stealing of a small lock of hair from a young lady by a "beau" or gentleman of fashion. Pope describes the incident humorously, using continual classical references in the tradition of the Latin epic. The comedy arises from the contrast between the solemnity of the descriptions and the triviality of the action.

The poem, as a whole, is not intended as social criticism. On the contrary, its audience are the very same well-educated ladies and gentlemen that it portrays. This is another example of the complicity between author and audience that is so characteristic of the Augustan Age. The poet can gently mock the ritualised social meetings of the period, but by doing so he is in fact praising the culture of his readers, who will understand the joke.

Within this tone of amiable jest, the Queen herself can be alluded to:

"Here thou, great Anna! Whom three realms obey,
Dost sometimes counsel take, and sometimes tea." (III, 7-8)

Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*.

The mock-heroic is also the style adopted in *The Dunciad* (1728), where the poet attacks his rivals in verse.

2.2.3. Pope's essay in verse

The poetic form that is most representative of the age is the essay in verse, some of the best examples of which were written by Pope. *An Essay on Criticism*, for instance, which we quoted at the beginning of this module, stands as a canonical poetics of the period, while *An Essay on Man* (1734) must probably be seen as the most important of all Pope's works.

These texts may not read like poetry to us, but they nevertheless manage to express the basic and most general ideals of their age in a concise and memorable form. Here, the **decasyllabic couplet** is particularly useful to the poet, allowing him to organise his sentences and arguments into emphatic and sententious formulas. With Pope, the Age of Reason had found an appropriate form of expression in verse.

An Essay on Man

A poem in four epistles addressed to Pope's friend Henry St John, Lord Bolingbroke. The overall purpose of the poem was to demonstrate the essential rightness of the world as ordered by God; man's inability to recognise this is due to his limited perception.

Activity

2.1. Read the following two fragments from of Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man* and write a commentary, using the questions below as a guide.

"Self-love thus push'd to social, to divine,
Gives thee to make thy neighbour's blessing thine.
Is this too little for the boundless heart?
Extend it, let thy enemies have part:
Grasp the whole worlds of Reason, Life, and Sense,
In one close system of Benevolence." (IV, 353-58)

"All nature is but art, unknown to thee;
All chance, direction, which thou canst not see;
All discord, harmony not understood;
All partial evil, universal good:
And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right." (I, 289-94)

a) These lines are part of a didactic essay written in verse. How do they differ from what we know as lyric poetry? Observe the phrasing, the level of language and the rhyme: What kind of tone is achieved through their use here? What kind of speaker is addressing the reader?

b) How does the speaker link the notions of nature and the common good in the second passage? Try to relate this passage to the Augustan notions of optimism and nature.

2.3. Other poets: Jonathan Swift, John Dyer, William Collins, James Thomson and John Armstrong

Alongside Pope we must also mention his close friend and collaborator **Jonathan Swift** (1667-1745), to whom we shall return below when we consider his works in prose.

For Swift, best known as the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, was also a fertile lyricist. Unlike Pope, he did not hesitate to break the rules of decorum whenever necessary, in order to furnish descriptions of city life that come closer to what later came to be known as **realism**.

His poetic vocabulary far exceeds the limits prescribed by classical norms. His attention to physical detail, and his gift for characterisation, stand out in contrast to the restraint and neutrality of the other poets.

He himself made a collection of his best verse, which was published in 1730. This collection shows that his distance from the postulates of Neo-classicism is matched by his distance from the general optimism of the period. No other contemporary writer could have produced a couplet specifying that "now and then / Beasts may degenerate into men".

Among the most representative of the poets that followed Pope's model (if not the best from our perspective) are **John Dyer**, **William Collins** and **James Thomson**.

In general, Dyer always remains a public poet, engaged in communication with his reader, and actively furnishing him with the means for moral and social improvement. He is perhaps too didactic to be appreciated outside of his context. William Collins, besides his lyrical quality, has a tendency to abstract thought and personification that is also quite representative of the imaginative rigidity of his time.

James Thomson, on the other hand, is perhaps the most enjoyable of the poets who concentrated on writing lyrics. His poems *The Seasons* (1726-30) are scrupulous renditions of natural scenery, detailed and objective, executed from the perspective of a civilised and serene speaker. But, while this individual voice is fully recognisable as enlightened and "Augustan", it chooses, significantly, to situate itself at a remove from the commerce and communication with its peers, and analyses itself in its isolation. Occasionally,



James Thomson. Portrait by Jean Patoun, c. 1746 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

there is a feeling of awe, and almost of fear, in front of the natural scenery, that seems to anticipate the Romantic sensibility, as in this fragment from *Evening and Night*:

"Drear is the state of the benighted wretch
Who then, bewildered, wanders through the dark,
Full of pale fancies and chimeras huge..." (*Autumn*, 1145-47)

James Thomson, *The Seasons*.

Thomson thus became a much more individualised voice, much more attentive to its own subjectivity, and to the contact of that subjectivity with nature, than the other authors of the period.

Much more representative of the period, however, were the didactic treatises by **John Armstrong** or Alexander Pope, which continued to be reedited throughout the latter half of the century.

The most representative of the eighteenth-century authors, and the one most in touch with the civil, congenial outlook of the period, was Samuel Johnson.

2.4. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

As a poet, Johnson tried to remain much closer to his contemporaries, and also to the classical tradition to which they belonged. His best poems are imitations of classical poetry that could be applied to the moral life of contemporary England. Good examples of this are his imitation of Juvenal's tenth satire, which he entitles *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749), or his rendition of several of Horace's *Odes* into English, recasting them into short and effective poems that concentrate not on the specific, but always on the general fate of humankind:

"In vain we shun the din of war,
And terrors of the stormy main,
In vain with anxious breasts we fear
Unwholesome Sirius' sultry reign;
We all must view the Stygian flood
That silent cuts the dreary plains." (9-14)

Johnson's imitation of the eleventh Horatian *Ode*.

This is only an example: what Johnson is interested in, as a poet, is the common fate of humanity, not the specific state of his own feelings.

James Thomson

He was later to be vindicated by the Romantic poets as a predecessor of their own forms of sensibility.



Samuel Johnson. Portrait by Sir J. Reynolds (1723-1792) (Southwark, Courage Brewery).

Samuel Johnson

Twenty years younger than Pope, Samuel Johnson was a direct inheritor of Dryden's Neo-classicism, and much of his best critical writing was carried out from that perspective.

The Horatian commentary on the general need to prepare for death is as valid in eighteenth-century England as it was in ancient Rome, and he renders it in a refined but clear style, keeping the same mythological references (the empire of Sirius, the Stygian river of death) but rendering the message in a clear, direct language, far from stylistic or syntactic complication.

Johnson, as a poet, is systematically more interested in the general and the common than in the individual or the specific; in "types" rather than in particular cases. This perspective also influenced his literary criticism and his work as an essayist: the essays he published in his periodicals, *The Idler* and *The Rambler*, were intended to be "general estimations of virtues and vices". While allowing him many opportunities to display his wit, they always tended to examine their subjects from a very distanced, neutral perspective.

It must also be mentioned that Johnson spent the last years of his life writing biographical and critical accounts of the poets that had preceded him: *The Lives of the English Poets* (1779-81). These writings remain a touchstone of the period, for they include the canonisation of Milton as a poet in the classical tradition, and also the stigmatisation of the Metaphysical poets as authors who endeavoured only to be "singular in their thoughts", without attempting to "copy from Nature". It was only logical that Johnson should also criticise Shakespeare for his lack of decorum and good sense, as we soon shall see.

2.5. The sentimental side of Augustanism: Thomas Gray and Oliver Goldsmith

As the century came closer to its end, there was a growing tendency to **sentimentalism** on the part of the poets who concentrated on nature. The vindication of the common interest or of a "normativized" nature began to lose strength against a tendency to concentrate on feelings of melancholy and isolation.

The sentimental side of Augustanism, which was also being nurtured by the new developments in prose fiction, can be seen in the verse of **Thomas Gray** (1716-1771, particularly from the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* onwards) and **Oliver Goldsmith** (1728-1774). Goldsmith was the author of *The Deserted Village*, the most famous of all the poems about the great migratory movements from the countryside to the big cities, and *The Traveller*, a long evocation of the beneficial influence of nature on the spirit, which seems to anticipate some of Wordsworth's subjects. Still, Goldsmith's language

More information

For more information on Oliver Goldsmith, see subsection 5.3 of this module.

remains too polished, and too close to Augustan convention; despite the growth of sentimental poetry and of individualism, the restrictive tendencies of Neo-classicism did not allow for full-fledged indulgence in feeling.

The definitive breach in linguistic expression, opening poetry up to colloquialism and "democratising" poetic diction, would only come with the work of William Wordsworth.

3. Augustan prose (1710-1730): Defoe and Swift

The initial developments of prose fiction in English took place outside the rules of Neo-classicism, and in an extremely informal way. It was only with the work of Fielding and Richardson in the forties and fifties that the novel began to be discussed as a literary genre from a Neo-classical perspective.

Selected chronology

- 1712 Daniel Defoe, *Reasons against the Succession of the House of Hanover*
- 1719 Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*
- 1722 Daniel Defoe, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*
- 1722 Daniel Defoe, *Colonel Jack*
- 1724 Daniel Defoe, *Roxana, or The Fortunate Mistress*
- 1726 Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*



The Canvass, from the series "An Election", by W. Hogarth (1697-1764) (London, Sir John Soane Museum).

Before that, there was no theoretical justification for a genre consisting of long fictional narratives in prose. Poetry and drama were the only forms of literature envisaged in classical theory, and the only ones deserving critical attention. It is quite significant that the first English novels which deserve the name, those written by Daniel Defoe before 1725, should have found their primary audience among the growing bourgeoisie, rather than among the nobility. From its origins, the **novel** was to be the privileged means of expression of the emerging middle class.

It is no coincidence that these first novels should have taken the form of **autobiographies**. In fact, the first narrative prose works to be widely read during the Restoration were biographical accounts of real individuals, written with an educative or religious intent. By including direct references to the everyday life of the protagonists, and by operating outside of the constraints of "literature", these works allowed for a greater range of linguistic variety. This same freedom of style, this opening to the everyday and the material conditions of life, was to condition the early development of **prose fiction**.

The Anglican church promoted the reading of these works among the middle classes; they were seen not merely as a form of entertainment, but as useful examples of lives worthy of imitation.

Some of them reconstructed the lives of specific gentlemen or ladies (as in the *Account of the Life and Death of Mrs Elizabeth Bury*, 1720), deliberately encouraging the audience to identify with the protagonist. Others offered biographies of eminent or pious parsons (as in *The Life of the Reverend Trosse, Written by Himself*, 1714). This latter work illustrates the importance of the autobiographical perspective in these publications.

Protestantism always emphasises direct, individual religious experience, without any need for a communal background. Religious experience is always and primarily individual, not shared. In the works of proselytism aimed at a wider middle-class public, the sense of individuality appeared both in the spiritual sense and in the notion of life as a journey that each individual has to make on his or her own.

These works are not very important in terms of literary quality, but they created the audience that was to welcome the first novels.

3.1. Daniel Defoe (1660-1731)

The works that Daniel Defoe produced between 1719 and 1724 belonged to this same trend, and were written with the same audience in mind. They could not be seen, therefore, as "literature" at the time of publication: they were "fictional lives", but they were also offered to the reader for the sake of moral edification.

Defoe had worked as a journalist, as a writer of treatises on the wool trade, and even as a spy for the Whig party, before he sat down to write his five novels. His allegiance (even in political terms) to the world of the emerging class was a motivating force in his work, in which the theme of personal, individual dignity was given a strong religious significance.

3.1.1. *Robinson Crusoe*

This strong religious significance is especially evident in the case of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719): the mature reader coming to it today will recognise it, before he is more than half way through, as being first and foremost a book of Puritan proselytism.

From our post-romantic perspective, the protagonist's extreme coldness towards nature, his failure to identify with the environment of the desert island, will be difficult to understand. Yet, it soon becomes evident that these elements are necessary if the book is to achieve its main purpose: to show the capacity of the good, responsible English citizen to resist extreme hostility, the hostility of that which is not human, in the state most feared by the Augustan mind, solitude, shut off from exchange and intercourse with other, equal minds.



Daniel Defoe. Engraving by M. U. de Gucht (London Library).

Daniel Defoe

Defoe did not start writing narrative fiction until he was almost 60 years old. What he wrote were fictitious reports, narrated by their supposed protagonists: these were his great novels. Defoe was almost 70 when he sold the manuscript of *Robinson Crusoe* to a printer for the sum of £10.

In this way, almost by contrast, *Robinson Crusoe* confirms the general ideology of communality and social optimism that was characteristic of the early Augustan era. Robinson himself is an example of the enduring values of civilisation, which can withstand even the total absence of human contact.

The religious aspect of this optimism becomes evident after Robinson meets the savages, and among them his companion, Friday. Robinson quickly begins the task of converting him to Christianity, and the novel becomes an exaltation of the postulates of Protestant faith, which can be more effective, and more joyful, without the support of any ecclesiastical hierarchy: in this case, supported merely by the presence of God and his voice in the Bible.

It is quite understandable, therefore, that this novel should have been seen as epitomising the ideological basis of the English empire, seen:

- 1) on the one hand, as an attempt to export Protestantism to the colonies, and
- 2) on the other hand, as an attempt to appropriate and exploit the colonies' natural riches.

The meticulous descriptions that Robinson gives of his plantations of rice, or of the painstaking preparation and upkeep of his manufactured clothes, can be tiresome on account of the excess of detail, yet they are extremely suggestive of the practical, rational mentality that characterised the middle class of the period and its pragmatic and utilitarian approach to nature and material goods. Robinson Crusoe, in his isolation, and precisely because of his isolation, could thus become the best representative of the endurance and validity of the work ethic of the bourgeoisie.

3.1.2. *Moll Flanders*

Even more daring, from our perspective, is *Moll Flanders* (1722), another of Defoe's fictional autobiographies. *Moll Flanders* goes one step further, in that it gives an account of the life of a lower-class female character, daughter of a convicted mother and a deported father, who is forced to sell her own body as merchandise.

A penitent Moll looks back from the vantage point of old age on her life as a whore, wife, thief, transported felon and honest penitent, the story of which is to be published:

"for the sake of the just moral of every part of it, and for instruction, caution, warning and improvement to every reader".

Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*.



"Robinson Crusoe saving his goods out of the wreck of the ship."
Illustration from an edition of Defoe's novel published in 1726 (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale).

Moll Flanders

In the very title we are told that the account is "from her memorandums" and no other author is mentioned. Once again Defoe effaces himself as author in favour of his character, presenting her not as a type, but as an individual in her own right.

Moll Flanders is also the first example in English literature of the **picaresque novel**, with its serious presentation of an individual who has to live on the edges of society, wearing and changing masks whenever necessary. Moll never gives away her real identity, and changes her name constantly. Living outside the established order, she can perceive its occasional duplicity, and even comes to take advantage of it, always (and this is another significant innovation) from a specifically **female perspective**.

"Men had no scruple to set themselves out as persons meriting a woman of fortune, when they had really no fortune of their own. It was but just to deal with them in their own way, and if it was possible, to deceive the Deceiver."

Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*.

It sometimes seems that the older Moll, the narrator, tries too hard to justify her actions as a young woman, which merely adds to the general realism of the text. She goes through five marriages (one of them to her own brother), and through all of them she learns to adapt and to obtain the greatest financial benefit. Seen as a whole, the episodic nature of the novel, its lack of "plot", makes it seem more realistic and authentic.

Without disregarding the innovative element in Defoe, it is clear that *Moll Flanders* was basically consistent with the traditional picaresque frame. To find a significant departure from that frame we shall have to turn to the works of Henry Fielding.

3.1.3. Other novels

Defoe's other novels, *Colonel Jack* (1722) and *Roxana* (1724), follow the same trend of fictional autobiography, though by then Defoe's main contribution to narrative fiction had been completed.

He was the first author to give a voice to the spirit of **individualism** and the sense of personal confrontation with the world that was to be typical of the emerging middle class, and in general of the shifting, mobile society in which characters such as Moll Flanders had to learn to survive.

3.2. Jonathan Swift (1667-1745)

Before proceeding any further, we must stop to mention the most notable prose writer of the first half of the century, Jonathan Swift. For, while Defoe's works evidently represent a realistic, but also ultimately optimistic approach

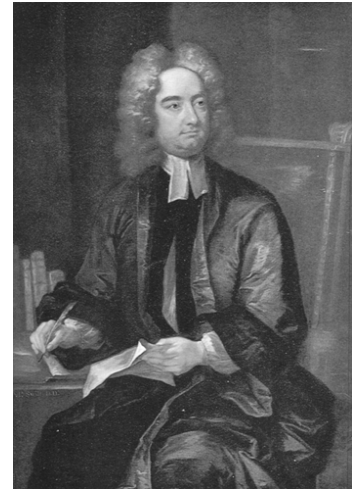
to society seen from a middle-class perspective, Swift appears rather as the most radical critic of the Augustan faith in human nature and man's capacity for improvement.

On the other hand, there is another aspect that, despite their many differences, links Swift to Defoe from our point of view: the break, in the early part of the century, with the stylistic notion of decorum. Swift works from a much more elevated position than Defoe, in terms of style; he adopts a much more refined and elegant literary language. Yet this stylistic elevation is used to heighten the satiric effect when he introduces a description of physical ugliness, or when he refers directly to grotesque features of the human body in an unexpected context.

In a period so preoccupied with delicacy and elegance, with "good manners" in literature, Swift stands out for his violent, uncompromising approach to the description of physical human nature, which is always seen with a sense of ridicule, and often with repugnance. This is only one aspect of Swift's **misanthropy**; what he attacks is not only the aesthetics of the times, but also the dominant ideology of consensus and rationalism. It is mainly the idea of progress that he ridicules by unmasking the barbarity that underlies the apparent improvement in manners and education, and by presenting the language of rationality as a cloak, or disguise, for the fundamental irrationality of human beings.

It has been argued that this misanthropy may have come from his contact with the lower levels of society, while working as a cleric in Ireland (he was ordained in Dublin in 1694, and later became Dean of St. Patrick's). However, this cannot account for his switch in political allegiance. Though he had been close to the Whigs, he changed sides in 1710 and became a member of the Tory party, mistrusting the close alliances between Whig members of Parliament and certain religious dissenting groups outside the Church of England (to which Daniel Defoe was loyal).

Seen from today, Swift appears as the most radical satirist of his time. His technique usually consists of using the polite, learned, educated tone of the period to describe an act of violence or degeneration.



Jonathan Swift. Portrait by C. Jervas, c. 1718 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

Jonathan Swift

Jonathan Swift appears both as the best satirist of the period and as the most difficult to classify in terms of ideology.

3.2.1. *Gulliver's Travels*

The most important of Swift's works, and the one most at odds with the general ideology of the period, is undoubtedly *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). The first pages read like a fictional life of a traveller, along the lines of *Robinson Crusoe*, until we reach the narrator's description of himself tied to the ground by the Lilliputians, whose world is a minuscule version of Western (and, in some respects, specifically English) society.

As the book progresses, the reader begins to realise that Swift's plan is far more ambitious, and more critically aggressive, than had at first appeared. Having ridiculed, in Gulliver's first two journeys, the social aspects of human civilisation and the very physiology of human beings, Swift goes one step further and attacks the very notion of **humanity**.

This takes place in the fourth part of the book, in which Gulliver visits an island inhabited by what appear to be horses, although they have a language of their own and a fully institutionalised society. Here Swift uses another of his best **satiric strategies**: he withholds crucial information from the reader and describes the situation in all its brutality, until a final revelation of the truth surprises us. The savage servants of these rational horses, called "Yahoos", are described in horrifying detail. It is not until their violent and aggressive behaviour has been commented on in detail that Gulliver (and, through him, the reader) realises that the Yahoos are human beings.

Here the ideal of perfectible humanity is ridiculed, while, on the other hand, rationality itself may not seem the most desirable goal. The intelligent quadrupeds (named Houyhnhnms) appear too cold, too empty of feeling, to allow for any ideological consolation.

In terms of ideology, therefore, a radical **nihilism** (the antithesis of Augustanism) emerges as the only viable option, and Gulliver ends the novel in isolation from humanity, unable to bear the sight of his own family.

It is evident that this emptiness does not satisfy the author either. Perhaps sentimentalism would be the only viable way of retaining contact with humanity, but Swift does not touch on this. The development of individual feeling was to be one of the major aspects of the novel only from Richardson onwards. *Gulliver's Travels* remains, in terms of literary history, as the most serious questioning not only of the ideology of its time, but of the very possibility of humanism.



Illustration for an edition of *Gulliver's Travels*.

Size of the inhabitants

The size of the inhabitants of the island makes it possible for Gulliver to see their ritualistic and hierarchical society from a distance, and to observe the solemn ceremonies of the court (which mirror those of the old English aristocracy) with a detached and amused eye. But in the second journey, to Brobdingnag, Gulliver himself becomes a toy in the hands of a society of giants. In spite of the magnanimity and enlightenment of the court, the narrator cannot help but feel disgust at the physical presence of the giants, which he describes in close-up, as they pick him up in their hands.

Activity

3.1. Read Chapter 5 of Book IV of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and write a commentary, using the questions below as a guide.

(Gulliver explains the concept of war, and the legal organisation of English society, to one of the Houyhnhnms, the race of rational horses he encounters on his last journey.)

"The reader may please to observe, that the following extract of many conversations I had with my master, contains a summary of the most material points, which were discoursed at several times for above two years; his Honour often desiring fuller satisfactions as I farther improved in the Houyhnhnm tongue. I laid before him, as well as I could, the whole state of Europe; I discoursed of trade and manufactures, of arts and sciences; and the answers I gave to all the questions he made, as they arose upon several subjects, were a fund of conversation not to be exhausted. But I shall here only set down the substance of what passed between us concerning my own country, reducing it into order as well as I can, without any regard to time or other circumstances, while I strictly adhere to truth. My only concern is, that I shall hardly be able to do justice to my master's arguments and expressions, which must needs suffer by my want of capacity, as well as by a translation into our barbarous English.

In obedience therefore to his Honour's commands, I related to him the Revolution under the Prince of Orange, the long war with France entered into by the said Prince, and renewed by his successor the present Queen, wherein the greatest powers of Christendon were engaged, and which still continued. I computed, at his request, that about a million of Yahoos might have been killed in the whole progress of it, and perhaps a hundred or more cities taken, and five times as many ships burnt or sunk.

He asked me what were the usual causes or motives that made one country go to war with another. I answered they were innumerable, but I should only mention a few of the chief. Sometimes the ambition of princes, who never think they have land or people enough to govern; sometimes the corruption of ministers, who engage their master in a war in order to stifle or divert the clamour of the subjects against their evil administration. Difference in opinions hath cost many millions of lives: for instance, whether flesh be bread, or bread be flesh; whether the juice of a certain berry be blood or wine; whether whistling be a vice or a virtue; whether it be better to kiss a post, or throw it into the fire; what is the best colour for a coat, whether black, white, red or grey; and whether it should be long or short, narrow or wide, dirty or clean, with many more. Neither are any wars so furious and bloody, or of so long continuance, as those occasioned by difference in opinion, especially if it be in things indifferent.

Sometimes the quarrel between two princes is to decide which of them shall dispossess a third of his dominions where neither of them pretend to any right. Sometimes one prince quarrelleth with another, for fear the other should quarrel with him. Sometimes a war is entered upon, because the enemy is too strong, and sometimes because he is too weak. Sometimes our neighbours want the things which we have, or have the things which we want; and we both fight, till they take ours or give us theirs. It is a very justifiable cause of war to invade a country after the people have been wasted by famine, destroyed by pestilence, or embroiled by factions amongst themselves. It is justifiable to enter into a war against our nearest ally, when one of his towns lies convenient for us, or a territory of land, that would render our dominions round and compact. If a prince sends forces into a nation where the people are poor and ignorant, he may lawfully put half of them to death, and make slaves of the rest, in order to civilise and reduce them from their barbarous way of living. It is a very kingly, honourable, and frequent practice, when one prince desires the assistance of another to secure him against an invader, that the assistant, when he has driven out the invader, should seize on the dominions himself, and kill, imprison or banish the prince he came to relieve. Alliance by blood or marriage is a sufficient cause of war between princes, and the nearer the kindred is, the greater is their disposition to quarrel; poor nations are hungry, and rich nations are proud, and pride and hunger will ever be at variance. For these reasons, the trade of a soldier is held the most honourable of all others: because a soldier is a Yahoo hired to kill in cold blood as many of his own species, who have never offended him, as possibly he can.

There is likewise a kind of beggarly princes in Europe, not able to make war by themselves, who hire out their troops to richer nations, for so much a day to each man; of which they keep three fourths to themselves, and it is the best part of their maintenance; such are those in Germany and other northern parts of Europe.

What you have told me (said my master), upon the subject of war, doth indeed discover most admirably the effects of that Reason you pretend to; however, it is happy that the shame is greater than the danger; and that Nature hath left you utterly incapable of doing much mischief; for your mouths lying flat with your faces, you can hardly bite each other to any purpose, unless by consent. Then, as to the claws upon your feet before and behind, they are so short and tender, that one of our Yahoos would drive a dozen of yours before him. And therefore in recounting the numbers of those who have been killed in battle, I cannot but think that you have said the thing which is not.

I could not forbear shaking my head and smiling a little at his ignorance. And, being no stranger to the art of war, I gave him a description of cannons, culverins, muskets,

carabines, pistols, bullets, powder, swords, bayonets, battles, sieges, retreats, attacks, undermines, countermines, bombardments, sea-fights; ships sunk with a thousand men, twenty thousand killed on each side; dying groans, limbs flying in the air, smoke, noise, confusion, trampling to death under horses' feet; flight, pursuit, victory; fields strewn with carcasses left for food to dogs, and wolves, and birds of prey; plundering, stripping, ravishing, burning, and destroying. And to set forth the valour of my own dear countrymen, I assured him, that I had seen them blow up a hundred enemies at once in a siege, and as many in a ship, and beheld the dead bodies drop down in pieces from the clouds, to the great diversion of all the spectators.

I was going on to more particulars, when my master commanded me silence. He said, whoever understood the nature of Yahoos might easily believe it possible for so vile an animal to be capable of every action I had named, if their strength and cunning equalled their malice. But as my discourse had increased his abhorrence of the whole species, so he found it gave him a disturbance in his mind, to which he was wholly a stranger before. He thought his ears being used to such abominable words, might by degrees admit them with less detestation. That although he hated the Yahoos of this country, yet he no more blamed them for their odious qualities, than he did a gnnayh (a bird of prey) for its cruelty, or a sharp stone for cutting his hoof. But when a creature pretending to Reason could be capable of such enormities, he dreaded lest the corruption of that faculty might be worse than brutality itself. He seemed therefore confident, that instead of Reason, we were only possessed of some quality fitted to increase our natural vices; as the reflection from a troubled stream returns the image of an ill-shapen body, not only larger, but more distorted.

He added, that he had heard too much upon the subject of war, both in this, and some former discourses. There was another point which a little perplexed him at present. I had said, that some of our crew left their country on account of being ruined by law; that I had already explained the meaning of the word; but he was at a loss how it should come to pass, that the law which was intended for every man's preservation, should be any man's ruin. Therefore he desired to be further satisfied what I meant by law, and the dispensers thereof, according to the present practice in my own country; because he thought Nature and Reason were sufficient guides for a reasonable animal, as we pretended to be, in showing us what we ought to do, and what to avoid.

I assured his Honour, that law was a science wherein I had not much conversed, further than by employing advocates, in vain, upon some injustices that had been done me; however, I would give him all the satisfaction I was able.

I said there was a society of men among us, bred up from their youth in the art of proving by words multiplied for the purpose, that white is black, and black is white, according as they are paid. To this society all the rest of the people are slaves. For example, if my neighbour hath a mind to my cow, he hires a lawyer to prove that he ought to have my cow from me. I must then hire another to defend my right, it being against all rules of law that any man should be allowed to speak for himself. Now in this case, I who am the true owner lie under two great disadvantages. First, my lawyer, being practised almost from his cradle in defending falsehood, is quite out of his element when he would be an advocate for justice, which as an office unnatural, he always attempts with great awkwardness, if not with ill-will. The second disadvantage is, that my lawyer must proceed with great caution, or else he will be reprimanded by the Judges, and abhorred by his brethren, as one who would lessen the practice of the law. And therefore I have but two methods to preserve my cow. The first is to gain over my adversary's lawyer with a double fee, who will then betray his client by insinuating that he hath justice on his side. The second way is for my lawyer to make my cause appear as unjust as he can, by allowing the cow to belong to my adversary; and this if it be skilfully done will certainly bespeak the favour of the Bench.

Now, your Honour is to know that these Judges are persons appointed to decide all controversies of property, as well as for the trial of criminals, and picked out from the most dexterous lawyers who are grown old or lazy, and having been biased all their lives against truth and equity, lie under such a fatal necessity of favouring fraud, perjury, and oppression, that I have known several of them refuse a large bribe from the side where justice lay, rather than injure the Faculty by doing anything unbecoming their nature or their office.

[...] Here my master, interposing, said it was a pity, that creatures endowed with such prodigious abilities of mind as these lawyers, by the description I gave of them, must certainly be, were not rather encouraged to be instructors of others in wisdom and knowledge. In answer to which, I assured his Honour, that in all points out of their own trade they were usually the most ignorant and stupid generation among us, the most despicable in common conversation, avowed enemies to all knowledge and learning, and equally disposed to pervert the general reason of mankind in every other subject of discourse, as in that of their own profession."

- a) How does Gulliver see the Houyhnhnm? What kind of relationship is established, according to this fragment, between the two characters?
- b) What are the implications of the Houyhnhnm's reaction to Gulliver's description of the arts of war, in paragraphs 7-8?

- c) Read the description of English law in the final paragraphs and discuss Swift's use of paradox.

4. The evolution of the novel: Richardson and Fielding

The great turning point in the development of prose fiction came about in the 1740s, some twenty years after the close of Defoe's career as an active writer.

Selected chronology

- 1740 Samuel Richardson, *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded*
- 1741 Henry Fielding, *An Apology for the Life of Mrs Shamela Andrews*
- 1742 Henry Fielding, *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews*
- 1747-48 Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady*
- 1749 Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*
- 1753-54 Samuel Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*

4.1. Samuel Richardson (1689-1761)

In one sense, Samuel Richardson brought about a new departure for the English novel, in turning away from the picaresque model established by Defoe in *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*. But in another sense he remained faithful to his predecessor, in deliberately maintaining a strict closeness to actual reality, as for instance in the first of his novels, *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* (1740).

4.1.1. *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded*

This novel did not carry the name of the author on its covers, as if the text were not a work of fiction, but what its subtitle indicated: "A series of letters written from a young damsel to her parents". On the very first page, then, the reader did not find an openly narrative voice, but instead a letter from a young and literate maidservant to her peasant parents:

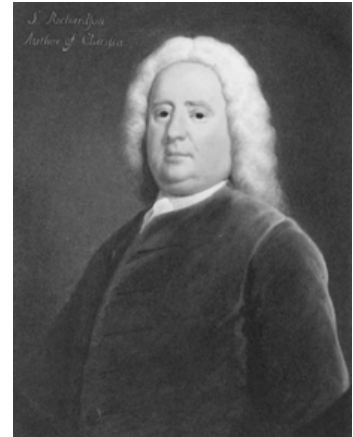
"My dear Father and Mother,
I have great trouble, and some comfort, to acquaint you with. The trouble is, that my good lady died of the illness I mentioned to you, and left us all much grieved for the loss of her; for she was a dear good lady, and kind to all us her servants. Much I feared, that as I was taken by her ladyship to wait upon her person, I should be quite destitute again, and forced to return to you and my poor mother, who have enough to do to maintain yourselves..."

Samuel Richardson, *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded*.

The "Virtue Rewarded" of the subtitle is the subject of the novel, but also the key to the protagonist's change of social class.

Pamela or Virtue Rewarded

Pamela's letters explain to her parents her anguish in the face of the sexual advances of her master, a young landed gentleman. In spite of all her fear and the danger, she manages to retain her virginity and resist his attacks, and in the end his desire turns to true, respectful love. Pamela finally marries her master and so rises above her humble origins to become a member of the landed gentry.



Samuel Richardson. Portrait by Joseph Highmore, c. 1747 (London, National Portrait Gallery).



"Pamela asks Sir Jacob Swinford's blessing." Richardson's *Pamela* was published in 1740; Joseph Highmore's series of twelve illustrations of scenes from the novel was completed in 1745 (London, Tate Gallery).

If we compare this text to Defoe's novels, the protagonist's (Pamela's) experiences appear to be confined to a very narrow space, the limits of which are marked by a pond, a garden wall or a meadow. What actually happens in the novel is very little; the action is reduced to the evolution of the relationship between Pamela and her master. Indeed, Richardson achieves his effect with very few materials; but he makes the best of them. We see all the little details of everyday life among the lower servant class, and we observe the relationships that are established among the members of the household, as well as their physical environment: the world of domesticity becomes the setting for a fictional love intrigue.

There are other advantages of the **epistolary novel** that are perhaps easier to appreciate now than they were in the 18th century. The scope for detailed exploration of the characters' psychology, for example, was immense, and after the success of his first novel, Richardson exploited this possibility further in *Clarissa Harlowe* (1747-48).

4.1.2. *Clarissa Harlowe*

This is an extraordinarily long text (1,400 pages in a recent paperback edition), with letters by several different characters slowly revealing all the nuances of feeling as their relationships with each other develop.

Clarissa's inner life, the way her feelings and opinions change, are shown in such detail that the reader feels he/she is getting to know a **real person**, not a "type".

It is not only Clarissa's deepest beliefs and feelings that are exposed before us, but also her momentary impressions and spontaneous reactions to minor incidents. And, if we consider that the novel ends with the dishonour and death of the main character, we can imagine the **melodramatic impact** that this device could have.

4.2. The epistolary form: some theoretical problems

Richardson's readers had already had the opportunity, in his first novel, to witness the unfolding of Pamela's love for her master in full detail, step by step, from the initial, almost unconscious awakening of passion to her final "exalted condition". This whole gradual and slow process is thoroughly portrayed. This was something that had never been done before, and even after Richardson the English novel would have to develop for a further half century before another author (**Jane Austen**) emerged capable of describing the evolution of the feelings of fictional characters with such exactness and accuracy.

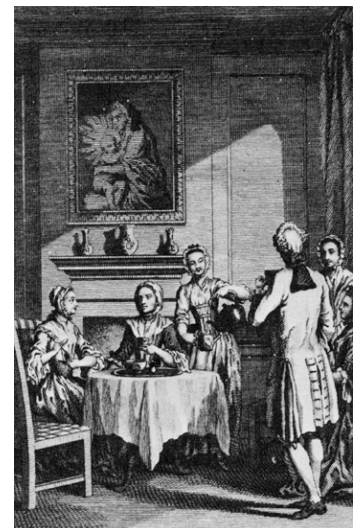


Illustration for an edition of Richardson's *Clarissa* published in 1768. This is the frontispiece to Vol. III and shows Clarissa and Lovelace at breakfast with Mrs Sinclair and her nieces.

The **extreme subjectivism** of the epistolary form, though, raises other problems. To what extent, for instance, can we believe Pamela to be objective? How can we be sure that the difficult situations she finds herself in are not distorting her vision of reality? Because if we cannot believe Pamela or Clarissa to be completely objective when they describe the world that surrounds them, there is no real reason to believe them capable of being objective about the morality of their own actions.

Pamela, for instance, could be seen as a social climber who uses her virginity as a weapon to oblige her master to marry her. If we read the novel in this way, and it is perfectly possible to do so, we can only assume that, to a certain extent, Pamela is constantly lying to her parents. And even if we choose to think that she does not set out deliberately to seduce her master, we can still infer that she does so unconsciously, and that she has been lying to herself, as well as to her parents, all through the novel.

This was the great danger of the epistolary novel. Since the authorial voice is not there to guide us in any way, there is no way of knowing whether what the characters tell us in their letters is true.

Later novelists were particularly aware of this. Richardson, at the beginning, was not, although *Clarissa* seems to reflect a greater awareness of the ambiguities, and an evident willingness to play with them. It is clear, however, that Richardson was in favour of greater social mobility, and of marriages between members of different social classes. His mentality was more bourgeois than rigidly aristocratic.

The main theoretical problem of the **first-person narrative**, though, had been posed. With what kind of authority can the character/narrator write about him/herself? How can the reader be sure that he/she is not being deceived?

For an author such as Henry Fielding, who was also a dramatist, this could be one of the main dangers of the epistolary form, and also of the picaresque tradition.

4.3. Henry Fielding (1707-1754)

For Fielding it was unimaginable to describe society from the point of view of a lower-class character. The use of **third-person narration** in his novels establishes a distance, a separation, between reader and character. Between the two appears the mediating figure of the narrator, whose voice fills the text in its entirety.

In this way, the narrator (identified with the author, with Fielding himself) appears as the moral authority and guide who interprets the action for the reader to ensure that it is correctly interpreted and its moral content clearly understood.

4.3.1. *Joseph Andrews*

Fielding wrote his novel *Joseph Andrews* (1741) partly in response to the moral ambiguity of Richardson's *Pamela*. What we find here is not a neutral narrative voice, but a narrator who is aware of his role as such, and ironically comments on the narrative. A direct contact, a close relationship is established between narrator and reader. This feature turns the text into a commentary on itself, and on the tradition to which it belongs.

This is evident, for instance, in the titles of many of the chapters: they are not informative, they are not intended to tell us anything about the contents of the chapter. Instead, they are self-referential; their aim is precisely to point out their own inadequacy as "titles".

The most important element, of course, is the actual **voice of the narrator**. Always distinct and always present, this voice does not allow the reader to forget that he/she is being told a story; that reading the book does not give access to reality but to fiction.

The story itself may appear as an ironic reversal of Richardson's *Pamela*: Joseph Andrews (introduced, in an interesting intertextual borrowing, as Pamela's brother) is also a servant, and he is also sexually harassed by his mistress, Lady Booby. Instead of staying in her service, though, he escapes, and the novel takes the form of a mock-heroic work, almost in the sense that Pope had given to the term: it has an episodic plot, as it follows the character around in his encounters with other travellers.

Here the English novelist seeks to establish a connection with a pre-existing **novelistic tradition**, and curiously, in doing so, reaches for a model that allows a greater moral clarity than Richardson's, following the advice that Neo-classical critics were already giving to the emerging novelists.

The following is an example of this advice:



Fielding. Portrait by an unknown artist (London, National Portrait Gallery).

For instance

Fielding used titles such as "Which some readers will find too long and others too short", "Of which you are not desired to read more than you like", etc.



Drawing by T. Rowlandson. The young Joseph Andrews is protected and guided by Adams.

"In narratives where historical veracity has no place, I cannot see why there should not be represented the most perfect idea of virtue; of virtue not angelical... but the highest and purest that humanity can reach... Vice, for vice is necessary to be shown, should always disgust; whenever it appears, it should raise hatred for the malignity of its practicer and contempt by the meanness of its strategies."

This passage does not belong to any of Fielding's novels, but to an essay by **Samuel Johnson**, published in his periodical, *The Rambler*, in 1750, eight years after the publication of *Joseph Andrews*, and one year after the publication of Fielding's second and most important novel, *Tom Jones* (1749).

4.3.2. *Tom Jones*

As creators of fictional worlds, the first novelists were seen as directly responsible for the influence their works could have on the reader's morality. It seems evident that, despite the highly ironical tone of his novels, what Fielding wanted to achieve was precisely what Johnson asked of the novelist in the passage we have quoted above.

The Anglican parson Adams

One of these other travellers, the Anglican parson Adams, soon becomes almost as important as Joseph. He is a brave but extravagant cleric, extremely idealistic but also ridiculous and grotesquely absent-minded. In fact, he is an Augustan version of Don Quixote, and as soon as we recognise the parallel we understand the key reason for Fielding's admission, on the very first page, that he has written "in imitation of Cervantes".

The distinction between good and evil in *Tom Jones*, for instance, is clear cut and unambiguous. The villains (Lord Blifil) are on one side, the victims/heroes (Tom, Sophia, the aristocrat Master Allworthy) on the other. However, this distinction imposes restrictions on the presentation of most of these characters: in *Tom Jones* there is no parson Adams, no Quixotic figure to entertain and surprise the reader.

The characters have been turned into simplistic representations of different aspects of "human nature", as the author puts it in the title. Still, there is another element that entertains us throughout (and that makes this novel one of the most enjoyable of the century), and that is the **authorial voice** itself.

The language that Fielding uses is, in fact, the same language employed by the periodicals of the age, the "middle style": elegant and classicist, but at the same time clear and accessible. In *Tom Jones*, this language is successfully welded to a Cervantic tone, establishing a close intimacy between the author and the reader.



The frontispiece to Vol. I of an edition of *Tom Jones* published in 1773. Left to right: Miss Bridget, Squire Allworthy, and Mrs Wilkins with the baby found in the Squire's bed.

The author addresses us directly, takes us by the hand and comments on the incidents of the plot in a friendly tone. We get the impression of a human voice speaking directly to us, and we cannot help but follow its discourse throughout.

The congenial, civil perspective typical of Augustanism is here applied to the relationship between the novelist and his public. The example of Cervantes has been followed not only in the structure of the novel, which is episodic and rambling, but in the discovery of a **narrative expression** that was to remain in English literature long after Fielding.

For instance

Fielding's *Tom Jones* is full of expressions such as "I have told my reader in the previous chapter...", "My reader will now imagine...", etc.

It should be pointed out, however, that this open and tolerant voice does not share the sense of social mobility that is at the centre of Richardson's *Pamela*. Both Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones discover, at the end of the novels, that they are heirs to an aristocratic dynasty, and become landed gentlemen.

In the final analysis, Fielding's optimism and humour seem to be motivated by a faith in the ethical and moral virtues of the hereditary nobility (as befitted his Toryism) rather than in the new bourgeois order. Hence, too, his criticism of the corrupt noblemen and ladies: for him, they were particularly despicable because they did not represent the Christianity and charity that the high social classes should exemplify (and that Fielding embodied, in *Tom Jones*, in the character of Mr Allworthy, his ideal of the landed gentleman). Fielding's Neo-classicism, then, may be seen as a literary consequence of his underlying social conservatism.

Activity

4.1. Read the following fragment from Chapter 3 of Book I of *Tom Jones* and write a commentary, using the questions below as a guide.

(Squire Allworthy, a landed gentleman, finds an unidentified, abandoned baby, whom he later christens Tom Jones.)

"I have told my reader, in the preceding chapter, that Mr Allworthy inherited a large fortune; that he had a good heart, and no family. Hence, doubtless, it will be concluded by many, that he lived like an honest man, owed no one a shilling, took nothing but what was his own, kept a good house, entertained his neighbours with a hearty welcome at his table, and was charitable to the poor, i.e. to those who had rather beg than work, by giving them the offals from it; that he dy'd immensely rich, and built a hospital. And true it is, that he did many of these things; but, had he done nothing more, I should have left him to have recorded his own merit on some fair free-stone over the door of that hospital. Matters of a much more extraordinary kind are to be the subject of this history, or I should grossly misspend my time in writing so voluminous a work; and you, my sagacious friend, might, with equal profit and pleasure, travel through some pages, which certain droll authors have been facetiously pleased to call The History of England. Mr Allworthy had been absent a full quarter of a year in London, on some very particular business, tho' I know not what it was; but judge of its importance, by its having detained him so long from home, whence he had not been absent a month at a time during the space of many years. He came to his house very late in the evening, and after a short supper with his sister, retired much fatigued to his chamber. Here, having spent some minutes on his knees, a custom which he never broke through on any account, he was preparing to step into bed, when, upon opening the cloaths, to his great surprize, he beheld an infant, wrapt up in some coarse linnen, in a sweet and profound sleep, between his sheets. He stood some time lost in astonishment at this sight; but, as good-nature had always the ascendant in his mind, he soon began to be touched with sentiments of compassion for the little wretch before him. He then rang his bell, and ordered an elderly

woman servant to rise immediately and come to him, and in the meantime was so eager in contemplating the beauty of innocence, appearing in those lively colours with which infancy and sleep always display it, that his thoughts were too much engaged to reflect that he was in his shirt, when the matron came in. She had indeed given her master sufficient time to dress himself; for out of respect to him, and regard to decency, she had spent many minutes in adjusting her hair at the looking-glass, notwithstanding all the hurry in which she had been summoned by the servant, and tho' her master, for ought she knew, lay expiring in an apoplexy, or in some other fit.

It will not be wondered at, that a creature, who had so strict a regard to decency in her own person, should be shocked at the least deviation from it in another. She therefore no sooner opened the door, and saw her master standing by the bed-side in his shirt, with a candle in his hand, than she started back in a most terrible fright, and might perhaps have swooned away, had he not now recollected his being undrest, and put an end to her terrors, by desiring her to stay without the door till he had thrown some cloaths over his back, and was become incapable of shocking the pure eyes of Mrs Deborah Wilkins, who, tho' in the 52d year of her age, vowed she had never beheld a man without his coat. Sneerers and prophane wits may perhaps laugh at her first fright, yet my graver reader, when he considers the time of night, the summons from her bed, and the situation in which she found her master, will highly justify and applaud her conduct; unless the prudence, which must be supposed to attend maidens at that period of life at which Mrs Deborah had arrived, should a little lessen his admiration.

When Mrs Deborah returned into the room, and was acquainted by her master with the finding of the little infant, her consternation was rather greater than his had been; nor could she refrain from crying out, with great horror of accent as well as look. 'My good sir! what's to be done?' Mr Allworthy answered, she must take care of the child that evening, and in the morning he would give orders to provide it a nurse. 'Yes, sir,' says she, 'and I hope your worship will send out your warrant to take up the hussy its mother (for she must be one of the neighbourhood) and I should be glad to see her committed to Bridewell; and whipt at the cart's tail. Indeed such wicked sluts cannot be too severely punished. I'll warrant 'tis not her first, by her impudence in laying it to your worship'. 'In laying it to me! Deborah,' answered Allworthy, 'I can't think she hath any such design. I suppose she hath only taken this method to provide for her child; and truly I am glad she hath not done worse.' 'I don't know what is worse,' cries Deborah, 'than for such wicked strumpets to lay their sins at honest men's doors; and though your worship knows your own innocence, yet the world is censorious; and it hath been many an honest man's hap to pass for the father of children he never begot; and if your worship should provide for the child, it may make the people the apter to believe: besides, why should your worship provide for what the parish is obliged to maintain? For my own part, if it was an honest man's child, indeed; but for my own part, it goes against me to touch these misbegotten wretches, whom I don't look upon as my fellow creatures. Faugh, how it stinks! It doth not smell like a Cristian. If I might be so bold to give my advice, I would have it put in a good night, only a little rainy and windy; and if it was well wrapt up, and put in a warm basket, it is two to one but it lives till it is found in the morning. But if it should not, we have discharged our duty in taking proper care of it; and it is, perhaps, better for such creatures to die in a state of innocence, than to grow up and imitate their mothers; for nothing better can be expected of them.'

There were some strokes in this speech which, perhaps, would have offended Mr Allworthy, had he strictly attended to it; but he had now got one of his fingers into the infant's hand, which by its gentle pressure, seeming to implore his assistance, had certainly out-pleaded the eloquence of Mrs Deborah, had it been ten times greater than it was. He now gave Mrs Deborah positive orders to take the child to her own bed, and to call up a maidservant to provide it pap, and other things against it waked. He likewise ordered that proper cloaths should be procured for it early in the morning, and that it should be brought to himself as soon as he was stirring.

Such was the discernment of Mrs Wilkins, and such the respect she bore her master, under whom she enjoyed a most excellent place, that her scruples gave way to his peremptory commands; and she took the child under her arms, without any apparent disgust at the illegality of its birth; and declaring it was a sweet little infant, walked off with it to her own chamber.

Allworthy here betook himself to those pleasing slumbers which a heart that hungers after goodness is apt to enjoy when thoroughly satisfied: as these are possibly sweeter than what are occasioned by any other hearty meal, I should take more pains to display them to the reader, if knew any air to recommend him to for the procuring such an appetite."

- a) What kind of narrative voice do we find in this passage, and what kind of relationship is established between it and the reader?
- b) Note the length of Deborah's speech. How does the author manage to convey his moral critique of the character through her own speech?
- c) What are the connotations that the author wants us to notice in the contrast between Mrs Wilkins and Mr Allworthy in the final part of the passage?

5. Further developments in novel and drama (1750-1780)

The reading of Cervantes by the Augustan novelists was to have, from Fielding onwards, a rich progeny.

Selected chronology

- 1748 Tobias Smollett, *The Adventures of Roderick Random*
- 1751 Tobias Smollett, *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle*
- 1759-67 Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*
- 1764 Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*
- 1765 Samuel Johnson, *Mr Johnson's Preface to his Edition of Shakespeare's Plays*
- 1766 Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield*
- 1771 Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*
- 1773 Oliver Goldsmith, *She Stoops to Conquer* (comedy)
- 1775 Richard B. Sheridan, *The Rivals* (comedy)
- 1777 Richard B. Sheridan, *The School for Scandal* (comedy)
- 1779 Richard B. Sheridan, *The Critic*

5.1. Laurence Sterne (1713-1768)

Between 1759 and 1767, Laurence Sterne, an Anglican parson, spent part of his leisure time working on a narrative text entitled *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*.

After Sterne's death, this text was published to little critical acclaim. For today's readers, however, it can be seen as one of the most enjoyable novels in the English language, extremely daring for its time, and offering a sense of playfulness that was only possible in an environment where the rules for the writing of novels were still in the making.

In fact, the text is barely recognisable as a **novel**. In spite of his own promises, the main character and narrator (the gentleman Tristram Shandy) does not have time to become its protagonist, since it is not until the sixth chapter that he tells the story of his birth, and when the text ends, four hundred pages later (the work was left unfinished at Sterne's death), he is still only six years old.

There is, therefore, enough space to fill with loosely connected stories about Shandy's family and its environment, which (not by coincidence) includes an extravagant and Quixotic parson named Yorick (the death of this same character, at one point, is lamented by the narrator with a page printed in solid black). All these extravagances need to be taken as jokes, of course, but it is through these jokes that the novel progresses.



Laurence Sterne. Portrait by Carmontelle (Chantilly, Musée Condé).

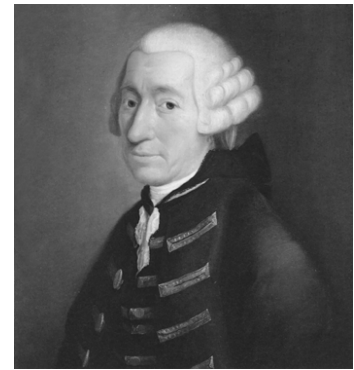
With Sterne's work it becomes evident that the great inheritance of Cervantes in the English novel has been the use of the **narrative voice**. For it is this voice that now becomes the very protagonist of the text, entering into direct conversation with the reader, and even asking the reader questions, to which possible answers are provided.

Among those who followed this Cervantic trend, we should mention the Scottish novelist Tobias Smollett.

5.2. Tobias Smollett (1721-1771)

In fact, it was Tobias Smollett who translated *Don Quixote* into English once more. His main contribution to fiction, however, were his novels *Roderick Random* (1748), *Peregrine Pickle* (1751) and *Humphry Clinker* (1771).

Roderick Random and *Peregrine Pickle* are picaresque narratives, episodic and loosely organised, with the particularity of being set at sea, and combining a sense of humour and the grotesque with moments of sentimentalism. Indeed, they are good examples of the tension between these two tendencies in the novel, which grew as the century drew on.



Tobias Smollett. Portrait by an unknown artist, c. 1770 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

Smollett is extraordinarily resourceful in both aspects (especially in his rendition of comic aspects through physical description, in which he seems to prefigure the caricaturesque style of **Dickens**), but he does not manage to integrate them into a coherent frame. The picaresque absence of a rigorous structure is, ultimately, what allows him to shift from one tone to the other.

The most important of his novels is possibly *Humphry Clinker*, in which he gives his version of the Richardsonian epistolary novel. In the letters that Squire Bramble, his sister Tabitha, and their nephew and niece Jeremy and Lydia write during their journey through England and Scotland, Smollett shows not only his mastery of the form, but also an acute awareness of its limitations. The characters can only narrate what they perceive, not the whole of the truth, and the reader becomes aware of confusions and grotesque incidents which the characters do not even notice.

An episodic plot, different accounts of reality, elements taken from everyday low-life: these are some of the main features we find in *Humphry Clinker*. They show how far we have moved from the influence of Neo-classicism. What Smollett saw as the main weakness of epistolary fiction, namely its subjectivism, would soon come to be seen as its greatest advantage over other

kinds of narrative. Since it is impossible for the author to be objective in an epistolary novel, **first-person** narration came to be considered the most appropriate style for analysing the inner life of fictional characters.

5.3. Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774)

In 1766, the poet Oliver Goldsmith published his novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*, one of the first examples of the purely sentimental fiction that was to predominate in the closing decades of the century.

Here it is evident that the first-person narrative has quickly evolved, from its beginnings in Defoe, to become an instrument designed to bring about an emotional **catharsis** in the reader.

The vicar of the title (who is also the narrator) undergoes a seemingly endless series of personal catastrophes, almost like an eighteenth-century version of Job, which allow him to display both his faith and his sensibility. And yet, in spite of the melancholy tones of some pages, the Augustan faith in humanity is not essentially lost, and the happy ending finally vindicates the vicar's endurance.



Oliver Goldsmith. Portrait by J. Reynolds, c. 1770 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

5.4. The Gothic and the sentimental novel

A real shift in taste away from Augustanism had been presented only two years before *The Vicar of Wakefield*, in a short work entitled *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), by Horace Walpole.

Strictly speaking, this was the first **Gothic novel**. It places the reader in a castle pervaded with a pseudo-medieval atmosphere, full of superstition and ghostly presences, and dwells on the theme of incestuous sexuality, almost completely reversing the classicist tendencies of, for instance, Fielding. What matters here is not society or morality, but feeling for its own sake. This is a tendency that was finally vindicated, only a few years later, by Romantic fiction.

The Castle of Otranto

The Castle of Otranto was an immediate success. Walpole's fear of ridicule led him to publish the first edition anonymously. He wrote of its composition: "I gave rein to my imagination; visions and passions choked me".

Towards the end of the 18th century, what mattered in European fiction was precisely feeling, along with the examination of the self and the subjectivity of the characters. Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse* and Goethe's *Werther* were the major achievements of this new mood. Being epistolary novels, they can also be seen as the culmination of a process that had begun with Richardson's *Pamela*.

In the English context, the novel was rapidly developing towards new and more popular forms, of which the sentimental and the Gothic narratives were the most important. The periodicals were being superseded, in the closing decades of the century, by magazines, which often serialised novels to satisfy the demands of a growing audience eager for descriptions of intense emotion. But with this evolution, we are in fact entering a new era: the domain of **Romanticism**.

5.5. Dramatists

The same progression is not so noticeable in the works produced for the theatre during these three decades, which remain far more bound by the constraints of classical rules. The *Preface* with which **Samuel Johnson** opened his edition of *Shakespeare's Plays* in 1765 clearly shows the importance of the most moralistic Neo-classical perspective in the critical evaluation of dramatic literature:

"His first defect is that to which may be imputed most of the evil in books or in men [...]. He carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong, and at the close dismisses them, without further care, and leaves their examples to operate by chance. This fault the barbarity of his age cannot extenuate; for it is always a writer's duty to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independent on time or place."

Samuel Johnson, *Mr Johnson's Preface to his Edition of Shakespeare's Plays*.

Johnson goes so far as to criticise Shakespeare for his seeming disdain of decorum and his lack of respect for the Aristotelian "unities". Such rigidity in a critical approach to an author whom Johnson obviously sees as the greatest English dramatist may be surprising to a present-day reader, but it is very indicative of the narrowly academic mentality with which the intellectuals of the period read dramatic literature.

The Augustan dramatists themselves tried to keep as close as possible to the Neo-classical precepts. The "three unities" (unity of action, of space, of time) were closely observed, and the "high style" of tragedy was clearly distinguished from the simpler, more accessible tones of comedy.

It is to this latter genre that the best plays of the period belong: the language of tragedy was too narrow and constrained to allow much room for creativity, and the need to respect the unities required a degree of self-control and a sense of rhythm that only occasionally gave memorable results (as had been the case with Dryden at the end of the Restoration).

What were obligatory limitations in the domain of tragedy could become advantages in the field of comedy. This is apparent in the case of the spirited *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773), by the poet and novelist **Oliver Goldsmith**, but also in the works of **Richard Brinsley Sheridan** (1751-1816), who emerges as the best dramatist of the second half of the century.

Sheridan accepted all the rules of the Neo-classical paradigm, but he did so in order to put them to the service of humour. The "unity of time", for instance, which obliged him to compress all the events of his plot into a single situation that unfolded in approximately two hours (the time it would take to perform the play), seems to have been a good working tool for him, as he was able to combine situations of misunderstanding and paradox at a very swift pace. He was nevertheless quite willing to ridicule the narrow-minded classicist intellectuals in *The Critic* (1779).

Sheridan was a specialist in creating situations that are confusing for the characters on the stage, but that remain perfectly clear at all times for the audience. *The School for Scandal* (1777) and *The Rivals* (1775) are excellent examples of this situational irony. In both plays we find the figure of the rich gentleman who disguises himself as a poor man in order to put the affection of his family or of his beloved to the test. Thus, the idea of inner, spiritual worth as opposed to external riches allowed for moments of sentimentalism in these comedies, indicating a shift towards a greater emotional expansion. Sheridan remained firmly rooted in the aesthetics of Augustanism, but the Romantic revolution in literary taste was at hand.



Richard B. Sheridan. Portrait by J. Russell, 1788 (London, National Portrait Gallery). Sheridan wrote half a dozen works between 1775 and 1780.

Answer key

For each set of questions, we have provided one specimen answer, which is meant to guide and orientate you. In no way is it intended to be the definitive answer. For the other questions, you are encouraged to form your own views and write your commentary on the basis of the material you have been given, and then to maintain a steady and ongoing contact with your tutor.

2.1.

a) These lines are very representative of Pope's poetic practice and, by extension, of the mainstream of eighteenth-century verse. The very fact that they belong to an essay in verse determines, to a certain extent, their particular tone: thus, the speaker is not individualised, and we get no expression of an individual poetic "I". The text strives to express abstract concepts, arranged in statements of universal validity ("All nature is but art, unknown to thee.../ All discord, harmony misunderstood,/ all partial evil, universal good"); the tone is didactic rather than lyrical. The metrical form employed here (decasyllabic couplets) directly contributes to this tone of didacticism; the continuity of the rhymes gives a sententious tone to the text, which in fact is made up of a series of axioms or statements of general truth. This has little to do with what the late twentieth-century reader will directly identify as poetry; but, at the same time, it is the author's mastery of the couplet form, his skill in compressing these abstract concepts into the verses and his graceful use of rhyme that turn this didactic, even prosaic material into a smooth, flowing text.

b) In these lines from his *An Essay on Man*, Pope presents a specifically Augustan view of nature. For Pope, every natural element, and every aspect of the living world, are part of a general, dominating force, which is organised in a progress towards the common good. Natural disasters, and the destructive phenomena which are a part of the environment, may actually be the cause of some evil; but if this evil is viewed from a general, detached perspective, it can be seen as part of a universal welfare. The fragment ends with a final axiom that expresses this cosmic optimism: "Whatever is, is right". This is the most obvious formulation of the belief in progress that is so representative of the Augustan period. In the political and ideological domains, and thanks to the development of democracy and the growing influence of the bourgeoisie, the sense of a harmonious progress towards the common social good was widespread among intellectuals. In the domains of philosophy and ideology, this optimism extended to a corresponding view of nature: the hierarchical order of the natural world had man at its cusp, and natural phenomena had their different functions, which could be rationally understood and used by man for his own benefit. In this sense, even though natural disasters could not be prevented, they could be understood and eventually put to the service of humanity. Pope's lines, therefore, can be taken as the most memorable expression of the self-confidence and sense of assurance with which this historical period saw itself, and of the utilitarian and positive perspective from which it defined nature.

3.1.

a) From the outset it is very clear that this is not a relationship of equality. Throughout this fragment, and indeed through the whole of the chapter, Gulliver refers to the Houyhnhnm as "my master"; he sees himself as being in the service of his interlocutor, and addresses it as "his Honour" just like a servant would have addressed his master in the England of this period. This subjection is all the more surprising if we remember that the Houyhnhnms, despite their rationality, are actually horses, and that Gulliver is a human being, who appears quite willing to place himself in a situation of subservience towards them. The situation is particularly offensive for the rationalist ideology of the Augustan period: instead of celebrating the superiority of human reason over the natural world, Swift inverts the order, and presents man as an essentially irrational being, who may yet be able to learn something from the Houyhnhnms. It is interesting to see how Gulliver sees his own language as being unfit for communicating the high commentaries of his master ("I shall hardly be able to do justice to my master's arguments and expressions, which must needs suffer by my want of capacity, as well as by a translation into our barbarous English"). English itself is seen as a language that has not yet evolved into a good instrument for rational thought or writing; Swift gives this feeling of cultural inferiority to his character in order to shed some doubt on the self-assured philosophy of Augustanism, which presented England as having reached its peak in terms of culture and civilisation.

b) It is interesting to observe that, in paragraphs 7 and 8, the Houyhnhnm is presented as unable to assimilate the account of human violence given by Gulliver ("He thought his ears being used to such abominable words, might by degrees admit them with less detestation."); the ensuing commentary on the vile nature of the Yahoos has to

be taken, obviously, as a comment on humanity itself, since the Yahoos are no more than human beings at the service of the rational horses. But let us notice that the Houyhnhnm refuses to blame the Yahoos (the humans) for their violent behaviour, because he sees them as acting according to their nature, which is not capable of reason, but only of a "corruption of that faculty". Swift is still placing himself outside the context of Augustanism, since the cultural context of that period presented reason as being the natural prerogative of humanity; ironically, it is on the basis of the very dictates of nature, as presented in this passage, that man is being presented as being incapable of reasoning.

c) In these final fragments, Swift's satire concentrates on the world of legal practice, which he presents from a paradoxical perspective: the key word in this passage ("lawyer") is used as if it meant exactly the contrary of what it actually signifies, from the very beginning, when it is defined as designing those "bred up from their youth in the art of proving by words ... that white is black, and black is white". The paradox is thus articulated through the equation of the two concepts of "law" and "falsehood", as if both of them were semantically akin, almost interchangeable: "law" does not stand for equity and justice, but rather for the contrary ("My lawyer, being practised almost from his cradle in defending falsehood, is quite out of his element when he would be an advocate for justice, which as an office unnatural, he always attempts with great awkwardness"). Once this central paradox is established, Swift proceeds to exaggerate it, to carry it to hyperbolic proportions: the next-to-last paragraph, on the role of the judges, is entirely based on the negative connotations that have been assigned to the word "lawyer", since the judges are only the best practitioners of that profession. The semantic field gathered around the words "lawyer" and "judge" in this paragraph would consist, then, of the words "falsehood" and "unjust" in the first paragraph, and of the terms "fraud, perjury, and oppression" in the second; Swift has based his satire on the manipulation of language, turning his key-terms upside down in order to present a corrupted reality, and not allowing the reader any possibility of discussing or distancing himself from his attack upon English legal practice.

4.1.

a) The fragment begins with a direct address to the reader ("I have told my reader, in the preceding chapter..."); from the start, then, the narrator is asserting his presence and his control over the text. The description of Mr Allworthy's lifestyle is presented as if it was a speculation made by the the readers after the previous chapter ("Hence, doubtless, it will be concluded by many..."); a speculation which the narrator immediately confirms, only to complete the portrait after promising much more surprising events ("Matters of a much more extraordinary kind are to be the subject of this history..."). The narrator does not attempt to be impartial or distant, he tries to come into close contact with the reader, to enter into a personal relationship with him, and to guide him through the text. This is not an anonymous or omniscient narrator, therefore; it is a personal voice that wants to be identified with the author (Henry Fielding), and that wants to be identified as such by the reader, to whom he is speaking from a situation of absolute equality. Here Fielding is following the civilised, "Augustan" tone of the prose that was published in journals in the early eighteenth century; but he is also adopting the model of Cervantes, whose style in *Don Quixote* is characterised precisely by the conversational addresses to the reader that Fielding is practising here.

b) Quite obviously, it is evident that the change of feelings of Deborah Wilkins towards the foundling, which takes place at the end of this passage, is an excellent instance of Fielding's comic resourcefulness. The quick shift in her opinions following the dictate of her master at once displays her hypocrisy and shows her as a character whom the reader will have to see as one of the potential antagonists of the heroes in the novel. But the Augustan ideals of stylistic contention and moderation are also present in the comic incident: there is a complete page of irrational and intolerant comments from Mrs Wilkins, which is obviously to be contrasted with the serene silence of Mr Allworthy, who, without any commentary of his own, follows the dictate "of feelings and of reason".

c) There is an obvious, immediate comic intention in the passage we have quoted. But the author's aims are more far-reaching than this: by showing the charitable disposition of Mr Allworthy (and his name itself should be seen as a metaphor), Fielding is delineating an example of the beneficial social role that he attributes to the gentry and the nobility: because of their superior social rank, they are supposed to be the best examples of liberality and of Christian charity. A higher status in terms of class implies a higher social responsibility. The contrast between Mr Allworthy's generosity and Deborah's inhumanity may also corroborate the distance between an education which is both rational and Christian and a narrow world-view, merely based on prejudice and on intolerant social topics ("Faugh, how it stinks!"). Let us observe, moreover, that the difference between both characters may indicate some classist prejudice on the part of Fielding himself (the servant is a mere comical character, not to be taken seriously)

though we must also observe that several examples of noblemen and women had been the object of satiric comment in his first novel, *Joseph Andrews*.

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Romanticism and the Nineteenth Century

Andrew Monnickendam

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Universitat Oberta
de Catalunya

www.uoc.edu

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Introduction

The Transformation of Great Britain

Great Britain underwent a radical change in the period 1750-1900. Britain signed the Peace of Versailles in 1783 and thereby recognised the independence of the USA. Although the loss of the American colonies marked the end of one colonial enterprise, British expansion continued, so that by the end of the nineteenth century Britain was in control of a vast, global empire. At the same time, Britain itself had been transformed from a rural economy into a modern industrial state.

During the reign of **George III** (1760-1820), over 3,500 Enclosure Acts were passed: old communal farming systems, suitable mainly for subsistence, were replaced by more modern or scientific systems requiring less labour. Added to this, the rise in the price of wheat during the Napoleonic wars led to widespread starvation in the country, partly relieved by the poor law reforms of 1795 and migration either to the cities or to the colonies. It has been calculated that in 1801 the only sizeable city in Britain was London: only fifteen other towns had a population greater than 20,000. In other words, apart from London, towns were basically commercial centres processing the business interests of rural communities.

The nineteenth century was marked by a series of reforms which corresponded to this move towards a metropolitan culture.

1) The **Catholic Emancipation Act** (1829) allowed Catholics to hold public office and, most important of all, to be elected to Parliament.

2) The **Reform Act** of 1832 gave the middle classes a role in political life by extending the franchise to people who owned or occupied a house valued at an annual rate of £10. Small boroughs lost representation, and 143 seats were redistributed to urban centres: Manchester and Sheffield, for example, had not elected MPs before.

3) The **Second Reform Bill** (1867), which effectively doubled the electorate.

4) The **Third Reform Bill** (1884), which extended the franchise to all householders.

One important consequence of these reforms was the establishment of two modern political parties: the Conservative or Tory party, and the Liberal party.



Newcastle-upon-Tyne, by J. M. W. Turner, 1823
(London, British Museum).

The Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution –a flexible term, though it could be said to have begun in 1771 when Arkwright used water power to drive a textile mill– changed Britain from a rural economy into a modern industrial state. Towns and cities became industrial centres, growing rapidly and creating a need for cheap labour in their factories. The centre of economic power shifted from country to city, but in political questions the process was much slower.

Social reform was a pressing need if society was to cope successfully with the excesses of industrialisation and the demands of the modern state. The stipulations of the **Factory Act** of 1833 give a clear indication of the inhuman practices prevalent at the time. The Conservative government (1874-1880) under Benjamin Disraeli passed a range of reforming legislation in order to improve the working and living conditions of modern cities: the **Public Health Act** (1875), which obliged local authorities to take charge of sanitation, is an important landmark. Between 1870 and 1891, a series of educational reforms made **elementary education** between the ages of 5 and 13 both compulsory and free.

The defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo (1815) ended a century of warfare, leaving Britain the dominant European power. This victory meant the demobilisation of approximately 350,000 soldiers, who were now unemployed, which simply added to the social unrest of a country that found it difficult to adjust its economic policy to the demands of peace. The government's response was to increase policing and censorship, and suspend Habeas Corpus.

The most significant event was the **Peterloo Massacre** (1819), in which troops turned on attendants at a reformist meeting, killing 11 people and wounding approximately 400. It seemed as if the armed forces that had been victorious at Waterloo had now turned on their own countrymen at St. Peter's Fields (hence the neologism Peterloo).

However, Britain required extensive armed forces to police its enormous empire, which continued to grow spectacularly, particularly in Africa. The **colonisation of India** provides an interesting example of British policy. One year after the Indian Mutiny (1857), the East India Company was abolished and the colony was taken over by the Crown. Queen Victoria issued a proclamation of her intention to rule the country for the common good of India's inhabitants. In 1875-76, the Prince of Wales visited India, and in the following year Queen Victoria became Empress of India.

From this example we can identify Britain's belief in its missionary role in the world; the undeniable economic nexus between Britain and its colonies; the belief that only the British state could and should lead the imperial enterprise; the establishment of the monarch at its head: all in all, an example of what many Britons believed to be the best of all possible forms of organisation.

The Factory Act

The Factory Act stipulated that children under 9 could no longer be employed in textile factories; children between 9 and 13 could not work more than 12 hours a day up to a maximum of 48 hours a week, and that those aged 13 to 18 could not work more than 12 hours a day up to a maximum of 69 a week.

Recommended Reading

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Objectives

In studying this module, students will:

1. Become aware of the complexity of the term *Romanticism* and its Revolutionary beginnings.
2. Learn to appreciate the importance given in Romanticism to the role of the creative artist, and to nature and the imagination.
3. Learn about the various theories of the imagination in Romanticism and anti-Romanticism.
4. See how the imagination came to be associated with the supernatural and the demonic in Romanticism and anti-Romanticism.
5. Learn about the reaction from anti-Romanticism to Romanticism.
6. Become acquainted with the new fictional Romantic and anti-Romantic heroes and heroines.
7. Learn about the end of the Romantic novel and the rise of the Victorian novel.
8. Gain insight into the responses in fiction to economic expansion in the Victorian Age.
9. Learn to appreciate the importance of sentiment in Victorian fiction.
10. Understand the reaction of the Victorian Age against the cult of sentimentality.
11. Learn to recognise the growing importance of women's fiction in the Victorian Age.
12. Understand the importance of rural contexts for the work of progressive writers in the Victorian Age.
13. Become familiar with the implications of the terms "Victorian" and "Victorianism".
14. Learn about the developments in poetry in the late Victorian period.

- 15.** Appreciate the importance of the essay in the late Victorian period.
- 16.** Gain insight into the birth of modern literary studies.

1. Romanticism

The term **Romantic** describes the literature written in the period covering the second half of the eighteenth century and lasting until approximately 1832. "Romantic" has its origin in the word "romance", and although this has led to romantic (with lower-case "r") literature being associated with stories of love and passion, Romantic (with a capital letter) literature refers, in Britain, to the literature which broke with Neo-classical ideals and put forward a new set of parameters which sprang from its uneasy relationship with the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth century and the French Revolution (1789), as well as the effects these two revolutions had on individuals and their relationship to society.

In this broad generalisation, we should be able to detect a noticeable shift away from the Augustan way of thinking. For, in this rejection of idealism and universals, literature, and indeed art in general, came to root themselves in localised, specific phenomena. This process inevitably led to greater interaction between literature and social issues, and the foregrounding of the role of the artist as social commentator and agent of change. From this moment on, literature was inextricably bound up with polemics.

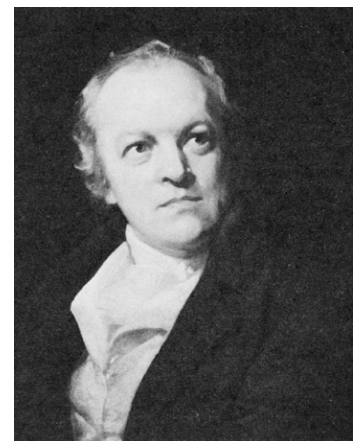
1.1. William Blake (1757-1827)

The work of William Blake illustrates this process. William Blake, an accomplished engraver and painter, begins his manuscript poem *Auguries of Innocence* (1803?) with the words:

"To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the Palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour." (1-4)

William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*.

It is not in philosophical disquisition and abstraction that we can perceive truth and divinity but in the most minute of objects, down to a wild flower or the smallest visible object, "a Grain of Sand". We should also notice, for later reference, that the objects William Blake has selected are natural ones.



William Blake. A detail from the portrait by T. Phillips, 1807 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

Blake wrote two short collections of poems, *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794), which illustrate the problems lying at the centre of Romanticism.

The first songs express the projected feelings of mostly babies and young children, who are at peace with the world and with God. For example, the introductory poem concludes:

"And I made a rural pen
And I stain'd the water clear
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear." (17-20)

William Blake, *Songs of Innocence*.

The occasional moments of doubt and apprehension that can be found in *Holy Thursday* or, more dramatically, in *The Chimney Sweeper* become the main concern of *Songs of Experience*. In this collection, through the simple device of echoing the titles and subjects of many of the poems of *Songs of Innocence*, the poet brings home the brutality of the loss of infancy, comparing the "before" (innocence) with the "after" (experience).

Blake invites us to consider whether the coming to knowledge of the real world is just a fact of life, or whether a parallel process has taken place in society at large: whether, in fact, the desolation of modern life is caused exclusively by industrialisation. What he leaves us in no doubt of is that the modern world is a devastating place.

Thus, *Holy Thursday* asks, rhetorically:

"Is this a holy thing to see
In a rich and fruitful land
Babes reduc'd to misery...?" (1-3)

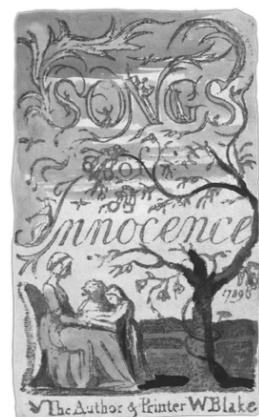
William Blake, *Songs of Experience*.

On the other hand, a series of poems on flowers, *My Pretty Rose Tree*, *The Lily* and *The Sick Rose*, are about disease rather than blooms, and so on.

Evil, the modern industrial world, is represented by London; in the poem of the same name, Blake remarks that:

William Blake

William Blake as well as being a writer, was also an outstanding artist. He produced engravings to accompany many of his own poetic works and to illustrate the works of other authors, such as Milton. He also worked in tempera and watercolours.



Engraving for *Songs of Innocence*, by William Blake, 1789 (British Museum Print Room).

"I Wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear." (1-8)

William Blake, *Songs of Experience*.

Cries of desperation come from the mouths of *every* man: the situation is apocalyptic. However, Blake's twin volumes pose an intriguing question, one which most Romantics confront.

Blake describes the transformation of innocence to experience in two binary oppositions: childhood to youth, rural to urban. To what extent is his criticism of contemporary life forward-looking (i.e. seeking revolution) or backward-looking (i.e. true values lie in rural communities)?

1.2. Romantic revolutionary thinking: Burns, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley

The impulse of revolutionary thinking led many Romantics to confront established institutions: the church, the monarchy and Parliament.

Take, for example, **Robert Burns** (1759-1796): he not only attacked the established religion of Scotland, Presbyterianism, with great humour and venom, particularly in *Holy Willie's Prayer* (1785), but also, influenced by the revolutionary thought of **Thomas Paine**, envisaged a new model of society along republican lines, as at the close of his poem *For A' That and A' That* (1794):

"It's coming yet, for a' that
That man to man the world o'er
Shall brothers be for a' that."

Robert Burns, *For A' That and A' That*.

Burns' universal brotherhood and optimism were shared by **William Wordsworth**, who, in Book XI of his autobiographical poem *The Prelude* (1799-1850), describes the impact of the French Revolution in this exalted fashion: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very Heaven!" (XI: 108-9).

Lord Byron (1788-1824), himself an aristocrat, brutally satirises the aristocracy in the final canto of his epic poem *Don Juan* (1818-1824). British politics in general and British policy in Ireland in particular are attacked in

Recommended Readings

The most complete anthology of Romanticism is:

Wu, Duncan. (1994). *Romanticism*. Cambridge: Blackwell.

The Norton Anthology of English Literature (Volume 2), in its various editions, has a good selection of both nineteenth and twentieth century texts.

Thomas Paine (1737-1809)

English writer and revolutionary. Encouraged by Franklin, he travelled to the United States and contributed to the cause of independence with various writings. In 1794-95 he wrote *The Age of Reason*, against the element of superstition in religion and the interference of religion in politics.

the poem's *Dedication*: the monarchy became his target in his parodic eulogy of George III, *The Vision of Judgement* (1821). **Percy B. Shelley** (1792-1822) launched his own particular crusade in his *A Song: Men of England* and the sonnet *England in 1819*. Most critics would agree, however, that Byron and Shelley's deep concern with the condition of England did not lead them to promote an overthrow of government on the French model.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the revolution had lost impetus and force, becoming more closely associated with bloodshed and the authoritarian figure of Napoleon: it no longer provided an alternative model.

1.3. William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

Wordsworth's *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* (1802) sought to define a new code of poetics for a new age. Wordsworth's objective was to write poetry based on "incidents and situations from common life" written "in a selection of language really used by men". His poetry would have "a worthy *purpose*"; his subject matter would consist of, for example, "maternal passion" and "the last struggles of a human being, at the approach of death".

The novelty of his ideas can best be understood by thinking back to the aesthetic modes of the previous century.

1) Wordsworth's insistence on real language and scenes from everyday life are far removed from the stylised language of the heroic couplet, the court and high society, and the intellectual concerns of an elite.

2) His insistence on morality has its roots in Protestant discourse, but is also evidence of his belief that poetry can and should divulge information and opinion, as Thomas Paine had done with broadsheets such as *Common Sense* (1776): obviously, the worthy purpose can be political.

3) A more democratic poetics can be achieved when poetry deals with everyday lives and loves rather than with the extraordinary or the heroic.

Wordsworth's subject is country folk and country people; as in the poetry of Blake, the city is associated with corruption.

Thus, the conclusion of his long poem *Michael* (1800) describes the fate of the country boy, Luke, who has been forced to emigrate:



W. Wordsworth. Portrait by R. Hancock, 1798 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

"at length
 He in the dissolute city gave himself
 To evil courses, ignorance and shame
 Fell on him, so that he was driven at last
 To seek a hiding place beyond the seas." (443-447)

William Wordsworth, *Michael*.

Luke's fall, which occupies only four out of the poem's 482 lines, is both rapid and inevitable, an impression confirmed by Wordsworth's syntax. Luke, it is implied, didn't actually do anything: the three verbs "gave himself... Fell on him... he was driven" all suggest that Luke is the object of the actions rather than the subject, the victim rather than the instigator.

As in Blake, the industrialised world forces society into the modern age, but modernity is hideous and demoralising.

1.4. Nature and imagination in the poetry of Wordsworth

Romantic poetry is commonly associated with nature and the imagination. An analysis of Wordsworth's poetry reveals a more ambivalent attitude to nature than that of many of his contemporaries.

For example, his *Elegiac Stanzas* contrasts love of nature with its representation in art, but closes with a bitter comment on the cruelty of the natural order. It implies that depictions of nature as picturesque, beautiful and consoling as this are a form of self-deception – a remarkable conclusion when we consider that Wordsworth's poetry, along with that of many other Romantics, represents nature in precisely the way he has rejected.

Highly illustrative, in this sense, are poems such as *Lines Written in Early Spring*, *The Green Linnet*, *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*, *My Heart Leaps Up*, or *It is a Beauteous Evening*.

Of particular interest is the poem *Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, which concludes the *Lyrical Ballads*:



Mountain waterfall, by H. Bright (1814-1873)
 (London, private collection).

"[...] when like a roe
I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides
Of the deep rivers, and lonely streams [...]. (67-69)

[...] For nature then
(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days
And their glad animal movements all gone by)
To me was all in all. – I cannot paint
What then I was. The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion; the tall rock
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite: a feeling and a love." (72-80)

William Wordsworth, *Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*.

Wordsworth equates unqualified **love of nature** with the folly of youth –"boyish days"– and emotionalism, which maturity has to reject. Wordsworth's sober reflections on the natural world should therefore be read in the context of other poetry where "An appetite: a feeling and a love" lie at the centre of Romantic aesthetics.

The love of nature

The love of nature is reflected in Percy Shelley's *Mont Blanc* or *Stanza's Written in Dejection*, Coleridge's *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison* or *Frost at Midnight*, or many of Burns' songs.

Wordsworth retains his belief in **rationalism**, and stands a long way from the **pathetic fallacy**, the belief that the natural world is a reflection of the poet's mind. This withdrawal from emotionalism is also evident in the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* (1802), where he states that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", to which he adds that as well as "organic sensibility" the poet must "also [have] thought long and deeply". This idea is repeated later on in slightly different terms, when he says that poetry "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity". We can see that the emphasis on feeling and spontaneity as essential to Romantic poetry are balanced by the need for rational analysis.

Wordsworth's stance puts him at odds with many accounts of Romanticism based on spontaneity and the imagination, to such an extent that we might wonder whether "Romanticism" is a meaningful term at all, for the differences are not minor but highly significant.

This is a controversial question, but if there is one thing that the Romantics have in common it is their belief in the importance of poetry and the artist. Thus, Wordsworth asserts that "Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge". And Percy Shelley closes his *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) with the claim that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world", a message that is borne out in his poetry: poems such as *When the Lamp is Shattered*, in which the poet is seen as the light which illuminates the world, or *To a Sky-Lark*, where the poet inhabits the ethereal realm of real knowledge, far above mundane realities. Poetry, the Romantics suggest, is a force to be reckoned with.

Activity

1.1. Read through Wordsworth's poem *Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802* several times before attempting the questions which follow it.

"Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock or hill:
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!"

- a) In what metrical form is this poem composed?
- b) Where is Wordsworth standing, and how does this affect his closeness or distance from the scene he is describing?
- c) Wordsworth describes a scene of great beauty: how does he attempt to communicate this feeling to the reader?
- d) How does the metaphor of clothing ("... like a garment, wear...") modify the beauty of the scene?
- e) What are the main objects of beauty in the poem? Are they representative of an expanding capital city? Why? Why not?
- f) Why does Wordsworth insist that the buildings "... lie / Open unto the fields, and to the sky...?"
- g) What is the meaning of the verb "steep" in the poem? How can it be related to the metaphor of clothing (see question *d* above)?
- h) In the final line, the word "still" could be either an adjective meaning "motionless" or "calm", or an adverb meaning "up to the present moment". Describe how each definition affects the interpretation of the final line of the poem.

2. Romanticism and anti-Romanticism

2.1. The imagination and the creative process in the poetry of Coleridge and Keats

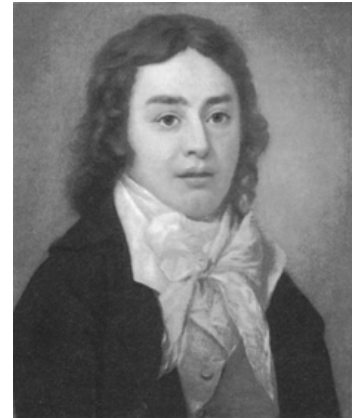
Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), co-author of the *Lyrical Ballads*, might have shared Wordsworth's early revolutionary fervour, but he disagreed violently over artistic questions. In *Biographia Literaria* (1817), he ridiculed Wordsworth's idea that poetry could be rooted in everyday language and events.

For Coleridge, what made poetry art was its extraordinary form, its poetical language and its metre, in other words precisely those devices which removed it as far as possible from the everyday. Given his interest in the supernatural, it is not surprising that Coleridge should have differed so radically from Wordsworth.

At the same time, central to Coleridge's thought is the imagination, an imagination unbridled by meditation or tranquillity. Coleridge accounts for artistic creation by separating perception from creation. We all, he argues, possess the power to perceive, the "primary imagination", but that is not sufficient for creation: for that, we require the **secondary imagination**, which "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate, or, where the process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealise and to unify".

This power, even in its most uneven and fragmentary form, is a god-like gift reserved for the chosen race of poets. Coleridge's language reinforces the parallel between creation as the work of God, and poetical creation, or "re-creation", as the task of the poet. The poet is thus elevated to the status of a **prophet**.

John Keats (1795-1821) also believed in the uniqueness of poetry. He took Shakespeare as his model. Shakespeare's greatness, according to Keats, stems from his "**Negative Capability**", which he defines as being "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 1817), and his being "a camelion Poet" (Letter to Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818). Strange as it may seem, the poet whom Keats believes incapable of withstanding uncertainties is Coleridge! However, it is more important to see how far we are from Wordsworth's balance of rationalism and emotion.



Coleridge. Portrait by P. Vandyke, 1795 (London, National Portrait Gallery).



John Keats at the Roman baths of Caracalla. Portrait by Keats' friend J. Severn (Rome, Shelley's House).

The "**camelion Poet**" is able to erase his own identity and take on that of his creation, whether it has an evil or an angelic identity. This might at first seem at odds with the individualistic tendencies of Romanticism, but in fact what it implies is that the artist has become a god-like figure who has created a living universe.

It is also important to note that the Romantics' revival of Shakespeare reveals their belief that his greatness stems from his poetry rather than from his dramatic abilities. Because he broke with the rules of poetic and dramatic decorum, Shakespeare was seen as a prototypical Romantic poet.

The constant desire to discuss the creative process spilled over from letters and prose into poetry. If creation is a divine gift, if it is something beyond the poet's control, the creative process will naturally become both problematic and a focal point, as Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* reveal.

Kubla Khan is subtitled *Or a Vision in a Dream, A Fragment* to indicate that its apparent lack of structure is a result of its immediacy, of its being the form of writing closest to the moment of illumination. Just as dreams and visions have their own recognizable language and beauty, so, Coleridge implies, will this fragment, and just as a dream leaves us with impressions rather than coherence, so will the poem.

For example, the landscape "Where Alph the sacred river, ran / Through caverns measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea" (2-4) is one retrievable only on its own terms; that is, as a vision rather than as a realistic description. Consequently, we are presented with a landscape of the mind engineered via the **imagination**, rather than via the interpretation of natural scenery. The creative process is variously described as ecstatic and visionary, but this is to the detriment of the poet:

"His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honeydew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise." (50-54)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Kubla Khan*.

The **creative process** brings the poet towards madness, in part due to its intensity, in part due to the realisation that its uncontrollable nature must lead to long periods of frustration and inactivity, and in part due to its unknown origin. For, the reader asks, if the poet has drunk "the milk of Paradise", why does he require exorcism?



Coleridge's house at Nether Stowey. It was in this house that Coleridge transcribed the poem that had come to him in a dream, *Kubla Khan*.

A similar sense of doubt afflicts the ancient mariner. Although the poem has traditionally been read as a Christian fable of crime, punishment and redemption, more modern interpretations emphasise the ghastly appearance of the mariner, his compulsive, manic need to tell his story, and the whole macabre atmosphere of death, as indications of even greater disquiet: that the creative process, and by extension the artist him/herself, is linked to the profane rather than to the sacred.

Keats' literary fame rests to a great extent on five highly elaborate odes. At the end of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, there is no doubt that art is beautiful; the poem's concluding lines affirm that:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty.' – that is all
Ye know on earth and all you need to know." (49-50)

John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

Although there is considerable controversy as to whether these lines are solely those of the object of beauty –the urn– or whether they belong to the artist or Keats himself, the Latin dictum *Ars Longa, Vita Brevis* is engraved permanently on the reader's mind.

But objects of beauty are the end product of a painful process, which Keats, like Coleridge, locates in the world of melancholy, pain and frustration. This can be seen in *Ode to Psyche*, *Ode on Indolence*, *Ode on Melancholy*, and most graphically in *Ode to a Nightingale*.

This last ode suggests that the perceptive powers of the Romantic artist only increase his/her pain by heightening his/her awareness of the miseries of the material world, which is likened to a hospital ward:

"Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin and dies
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow." (25-27)

John Keats, *Ode to a Nightingale*.

The most graphic example of "Where but to think is to be full of sorrow" is undoubtedly Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), where invention, imagination and solipsism create a being whose creator initially "had selected his features as beautiful" but who turns into a monster that destroys his creator's peace of mind, and haunts him to madness, despair and death. The Romantic dream has turned into a **nightmare**.

Activity

2.1. Read through this extract from Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* several times before attempting the question which follows it.

"Darkling I listen; and for many a time
I have half been in love with easeful Death,



Illustration by Doré for *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

More information

For more information on Mary Shelley, see subsection 3.1 of this module.

Called him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
 To take into the air my quiet breath,
 Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
 To cease upon the midnight with no pain
 While thou [nightingale] art pouring forth thy soul abroad
 In such an ecstasy!
 Still would thou sing, and I have ears in vain -
 To thy high requiem become a sod." (51-60)

a) What leads the narrator to state his affinity with the nightingale and why does it "seem rich to die" in the circumstances described?

2.2. Heroes and heroines in the fiction of Jane Austen and Walter Scott

The major British novelists of the Romantic period are Jane Austen and Walter Scott, but their links with Romanticism, as regards revolutionary or aesthetic ideas, are practically non-existent. This does not mean their fiction is escapist, but simply that their interests lie elsewhere. They are more concerned with conformity and domesticity, subjects that affect the everyday life of their middle-class readership.

2.2.1. Jane Austen (1775-1817)

Jane Austen's novels are currently enjoying a vogue through television and film adaptations. A useful exercise is to try and understand the reasons for their popularity. Initially, this would be a difficult task, as there seems little in common between the comfortable, rural life of the leisured classes of the early nineteenth century and the closing years of the twentieth, which are marked by a bombardment of information about external events.

Jane Austen's world appears to be an oasis of tranquillity cut off from the turbulent events of the time: only the occasional arrival or departure of troops preparing for the Napoleonic wars, or the rare trip to London or Bath disrupt the placidity. Such inaction, possibly verging on boredom, becomes representative of Jane Austen's reiterated subject: the education and social plight of women.



Jane Austen. Drawing by Cassandra Austen, c. 1810 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

Whether we are talking about *Emma* (1816) or the sisters of *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), or indeed any of her other novels, we encounter similar situations.

1) Young women are brought up to be silent and submissive, music occasionally providing the only outlet for emotional expression.

2) Women who are not like that, those who are capricious, like Emma, or intelligent, like Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), go through a process of re-education that ends with their submission through marriage, which leaves us with the doubt as to whether their wit has been modified or completely eradicated.

3) Women who get involved with Romantic figures suffer as a result.

4) Although marriage represents the only moment when they have an arguably active role, women's submissiveness is not solely the result of ideology, but a consequence of the very real threat of financial insecurity.

Throughout Austen's fiction it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate narrator from author, and criticism of social conditions from a desire for conformity. From this brief analysis of her fiction, we can address the opening lines of *Pride and Prejudice* (see text in the margin).

The "man in a possession of a fortune" requires a wife; but although this might be due to the sound economic policy of looking for another fortune to add to his own, this would not alter the fact that the wife (and her fortune) become another possession. If the man lacks a wife, and if this is "a truth universally acknowledged", the suggestion is surely that a woman's identity comes into being only at the moment when she becomes a wife, in other words as part of her husband's property, which is simultaneously the moment of her disappearance as a distinct personality.

This denunciation of a woman's role within society might seem at odds with Jane Austen's very conservative views on other social questions, as well as her constant belittling of Romanticism. Indeed, film adaptations, with their heavy emphasis on happy endings (marriage), neutralise any militancy and foreground her conformity. The explanation must surely lie in the fact that the political parameters we are dealing with are different from those of her contemporaries.

Thus, the universal truth is socially determined, condemning women to silence; their views or wants are never heard. Jane Austen's novels are clearly gender-based, and become, as fiction, the voice that claims other universal acknowledgements valid for women as well as men.

Jane Austen is one of a tradition of women writers who turned to fiction as a way of combining aesthetics and social criticism, and, it could be argued, leading public opinion rather than following it. One could also cite the work of Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) or George Eliot (1819-1880).



Design by R. Wistler for a stage adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* in 1936. Above, the curtain; below, the scenery for Act II, scene III (London, Roy Miles Gallery).

***Pride and Prejudice's* opening lines**

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a fortune, must be in want of a wife."

More information

For more information on Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot, see subsections 3.3 and 4.1, respectively, of this module.

Activity

2.2. Read through this extract from Chapter 31 of Jane Austen's *Emma* several times before attempting the question which follows it.

(Emma is thinking about the departure of Frank Churchill, a prospective husband.)

"Everything tender and charming was to mark their parting, but still they were to part. When she became sensible of this, it struck her that she could not be very much in love; for in spite of her previous and fixed determination never to quit her father, never to marry, a strong attachment certainly must produce more of a struggle than she could foresee in her own feelings.

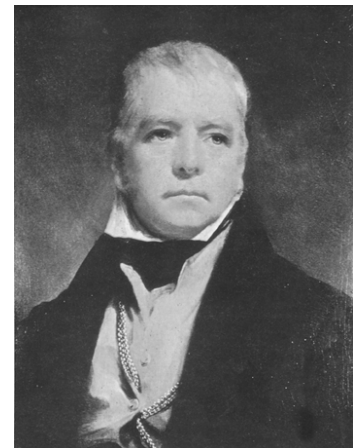
'I do not find myself making any use of the word sacrifice,' said she. 'In not one of all my clever replies, my delicate negatives, is there any allusion to making a sacrifice. I do suspect that he is not really necessary to my happiness. So much the better. I certainly will not persuade myself to feel more than I do. I am quite enough in love. I should be sorry to be more.'"

a) What do you think is implied by "love" in this text?

2.2.2. Walter Scott (1771-1832)

In fact, narrative fiction, as opposed to poetry, had for a long time been associated with women. One of the possible reasons for the anonymous publication of *Waverley* (1814) is that Walter Scott did not want to be associated with fiction because of its reputation for frivolity, which would have been at odds with his successful career in the far more serious and respectable medium of poetry. Scott shared Jane Austen's conservatism, and throughout Scott's fiction there is a similar deep distrust of Romanticism. He also felt great affinity with **Maria Edgeworth** (1768-1849), who developed the regional, or national, novel of manners in her tales about Ireland.

Scott's reputation as a novelist derives not only from his descriptions of national manners, whether in Scotland or in Europe, but from his having founded the **modern historical novel**. Scott's fiction is deeply influenced by Enlightenment theories of progress. Thus, he turns rebellion, quite often in the form of nationalism, into an act of absurdity, an attempt to reverse progress; therefore, rebels and rebellions become essentially reactionary.



Walter Scott. Portrait by Sir H. Raeburn (1756-1823) (Edinburgh, Scottish National Portrait Gallery).

Furthermore, readers of Scott's fiction often feel dissatisfied with the central character, flanked on one side by a grand historical figure, for example, Charles Stewart in *Waverley*, and, on the other, by a host of dynamic folk characters, whose linguistic versatility reinforces the impression that the hero is uninteresting. The hero's passivity has sometimes been explained as a narrative strategy which permits the reader to perceive history and locality through a neutral medium. This is a debatable point, but it is far more likely that what Scott was aiming for was a new kind of hero, as distant as possible from the hero of previous times and the Romantic or Byronic hero.

Scott is suggesting that for modern life the concept of **heroism** is obsolete and that modernity requires another kind of action: namely, **non-action**, or **conformity**. We can see that ideologically both Austen and Scott, despite clear gender differences in their fictional subjects and authorial interpolations, share similar, strong anti-Romantic tendencies.

Romanticism might have been born out of revolutionary fervour, but by 1814 it had come to be seen as something non-productive and useless in an age which projected the family as the central institution of the nation state.

3. From Romanticism to the Victorian Age

3.1. Mary Shelley (1797-1851) and *Frankenstein*

Mary Shelley's highly eclectic and ever popular *Frankenstein* (1818) is arguably the last great Gothic novel, a genre which achieved great popularity and notoriety at the end of the eighteenth century. This was partly due to its supposed immorality, notably in the works of **Ann Radcliffe** (1764-1823), author of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), **M. G. Lewis** (1775-1818), author of *The Monk* (1795), and many others.

Frankenstein contains many of the standard devices of the **Gothic novel**: pursuit, illicit passions, murder, a strong demonic element, haunted castles, graveyards, ruins, and wild picturesque landscapes.



Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. Portrait by R. Rothwell, 1841 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

The novel also contains a dedication to the author of *Caleb Williams* (1795) and *Political Justice* (1793): **William Godwin** (1756-1836), Mary Shelley's father.

Caleb Williams is one of the best known Gothic novels, where the theme of the persecution of innocence is given a strong dose of class oppression, not only because of the pursuer's aristocratic background but also because of the flagrant exercise of power that this entails.

The reference to *Political Justice* might not seem an obvious one, as this was one of the most influential revolutionary tracts of its time, opposing institutions such as marriage and private property.

However, as has been stated, *Frankenstein* is an eclectic novel. Not only is it Gothic, it also contains much biographical and autobiographical information about Mary Shelley's relationship with **Percy Shelley** and the summer of 1816 spent in the company of Byron and Diodati on Lake Geneva, Romantic descriptions of wonderful and supernatural landscapes, considerable anguish about childbirth (again autobiographical in origin but not necessarily in implication), and a Socratic dialogue on society between creator and created.

The created, the monster, uses the arguments of Godwin and Jean Jacques Rousseau to plead that he is a victim of political injustice, that he has been hounded from society simply because he has tried to behave like a model citizen, and that this has been enough to turn him from pursuer into

pursued. In other words, it seems that what is monstrous is not the monster's hideous physical presence, but the reactionary and intolerant nature of post-Napoleonic Europe.

Frankenstein is not the last Romantic novel by any means. The novels written by the Brontë sisters would dispute this honour, and in particular Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.

3.2. The Brontës: Emily, Charlotte and Anne

In *Wuthering Heights* (1847) Emily Brontë (1818-1848) follows many of the conventions of the Gothic but combines them with a most extraordinary account of physical passion between Cathy and Heathcliff, reaching beyond the grave. This work is one of the most powerful fictional accounts of the pathetic fallacy.

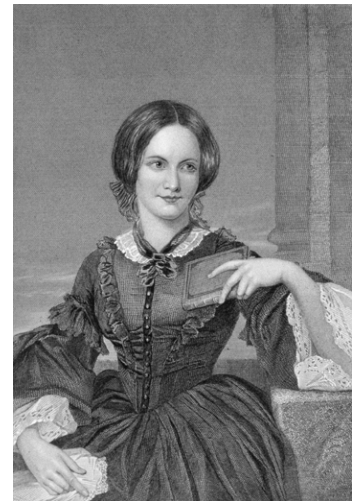
However, in the case of the Brontës, the Romantic element is present not only in their fiction, but also in the astonishing legends that surround their upbringing in wild, remote Yorkshire, as well as in the contrast between the Brontës' frail physical appearance and the turbulence of their fiction. The late publication of *Wuthering Heights* is itself an indication of how isolated they were from the literary currents of the time.

Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) published *Jane Eyre* (1847), a novel which describes a most interesting ideological shift.

Jane Eyre

The opening chapter describes the plight of the orphaned Jane, who prefers the company of books and her imagination to that of her relations, who bully her physically and mentally. She fights with her cousin John Reed; it is a very one-sided battle because he is male, four years older, and his interests are always defended by his mother. Jane's physical resistance to her tormentor results in her being punished and confined to the terrifying red room.

The opening chapter clearly depends on the Gothic trope of pursuit, but it is interesting to note an important shift. Jane's persecution can be analysed in terms of gender or class, but it is more important to note that it takes place within the family. What Jane has been deprived of is a stable family environment; this is made clear when, on the novel's opening page, Jane is excluded from the warmth of the hearth, the most powerful Victorian symbol of love and family. Jane's rebellion leads to her expulsion from the family circle: she is sent away to school.



Charlotte Brontë. Portrait by George Richmond, 1850 (Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional).

Charlotte Brontë draws a clear contrast between formal **education** –authoritarian, inhuman and highly limited– and the informal, alternative system run by Miss Temple, which is guided by true knowledge, an exchange of ideas, and companionship. Thus, *Jane Eyre* demonstrates, unlike the fiction of Jane Austen, that women can be educated to things beyond marriage, and that if they do not excel in certain areas it is simply due to the barriers which society has erected.

Miss Temple

Miss Temple, the teacher whose very name suggests that she is the source –the temple– of true knowledge. Her circle is able to read, understand and discuss the male domain of the classics.

To this second shift, we can add a third one, possibly the most remarkable of all, which concerns **marriage**. Instead of the submissive marriage of a Jane Austen novel, the novel's final chapter begins with the words "Reader, I married him." In itself, the syntax is suggestive: Jane has taken the initiative.

However, a purely feminist reading of the sentence has to take into account the fact that the groom, Rochester, is a blind, burnt-out Byronic hero whose passions have been completely extinguished: in other words, he has been completely domesticated. If Jane has taken the initiative, it has been in order to establish the nuclear family.

In a highly symbolic ending, Rochester, purged of all Romantic rebellion, regains his sight in order to see the major object of beauty, his first-born son:

"On that occasion again, with a full heart, acknowledged that God had tempered judgement with mercy."

Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*.

The potentially subversive messages of Romanticism have been well and truly buried, and their place taken by conformity.

The reputation of Charlotte and Emily has eclipsed that of the youngest sister Anne (1820-1849), author of two substantial novels, *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848).

Her first novel describes the life of a governess, which is in part a reflection of her own life, while at the same time the governess became a standard Victorian female character, whose knowledge and intelligence often set her at odds with the mercantile ethos of her employers. The second novel describes the plight of a young mother abused by a violent, drunken husband, who resembles the Brontë's brother, Patrick Branwell, whose Byronic excesses haunt much of the fiction that was written at Haworth.

The repressed passions, both in their lives and in their fiction, have fascinated successive generations of readers, turning the Brontës into a literary legend. One can appreciate that realist fiction in the Victorian age is tame in

comparison, but we should not lose sight of the fact that much of the Brontës' fiction is based on an evaluation of contemporary life, as is illustrated by the fact that they used male pseudonyms for their first publication, *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell* (1846), and also when they published their novels.

Nineteenth Century English literature is dominated by the novel, and in particular by Charles Dickens.

3.3. Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

Dickens' fiction, particularly the heavily autobiographical *David Copperfield* (1849-50), is very much family-centred, reflecting both his own and wider, social concerns. This same novel brilliantly lays out the bizarre requirements for the perfect wife. David's search for the perfect match might seem a reenactment of the judgement of Paris in a bourgeois context, but the perfect wife, in Dickensian terms, requires such a high degree of submissiveness that she lacks more than a modicum of intelligence. To what extent this situation is evident to Dickens as an author or ideologue is impossible to tell.

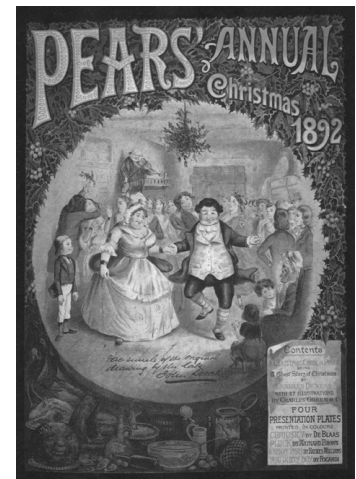
Dickens is a clear representative of the Victorian **cult of sentimentality**, sentimentality based on feelings towards children in particular, a situation which interacts with the ideal of stable family life. Dickens creates numerous children who, very much along the lines of Blake's binary opposition of innocence and experience, are forced to confront a cruel world, when they would be better protected in the sanctity of the home.

If marriage and love have come together as a civic duty, and if the productive family is the centre of life, it is logical that the death of a child should become the most poignant emotional crisis.

The most dramatic child death is that of little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841). After a long period of suspense, in the form of a hiatus of sixteen chapters, we are told that Nell is asleep, but we are probably aware of what is to come:

"For she was dead. No sleep so beautiful and calm, so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon. She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death. Her couch was dressed with here and there some winter berries and green leaves, gathered in a spot she had been used to favour. 'When I die, put near me something that has loved the light, and had the sky above it always.' Those were her words. She was dead. Dear, gentle, patient, noble Nell, was dead." (Chapter 71)

Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*.



Front cover of the Christmas 1892 edition of *Pears' Annual*, with an engraving after J. Leech's drawing for Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

Dickens' presence

Dickens' presence, whatever his artistic genius, in part derives from his understanding of the economics of literature. Learning from the success and failure of Scott's manipulation of the literary market, Dickens not only wrote fiction in magazine form, adapted the development of plot according to public response as manifested in monthly sales, later published his fiction in book form, went on lecture tours, reading and performing and his own works, but also had a biography, or perhaps hagiography, published to further his public image: **John Forster's *Life of Dickens***.

Although the "winter berries" could possibly have pagan overtones, this death scene is usually used to illustrate the worst excesses of Victorian sentiment, a result not only of its content but also of its highly rhetorical style: inversion of word order, alliteration and anaphora. But at the same time, we should not forget that perhaps what makes this scene demeaning or unacceptable is our belief that such an intense experience –the death of a child– deserves a different mode of expression. However, this novel, critically perceived to be one of Dickens' worst (in artistic terms) and therefore greatly at odds with its great popularity, foregrounds a remarkable tension in Dickens' fiction: his ambivalence towards modernity.

What has really "killed" Nell might be the lack of a stable family, or it might be the pressures of mercantilism, but most surely it is her pilgrimage through industrial England.

Other authors, such as **Benjamin Disraeli** (1804-1881) in *Sybil* (1845), or **Charles Kingsley** (1819-1875) in *Alton Locke* (1850), or **Elizabeth Gaskell** (1810-1865) in *North and South* (1854-55), criticised the social injustices of mid-Victorian urban Britain. Indeed, *North and South* was first published in Dickens' magazine *Household Words*, just after Dickens had concluded another accusatory novel with a self-explanatory title, *Hard Times*. However, in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and in his other fiction, Dickens goes much further than the realist description or criticism of his contemporaries.

Dickens states that Nell and her Grandfather:

"were but an atom, here in a mountain heap of misery, the very sight of which increased their hopelessness and suffering." (Chapter 44)

Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

Dickens' description of industrial towns abandons its realist roots and moves towards the **apocalyptic**, the **nightmarish**, the **allegorical**: industrialism seems to have brought hell to earth.

In a similar way, the depiction of London in *Oliver Twist* is localised, in the sense that the descriptions of buildings and streets can be matched to real places, but the more the novel progresses, the more it becomes obvious that London represents hell. It is a city full of vice and crime, presided over by the devilish figure of Fagin, who is responsible for the worst of all possible crimes: corrupting the innocence of children.



The punished child. Oil on canvas, by Léopold Levasseur (Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts).

Dickens' children

Dickens' children are, for example, Oliver Twist in the eponymous novel (1837-38), or Pip in *Great Expectations* (1860-61).



Charles Dickens. Portrait by W. P. Fritz (1819-1909) (London, Victoria and Albert Museum).

The standard account of Dickens is that he awakened Victorian consciousness to the harsh realities of the times, a clear illustration that literature strove to lead the public demand for reform. But this in itself is not sufficient: what Dickens has terrible problems with is not simply industrialism, but the whole question of money and commerce.

For, in *Oliver Twist*, the evil figure is Fagin, who is Jewish, and in *Great Expectations*, the money which allows Pip to be a gentleman comes from the hands of a criminal who was sent to Australia as a convict.

So we can see that what draws the two novels together is the fact that both sources of wealth are marginal and commonly perceived as irredeemably criminal (in a society which was anti-Semitic), and we therefore wonder to what extent Dickens sees all money as "dirty money". Although Dickens describes Britain's prosperity as proceeding from industry at home and the empire abroad, both share the landscape and lawlessness which are to be found at the very centre of the empire: Dickens' London.

Furthermore, how can we square this reading with the belief that Dickens is a great reformer? For if he does draw attention to terrible social conditions, where is this curious gaze meant to stop? Dickens does not simply restrict his critical eye to those aspects of domestic policy which are the subject of parliamentary reform. All the indicators point to a fundamental questioning of **modern economics**.

When, during the course of their pilgrimage, Nell asks herself:

"Why had they ever come to this noisy town, when there were peaceful country places, in which, at least, they might have hungered and thirsted, with less suffering than in its squalid strife!" (Chapter 44)

Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

We might well feel that this is a pertinent question, which Dickens only partially addresses throughout his fiction. The possible answers are:

- 1) The emigration to the city and empire are now unstoppable processes.
- 2) Rurality remains a mythological resting place for the collective memory in precisely the same way that it was a resting place for Nell.
- 3) Even though the urban is apocalyptic, it is at the same time the fascinating centre of modern life.



The Speculators. Satirical engraving by Dighton (1752-1814) (London, Guildhall Library).

Finally, we should add that whereas Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë adopt the family and home as the principal source of female and moral improvement, Dickens' use of the family is far more conservative. Using Blake's binary opposition, home becomes the place of innocence, and commerce the place of experience. But home can only be built on the proceeds of experience; that is what the father knows, and from this he shields his family.

Activity

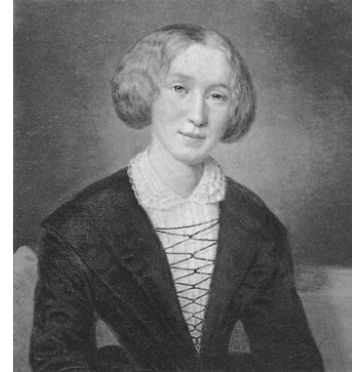
3.1. Read through the opening paragraph of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852-53), a novel which is highly critical of the legal profession, before answering the question that follows it.

"London. Michaelmas Term, lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as thick as full grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill temper, and losing their foothold at street corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if the day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest."

a) Which parts of this description are intended to be realistic and which parts are figurative? What effect do you think the passage tries to convey?

4. The Victorian novel

In this introduction to the nineteenth century, we have noted that the literature of this period often tended to display a marked gender-based division. This issue was analysed by George Eliot in an essay entitled "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists", first published in the *Westminster Review* (1856). As a lady novelist, she argues, one is supposed to write a romance, a work of pure entertainment void of serious intellectual content, in other words a "silly novel". For a woman to engage in philosophical debate is socially unacceptable. What, then, can a bluestocking do? For **Mary Ann Evans**, the answer was simple: take on the male pen name of George Eliot.



Mary Ann Evans –George Eliot– at the age of thirty. Copy of a painting by F. d'A. Durade, 19th century (London, National Portrait Gallery).

4.1. George Eliot (1819-1890)

From this brief account, we would expect the fiction of George Eliot to engage with **gender questions**. This is the case: her novels contain heroines whose pretensions go beyond those which culture has allocated to them. Frequently, the heroine's intelligence is contrasted with the model of womanhood that she can never fulfil, leaving her with a sense of terrible frustration, often tinged with envy.

Thus, Dorothea Brooke, in *Middlemarch* (1871-72), would like to live in the library rather than the salon, but that does not mean that the salon, as represented by Rosamond, is not an attractive place.

Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) might find the marriage market an uncomfortable place, but if the blonde Lucy reigns supreme and is desirable, then Maggie realises she has become undesirable and frustration is therefore not a matter of the mind, but also of the body. Maggie's first major act of resistance comes when she is told to brush her hair, but decides, with some help from her brother, to cut it off, which is not only an act of rebellion but also an act of real, social and metaphorical disfigurement. In particular, her mother's reaction –she tells the assembled family that her daughter will break her heart– confirms that this is not a skirmish but a declaration of war on all social customs.

Maggie

The main character of *The Mill on the Floss*, has become one of the best known rebels of Victorian literature, admired by such figures as Simone de Beauvoir.

Like Jane Eyre, Maggie Tulliver proves her worth intellectually: she learns the classics with much greater ease than her brother, for whom this form of education is intended. But the intertextuality does not reach as far as the novel's resolution: whereas Jane Eyre marries her lover and is happy, Maggie does not or cannot obtain Stephen.

The novel, however, leaves open the possibility, or even the desirability, of such a separation of the physical from the intellectual. George Eliot is one of the first Victorian novelists to tackle questions of female desire.

Maggie's hair

In *The Mill on the Floss* Maggie cuts her hair "because she didn't want her hair to look pretty –that was out of the question– she only wanted people to think her a clever little girl" (Chapter 7).

Middlemarch develops and analyses similar concerns. Its opening chapter presents us with a heroine, who, because she has the financial security Maggie lacked, can aspire to everything:

"And how should Dorothea not marry? –a girl so handsome and with such prospects? Nothing could hinder it but her love of extremes, and her insistence on regulating life according to notions which might cause a wary man to hesitate before he made her an offer... Women were expected to have weak opinions; but the great safeguard of society and of domestic life was, that opinions were not acted on. Sane people did what their neighbours did, so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them."

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*.

Dorothea's great mistake in life is to believe in one extreme: the beauty of intellectual life. She marries an intellectual, but the marriage turns sour, as her husband is presumably impotent and the only passion he experiences is intense sexual jealousy. Both knowledge and marriage, it is suggested, must have contact with the physical realities of the world

That "Women were expected to have weak opinions" is not a surprising comment to come from George Eliot, but what is extremely interesting is the comment that follows. For, it is made clear that it does not really matter what is said, debated or analysed, either in family or social life, as ideas are rarely important. The more intellectually dull you are, the more society considers you normal and acceptable. Doing what other people do is the mark of sanity; the thinkers of this world, Maggie and Dorothea, are seen by others to be lunatics.

This is an extremely bitter generalisation, but it serves not only to demonstrate George Eliot's harsh picture of rural life, but goes some way towards explaining one of the troublesome features of nineteenth-century fiction: the contrast between **social criticism** and **environment**. Why, if authors are so critical, do they continually use rural settings which belong to an irretrievable past? Interestingly enough, even such a progressive thinker as George Eliot rarely if ever writes about contemporary urban Britain.

For example, *Felix Holt, The Radical* (1866) is basically rural; *Silas Marner* (1861) deals very realistically with the decline of the countryside, but the section of the novel dealing with industry is, like Dickens' *Hard Times*, narrated in the form of an **allegory**, in which pure human relationships triumph over materialism.

The question posed demands an answer, which obviously exceeds the limits of this publication, but some indications have to be given. The first answer, namely that the public demanded rural fiction, is presumably true but clarifies nothing. Perhaps a more useful explanation lies in the **influence of Wordsworth**.

Wordsworth stated that real language and emotion were essentially rural. Whether this was simply opposition to eighteenth-century poetics, or fear of industrialism, or Rousseauism, or whatever other theory we wish to apply, the Wordsworthian ethos became the location of a **national mythology**. That is to say, it was very much in this concept of a rural Britain that a set of national values was born. Therefore, if fiction was to have a critical function, it was only by reference to and criticism of its ideological roots that this could be achieved.

Thus, what George Eliot accomplished, as the above quotation perhaps makes clear, was to show that what was generally perceived as rural, and therefore positive, and by extension an essential part of a national mythology, was nothing other than the **dullness of provincial life**. Consequently, it was British society generally which was provincial, in the most negative sense of the word.

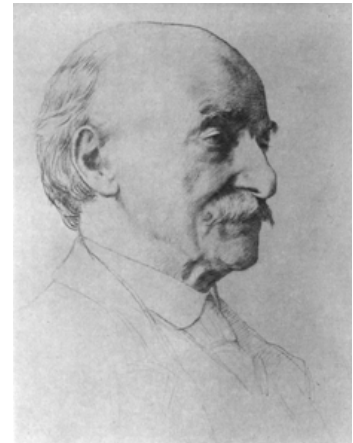
It is surely significant that Mary Ann Evans' own life followed this pattern. Unable to lead the life of a serious female novelist, she took on her pseudonym; although she wrote for and lived amongst the progressive intellectual London circles, she felt that the intellectual heartland of Europe was Weimar, to which she made several trips during the course of her lifetime.

4.2. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

The fiction of Thomas Hardy has much in common with George Eliot's. Hardy creates a fictional world in south-west England, which he calls **Wessex**, using the old Saxon name for the region. However picturesque or passionate Hardy's Wessex may appear in screen adaptations, in his fiction it is even more *provincial* than George Eliot's countryside.

Hardy's bludgeoning criticism is directed against Victorian hypocrisy, particularly its attitude to sexuality and the maintenance of an established church.

It is only with this realisation in mind –that Hardy is not analysing a region in the interests of locality but is using this location for his crusade against hypocrisy– that we can fully understand why he stopped writing novels in 1895 after the publication of *Jude the Obscure*, a rural novel that shocked certain sectors of society because of its depictions of passion, of a common law marriage, and of children taking their own life.



Thomas Hardy.

It is because he was writing against national institutions rather than merely narrating the habits of a (fictional) backward part of England that he was pilloried in much the same way as was his French contemporary Emile Zola.

Hardy wrote many Wessex novels, but perhaps the most revealing one is *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), which brings together many of the concerns of his earlier fiction. Three areas of particular interest are:

- 1) his depiction of rural communities,
- 2) his treatment of sexuality, and
- 3) his opposition to religion.

In its second chapter, a May-Day dance is described. This scene provides the author with an opportunity to describe the picturesque. For two of three brothers "of a superior class" who are witnessing the scene –and to whom Hardy sarcastically refers, using a Biblical turn of phrase, as "Those three brethren"– the scene is of no interest whatsoever; their time must be occupied with the reading of a religious tract, *A Counterblast to Agnosticism*. But for the third, Angel, the scene is delightful, encapsulating the essence of a national mythology.

Here, in a way reminiscent of Scott's descriptions of the Highlands, the narrator withdraws authority from his character. For Angel, for the visitor, for the outsider, the scene may be attractive, the ideal, but Hardy zooms in to show another version, the reality.

Thus, apart from young maidens,

"There were a few middle-aged and even elderly women, their silvery-wiry hair and wrinkled faces, scourged by time and trouble, having almost a grotesque, certainly a pathetic appearance in such a jaunty situation." (Chapter 2)

Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

If they are certainly grotesque, for the whiteness of May is not that of blooms but that of age, neither are the girls necessarily attractive, as Hardy adds in his characteristic mixture of honesty and misogyny:

"Some had beautiful eyes, others a beautiful nose, others a beautiful mouth and figure: few, if any, had all." (Chapter 2)

Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

In this particular episode, it is Angel who lacks insight, but on many other occasions, Hardy is forthright in his criticism.

His country folk are pagan and collectively brutal, particularly in *The Return of the Native* (1878) and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), which begins with a dramatic scene in which a Wessex man sells his wife for five guineas; she shows no hesitation in leaving her husband. Neither is it very clear that Hardy is particularly fond of the marked Wessex accent he recreates. Whereas Scott delights in dialect, Hardy possibly believes it to be a mark of **rural primitivism**. All in all, his countryside is brutal.

The centre of the novel revolves around the love affair between Angel and Tess. Hardy sets the scene in a dairy in summertime, an environment charged with erotic potential, as when Angel observes Tess milking a cow:

"Her temple pressing the milcher's flank [...]. Nothing moved in the picture but Old Pretty's tail and Tess's pink hands, the latter so gently as to be a rhythmic pulsation only, as if they were obeying a reflex stimulus, like a beating heart." (Chapter 24)

Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

The heart which is beating so fast is, of course, Angel's. The chapter from which this passage is taken begins:

"Amid the oozing fatness and warm ferments of the Froom Vale, at a season when the rush of juices could almost be heard below the hiss of fertilization, it was impossible that the most fanciful love should not grow passionate." (Chapter 24)

Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

The "picture" of Tess corresponds to "a fanciful love" which has become "passionate", but, as usually happens in Hardy's **fatalistic writing**, one of two things occurs: either passion is unfulfilled, or the passion becomes painful and soon after destructive; or both.

In this particular case, passion is unfulfilled and fatal for socially determined reasons. Tess has been previously seduced by Alec; and Hardy, using a Victorian euphemism to title the second part "Maiden No More", knows that this counts for more than the truth –encapsulated in the book's subtitle, *A Pure Woman*– that she is a victim, with a label attached to her.

It is highly fitting that her lover should be the son of a parson, as it is religion, following the book's logic, which has stuck the label of impurity on her. Tess is right in believing that Angel will not accept her when he knows of her past; but, more profoundly, Hardy suggests that the anguish caused by the loss of virginity prevents Tess from achieving any form of sexual fulfilment with anyone, and for this reason she embarks on a course of self-destruction.

If Hardy appears misogynistic at times, at others he takes the victim's side, entitling the novel's fifth part, "The Woman Pays", in other words, suffers the consequences.

Hardy thus takes an anti-individualistic stance through his insistence that social forces inevitably crush the individual spirit; this is the truth that Tess and all Hardy's major characters come to realise.

Thus, Angel, who is largely responsible for Tess' decline and fall, himself becomes a victim, because he cannot break free from the hold religion has over him. In a move which prefigures the modernist paradigm of exile, he emigrates.

Hardy's portrait of the Clares, the representatives of religious intolerance, borders on caricature, a style endemic in Hardy's later novels, where his intentions are so clear that the objects of criticism are unconvincing. The rival for Angel's affection is given the absurd name of Mercy Chant (a name reminiscent of a church hymn), which might indicate her religious correctness and suitability as a wife, but as no attempt is made to make her credible, she becomes no rival at all. The Clares themselves are pompous, snobbish and easy to forget.

Hardy used fiction to state his firm opposition to established religion, but apart from biographical interest, it is important to see that Hardy wrote during a time of intense religious and social ferment, a subject to which we will turn in the next section.

Activity

4.1. Read through this extract from Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* several times before attempting the question which follows it.

(The scene describes the May dance.)

"The young girls formed, indeed, the majority of the band, and their heads of luxuriant hair reflected in the sunshine every tone of gold, and black, and brown. Some had beautiful eyes, others a beautiful nose, others a beautiful mouth and figure: few, if any, had all. A difficulty of arranging their lips in this crude exposure to public scrutiny, an inability to balance their heads, and to dissociate self-consciousness from their features, was apparent in them, and showed that they were genuine country girls, unaccustomed to many eyes." (Chapter 2)

- a) What do you think the narrator means by "genuine country girls"? How does he judge them? How would you describe the narrator's attitude to them?

4.3. Other Victorian novelists

This description of the Victorian novel has necessarily been short and highly selective, excluding many novelists of great interest, such as **William Thackeray** (1811-1863), **George Meredith** (1828-1909) or **George Gissing** (1857-1903), as the objective has been to concentrate on common issues.

At the same time, it could be argued that this selection presents a false picture, as it concentrates solely on novelists who take a critical stance. There were, of course, popular novelists who were deeply conservative and wrote basically as a profession: such writers as **Robert Surtees** (1803-1864), **Sheridan Le Fanu** (1814-1875) or **Wilkie Collins** (1824-1864). But we should not forget that Dickens was an immensely popular writer, too.

In other words, critical novels and popularity often went hand in hand. Nevertheless, the Victorian novelist had a completely different concept of the artist, compared to what went before (Romanticism) and what followed (modernism).

5. Victorian poetry and essay

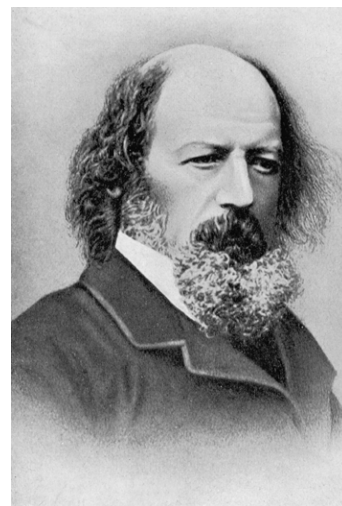
The 1993 *The Chambers Dictionary* defined "Victorian" as "strict but somewhat conventional in morals, with connotations of prudery, solemnity and sometimes hypocrisy". These connotations derive from the denotation of "Victorian" as "contemporary of the Victorian age, the reign of Queen Victoria" (1837-1901).

As we have seen in the preceding sections, Victorian conformity was contested from within the literary scene. In other words, the widespread belief in nineteenth century solemnity has little value in itself without consideration of the ongoing intellectual debate of the times. Victorian London might be a city represented by fog, as **Arthur Conan Doyle's** Sherlock Holmes stories would have us believe, but it was also a centre of learning, as represented by the **British Library Reading Room**, in which **Karl Marx**, among many other intellectuals, studied and wrote. The final section of this module will describe the literary developments in poetry and will analyse nineteenth-century polemical essays.

5.1. Late Victorian poetry

Victorian poetry is dominated by the figure of **Alfred Tennyson** (1809-1892), whose career and work appear very much the model of Victorian conformity. Not only did Tennyson become Poet Laureate in 1850, but he also became a Lord. In addition, some of his best known poems are unmistakably jingoistic, especially *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1854), which glorifies the death in action of British troops during the Crimean War, in what was essentially an act of suicidal folly.

Tennyson is also identified with the cult of the Arthurian legends. In 1888, after years of preparation, he published his epic poem in twelve books *Idylls of the King*, dedicated to the memory of Queen Victoria's husband, Albert, "Albert the Good".



Tennyson. A detail from the portrait by Samuel Laurence, c. 1840 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

Epic poems describe moments of national glory or defeat, emphasising the virtues of the victorious or defeated nation. In the case of Tennyson, it is logical to argue that the **Arthurian legends** provided a pretext for emphasising British values and culture at the culmination of its imperial power, but without going to the extremes of Wagner, Bayreuth and contemporary German nationalism. Although this is probably true, the embittered tones of the final books, tales of sexual jealousy, disappointment and death, hardly correspond to this format. In other words, a consideration of the most *Victorian* of poets demonstrates the limits of the standard conception of the term.

It is easy to proceed with further critical remarks against Tennyson, highlighting his sentimentality, the constant presence of tears, his marked technical inferiority to his contemporaries Robert Browning (1812-1889) and Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), but we should not ignore four interesting facets of his career.

- 1) Tennyson might have been a conventional poet, but he was also an extremely popular one, whose verse enabled him to lead a very comfortable life: in fact, Tennyson is the first major poet whose voice has been recorded.
- 2) Tennyson might often be conventional, but he was never out of touch. On many occasions, his poems clearly reflect how the findings of Darwin forcefully reoriented society's understanding of time.
- 3) There is a strongly innovative side to Tennyson, in particular in *In Memoriam A.A.H.* (1850), an extensive poem written in the form of a cycle of inter-related poems.
- 4) The major difficulty in approaching Tennyson is that his long narrative poems are a completely alien genre to us, as extended narration is something which we no longer associate with poetry.

Similarly, **Robert Browning's** poetry, and in particular his dramatic monologues, are often biographical stories in which the narrator recounts his life and experience, often revealing a rather murky past. Again, the content, the revelation, is more familiar to us in other forms, in novels or in drama.

Browning's best dramatic monologues are *My Last Duchess* (1842), *The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church* (1844), *Fra Lippo Lippi* (1853) and *Andrea del Sarto* (1853). All four monologues are set in Italy, where Browning and his wife, **Elizabeth Barrett** (1806-1861), also an accomplished poet, lived after their elopement.



Robert Browning. A detail from the portrait by M. Gordigiani, 1958 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

Browning's poetry shows a deep admiration for Italian Renaissance painting, an appreciation most forcefully represented by **Walter Pater's** *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), which, in its admiration for the Renaissance, questions the role of British culture as the rightful inheritor of an illustrious predecessor.

By far the most innovative poet of the nineteenth century was **Gerard Manley Hopkins**, whose poems were published anonymously in 1918. Hopkins was a Jesuit who never sought fame or publication during his lifetime, believing it to be incompatible with his religious calling. It is generally believed that even if he had published his verse, so revolutionary was its form that the great majority of readers, accustomed to the highly formal canon of Victorian poetry, would not have known what to make of it.

Hopkins' poems are basically either about religious doubts, following very much the line of the early seventeenth-century Metaphysical poets, or about nature. The latter are certainly revolutionary. Hopkins devised a new kind of verse based on stress –he uses the term **sprung rhythm**– rather than on regular metrical feet.

The following example comes from his sonnet *Spring*:

"Nothing is so beautiful as spring-
When weeds in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush
Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush
Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing;
The glassy pear tree leaves and blooms, they brush
The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush
With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling." (1-8)

Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Spring*.

Hopkins' sprung rhythm accumulates a series of verbal associations to create this "rush [of] richness", an effect comparable to an impressionist painting. This is achieved not only with innovation but also with intensive use of internal rhyme, which was the basis of Anglo-Saxon poetry. For example, look at line two: "weeds... wheels... long, lovely... lush". Hopkins' choice of form, the sonnet, that of Shakespeare and the Renaissance, is likewise a reinstatement of a rich national tradition. Hopkins brings English poetry into the vanguard of the twentieth century.

5.2. The Victorian essay

The great issues of the nineteenth century were debated in public and appeared in fiction, but were most coherently discussed in essay form: the Victorian age is the great era of the English essay. We will concentrate on three essayists: **John Stuart Mill** (1806-1873), **Charles Darwin** (1809-82) and **Matthew Arnold** (1822-1888).

In writing a literary history, one can clearly trace a tradition of Protestant writing, in which **Bunyan's** *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) was the most influential work, although only one of many.

Due to the fact that the Church of England was the established church at whose head was the reigning monarch, much Protestant writing was inevitably placed in a position of political opposition to the state. If we add to this its strong individualist roots, we can well understand how this was very much a literature of dissent.

5.2.1. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

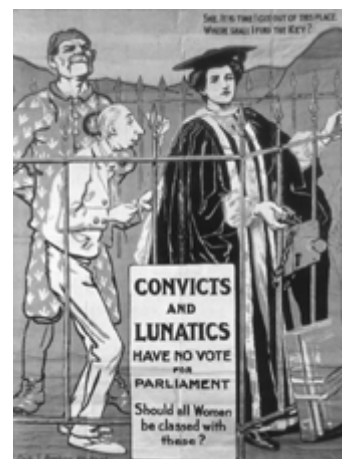
Mill's best known essays, *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and *On Liberty* (1859), are no exception. The former states clearly that:

"The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes –the legal subordination of one sex to the other– is wrong in itself, and now [is] one of the chief hindrances to human improvement." (ed. Abrams, M. H. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, second edition, New York: W.W. Norton, 1974, 989)

John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*.

Mill's forthright, unequivocal message is based on the metaphor of **slavery**: just as there was slavery in Greece, slavery on the American plantations, lords and vassals in the Middle Ages, so there is in modern society, whose central institution of enslavement is marriage. Men, Mill argues, want willing slaves, which the education system supplies them with in the form of willing wives. The inferiority of women is simply a social construct, and it is therefore through better education that greater equality will be achieved: as a result, society will become even more and more productive.

In *On Liberty* Mill again takes a dissenting, anti-establishment line. He argues that "society has got the better of individuality" to such an extreme that "even in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of; they like in crowds". This simple but extraordinarily powerful phrase "they like in crowds" leads Mill to assert:



Propaganda poster of the suffragette movement, by Emily H. Andrews, c. 1900 (London, Fawcett Library).

Change of attitude

Women were left out of all the electoral reforms. The publication of *The Subjection of Women*, however, contributed to a gradual change of attitude in English society.

"The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement, being in unceasing antagonism to that disposition to aim at something better than customary, which is called, according to circumstances, the spirit of liberty, or that of progress or improvement." (ed. Abrams, M. H. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, second edition, New York: W.W. Norton, 1974, 987)

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*.

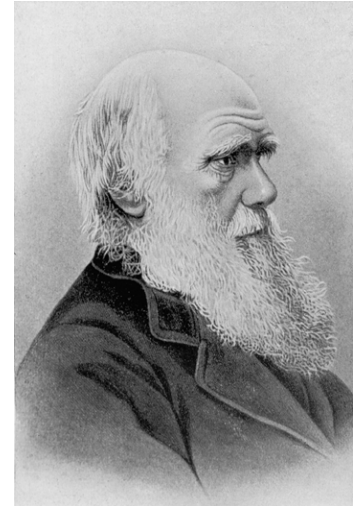
On the one hand, Mill's individualism is unmistakable; on the other hand, it might not be immediately clear what progress or liberty is. The answer lies in Mill's strong belief in the Protestant work ethic: if men and women are to be freer, if they are to withstand the pressures of an increasingly monolithic society, the type of progress that is being held back is economic expansion.

Thus, however progressive Mill's thinking might appear to us in some respects, we should not forget that this combination of individualism and mercantilism produces, in its representation in fiction, a narrow-minded person who advocates self-help rather than charity. Victorian fiction, particularly that of Dickens and Eliot, is full of satirical, critical portraits of such characters, for whom the arts have little or no significance.

5.2.2. Charles Darwin (1809-1882)

Darwin's tracts on evolution, by confirming earlier scientific findings, had a revolutionary effect on culture, probably on a par with the revolution that the change from a geocentric to a heliocentric universe had had on society centuries before.

The nineteenth century had already witnessed religious upheavals. **John Henry Newman** (1801-1890) became the leading member of the Oxford Movement, which was dissatisfied with the Anglican faith and ritual. He joined the Roman Catholic Church, eventually becoming a Cardinal in 1879. Of far greater impact was the strife in the Church of Scotland, which split in two in 1843. But whether Anglican, Catholic or Presbyterian, Darwin, both in *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and in *The Descent of Man* (1871), brought to the attention of the public the irreconcilable nature of religious faith and a belief in science, in both discourse and practice.



Charles Darwin. A detail from the portrait by J. Collier, 1881 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

The insistence that "man is descended from some less highly organised form" and that "man is descended from a hairy quadruped, furnished with a tail and pointed ears", rather than from Adam, God's perfect, stable creation, is probably the foundation stone of our modern, highly secular society.

There are many moving accounts of how Darwinism affected religious life, particularly those of families belonging to strict Protestant sects. Of particular note are **Samuel Butler's** *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) and **Edward Gosse's** *Father and Son* (1907). The latter describes how Gosse's father, a leading scientist of his time, tries to and fails to halt the influence of Darwin's theories. Gosse's fundamentalist position was that

"[...] there had been no gradual modification of the surface of the earth, or slow development of organic forms, but that when the catastrophic act of creation took place, the world presented, instantly, the structural appearance of a planet on which life had long existed" (Chapter 5).

In other words, any evolutionary hypothesis was incompatible with a belief in the perfection of God's creation. This doctrinal incompatibility led, in this particular case, to the ridicule and ostracism of one renowned scientist, but also led to a widespread belief in all sectors of society that the answers to metaphysical questions lay no longer in religion but in science. Had science and faith become incompatible?

5.2.3. Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)

The final essayist we will encounter in this section is Matthew Arnold. In terms of the development of Western thought, in no way can Arnold be considered as influential as Mill or Darwin, yet his influence on British literary and cultural studies has been enormous.

Arnold was a school inspector, a job which, by its very nature, is concerned with the assessment of educational standards. In *Function of Criticism at the Present Time* (1864), he set out the rules for a new discipline: literary criticism.

Criticism, he argues, must be independent and objective; it must aim *"to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world"*. However, Arnold insists that English literature is neither widely known nor the "best" in comparison to the literatures of France and Germany. He claims that good literature and good criticism might "nourish us in growth towards perfection".

In *Culture and Anarchy* (1868) he begins with an analysis of Puritanism, whose "ideal of beauty and perfection remains narrow and inadequate"; thus, "the Dissidence of Dissent and the Protestantism of the Protestant religion will never bring humanity to its true goal". This is not simply a philosophical argument, but a critical view of his Victorian contemporaries, the true descendants of the Reformation; and, one would imagine, also a criticism of thinkers like Mill.

Arnold probably has Mill and Utilitarianism in mind when he argues that modern society, with its insistence on individualism, is "in danger of drifting towards anarchy". He recognises the power of the aristocracy, distrusts the "middle class, the great representative of trade and dissent", and believes the working class are "pressed constantly by the hard daily compulsion of material wants" and are "raw and uncultivated": all in all, a very bleak panorama. The key to improvement lies in literary studies, serious literary studies along the lines he has proposed, rather than in literary appreciation or impressionistic criticism.

In *Literature and Science* (1882) he states:

"[...] if we know the best that has been thought and uttered in the world, we shall find that the art and poetry and eloquence of men who lived, perhaps, long ago, who had the most limited natural knowledge, who had the most erroneous conceptions about many important matters, we shall find that this art, and poetry, and eloquence, have in fact not only the power of refreshing and delighting us, they have also the power –such is the strength and worth, in essentials, of their author's criticism of life–, they have a fortifying, and elevating, and quickening, and suggestive power, capable of wonderfully helping us to relate the results of modern science to our need for conduct, our need for beauty." (ed. Abrams, M. H. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, second edition, New York: W.W. Norton, 1974, 1458)

Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Science*.

It would be difficult to find a more confident assertion of the beneficial effects of humanism: not only does it educate, it also enables the student to understand and contextualise the findings of modern science. Arnold firmly believes that art consists of *the best*, and that "our need for beauty" is an integral part of our lives. In other words, not having access to culture becomes the denial of a basic human right. Arnold's insistence on high culture and its function in society are two of the major concerns of twentieth-century literature.

Activity

5.1. Outline Matthew Arnold's reasons for believing in the beneficial effect of the arts. Explain why you agree or disagree with him.

Answer key

Although some of these questions have simple answers, many are intended to encourage the student to discuss the texts and issues with his/her tutor. The more discursive answers, and particularly the answer to the last question of all, are open to debate.

1.1.

a) Sonnet.

b) On Westminster Bridge, and therefore at a slight distance from the scene he is describing. Although a certain distance might imply that the description is objective, you should consider whether this is actually the case, or whether, on the contrary, distance has made the description selective and therefore subjective.

c) The second and third lines suggest that everyone should be moved by the beauty of this scene, except the few who are insensitive – "Dull of soul" – to beauty and life in general.

d) The metaphor of clothing implies that a garment can as easily be taken off as put on; in other words, the beauty might be only temporary.

e) The objects of beauty certainly suggest commerce and power ("Ships, towers"). Wordsworth also includes centres of culture and places of worship ("theatres, and temples") in his picture. All in all, this would seem to add up to a representative picture of a capital city. At the same time, it is noticeable that Wordsworth omits factories or banks. Consequently, we could argue that the picture is unbalanced, and even Romanticised.

f) This would suggest at least two possibilities. First, that the buildings' beauty is enhanced by their background; in other words, we have a completely harmonious picture. Second, that the buildings are beautiful only because of their natural background; in other words, beauty lies essentially in nature and not in the city.

g) "Steep" means to wet or saturate, and is a verb used with liquids. In the poem, it suggests how profoundly the sun penetrates the objects it shines on, magnifying their beauty. At the same time, an object that is soaked in liquid can be removed from the liquid, and for this reason the temporary nature of the beauty becomes its most remarkable facet.

h) If "still" means "motionless", it implies that the city will soon wake up and move. If it means "up to the present", it implies that the city is not yet fully awake, but soon will be. However, if "still" retains the second meaning, it is possible to modify the meaning of the verb, so that "lie" means "not to tell the truth". The implication of this interpretation would be that what we have been seeing is a false – "lying" – picture of a city. The observer would therefore be misguided in suggesting that cities are beautiful: they only appear to be beautiful when they are asleep, or when they are not productive.

2.1.

a) Your answer should include the following points, though you are encouraged to develop them. The affinity between poet and bird stems from the fact that the bird sings beautifully, naturally, and without any effort, thus fulfilling a Romantic ideal of effortless, perfect, natural creation. However, it should be emphasised that this is an ideal, an unobtainable ideal, as for many Romantics the creative process was painful, frustrating and often unproductive. Thus, in the desire to die, two ideals converge at the moment of extinction: a painless death, and artistic ecstasy. We should also note that Keats emphasises that this desire has not completely dominated him, for he has been "half in love with easeful Death". Is it more important to emphasise that the desire itself has occurred, or that in fact it has never been that powerful ("half in love")? We should also notice that Keats stresses that he has been in love not with death, but with a particular concept of death: "easeful Death". Perhaps he is admitting to himself that the belief in a painless death is illusory.

2.2.

a) Nineteenth Century fiction often deals with love, but it could mean many different things. Love could be seen as transcendental Romantic passion, physical desire, or the wish to find a perfect spouse. In the fiction of Jane Austen, and particularly in this fragment, Romantic passions are frequently satirised. Emma is surprised to find that love has had no effect whatsoever upon her emotions. In the end she decides she cannot be in love. The lack of correspondence between Romantic passion and real life is one of Jane Austen's favourite objects of satire. The suggestion that love necessarily entails struggles would seem to be one interpretation of this citation. Another would be that Frank Churchill, a highly attractive person, does not attract her at all, though it is difficult to distinguish between Frank as a character in a novel, and Frank as a representative of a dashing, gallant model of the ideal husband. Maybe the narrator objects to the romantic hero (that is to say, the ideal of romantic fiction). As the text progresses, we should note a growing determination on Emma's part to trust her own feelings and beliefs and come to self-knowledge that way, rather than through socially

determined norms or beliefs. Her determination to resist the most powerful of these, the concept of love, takes on a strongly feminist cast, as her rejection of the obligation to be in love simply because she is of a marriageable age defies what social norms dictate.

3.1.

a) The way in which the real and the figurative overlap and interact with each other is an essential feature of Dickens' literary style. Thus, it is just as important to see how the process develops as it is to see of what elements it is made up. The extract begins with four simple statements: this is London, the Chancellor is in Lincoln's Inn, it is November, the weather has filled the city with mud. Then follows an extended simile of a geological movement: the waters, the seas, have "retired from the face of the earth", leaving a primeval landscape of mud and dinosaurs. Dickens then shoots forward to the present day by identifying an urban landscape –Holborn Hill– and describing this modern site as sharing the same primeval climate of darkness. Even snow, the whitest of natural materials, has become blackened, and it seems we have reached the end of civilisation. It seems the snow is mourning the death of the sun. Again, natural phenomena, snow and the sun, have taken on enormous symbolic importance. Dickens' landscape is populated with horses and people, which are an integral part of a modern city: a transport system is indicative of progress; but in Dickens' London, men and beasts seem to be struggling simply to keep their balance rather than going anywhere. People are terribly unhappy, and umbrellas, rather than keeping off the rain, just annoy the other passers-by. The description closes with the suggestion that more and more mud will accumulate, as if it were really forming another crust –another geological term– upon the surface of the earth.

Dickens has transformed real London, Lincoln's Inn, Holborn, into a nightmare, a city of eternal night. To what effect? A clue is provided by the final phrase, which describes how the mud continues to accumulate at "compound interest". This term taken from the world of finance suggests that this madness is caused, in part, by modern commerce. And who or what presides over this mad system? Presumably the Lord Chancellor. The legal system, the monstrous legal system, perhaps reflected in the Megalosaurus' enormous size, presides over the hellish kingdom of mid-Victorian England. Rather than bringing justice, it plunges the world into greater darkness.

4.1.

a) It is, of course, impossible to know exactly what the narrator means by "genuine country girls", and therefore determining his views on them is equally difficult. What is clear is that the narrator uses clichés about rural life while at the same time using irony and commentary to obtain a different –non-clichéd– description. First, the clichés: a typical image of country people, such as that used in advertising, is provided in the opening sentence: "heads of luxuriant hair reflected in the sunshine every tone of gold, and black and brown". Even here, we should note that the narrator has already commented that the beauty extends not to all but to "the majority". Further authorial distance is created in the sardonic second sentence. The first three phrases accumulate features as if the narrator were about to reach a climactic statement on rural beauty, but he deflates our expectations with a remark which might be interpreted as realistic or as simply cruel and sarcastic. The third sentence, describing the girls' self-consciousness, reflects on their innocence and feeling of awkwardness when exposed to public scrutiny. The narrator implies that if we hold views about the purity of rural life, its essential quality is to be found not in an unreal concept of physical beauty (not a genuine feature) but in the girls' feeling of social embarrassment. Furthermore, the narrator's description of the girls draws the reader into the scene: if the girls are subject to public scrutiny, we, as readers, are part of the public watching them attentively. The narrator invites us to look at them in realistic terms and abandon common misconceptions about the country.

The narrator reverses the process of observation: initially, we, the readers, look at the country girls while the narrator tells us that we should try to be realistic. We then ask ourselves whether remarks such as "few, if any had all" display the narrator's realism or even misogyny. But finally, we realise that even though the narrator suggests that our gaze makes the country girls feel uncomfortable, the narrator has in fact turned *his* gaze towards the readers by suggesting that equally, if not more important than the girls themselves or the narrator's opinion is a series of misconceptions about country life, which as readers we are invited to abandon. Thus, a critical description of country life has turned into a critical view of the readers.

5.1.

Matthew Arnold firmly believed that the arts have a beneficial effect on humanity. He adopted a quite common theory that if people are exposed to the best that culture has provided throughout history, they will assimilate part of this rich cultural heritage and become better citizens. Arnold had no doubts whatsoever as to the glories of Western civilisation. We might find it rather curious that he should insist on the fact that

those who produced this wonderful heritage, the Greeks and Romans in particular, had "limited natural knowledge" and "erroneous conceptions about many important matters". In part, this is due to the fact that Arnold, as a Christian, was undoubtedly reflecting on their paganism, and perhaps their sexuality and other social practices. At the same time, by separating the misguided producer from the product –culture– Arnold was able to conceive of an ever growing, accumulating model of excellence, which did not reject a society solely because its religion was different. This put him at odds with contemporary religious fundamentalism, which stated that all knowledge derived from the Bible, and what was not in the Bible was not worth consideration (perhaps the confrontation between Darwin and religious fundamentalism was at the back of his mind here). One important consequence of Arnold's belief is that we build up an expanding model of culture, which implies not simply a reliance on the past but the importance of incorporating the best of the present; note his reference to science. "The best" is unequivocally an affirmation of the excellence of high culture, and the model we should aspire to is always that of high, rather than popular culture. To what extent you agree with Matthew Arnold is a matter of opinion, but it is surely undeniable that many justifications for a liberal education (and literature in particular) are based on arguments similar if not identical to Arnold's.

Bibliography

Source Literature

To achieve the objectives of this module, read any edition of the following works.

• Compulsory Readings

1) The Romantic poems mentioned and analysed; these can be found in any anthology (refer to the General Introduction).

Blake, W. *Auguries of Innocence*.

Blake, W. *Songs of Innocence*.

Blake, W. *Songs of Experience*.

Burns, R. *For A' That and A' That*.

Coleridge, S. T. *Kubla Khan*.

Hopkins, G. M. *Spring*.

Keats, J. *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

Keats, J. *Ode to a Nightingale*.

Wordsworth, W. *The Prelude*, Book I.

Wordsworth, W. *Michael*.

Wordsworth, W. *Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*.

Wordsworth, W. *Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802*.

2) One of the following novels:

Austen, J. *Pride and Prejudice*.

Brontë, C. *Jane Eyre*.

Dickens, C. *Great Expectations*.

Eliot, G. *The Mill on the Floss*.

Hardy, T. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

• Recommended Readings

1) A wider range of poetry written by the authors analysed in this module.

2) Any of the other novels by the authors analysed in this module.

Austen, J. *Emma*.

Dickens, C. *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

Dickens, C. *Bleak House*.

Eliot, G. *Middlemarch*.

Secondary Literature

Butler, M. (1981). *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Williams, R. (1984). *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*. London: Hogarth Press.

Late Nineteenth Century to 1945

Felicity Hand

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Universitat Oberta
de Catalunya

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Introduction

Historical Background 1890-1945

In the late 19th century, with Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1887 and her diamond Jubilee in 1897, there was already a sense of the passing of a major phase of British history.

As the 19th century drew to a close there were many manifestations of a weakening of traditional stabilities and the onset of doubt in Victorian values and beliefs, including pessimism (Thomas Hardy) and stoicism (Rudyard Kipling).

The growth of popular education as a result of the Education Act of 1870, which finally made elementary education compulsory and universal, led to the rapid emergence of a large unsophisticated literary public, which became the target for new kinds of journalism, in particular the cheap "yellow journalism". The **Education Act** of 1902 made the state responsible for secondary education by providing scholarships for grammar schools, which would slowly dissolve existing class divisions and pave the way for the future Labour victory in the post-World War II elections.

The steady emergence of a public that was literate but not in any real sense educated resulted in the splitting up of the audience for literature into "highbrows" and "lowbrows". In earlier periods there had been different kinds of audiences for different kinds of writing, but the split now developed with unprecedented speed and to an unprecedented degree thanks to the mass production of "**popular**" **literature** for the semi-literate. This fragmentation of the reading public, together with the artist's war on the uninitiated middle class, widened the gap between popular art and the kind of art appreciated only by the sophisticated and the expert.

The position of women was changing. The **Married Women's Property Act** of 1870 had allowed married women to own property in their own right; women were admitted to university during the latter part of the century, and the fight for women's suffrage started in the 1870s. The **suffragette movement** formed by **Emmeline Pankhurst** resorted to violent methods in view of the lack of support from the Liberals. Women's suffrage was not fully won until 1928, although women over thirty were granted the vote in 1918. The first decade of the twentieth century witnessed a marked change in the attitude to women and in the part they played in national life, as well as in relations between the sexes.



Left: Demonstration by suffragettes in England, 1909.



Right: "Suffragettes who have never been kissed". Anti-suffragette postcard, 1909 (Mary Evans Picture Library).

The **Boer War** (1899-1902), fought by the British to secure political and economic control over the Boer republics of South Africa, marked both the high point of British imperialism and the reaction against it. The transformation of the British Empire into the **British Commonwealth** (an association of self-governing countries) continued throughout the first half of the 20th century amid both imperialist and anti-imperialist sentiment.

A steadily rising **Irish nationalism** protested with increasing violence against the political subordination of Ireland to the British Crown and government. Although the House of Commons passed a bill granting Ireland Home Rule in 1912, the Ulster protestants wanted to remain in the United Kingdom. Finally, Ireland was partitioned: six counties in Ulster remained in the UK while the rest of the country became the Irish Free State.

During the **Edwardian decade** (1901-1910) the social and economic differences between the classes remained undiminished, although on the level of ideas there was a sense of change and liberation, restlessness and experimentation.

World War I (1914-1918) did not itself initiate any major shift in attitudes or social reforms, as many of these developments were already under way, but it certainly accentuated them.

In 1906 the newly elected Liberal government introduced far-reaching **social legislation**, including old-age pensions in 1908 and unemployment insurance and payment for members of Parliament in 1911. Between 1900 and 1914 trade union membership doubled and the recently launched Labour Party gradually attracted the working class vote away from the Liberal party.

Edward VII's son, **George V**, reigned until 1936, but the "Georgian period" usually refers to the lull before the storm of the Great War. This was the last phase of assurance and stability before the old order throughout Europe broke up in violence.



Proclamation issued by the president of the first Irish Republic on Easter Monday, 1916, in Dublin, calling on all Irishmen to take up arms "in the name of God and the dead generations". Although the Easter Rising was unsuccessful, it played a fundamental role in the evolution of the independence movement.

The **treaty of Versailles** (1919) proved to be no more than a temporary compromise in the face of political circumstances moulded not simply by the disasters of war but also by the presumptions of the social and national revolutions the war had provoked. The old continental empires had been dismembered; Germany had been humiliated and was moving slowly towards National Socialism.

A sense of fragmentation, geographical and historical as well as cultural and psychological, haunted the experimental texts of the 1920s.

The **October Revolution of 1917** and the newly created Bolshevik state soon became the model progressive society for many post-war British intellectuals such as Sidney and Beatrice Webb, H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw. Their optimism about the achievements of the first "Workers' State" was informed not simply by Soviet propaganda but also by an awareness of the manifestly poor working and living conditions of a large percentage of British men and women. Despite the social reforms initiated by the pre-war Liberal governments, the condition of the industrial and agricultural poor, and of the unemployed, often contrasted as starkly with that of the rich as it had in mid-19th century Britain.

The **General Strike of May 1926**, which collapsed after nine days, demonstrated the failure of organised labour to topple a resolute and unsympathetic government. The Government's propaganda victory was partly due to its successful control of the media, including, for the first time, broadcasting. Continuing economic depression and rising unemployment nevertheless helped to ensure that Labour was able to form a second government between 1929 and 1931 (a minority Labour government had been formed after the General Election of 1923 but had fallen after only ten months). However, there seemed to be relatively little any democratic government could do to reverse the devastating effects of the **economic depression** on heavy industry. Much of British literature of the 1920s and 1930s is dominated by images of decay and instability or by a language of fragmentation.

A broad national culture and a sense of participation in all elements of national life were gradually ceasing to be the exclusive preserve of an educated or privileged elite. **Popular newspapers** secured their position as moulders of social opinion by sponsoring moderately priced encyclopedias or cheap issues of the classics.

The triumph of the middlebrow was helped by **technological innovations**. The construction of detached and semi-detached houses offered the middle classes the possibility of a better and cleaner life in the expanding suburbs of those British cities which remained unaffected by the Depression of the 1930s.



Unemployed. Poster for the British Labour Party, printed by Vincent Brooks Day & Son Ltd., 1910 (Essen, Devische Plakatmuseum).

The advent of the **wireless** in the 1920s moved popular entertainment from the public domain into the domestic sphere, and hence across class barriers. George V was the first British monarch to use the radio to broadcast Christmas messages to the Empire. However, the main form of public entertainment in the 1930s was the **cinema**, which appealed equally to the middle and working classes.

Depression and unemployment in the early 1930s were followed by the rise of Hitler and **Fascism** throughout Europe. The impotence of capitalist governments in the face of **Nazism**, combined with the economic dislocation, made many young intellectuals turn to the political left for solutions. In many ways, the thirties was the decade of opinions and attitudes rather than artistic innovation. The outbreak of **World War II** in September 1939 followed very shortly on Hitler's pact with Russia, both of which disillusioned many young left-wing writers.

Recommended Readings

Morgan, K. (ed.). (1990). *The Oxford History of Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Graves, R.; Hodge, A. (1985). *The Long Weekend. A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939*. London: Faber & Faber (1st edition, 1940).

Objectives

In studying this module, students will:

1. Become familiar with the social and cultural changes that took place at the turn of the twentieth century.
2. Analyse the way nineteenth-century values evolved and were criticised in the new century.
3. Compare and contrast the realist tendencies with the Modernist style of writing.
4. Acquire guidelines for understanding modern poetry and drama.

1. The Nineties

Late 19th century English literature remained insular in its styles and preoccupations. Its predominant concerns were English society and its ills, English religion and its development, and England's position within the United Kingdom and as the centre of a still expanding colonial and commercial Empire.

The preoccupation with social and spiritual evils, and the widespread awareness that answers to domestic problems were not to be found in conventional Christian teaching, led to a revival of interest in other religions and scientific alternatives to religion, and to an anti-rational revival of Gothic extravagance.

An obsession with crime, anarchy, decadence, the animal, or simply the paraphernalia of horror can be seen running through the work of many of the key writers of the end of the century, such as **Oscar Wilde**, **W. B. Yeats**, **Joseph Conrad**, **H. G. Wells** and **Robert Louis Stevenson**, among others.

The Nineties have often been labelled the era of "decadence", or of aesthetic renewal after the onslaught of realism and naturalism. According to the canons of *aestheticism* or "art for art's sake", the work of art should not be a vehicle for analysing social or political issues but rather should celebrate beauty in as polished a style as possible. As Oscar Wilde, the self-appointed spokesman of this movement, declared, "All art is quite useless", meaning that art has its own intrinsic values and is independent of the world outside.

Naturalism, however, was by no means dead in English literature, as can be seen in the work of late Victorian and Edwardian writers such as **Arnold Bennett** or **H. G. Wells**. In fact, the high art of the aesthetic movement, intermingled with influences from the French symbolist poets, coexisted with the romances and imperial adventure stories enjoyed by middle-brow readers.

More information

For more information on Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells, see subsections 4.2 and 4.3, respectively, of this module.

1.1. Crime, adventure and Gothic extravagance: Doyle, Stevenson, Wilde, Stoker and Haggard

In their own different ways, the writers of the nineties all described a shadowy world behind a social façade. Gothic tales and ghost stories became more popular as the age examined its own hidden spaces. The popular literature of crime was sensational and spectacular, but it should be remembered that the identity of Jack the Ripper was a topic of speculation.

Sherlock Holmes, the first great detective of English literature, was introduced to the reading public by **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** (1859-1930) in the *Strand Magazine* in 1887. Conan Doyle captured an impression of a foggy, disordered London, a city of mystery and murder that was to remain in people's imagination for many generations.

The creation of his unofficial detective Holmes, a man of medicine, science and deduction, may have been influenced in some way by **Robert Louis Stevenson's** *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), which presented a darker world hidden beneath the surface of bourgeois urban life.

The theme of the doubled self in a doubled environment appears in its utmost decadent form in **Oscar Wilde's** *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Dorian Gray becomes more and more corrupt in life but holds on to his golden youth. Meanwhile, his portrait, discreetly stowed away in the attic, ages and decays. Art thus expresses the reality as the reality turns into art; the portrait becomes Gray's double.

The duality of man, and ideas of self/other and civilisation/darkness are analysed in **Bram Stoker's** *Dracula* (1897). Stoker (1847-1912) was born in Dublin and worked as an actor's manager. In his best known work, *Dracula*, he combines theatricality with Irish Gothic. The novel, which has never been out of print since it first appeared, presents a conventional backcloth to a Gothic horror story with its "vast ruined castle, from whose tall black windows came no ray of light, and whose broken battlements showed a jagged line against the moonlit sky" (Chapter 1).

However, despite the inevitable sensationalism of the descriptions, Stoker touches on themes that were very much in vogue in his day and that explain the immense popularity of his work.

There were serious doubts about much of Christian dogma, including the belief in the resurrection of the body. The novel shows the existence and power of evil, which cannot be fought merely with force or even counteracted by means of virtuous behaviour.



"Sir Arthur Conan Doyle the slave of his creation, Sherlock Holmes." Cartoon by Bernard Partridge, 1926 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

Sherlock Holmes

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's celebrated detective, who appears in over 60 short stories and novels, perhaps most notably in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Dracula also opens up questions of sexual ambiguity with its suggestion of homosexuality, incest and necrophilia, and thus defies any clear-cut classification into either a male or a female world. Much of the literature of the time fell into one or the other category. The female world was that of social and domestic pressure at home, while the male realm was the world of empire and adventure.

Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) was almost a forerunner of the tales of adventure set in various parts of the Empire that flooded the market in the late Victorian and Edwardian years. H. Rider Haggard (1856-1925) and Rudyard Kipling are among the writers of this subgenre still in print.

Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and Allan Quatermain (1887) are tales of manly adventures into the unknown and dangerous parts of the ever expanding British Empire.

Such tales of optimism and national pride were promoted by the new boys' papers as a kind of antidote to the pessimistic agnosticism of late Victorian fiction. The decade of the nineties thus combined decadence with jingoism.

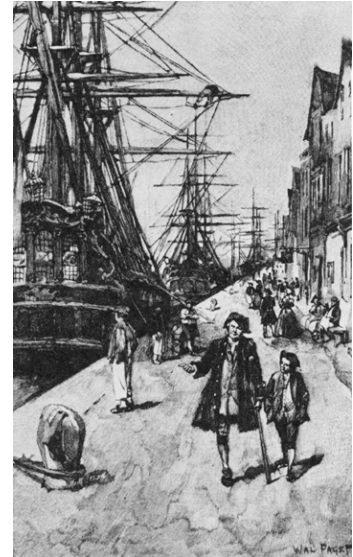
Rudyard Kipling, the first British writer to be awarded the Nobel prize, went one step further than Haggard, however.

1.2. Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

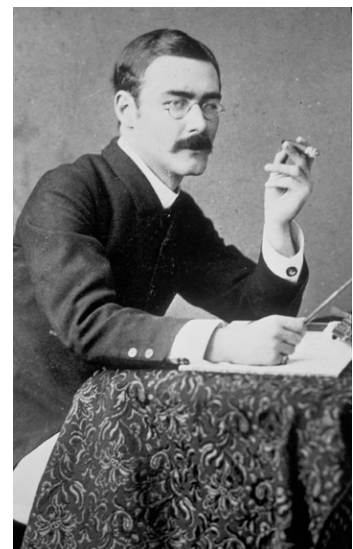
Kipling reflected the imperial adventure not only as a vast commercial and governmental task, but also from the perspective of the everyday routine work. He was a plain storyteller, who valued the world of masculine action but who was also alert to subtleties, human weaknesses, vulnerability and failure.

He was conditioned by India, having been born and brought up in Bombay, by its densely overcrowded cities, its hot deserts, its princely states, its ancient customs and its cantonments. He was a detached European outsider but he tried to see India from the inside.

He was a great short story writer, but perhaps his finest work is his novel *Kim* (1901). Kim, an Irish orphan, grows up believing himself to be Indian and serves a Tibetan lama as his disciple. When his parentage is discovered, he learns to be a Sahib and acts as a British Secret Service spy. Although



An illustration by Wal Paget for an edition of *Treasure Island* published in 1899. Stevenson's novel was first published as a serial in 1881.



R. Kipling. Portrait by P. Burne-Jones, 1899 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

nature seems to gain the battle over nurture, Kim struggles to discover his true identity and Kipling poses questions about identity, and problems of race and religion:

"What am I? Mussulman, Hindu, Jain, or Buddhist? This is a hard knot [...]. I am Kim. I am Kim. And what is Kim?" (Chapter 8 and 15)

Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*.

Many Kiplinesque phrases have come to form part of the accepted stock of English sayings, such as "East is East, and West is West and never the twain shall meet" or "the female of the species is deadlier than the male"; but the phrases that are now most associated with him tend to be those with marked colonial connotations, such as "the White Man's Burden", "lesser breeds without the law" or "half devil and half child".

1.3. Joseph Conrad (1857-1924)

The image of Empire that very appropriately closed the nineteenth century was the highly ambiguous vision presented in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

Conrad, born Josef Korzeniowski in the Russian occupied Polish Ukraine, joined the British merchant navy and sailed to many parts of the European colonial empires, which would serve as the raw material for his subsequent novels.

Heart of Darkness is a highly symbolic novella which compares and contrasts civilisation and savagery, nature and art, and faith and betrayal through a multilayered narrative. The critique of the corruption of empire is only one of the many possible interpretations it allows.

The narrator Marlowe tells how he journeyed up the River Congo in search of Kurtz, only to discover that the man who was supposed to bring civilisation and enlightenment to the savages in Africa has himself fallen victim to the darkness of his inner self. Kurtz's deathbed realisation of the depth to which he has sunk is summarised by his cry, "The horror! The horror!". It is also the story of Marlowe's own dilemma: whether he should tell the truth about what he has witnessed and so destroy the European belief in civilisation.

Like many other turn of the century novels, *Heart of Darkness* shows the latent evil in humankind and the need to keep up appearances.

Other works of Kipling

Kipling quickly gained popularity, both as a journalist and as a writer of short stories. He also wrote poems, such as *Barrack-Room Ballads* (1892) or *The Seven Seas* (1896). Kipling's other works include *The Jungle Books* (1894-95), *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888) and *Just So Stories* (1902).



J. Conrad in 1924, by M. Arbutnot.

Heart of Darkness

The title of this book is taken from a speech given by the Belgian king on becoming king of the Congo with a mission to "percer le coeur des ténèbres".

1.4. Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)

The literary figure most easily associated with Decadence is Oscar Wilde. He was born and grew up in Dublin. Later, he won a scholarship to Oxford, where he was influenced by aestheticism. He soon came to stand out in society for his sparkling wit and often outrageous comments.

Apart from his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and several poems, including *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, written during his two-year prison sentence for homosexuality, Wilde's outstanding successes were his comedies *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and his best known play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895).

The first three are mostly concerned with the question of whether a woman with a past can become acceptable to "polite society".

The title of the fourth play is Wilde's jibe at the Victorian value of earnestness. Wilde takes certain literary conventions – babies mixed up at birth, people with double identities, and absurdly romantic ideals ("it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love someone whose name was Ernest"; "the only really safe name is Ernest"). The two main female characters, Gwendolen and Cecily, are much more decisive than the two men, neither of whom is called Ernest. They refuse to marry Jack and Algernon until they are christened "Ernest".

On the surface this is comedy raised to the level of fantasy and pushed into the realm of the absurd. However, even at its most preposterous there is an element of unorthodox social comment, a living reality, a desire to attack Victorian morality.

Wilde's method is to juxtapose moral judgements and absurdities, such as:

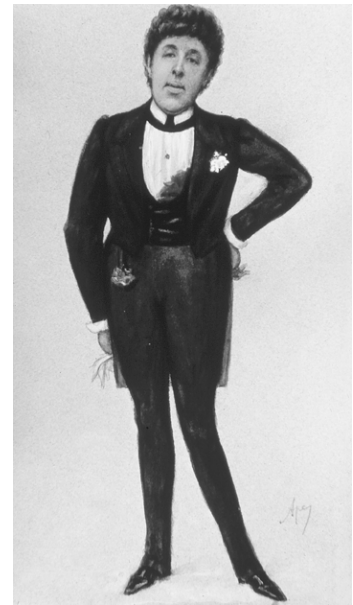
"If the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility." (Act I)

Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Wilde's arrest and the scandal that surrounded his name put an end to his popularity in his lifetime. After leaving gaol, he left England for good and died friendless and penniless in Paris. However, his refusal to deal too seriously with serious topics was to inspire several twentieth-century playwrights, such as Noël Coward and Joe Orton, among others.

Activity

1.1. Read through this extract from Act 1 of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* several times before attempting the questions which follow it.



Oscar Wilde. Watercolour by C. Pellegrini, 1984 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

More information

For more information on N. Coward, see subsection 2.3.1 of this module.

"LADY BRACKNELL: [*pencil and notebook in hand*] I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men, although I have the same list as the dear Duchess of Bolton has: We work together, in fact. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke?

JACK: Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.

LADY BRACKNELL: I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is. How old are you?

JACK: Twenty-nine.

LADY BRACKNELL: A very good age to be married at. I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?

JACK: [*after some hesitation*] I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL: I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square."

- a) What Victorian values do you think Wilde is attacking in this extract?
- b) How does Wilde achieve the humorous effect in this exchange?
- c) From your reading of the play, how important are the individual characters of Jack Worthing and Lady Bracknell?
- d) If you were directing this play, what instructions would you give the actors for this scene?

2. The Revival of the Theatre to 1945

The last decade of the 19th century saw a revival of British drama. Why do we talk in terms of a revival? While the theatre in the 19th century was by no means dead, it being a period of great actors and actresses, they tended to perform Shakespeare and the classics or else trivial comedies and sensational melodramas. Until 1890 the theatre offered little literary quality, and much sensation and spectacle. The revival was a new force, with new plays written for an intelligent audience and usually concerning the lives of people with whom the audience could identify.

The father of this revival was the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906). Ibsen explored social problems and denounced public hypocrisy. His female characters spoke out against the social conventions that trapped women at the time. Thus, the scope of the modern dramatist was extended by widening both plot and character presentation.

Henrik Ibsen's works

Henrik Ibsen's works include *Brand* (1866), *Peer Gynt* (1867), *Hedda Gabler* (1890) and *Bygmester Solness* (1892).

For the next 30 years the big name in British theatre was **G. B. Shaw**, although we must also mention **J. M. Synge**, **S. O'Casey**, **N. Coward**, **J. B. Priestley** and **C. Fry**.

2.1. George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)

Shaw was greatly influenced by Ibsen but brought to his own plays wit and comedy bordering on farce, which gave them a different flavour.

Born in Dublin in 1856 of Irish Protestant parents, Shaw left Ireland for good at the age of 20. He settled in London, took up socialist politics, was a local government councillor in St. Pancras (N. London) and served on the Executive Committee of the small but influential Fabian Society. He was an effective public speaker and knew how very much people are prepared to take in serious thought and provocative ideas if entertainingly and strategically presented in dialectically dramatic form dosed with humour.

"To me the tragedy and comedy of life lie in the consequences, sometimes terrible, sometimes ludicrous, of our persistent attempts to found our institutions on the ideals suggested to our imaginations by our half-satisfied passions, instead of on a genuinely scientific natural history."

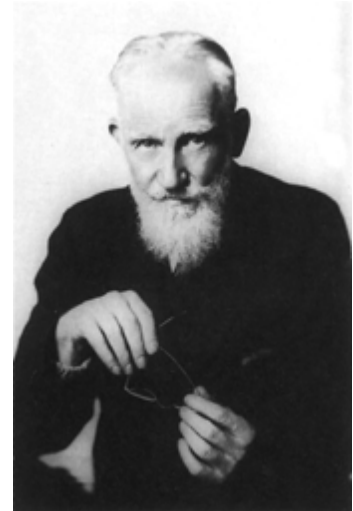
G. B. Shaw, Preface to *Plays Pleasant* (1898).

Sir James Matthew Barrie

Sir James Matthew Barrie was a dramatist and literary critic. He achieved his first success on the stage with a dramatisation of his novel *The Little Minister* (1897), but he is better known for his play, *Peter Pan: or The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up*. A narrative version, *Peter and Wendy*, was fashioned by Barrie and published in 1911.

Shaw did not win easy success in the theatre. He wanted his plays to be read and discussed, so he wrote long prefaces that have little to do with the plays they introduce, but expatiate on many topics. His plays contain highly elaborate stage directions (like those of **J. M. Barrie**, 1860-1937), so that they can be read like novels.

His views were the advanced commonplaces of the time: that the ordering of society should be in the hands of educated, reasonable men; that is, orderly progress in a democracy. The emotional basis of his progressivism was his hatred of the narrow-minded religious bigotry he had known in his boyhood.



G. B. Shaw

Shaw classified many of his own plays as either "pleasant" or "unpleasant". His play *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, which was not performed until 1902 as the Lord Chamberlain refused it a licence, deals with organised prostitution. A well-educated young woman discovers that her mother has graduated through the "profession" to become part proprietor of brothels throughout Europe. This is an example of what Shaw called an "unpleasant play" because he forces the spectator to face unpleasant truths, despite the fact that the vehicle through which these truths are presented is essentially that of high comedy.

G. B. Shaw

Shaw began as a book reviewer and art and music critic, and did not write plays until he was over 40. In a sense, he was creating the taste by which he was to be appreciated.

Although Shaw proclaims that he is showing life as it is, this is all part of the joke. Some of his plays are wild romances like those of the French dramatist Molière, and his humour tends towards the farcical. Unlike the authors of classic comedy, he does not combine making fun of people with moral disapproval. Hence the atmosphere of irresponsibility and farce.

Arms and the Man (1894) seems to be a light comedy, yet at the time it was thought shocking because of its unromantic treatment of war and soldiering.

Shaw was greatly influenced by the new European theatre of Ibsen, whose plays may not be tragic but are certainly gloomy. In Shaw's plays, even in the "unpleasant" or propaganda plays where he is a didactic dramatist like Ibsen or Brecht or even **Arthur Miller**, farce is always breaking in.

His characters can often turn into mere caricatures (compare **Dickens**). The plays have little or no intrigue, and the situations are indefinite, absurd, or even unreal, because the real subject is an **idea**.

Activity

2.1 Read through this extract from Act III of Shaw's *Arms and the Man* several times before attempting the questions which follow it.

SERGIUS: [*going to Bluntschli*] I have allowed you to call me a blockhead. You may now call me a coward as well. I refuse to fight you. Do you know why?

BLUNTSCHLI: No; but it doesn't matter. I didn't ask the reason when you cried on; and I don't ask the reason now that you cry off. I'm a professional soldier: I fight when I have to, and am very glad to get out of it when I haven't to. You're only an amateur: you think fighting's an amusement.

SERGIUS: [*sitting down at the table, nose to nose with him*] You shall hear the reason all the same, my professional. The reason is that it takes two men –real men– men of heart, blood and honor –to make a genuine combat. I could no more fight with you than I could make love to an ugly woman. You've no magnetism: you're not a man: you're a machine.

BLUNTSCHLI: [*apologetically*] Quite true, quite true. I always was that sort of chap. I'm very sorry.

- What conventional ideas about war and masculinity does Shaw mock in this extract?
- What is ironic about Sergius' jibe that Bluntschli is a machine?
- How does Shaw's treatment of heroism and war complement or contrast with that of the War poets such as Wilfred Owen?

2.2. The Irish theatre: J. M. Synge and S. O'Casey

Outside London, the creation of the Irish National Theatre in Dublin witnessed the revival of a native and distinct Irish theatre (quite apart from the fact that many of the distinguished names in "English" theatre were in fact Irish). This new Irish theatre went back to the 19th century and was inextricably bound up with the Nationalist movement.

The dramatists of the **Abbey Theatre**, established in 1904, looked on drama as a vehicle of the emotions and sought their themes among the legends, folklore and peasantry of Ireland.

Among the major writers associated with the Irish theatre are **John Millington Synge** (1871-1909), who explored the potential of Irish speech both in his comedies and in his tragedies. His play *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) provoked riots at the premiere, which showed that it was not going to be easy for Irish dramatists to tell the truth as they saw it about their country and its people.

Sean O'Casey (1884-1964) used a realistic, working-class framework for his plays. His men are full of empty boasts and posturing, while his women are the workers and realists. *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) brought trouble again to the Abbey Theatre because O'Casey dared to suggest that an Irish woman might be a prostitute.

Similar plays were rejected by the Abbey owing to pressure from the Catholic hierarchy, and the Irish stage withered into nostalgia and provincialism.



J. M. Synge. Drawing by J. Paterson, 1906 (private collection).

2.3. Post-war theatre

The arrival of the **cinema** posed a new threat to the theatre once the cinema became the entertainment of the masses. On the other hand, the development of broadcasting fomented a taste for drama. **Radio drama** did much to interest a wider public in drama and also helped the professional stage by offering dramatists new opportunities.

In the years following the Great War, there was a clear demand for lighthearted, escapist entertainment, with the result that farces, shows and musical comedies reigned supreme on the London stage. The dominant mood of the 1920s was the desire to forget about the war and the generation blighted by war and to have a good time.

2.3.1. Noël Coward (1899-1973)

The plays of Noël Coward mirrored this feeling. Coward was writing for a class of people who had had their confidence shaken by war but who desperately needed to reassert upper-class values. His plays contain no overt social comment, although indirectly they comment on the society they entertained. *Cavalcade* (1931) covers the first thirty years of the 20th century, seen through the story of two families of different social classes.

2.3.2. J. B. Priestley (1894-1984)

John Boynton Priestley, who became famous for his wartime radio broadcasts (during WWII), was a novelist and playwright.

In many of his plays Priestley was influenced by the theories of **Ouspensky**, who claimed that time is in the form of a spiral, which means that we live our lives many times over, each time making the same choices and the same mistakes, unless an exterior agent intervenes to break this spiral.

Among his best known "time" plays are *Laburnum Grove* (1934), *I Have Been Here Before* (1934), *Time and the Conways* (1937) and *An Inspector Calls* (1947). Time is seen not so much as the enemy that spoils illusions, but instead as just one dimension in a multi-dimensional reality.

In *Time and the Conways* the action of the play spans eighteen years, but Act I begins one autumn evening in 1919, Act II another autumn evening in 1937, and Act III continues from where Act One left off. The poignancy of Act II lies in the shocking revelation of what time has done to the Conway family and



Noël Coward in the role of Elyot in a performance of his play *Private Lives* at the Phoenix Theatre, London, in 1930. With him is the actress Gertrude Lawrence (London, Victoria & Albert Theatre Museum).



Photograph of a staging of *Time and the Conways* in Barcelona.

what they could have made of their dreams in Act III. The irony of the play is that Alan, the only character to be untouched by time, is the one who had no dreams and therefore the one who did not become imprisoned by time.

"You know, I believe half our trouble now is because we think Time's ticking our lives away. That's why we snatch and grab and hurt each other." (Act II)

J. B. Priestley, *Time and the Conways*.

Priestley's plays are good examples of the "well made play", in which the nature of society or even the role of the theatre are in no way challenged.

2.4. The poetic drama

Apart from light comedies, history plays and drawing-room realist plays, the period between the wars also saw a revival of **poetic drama**.

The best known example of this subgenre is T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935). The play focuses on the spiritual crisis of the twelfth-century churchman Thomas Becket and the balance between the demands of the secular and the spiritual. Eliot uses devices from Greek drama, expressionist drama, and **Brechtian "alienation"**. The knights who murder Becket are not seen as individuals but as representatives of certain attitudes.

Brechtian alienation

Brechtian alienation aimed, through the use of parable, to distance the spectator and encourage objectivity; in other words, it sought to arouse the spectator's rational faculties.

Christopher Fry (b. 1907) also tried his hand at reviving poetic drama and in this respect was influenced by Eliot. However, Fry's best known plays are his comedies. *The Lady's Not For Burning* (1948) deals with a fourteenth-century adventurer who finds a meaning in life through his love for the daughter of an alchemist condemned as a witch and sentenced to be burnt. This play, together with his other comedies *A Phoenix Too Frequent* (1946), *Venus Observed* (1950) and the church pageant *A Sleep of Prisoners* (1951), were enormous commercial successes.

However, the theatrical revolution of the 1950s was to put paid to any continuation of verse drama and was to relegate playwrights like Fry to a genteel backstage.

3. The Birth of Modern Poetry

The early 20th century was not a haven of afternoon tea and scones on the lawn, but a time troubled by the Irish question, the Suffragette movement, the rise of Socialist parties, the decline in religious belief: in short, a waste ground of disputing ideologies.

Although intellectuals saw the ugliness and emptiness of modern life, in general terms, late 19th century poetry was out of touch with the realities of the new century. Edwardian and Georgian poets adopted genteel, nostalgic, leisurely country themes and atmospheres.

3.1. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

Among the notable poets of the early 20th century Thomas Hardy, who wrote most of his poems after he had completed his novels, composed individual poetry, often containing dialect.

His themes vary from laments for a godless universe or current events such as the sinking of the "Titanic" (1912) to the death of his wife. Hardy stamps his own individual, pessimistic style onto the traditional mode:

"And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue,
In shadowy silent distance grew the iceberg too." (Stanza 8)

Thomas Hardy, *The Convergence of the Twain* (1912).

More information

For more information on Hardy's narrative works, see subsection 4.2 of the module "Romanticism and the Nineteenth Century".

3.2. Pre-war poetry: the Georgian School

Among the poets of the so-called Georgian school were **Rupert Brooke**, **Walter De la Mare** and **Edmund Blunden**, who published five volumes of *Georgian Poetry* between 1912 and 1922.

They all had their clearly recognisable individual qualities but were alike in their rejection of the ideas of the decadents, namely that art should be unconcerned with controversial issues, such as politics, and that it should be restricted to celebrating beauty in a highly polished style. They all sought to achieve simplicity and realism, and were united in their **love of natural beauty**, especially as found in the English landscape, and their adherence to the forms and techniques of the main traditions of English poetry.

In their own way they too were **escapist**. For the most part, their work shows little awareness of the industrial world around them, and often it has an all too obvious facility of technique and shallowness of feeling bordering on the trivial.

3.2.1. Rupert Brooke (1887-1915)

Rupert Brooke was educated at Rugby and Cambridge, where he began to write poetry. In 1911 he settled at Granchester, the village near Cambridge which he was to immortalise in *The Old Vicarage, Granchester*, and then during 1913-14 he travelled in America and the South Seas. He joined the Army in 1914 and in the following year died of blood poisoning on his way to Gallipoli and is buried on the Greek island of Skyros.

Brooke could be regarded as the pre-war representative of social and cultural protest against Victorianism. His poetry deals with nature, and simple pleasures were his chief inspiration, although he was also a subtle observer of natural beauty. His work rarely delves below external appearances and his simple subject matter contrasts with the skilfully contrived verses.

Brooke, who wrote with feeling about the outbreak of war, died before he saw much action. His poetry does not in consequence reflect the shock and violence so evident in the group of poets who served in the army in the Great War and made poetry out of the experience of their generation, sent to the front to be slaughtered by the hundreds.

3.3. The World War I poets

The three who are most commonly thought of as War Poets are **Wilfred Owen** (1893-1918), **Siegfried Sassoon** (1886-1967) and **Isaac Rosenberg** (1890-1918).

The effect of the war on their poetry was to cause them to turn away from the rather tepid romanticism of much pre-war poetry, and to adapt their language to the new and terrible experiences, creating poetry that could convey the horror of the battlefield. They thus played a significant part in the renewal of poetic language.

3.3.1. Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

Owen is perhaps the best known of these World War I poets. In 1916 he sailed to France on active service. He served as an infantry officer, was awarded a decoration for bravery (Military Cross for gallantry in action), and on November 4th (a week before the armistice) was killed by machine-gun fire, trying to get his company across the Sambre Canal.

Before the war he was already writing mildly sensuous poetry influenced by Keats. For some time during the war he continued to write in the sensuous, late romantic tradition, but he then adapted his technique to express the intensity of the suffering on the Western Front, deliberately introducing elements of discordance and harshness into his style. Like Sassoon and Rosenberg, Owen reacted to the war with indignation and compassion.

In the Preface to his poems he wrote:

"This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion or power, except War. Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity."

Wilfred Owen, Preface to *Poems*.

Though Owen and the other war poets may not have contributed to the establishment of what we call "modernism", the poetry of World War I has a clear right to be considered part and parcel of modern poetry. The experience of the War was emphatically one which could not be conveyed in debilitated nineteenth-century poetic conventions.

The Great War

It was the most horrific the world had known and proved a turning point for many British poets who had been happily writing in the old manner. For those who fought in the war, the mud and slaughter of the trenches put an end to the traditional patriotic heroism which glorified war.

Technically, Owen was an innovator with his use of half-rhymes, but he always innovated *within* a poetic tradition, which he firmly adhered to.

At the same time as the tragedy of the war was changing poetical content, radical innovations were taking place in English poetry, both in form and in language.

Activity

3.1. Read through Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est* (1917-18) several times before attempting the questions which follow it.

"Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the hunting flares we turned our backs



Paths of glory, by C. R. W. Nevinson, 1917
(London, Imperial War Museum).

And toward our distant rest began to trudge.

Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.
Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! – An Ecstasy of fumbling,

Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.
If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,

His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, –

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children, ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori."

- a) What is striking about the description of the soldiers in lines 1-2?
- b) How appropriate is the adjective "blood-shod" in this context?
- c) Who do you think the poet is addressing in the first line of the last verse, "My friend"?
- d) Why has Owen written "lie" with a capital letter? (penultimate line)
- e) How do you imagine civilians would have reacted to this poem in 1918?

3.4. T. S. Eliot (1888-1965)

Thomas Stearns Eliot came to Britain from America in 1915 to settle. *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is a poem about urban man throughout the Western world, rootless, dissatisfied, lacking in belief, decision and vitality.

The poem addresses the need for poetry to shake off dreamy Romanticism and concern itself with twentieth-century realities, to be hard, precise and even unpleasant. Prufrock is modern man, split, bewildered, divided between old and new values. Proof/Rock suggest certainty, faith, stability. Pru/Frock suggest prudence, prudery, conformism, and so forth. It is a poem about the frustration of not being able to give meaning to the emptiness of life. Prufrock desires to ask an overwhelming question but he never does.

The originality of *Prufrock*, with its disjointed syntax, starting after subjects that are then forgotten, the juxtaposition of speech rhythms with traditional verse patterns, and harsh modern images, is taken even further in *The Waste Land* (1922). This poem analyses the modern world in terms of its isolation from tradition, from faith, from fruitful contact with nature.



T. S. Eliot, 1960.

The first four lines echo Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

"April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain." (1-4)

Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Waste Land*.

The difficulty of the poem is deliberate; connecting links are dispensed with to produce an effect of fragmentation. Eliot fills the poem with literary and mythological references, modern and ancient. The modern is thus contrasted with the old. Eliot was, like the other avant-garde poet of the early twentieth century, Ezra Pound, politically right-wing.

Activity

3.2. Read through T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915) several times before attempting the questions which follow it.

"Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
Let us go then, through certain half-deserted streets,

The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent

To lead you to an overwhelming question...
Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'
Let us go and make our visit.
In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,

Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep."

- Comment on the clinical image in the third line. What effect does this produce on the reader?
- What is the effect of line 12: "Let us go and make our visit"?
- Analyse the extended metaphor that begins in line 15: "The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes".
- What do you think the overwhelming question is?

- e) Compare this fragment of Eliot's poem with the poem by Owen above. Which of the two do you find more innovative?

3.5. Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

Ezra Pound arrived in London from America in 1909. He was arrogant but clever and was to become a key figure in modern poetry through his influence on other poets.

Pound was a leading figure in the **Imagist movement**, which presented a world perceived by the senses, with themes displayed in a succession of concise, clearly visualised concrete images.

Eliot dedicated his poem *The Waste Land* to Pound, whom he described as *il miglior fabbro*, the better craftsman.

"The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough."

Ezra Pound, *In a Station of the Metro* (1916).

Pound was practically the inaugurator of the revolt against traditional verse which resulted in what we call **modern poetry**. Pound, like Eliot, often alludes to obscure works in other languages and inserts into his poems quotations in other European languages or in Chinese.

Despite this erudition, which often borders on obscurity, Pound has had a profound influence on modern letters. He was instrumental in the early publication of works by James Joyce and T. S. Eliot, and poets from W. B. Yeats onward have acknowledged a literary debt to him.

3.6. W. B. Yeats (1865-1939)

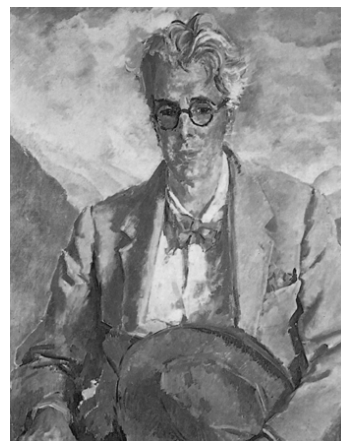
William Butler Yeats was born in Dublin and although he spent his adolescent years in London, he was stimulated by Irish peasant life and Celtic folklore.

In the early twentieth century Yeats became involved with public matters, due to his long, hopeless love for Maud Gonne and his involvement with the Irish theatre movement, which was associated with the various phases and factions of Irish nationalism.

His attitude to the struggle for independence was ambiguous. He disliked the mercenary, bigoted, prejudiced Irish middle classes, but he also feared the democratic spirit of the nationalists. Yet for all his doubts, this was a struggle that could arouse his most romantic loyalties.



Ezra Pound, 1918. Photograph by E. O. Hoppé.



W. B. Yeats. Portrait by Augustus John, 1930 (Glasgow, Museum and Art Gallery).

When the nationalist leaders of the abortive Easter Rising of 1916 in Dublin were executed by the British, Yeats wrote his *Easter 1916* in their honour. This powerful political poem reflects on the psychological consequences of political dedication, of the fanaticism that can "make a stone of the heart".

Nobel prize

Yeats was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1923.

Yeats' output spans almost sixty years, which accounts for the number of stages in his artistic development. In response to the change in poetic taste represented by the poetry and criticism of Pound and Eliot, he left the world of Gaelic myth and wrote poetry of insight and knowledge, driven by a growing interest in spiritual phenomena, religion and cults.

His later poems, such as the collections *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair* (1933), add a metaphysical and symbolist element.

Metaphysical and symbolist element

"An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick,..." (Stanza 2)

W. B. Yeats, *Sailing to Byzantium*.

3.7. Depression and war: the poets of the thirties

The generation of writers who made their mark in the thirties were the generation that had grown up during the Great War, but who had been too young to fight in it.

Ironically, the young, left-wing, anti-Fascist poets of the thirties looked to the three, politically speaking, highly conservative poets of the early part of the century: Pound, Eliot and Yeats.

Implicit in the attitudes of the poets of the thirties is a mixture of relief and guilt. They were conscious of being replacements for a lost generation. Middle-class, products of the public school system, they grew to full awareness in the period of disillusion after the war.

The events which made them all politically aware were the General Strike of 1926 and the Wall Street Crash of 1929, with the resulting depression in America and Europe.

W. H. Auden (1907-1973), **Stephen Spender** (b. 1909), **C. Day Lewis** (1904-1972) and **Louis MacNiece** (1907-1963) are among the best known.

They were socialists who were destined to enter the Establishment, atheists who turned towards the Anglican Church. They wrote about breaking with the past but never actually did so. However, their work is technically accomplished, the voice is direct and immediate. They impressed their image on the educated reader's mind; they insisted that the new poetry had to be modern, socially aware, left-wing.

Many of these writers were pacifists, but they became very belligerent at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. The Spanish War caught the poets' imagination and many joined the International Brigade.

W. H. Auden, one of the major voices of the period, went to Spain as a stretcher bearer and wrote several poems inspired by the conflict. *Spain*, composed around 1937, is one such poem, in which Auden asks:

"What's your proposal? To build the just city? I will.
I agree. Or is it the suicide pact, the romantic
Death? Very well, I accept, for
I am your choice, your decision. Yes, I am Spain." (Stanza 14)

W. H. Auden, *Spain*.



Left to right: W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood and Stephen Spender. Detail from a photograph by Howard Coster, 1936.

4. The Birth of the Modern Novel

The history of the English novel in the first three decades of the twentieth century is the story of a few writers who felt the need to do new things, and invented ways of doing them. The focus was not so much on what people feel and do but on what they are. However, despite the new trends, many writers were still writing in the realist tradition, dealing with matters of social concern, portraying in detail the habits and attitudes of a particular social group; and these so-called "materialists" were among the most widely-read writers of their day.

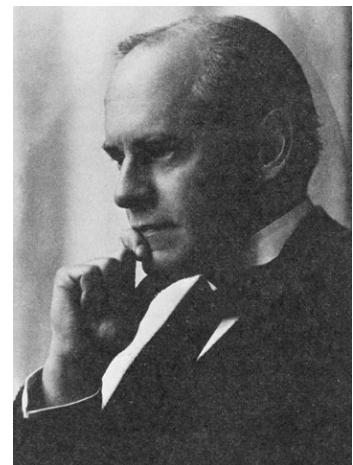
4.1. John Galsworthy (1867-1933)

John Galsworthy came from a wealthy family, and was educated at Harrow and Oxford. He wrote serious plays with a strict moral message, which were popular in his day, but he was awarded the Nobel prize for literature on the basis of his fiction.

His novel *The Man of Property* (1906) was to become the first of the nine-volume *The Forsyte Saga* (1906-21), which analyses the disintegration of a rich business family. The novels trace the course of a solid English upper-middle-class family between 1886 and 1920. The Forsytes start as the representatives of the rising class of their age, whose power is corrupted from within by their allegiance to the code of property, and threatened from without by adultery and divorce.

For Galsworthy money is the controlling principle. His characters are depicted in terms of their social and economic determination. The Modernist elite mocked this obsession with money, but writers from the propertied classes, such as Virginia Woolf, could afford to take money for granted. As Margaret Schlegel in E. M. Forster's *Howard's End* (1910) remarks, "[money] is so firm beneath our feet that we forget its very existence".

Galsworthy can be classified as one of the chroniclers of middle-class Britain trapped by its own social conventions. In the first volume of the saga, *A Man of Property*, Soames Forsyte cannot relinquish his claim on his wife, Irene, despite the fact that she is having an affair with another man. The young man's suicide, for which Soames is indirectly responsible, fails to shake him from his resolve to keep his property intact.



John Galsworthy, 1921. Photograph by E. O. Hoppé.

"If only he could act on an impulse!
he could forget nothing, surrender to no thought, vision, or desire; it was all too serious;
too close around him, an unbreakable cage." (Part III, chapter 9)

John Galsworthy, *A Man of Property*.

4.2. Arnold Bennett (1867-1931)

Arnold Bennett was, unlike Galsworthy, a self-made author. Born the son of a solicitor in the Midlands district in which he later set many of his books, he became a journalist, a book reviewer and eventually a novelist.

He conferred on his fiction his own stamp of Naturalism. In 1902 he published *Anna of the Five Towns*, the story of a miser's daughter in the Pottery towns of his childhood.

His personal experience provided the background for the process of social change from the late Victorian era to the Edwardian days. He unashamedly admitted to writing for money, and the popularity of his novels enabled him to make a satisfactory living.

He moved to Paris in 1902, where he obtained the idea for his novel *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908), which traces the history of two sisters whose different destinies fail to erase their shared heredity and environment.

Bennett's work, with its prosaic backgrounds, minute details but scanty character study, and its emphasis on the political and economic inequalities of society, is typical of much of Edwardian fiction.



Arnold Bennett, 1911. Photograph by E. O. Hoppé.

4.3. H. G. Wells (1866-1946)

H. G. Wells also came from a lower-middle-class background. He became a school teacher, and wrote a large number of novels using popular forms for a popular audience.

Wells virtually invented **science fiction** in its modern form. His first work was *The Time Machine: An Invention* (1895), which proved that the imagination could travel forwards as well as backwards in time. Up to the turn of the century Wells produced further popular scientific romances: *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898).



H. G. Wells, poised between analysis of the modern world and science fiction.

He drew on real scientific and military possibilities, and although he wrote of new horrors (world wars, social collapse, Martian invasions), his novels have a strongly optimistic note. Literature for Wells was a means to an end and not an end in itself.

The War of the Worlds

The War of the Worlds was adapted for radio by Orson Welles in 1938. Welles constructed the broadcast as a series of "newsflashes" about an invasion from Mars, provoking widespread panic among listeners.

In the new century he abandoned scientific romance and started to write novels about ordinary, familiar events and people. His characters are usually promising young men and women from lower-middle-class backgrounds, like himself, who have to challenge convention in order to succeed in life.

The History of Mr. Polly (1910) carries the message: "If the world does not please you, you can change it".

4.4. The inter-war period: the novelists of the twenties and thirties

By the twenties most of the serious writers were experimenting with language and techniques, and were writing for a minority audience. At the close of the decade, a whole new group of young writers, products of the post-war climate, came onto the scene. By the thirties, writers were moving beyond aesthetic humanism towards **social realism** and the search for a new way to reach out to people in their struggle for a better world.

The novelty of Modernism began to fade as the country entered the Depression years. The political future of Europe augured badly and writers became more socially committed. Modernism was readily absorbed into the English literary tradition, but its golden age was already over.

Among the most significant writers of the inter-war period, **George Orwell**, **Christopher Isherwood** and **Evelyn Waugh** stand out as representing the mood of their generation.

4.4.1. Christopher Isherwood (1904-1986)

Christopher Isherwood was in Berlin in the last years of the Weimar Republic and witnessed the rise of Fascism. Originally planned as a novel entitled *The Lost*, the project turned into a series of novels and stories, which were collectively presented as ***The Berlin Stories***. They include *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (1935) and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), which became the inspiration for the film *Cabaret*.

The narrator in these stories observes people and events from a detached, cool distance. The characters observed are not the leaders of fascist movements but the by-products of the social and political upheaval of the time. Isherwood plays the passive reporter, or in his own words,

"I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking [...]. Some day all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed." (Chapter 1)

Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin*.

These stories capture the atmosphere and drama of a critical historical moment.

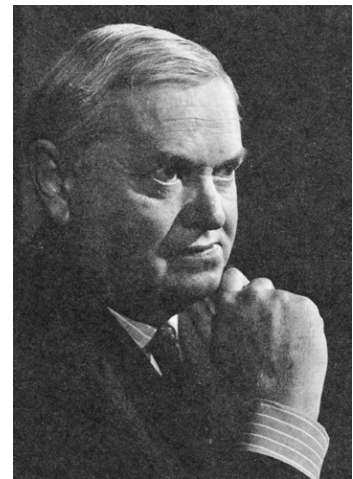
4.4.2. Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966)

Evelyn Waugh wrote novels that combine social history with a critique of his age. In a very different way from Isherwood, Waugh also mapped out the discomfort of the thirties.

In his novel *Black Mischief* (1932) he analyses the barbarism into which European civilisation was descending. Set in "Azania", based on Abyssinia, which Waugh had visited, the novel is no post-war *Heart of Darkness*, but rather a tongue-in-cheek attack on the Bright Young Things, the twenties generation.

Waugh was emotionally drawn to authoritarian, traditional institutions and social systems, but at the same time he was rebellious and anarchic, which led him to ridicule the aristocracy, the Catholic Church and the army.

As a novelist, Waugh was conservative. He talks about his generation as one of artists and craftsmen following in the wake of the originators of the twenties. While his early novels are comedies with fantastic plots, his later novels are more conservative and celebrate an imagined era of stability that has since passed.



Evelyn Waugh, 1964.

Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memoirs of Captain Charles Ryder (1945) is far from comic. It is a novel about the world of one of the great English Catholic families, apparently rich, stable and confident, but in fact divided and unhappy, seen as part of a race doomed to extinction. The social history covers the General Strike, the disorders of the thirties and the rise of the common man. The central image is the great house, Brideshead, with its small chapel, which symbolises English aristocratic life and the passing of a bygone age.

4.4.3. George Orwell (1903-1950)

George Orwell stands out as the great inter-war British novelist, a literary descendant of the nineteenth-century "Condition of England" novelists and the British Naturalists, Kipling, Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy.

He was born Eric Blair in British India, in a "lower upper middle class", as he himself defined it. Orwell cannot be understood without reference to English class structure, as he wrote passionately about social inequalities and snobbery, which he himself had trouble shaking off. He had an upper-class education at Eton and became a colonial policeman in Burma, but in revulsion from imperialism he gave it up and plunged into the depths of poverty. He lived as a tramp and worked as a dishwasher in an attempt to identify himself with the working class. He was a left-wing author and was involved in left-wing politics, but he was also critical of the left.



George Orwell behind the microphone at the BBC.

Burmese Days (1934) was his first novel, in which he drew on his first-hand experience of the Empire. His anti-hero Flory is scarred with an ugly birthmark, signifying his own curse of birth and class and his social displacement and loneliness.

In *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) Orwell describes a journey into working-class England and at the same time he comes to terms with his upper-middle-class prejudices. In this book on the life of a depressed area and in other political essays, he draws social and political conclusions which were not always to the taste of left-wing orthodoxy.

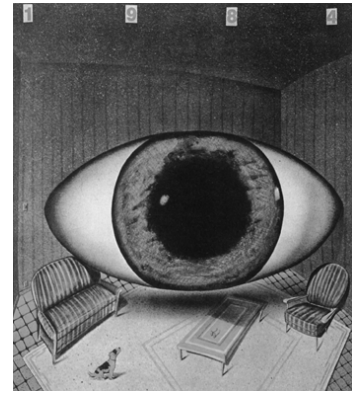
Homage to Catalonia (1938) is an account of his experiences in the Spanish Civil War. This became a turning point in his life, as he returned from Barcelona thoroughly disillusioned with Communist propagandists.

It was during his war experience in Spain that Orwell conceived the idea for what was to become one of his best known works, *Animal Farm* (1945), a satire on Stalin's dictatorship. In this work Orwell aimed at fusing his political critique with his artistic purpose.

The story relates how the rebellion of the animals ousts the humans from Manor Farm and puts the farm under their control. The animals work with great enthusiasm for the common good, but the pigs gradually seize control and set up the apparatus of a police state. By the end the main slogan of animalism, "All animals are equal", has been extended to include the memorable addition "but some animals are more equal than others".

The publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) reinforced the point that Orwell's later fiction was not simply a warning against Stalin, but about the corruption of power, the nature of authoritarianism and the defeat of language itself. The novel is a despondent forecast of what will happen when totalitarianism succeeds in taking over not only the body but also the soul.

In his essay *Politics and the English Language* (1946) Orwell warned that "if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought".



Poster by J. C. Knaff commemorating George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

In the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the Newspeak dictionary, by drastically reducing the number of words in the language, has narrowed the range of thought. The aim of the Party, as Winston Smith discovers, is to create a world where there are no emotions except fear, rage, triumph and self-abasement. Not to be read as a retreat from the real world, Orwell's last novel should be seen as his response to a menacing future.

Activity

4.1. Read through these two extracts from George Orwell's *Burmese Days* several times before attempting the questions which follow them.

From Chapter VI

"And yet –it was safer to keep out of this business altogether. It is so important (perhaps the most important of all the Ten Precepts of the pukka sahib) not to entangle oneself in 'native' quarrels. With Indians there must be no loyalty, no real friendship. Affection, even love –yes. Englishmen do often love Indians –native officers, forest rangers, hunters, clerks, servants. Sepoys will weep like children when their colonel retires. Even intimacy is allowable, at the right moments. But alliance, partisanship, never! Even to know the rights and wrongs of a 'native' quarrel is a loss of prestige."

From Chapter XXII

"Maxwell's death had caused a profound shock in Kyauktada. It would cause a shock throughout the whole of Burma, and the case –'The Kyauktada case, do you remember?' – would still be talked of years after the wretched youth's name was forgotten. But in a purely personal way no one was much distressed. Maxwell had been almost a nonentity –just a 'good fellow' like any other of the ten thousand *ex colore* good fellows of Burma –and with no close friends. No one among the Europeans genuinely mourned for him. But that is not to say that they were not angry. On the contrary, for the moment they were almost mad with rage. For the unforgivable had happened –a *white man* had been killed. When that happens, a sort of shudder runs through the English of the East. Eight hundred people, possibly, are murdered every year in Burma; they matter nothing; but the murder of a *white man* is a monstrosity, a sacrilege. Poor Maxwell would be avenged, that was certain. But only a servant or two, and the Forest Ranger who had brought in his body, and who had been fond of him, shed many tears for his death."

- a) How does the first passage reflect Flory's ambivalent position in the novel?
- b) What is the attitude of the narrator to Maxwell's death?
- c) What is ironic about the sentence "Even intimacy is allowable, at the right moments"?

5. Modernism in English Literature

Modernism could be said to have flourished between 1910 and 1930, although the effects of this current were to be felt throughout the whole of the present century.

In Modernism, which was not only confined to literature, the emphasis is on the individual and on design and texture. At one extreme, imitation and description were eliminated in favour of **abstraction**. At another extreme, the **surrealists** juxtaposed incongruous forms and symbols.

Among the main British modernists are the sculptor **Henry Moore**, the artist **Francis Bacon**, who pushed figures out of shape, and the writers **W. B. Yeats**, **T. S. Eliot**, **Virginia Woolf**, **James Joyce**, **D. H. Lawrence**, **Ezra Pound** and, to a lesser extent, **E. M. Forster**.

They stood at the centre of a "movement" and their overlapping achievements effected a literary revolution. The question of individual destiny was analysed through the meanderings of the unconscious in Modernist or "high-brow" fiction. Serious realist novels focussed on social determination or class confrontations, while in popular fiction such questions were more quickly resolved through displays of physical force, as in the spy or cowboy story.



Three studies for a self-portrait, by Francis Bacon (1909-1992). All of Bacon's work seems to be dominated by terror, anguish, isolation and decomposition.

Modernism can be understood as a revolt against English complacency and philistinism, carried out by an elite group of British and American writers. Modernist writers celebrated the special language of art because the form was the message; in fact, form was elevated over content. Narrative became an inner exploration of psychic forces and therefore the denial of outward social presence. External political issues lay beyond the scope of the modernist text; only the domestic or the sexual were at all relevant.

5.1. The Bloomsbury Group

Many of the writers and intellectuals associated with avant-garde thinking and experimentation chose to live in Bloomsbury, a district of London which soon came to be synonymous with the movement itself.

The **Bloomsbury Group** was composed of artists, thinkers and writers who set a high value on aesthetic experience and love, who rejected the conventions of Victorian respectability, and who were scornful of the vulgar and the philistine.

The originality centred around Virginia Woolf, her husband, **Leonard Woolf**, her sister **Vanessa Bell**, **J. M. Keynes**, the economist, and **G. E. Moore**, the philosopher.

They were important in literary history as they were an elite group of people who shared certain attitudes and who influenced the notion of "high" art and culture. The Bloomsbury Group and the writers who sympathised with their ideals were detached from the realities of the war. The self-conscious experimentation in art and the view of the artist as isolated by the intensity of his or her vision both expanded and constrained British literary culture.

However, the post-war depression produced among intellectuals an outburst of social commitment, which clashed with Bloomsbury ideals of aestheticism.

5.2. Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)

Virginia Woolf sought to capture in her style the actual experience of life as it is lived, the flow of perceptions from moment to moment, a thought as it is actually thought, a feeling as it is actually felt.

Woolf was an ardent feminist and campaigner for the emancipation of women, yet her female characters, such as Mrs. Dalloway in the novel of that name, seem to exhibit the traits of women to which men have felt superior: lack of intellectual interest, an inconsequent, unsteady, unreliable nature.

Various philosophers, such as Henri Bergson, were at that time attempting to analyse "time", and in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) Woolf deals with the passing of time and the way the concept of the present is not fully understood until it becomes the past. She shows life to be made up of sensations, impressions that accumulate within us.

Like her description of life in *Modern Fiction* (1925), we see life to be:

"a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end".

Virginia Woolf, *Modern Fiction*.

Woolf can be said to have feminised Modernism as the feminine vision is given a central role in her novels. *To the Lighthouse* covers an evening and a morning ten years apart, split by an interlude, "Time Passes", which forwards the novel ten years but which is related as if only one night has passed, so



Virginia Woolf at the age of twenty.
Photograph by G. C. Beresford.

that the three parts of the novel represent a single day. The novel concludes with Lily Briscoe's final successful brushstroke. Despite the losses, deaths and chaos of the outside world, there exists a unity, achieved with the completion of the work of art, which is both the painting and the novel itself.

Activity

5.1. Read through Part I, "The Window", of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* several times before attempting the questions which follow it.

"Mrs. Ramsay, who had been sitting loosely, folding her son in her arm, braced herself, and, half turning, seemed to raise herself with an effort, and at once to pour erect into the air a rain of energy, a column of spray, looking at the same time animated and alive as if all her energies were being fused into force, burning and illuminating (quietly though she sat, taking up her stocking again), and into this delicious fecundity, this fountain and spray of life, the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare. He wanted sympathy. He was a failure, he said. Mrs. Ramsay flashed her needles. Mr. Ramsay repeated, never taking his eyes from her face, that he was a failure. She blew the words back at him. 'Charles Tansley...' she said. But he must have more than that. It was sympathy he wanted, to be assured of his genius, first of all, and then to be taken within the circle of life, warmed and soothed, to have his senses restored to him, his barrenness made fertile, and all the rooms of the house made full of life – the drawing-room; behind the drawing-room the kitchen, above the kitchen the bedrooms; and beyond them the nurseries, they must be furnished, they must be filled with life."

- Whose thoughts are reflected in this passage?
- How is Mrs. Ramsay portrayed in this extract?
- Would you describe this extract as emotional?
- To what extent has Virginia Woolf defamiliarised a typical domestic scene?

5.3. E. M. Forster (1879-1970)

Edward Morgan Forster shared similar social and intellectual origins with the Bloomsbury group but, as he clearly stated in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), he believed that novels should tell a story.

Forster was upper-middle class by birth, but he was severely critical of the class and rejected its values with scorn. Forster was outraged at the way natural instinct and emotions were smothered by conventions of propriety. His homosexuality probably lay at the root of his protest, but it was impossible in those days to deal with this issue openly.

His novels put representatives of the values he hated (middle-class respectability, snobbery, prudence, efficiency) into conflict with representatives of his ethic (zest for life, frank sensuousness, imaginative vitality), and in them we find a constant evaluation and criticism of bourgeois values.



E. M. Forster. Portrait by D. Carrington (1893-1931) (London, National Portrait Gallery).

Two of his main novels are *A Room With a View* (1908), in which Lucy Honeychurch chooses between the false and the true, the railway clerk and the conceited intellectual, and *A Passage to India* (1924), which is an exploration of Anglo-Indian relations and a critique of Empire. In the foreground of

Equality and Independence

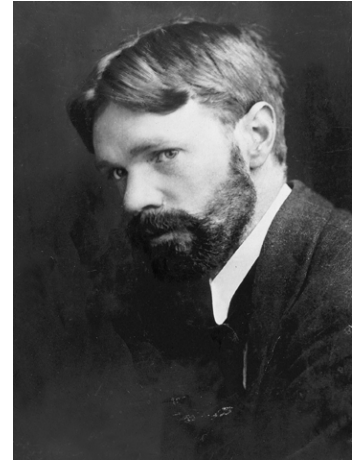
Virginia Woolf demanded equality and independence for women in her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929).

this novel lies the need for more spontaneous fellowship between people of differing backgrounds, but it is a book which describes a world where the white man rules and the Indian resentfully accepts his rule. For all Forster's belief in friendship and spontaneity, the novel ends in frustration and separation.

5.4. D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930)

David Herbert Lawrence was the son of a miner and a talented woman with middle-class aspirations. He grew up in the typical environment of the industrial working class in Nottingham. However, he had little in common with working-class people and was always the sensitive, talented child who would inevitably leave the nest. He was somehow inside working-class life but not of it.

He qualified as a teacher, but illness forced him to give up teaching, after which he lived precariously by writing. His poor health released him from active service in the war, but he became the object of public suspicion and official near-persecution from 1916-1918. The patriotic hysteria of the time made an indelible impression on him. After the war, he lived abroad (Italy, Australia, USA) and finally died of tuberculosis in France in 1930.



D. H. Lawrence wrote poems, short stories and travel books as well as novels.

Lawrence hated industrialism and machinery and opposed all restraints on sexual life, whether these be religious, moral, or merely social, in so far as they were based on fear. He was against the romantic idealisation of sex and the opposite pole of promiscuity.

Sons and Lovers (1913) is semi-autobiographical and it has been said that this novel shows the working-class finding their voice in fiction as for the first time they are depicted from the inside by one of themselves.

Women in Love (1920) deals with the right and wrong ways of loving and the potential and limitations of the marriage relationship. Lawrence believed in a relationship of independent beings who have to do as their instinct tells them.

Lady Chatterley's Lover (1928) was banned in Britain, and was not available in its complete form until 1960, when it failed prosecution under the Obscene Publications Act. With its anti-materialism, anti-intellectualism and anti-hypocrisy, it describes an England crushed and weakened after the war.

Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf, as a literary critic, acknowledged Lawrence's contribution to the novel, but she had reservations about James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922).

5.5. James Joyce (1882-1941)

James Joyce was born in Dublin, of a shabby-genteel Catholic family. He passed through a religious crisis and left Ireland in 1904 as a self-consciously blasphemous atheist. He felt that England could teach him nothing, so he made for the Continent and lived in Trieste, Zurich and Paris. Wherever he went, however, he remained spiritually in Dublin.

The paradox about Joyce is that he was the modern, international writer and yet all his work is grounded in the day-to-day life of **Dublin**. Joyce subscribed to the tenets of the aesthetic movement and was a highly original writer, one of the great experimentalists in the modern novel.



James Joyce. Portrait by J. E. Blanche, 1935 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

Joyce was passionately interested in words, and one of the most striking features of modern thought is its concern with language. For Joyce, **language** is what defines the human world. The surface difficulty of Joyce's work is due to the fact that he was a man of great learning and immense ingenuity. He was a joker, a linguistic reveller, a constructor of puzzles and a parodist of genius.

Equally important are Joyce's theories about the artist, rooted in the aesthetic movement. For Joyce, the **artist** is the man apart, a man bound to reject the values and tastes of ordinary people, and who must, if necessary, alienate himself from the life around him. However, in spite of this apparent self-exclusion, Joyce's work concerns itself with the man in the street, and with the streets themselves.

Dubliners (1905) is a collection of short stories dealing with Irish people and Irish problems, which are also universal problems. "The Dead" is perhaps the best known of the stories and was made into a film.

The semi-autobiographical *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) suggests that this phase of life is over and can be looked back on with a fair degree of objectivity.

In one of the climaxes or "epiphanies" of the novel, Stephen sees a girl standing in midstream staring out to sea. She is the perfect image of the call to the life of creativity that he is now answering. He is torn between the literary life and the Church.

"Her image had passed into his soul for ever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called and his soul had leaped at the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life!..." (Chapter IV)

James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

In *Ulysses* Joyce recreates a day in the Dublin of 1904, highlighting the extraordinariness of the ordinary. The novel is about the commonplace, the dull, the sordid, with the occasional flashes of significance, which is what life is all about, rather than a well-contrived plot with measured doses of comedy, tragedy, love and coincidence.

Owing to its frankness and honesty and its concern with bodily functions, this work was banned at first in England and the USA. It was first published in Paris, and was finally put on sale in Britain and the United States in the 1930s; but it was not available in Ireland until the sixties.

In many ways, *Ulysses* is a key text in Modernism. Joyce was not the first writer to use **interior monologue**, but he was the first to do so on such a grand scale. It is a book filled with multiple types of discourse, literary echoes, parody and pastiche, and numerous linguistic inventions.

5.6. Katherine Mansfield (1880-1923)

Katherine Mansfield, like Virginia Woolf, wrote in an intensely personal and emotional style.

She was born in New Zealand and settled in London in 1908. She rebelled against her middle-class upbringing, and the only stable relationship she managed was with John Middleton Murry, whom she married in 1918. D. H. Lawrence modelled Gudrun and Gerald Crich in *Women in Love* on Mansfield and Murry.

Mansfield was Chekov's literary disciple and was a great short story writer, with an eye for detail, combining symbolism with a sense of place. In her work the transitions between her characters' inner voices and the authorial voice are so smooth as to be imperceptible.



Katherine Mansfield

Her untimely death from tuberculosis cut short a promising career.

Answer key

For each set of questions, we have provided one specimen answer, which is meant to guide and orientate you. In no way is it intended to be the definitive answer. For the other questions, you are encouraged to form your own views and write your commentary on the basis of the material you have been given, and then to maintain a steady and ongoing contact with your tutor.

1.1.

- a) Amongst other typical Victorian values, Wilde seems to be attacking the whole notion of respectability, which dictates that one's appearance is more important than one's real worth. One only needs to scratch the surface to find an empty, shallow interior. The play as a whole mocks earnestness, a quality usually associated with serious matters such as work, education or religion, which in this extract Lady Bracknell dismisses as being totally useless.
- b) The humorous effect is achieved through Lady Bracknell's totally irrelevant and unexpected responses. She approves of Jack's smoking and applauds his ignorance.
- c) What is important in Wilde's play is the witty dialogue. The characters are quite flat and are designed merely to be mouthpieces for the playwright's ideas.
- d) Lady Bracknell should no doubt have a booming voice and tower over a cowering Jack. She should take centre stage and act as if she owned the premises. Jack here should convey quite the opposite of earnestness. He is vague, hesitant and deferent.

2.1.

- a) Here Shaw mocks the idea that cowardice is a female attribute, that war is a game, and that a battlefield is a training ground for boys to become real men. He also ridicules the belief that there is anything honourable in fighting a war.
- b) Bluntschli is in fact more human than Sergius because he is honest about his failings and about his motives. He doesn't pretend to be brave just because soldiers are expected to be fearless, whereas Sergius feels obliged to live up to the soldierly ideal.
- c) Shaw introduces a critical voice by ridiculing accepted beliefs about the romantic nature of war. His criticism is still mild in comparison with Owen's frank treatment of the physical and psychological horrors of war.

3.1.

- a) Soldiers were supposed to wear smart, spotless uniforms and march upright. Owen's description portrays the exact opposite of the romantic image of a soldier.
- b) The adjective *blood-shod* that the poet has coined conveys the painful, distressful state the soldiers are in. No doubt they have lost their boots and their feet are completely covered in blood.
- c) He could well be addressing a person in a position of authority, such as a general or a minister who can influence young men desirous of proving their worth on the battlefield.
- d) Owen is obviously extremely angry at the senseless patriotic propaganda that encourages young men to act as cannon fodder. There is nothing sweet or proper about dying in the trenches.
- e) Civilians must have been very shocked and disturbed to read the crude descriptions in this poem. For many people poems like this one must have opened their eyes to the harsh reality of war.

3.2.

- a) The reader is not prepared for this rather clinical image after the apparently romantic opening lines. The effect is somewhat unsettling as one is not quite sure what to expect. The title had suggested that the poem would be a pleasant love song.
- b) This line is an anticlimax after the emotional buildup of the first ten lines and breaks up the rhythm. This contributes to the fragmentary effect of the poem.
- c) The yellow fog is likened to a cat, with all the movements usually associated with felines.
- d) The overwhelming question could range from "What is life all about?" to "Where is modern civilisation leading us?" The fact that the question is never articulated suggests that it is indeed a momentous issue.
- e) Owen's poem is striking in its content, but the actual form of the poem does not differ very greatly from the conventional type of verse form. Eliot's poem, on the other hand, represents an innovation both in content and in style. Eliot breaks up his poem, changing the rhythm, using disjointed syntax, adding unexpected rhymes and so forth in order to create a feeling of fragmentation and uneasiness, which itself is the message of the poem.

4.1.

a) Flory finds himself in an extremely uncomfortable position. On the one hand, he is very friendly with the Indian Dr. Veraswami, while on the other hand, as a white man, he is expected to keep himself aloof from the affairs of the native people. He finds he has much more in common with Veraswami than with his fellow Britons, but he has to remain on good terms with the latter.

b) There is a certain amount of irony in the words of the narrator. It is obvious from the way he puts the death of one single white man into perspective that he does not share the belief in the racial superiority of the whites. While hundreds of black people are murdered every year, Maxwell's death has enraged the British, not because he was particularly liked but because he was a white man and thus a member of a privileged group.

c) "Intimacy is allowable, at the right moments" underlines the hypocrisy of white/black relations in the British colonies. It was acceptable for a white man to have a native mistress, but close friendships between whites and blacks were frowned upon. This is especially ironic when one considers the number of half-caste children that were born out of these officially sanctioned intimacies and subsequently ostracised by the European community.

5.1.

a) The passage reflects Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts.

b) Mrs. Ramsay is portrayed as a strong source of energy for all the people around her. She is the one who encourages, supports and inspires her husband and children. Without her physical presence, the rest of the family would flounder.

c) If by "emotional" one means full of the nuances of feelings, this extract is certainly highly emotional. It is an extract that delves deeply into Mrs. Ramsay's consciousness and enables the reader to experience the same sensations.

d) Woolf has reproduced this scene in great detail by dwelling on the changes in mood and describing the apparently sedate motherly figure as an extremely powerful and vital force. In contrast, the father figure is depicted as being weak, in need of the energy that his wife must pour into him. The scene itself is not unusual, but Woolf has brought to the surface the internal struggles that are taking place.

Bibliography

Source Literature

To achieve the objectives of this module, read any edition of the following works. We recommended, generally, Penguin Books; for the novels, Oxford Classics and Wordsworth Classics; for poetry and essay, the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. II, and the *Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. II (the last one also for Oscar Wilde's works); for G. B. Shaw's works, Longman Books; for James Joyce's works, Heinemann Educational Books.

• Compulsory Readings

Shaw, G. B. *Arms and the Man*.

Eliot, T. S. *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*.

Orwell, G. *Burmese Days*.

Owen, W. *Dulce et Decorum Est*.

• Recommended Readings

Kipling, R. *Kim*.

Galsworthy, J. *A Man of Property*.

Stoker, B. *Dracula*.

Priestley, J. B. *Time and the Conways*.

Wilde, O. *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Woolf, V. *To the Lighthouse*.

• Other works referred to in this module

Auden, W. H. *Spain*.

Eliot, T. S. *The Waste Land*.

Hardy, T. *The Convergence of the Twain*.

Isherwood, C. *Goodbye to Berlin*.

Joyce, J. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Owen, W. *Poems*.

Pound, E. *In a Station of the Metro*.

Shaw, G. B. *The Complete Prefaces. Vol. I. 1889-1913*. (1993). Dan H. Laurence and Daniel J. Leary (ed.). Allen Lane: The Penguin Press.

Woolf, V. *Modern Fiction*.

Yeats, W. B. *Sailing to Byzantium*.

Secondary Literature

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Post-War English Literature 1945-1990

Sara Martín Alegre

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Universitat Oberta
de Catalunya

www.uoc.edu

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Introduction

Historical Background 1945-1990

The history of Britain in the post-war period is undoubtedly a history of decline. In the last fifty years Britain has tried to maintain a leading role in the world, based on its heroic defence of democracy in World War II and its links with the Commonwealth countries, the ex-colonies of the now lost British Empire. Yet a succession of economic crises, the predominance of the USA and its "Cold War" politics, and the Franco-German project of a United Europe have forced Britain to partly abandon its pretences to world leadership. Arguably, Britain now occupies an uncomfortable secondary position among the world's nations, under the powerful shadow of its former colony, the USA, and lacking a firm pro-European stance.

Ten Prime Ministers –four Labour, six Conservative– headed the British Government between 1945 and 1990. Labour ruled the country for seventeen years, the Conservatives for twenty-eight, including the eleven years under Margaret Thatcher, the longest-serving Prime Minister of this century (1979-1990). Despite frequent changes of Government, history has run its own course, shaping an economic, social and cultural new order beyond the control of the politics and ideology of either Labour or Conservatives.

The history of Britain in the period 1945-1990 can be roughly divided into two parts.

1) The period 1945-1963 saw the establishment by Labour governments of the Welfare State, the beginnings of the dismantling of the Empire –supported by an optimistic faith in the capacity of the Commonwealth to maintain the links between Britain and its ex-colonies– and the birth of Harold Wilson's "affluent society".

2) From 1963 (the year of the Profumo scandal) onwards, the British were progressively disappointed by their own institutions, and started to harbour serious doubts about Britain's capacity to retain its role as world leader. The imperialist attitude still maintained by Britain in the disastrous Suez crisis (1957) opened a breach in the Commonwealth, whereas Britain's subordination to American Cold War politics through NATO showed that the country could no longer maintain an independent position in international politics.

Recommended Readings

Cook, C.; Stevenson, J. (1996). *The Longman Companion to Britain since 1945*. London: Longman.

Sked, A.; Cook, C. (1984). *Post-War Britain: A Political History* (1st edition, 1979). Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Thomson, D.; Warner, G. (1981). *The Pelican History of England: England in the Twentieth Century* (1st edition, 1965). Harmondsworth: Penguin.

After 1963 a constant state of economic unrest brought the fall of one government after another. Britain was faced with the loss of its Empire, France's reluctance to grant it membership of the European Economic Community, and also major conflicts at home, especially those caused by strained industrial relations and the situation in Northern Ireland.

Thatcher's successful lightning war in the Falklands (1982) elevated Britain's morale for a while. This victory helped her to stay in power for two more terms of office, during which her liberal politics brought about the illusion of the recovery of a lost economic splendour. In fact, the gap between rich and poor grew, while Thatcher's alliance with Reagan's America jeopardised Britain's position in Europe. After forcing Thatcher's resignation in 1990 over the issue of Europe, the Conservatives led by **John Major** continued her economic policies while strengthening the Government's pro-European stance.

More information

In the web site related to this subject you will find a detailed chronology of the events, works and authors of this period.

Objectives

In studying this module, students will:

1. Become familiar with the basic outline of British history in the period 1945-1990.
2. Begin to understand the place of Literature in Britain within the cultural market (1945-1990).
3. Learn about the main trends and authors of the British novel (1945-1990).
4. Learn about the main trends and authors of drama in Britain (1945-1990).
5. Learn about the main trends and authors of poetry in Britain (1945-1990).

1. Literature 1945-1990: cultural context

Four main trends define the evolution of post-war English Literature within the cultural context of the period in Britain:

- 1) the intensive commercialisation of the book market,
- 2) the expansion of literary criticism and literary theory, brought about by the departments of English of the universities, old and new,
- 3) the popularisation of audio-visual narrative media, which is often said to be a direct cause of the alleged decline of Literature, and
- 4) the growth of English Literature written by women and by post-colonial writers.

Despite the frequent apocalyptic warnings concerning the decline of Literature, the list of prominent contemporary writers in English is, in fact, remarkably long. At any rate, although it cannot be denied that more books are sold than ever, it is important to note that Literature is but a segment of a much larger book market.

1.1. The book market in Britain

Literature is published in Britain by a small number of publishing houses that are currently undergoing an as yet unfinished process of merger, often with other publishing houses based in the USA. These gigantic conglomerates have made the survival of the smaller, independent houses difficult and are forcing the market to march in directions that have more to do with **multinational business** than strictly with Literature.

The trend is to publish more and more titles each year in smaller editions, with only a few reaching substantial sales figures. Most Literature is published initially in **hardback format**, that is to say, in editions with hard covers and good quality paper that are designed to last. Hardbacks cost between £15.00 and £25.00 and are bought mainly by public libraries and those readers who can afford them.

Hardbacks are expected to have a year-long run in the bookshops, after which a **paperback edition** is issued, usually by a different, specialised publishing house. Paperbacks are editions with paper of inferior quality and soft covers, and cost between £5.00 and £7.00; their relatively low price means that they may reach a large readership.

"Literature", with L

"Literature", with a capital L is used in this section to mean novels, poetry and drama that aspire to be accepted as art by critics and readers; "literature", on the other hand, refers to novels, poetry and drama that may or may not be regarded as art, but that are not primarily created as works of art.

Remember

Books in English are sold in all the Commonwealth countries. Thanks to the world-wide popularity of English, books in English are also an important British export to other nations whose native language is not English. The book market for English is therefore much larger than just the United Kingdom.

However, the choice of new titles is limited also by the **selling policies** of the main chains, which usually keep new books on display for only a very short period, so as to be able to display and sell a large number of new titles.

It is easy to see that prospective readers need **reliable guides** to find their way among so many new titles. The problem is that literary journalists and reviewers are no longer very influential – the market for Literature is not animated by literary debates but, rather, by advertising, the media coverage of publicity surrounding authors and books, and also by television and film adaptations.

Universities, which support their own circuits –conferences, specialised journals, academic presses– and university teachers (often themselves writers or editors) maintain a readership for literary works that find a less favourable reception among the general reading public. Best-seller lists show, nonetheless, a remarkable **mixture of literary works and popular literature** of the type usually disregarded by the universities.

Yet, many prejudices regarding the **commercialisation of Literature** still survive. There is still the opinion that Literature is somehow tainted by the touch of money. Martin Amis, one of the main contemporary novelists, was heavily criticised when he was offered a £1 million advance for his novel, *The Information* (1996). Amis argued that he had as much right as other people to sell his talent for money, but this did not convince his detractors. In contrast, novelists such as Frederick Forsythe or John Le Carré measure their success by the number of books they sell, seemingly accepting commercial success as compensation for the literary critics' neglect of their work.

1.2. The relationship between Literature and the universities

The universities have played a rather ambiguous role in the evolution of contemporary Literature in Britain.

1) On the one hand, many contemporary writers and editors (especially of poetry) are also university lecturers, so that it is safe to say that Literature is influenced by the **literary criticism** and the **literary theory** produced by the universities. Most writers –including the so-called popular novelists and playwrights– hold university degrees in English and are therefore familiar with both the classics of Literature and contemporary literary theory.

The rub is that the Literature produced by this fusion of writer and university teacher runs the risk of excluding, in Virginia Woolf's famous phrase, the **common reader**, if such a common reader still exists. The academic novel, a genre popularised by David Lodge and Malcolm Bradbury, gives an insight

The three main chains

The three main chains, W. H. Smith, Waterstones and Dillons, almost monopolise bookselling in Britain. Every town and city has one or more branches of each chain, and there are very few independent bookshops, which are usually specialised.



Dining-room of Trinity College Cambridge, founded by Henry VIII in 1546. It was here that Bacon, Newton, Thackeray and Tennyson, among others, studied.

into the tortuous relationship between Literature inside the university and the world outside it, but it seems at times a private joke that the uninitiated cannot grasp.

2) On the other hand, university departments of English face the problem of what to do with the literature that the British common reader massively reads –from Ruth Rendell to Ken Follett– while also trying to accommodate in their syllabi the Literature produced by the minorities (women and post-colonial writers, mainly), without neglecting the latest trends in literary theory, often imported from abroad.

One way of bridging the gap between Literature and popular taste is through **literary prizes**. The Booker Prize –the main award given to novels in English– ensures that the attention of many buyers and readers is drawn to novels purportedly selected on the basis of their undeniable literary merit by informed judges. However, prizes like this are now being questioned from various sides: some unpopular choices have worried book sellers, who have accused the judges of being elitist; on the other hand, much that is popular and of good quality is excluded from the Booker, which has never, for example, selected a **genre novel** (science-fiction, fantasy, horror, thriller, romance and other genres).

1.3. Adaptations of literary works for television and the cinema

The main bridge towards the common reader's pocket is now the television or film adaptation. Even though film and television are regarded with hostility by many literary purists, in fact, they have provided a **new field for writing**; many novelists and playwrights combine their literary work with writing original or adapted screenplays.

Indeed, instead of undermining the book market, adaptations have proved to be one of its greatest boons. Famous television adaptations, such as that of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, or film adaptations such as that of Jane Austen's *Emma*, have opened new markets for both contemporary Literature and the classics.

Not even poetry has been left unaffected by this phenomenon. Thanks to the popularity of the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), in which a poem by W. H. Auden is read in a crucial, emotive scene, an anthology of Auden's poems edited for the occasion became the surprise best-seller of the year.

The prestigious English universities

The prestigious English universities where various well-known figures from the world of literature, art and science studied, have throughout the second half of the 20th century maintained close links with English writers and critics. Most writers come from and/or have contact with the academic world.



Scene from the film *Emma* (1996), based on the novel by Jane Austen and directed by Douglas McGrath.

1.4. The minorities in English Literature: women and post-colonial writers

Feminism and post-colonialism are two other important issues in post-war English literature.

1) **Women writers** are not a novelty in English Literature, nor can it be said that they have been systematically discriminated against by literary criticism. Thus, for the influential critic **F. R. Leavis**, Jane Austen and George Eliot (Mary Anne Evans) are an undeniable part of the Great Tradition in the English novel. However, the rise of 1960s **feminism** and successive waves (or feminisms) have forced post-war female writers in English to take a position for or against feminism, especially as this has played an important role in academic literary criticism. Some of the most important female writers, such as Angela Carter or Fay Weldon, have based their literary careers precisely on their ambiguity concerning feminism.

2) Writers born in the ex-colonies of the British Empire –and also writers of other nationalities within the United Kingdom: Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish– have used English to express the experience of colonization. **New national literatures in English** have been born in the post-war period, mainly in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. The work of **migrant writers** from the ex-colonies who now live in Britain (first or second generation, that is, immigrants or born of migrant parents in Britain) has also forced literary critics to question the meaning of the adjective 'English' in the phrase 'English Literature'.

To sum up, there is no denying that the book market for Literature in Britain is rich and thriving, despite the apocalyptic pessimism of some. The variety of literary and extra-literary texts –that is, of texts likely to enter the university syllabus or not– is certainly remarkable. The classics of the past share the same cultural space with the new products of post-war literature, whether traditional or experimental. And the new voices of women (feminist or not) and post-colonial writers have joined a culture in constant expansion.

F. R. Leavis (1895-1978)

Literary critic and Cambridge professor. He established a new critical approach that largely superseded the historical and narrative type of literary history. In his writing, he radically altered the literary map of the past and laid out new patterns for the future; but perhaps his most vital contribution lay not in his assessment of individual authors, but in his introduction of a new spirit of seriousness into English studies.

In *The Great Tradition* (1948) he championed the work of J. Austen, G. Eliot, H. James and J. Conrad to the detriment of other great writers such as L. Sterne and T. Hardy.

Recommended Readings

We recommend you read the work of the following 25 post-colonial writers:

Chinua Achebe, Mulk Raj Anand, Margaret Atwood, Peter Carey, J. M. Coetzee, David Dabydeen, Anita Desai, Buchi Emecheta, Nadine Gordimer, Amitav Ghosh, Keri Hulme, Jamaica Kincaid, Bharati Mukherjee, Timothy Mo, R. K. Narayan, V. S. Naipaul, Ben Okri, Michael Ondaatje, Raja Rao, Vikram Seth, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Amos Tutuola, Derek Walcott and Patrick White.

Activity

1.1. Read through this extract from Book 3, Chapter 10 of Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) several times before attempting the questions which follow it.

Plot summary: 1899. Jack Walser, a young Californian reporter, falls in love with Fevvers the Cockney Venus, a winged woman, when he interviews her. Love and his curiosity about whether her wings are genuine lead him to secretly join the circus where she works as a trapeze artist. The circus tour suddenly comes to an end when an accident leaves Walser amnesiac and both him and Fevvers stranded in Siberia.

These are Fevvers' reflections, as she is about to rescue him, on Walser's role in woman's history. Fevvers is addressing her foster-mother, Lizzie. The date is the last day of 1899.

"Think of him, not as a lover, but as a scribe, as an amanuensis,' she said to Lizzie. 'And not of my trajectory, alone, but of yours, too, Lizzie; of your long history of exile and cunning which you've scarcely hinted to him, which will fill up ten times more of his notebooks than *my* story ever did. Think of him as the amanuensis of all those whose tales we've yet to tell him, the histories of those women who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten, erased from history as if they had never been, so that he, too, will put his poor shoulder to the wheel and help to give the world a little turn into the new era that begins tomorrow.'

'And once the old world has turned on its axle so that the new dawn can dawn, then, ah, then! all the women will have wings, the same as I. This young woman in my arms, whom we found tied hand and foot with the grisly bonds of ritual, will suffer no more of it; she will tear off her mind forg'd manacles, will rise and fly away. The doll's house will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed.'

'It's going to be more complicated than that,' interpolated Lizzie. 'This old witch sees storms ahead, my girl. When I look to the future, I see through a glass, darkly. You improve your analysis, girl, and *then* we'll discuss it.'

- a) Feminism has stressed the need for women to find a narrative voice capable of telling their own stories. Yet in this novel, Carter has Fevvers claim that role for Walser, her lover. In your opinion, why is Fevvers interested in including Walser's collaboration in her schemes for female liberation?
- b) In your opinion, is Fevvers' speech to be taken literally? Is Angela Carter being ironic at the expense of Fevvers' and other feminists' optimistic view of woman's future?
- c) Why does Lizzie react with such scepticism to Fevvers' enthusiastic speech about women's liberation?

Activity

1.2. Read through this extract from Book 1, Chapter 1, "The perforated sheet", of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) several times before attempting the questions which follow it.

"I was born in the city of Bombay... once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. There were gasps. And, outside the window, fireworks and crowds. A few seconds later, my father broke his big toe; but his accident was a mere trifle when set beside what had befallen me in that benighted moment, because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape. Soothsayers had prophesied me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, politicians ratified my authenticity. I was left entirely without a say in the matter. I, Saleem Sinai, later variously called Snotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha and even Piece-of-the-Moon, had become heavily embroiled in Fate –at the best of times a dangerous sort of involvement. And I couldn't even wipe my nose at the time."

- a) This is the beginning of *Midnight's Children*. Why is the narrator dissatisfied with the phrase "once upon a time"? Why won't the phrase do?
- b) How does the narrator feel about the coincidence in time of his birth and the birth of India as an independent nation?
- c) Salman Rushdie was born in Bombay, but lives in England and writes in English. In your opinion, can we say that *Midnight's Children* is an English novel?

2. The English Novel 1945-1990

The history of the post-war novel in English, and also that of drama and poetry, cannot be understood without reference to the coexistence in the first half of the twentieth century of Modernism and the more traditional approaches to literature inherited from the Victorian period.

The Modernist writers reacted against realism in fiction and the remains of Romantic sentimentalism in poetry by introducing technical innovations that could be used to look at reality from the point of view of the irrational, the subconscious, the anti-sentimental, or the highly individualistic. In drama, the revolution followed other lines, with G. B. Shaw's introduction to the English stage of the naturalistic drama developed by Ibsen. Modernism can be said to enter the English stage precisely at the time of Shaw's death in 1950, when Samuel Beckett's plays challenged the hegemony of naturalism and the artificial, well-made play.

After 1945, when novelists faced the task of explaining the new historical reality and the position of the individual in the new post-war order, most realized that this entailed making a choice between traditional literary models that seemed more suitable for transmitting an accurate portrait of the individual in a changing society, and experimental, Modernist models that seemed more suitable for explaining the disjunction between the individual consciousness and the problematic flow of contemporary history.

Post-modernism was born out of this dilemma. **Post-modernism** can thus be said to be a new cultural atmosphere in which the writer is inevitably aware of this open choice between **tradition** and **experimentalism**, rather than a continuation of Modernism or a reaction against it. Post-war novelists cannot escape the shadow of either Modernism or Victorianism and must accommodate both in their work. Some have produced a new **synthesis** –which is what is really characteristic of post-modernism– while others have openly acknowledged their allegiance to either literary tradition or experimentation.

As far as the post-war novel is concerned, the post-modernist synthesis was relatively slow to come, if it came at all, for there seemed to be a need to first define the **new contours of social reality** after the war before resuming the project of Modernism.

2.1. Traditionalism: between the past and the present

In the period between 1945 and 1955, a **nostalgic look** at the lost pre-war past was combined with a **look at the new reality** faced by the generation growing up in the 1940s, often in provincial surroundings.

Novels such as **Evelyn Waugh's** *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) and **L. P. Hartley's** *The Go-Between* (1953) analyse the present by looking backwards, searching for the flaws that cause the desolation of the individual speaking in the present.

This return to a personal past shows, above all, why innocence has been the main casualty of war, and suggests that despite its apparent placidity, the best that the pre-war world could offer in social terms was inherently corrupt.

The idea that civilisation contains the seeds of corruption is perhaps best expressed in **William Golding's** *Lord of the Flies* (1954). In this novel Golding does not examine a particular moment of the recent past, but childhood, as the site where adult civilised values are implanted, only to find there sheer brutality.

The early 1950s brought a **new interest in the present**, possibly as a reaction against the nostalgic backward look at an essentially phoney world from which many –above all, the lower middle and working classes– were excluded. Leaving aside the beginnings of the post-colonial novel, what happened in the 1950s novel is that the margins of culture moved to the centre, expressing a generalised discontent, which was paralleled in the plays of the Angry Young Men and some of the poetry of The Movement.

At the time, this discontent was defined as political discontent, but it would seem now, rather, to be lower middle-class frustration at being denied a place in the vanished world of the upper classes portrayed by pre-war Literature. Thanks to the new educational opportunities opened up by post-war Labour governments, new lower middle-class and working class writers, who often came from places other than London, found themselves in a cultural world in which they were simultaneously strangers and also the rising new stars.

William Cooper's *Scenes from Provincial Life* (1950) was the mirror in which the new writers found an appropriate model to narrate the discontent of the post-war generation. Novels such as **Kingsley Amis's** *Lucky Jim* (1954), **John**

Recommended Readings

Waugh, E. (1945). *Brideshead Revisited*.

Orwell, G. (1949). *1984*.

Hartley, L. P. (1953). *The Go-Between*.

Golding, W. (1954). *Lord of the Flies*.

Spark, M. (1961). *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.

Drabble, M. (1965). *The Millstone*.

Fowles, J. (1969). *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

McEwan, I. (1978). *The Cement Garden*.

Weldon, F. (1983). *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*.

Ballard, J. G. (1984). *Empire of the Sun*.



Scene from *Brideshead Revisited*, a film made for television, based on the novel by Evelyn Waugh.

More information

For more information on the Angry Young Men and The Movement, see subsections 3.4 and 4.2, respectively, of this module.

Waine's *Hurry on Down* (1953), John Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957), Allan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* (1958), Keith Waterhouse's *Billy Liar* (1958), or David Storey's *This Sporting Life* (1960), dramatise the position of the individual who is aware of the new chances for upward social mobility and who either benefits from them –hence Jim's luck– or sees them slip from his grasp, whether by choice or because the social structure is still too rigid.

What is relevant is that through these novels a world that had been neglected by pre-war fiction entered the course of the English novel, often in close alliance with the **Free Cinema movement** of the 1960s, which frequently found its inspiration in these novels and the plays of the Angry Young Men. Both films and novels portray an England that is no longer the heroic country of World War II but a country struggling to understand its own contradictions.

Free Cinema

Name given to the group of filmmakers whose main representatives were Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson. They rebelled against the conformism of British commercial cinema of the 1950s and produced films inspired by experience, contemporary social reality, and the rigour of the English documentary school. The two masterpieces of Free Cinema are *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* (1960), by Karel Reisz, and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), by Tony Richardson, both adaptations of novels by Alan Sillitoe.

2.2. Fantasy, realism and experimentalism

The period 1945-1960 also saw the entrance of **fantasy** into the English novel on a large scale. The novels of these years preceded the new wave of fantasy writers in the 1960s, including J. G. Ballard and Michael Moorcock, who questioned the boundaries between fantasy and the mainstream or realistic novel.

Orwell's political dystopian fantasies, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Mervyn Peake's Gothic *Gormenghast* trilogy (*Titus Groan*, 1946; *Gormenghast*, 1950; and *Titus Alone*, 1959), John Wyndham's science-fiction novel *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) and J. R. R. Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, 1954; *The Two Towers*, 1954; and *The Return of the King*, 1955) exemplify this trend.

Orwell's use of fantasy suggests that far from being escapist, fantasy can be a way of expressing the anxieties caused by history in an alternative way. Peake himself drew the inspiration for his bizarre gallery of characters in *Gormenghast* from the horror of the Belsen concentration camp, which he had visited.

The idea of the long chronicle criss-crosses fantasy and realism in the novel, for the trilogy and other even longer sequences, now typical only of fantasy, were the format chosen by, among others, Anthony Powell (*The Music of*



J. R. R. Tolkien, 1972.

Time, 1951-75, 12 volumes), **C. P. Snow** (*Strangers and Brothers*, 1940-70, 11 volumes), **Olivia Manning** (*The Balkan Trilogy*, 1960-62), **Paul Scott** (*The Raj Quartet*, 1966-75, 4 volumes) and **Lawrence Durrell** to narrate contemporary life.

Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* (*Justine*, 1957; *Balthazar*, 1958; *Mountolive*, 1959; and *Clea*, 1960) and his *Avignon Quintet* (1974-85) question the very idea of the chronicle by returning repeatedly to the same events, which are narrated in each volume from the point of view of a different character.

Reality, Durrell suggests, cannot be apprehended from a single point of view and is necessarily mediated by the consciousness through which it is filtered – a point that had already been made by the Modernists.



Lawrence Durrell (b. 1912).

As Durrell's work shows, the **experimentalism** derived from Modernism found a new, if clearly minority, vein in the novel of the late 1950s, especially in the novels of **Samuel Beckett** and **Nigel Dennis**.

Experimentalism greatly expanded in the 1960s and 1970s without, however, displacing the work of **realists** such as **Graham Greene** from its position of pre-eminence. At what precise moment the Modernist experiments in technique became post-modernist is a matter of dispute. Writers such as **Henry Green**, **Lawrence Durrell** and **Wyndham Lewis** seem to bridge the gap between the two periods, whereas others alternate realism with experimentalism.

Anthony Burgess's *The Clockwork Orange* (1962), **Doris Lessing's** *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and **John Fowles's** *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) are outstanding novels outside the realistic framework, but they were written nonetheless by novelists who were also proficient in the writing of more traditional realistic novels.

A number of novelists heavily influenced by the French "nouveau roman" – **Andrew Sinclair**, **Julian Mitchell**, **Christine Brooke-Rose**, **John Berger** – chose experimentalism rather than realism in the 1960s and 1970s.

Activity

2.1. Read through this extract from Book 3, Chapter 2 of Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* (1951) several times before attempting the questions which follow it.

Plot summary: Sarah Miles, a childless housewife married to a civil servant, and Maurice Bendrix, a novelist who is an acquaintance of her husband, have been having an affair since the beginning of World War II in 1939. A bomb falls on Maurice's house in 1944 when the lovers are together. Believing him dead, Sarah makes a rash promise to God that forces her to subsequently abandon Maurice without an explanation. Here is the fragment of her diary which narrates what she thought and did after the explosion.

"I knelt down on the floor: I was mad to do such a thing: I never even had to do it as a child – my parents never believed in prayer, any more than I do. I hadn't any idea what to say. Maurice was dead. Extinct. There wasn't such a thing as a soul. Even the



Doris Lessing at her house in Hampstead, London.

half-happiness I gave him was drained out of him like blood. He would never have the chance to be happy again. With anybody I thought: somebody else could have loved him and made him happier than I could, but now he won't have that chance. I knelt and put my head on the bed and wished I could believe. Dear God, I said –why dear, why dear?– make me believe. I can't believe. Make me. I said, I'm a bitch and a fake and I hate myself. I can't do anything of myself. *Make* me believe. I shut my eyes tight, and I pressed my nails into the palms of my hands until I could feel nothing but the pain, and I said, I will believe. Let him be alive and I *will* believe. Give him a chance. Let him have his happiness. Do this and I'll believe. But that wasn't enough. It doesn't hurt to believe. So I said, I love him and I'll do anything if you make him alive. I said very slowly, I'll give him up for ever, only let him be alive with a chance and I pressed and pressed and I could feel the skin break, and I said, People can love without seeing each other, can't they, they love You all their lives without seeing You, and then he came in at the door, and he was alive, and I thought now the agony of being without him starts, and I wished he was safely back dead again under the door."

- a) Neither Sarah's parents nor Sarah herself are believers, yet belief comes to her spontaneously at this critical moment. Just after Sarah's death, her mother tells Maurice that Sarah had actually been christened as a Catholic when she was two, but was unaware of this. Does Sarah's behaviour in this passage suggest that her sudden conversion stems from that forgotten ceremony or is her conversion prompted by other causes?
- b) Maurice's happiness matters so much to Sarah that she is ready to abandon him if another woman could make him happier. In contrast, Maurice is fiercely possessive and jealous. Does Sarah's capacity for self-sacrifice correspond to a sexist cliché, namely, that women naturally tend to sacrifice themselves for their man or children? Is it believable?
- c) Is Sarah's promise the fruit of authentic belief or mere superstition? Has a real miracle taken place or is she simply being superstitious and, in addition, masochistic?
- d) Graham Greene once said that without religion and without the corresponding sense of morality the novel was not possible. Discuss.

2.3. The post-modern novel

Nonetheless, it could be said that the distinguishing mark of the English **post-modern novel** is its reluctance to totally abandon realism and its interest in creating a synthesis with other narrative modes, such as fantasy, autobiography and historiography. At any rate, it is essential to understand that the coexistence of widely diverging novelistic genres is the main characteristic of the post-war English novel and, perhaps, of post-modernism itself.

This may be due to a pragmatic approach to the world of Literature, an approach that precludes confrontations of the kind that took place between the Modernists and the Edwardian traditionalists. Possibly, novelists are aware, above all, of the increasing popularity of the **audio-visual narrative** media, which compete with the novel, and would rather secure a place in the cultural marketplace for the novel in general than for any particular kind of novel.

A look at the English novel of the period 1975-1990 reveals a healthy state of affairs, despite the constant warnings about decaying standards. It may be true that there are not as many memorable characters as in the Victorian novel, but there are certainly novels that are memorable for their **complex architecture** and, often, for their **wry humour**.

Nothing much can be said to unify the work of contemporary English novelists except the writers' reluctance to see their work as part of any identifiable school, movement or trend.

Women novelists, such as **Angela Carter** or **Fay Weldon**, challenge feminist tenets in their work, thus questioning the idea that women's novels are necessarily feminist novels.

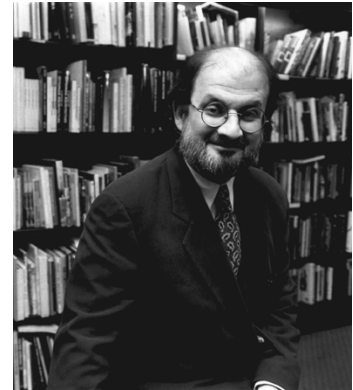
The work of other novelists such as **Kazuo Ishiguro** or **Salman Rushdie** –and indeed the remarkable group of Scottish novelists, including, among others, **Alasdair Gray**, **James Kellman**, **Janice Galloway** and **Iain Banks**– has forced literary critics to consider whether the English novel is written by the English at all.

English novelists such as **Martin Amis**, **Julian Barnes**, **Graham Swift**, **Peter Ackroyd**, **Alan Hollinghurst** and **Ian McEwan**, who started their careers in the late 1970s, are currently pursuing their individual projects. The work they produce is regarded as **literary fiction**, as opposed to that of more popular writers, yet literary fiction is not as radically different from fiction without literary ambitions as might be expected. In fact, much of the literary fiction of the 1980s and 1990s uses elements drawn from popular fiction; alternatively, it could be said that it has turned experimental techniques into devices to produce eminently readable novels.

This may explain why the lists of best-selling novels in Britain are now as likely to feature the latest Ishiguro, Rushdie or Amis as the latest book by any of the more popular writers, from **Terry Pratchett** to **Ruth Rendell**.

The post-war English novel is **polyphonic**, as it gathers many different voices. If there is anything that defines the English novel of the last fifty years it is its protean essence: thanks to its flexibility, the novel can now accommodate the experiences of different social classes, different genders, different nationalities and different literary projects, from realism to experimentalism.

The novel is certainly conditioned by the market forces that dictate literary fashions and make or break literary reputations, yet there is still room in the book market for very personal projects, provided they find enough readers to sustain them.



Salman Rushdie (b. 1947).

Contemporary novels in English do not seem to be at the ideological centre of contemporary culture –which has shifted to the **media**– but in all their variety they provide a comprehensive, highly critical and often pessimistic portrait of the realities and the fantasies that shape the world of the individual in the late twentieth century.

3. Drama in England 1945-1990

Although both novels and plays can be said to be narrative genres, there is an obvious difference between them: a play can only reveal all its literary potential when it is performed on a stage. There are, thus, two possibilities when considering the evolution of drama in a particular period:

- 1) considering plays as published texts,
- 2) considering plays in performance.

The history of post-war drama involves important changes in the way plays are performed. These changes are interdependent with the changes in the way plays are written: the innovations introduced by the plays require **new acting styles, new theatres**; the evolution of acting styles and new trends in the management of theatres also encourage the writing of **innovative plays**.

3.1. West End theatre and the new English drama

The recent history of English drama can be summarised as the rise of a strong **opposition to** the mainstream play that dominated **the West End theatres** of London. Paradoxically, after decades in which constant innovations inspired by revolutions in both the form and the content of contemporary drama in English have led to the establishment of solid alternatives to the West End, the success of the playwrights who sustained the **new English drama** can be measured by their now habitual presence in West End theatres. As happens in the field of the novel, in which literary fiction coexists with popular fiction in the best-seller lists, mainstream theatre has expanded to include everything commercially successful, whether experimental or traditional.

At the end of World War II the **theatre industry** was in a very delicate position. Many theatres had been destroyed, there was a shortage of actors and managers, and more worrying still, films were becoming increasingly popular, which led to many theatres being converted into cinemas. Later, the stage was to face further competition from television.

In the decade after the war, the West End theatres in London were dominated by a consortium of business interests, popularly known as **The Group**, which ensured the predominance of metropolitan over provincial tastes, the success of musicals (often imported from the USA) and the dependence of drama on the star system. Repertory companies working in provincial theatres and touring companies from the capital satisfied the craving for theatre outside London.

Recommended Readings

- Priestley, J. B. (1945). *An Inspector Calls*.
 Beckett, S. (1955). *Waiting for Godot*.
 Osborne, J. (1956). *Look Back in Anger*.
 Pinter, P. (1958). *The Birthday Party*.
 Delaney, S. (1958). *A Taste of Honey*.
 Bond, E. (1965). *Saved*.
 Orton, J. (1966). *Loot*.
 Ayckbourn, A. (1972). *Absurd Person Singular*.
 Churchill, C. (1982). *Top Girls*.
 Friel, B. (1990). *Dancing at Lughnassa*.

West End

Name given to the western part of central London, which contains some of the best-known shopping areas and most of the main theatres.

The tastes of West End audiences were conservative and the main **innovations** in drama came from **amateur clubs**, which were free from the pressures of business. Actor-managers with their own companies, such as **Laurence Olivier**, contributed to enlivening post-war theatre by offering alternatives to the habitual West End fare, alternatives based mainly on the classics.

What could be seen in most West End theatres were so-called **well-made plays**, originating in late nineteenth-century French theatre. These were plays that centred on an upper-class hero undergoing a crisis, which would mark his progression from ignorance to knowledge, bound by a plot fixed by the unities of time, place and action. Ibsen had added naturalism to the well-made play, thus opening the way for the drama of social and political content written by **G. B. Shaw** in England. By the 1940s, the well-made play was sounding too artificial –the twist endings too contrived– and naturalism, especially in acting, was gaining ground.

The main playwrights of the time were **Noël Coward**, **Terence Rattigan** and **J. B. Priestley**, though the more experimental plays in verse by **T. S. Eliot** and **Christopher Fry** also enjoyed considerable success.

3.2. Absurdist drama and social and political drama

By the 1950s, the time was ripe for a reaction against West End drama. Almost simultaneously, the West End stage faced two challenges:

- 1) one posed by the **minimalist, absurdist drama** of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1955),
- 2) the other by the **socially critical theatre** of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956).



Samuel Beckett (left) and John Osborne (right).

Beckett proposed a reflection on the form of drama, drawing the audience's attention to the artificiality of speech, plot and characters on the stage. **Osborne** invited the audience to consider the new sense of social alienation of the rising lower middle-class, also shattering conventions as to the decorum so far observed on the English stage.

Look Back in Anger also secured the financial survival of George Devine's **English Stage Company** at the Royal Court, Chelsea. This company exerted an enormous influence as it specialised in staging work by new dramatists, among them **N. F. Simpson**, **Arnold Wesker**, **Anne Jellicoe** and **John Arden**.

It was also in the 1950s that **Harold Pinter** presented his masterpiece, *The Birthday Party* (1958). Pinter, still regarded today as the main figure of the English stage, set with this absurdist play an apolitical alternative to Osborne's theatre.

Pinter is perhaps Beckett's main disciple, though he lacks the latter's philosophical, existentialist preoccupations. Yet Pinter's plays are unmistakably his own. His antinaturalistic, minimalist, often violent dramas, in which silence occupies the dramatist's attention as much as speech, speak above all of the impossibility of communication. His characters move in a void, in a bizarre world best defined by the adjective **Pinteresque**.



Poster by J. J. Sorbie for a production of *The Homecoming*, written in 1965 by Harold Pinter, at Johnson Hall Theatre under the direction of M. Burns (Fort Collins, Colorado, artist's collection).

3.3. New theatre companies and the Arts Council

Between 1956 and 1966 there was an extraordinary transformation of the English theatre. These years saw not only the emergence of many new playwrights, but also the establishment in 1960 of the London branch of the **Royal Shakespeare Company**, directed by **Peter Hall**, and of the new **National Theatre** company led by **Laurence Olivier**. Hall would replace Olivier when the National Theatre moved to the new South Bank complex in the 1970s.

The figure of the **director** steadily grew in importance and so did the companies formed around them. **Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop**, a company that in 1953 moved to the **Theatre Royal**, located in a suburb of London, was the most outstanding example of the cohesion then sought between director, actors and authors.

Littlewood's Workshop had much in common with **Brecht's Berliner Ensemble**, the foreign company that most deeply influenced the development of drama in England. The idea of creating permanent companies like Brecht's appealed to actors, directors and authors alike, who saw the advantages of collaboration over individualism.

In addition, Brecht's **political and experimental theatre** offered a useful synthesis that attracted many followers. Brechtian drama also encouraged the use of new architectural styles for new play houses –less formal, with less marked differentiation between audience and stage– and a much more open acting style, with a new emphasis on the possibilities of body language.

The problem was that Brecht's state-supported company inspired British directors to look to the Government for support through the **Arts Council**. And this brought instability to the English stage. Between 1946 and 1956 the patronage of the Arts Council was limited; it was assumed that local councils should support drama as they were empowered by a 1948 act to spend a percentage of taxes on the arts.

However, given the lack of interest among local councils, between 1957 and 1964 grants rose steadily, and from 1964 onwards it can be said that the Arts Council became a victim of its own success as subsidies became more and more necessary to keep afloat not only fringe theatres but also the national companies.

The modern fringe theatre

The fringe theatre appeared in the mid-1960s. According to John Elsom (1979), two events from the years 1963-64, the establishment of the **Traverse Theatre** in Edinburgh and the **Theatre of Cruelty** seasons at LAMDA, inaugurated the modern fringe. Fringe theatre typically depends on the existence of very small venues, where highly experimental drama, addressed to small audiences who would avoid mainstream theatres, can be performed. The experimentalism of fringe theatre focuses, above all, on acting styles.

A series of measures aimed at obtaining patronage from other sources, such as industry, local councils, private investors or even the trade unions, proved unable to counteract the centralisation of patronage. Thus, the work of the Arts Council, while positive in that it encouraged new initiatives, was also negative, for it created an artificial situation in which it was impossible to know what audiences really wanted, unlike in the field of literary fiction, which was practically untouched by state patronage.

3.4. Theatre from the mid-1960s onwards

By the mid-1960s the distinctions between experimental and established theatre were becoming blurred: conventional plays such as **Robert Bolt's A Man for All Seasons** were praised by the critics; Osborne's more demanding

plays were staged in the West End. Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter continued writing their minimalist drama, increasingly focusing on the meaning of silence.

The so-called "**kitchen-sink**" playwrights, those interested, like **Arnold Wesker**, **Brendan Behan** and **Shelagh Delaney**, in the daily dramas of the lower-middle and working classes, had somehow lost momentum. Despite their efforts, it is difficult to say to what extent they succeeded in creating a genuine working-class theatre in England.

The late 1960s also brought the **end of stage censorship**: the rule of the Lord Chamberlain was abolished in 1968. This gave younger authors a greater freedom of language and allowed them to go much further than the **Angry Young Men** or the working-class dramatists in their virulent social criticism.

Angry Young Men

A journalistic catch phrase loosely applied to a number of British playwrights and novelists of the mid-1950s, including Amis, Osborne, Sillitoe and Wilson, whose political views were radical or anarchic.

Several new trends thus merged in the mid-1960s with the rise of the second wave of new dramatists, who still dominate the English stage today. **Tom Stoppard** brilliantly continued the tradition of experimentalism first set up by Beckett and Pinter with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (first presented at the Edinburgh Festival Theatre in 1965), responding to their minimalism with a rich, luxuriant use of dialogue.

The ludicrous and the outlandish, influenced by Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty and Eugene Ionesco's absurdist drama, inspired the disruptive, carnivalesque work of **N. F. Simpson**, **Joe Orton** and **David Rudkin**. This was anti-middle class drama for the middle classes, and the limits of upward mobility seemed to be the centre of interest for the new playwrights' often satirical portrait of English society.

The new social realists of the 1970s –**Peter Nichols**, **David Storey**, **Simon Gray**– fused social satire with G. B. Shaw's problem plays to offer a bleak portrait of suburbia, also shared by more conventional plays, such as the comedies of **Alan Ayckbourn**.

More committed to the political left was the work of **Edward Bond**, **Howard Brenton**, **David Hare**, **David Edgar**, **Trevor Griffiths**, **Peter Barnes** and **John Arden**, among others, which flourished in the smaller theatres under the influence of Brecht's example but later came to be accepted by the West End.

Apart from the experimentalists and the politically committed playwrights, the English stage has sustained an important number of more traditional dramatists, such as **Alan Ayckbourn, Michael Frayn, Christopher Hampton, James Saunders, Anthony Shaffer, Peter Shaffer, John Mortimer, John Whiting and Robert Bolt**. Not only they, but also others such as Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard, have divided their time between writing original plays and writing for the screen –both film and television– and, alternatively, adapting novels for the stage. Presumably, this mixed **allegiance to the stage and the screen** will also bring in new ideas about their work, for it will have to be reassessed.



Still from the film *The Servant* (1963), by Joseph Losey, based on a screenplay by Harold Pinter and starring Dirk Bogarde. Joseph Losey directed at least two more masterpieces based on screenplays written by Pinter, namely *Accident* and *The Go-Between*, the latter based on the novel by L. P. Hartley. These two films won prizes at Cannes in 1967 and 1971, respectively.

It seems simply inappropriate to draw rigid dividing lines between plays and screenplays when both are produced by the same writer. As for the English stage, although in need of new blood, it cannot be said to be in decline, despite the competition from television and the cinema. Each seems to have found its place in the global map of entertainment, perhaps at the expense of blunting their political and artistic edges.

Activity

3.1. Read through this extract from Act I of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) several times before attempting the questions which follow it.

Plot summary: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two minor characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Their function in that play is to deliver Hamlet, their friend, to the king of England, who is to murder him; yet Hamlet discovers the plot against his life and has them murdered instead. In Stoppard's play Ros and Guil while away their time, as they wait for the action in *Hamlet* to develop, trying to ascertain who they are, whether they are alive at all and who controls their existence.

"GUIL: [*tensed up by this rambling*] Do you remember the first thing that happened today?
 ROS: [*promptly*] I woke up, I suppose. [*Triggered*] Oh – I've got it now – that man, a foreigner, woke us up –
 GUIL: A messenger. [*He relaxes, sits*]
 ROS: That's it – pale sky before dawn, a man standing on his saddle to bang on the shutters – shouts – What's all the row about?! Clear off! – But then he called our names. You remember that – this man woke us up.
 GUIL: Yes.
 ROS: We were sent for.
 GUIL: Yes
 ROS: That's why we're here. [*He looks around, seems doubtful, then the explanation.*] Travelling.
 GUIL: Yes.
 ROS: [*dramatically*] It was urgent – a matter of extreme urgency, a royal summons, his very words: official business, and no questions asked – lights in the stable-yard, saddle up and off headlong and hotfoot across the land, our guides outstripped in breakneck pursuit of our duty! Fearful lest we come too late!! [*Small pause.*]
 GUIL: Too late for what?
 ROS: How do I know? We haven't got there yet.
 GUIL: Then what are we doing here, I ask myself.
 ROS: You might well ask.
 GUIL: We better get on.
 ROS: [*actively*] Right! [*Pause.*] On where?
 GUIL: Forward.
 ROS: [*forward to footlights*] Ah. [*Hesitates.*] Which way do we – [*He turns round.*] Which way did we –?
 GUIL: Practically starting from scratch... An awakening, a man standing on his saddle to bang on the shutters, our names shouted in a certain dawn, a message, a summons... A new record for heads and tails. We have not been ... picked out ... simply to be abandoned ... set loose to find our own way ... We are entitled to some directions ... I would have thought."

- a) Ros and Guil find it difficult to recall how their day began. Why does this worry them?
- b) Comment on the stage directions used in this passage. In your view, do they help or hinder the task of the actor?
- c) Comment on the ambiguous meaning of the word "directions" as used by Guil. Does he mean "stage directions" –as they are, after all, characters in a play– or "travel directions" –as they seem to be going somewhere– or just some guidance in life?
- d) In *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), E. M. Forster speaks of "flat" and "round" characters. Forster argues that flat characters can be described in just one line, have a limited development and are often associated with a particular way of speaking, whereas round characters are always capable of surprising the reader by taking new directions. In *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are flat characters. In your view, do they seem to be flat or round characters in Stoppard's play?

4. English Poetry 1945-1990

The history of post-war poetry is initially the history of the poets' constant fluctuations towards and away from **T. S. Eliot** and **W. H. Auden**. Eliot's Modernist experimentalism and Auden's rational, moralising, politically committed poetry offered post-war poets two eloquent alternatives that could not be ignored. Yet, post-war poetry was also influenced by the remarkable integration of the poet and the academic world.

The market for poetry is limited and this has forced poets to seek other means of securing financial support. Thus, most English poets hold university positions as lecturers or writers in residence, frequently in American universities. Otherwise, their professional occupations are related to publishing or literary journalism.

Poets who are professional writers, and these are very few, usually combine poetry with other genres. Contemporary poets live and work, therefore, in a much more limited cultural territory than novelists or playwrights. This does not mean, however, that contemporary poetry is uniform in tone and content –quite the contrary; post-war poetry is as varied as post-war novels and post-war drama.

Post-war poetry also reflects the breakdown of the unity of English. Other **varieties of English** spoken in and outside England have entered contemporary poetry, questioning the privileged position held by standard English, which is often denounced as an instrument of cultural imperialism.

This common interest in vindicating other varieties of English for poetry links the work of followers of **Modernism**, such as David Jones and Basil Bunting, with that of **social realists** such as Douglas Dunn and Tony Harrison.

Outside England, the poets of **Northern Ireland**, led by Seamus Heaney, have fused English with local poetical traditions, whereas the **post-colonial poets** –including first and second-generation immigrants as well as poets living outside Britain– have introduced **new rhythms** and **speech patterns** into English poetry.

Recommended Readings

To really get to know the poetry of this period, we recommend you read the works of the following authors:

W. H. Auden, Wendy Cope, Roy Fuller, Thom Gunn, Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, Craig Raine, Stevie Smith, R. S. Thomas and Dylan Thomas.

4.1. Romantic and other singular poets

After Auden's exile, **Dylan Thomas** became the main poet living in Britain. His new romanticism exerted an immediate influence on the poets of the 1940s, from **W. S. Graham** and **George Barker** to the poets of **The Apocalypse**. These mixed Thomas' example with the influence of French Surrealism, which was especially strong in the work of **David Gascoyne**.

The poets of The Apocalypse, a movement that soon came to be known as **New Romanticism** –**Henry Treece**, **J. F. Hendry**, **Nicholas Moore**, **Norman MacCaig**, **Vernon Watkins**– preferred to follow the example of Thomas' highly sensitive, personal and subjective poetry to Auden's more rational approach in their search for a poetical language capable of expressing the anxieties endured by the individual trapped by the horrors of contemporary history.

The work of the Second World War poets, especially **Keith Douglas** and **Alun Lewis**, also addressed this question. Paradoxically, unlike in World War I, when civilians were at a safe distance from the front line, Hitler's raids over England forced civilians to face violent mass destruction. As a consequence, both civilians and combatants expressed in their poetry similar horrors.

The 1940s, however, also saw the beginnings of the careers of **Stevie Smith** and **R. S. Thomas**. Possibly thanks to their relative isolation from the main channels of poetical activity, each developed throughout their long career a unique, singular poetical voice. Smith's feminine but wry, almost minimalist verse contrasted with Thomas' poetry about his difficult relationship with God and his links with his native rural Wales.

4.2. The Movement and The Group

The 1950s were almost totally monopolised by the emergence of **The Movement**, a group of poets (which was not a unified school in any sense) gathered around **Stephen Spender's** journal *Horizon* and anthologised by **D. J. Enright** and **Robert Conquest**. The group included **Kingsley Amis**, **John Waine** –both also novelists– **Enright** himself, **Elizabeth Jennings**, **John Holloway**, **Thom Gunn**, **Donald Davie** and, above all, its main figure, **Philip Larkin**.

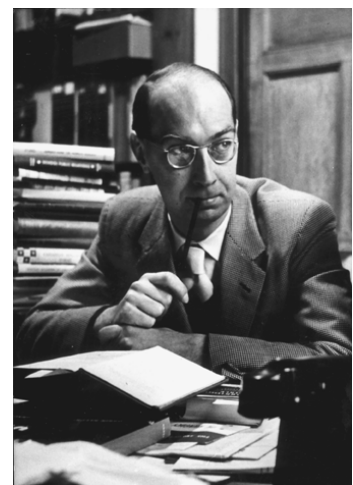
The poets of The Movement were products of the expansion of education brought about by the Labour government: often of lower middle-class origin, they had been helped by scholarships to enter Oxford or Cambridge, and were later employed as lecturers of English in the new universities. As scholars, they were indebted to the work of the English critic **F. R. Leavis** and to **American New Criticism**, though some of them –especially Larkin– rejected foreign influences on English poetry.



Dylan Thomas. Portrait by R. Shepard, 1940 (London, National Portrait Gallery).

Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)

His first volume of verse, *18 Poems*, appeared in 1934. The publication of *Deaths and Entrances* (1946), which contains some of his best-known work, established his reputation among a wide public. His *Collected Poems 1934-1952* (1952) sold extremely well. He also wrote a considerable amount of prose.



Philip Larkin.

The poetry of The Movement mocked the excesses of New Romanticism and was characterised by its urbanity, civility and decorum, and by a restrained use of emotion. It was a poetry aimed at maintaining with the reader a "level-toned and civilised conversation, often of a fairly literary kind" (Corcoran 1993: 82).

Apart from The Movement, the 1950s saw the birth of other movements, such as **The Group**, organized by **Philip Hobsbaum** and **Edward Lucie-Smith**. The Group, founded in 1952, included poets such as **Peter Porter**, **Peter Redgrave**, **George MacBeth** and **Alan Brownjohn**.

The Group had no common pattern, no manifesto, but it acted as an **open forum** where poets could read each other's work, and thus foreshadowed the now popular writing workshops.

Activity

4.1. Read through Philip Larkin's *High Windows* (1974) several times before attempting the questions which follow it.

"When I see a couple of kids
and guess he's fucking her and she's
taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
I know this is paradise

everyone old has dreamed of all their lives –
bonds and gestures pushed to one side
like an outdated combine harvester,
and everyone young going down the long slide
to happiness, endlessly. I wonder if
anyone looked at me, forty years back,
and thought, *That'll be the life;*
no God anymore, or sweating in the dark

*about hell and that, or having to hide
what you think of the priest. He
and his lot will all go down the long slide
like free bloody birds.* And immediately

rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
the sun-comprehending glass,
and beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless."

- How is the generation gap reflected in this poem? In your view, what is the poet's attitude towards the younger generation?
- What is the effect of the enjambments (the lack of breaks from stanza to stanza) employed by Larkin in this poem?
- What is the effect of the colloquialisms employed by Larkin in this poem?
- In your opinion, what is the meaning of the "high windows"?

Philip Larkin (1922-1985)

Poet and novelist. His early poems appeared in an anthology, *Poetry from Oxford in Wartime* (1944), and a collection, *The North Ship* (1945), much influenced by Yeats. He also published the poems *The Less Deceived* (1955) and *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964). Many of the poems in *High Windows* (1974) show a preoccupation with death and transience. Throughout his work, the adaptation of contemporary speech rhythms and vocabulary to an unobtrusive metrical elegance is highly distinctive.

4.3. Foreign influences and the Underground poets

Other poets who started their careers in the 1950s, such as **Donald Davie**, **Charles Tomlinson** and **Thom Gunn**, showed a much greater enthusiasm towards **American poetry**. For them, American poetry seemed more in touch with the rough rhythms of contemporary life than the urbane poetry of The Movement. Gunn himself eventually emigrated to America, like Auden.

The interest in incorporating foreign poetical influences into English poetry was also shared by **Ted Hughes** and **Geoffrey Hill**. Despite their very different styles, both sensed that the historical realities of post-war Europe demanded a more vigorous poetry than anything The Movement could offer.

Yet, instead of looking towards America, they looked towards their **native North England** and towards the work of other **European poets**, especially from the 1960s onwards, when translation became an essential activity in English poetry. Hughes has become one of the main poetical voices in English thanks to his celebration of the dark rhythms of nature and his valuation of the animal world above the rational, destructive impulses of human civilization.

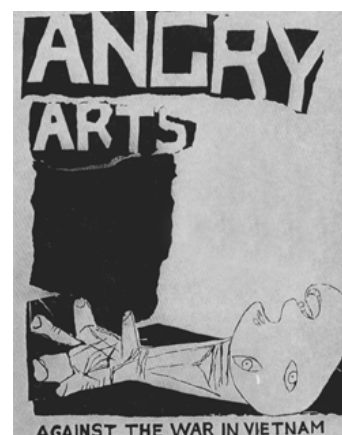
By the 1960s English poetry came clearly under the influence of the American poets (especially **Robert Lowell** and **Sylvia Plath**), whose work seemed to better dramatise the individual's disintegration in the chaotic post-war world. The "academic-administrative verse" of The Movement –in the critic A. Alvarez's words– seemed unable to carry the weight of this disintegration, and so the younger poets drifted towards other currents coming from abroad through translation, and also towards Underground experimental poetry.

The **Underground** brought a renewal of poetry in performance, associating it with rock music, festivals, happenings and anti-Vietnam war protest, but it was by nature ephemeral.

It had its high point in England in the 'International Poetry Incarnation' at the Albert Hall in June 1965 and in Michael Horowitz's Penguin anthology *Children of Albion: Poetry of the 'Underground' in Britain* (1969).

4.4. Social realists and neo-modernists

With the work of **Douglas Dunn** and **Tony Harrison** the 1960s England of the lower middle class found its poetical voice. Theirs is a poetry that speaks about the difference between the centre and the margins (social, cultural and



Angry Arts. Against the war in Vietnam. Poster by Rudolf Baranik, 1967.

geographical), written by people displaced from their origins –Scotland and the Midlands, respectively– by the new educational opportunities opened up by comprehensive schools and the newly built universities of the early 1960s.

Yet the **social realism** of Dunn and Harrison does not exclude the **neo-modernism** of poets such as **Christopher Middleton**, **Roy Fisher** and **J. H. Prynne**, whose work runs parallel to the development of new trends within literary theory, such as post-structuralism, and who seem interested above all in making room in poetry for commenting on poetry itself.

4.5. The Northern Irish poets

The first group of Northern Irish poets, headed by **Seamus Heaney**, is completed by **Michael Longley** and **Derek Mahon**.

Heaney's first book, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), made it possible for other poets to express their problematic sense of Irishness, often as a burden imposed on their personal, poetical sensibilities by the political circumstances in Northern Ireland. Heaney fused the tradition of English poetry with the Irish poetical tradition, thus finding a new language for Northern Ireland. His poetry deals with the historical confrontation between Britain and Ireland from the point of view of the sensitive individual facing it, rather than as a political issue.

Longley and Mahon followed Heaney's example and adapted Irish tradition to contemporary needs marked by history. Longley shows an interest in using historical, classical and mythical events to comment on the present, whereas Mahon shows a greater scepticism as to the force of poetry in difficult historical conditions such as those of Northern Ireland.

The second generation of Northern Irish poets –**Paul Muldoon**, **Tom Paulin**, **Ciaran Carson**– have found themselves forced to either accept or reject Heaney's powerful figure. They have shown an interest in a strong sense of orality rooted in the vernacular and the contemporary (Carson being the one most interested in recovering the lost sense of orality in poetry), rather than in historical issues.

4.6. Regionalists, women and post-colonial poets

The 1970s were marked by the steady rise of the poetry of **regionalism** –poetry based on geographical variants of English other than the standard– and the progressive decentralisation of publishing. The polarisation of England between a poorer North and a richer South inspired poets to cut their ties with the metropolis.



Seamus Heaney (b. 1939).

Both **Neil Astley's** Bloodaxe Press (1978) in Newcastle and **Michael Smith's** Carcanet Press (late 1960s), first based in Oxford then in Manchester, published new poets, kept the old ones in print, and translated foreign works, thus animating the market for poetry outside London.

New poetry marked by region, gender or race –often antagonistic to the idea of London as the dominant cultural or political system– emerged in the 1970s. In addition, an important number of poets started publishing: women poets such as **Medbh McGuckian**, **Liz Lochhead**, **Anne Stevenson**, **Sylvia Kantaris**, **Carol Rumens**, **Denise Riley** and **Wendy Cope**; and post-colonial poets such as **John Aggard**, **James Berry**, **Linton Kwesi Johnson**, **Grace Nichols** and **E. A. Markham**. In the 1980s, possibly the most important post-colonial poetical voice to be heard was that of **David Dabydeen**.

4.7. The 'Martian school of poetry' and other poetical voices

From the 1970s onwards these main trends continued. The more recent innovations are those of **Craig Raine's** 'Martian school of poetry'–christened thus because of his poem "A Martian Sends a Post-card Home". Both Raine and Christopher Reid have shown a keen interest in representing reality from a fresh, slightly ironic or parodic point of view.

On the other hand, poets such as **James Fenton**, **Andrew Motion**, **Peter Reading** and **Blake Morrison** have been using verse to produce a new narrative poetry, which has also attracted Raine.

Like Craig's Martians, the narrators of these poems are often strangers or aliens in their communities –a feature shared by many contemporary novels. This is a poetry of circumstance, of a time, place and society in which the poet must show his/her power to mimic the **voice of the outsider**, as in Blake Morrison's *The Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper* (1987).



Craig Raine, 1983.

The newest wave of poets, including **Michael Hoffman**, **John Ash**, **Simon Armitage**, **Tony Curtis**, and **Glyn Maxwell**, are, like the novelists, following their own individual projects, keeping their own singular poetical territories afloat in a crowded cultural marketplace.

It is certainly difficult to assess the role of poetry in the post-war period. As can be seen, this is a rich field in English literature. The permanence of the novel at the centre of contemporary culture worries contemporary novelists, despite the undeniable popularity of the novel as a genre. On the other hand, the lack of popularity of poetry, which occupies a clearly marginal position in the contemporary world, does not seem to worry literary critics or poets to the same extent. Perhaps this is as it should be, for poetry has never been a

genre enjoyed by many. Post-war poetry can be said to be written and read by a much larger circle than, for instance, Elizabethan poetry, but it is nonetheless a small circle.

Answer key

For each set of questions, we have provided one specimen answer, which is meant to guide and orientate you. In no way is it intended to be the definitive answer. For the other questions, you are encouraged to form your own views and write your commentary on the basis of the material you have been given, and then to maintain a steady and ongoing contact with your tutor.

1.1.

a) Some radical feminists such as the French intellectual Julia Kristeva have argued that, since language has been shaped by men, women cannot express their own experiences or narrate their history with it. They have proposed instead that women create their own language and construct their own way of narrating their lives.

Carter questions in her novel this separation between men's and women's language, and also the idea that a man narrating a woman's life will necessarily manipulate it. *Nights at the Circus* offers a thought-provoking alternative in the collaboration between Walser and Fevvers: she needs his literary skills (he is a reporter) but she is in control of the contents of her narrative. By choosing when to tell lies and when to tell the truth, Fevvers teases Walser and also challenges the readers to consider who she really is.

b) Fevvers' speech is not to be taken literally. Lizzie's sceptical attitude contrasts with Fevvers' idealism and is used by Carter to force the reader to consider the optimistic and the pessimistic view of women's future.

Carter herself has not openly committed herself to either view; her novels appeal to many readers precisely because of their ambiguity regarding feminism. As happens in this passage, Carter often voices through her heroines feminist ideas, but their impact is usually restricted by the ironic contrast with the many violent events in the plot or the opinions of other characters.

c) Lizzie is older, hence more experienced than Fevvers, and knows that the war of the sexes will not be fought (and presumably won, by women) overnight; she is also cautious about Fevvers' idealistic view of the future and thinks that she is blinded to more immediate concerns. In Lizzie's view, women need to be pragmatic rather than idealistic and must face the important problems of their present rather than speculate on the future.

1.2.

a) "Once upon a time" is the traditional beginning for fairy tales; here the narrator is referring to a particular time and place in recent history: the specific historical setting of this novel is contrasted with the timelessness and the lack of historical background of fairy tales.

Unlike the fairy tale, the realistic novel is a literary genre characterised by its depicting individuals within a particular social, historical and cultural setting: this is why the traditional "Once upon a time" will not do for the narrator. However, Rushdie's style has often been described as 'magic realism', for it includes elements of fantasy, often close to those of traditional folk tales. This beginning might also be an indication of the mixture of realistic and unrealistic elements in *Midnight's Children*.

b) He obviously feels that the coincidence conditions his whole life: that public history and private story are all the same for him. This is not a pleasant situation for Saleem Sinai, as he speaks of being "handcuffed to History" and "heavily embroiled with Fate". His initial reluctance to tell the reader that his birth coincided with the birth of India as a nation shows that he feels somehow unjustly trapped by history. His fate is not only his personal fate, but the fate of his nation, and he seems to resent that this should limit his options as a human being.

c) *Midnight's Children* is a (post-colonial) novel in English, but not necessarily an English novel, for although Rushdie is a British citizen, he is not an Englishman. Rushdie has lived for a number of years in England, but his novels deal mostly with Indian identity. The very idea of a national literature is put in question by authors like him, who benefit from their contact with very different cultures to create exceptional cultural hybrids that defy easy classifications.

2.1.

a) This passage suggests that Sarah is suddenly converted because she thinks that her lover is dead. Greene introduces the issue of her secret christening through Sarah's mother, not through Sarah herself. There may be a certain irony in the fact that Sarah's faith "returns" to her (if we are to believe her mother) in a moment of despair caused by her fear that Maurice is dead and not in a moment of repentance in which she regrets being an adulteress.

b) This depends on whether we could imagine Maurice (or a man) doing the same for Sarah (or a woman). Maurice is presented as the rational part of the couple, whereas Sarah is irrational and impulsive. We might consider this characterisation as a stereotypical presentation of gender differences.

c) This is precisely the question that Greene won't answer. An agnostic reader may think that Sarah reacts in a superstitious way, mistaking her yearnings for genuine religious feeling. Thus, her decision is especially enigmatic because she maintains it despite its apparent irrationality and also despite the unhappiness it later brings. In contrast, a reader who believes in God may think that Sarah's conversion is prompted by an authentic religious experience. In any case, there is no clear evidence that Maurice is dead, so the suggestion is that Sarah makes a rash promise she cannot undo later.

d) Morality in the sense of providing the reader with solutions to ethical problems is not the main concern of the contemporary novel, nor is God. In fact, the contemporary novel is characterised by the absence of God and by the exploration of amorality in a world without clear-cut moral rules.

3.1.

a) Human beings rely on their memory to feel assured of their own identity: if we cannot remember our past, we cannot be sure of who we are. Ros and Guil have no recollection of their remote or immediate past, they live in the present, as only fictional characters do. Accordingly, they are beginning to realise that they are not real human beings, and this obviously frightens them.

b) The stage directions are short and consist mainly of adverbs indicating the psychological state of the characters and brief indications about their actions. The stage directions are always important in plays as they furnish the readers (and also the actors) with important clues about how the author sees his or her characters and how the play should be read and interpreted.

c) The word "directions" has three meanings in this passage: Ros and Guil are characters demanding indications about how to behave from the author, they also want to know where to go in a geographical sense; finally, "directions" is extended to mean, in a general way, their disorientation in the face of the difficulties of life.

d) Stoppard's play is precisely a joke on the distinction between flat and round characters: Stoppard turns Shakespeare's Ros and Guil into round characters as a way of breaking down the distinctions between the main characters and the secondary characters in fiction, and perhaps in life, too. In this way, Stoppard indicates that all human beings are important.

4.1.

a) This poem reflects the lifestyle of three generations: that of the poet's elders, his own, and that of the younger generation. The poem deals with the envy the oldest generation felt for that of the poet, as people his age were no longer worried by the idea of sin that had so badly affected the youth of the preceding generation. In his turn, the poet envies the freedom of the young, especially as regards their free enjoyment of sex.

b) They make the poem flow and also suggest the continuity between the succeeding generations.

c) Larkin implies that modernity is partly about being able to use language freely, disregarding old-fashioned notions of decorum. This works in two ways: when Larkin says about the young couple that he guesses the boy is "fucking" her, he seems to be assimilating his language to that of the young. However, he may also be criticising their sexual freedom, implying that what they do is only "fucking" and not "making love" –not even "having sex". On the other hand, he may be breaking taboos associated with his own generation, for whom "fucking" would be a "forbidden" word.

d) The "high windows" have been identified with the actual windows of the apartment Larkin occupied when he wrote this poem; however, this needn't be so. The "high windows" may well be a symbol of death or an infinite, eternal peace beyond the specific concerns of this world and perhaps beyond the passage of time and the generations.

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