

# The Modern Period

1900-1961

History of English Literature

## The Modern Period

- Brief introduction of the modern period
- In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both natural and social sciences in Europe had enormously advanced.

## The Modern Period

- Their rapid development led to great gains in material wealth. But when capitalism came into its monopoly stage, the sharpened contradictions between socialized production and the private ownership caused frequent economic depressions and mass unemployment.
- The gap between the rich and the poor was further deepened.

- The Modern Age in English Literature started from the beginning of the twentieth century, and it followed the Victorian Age. The most important characteristic of Modern Literature is that it is opposed to the general attitude to life and its problems adopted by the Victorian writers and the public, which may be termed 'Victorian'.

- The young people during the first decade of the present century regarded the Victorian age as hypocritical, and the Victorian ideals as mean, superficial and stupid.

- This rebellious mood affected modern literature, which was directed by mental attitudes moral ideals and spiritual values diametrically opposed to those of the Victorians. Nothing was considered as certain; everything was questioned. In the field of literary technique also some fundamental changes took place. Standards of artistic workmanship and of aesthetic appreciations also underwent radical changes.

- What the Victorians had considered as honourable and beautiful, their children and grandchildren considered as mean and ugly. The Victorians accepted the Voice of Authority, and acknowledged the rule of the Expert in religion, in politics, in literature and family life.

- They had the innate desire to affirm and confirm rather than to reject or question the opinions of the experts in their respective fields. They showed readiness to accept their words at face value without critical examinations. This was their attitude to religion and science.

- They believed in the truths revealed in the Bible, and accepted the new scientific theories as propounded by Darwin and others. On the other hand, the twentieth century minds did not take anything for granted; they questioned everything.

- Another characteristic of Victorianism was an implicit faith in the permanence of nineteenth century institutions, both secular and spiritual. The Victorians believed that their family life, their Constitution, the British Empire and the Christian religion were based on sound footings, and that they would last for ever.

- This Victorian idea of the Permanence of Institutions was replaced among the early twentieth century writers by the sense that nothing is fixed and final in this world.

- H. G. Wells spoke of the flow of things and of “all this world of ours being no more than the prelude to the real civilisation”. The simple faith of the Victorians was replaced by the modern man’s desire to prob and question, Bernard Shaw, foremost among the rebels, attacked not only the ‘old’ superstitions of religion, but also the ‘new’ superstitions of science.

- The watchwords of his creed were: *Question! Examine! Test!* He challenged the Voice of Authority and the rule of the Expert. He was responsible for producing the interrogative habit of the mind in all spheres of life.

- He made the people question the basic conceptions of religion and morality. Andrew Undershaft declares in Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*: "That is what is wrong with the world at present."

- It scraps its obsolete steam engines and dynamos; but it won't scrap its old prejudices and its old moralities and its old religions and its old political institutions". Such a radical proclamation invigorated some whereas others were completely shaken, as Barbara herself: "I stood on the rock I thought eternal; and without a word it reeled and crumbled under me."

- The modern mind was outraged by the Victorian self-complacency. The social and religious reformers at first raised this complaint, and they were followed by men of letters, because they echo the voice around them.

- Of course, the accusation of self-complacency cannot be rightly levelled against many of the Victorian writers, especially the authors of *Vanity Fair*, *David Copperfield*, *Maud*, *Past and Present*, *Bishop Blouhram*, *Culture and Anarchy*, *Richard Feveral* and *Tess*.

- But there was felt the need of a change in the sphere of literature also because the idiom, the manner of presentment, the play of imagination, and the rhythm and structure of the verse, of the Victorian writers were becoming stale, and seemed gradually to be losing the old magic. Their words failed to evoke the spirit.

- Thus a reaction was even otherwise overdue in the field of literature, because art has to be renewed in order to revitalise it. The Victorian literature had lost its freshness and it lacked in the element of surprise which is its very soul. It had relapsed into life of the common day, and could not give the reader a shock of novelty.

- At the end of the Victorian era it was felt that the ideas, experiences, moods and attitudes had changed, and so the freshness which was lacking in literature had to be supplied on another level.

- The Victorians believed in the sanctity of home life, but in the twentieth century the sentiments for the family circle declined. Young men and women who realised the prospect of financial independence refused to submit to parental authority, and considered domestic life as too narrow.

- Moreover, young people who began early to earn their living got greater opportunity of mixing with each other, and to them sex no longer remained a mystery. So love became much less of a romance and much more of an experience.

- These are some of the examples of the disintegration of values in the twentieth century. The result was that the modern writers could no longer write in the old manner. If they played on such sentiments as the contempt for money, divine love, natural beauty, the sentiments of home and life, classical scholarship, and communication with the spirit of the past, they were running the risk of striking a false note.

- Even if they treated the same themes, they had to do it in a different manner, and evoke different thoughts and emotions from what were normally associated with them. The modern writer had, therefore, to cultivate a fresh point of view, and also a fresh technique.

- The impact of scientific thought was mainly responsible for this attitude of interrogations and disintegration of old values. The scientific truths which were previously the proud possessions of the privileged few, were now equally intelligible to all. In an age of mass education, they began to appeal to the masses.

- The physical and biological conclusions of great scientists like Darwin, Lyell and Huxley, created the impression on the new generation that the universe looks like a colossal blunder, that human life on our inhospitable globe is an accident due to unknown causes, and that this accident had led to untold misery.

- They began to look upon Nature not as a system planned by Divine Architect, but as a powerful, but blind, pitiless and wasteful force. These impressions filled the people of the twentieth century with overwhelming pity, despair or stoicism. A number of writers bred and brought up in such an atmosphere began to voice these ideas in their writings.

- Twentieth century has become the age of machine. Machinery has, no doubt, dominated every aspect of modern life, and it has produced mixed response from the readers and writers. Some of them have been alarmed at the materialism which machinery has brought in its wake, and they seek consolation and self-expression in the bygone unmechanised and pre-mechanical ages.

- Others, however, being impressed by the spectacle of mechanical power producing a sense of mathematical adjustment and simplicity of design, and conferring untold blessings on mankind, find a certain rhythm and beauty in it. But there is no doubt, that whereas machinery has reduced drudgery, accelerated production and raised the standard of living, it has given rise to several distressing complications.

- The various scientific appliances confer freedom and enslavement, efficiency and embarrassment. The modern man has now to live by the clock applying his energies not according to mood and impulse, but according to the time scheme. All these ideas are found expressed in modern literature, because the twentieth century author has to reflect this atmosphere, and he finds little help from the nineteenth century.

- Another important factor which influenced modern literature was the large number of people of the poor classes who were educated by the State. In order to meet their demand for reading the publishers of the early twentieth century began whole series of cheaply reprinted classics.

- The twentieth century literature which is the product of this tension is, therefore, unique. It is extremely fascinating and, at the same time, very difficult to evaluate, because, to a certain extent, it is a record of uncoordinated efforts. It is not easy to divide it into school and types.

- It is full of adventures and experiments peculiar to the modern age which is an age of transition and discovery. But there is an undercurrent in it which runs parallel to the turbulent current of ideas which flows with great impetuosity.

- Though it started as a reaction against 'Victorianism' in the beginning of the twentieth century, it is closely bound up with the new ideas which are agitating the mind of the modern man.

# I. Historical, social and cultural background

- **1. Historically**

- Modernism rose out of skepticism and disillusion of capitalism. The First World War and the Second World War had greatly influenced the English literature.

- **2. Economically**

- The Second World War marked the last stage of the disintegration of the British Empire. Britain suffered heavy losses in the war: thousands of people were killed; the economy was ruined; and almost all its former colonies were lost. People were in economic, cultural, and belief crisis.

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- **3. Ideologically**

- The rise of the irrational philosophy and new science greatly incited modern writers to make new explorations on human natures and human relationships.

## II. Literary history of the period

- 1. **Literary trends**

- After the First World War, all kinds of literary trends of modernism appeared: symbolism, expressionism, surrealism, cubism, futurism, Dadaism, imagism and stream of consciousness.
- (1) **Modern English poetry:**  
It is, in some sense, a revolution against the conventional ideas and forms of the Victorian poetry.
- (2) **Modern English novels:**  
The first three decades of 20th century were golden years of the modernist novel.
- (3) **The development of 20th century English drama:**  
The most celebrated dramatists in the last decade of the 19th century were Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, who, in a sense, pioneered the modern drama, though they did not make so many innovations in techniques and forms as modernist poets or novelists

## 2. Artistic features of modern period

- (1) Modernism
- Modernism was a complex and diverse international movement in all creative arts, originating about the end of the 19th century. It provided the greatest renaissance of the 20th century. After the First World War, all kinds of literary trends of modernism appeared: symbolism, expressionism, surrealism, cubism, futurism, Dadaism, imagism and stream of consciousness.
- (2) The basic characteristics of Modernism in literature: Modernism takes the irrational philosophy and the theory of psycho-analysis as its theoretical base. One characteristic of English Modernism is "the dehumanization of art". The major themes of the modernist literature are the distorted, alienated and ill relationships between man and nature, man and society, man and man, and man and himself.

### 3. Major figures of this period

**George Bernard Shaw** (1856- 1950) *Mrs. Warrant's Profession*

**John Galsworthy** (1867- 1933) *The Man of Property*

**William Butler Yeats** (1865- 1939) *The Land of Heart's Desire*

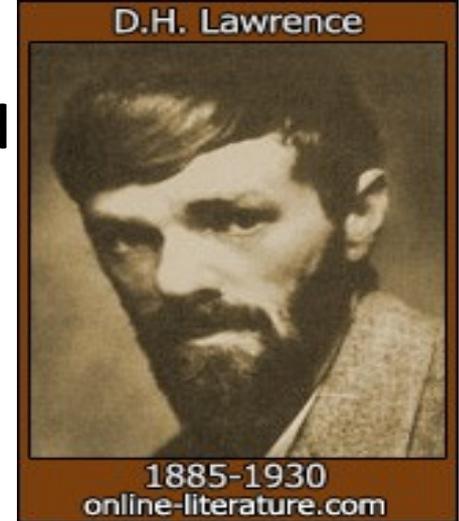
**Thomas Stearns Eliot** (1888- 1965) *Murder in the Cathedral*

**David Herbert Lawrence** (1885- 1930) *Sons and Lovers*

**James Joyce** (1882- 1941) *Ulysses*

### III. Representatives of this period

#### D. H. Lawrence



- 1. Biography
- 1885–David Herbert Lawrence was born at a mining village in Nottinghamshire. His father was a coal-miner with little education; but his mother, once a school teacher, was from a somewhat higher class, who came to think that she had married beneath her and desired to have her sons well educated so as to help them escape from the life of coal miners.
- The conflict between the earthy, coarse, energetic but often drunken father and the refined, strong-willed and up-climbing mother is vividly presented in his autobiographical novel, *Sons and Lovers* (1913).

#### Literary works

- *The Rainbow*
- *Women in Love*
- *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

## 2. Major theme

- In his writings, Lawrence has expressed a strong reaction against the mechanical civilization.
- In his opinion, the bourgeois industrialization or civilization, which made its realization at the cost of ravishing the land, started the catastrophic uprooting of man from nature and caused the distortion of personality, the corruption of the will, and the dominance of sterile intellect over the authentic inward passions of man.
- Under the mechanical control, human beings were turned into inanimated matter, while the inanimated matter should be animated to destroy both man and earth.
- It is this agonized concern about the dehumanizing effect of mechanical civilization on the sensual tenderness of human nature that haunts Lawrence's writing.

### 3. Analysis of his masterpiece

- (1) Brief introduction of *Sons and Lovers*:
- *Sons and Lovers* is largely an autobiographical novel told by means of straight-forward narrative and vivid episodes in chronological sequence. The story starts with the marriage of Paul's parents. Mrs. Morel, daughter of a middle-class family, is "a woman of character and refinement", a strong-willed, intelligent and ambitious woman who is fascinated by a warm, vigorous and sensuous coal miner, Walter Morel, and married beneath her own class.
- (2) Theme
- Lawrence was one of the first novelists to introduce themes of psychology into his works. He believed that the healthy way of the individual's psychological development lay in the primacy of the life impulse, or in another term, the sexual impulse. Human sexuality was, to Lawrence, a symbol of life force .by presenting the psychological experience of individual human life and of human relationships, Lawrence has opened up a wide new territory to the novel

- **(3) Character analysis**

- **Gertrude Morel** – The first protagonist of the novel. She becomes unhappy with her husband Walter and devotes herself to her children.
- **Paul Morel** - Paul Morel takes over from his mother as the protagonist in the second half of the book. After his brother William's death, Paul becomes his mother's favorite and struggles throughout the novel to balance his love for her with his relationships with other women.

- **(4) Artistic features**

- Lawrence's artistic tendency is mainly realism, which combines dramatic scenes with an authoritative commentary. And the realistic feature is most obviously seen in its detailed portraiture. With the working-class simplicity and directness, Lawrence can summon up all the physical attributes associated with the common daily objects.

# James Joyce



## 1. Biography

- 1882 James Joyce was born into a Catholic family Dublin, got his education at Catholic schools where he passed through a phase of religious enthusiasm but finally rejected the Catholic Church and started rebellion against the narrowness and bigotry of the bourgeois Philistines in Dublin. Influenced by Ibsen, Joyce finally decided to take the literary mission as his career.
- Joyce is not a commercial writer. In his lifetime, he wrote altogether three novels, a collection of short stories, two volumes of poetry, and one play. The novels and short stories are regarded as his great works, all of which have the same setting: Ireland, especially Dublin, and the same subject: the Irish people and their life.

### Literary works

- *Dubliners*
- *A Portrait of Artist as a Young Man*

## 2. Major theme

- He changed the old style of fictions and created a strange mode of art to show the chaos and crisis of consciousness of that period.
- From him, stream of consciousness came to the highest point as a genre of modern literature.
- In *Finnegans Wake*, this pursue of newness overrode the normalness and showed a tendency of vanity.

### 3. Analysis of his masterpiece

- (1) Brief introduction of *Ulysses* :
- *Ulysses* gives an account of man's life during one day (16 June, 1904) in Dublin. The three major characters are: Leopold Bloom, an Irish Jew, his wife, Marion Tweedy Bloom, and Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The whole novel is divided into 18 episodes in correspondence with the 18 hours of the day. .
- (2) Theme
- *Ulysses* is widely regarded as the most "revolutionary" literary efforts of the twentieth century if only for Joyce's "stream of consciousness" technique. In his efforts to create a modern hero, Joyce returned to classical myth only to deconstruct a Greek warrior into a parody of the "Wandering Jew." Joyce set a flawed and endearing human being. Joyce devoted considerably detailed passages to the most banal and taboo human activities: gluttony, defecation, urination, dementia, masturbation, voyeurism, alcoholism, sado-masochism and coprophilia and most of these depictions included the hero, Bloom.

### (3) Character analysis

Bloom, Leopold "Poldy": The protagonist of Joyce's mock-epic. Bloom is a "modern" hero in contrast to the Homeric Ulysses. Throughout the novel, Joyce exposes Bloom, an ad-canvasser, as an outsider and as a Christ-like figure.

Bloom, Molly (Marion Tweed): The wife of Leopold Bloom who has an affair with fellow singer, Blazes Boylan

Boylan, Blazes: a Dublin singer who has sex with Molly Bloom on the afternoon of June 16, 1904.

### (4) Artistic features

*Ulysses* has become a prime example of modernism in literature. It is such an uncommon novel that there arises the question whether it can be termed as a "novel" at all; for it seems to lack almost all the essential qualities of the novel in a traditional sense: there is virtually no story, no plot, almost no action, and little characterization in the usual sense. The events of the day seem to be trivial, insignificant, or even banal. But below the surface of the events, the natural flow of mental reflections, the shifting moods and impulses in the characters' inner world are richly presented in an unprecedentedly frank and penetrating way.

# Edwardian Period (England 1901-1914)

- Named for King Edward.
- Some see as a continuation of Victorian Period; however, the status quo is increasingly threatened.
- Distinction between literature and popular fiction.
- Joseph Conrad (*Lord Jim*, *Heart of Darkness*), H.G. Wells (*War of the Worlds*), E.M. Forster (*A Room with a View*, *A Passage to India*), George Bernard Shaw (*Major Barbara*), A.C. Bradley (*Shakespearean Tragedy*).

# Modern Period (1914-1945)

- Reaction against the values which led to WWI.
- Influenced by Schopenhauer (“negation of the will”), Nietzsche (*Beyond Good and Evil*), Kierkegaard (*Fear and Trembling*), as well as Darwin and Marx.
- If previous values are invalid, art is a tool to establish new values (Pound: “Make it new”).
- Writers experiment with form.
- Form and content reflect the confusion and vicissitudes of modern life.
- Expositions and resolutions are omitted; themes are implied rather than stated.

# Modern Period (cont.)

## Poetry:

Ezra Pound (*The Fourth Canto*), T.S. Eliot (*Prufrock and other Observations, The Waste Land, "The Hollow Men"*), W.B. Yeats (*The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems, The Swans at Coole*), H.D. ("Pear Tree"), Wallace Stevens (*Harmonium*), William Carlos Williams ("The Red Wheelbarrow," "This Is Just to Say"), Robert Frost (*Mending Wall, The Road Not Taken*).

# Modern Period (cont.)

Fiction:

James Joyce (*Dubliners, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), Franz Kafka (*The Metamorphosis, The Trial, The Castle*), Ernest Hemingway (*In Our Time, The Sun Also Rises*), William Faulkner (*As I Lay Dying, The Sound and the Fury*), F. Scott Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby*), John Steinbeck (*The Grapes of Wrath*), Thornton Wilder (*Our Town, The Bridge at San Luis Rey*), D.H. Lawrence (*The Rainbow*), Virginia Woolf (*Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse*).

## Post-Modern Period (1945-?)

- Critical dispute over whether an actual period or a renewal and continuation Modernism post-WWII.
- Influenced by Freud, Sartre, Camus, Derrida, and Foucault.
- Deconstruction: Text has no inherent meaning; meaning derives from the tension between the text's ambiguities and contradictions revealed upon close reading.
- Some believe it leads directly to the counter-cultural revolution of the 1960s.

# Post-Modern Period (cont.)

Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*), Gabriel Garcia Marques (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*), William Burroughs (*Naked Lunch*), J.D. Salinger (*A Catcher in the Rye*), Kurt Vonnegut (*Slaughterhouse Five*), Thomas Pynchon (*Gravity's Rainbow*), John Updike (*Rabbit Run*), Phillip Roth (*Portnoy's Complaint*, *American Pastoral*), J.M. Coetzee (*Life & Times of Michael K*), Joyce Carol Oates ("Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"), Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid's Tale*), Cormac McCarthy (*Blood Meridian*), Allen Ginsberg (*Howl and Other Poems*), Charles Bukowski (*The Last Night of the Earth Poems*).

***Thank You***