

The First Half of the 20th Century (1901-45)

The historical context

This period opens with the death of Queen Victoria and the beginning of the Edwardian Era. The King is now Edward VII (1901-10). Apart from the Boer War (1895-1902) against the white Afrikaners of South Africa and some episodes of social unrest, this is considered an age of peace and prosperity.

Under George V's reign a lot of important events happened (1910-36):

- the explosion of social unrest and of the suffragette movement. Women over 30 got the right of vote in 1918, while the suffrage for women over 21 was granted in 1928;

Irish nationalists refused to partially separate from Great Britain in 1922. Southern Catholics rose in open rebellion in 1916, but they were defeated. IRA started terrorist attacks.

In 1921 Michael Collins, one of the heads

of the terrorists, signed a treaty with Britain. The Irish Free State was created. Ireland had its own Parliament and Prime Minister, but was still in the Commonwealth. Moreover, six counties of Ulster remained with Britain. The Irish Free State became free in 1937;

- the First World War, that broke the illusion that problems could be solved peacefully. The war had a terrible physical and psychological impact on the British population. It ended up with the disappointing Treaty of Versailles (1919);

- the non-violent protest led by Mahatma Gandhi against British rule in India. This led to the increase in Indian participation in government in 1935.

During the twenties and the thirties of the twentieth century we have the rise of totalitarianism in whole Europe. The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 saw England fighting against Germany in the defence of democracy against totalitarianism.

The social context

We have already seen some social aspects of English society, but we can surely add some thing.

A lot of social reforms characterised the Edwardian Era. They are the basis for the future Welfare State. In fact, Old Age pensions and a national insurance scheme were introduced. In 1902 we have the Education Act.

England was affected by devaluation of its currency, heavy taxation and industrial decline for the debts of the war and the competition of new industrialized countries. Even if people wanted the return of the Victorian ideals, the demands for independence from the colonies and the economical difficulties led to a mood of unrest. In fact in 1926 the Commonwealth was created to calm down the social unrest.

Workers protested for the economical difficulties provoked by depression and unemployment with

the General Strike of 1926.

In 1903 Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel founded the Suffragette movement. Women had worked as men during the First World War and wanted the rights they deserved with the possibility of keeping their widened field of activities. It's the beginning of women's emancipation.

Two national parties were founded in Wales and Scotland against British government.

The rigid class system of the Victorian age was strengthened by economic factors.

During "The Roaring Twenties" some famous people began to behave in a shocking way to overcome (or forget) all the social problems.

The cultural context

New theories replaced the religious belief. Western men and women look for replacement also in magic, other religions or science. Some joined the pacifist movement.

We are going to state the names of the philosophers who proposed new theories, but we won't explain their philosophical ideas apart from their main concept:

- Nietzsche (1844-1900), with God's death;
- Freud (1856-1939), with the discovery of subconscious;
- Jung (1875-1961) and Frazer (1854-1941) who underlined the importance of myth.

For a deeper analysis of the philosophers, look up on the notes of Philosophy.

Meanwhile science was revolutionised by Albert Einstein (1879-1955) with the theory of relativity.

Both philosophical and scientific new theories

influenced art and provoked the rise of Modernism. Picasso and Stravinsky were the main representatives of Modernism in figurative art. Eliot was the most important Modernist poet, Joyce the most important fictional writer.

The Story of English

The BBC spread British English and, in particular, RP on radio and on television.

Accent remained a factor of social inequality. The Americans tried to adopt RP. So they affected "posh" accents.

The Irish question caused the revival of the Celtic tradition. Gaelic lived together with Irish English.

The development of Fiction

Fiction reacted to the realistic tradition of Victorian fiction.

The new way of seeing reality and human being is called Modernism. New authors want to represent the complexity of the inner life of the individual. This psychological interest is provoked by Freud's research about human mind.

The omniscient narrator knew the past, the present and the future of the characters of the Victorian fiction. Now the internal point of view destroys the possibility of telling all the aspects which are necessary to understand the characters' situations. All what was told by Victorian fiction was considered objective.

In Modernistic fiction the story is not any more objective. Since the story is told by a particular character it's his/her stream of consciousness which has the back of the

memorator. But the facts are narrated as they are seen from a particular point of view, the conventional structure of beginning, development and conclusion disappears while the "events" can consist only on the sensations, dreams and recollections of the telling-voice.

The best representative of Modernism in poetry can be considered James Joyce, who made a large use of the stream of consciousness.

Just like Joyce, Virginia Woolf economizes in the story action. In "Mrs Dalloway" (1925) she only represents one day of Clarissa Dalloway's life. At the beginning Clarissa leaves her house to buy flowers for her party, at the end there is the party itself. But almost of the day is described from Mrs Dalloway's thoughts.

The psychological introspection in the characters, the attention paid to the choice of words,

the unconventional use of graphic conventions of writing (punctuation, capital letter and paragraphs) made Modernist fiction difficult to understand. There isn't any more the relationship of agreement between the writer and the reader. The moral values are not the ones of the Victorian age and the common reader doesn't reflect in them. Only critics and academics can really understand Modernist fiction.

Some other authors continued to write in the realistic tradition, even if they introduced some innovations, for example their attention for the psychology of the characters:

- Joseph Conrad explores human nature through the use of more than one narrator and symbols taken from nature. He also criticises imperialism and the exploitation of blacks;
- D. H. Lawrence analyses anti-Victorian themes in a realistic form. He makes

symbolic use of nature and sees family and sexual love in an anti-conformistic way. This is evident in "Lons and Lovers" 1913;

E.M. Forster rejects Victorian social values, but he remains a realistic novelist. He criticizes the cold English reaction to passion and emotions, while he celebrates Italian passion.

During the 1930s Modernism was abandoned in favour of traditional realism. The new writers adapted the old Victorian values to the 20th-century life. They re-discovered the utopian tradition and the conventions of science fiction.

In "Brave New World" Aldous Huxley presents a utopia of the future world in the attempt of analysing the social problems of his times.

The development of Poetry

There are a lot of different movements of the poetry of this period.

Poets can be divided into two groups, the "English" one, made up of poets who followed the English tradition and "European" poets, who believed in a international culture. In fact they are influenced by poets from all the European cultures.

Hopkins' experimentalism in metre and language influenced 20th-century poets.

"English" poets have their highest representatives in the so-called Georgians. They followed the Victorian and Romantic tradition. They idealized rural England through the use of musical language and rhythms.

Hardy and Thomas are considered Georgians for their sorrow for rural England even if they are definitely superior than the Georgians.

Poetical changes can be found in the poetry of the poets of the First World War. Owen and the others use an everyday English with discordant rhythms to convey a real image of war, with its horror and violence. In "Dulce et Decorum Est" the dramatic death by gassing is given also by the free use of iambic pentameters.

The real revolution of poetic Modernism is represented by Ezra Pound, Lawrence, Eliot and Yeats. In the movement's manifesto Pound explains the major aims of the new poets (1913):

- the use of common language but chosen with precision;
 - the creation of new rhythms and the use of the free verse;
 - the freedom in the choice of the subject matter;
 - the use of imagery.
- The use of imagery is so important that

English Modernism can be also called Imagism. Imagery is present in Yeats' poem "Easter 1916".

Modernist poetry is usually complex and obscure because it analyses unconventional themes that can be understood only by a sophisticated elite.

Many cultural movements originated by Modernism: Symbolism, Cubism, etc., expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism (and Imagism, of course).

In the 1930s there will be a reaction to the Modernist movements: poets will look for a more simpler approach to reality. They will also fight against injustice, war and fascism.