

THE MODERN AGE 1890 - 1930

In the early 20th century many Victorian doubts and fears about society and man's place in the Universe were confirmed and many optimistic hopes were disappointed.

By 1890 modernization had been so successful in countries such as France, Germany, Japan and the United States that international competition for raw material markets and the control of trade routes made conflicts seem inevitable sooner or later. An atmosphere of tension which had not existed in the earlier days of British supremacy was visible and obliged the different European nations to make defensive alliances for when decisive moment finally came.

It came in 1914 with the First World War: a turning point in the history of the world. It shocked a whole generation, making many lose their faith in liberal democracy, capitalism and the Victorian idea of progress.

Science and industry had not produced a better world, they had only brutalized men and made their powers of destruction greater. The war seemed to destroy European self-confidence. It marked the beginning of the end of European domination of the world: after 1920 the U.S.A and Russia replaced France and Britain as the two great powers and American capital began to replace British capital as the dominant force in many developing countries.

Economic depression in the 1870's and 1880's had caused serious unemployment among the working class and shown that "laissez-fair" would not necessarily produce benefits for everyone or serve the public good. As a result of this and the consequent pressure for changes of the working class, governments accepted that state must exercise some control of the economy and accept some responsibilities in looking after its poorer citizens. This policy laid the basis of the modern **Welfare State** by introducing national insurance for old-age pensions, unemployment pay and medical treatment. Some elements in the working class parties of Europe believed that it was time to take advantage of the crisis which capitalism was experiencing and do what Marx had suggested in **The Communist Manifesto** of 1848: to take power away from the middle classes by revolution and establish a fully socialist society. An example came in **1917 when Lenin and the Bolshevik party took control of the Russian state in the name of the Russian working class** and invited the working classes of the other countries to follow their lead. Bolshevik influence was great in Germany and France and somehow also in Britain. Moreover **Marxism offered an optimistic secure view of the future** to a generation which had lost faith in the traditional virtues of liberalism and democracy. **The most profound fear that had afflicted the Victorians, however, was neither political nor social in nature; it was religious.** They were afraid that man was only a superior animal, isolated in an indifferent mechanical universe, **living a life without a meaning and without God.**

People living at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, even those who considered themselves Christian, experienced this **sense of man's isolation, of his spiritual vulnerability in a world which did not seem to obey any divine principles or to be part of any divine plan.** For this reason many felt that the system of belief and morality which were associated with traditional religion could no longer be valid either. **The only sure point of reference that any individual had was himself,** either in a limited personal relationship with God or alone. **It was for him to decide what was right and wrong and to act accordingly.**

This **doubt** and **insecurity**, this **sense of isolation**, is clear in the works of writers of the period, but it produced different responses in different cases. T. Hardy and J. Conrad for example, were both pessimists. They believed in cultivating a stoical dignity and accepting what happened in one's life as well as possible. It was precisely this attitude, Conrad found, that a ship's captain needed to make his command affective. V. Woolf, D. H. Lawrence and E. M. Forster, on the other end found in personal relationship and human core a substitute for the divine love which man had lost. Hilaire Belloc, G. K. Chesterton and T. S. Eliot decided to ignore their rational doubts and became Christians. G. B. Shaw and H. G. Wells found purpose and direction in trying to improve society and dedicated themselves to social reform. **There was no set of values, either social or personal** to which writers could confidently refer to and be sure they were valid for everyone, consequently they left their **characters to speak for themselves, to present their own version of reality, without interviewing to offer the reader an alternative point of view.**

In effect, the 20th century **the novelist disappeared from his own work**. Moral criticism and humorous observation on the part of the another, are completely absent in the novels of Joyce, V. Woolf and D. H. Lawrence.

It **was not only morality and social philosophy, however, which had become relative. Euclidean geometry and Newtonian physics** - the very basis of traditional science - were shown to rest on false assumptions. In **1906 Albert Einstein's General Theory of Relativity** said that space and time did not exist as separate, absolute phenomena, but changed according to the point of view of the observer. The **French philosopher Henri Bergson** (1859 - 1941) and **the American philosopher William James** (1842 - 1910) also **rejected conventional ideas of time**. They argued that it is an illusion to think of time as an independent medium which contains events in a certain sequence.

Past and future (as memory and anticipation) exist together with the present in people's mind. People, in fact, are simply a sum of their past experiences and future expectations. **Their past and future** fuse together, run into one another in what Bergson described as a **"stream of consciousness"**.

The stream is what constitutes a person 's mind and determines his thinking. Although the rational part of the mind tries to organize and discipline this stream, **the stream itself is not rational; it flows at a semiconscious level, with far greater speed and subtlety than the rational part of the mind is capable of.** The importance of the irrational in determining people's actions was understood by **the Viennese psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)**. In **The Interpretation of Dreams** (1900), he argued that **people's behaviour depends very largely on the unconscious part of their minds: they are motivated by their instincts (Id) and controlled by their social conditioning (the Super-Ego)**. This leaves little place for the conscious **"Ego"** and, consequently, for **man's power of reason**. By 1910 Freud's views had become widely accepted and **they made it difficult to see man in the traditional way, as a responsible creature taking decision for himself with free will.**

The importance of **a primitive element in human** psychology was also apparent in the work of another **psychologist, Carl Jung** (1875-1961). In **The Psychology of the Unconscious** (1916), **Jung** argued that **a basic element of man's unconscious mind was formed by his racial memory, that is the primitive memory preserved by each individual of the experience of his race during its evolution.** It operated **on a symbolic level**, which meant that certain **figures or objects** in the ordinary world had **great symbolic power** and that **people responded to them without realizing it.** Only the psychologist, or perhaps **the poet, discover these hidden, symbolic meanings and understand their importance.** This is what **the French Symbolist poets**, particularly Mallarme, writing at the end of the 19th century, had tried to do giving mystical significance to their impressions of the observed world, the world of the senses and **using language which spoke to the irrational rather than the rational in the reader.** It was the aim of the Irish poet W.B. Yeats too, not only in his poetry but also in the elaborate prose work *A Vision* in which he formulated a complete symbolical system.

The Symbolist poets influenced the writers of the Aesthetic Movement. Their influence is also apparent in the work of **Ezra Pound** and **T.S. Eliot**, two American poets who came to England, in 1907 and 1914 respectively, and there produced **poetry which broke completely with the Victorian tradition.** English poetry at the end of the 19th century was still under the shadow of Tennyson and the earlier Romantics. It was sentimental, elegiac and often pastoral, as the poems of Thomas Hardy show. This did not mean that poets simply copied those who had come before them. Indeed, in the years before the First World War (called the **Georgian Period after George V**, who became king in 1910), the poet Edward Thomas (1878-1917), Walter De La Mare (1873-1956) and A. E. Housman (1859-1936) all produced original verse. But this verse like that of the Aesthetes before them, made no serious attempt to come to terms with the **spiritual anguish of the modern world.** It expressed instead a regret for a world which would not return. In fact the lyrical tradition these poets represented, with its concentration on the sentiments and impressions of the poet, and its rejection of critical reason, had not got the means to meet this difficult challenge. A new poetry was necessary and it was **T. S. Eliot** and **Ezra Pound**, and in a different way W. B. Yeats, who produced it. This development began in England with **the critical writings of T. E. Hulme.** In his essay, which appeared between 1909 and 1915, **Hulme condemned the Romantic idea that art**

was only a matter of self-expression on the part of the artist: he believed **it should be impersonal in the way that Neo-Classicism had been.** He wanted writers to return to a **Pre - Romantic idea of man**, the one of Pope's Essay on Man (1733). **This recognized man's limitations and did not exaggerate his importance;** in a similar way Neo - Classical verse was always **controlled, with emotion dominated by critical reason.** Hulme summarized many of his ideas in *Romanticism and Classicism* , written in 1919 but not published until 1927. **Hulme's theories had great effect on a whole generation of poets**, but it is in the work of T. S. Eliot that they find their most important expression. Eliot was also influenced by Pound, who had been in England for several years before Eliot arrived and who had helped found **the Imagist Movement.** The Imagists wanted **poetic language to be dry and hard, with clear and precise images.** They rejected the soft, pastoral nature of Georgian verse, which they considered escapist, and tried to produce **poetry which reflected the cold, mechanical reality of the modern world.** Both Eliot and Pound had little sympathy for popular taste. What they wrote was not intelligible or attractive for the majority of people; **it was indeed deliberately difficult and obscure, being full of literary references beyond the education of most readers.** Pound, in particular, considered contemporary society and its art degenerate, and he was not prepared to compromise his own ideas to suit other people. He was not alone in all this, both W. B. Yeats and D. H. Hulme were **desperately looking for a new order that they felt Western society so desperately needed.**

New Dramatic Novel

Here, such as in drama, **the narrator** is always there, but he is **invisible, characters tell and represents the story. The story is self-told.** The **scene** substitutes the old novel. The author is **hidden or doesn't appear. The analysis is transferred from the novel to the reader.** The reader has the task to discover the meaning and the judgment is left to him. With the author escaping from the novel, his **absence of comments, judgments and interference, ambiguity and uncertainty permeate the novel.** The new novel, as a consequence, does not bring about moral convictions or the security of his predecessors. **Aesthetic values have taken the place of moral values in modern novelists.** (H. James – J. Conrad).

With H. James the main characteristics of modern prose is evident: the author turns **inside people's consciences to explore the flux of his mental experience: the - called stream of consciousness.** The **interior monologue** appears where there is **no perception for logical connection**, deep thoughts, the one nearest to the unconscious and expressed sensations take the place of thoughts and what the author is looking for is the possibility to render them vividly leaving aside his comments. The reader, instead of studying the characters from a high position is invited to listen to one of them, to identify with him. **The reader must not only reconstruct the characters, but discover his identity, too.**

Old and New Novel

It is commonly accepted by now to distinguish between old novel and new novel whereas the structure of the former was essentially **narrative** and the one of the latter essentially **dramatic.**

Old Novel

It's mostly a **narrative structure.** The narrator is **omniscient** and alternates summaries of previous events, personal commentaries, scenes, characters' description, conversation, reported conversations, conclusions and précis. The proportion in which the author combines all the elements determines the time, the pace around which the whole novel is organized. The summary is quick the scene has a normal lasting, the comment creates a stay in a movement. If we had to compare it to the world of cinema we could create this sort of analogy:

- summary = panoramic vision,
- description = close up (primo piano);
- scene= sonorous (close up)

In the old novel (H. Fielding, J. Austen, W. Scott, C. Bronte, C. Dickens, W. M. Thackeray, A. Trollope) the story is told by an **omniscient narrator, always present and visible both in**

3rd person and in 1st person narrations and where most of the times the protagonist speaks with the same voice of the author. (De Foe, Moll Flanders)

Eliot's mythical method

Eliot sees **myth** and **ritual** (the use of **anthropological material**) as a potential **means of ordering and transforming into significance contemporary experience**. Their **technical function** seems to have been even more important to him than their symbolic meaning . By November 1923, after The Waste Land's publication, Eliot is ever more explicit about this problem. The very title of his review in "The Dial" of Joyce's *Ulysses* make the point - *Ulysses, Order and Myth*. He sets out to answer the challenge of readers who, in terms used by many early readers of The Waste Land, saw *Ulysses* as "an invitation to chaos; an expression of feelings which are perverse, partial and a distortion of reality". **Eliot**, in answer to this, calls **the work classical and complains that that people have underestimated the importance of the Odyssey parallel as a structural device**

"In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him". Then comes the famous remark which sounds so like a comment on his own The Waste Land: "It is simply a way of controlling and ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history".

Eliot's own technique for presenting, the "immense panorama" is different from Joyce's . by **compression** and **allusion** he **condenses** it where **Joyce expands the moment** almost to **infinitude**, but **both resort to a black-cloth of mythology to hold their material in share**.

Eliot's objective correlative

A now famous term used by T. S. Eliot in an essay "On Hamlet" (1919). The relevant passage is:

"The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked".

Eliot goes on to suggest that in Lady Macbeth's sleep walking speech and in the speech that Macbeth makes when he hears of his wife's death, the words are completely adequate to the state of mind; whereas in Hamlet the prince is "dominated by a state of mind which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear". These observations have provoked a good deal of debate.

In other terms a **successful artistic creation** requires an **exquisite balance between**, and **coalescence of form and matter**. If the **matter (thought, feeling, action)** is "too much", ("in excess of") **the form** (in this case words) we have a discrepancy, strain, a lack of unity (that is **insufficient correlation**; they don't "fadge"). Vice versa, another kind of discrepancy and strain: the experience is overwhelmed by the words. Colloquially we say "I was speechless", "it was indescribable". In other words **we have not found the "formula"**. In reverse, lacking the "formula" again we over-describe, say too much.

Anthropology

J. Fraser's The Golden Bough: an anthropological research. The work entitled The Golden Bough by J. G Fraser (1854-1941), the first edition of which appeared in 1890, was indicative of the **new interest in mythology** and **pre-history** which **arose**, in one way, **out of the Symbolist Movement**, and in another, **from the theories of Darwin**. If art were an instinctual thing, if, that is to say, the **sources of art lay in the "unconscious"**, which can be a **collective unconscious** as well as a **personal one**, then it followed that **in writing or painting** we follow **a set patterns of behaviour** and **use ancient symbols** without **being aware consciously** of what we are doing or why we are doing it. Fraser discussed in his work the ancient myth of the Grail, which had such an important part in the Arthurian cycle - well -

known to the Victorian public from Tennyson's Idylls of the King; he also discussed **primeval customs, fertility rites**, etc. Fraser was above all interested in **the man beneath the surface** of so - called "**civilization**"; he wrote that he wished to **investigate** the "**solid layer of savagery beneath the crust of society**" and that "we seem to move on a thin crust which may at any moment be rent by the subterranean forces slumbering below".

Jesse L. Weston 's From Ritual to Romance

She posits **a complex synthesis** both historical and geographical **behind the 12th century - medieval Grail legends**. Her major claim is that "in the Grail King we have a romantic literary version of that **strange mysterious figure** whose presence hovers in the shadowy background of the history of our Aryan races, **the figure of a divine or semi- divine ruler at once God and King, upon whose life, and unimpaired vitality, the existence of his lord and people directly depend.**"