

The modern age

Toward the end of the 19th century two writers born in Ireland moved to England, where they became known for their plays. Oscar Wilde was associated with a movement known as aestheticism. Wilde and others thought that art should exist for the sake of its beauty alone and that it need serve no political purpose. His plays, notably *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) are high comedies known for their witty dialogue. George Bernard Shaw's plays are also known for their wit, but they often address political and social problems. They include *Major Barbara* (1905) and *Pygmalion* (1913).

Shaw's works reflect a new concern with the problems of modern life. At the beginning of the 20th century many writers wondered if scientific advances could bring about a better life for humans. This doubt was reflected in the literature, which sometimes took on a gloomy mood. Society became freer. Longstanding religious and social ideas were challenged, and old values were replaced by new ones. A new freedom was also seen in the arts, allowing writers to experiment with form, style, and subject.

The prose of the early part of the century showed writers struggling to understand modern life. In the several novels that make up *The Forsyte Saga* (1906–21) John Galsworthy depicted the changing values of an upper-class family. After writing *The Time Machine* (1895), a pioneering work of science fiction, H.G. Wells turned his attention to social and political subjects, criticizing middle-class life. Joseph Conrad wrote realistic tales like *Lord Jim* (1900) about characters who are torn by inner conflicts. Conrad's scenes set against a wild and stormy sea reflect the turbulence of modern life. E.M. Forster wrote masterful novels about ordinary middle-class Englishmen and women in a variety of settings. In such works as *A Passage to India* (1924), Forster's characters are moved by accident because they fail to choose their own course of action.

Life became even more confusing as the century wore on. World War I left writers discontented and without any illusions about progress, which had not spared humankind from the terrors of war. Novelists focused on individual characters, tracing their inner conflicts and the search for meaning. In *The*

Moon and Sixpence (1919) W. Somerset Maugham portrayed a man without roots. D.H. Lawrence wrote about the tangled relationships between men and women. Virginia Woolf used the stream-of-consciousness technique pioneered by Irish writer James Joyce to reveal her characters' thoughts and motives. In contrast, Aldous Huxley looked outward. In such novels as *Brave New World* (1932) he portrayed a brutal and inhuman world. During the 1930s some writers sought refuge in traditional values.

For example, Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene turned to Christianity in their struggle to make sense of modern life.

After World War II society was left with the terrible knowledge of the atom bomb. Many countries were also left with harsh Communist governments. Life seemed unstable and many feared the loss of individual freedoms. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) uses barnyard life to show the problems of the Communist system. In *Lord of the Flies* (1954) William Golding explores humankind's most basic nature and examines the role of society.

In the second half of the century English writers continued to reflect the uncertainties of modern life. The dark mood of the postwar era turned to anger in the hands of such writers as Alan Sillitoe and Kingsley Amis. Novelist Iris Murdoch created characters confronted with difficult choices. Doris Lessing showed people involved in the social and political upheavals of the 20th century. But there was also diversity. Muriel Spark wrote with a dash of fantasy, D.M. Thomas wrote experimental novels, Anita Brookner wrote fiction in a more traditional form, and Martin Amis and Julian Barnes wrote satirical novels.

Poetry and drama also reflected a bleak mood. In the 1930s such poets as Cecil Day-Lewis and W. H. Auden confronted society's problems head-on. They experimented with the poetic form to express their liberal views. Others, such as Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, looked at man's inner world, examining the emotional landscape. Among the leading poets of the late 1900s was Ted Hughes, who wrote a series of poems revealing the brutality of the natural world

In the 20th century England became home to writers from many other countries. Some, such as novelists Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul, came from countries that had once been part of the British empire, and they wrote about their native lands. Playwright Tom Stoppard used clever word play to explore a wide variety of topics, including art, mathematics, and education. Kazuo Ishiguro used both his native Japan and England as settings for his works. Timothy Mo wrote of former European colonies in East Asia.

Cite

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