

# Post-War English Literature 1945-1990

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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.

### 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.

### 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.

"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*. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

**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 *Avinyon 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.

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



Lawrence Durrell (b. 1912).



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.

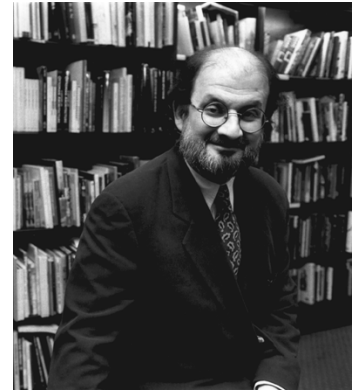
A look at the English novel of the period 1975-1990 reveals a healthy state of affairs, despite the constant warnings about decaying standards. It may be true that there are not as many memorable characters as in the Victorian novel, but there are certainly novels that are memorable for their **complex 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.



Salman Rushdie (b. 1947).

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.

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.

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."



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.

- 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**.

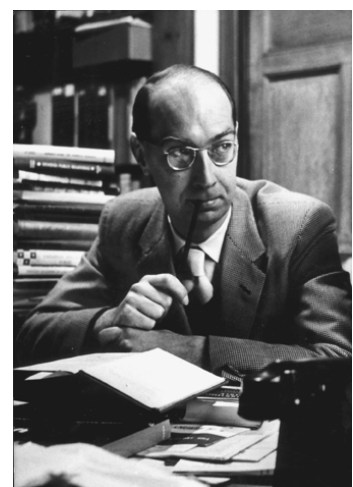
The poets of The Movement were products of the expansion of education brought about by the Labour government: often of lower middle-class origin, they had been helped by scholarships to enter Oxford or Cambridge, and were later employed as lecturers of English in the new universities. As scholars, they 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 Redgrove**, **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.

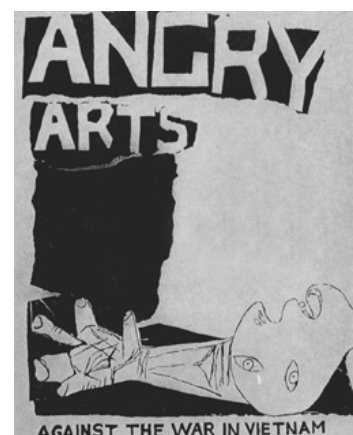
By the 1960s English poetry came clearly under the influence of the American poets (especially **Robert Lowell** and **Sylvia Plath**), whose work seemed to better dramatise the individual's disintegration in the chaotic post-war world. The "academic-administrative verse" of The Movement –in the critic 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).

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



Craig Raine, 1983.

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 Walsler 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 Walsler 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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