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TWENTIETH CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE

Curs universitar pentru învățământul la distanță



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UNIT 1

Aspects of the twentieth-century British historical and cultural context

- Historical context
- Technical devices in literature
- The main representatives of the twentieth-century British literature

Objectives:

To familiarize students with the historical and social context of the twentieth-century.

To present students with certain cultural aspects.

To make students understand the technical devices used in literature.

To present students with the representative writers who published their works during the 20th centuries.

To create the necessary context for discussions and debates.

Time allotted: 2 hours

Historical context

Literature and the social, cultural and historical context have always been interrelated. Literature was artistically reflective of the most significant issues of the times it was written, yet the form of expression and the focus have continuously changed and refined. The literature of the beginning of the twentieth century marks a turning point due to the most innovative techniques writers used and to their growing awareness of themselves as artists, of their inner experiences, of the reality they perceived and of the ways in which it could be rendered in art. This development of literature is related to the last two decades of the 19th century and of Queen Victoria's reign which represented social and administrative progress, a period of urbanization when museums, public libraries, parks and lodging houses were built. At the same time, the new century meant scientific discoveries which led to technological development and also to man's moral and mental evolution. As the twentieth century was a period of speed and machines, it brought a change of rhythm that led to a deep disturbance in people's life.

Technological development gave people more confidence in their power and gave birth to the desire to extend their influence and dominance. Britain experienced a period of decay at the beginning of the twentieth century when their neighbours, France and Germany, developed their navy. Though the two powers could have been allies during Edward VII's reign, Neville Chamberlain hesitated knowing that an alliance would have been dangerous. Eventually Britain signed an agreement with France (1904) "Entente cordiale", and later Russia became the third ally. The troubles outside the country were doubled by inner political fights. A help came from the United States in 1917 when they decided to enter the war and support Britain and the Allies.

World War I led to an important crisis associated with nationalism and chauvinism, unemployment, debts, change of interest from production to services such as tourism and transport. In 1914, Britain chose neutrality but in August 1914, when Germany attacked Belgium despite its declared neutrality, it entered the war. In 1931 when the crisis ended, British economy experienced a rapid development. The experience of the war and the changes in the flow of events determined a shift in Britain's politics from imperialism to nationalism. By 1931 many British writers had created a revolution in literature with very complex and innovative works in poetry and prose.

In 1938 Britain was faced again with a new conflict created by Germany, a power that wanted the European hegemony. Winston Churchill who served as Prime Minister during the war led his country to victory. Britain went through a very difficult period when part of the country was destroyed and many people died. After the war, Britain was victorious but exhausted. During the war, the British economy was centralized. This led to the victory of the Labour Party in 1945 and the nationalization of industry as the main objective of the party's programme.



1. What was Chamberlain's role during the war?
2. Mention ways in which the historical context could affect / influence literature.

Technical devices in literature

The period of social, political and economic trouble in combination with the rise of philosophical theories and scientific discoveries made writers decide that a subjective perspective is the most reliable in its limitation. Writers recreated worlds where the subjective perspectives of more characters are combined; they complete or oppose each other as ambiguous representations. Narrative, poetic and dramatic devices became more important than the meaning they were to transmit in works where daring experiments and ideas found their place. Ambiguity and multiple perspectives made the reader more active and involved.

Twentieth century literature became a terrain where techniques specific to other arts found their utility and through adaptation contributed to the exchanges in arts. Impressionism, Cubism and even Expressionism as well as music find their way to influence literature. Impressionism, rooted in the 19th century, made writers like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce represent human perception and experience in strokes of changing light and complementary colours, in texts open to interpretation which mark the transition period from the cause-effect based literary realism to a representation of mind and senses in relation to reality. Literary texts are ambiguous, hide allusions, multiple perspectives and multiple meanings in discontinuous stories due to the use of devices such as fragmentariness, allusion, intertextuality, juxtaposition, images and symbols. Writers discover, due to psychology, their split personality, depersonalisation or impersonality, the loss of control over the making of the work of art, the authority of language and the autonomy of the text after publication. Criticism develops rapidly as writers register their artistic innovations and experiences.

Twentieth-century poetry displays from traditional, late Romantic, forms in William Butler Yeats' early poems to the experimental visual or concrete poetry at the middle of the century and to the exquisite use of symbols and mythology. William Butler Yeats known for his symbolism, the influence of Mallarmé, and occultism also wrote critical essays, historical poetry and drama. A more active critic with an influential theory that requires the critic to be a writer, T.S.Eliot became famous and has been also assumed by prose writers in their deliberately self-reflexive novels and by playwrights in their experimental plays.

Experimental poetry evolved rapidly and reached the extreme towards the middle of the twentieth century. These limits were determined by the poets' interest in exploring the interferences between arts and other domains. Poets evolved from writing musical poetry, to

irregular and visual poetry. They also gave authority to language aiming at ambiguity and openness and created unexpected images to elicit emotions in readers. T.S. Eliot contributed to the theory about the relation between music and poetry showing that the meaning could be also rendered through musicality.

The visual qualities of the printed poem acquired increasing importance and were illustrated by their so-called picture poems or pattern poems. Matterson (156-167), considers that pattern poems can be divided into: poems which are entirely readable but have a mimetic visual element and poems which are not readable. Dylan Thomas may be considered a precursor since he made the transition from imagism to concrete poetry through his almost palpable words.



1. Give examples of poets who wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century.
2. Which of the mentioned poets is concerned with the visual aspect of his poetry?

The main representatives of the twentieth-century British literature

Traditional narrative, characterized by chronological order, accurate presentation of external reality, a powerful authorial voice and no significant or conscious focus on the duration and frequency of the events, was entirely abolished and starting with the end of the 19th century there was an increasing interest in the creator and in subjectivity. The novels have a new psychological and philosophical dimension, narrative devices are indebted to other arts while genres start overlapping, characters are indirectly built, time and space are relative and plots are cancelled.

Changes in the evolution of the writers are also obvious, which explains why only the most representative works will be analysed. Writers aim at representing another reality which seems closer to the way in which people subjectively perceive reality as various. Aldous Huxley combined elements taken from music with theories on painting and multiple perspectives. In *Point Counterpoint* contrasting perspectives are presented and possibilities are explored in the self-reflexive novel. Psychoanalytic theories, especially Freudian, found their way through the lines of many works either explicitly or implicitly. The indubitable influence of the Freudian Oedipus complex is the engine of D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, but glimpses of it can be caught in other writers' works. Various symbols that Freud interpreted and the very insightful theory concerning writers and daydreaming represented a very resourceful material for the beginning of the century.

Virginia Woolf and James Joyce wrote much more complex novels that show exquisite refinement in the use of the point of view, of the stream of consciousness technique or fragmentariness, intertextuality and techniques borrowed from other arts. James Joyce's novels cover techniques and themes specific to traditional, modern and postmodern writings, revealing an extremely wide and visionary experience. With John Fowles, there is a visible switch of interest from exploring time to exploring space and spatial experiences and to their interrelatedness.

Twentieth-century successful literary experiments bring their contribution to drama providing names like Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard after the former half of the century, when T.S.Eliot, W.B.Yeats, Whyndham Lewis and D.H. Lawrence are the representative British playwrights. Drama is not well represented during the former half of the twentieth century. T.S.Eliot's plays written in the 1930s are considered just "a new religious drama using poetic language" (Childs 108), while W.B.Yeats' plays are part of the literary Irish revival movement and answer the need for works of national and mythological inspiration.

Samuel Beckett writes against Joyce and focuses on common people and common events, rejecting the excessive intellectualism of the time. He creates pairs of characters that are opposite to Joyce's and tries to get to the essence of simple things. Malcom Bradbury appreciates Beckett's drama as follows: "it is experimental, formally complex, elliptical, contains elements of decreation as well as creation, and tends to associate notions of the artist's freedom from realism, materialism, traditional genre and form, with notions of cultural apocalypse and disaster." (qtd. in Childs and Fowler, 2005)

EVALUATION

1. What was Britain's political position during World War I?
When World War I burst out in 1914, the British government preserved its peaceful position until August 1914, when Germany attacked Belgium despite its declared neutrality.
2. Who are the representative novelists of the twentieth century?

Questions:

1. Mention and explain three literary devices used in poetry.
2. What is the influence of impressionism on literature?
3. What is Freud's contribution to literature? Give the name of a writer who used his theories.
4. What is the perspective from which stories and novels are told?
5. Who are the writers who considered music important and used it as a technique in their works?

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