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A SURVEY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE  
IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

STUDIENBRIEF LITERATURWISSENSCHAFT ENGLISCH  
FÜR DIE UNIVERSITÄT KOBLENZ-LANDAU  
1999

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## INTRODUCTION: TO THE READERS

This brief survey of English literature has been written as a very first introduction to the subject. To read it you need a reasonable knowledge of English, but no knowledge of either the literature or the history of the country.

The development has been sketched in broad lines, the literature described in the historical context in which it was produced and received. Selection was essential; I have focused on writers who went in new directions with their work and I have often passed over those who continued to explore traditional subjects using the old forms although what they produced may be of good quality and of interest.

The four chapters are roughly equal in length, but the periods they cover become shorter as we approach the present. The Middle Ages is the longest epoch, lasting about 700 years; this has been given the same amount of space as our century; the distribution of space corresponds roughly to the amount of literature produced in the respective periods. Even so, all chapters are mere sketches, outlining the story, hoping that it may arouse your interest in the period, and help you to continue studying the field yourself. The only literature I quote is poetry. That is the least accessible genre today, and as poems cannot be easily outlined, I felt examples were necessary.

English literature goes back some thirteen hundred years. It has preserved for us a record of how people with a talent for story-telling, dramatic representation and verse-making have seen the world, how they have reacted to its challenges and come to terms with its problems. Today, at the end of the twentieth century, we are unlikely to feel we have found the answers to the big questions about life and living, joys and losses, love and death, and about what we are doing here in this world of ours. Perhaps we can find some thoughts of relevance in the writings of the past.

## CHAPTER ONE: 450 - 1500

## THE LITERATURE OF MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

The term "medieval" or "Middle Ages" was first used by sixteenth century Renaissance scholars who saw the period as a rather dismal one compared with the progress made in classical antiquity and the advance of knowledge in their own time. The period 450 - 1000 has been called the "Dark Ages", the term "Middle Ages" then being reserved for the period 1000-1500; however, the darkness of our own century has made us rather more careful about giving bad names to other epochs.

*(1) Pre-Medieval England*

England was inhabited from about 3000 BC; the builders of Stonehenge were excellent astronomers, had extraordinary engineering skills and a complex social organisation. Celtic tribes invaded England around 700 BC, their bronze weapons ensuring their victory over the previous settlers. The next invaders were the Romans. They arrived in 43 AD and stayed for 400 years. They drove the Celts or Britons into Scotland and Wales and created an urban civilisation; they built towns, roads, developed trade, took corn and tin from England. When the Roman Empire began to come under attack from migrating Asian tribes, the English colony was abandoned.

*(2) Anglo-Saxon England (450-1066)**(i) The Anglo-Saxon kingdoms invaded*

After the departure of the Romans, tribes from Germany called the Angles and Saxons began to invade the now disorganised country. The name "English" is derived from the first group. Many of the Celts or Britons fled from the massacres to Brittany, which was named after them. The newcomers established several kingdoms, which were organised on a tribal basis: that is to say, the free people held the land in common; life was mainly agricultural, herds of cattle constituted the main source of wealth, apart from plunder. The warriors held a special position under the kings, whose crown depended on military force; prisoners of war were enslaved.

From about 800 on Danish or Viking invaders began to plunder Ireland and France, and to invade northern and eastern England, attracted by the rich monasteries. They gradually founded permanent settlements, building fortified towns from which they traded. Under this threat to their rule, the Anglo-Saxon kings began to unite. In the reign of King Alfred the Great (849-899), the Danes controlled nearly half of the country. He paid them huge sums of money (the "Danegeld") until he had won over the Anglo-Saxon rulers, and had learnt enough from the Danes to defeat them.

The English adopted the Viking iron axes which made it easier to cut down forests, winning land to use for agriculture. The rulers began to build stone castles; towns grew up close to them because of the trade which the lord attracted. With the beginning of centralised rule under the most powerful Anglo-Saxon kings, the status of the people began to change: in return for protection from the Vikings, they had to give up many of their freedoms, and were becoming increasingly dependent on their lords. Tribal Anglo-Saxon England began to develop into a feudal society under the pressure of the wars against the Norsemen.

*(ii) Anglo-Saxon literature*

The language spoken by the people was a Germanic dialect which we call Old English. Anglo-Saxon culture was mainly oral; poets entertained the kings, warriors and their families with tales of the ancestors' adventures and heroic deeds. Only a fraction has survived: about 30,000 lines of poetry in four manuscript collections. There are also collections of laws, historical works, and translations from Greek and Latin into English.

*(a) Monks introduce writing*

We would know nothing of Anglo-Saxon literature had England not been christianised during that period. In 597 St Augustine was sent from Rome to preach to the pagans of southern England; Irish missionaries began to work in the northern areas. The priests were the only literate people in the country; their organisation was a European one, and they brought with them its international language, Latin, at the same time creating a large new vocabulary in English for church matters; they introduced agricultural, engineering and medical skills as well as philosophical learning of the now vanished civilisations of Greece and Rome. They founded monasteries which became centres of education. They wrote and copied books, built in stone, developed crafts, traded - and took taxes. The rulers of these monasteries, the abbots, and the bishops

soon occupied a position at the top of the social pyramid. They wrote down the laws of the kingdoms they lived in so as to record their rights and privileges. But the art of writing was also used to record pagan literature given a Christian veneer.

*(b) Beowulf*

The greatest literary work that has survived is an epic poem of about 3000 lines called *Beowulf*. It was probably composed in the eighth century and written down some 300 years later. It is the story of the heroic deeds of Germanic warriors in the fifth and sixth centuries. The hero comes to the court of a Danish king and frees him from a terrible monster called Grendel, and then from Grendel's mother, an even more ferocious beast. The second half deals with Beowulf's old age, when he is king and must defend his country against a fearsome dragon, which he manages to destroy, but dies in the process. Alliteration is the basis of the verse: having a clear pattern of words beginning with the same sound was a great help for memorising, a vital consideration in communities where books were rare treasures.

Stories about monsters, horror and magic have remained popular to this day, but the perilous quality of life in those times must have made them seem quite realistic. Most of the country was covered by dense forest and inhabited by wild animals; the only light people had in the long winter evenings came from flickering wick lamps; the evils of disease, malnutrition and war accompanied their short lives. The tales would have been popular with people of all ranks and ages and would have been told at village fairs by local storytellers as well as in the household of the kings by wandering *scops* or poets. Perhaps it is a sign of progress that this lengthy tale is about the killing of dangerous monsters rather than the slaughtering of other tribes and the stealing of their women and cattle.

*Beowulf* is the only complete Anglo-Saxon heroic epic we know; there are small fragments of two other poems (*Finn* and *Waldhere*) which may have been of similar length. The chance that something as fragile as a parchment should survive over a thousand years is slight indeed. The *Beowulf* manuscript was discovered by a seventeenth century scholar; it was nearly destroyed in a fire a hundred years later; today it is safely housed in the British Museum.

A few shorter poems by non-clerical authors give us a window into the Anglo-Saxon world. One called *Widsith* (traveller to distant lands) describes the virtues of



rulers and heroes of all lands encountered by the poet on his wanderings through the world. Most of the other poems are sorrowful: one describes the sadness of a ruined city (possibly Bath); four lament separation from a beloved wife or husband; two are laments by old men contrasting their present desolate condition with former happiness. We also have an entertaining collection of 96 Anglo-Saxon verse riddles, surprisingly uncensored by their clerical recorders.

*(c) Religious and historical writing*

There is a good deal of religious verse: the monks used the popular pagan genre to instruct and win converts. One re-telling of the story from *Genesis* about the fall of Lucifer and creation of hell must have been admired by listeners used to Beowulfian monsters and horror landscapes. There are poems on the heroic exploits of the saints, and an account of Judith's killing of the tyrant Holofernes presenting her like a Celtic warrior queen. Quite different is *The Dream of the Rood* in which the cross on which Christ was crucified tells the poet of its terrible duty.

Furthermore, there are important prose documents dating from the Anglo-Saxon period. A monk called the Venerable Bede (673-735) compiled an *Ecclesiastical History of the English Race*. It was written in Latin, and translated into English by King Alfred over a hundred years later. It gives a fascinating account of Bede's time, in which miracles and legends have their place next to battles, the death of a king, or the founding of a monastery.

The outstanding lay scholar of the period is King Alfred. He was so appalled by the decline of learning after the Viking destruction of monasteries that he learnt Greek and Latin as a middle-aged man in order to translate important works into English, often adding passages of his own to explain or comment. He hoped to make the freeborn youths of England literate in their own language. Such an interest in culture was rare indeed in a military man. He drew up laws for his kingdom. He commissioned the monasteries to keep records: the monks compiled a prose work known as *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which is a sort of national history, recording important events, the lives of famous abbots as well as storms, fires, famines and invasions.

Anglo-Saxon culture was greatly enriched through its assimilation of Christianity. The churchmen were the main writers of literature, sometimes recording the works

produced by lay people. There was narrative verse, which is either heroic or religious in nature, as well as religious, historical and legal prose.

### (3) *Feudal England (1066-1485)*

#### (i) *Norman England 1066-1200*

The feudal system already existed in parts of Europe. Under feudalism the land is the property of the king, not of the tribe. He kept huge areas for himself, but made grants of land for his nobles and the great princes of the church to use (but not to own) in return for their acceptance of his rule. Land was granted for use to the king's military elite, called knights, in return for their army services. These people all rented out part of their lands to others below them in rank in return for their services. The vast majority of the people were unfree serfs who could not leave their masters' land.

In 1066 King Edward the Confessor died: he was Anglo-Saxon with Norman-French relatives. William Duke of Normandy claimed the throne, invaded England and within four years established his rule all over the country, maintaining it through his barons. The Normans (Norsemen) had first come to northern France as pirates and then settled there. William was a skilled administrator, who imposed a unified form of feudalism on England and Wales. Within twenty years of the conquest, his officials conducted an inquiry into the wealth of the country in order to have an accurate basis for tax assessment. *The Domesday Book* was completed in 1086, and tells us who owned what in every district. (The Old English word *dome* or *doom* meant law or judgement; hence it came to mean fate or ruin). The survey shows that most of the land was now held by Normans: one fifth by the king, one quarter by the church, the rest by about 200 barons. About 10% of the people were slaves, 70% serfs, and 10% freemen. The population of England will not have exceeded two million.

William established a central administration in order to keep the political power of his barons in check. He imposed a unified legal system, the common law; the tax collectors, the shire reeves (sheriffs) were checked and, if found to be corrupt, sacked. Relations between the crown and church were complex. The great churchmen were subject to the king as landholders; they also represented the European power of the papacy and had enormous influence over the king's subjects due to their claim to be God's representatives on earth. Conflict often arose between church and crown; in England it was settled by compromise.

William's successors were not always such wise rulers. King John (1199-1216) was greatly pressed for money to wage war in Europe and taxed his barons heavily. When he lost those wars, almost all his French territories in 1204, and got involved in conflict with the church, the barons combined with the church lords in 1215 to make him sign a charter, *Magna Carta*, setting out the rights of the monarch's (free) subjects, and establishing a council of 25 barons to ensure that they were upheld. The general sections of *Magna Carta* are still valid English law; the council can be seen as a precursor of parliament. Its mainly noble members were nominated by the king, but the country gentry and merchants were also represented. The monarch had to consult the council before taxes could be raised.

General stability, a unified system of weights and measures, one currency, and an efficient administration were highly beneficial for domestic and overseas trade: merchants became very wealthy by supplying northern Europe with wool. When the kings had to raise money for crusades they sold freedoms to the towns, thus giving the merchants political power. The crusades were not successful in driving the Muslims out of Palestine, but many fortunes were made and profitable trading in spices, valuable textiles, jewels was established. Contact with Arab science brought mathematical, astronomical and medical knowledge of great value to Europe. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries saw great advances in learning and the arts: the universities of Oxford and Cambridge had some of the best scholars of Europe and gothic cathedrals built by the kings were feats of engineering worthy of Rome.

Another factor which hastened the transformation of feudal society was the catastrophic epidemic which hit Britain in 1348. Bubonic plague came to Europe from Asia along the new trade routes killing probably over a third of the population within a few years. This created a huge labour shortage, which made it possible for many serfs to obtain their freedom while landlords were competing for workers.

From 1327 to 1453 the kings of England sought to win back their former French territories. These expensive and finally unsuccessful wars completed the transformation of feudal society. Professional armies were needed for such long campaigns. The knights were made obsolete through the invention of the longbow: an ordinary foot-soldier could now pierce their armour. The hitherto impregnable castles of the great nobles lost their defensive function with the invention of gunpowder.

The wars against the Danes brought unity among the Anglo-Saxon tribal kingdoms, and strengthened the military leaders at the expense of those who worked the land. Feudalism was imposed in England as a centralised system; its successes, the growth of trade and its wars undermined it, strengthening the crown, the merchants, the serfs against the feudal barons.

*(ii) Middle English Literature:*

*(a) Literature in French*

For two hundred years after the Norman conquest of England, French was the language of the rulers, the powerful, the refined; Latin that of the clergy and scholars; English the language of the servants and serfs. English gradually became simplified and lost most of its inflections. This phase is known as Middle English. The literary art which has been preserved of the Norman period was written in French; it was courtly in nature, not heroic. It was not intended for a warrior audience as in Anglo-Saxon days, but for a refined Christian aristocratic society in which women played an important role, with a sophisticated cult of chivalry. There were love songs ("chansons courtoises") and romances or fantastic tales of the adventures of chivalrous knights. The source of much of this courtly romantic literature was a history of Britain written in Latin in the early twelfth century by the Welshman Geoffrey of Monmouth recording the Celtic legends of King Arthur.

*(b) Religious Literature in English*

The loss of Normandy in 1204 encouraged the nobles to stay in England and to learn English. By 1300 English was used by all classes, having been greatly enriched by the huge number of French words imported into the language by the new users. Writing in English flourished from this time, a great deal of which has been preserved. There were love poems which were personal in nature and not conventionally stereotyped as the courtly French songs of the previous period had been. There was much religious poetry, often also personally expressive, as it was part of the great movement of religious enthusiasm and reform which had led to the founding of many new orders. There was much mystical writing in fourteenth century Europe: the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* in England; the works of Eckhardt, Tauler and Seuse in Germany. In their quest for unification with the deity, the mystics pursued individual rather than communal regimes of discipline and contemplation: the emphasis on the personal was

to become a dominant feature of religious life after the Reformation. In 1395 for the first time the whole bible was translated into English by John Wycliffe (1320-84) and his followers. He was a clergyman who lost his post at Oxford for his radical criticism of the wealth of the church - Huss, and through him Luther, were greatly influenced by his views.

Medieval religious literature also appeared in dramatic form. Mystery Plays were very popular from the tenth to the sixteenth centuries. The famous Oberammergau Passion Play is one of that genre. Their themes were biblical; they were performed on movable stages in the towns. Their purpose was to edify and teach the illiterate people; they also entertained through the spectacle itself and the tricks and dialogues of the devil. The Morality Plays arose in the fourteenth century and were sermons in dramatic form about the lifestyle of the good Christian. The best known is the anonymous fifteenth century *Everyman*. A messenger orders the main character with the allegoric name to set out on a long journey: he unwillingly obeys. None of Everyman's friends such as Worldly Goods will accompany him; only Good Deeds is willing to go with him, but he has not had much to do with that person during his life. These are allegories or parables about the human condition: virtues and vices are personified; the characters and the story teach a moral lesson. The play no doubt reflects the levelling experience of the Black Death, which unexpectedly summoned all ranks, both rich and poor, on a "long journey".

*(c) Langland's Piers Plowman*

A radical criticism of society is to be found in the famous allegorical poem: *The Vision of Piers the Plowman* by William Langland (1330?-1400?). The first version was written around 1360, the third in 1390; he does not use the fashionable French courtly genre, but the alliterative verse form of Old English literature. Fifty manuscripts have survived, which indicate its popularity. The poet was probably a poor cleric without a benefice. He reviews the problems of his time in allegoric form: vices and virtues appear as characters in the story. Piers sees Lady Mede (i.e. bribery) trick clerics and even the king, but Conscience exposes her, and in the poet's dream the king decides that he will in future be ruled by Conscience and Reason. The Seven Deadly Sins repent and give an account of themselves - in the passage on Gluttony there is a wonderful portrait of a medieval tavern and its customers. When the converted sinners decide to undertake a pilgrimage, Piers offers to guide them if they first help him plough his land. This visionary has a dream of solidarity in which even knights understand the dignity of

labour and share the common tasks. But he also attacks those labourers who make what he sees as excessive wage demands and lack humility - the poem was written after the Black Death when many serfs were demanding better conditions. In Magna Carta of the previous century the king was forced by his barons to declare himself subject to the law and bound to respect their rights. Here a poor cleric "has a dream" comparable to that which a black American colleague was to have 600 years later: of an equitable society, in which a ploughman preaching justice is not only listened to by the rich and powerful but moves them to change their ways. The need for such change is graphically described in Langland's account of the corruption, exploitation, cheating and cruelty of the time. Ploughmen were to rise up against such tyranny in 1381, less than twenty years after the poem was written - the vision of solidarity and justice which it advocates transpired then to be but a dream. It was, however, to remain a powerful force underground and to re-emerge in later periods of English history.

(d) *Geoffrey Chaucer 1345?-1400*

Chaucer is the greatest writer of the period. He was the son of a wealthy London wine merchant; he became a page in a noble household, and later a high official in the royal service. He travelled widely in Europe negotiating financial treaties for the crown, and thus became acquainted with the works of Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch. As an educated Englishman he knew and loved French literature and as much of classical culture as was known in his time. It was his cosmopolitan European orientation which made him into one of the most original of English writers.

There are three stages in his work: at first he wrote in the French courtly style (the allegorical romance *The Romaunt of the Rose*); then he came under the influence of Dante and Boccaccio, producing the masterpiece *Troilus and Cryseyde* (c 1380). He borrowed freely from his Italian source: this was standard medieval practice, as originality counted for little but the weight of a revered authority much. Chaucer made something unique out of the story about the son of the king of Troy and his unfaithful lover. It is told in verse - the seven-line "rhyme royal" (so called because King James I used it). Chaucer's characters are drawn with a subtlety and psychological insight characteristic of the novel, not found hitherto.

*The Canterbury Tales* of 1386, the most famous of Chaucer's works, is a collection of stories told (so the framework) by 31 pilgrims resting in a tavern on their way to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket, the archbishop murdered in 1170 in Canterbury

cathedral by the Norman king Henry II. Boccaccio's *Decameron* has a similar structure: his characters entertain themselves having fled to the countryside from the plague. The characters are introduced in the Prologue: they nearly all come from the middle ranks: professional men such as a doctor, lawyer, an official; a merchant, a sailor; there are craftsmen, servants, a woman who has outlived five husbands; a nun, priests and monks. They are further characterised by their stories, so that we get a panorama of medieval life as well as a survey of popular literary genres: fables, classical legends, lives of the saints, tales of chivalrous adventure as well as of decidedly unchivalrous erotic exploits. Most of the tales have a continental source, but through the framework in which they are placed they are woven together, each tale commenting ironically on its predecessor and contributing a further facet to the complex and sophisticated whole. Chaucer's work consists of 23 tales written in verse: most in heroic couplets. These were given the name "heroic" in the eighteenth century because they were used to translate Homer's heroic epics into English. The "couplets" are lines rhyming in pairs; each line has five measures; heroic couplets are written in iambic pentameter, that is each of the five measures consists of a short syllable followed by a long, a pattern resembling the rhythm of ordinary speech.

*The Canterbury Tales* bear witness to the strength and self-confidence of England's fourteenth century urban citizenry to which Chaucer belonged. We see the spirit of the Renaissance and Reformation at work in his satirical depiction of churchmen's worldliness and corruption, in the respect shown for the labour of the decent ploughman and the honest cleric, in his detached and critical powers of observation. The most striking feature of Chaucer's art is surely his ironic sense of humour. In Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose*, the librarian poisons anybody who reads Aristotle's book on comedy; he believes laughter subverts authority, as it results from understanding, thus reducing fear. Chaucer's ironic approach to the evils of his time will no doubt have had a liberating impact on his listeners. He is not angry, does not incite to rebellion; the nobility, the princes of the church do not appear - neither do the unfortunate serfs. But his sharp-sighted and amused observation of the reality behind the respectable mask in the middle ranks must have encouraged his audience not to accept blindly what they were told, but to scrutinise things for themselves. From Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* we see that there was much enlightenment in the Middle Ages.

CHAPTER 2: 1485 - 1760 LITERATURE IN THE AGE OF MERCANTILISM;  
THE RENAISSANCE, PURITANISM, ENLIGHTENMENT

*(1) The Rule of Absolute Monarchs 1485-1649*

*(i) Reformation and the beginning of Empire*

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, after the loss of the English territories in France, England suffered thirty years of civil war fought by rival aristocratic families for the throne: the Wars of the Roses. The Welsh Tudor family was victorious and proceeded to secure its position. The dynasty ruled from 1485 to 1603, and was succeeded by Scottish relatives - and former opponents - the Stuarts. The military power of the aristocracy was removed: private armies were forbidden; only the crown was entitled to raise an army. The nobility's great economic power based on land ownership remained intact. The Tudors elevated loyal supporters to the aristocracy, thus weakening hostility among defeated rivals. Aristocratic titles derive from land, and that became available for the monarch to dispose of with the Reformation, the expropriation of church property and with the conquest of Ireland. The Tudors therefore no longer shared power with the aristocracy as in the Middle Ages, but ruled alone, or absolutely. Parliament existed, was involved in the legislative process but did not determine it.

The Church of Rome was another factor limiting the monarch's power which the Tudors dealt with. Though Henry at first denounced Luther as a heretic, in 1531 he set up the Church of England, with himself as the head, thus nationalising religion, because Vatican politics had become a threat to him. In 1538 the English were given direct access to the sacred book, to the bible in their own language. The monasteries were suppressed in 1539 and the lands sold off, providing Henry with badly needed revenue. Zealous reformers burnt monasteries and abbeys, destroyed countless priceless works of art, as well as centres of learning and care for the sick and poor. Under Henry's daughter Mary, Catholicism was restored and Protestants persecuted: 400 were burnt as heretics. In Elizabeth's reign, when England was under threat of invasion by Spain, Catholics were regarded as foreign agents and persecuted accordingly.

But those Protestants unwilling to accept the authority of the new state church also found themselves in trouble with the law. These became known under the general name



of Puritans because they demanded that Protestantism be purified of all traces of Catholicism. They felt the reformation had not gone far enough: they wanted the hierarchy within the new church abolished, they disapproved of bishoprics, wanted ministers of religion elected by their congregations, and insisted on their right to speak out. Such freedom of speech they did not regard as a general right, but one they were entitled to as God's personal spokespeople. Nonetheless, Elizabeth regarded such religious democrats as potentially dangerous and acted accordingly. They were on the whole courageous, upright people, though some were highly dogmatic moral rigorists. They had a considerable impact on English literature, as will be seen.

Obstacles to the consolidation of royal power were eliminated under the Tudors; action was also taken to extend its scope. Parallel with the development of England as a modern nation came its growth as a colonial power. Ireland had been under English overlordship since the Middle Ages, but now it became a colony, that is occupied territory ruled in the interests of the so-called mother country. The methods used to pacify the country were as brutal as those used by the Spanish in the New World. The population was decimated; wholesale land confiscation took place. Revenue also came to the crown from trading expeditions to the newly discovered overseas countries, which the Tudors supported; successful adventurers who established British control in parts of the New World, who brought back gold and silver, and exotic new produce such as sugar, rum, tobacco, cocoa and potatoes were made very welcome at court.

The increase in overseas trade led to a great boom in manufacturing within England. A flourishing export trade in woollen cloth developed, whereas during the Middle Ages unprocessed wool had been sent to Europe. The profitable cloth trade made sheep farming more profitable than tillage; the result was the beginning of enclosures by landlords of areas traditionally used by the villagers as common lands. Towns and cities grew, London reaching a population of over 200,000 by 1600 in an overall population of four to five million. The crafts flourished due to the extra demand for ships, weapons, export goods of all kinds, and the condition of the common people of England improved compared to that of the Middle Ages. Most of the people continued to live in rural areas, but mobility was increasing.

*(ii) Renaissance Culture: Humanists More and Bacon*

This period is known as the Renaissance because of a rebirth or flowering of learning due to discoveries of unknown classical Greek and Roman works of art. It was a period which revolutionised three areas of knowledge: about the nature of the universe, about our planet, and the classical European past. Francis Bacon said that three important discoveries were responsible for the changes: the magnetic compass, which allowed ships to leave the coast lines and sail across the oceans; gunpowder, which destroyed the power of feudalism; and printing (invented by William Caxton in 1476), which made knowledge accessible.

Copernicus published a tract in 1530 on his theory that the earth circled around the sun. This shook the foundations not only of astronomy but also of religion and philosophy. It was an overwhelming and troubling discovery that the universe was not a harmonious system revolving around the earth, as had been thought since the days of the Greeks, but that the earth revolved around the sun and was merely one of many planets, indeed a speck of dust in an infinite cosmos. Copernicus's theory was not proven until Galilei turned his telescope on the stars, though in 1633 the latter was forced by the Inquisition to recant. But there could be no doubt about the geographical discoveries made on this planet. It was found to be not only so much larger than believed, but also to be inhabited by peoples who had never heard of Christ, and some of the early travellers considered that they lived better lives than those that had. It was an unsettling time for those who needed the old certainties to cling to; stimulating in the extreme for those who had the spirit to face up to the new realities. Of the latter there were many in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The philosophy inspiring these people was humanism. They believed, as Alexander Pope was to phrase it much later, that "the proper study of mankind is man", rather than scholastic theology. Theology was no longer accepted as the mother of all sciences, and the first rifts appear between the two. For humanists the divine principle of reason was the guideline and that they found better realised in the classical world of antiquity than in the Middle Ages. They hoped to create a new civilisation in Europe at least equalling that of the old world.

Thomas More (1478-1535) was an intrepid questioner of authority, making his case in a new genre of literature: the utopian novel. He was a lawyer, a scholar, a friend of Erasmus of Rotterdam and of Holbein the painter; he was greatly esteemed by Henry

VIII, who made him Lord Chancellor in 1529. But More would not accept Henry as head of the church, and would not publicly deny the authority of the pope. Henry thought to enforce the support of the distinguished man by imprisoning him in the Tower of London. More would not capitulate, and was executed in 1535 for treason. (He was canonised four hundred years later.)

His *Utopia* (meaning: nowhere) was published in Latin in 1516 while he was in Flanders on a diplomatic mission for the king. The information (and treasure) coming back to Europe from America was of burning interest; More's brother-in-law had explored parts of Northern America. *Utopia* is a fictitious travel report on the strange nature and customs of a newly discovered people. It is an astonishingly radical critique of the modern European form of society, which had only recently become established. More satirises the fetish character which money had come to acquire: it does not exist in Utopia; jewels are children's playtoys which they soon grow out of; gold and silver are used for chamber pots and as chains for criminals. Utopians live as in a kibbutz: property is held in common, everybody works, everybody receives good education; there is complete freedom of religion; what we would today call consumerism is despised. Conditions in England are contrasted most unfavourably with those in "primitive" Utopia: the greed, corruption, cruelty to the poor and ignorance are denounced.

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) was a philosopher, an essayist and a lawyer; like More, he questioned authority and received opinions, but he was not a man of personal integrity. Like More, he became Lord Chancellor, but in 1621 was removed from office after three years having been impeached for corruption. (His defence was that he had accepted presents from both sides but had always decided the cases according to his conscience!) In his *Advancement of Learning* of 1605 and *Novum Organum* (The New Method) of 1620 he presents a theory of knowledge to replace the Aristotelian one that had dominated European thought for a millenium. His scientific principles mark a break with the medieval approach in which the authority of tradition, of treasured books was paramount. Bacon insists that experience is the source of knowledge, and advocates the experiment as the ultimate authority. He urges that nothing be accepted merely because it always has been. He discusses those factors which lead to a distortion of our experience and knowledge of the world, maintaining that awareness of them can correct the distortion. He believed that the purpose of research and scientific study should not be personal ambition or profit but concern "for the glory of the Creator and the relief of man's estate" or life.

### *(3) Renaissance literature: the age of Shakespeare*

The momentous astronomical, geographic and scientific discoveries of the age led to an unprecedented blossoming in the arts, the splendour of which was unique. Dante and Michelangelo in Italy, Cervantes in Spain, Rembrandt in Holland, Shakespeare in England were innovators and pioneers who changed perceptions as radically as did the explorers and scholars. The English language, which Shakespeare was to transform, had already grown through printing, acquiring enormous numbers of new words from Latin, from science and from the communication within the nation generated by the new medium. It was also developed by King James's *Bible* of 1611, the *Authorized Version*, a new translation based on the Greek, Latin and previous English ones, which is a masterly work of English. Shakespeare had the good fortune to come to the theatre at a time when the language, like the country, was in flux, when he could use a standardised form becoming common to the nation, and when the vigorous and colourful language and songs of the people in villages and market places offered material rich and real for poets and dramatists to work with.

Shakespeare's poetic dramas are the crowning glory of Renaissance England, a nation with a profusion of artistic work of all kinds. His plays would be unthinkable without the brilliant courtly culture of his time: without the music, the pageantry, the poetry and above all the drama, which he fused with the popular culture of the people, to create something unique and unequalled. Since the nobility had been deprived of their armies, the Tudor monarchs were careful to offer compensation in form of magnificent court life with lavish entertainment to keep them in view and out of mischief. The pleasures included, in keeping with the Renaissance ideal of the generally accomplished gentleman and woman, sports and hunting, the best of music, masques, tournaments and theatre.

#### *(a) Renaissance poetry and theatre*

Poetry was one of the sources of Shakespeare's drama. It was very popular with people of all ranks. It had been enriched by Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey bringing back from Italy works of Dante, Petrarch and Ariosto, and in particular the 14-line sonnet form; this had been used by Petrarch for his love poetry, and was to be adopted by Shakespeare and many of the best lyric poets after him. Unrhymed or blank verse, as it was called, was introduced to England by the Earl of Surrey in his

translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* - he did not live to see what Shakespeare would make of it, being as a young man unjustly executed for treason by Henry VIII.

Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) was the Elizabethan master of arcadian or pastoral poetry, and one of those who contributed to the cult built up around "Gloriana" or *The Faerie Queen*, the title of his epic in praise of the monarch. - Elizabeth was the first monarch to travel the country to show herself to the people; she saw the importance of establishing strong personal links with the wealthy citizenry of England and of making herself loved by the commoners. She presented herself as the Virgin Queen wedded to the nation, and her immense popularity may have derived to some degree from the cult of the heavenly Virgin Queen of Catholicism now deposed by the Reformation. - Spenser was the son of a well-to-do cloth maker who was given high office in Ireland during the colonial wars. He wrote much of his poetry there while in charge of bringing English settlers to live on the confiscated lands. His castle was burnt down by some of the expropriated in 1598 and the last volumes of the *Faerie Queene* destroyed; he died in poverty in London the following year. The glaring discrepancy between the idyllic pastorals of his literary work and the brutal reality of the desperate peasantry starving in the countryside around his residence in County Cork was only exceptional in its crassness: pastoral poetry about shepherds and their loves and lives in a peaceful rustic setting resulted from the nostalgia of city writers living in difficult times for a fantasy world of simplicity, quiet and virtue. Spenser's pastorals were also political allegories on the condition of England. He combined medieval poetic forms with contemporary Italian and French; his mastery of technique and of language was virtuose.

The poet John Donne (1571-1631) became Dean of St Paul's Cathedral and a famous Anglican preacher after having been a Catholic, a lawyer, lived at court, run away with his master's niece, gone to sea with the Earl of Essex, and to prison for his elopement and secret marriage. He is one of the great English poets, and as original as one might expect from such a background. He is remembered for his love poetry and his religious poetry. The love poetry is startlingly intimate: very often a conversation with his mistress in bed; it is witty, impudent and a fireworks of unexpected imagery, comparisons and irreverent paradoxes. The religious lyrics were written after the death of his beloved wife, and in them the ingenious imagery gives intense and original expression to his anguish over the paradox of life and death. The wit remains too: in his last poem, written when he was dying, he bargains with God about forgiving his sins, punning in the last lines on his name: "And, having done that, Thou hast done: / I fear no more."

Important new work had also been underway in the theatre. The great noble families had private theatres, the actors and writers employed as their servants. The first public theatres were built between 1570 and 1600 outside the city of London, on the river near the bear gardens and brothels, where the city fathers could not forbid them - the latter did not relish the idea of the lower orders leaving work to see the dramas, which were performed during the daytime. The theatres were frequented by people of all ranks: the plays therefore had to appeal to people of high education and those of none at all; to people with the most fastidious of tastes and those who enjoyed cock and dog fighting, boxing and bear tormenting; the dramas had to be of interest to apprentices, students, citizens and nobility alike. Thomas Kyd (1558-94) managed to do this with his very popular *Spanish Tragedy*, a romantic, melodramatic piece dealing with love, betrayal, revenge, madness and very many murders. The first play by Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) was *Tamburlaine the Great*, presenting an Asiatic cattle owner who set out to conquer the world, a grandiose individual whose ambition and military genius are matched by his cruelty, and who defies death to achieve glory, power and splendour. In *Dr Faustus* and *The Jew of Malta* he again presents exceptional individual characters whose fate is determined by their own nature and by circumstance - new concepts in the theatre. Sir John Lily (1554-1606) was the inventor of the Elizabethan love comedy; and Ben Jonson (1572-1637) the creator of a new type of drama, the witty comedy of manners, satirising social conventions. Shakespeare was a friend of Ben Jonson's, acted with him in Jonson's plays, and built on his work.

*(b) Shakespeare's works*

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-on-Avon in 1564, and died there in 1616. His father had a glove business and became mayor of the town. When he was eighteen, William married an older woman, Anne Hathaway, whom he had made pregnant. There is a record of him acting and writing plays in London in 1590; in 1592 the theatres closed for two years because of plague, which would have left him and his family penniless, but his aristocratic patron supported him during the bad times, and bought him a share in the new Globe Theatre Company, which later became King James' company, thus eventually acquiring both prestige and commercial success. Shakespeare's family remained in Stratford and, once he could afford to do so, he bought a fine house there, to which on giving up the theatre he retired for the last seven years of his life. He was, according to accounts of his contemporaries, an excellent actor and kind good friend: he too had good friends, especially Ben Jonson, who after his death undertook the arduous task of publishing his collected works.

Shakespeare is not only the greatest dramatist in the English language, but also the greatest poet. His 154 sonnets are love poetry, addressed to a man and to a woman. The man was Shakespeare's young patron, a nobleman from whom he received inestimable help. Platonic friendship between men was cultivated during the Renaissance; artists were also expected to write, paint and compose for their patrons, but these poems, never intended for publication, transcend the conventions and give us unique insight into Shakespeare's emotional life. The woman of the sonnets, the "Dark Lady" though neither beautiful, good nor kind, enslaved his soul, and took his innocent young patron as her lover, thus tormenting the poet doubly.

Shakespeare wrote comedies, history plays and tragedies. The comedies can have classical or contemporary sources: Shakespeare always transformed his material, giving old conventions life in a new world, and through fusion and innovation creating forms all his own. *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* is peopled with spirits and fairies of English folklore, never before found in drama; in the history plays and in the tragedies he creates out of traditional stereotypes comic figures such as Falstaff and the fools, thereby giving an entirely new dimension both to the stock figures and to the genre. The sparkling brilliance of the dialogue, the poetic quality of the songs, the inventiveness of the plots, the wit of the satire are irresistible. *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* are among the great achievements. In some of the comedies, such as *Much Ado About Nothing* or *The Merchant of Venice* he stretched the genre to its limits, bringing them to the brink of tragedy. Shakespeare raised the relatively new genre of comedy to heights it has rarely since attained.

The history plays, written between 1590 and 1613, are based on Holinshed's *Chronicles of England*. They are reflections on the dangers of Shakespeare's own time and products of the sense of nationhood to which England's history and astonishing rise in the world had led. When he began these plays, Elizabeth's reign was drawing to a close; the question of her succession was unclear; a recurrence of civil war did not seem unlikely. Political advice offered by her subjects was something Elizabeth did not appreciate, so plays set in the past were a useful medium for a playwright concerned about the ambitious nation's future. The breakdown of civil society, the terrors of civil war caused by rivalry for the throne, or by the brutality, vice or weakness of the monarch are dominant themes. The attributes of good rule are presented directly or indirectly: it is a leitmotif that without the loyalty of the subjects, there can be no government, and that furthermore that loyalty must be earned by the sovereign through wise leadership carried out for the good of the nation. These lessons emerge from the history plays through elements of extravagant melodrama, hilarious comedy, exquisite

poetry and stark tragedy. That the transition of 1603 from the last of the Tudors to the first Stuart king from Scotland was so unexpectedly peaceful may well have increased the popularity of these plays. Among the most interesting are *Henry IV*, *Richard II*, *King John*.

The tragedies are generally regarded as Shakespeare's supreme achievement. Many of the main figures are kings and queens, as in Greek tragedy, or at least patricians - ordinary citizens are not yet considered appropriate vehicles for edification. Despite the upsurge of national pride evident in the history plays, there is only one Scot (in *Macbeth*) and one Briton (in *King Lear*) among the main figures: the others are Danes (in *Hamlet*), an Egyptian (in *Anthony and Cleopatra*), a Moor (in *Othello*), Romans (in *Julius Caesar*), Venetians, Veronese (in *Romeo and Juliet*). However, we do not remember Hamlet because he is a Dane, or a king's son, but because of his personality. During the Tudor age the fate of the nation depended to a greater extent than in medieval times on the personal character of the rulers; it is therefore not surprising that drama produced the greatest literary individuals the stage had ever seen. The tragic fate of these individuals is not caused by external forces outside their control but is of their own making: their downfall is caused by specific features of character or weaknesses exposed under exceptional circumstances. The tumultuous nature of his time had made Shakespeare acutely aware of the precariousness of fortune and how quickly the veneer of civilisation could disintegrate under adverse conditions. He has given us character studies of extraordinary psychological depth of men and women struggling in vain to extricate themselves from the traps and nets of their passions, their blindness, or even their self-awareness. For four hundred years his works have fascinated readers the world over, perhaps more so than ever before in our century with its unmatched progress, hubris and barbarism.



(2) 1641-89: *Civil war, restoration, "Glorious Revolution"*

(i) *Revolt against absolutism*

The alliance between crown and citizens of London, which the Tudors had been careful to nurture, began to crumble under the Stuarts. The seventeenth century brought sharp competition for trade in Europe, and new political conflicts there. Not only had times become harder for overseas trade: the balance of power between merchants and crown had shifted due to the increasing prosperity of the Tudor age, and the merchants needed more political say in order to safeguard their business interests abroad. But the Stuarts did not see any necessity to grant parliament more influence: on the contrary. Conflict between crown and parliament arose when the crown failed to adequately protect British colonial undertakings in the Far East from the Dutch, when it failed to invest adequately in the navy and became involved in a disastrous war with France. The Stuarts refused to accept any limitation to their powers, invoking the doctrine of the divine right of kings. This was something which the Tudors had taken for granted, acted upon but never talked about.

The contentious issues in the reign of James I (1603-25) and Charles I (1625-49) were whether the king was entitled to raise taxes, to declare war, and to raise an army without the consent of parliament. The conflict had to do with control of finances and foreign policy, that is to say with sovereignty. In constitutional terms the question was whether the monarch was under the law, and unable to legislate without parliament, or above the law and therefore the ultimate source of law. Charles I tried to impose the Anglican state church on Scotland, to find the whole country rising against him and girding for holy war to defend their Puritan Calvinist "Kirk". In 1640 parliament refused to vote for a tax to make war on Scotland; then it began to raise taxes itself for a war against the crown, took control of the army, and Charles had to flee.

One of parliament's generals was Oliver Cromwell, a small landowner and Puritan. He organised a new type of army and recruited radical Puritans who set up a disciplined, democratic and effective force. This alarmed parliament, which was not at all as radical. After a terrible civil war bringing immense misery to the people, the king and his forces were defeated; when he refused to compromise, the army in 1649 insisted on his execution in the name of God and of the people. For ten years England then became a republican dictatorship, the victors having abolished the monarchy and the House of Lords and by-passed parliament. They closed the theatres and other "houses of ill-repute". During the civil war, religious radicalism had flourished and within parliament and without groups calling themselves Levellers and sects of all sorts made loud and

articulate demands for far-reaching social reform. Once the danger was over, the conservative forces on the republican side saw to it that no radical legislation was passed, and from 1653-9 England was ruled by a Protectorate of ten Puritan generals. Many of the Levellers who had fought in the army were sent to Ireland to continue the war there, as the Irish had used the turmoil in England to rise against the colonial government and settlers. When the Irish had been defeated, the Cromwellian soldiers were given confiscated lands, which soon put an end to their radicalism. (The Irish troubles which began in 1668 have their roots in the confiscations and settlements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.)

After Cromwell's death in 1658 parliament was re-reinstated: in 1660 it decided to restore the monarchy and invited the executed king's son to take the throne. Charles II supported science, the arts, the empire, and overseas trade, setting up the East India Company; no conflict with parliament arose during his reign. But his brother James II, who was a Catholic, defied parliament by removing discriminatory laws keeping Catholics out of high office, and he was deposed in favour of his daughter Mary and her husband William of Orange. In 1689 they accepted a new legal framework for a constitutional monarchy in which the sovereignty of parliament was paramount. The act of parliament is known as the Bill of Rights, which guaranteed important civil liberties, though it discriminated against Catholics. The settlement is sometimes rather dramatically called "the Glorious Revolution".

In the seventeenth century, the legal framework for parliamentary democracy was established, and so were the foundations of modern science. King Charles II gave the Royal Society its charter in 1662: scientists met regularly in London, published a journal with articles in English and in Latin, thus catering for a non-scholarly commercial or artisan public interested in science, and providing scientists with both a national and an international forum of communication. Isaac Newton and Robert Boyle were among the members. In 1687 Newton published his *Principia Mathematica*. His studies of astronomy and mathematics had led to the discovery of the force of gravity: he could prove that everything in the universe, from the apple falling off the tree on earth to twin stars revolving around each other in distant space were governed by the same universal and calculable laws. Scientists discovered that the human body too was subject to the laws of physics - the doctor, William Harvey, for example had found in 1616 that the heart was a pump allowing the blood to circulate.

(2) *The literature of the civil war and restoration*

(a) *Writers of the civil war: Hobbes, Milton, Bunyan*

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) is one of the great prose writers of the civil war period, which determined his political philosophy. His life began with a shock - 1588 was a time of acute political crisis: when a report reached his mother that the Spanish Armada was approaching the coast, she gave birth to him prematurely in panic. His *Leviathan* was published in 1651 shortly after the defeat of the Royalists; it gave offence to both parties of the civil war. *Leviathan* is the name given in the bible to a frightful monster: it is Hobbes' term for the state or sovereign power. The view of man which the experience of the previous decade had imposed on him he sums up with the famous saying: *homo hominem lupus* - man is a wolf to men. He argues that people are basically equal in ability, that they are fundamentally selfish and driven solely by their desires, that in their natural condition they therefore live in a permanent state of war, their lives being "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." In order to escape from this intolerable situation, they set an authority in place to which they voluntarily contract to submit. The contract is seen as irrevocable; it stipulates that the sovereign power must enforce peace by whatever means necessary; only if it should become unable to do so are the subjects entitled to renounce the contract. As the Stuarts had ruled in the name of God, and the Cromwellian military in that of God and the people, it is understandable that neither relished seeing the power of the state stripped of its aura and presented as an unavoidable brutality essential for the survival of the race.

John Bunyan (1628-88) also gave offence to the authorities, but unlike Hobbes, he spent many years of his life in prison. He was the son of a tinsmith, learnt to read at the village school, and at 16 was recruited into the parliamentary army. On his discharge, he married, living in poverty with his wife, their only luxury being two religious books. One was the bible, the other a treatise on the Calvinist doctrine of pre-destination, according to which the fate of humans is decided long before their birth, there is therefore no such thing as free will, and people's conduct in life has no bearing on their ultimate destination. Bunyan went through years of grave religious crisis, suffering from terrible doubts and tormented by visions of the devil - these may have been partly caused by his wartime experiences. When he recovered, he joined a Puritan sect and began to preach. In 1660, after the restoration, he was arrested for not having a licence to do so - the authorities were very suspicious of dissident radicals. Bunyan refused to give the judge an undertaking that he would obey the law in future, and he therefore spent twelve years in prison. There he began work on his great folk epic *The Pilgrim's Progress From This World To That Which Is To Come*, published in 1678. It is a

religious allegory describing man's journey through the world, and all the dangers and temptations encountered. Before he reaches the safety of the Celestial City, the main figure Christian (the Everyman of medieval plays) has to pass through Vanity Fair, the Valley of Humiliation, and the Valley of the Shadow of Death, meeting all kinds of scoundrels, hypocrites and tempters as well as good and faithful friends. The Puritan soldiers of Cromwell's army had been taught to see their struggle as part of a universal battle between the forces of light and darkness. Bunyan uses the medieval allegory to present the plight of the individual striving to live according to what he has been taught and prevailing against enormous odds. *The Pilgrim's Progress* is one of the world's great works of the religious imagination; it has the simplicity of faith and strength of the ancient prophets; it has the humour and good sense of village folk. The intensity of the landscape descriptions gives us an inkling of what that man gave up who remained behind bars, deprived of the light of day and clean countryside, because he would not acquiesce to being silenced. *The Pilgrim's Progress* was until recently, like the bible, a family book in the English-speaking world; it has been translated into 120 languages and appreciated by religious-minded people of all creeds.

John Milton (1608-74) is another Puritan whose life is as significant as his work. He was the son of a notary and musician; he damaged his eyes as a child through too much reading by candlelight. In 1644 the revolutionary parliament had just ordered the reinstatement of censorship, which it had denounced while the king was doing the censoring. Milton addressed parliament with a speech entitled *Areopagitica*, a passionate appeal for freedom of the press. (Areopagus was the hill in Athens of antiquity where the highest court sat). Milton argues that censorship is tyrannical, that it is therefore unworthy of the revolution; that it is counterproductive, as it cannot suppress the truth; that it is an insult to the independence of mind of the English people. The splendid rhetoric of the speech corresponds to the courage of the speaker; the images are universal in their validity wherever and whenever "the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely" is denied. It had no impact on the Puritans now learning the ways of tyranny.

Milton nevertheless wrote many pamphlets in the parliamentary cause; he was appointed secretary to the Revolutionary Council after 1649 with the task of defending its actions, for example the execution of the king, which had outraged many former parliamentary supporters. After the restoration Milton was imprisoned for a short time and heavily fined. Though now blind, he began in prison to compose his major work, the verse epic *Paradise Lost*. It is monumental in its scope, encompassing not only the

creation, fall and redemption of the human race, but also the revolt and defeat of Satan and his rebel angelic armies in their battle against the divine ruler of heaven.

Power soon corrupted many of the Puritan military victors; many others were narrow, rigidly dogmatic fundamentalists; but the heroic prophetic element in the Puritan rebellion against the tyranny of absolutism finds expression in *Paradise Lost*. The themes of rebellion, defeat, loss, and hope of ultimate victory are placed in a dramatic cosmic context: the revolution defeated in one small part of the earth can now be understood as a mere episode within a universal struggle of mythical dimension. The blind artist who embarked on such a vast undertaking - the work consists of 10,000 lines of verse in 12 books - broke with the literary conventions of his time. He adopted for his poem the blank verse which Shakespeare had introduced for drama. In the preface explaining his choice of verse we hear Milton speaking as an innovator of the Renaissance, who looks back with pitying contempt on the "modern" literature of the Middle Ages, and who venerates the classical authors of antiquity. He calls rhyme a "jingling sound of like endings", which he says Homer and Virgil would not have countenanced: he declares it the "invention of a barbarous age, to set off wretched matter and lame meter". He proclaims that he has performed a service for epic poetry in setting an example: "the first in English, of ancient liberty recovered to heroic poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming."

His portrait of Satan is equally unorthodox, so much so that the Romantic poets Blake and Shelley regarded the defeated angelic rebel as the real hero of the epic. Milton would not have agreed, but Satan is not only one of the main characters of the epic, he is at the centre of the first two books, and above all, he is portrayed in despair, in doubt, in torment, opting for evil in an almost tragic attempt to preserve his dignity. Milton's language can be compared in its solemnity and splendour to the music of Bach. It is the language of the bible, of the epic masterpieces of Latin and Greek, and it has a unique dramatic quality. Milton makes extraordinary use of contrast, for instance of images of darkness and light. He draws on the experience of an artist deprived of sight, and also on his knowledge of the scientific discoveries of the age - he had visited the defeated astronomer Galilei in prison in Italy, encountering there a painful contrast between darkness and light of which he was to gain direct personal knowledge himself later on.

Milton's last works were *Paradise Regained* of 1671, on Satan's unsuccessful temptation of Christ, who thus restores mankind to paradise, and *Samson Agonistes* of

the same year, in which the blinded biblical figure Samson, betrayed by his wife, imprisoned, humiliated and tormented by his enemies the Philistines, destroys them and himself by pulling down the pillars supporting their palace. Milton's beautiful sonnets "On His Blindness" and "On His Deceased Wife" give insight into the poet's personal frame of mind.

*(b) Writers after the restoration: satire, the theatre, the diarist Pepys*

When the monarchy was restored in 1660, the elegant court life resumed with its manifold entertainments; the theatres reopened after 19 years, and writers who had been forced to remain silent during the Puritan regime found an interested audience. One such was Samuel Butler (1612-80), a farmer's son who entered the service of a noble family. His *Hudibras* is a satiric mock-heroic poem on Puritan hypocrisy, on intellectual pretension and folly, which greatly amused Charles II and his court. It recounts the ludicrous exploits of two Puritans, the grotesque Hudibras and Ralpho, who constantly quarrel with each other about religion, whose lofty stance on moral questions turns out to be a mask for ignoble self-interest, but who get away with nothing. It is a hilarious burlesque in the spirit of Cervantes.

The theatre after the restoration was very different to what it had been in Shakespeare's time. The buildings were now enclosed, the stage effects highly sophisticated and entrance was therefore more expensive, excluding the plebeian audience of Elizabethan times. Furthermore, the twenty years of Puritan preaching against the theatre had had an effect on the middle classes. Comedies of manners were now the fashion; they were written for fashionable society connected with the court; the subject matter was intrigues and all sorts of amorous adventures depicting human folly and vice. Most of these elegant and witty dramas presented middle class characters, rural and urban, as figures of fun, who were mocked for their bad taste, poor wit and the capital crime - dullness. The foremost playwrights of the time were William Congreve, John Dryden, George Farquhar, and Richard Brinsley Sheridan.

Henry Purcell (1658-95), the organist of Westminster Abbey, wrote wonderful incidental music for their plays at the theatre, choral works for various court occasions and church music. He is one of the foremost English composers.

An intriguing personal record of the first decade of the restoration has survived: it was written by Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) the son of a tailor who lived in poor

circumstances until he entered the service of a nobleman. He was given high office in government administration, and later in the organisation of the navy, and he became president of the Royal Society. He wrote the diary in code; it was kept among his papers in the University of Cambridge but was not deciphered until 1825. He describes London life of his time, the outbreak of plague in 1665, the great fire of London in 1666, the court, his efforts to stamp out corruption in the administration, and he gives amusing and very frank accounts of his private life.

### *(3) 1690-1760: Britain a Constitutional Monarchy*

#### *(i) The growth of trade*

After the "Glorious Revolution", political power was shared by the monarch, the aristocracy and representatives of merchant interests. Wealthy merchants had since Elizabethan times bought land in order to qualify for membership of the lower house of parliament; as their financial power grew, so did their number in the House of Commons. They were not representatives of the people as a whole, the great majority of whom had no vote. In the eighteenth century the political structures we know today emerged, with two parties dominating politics (the Tories or Conservatives and the Whigs or Liberals), the Prime Minister formulating policy and no longer functioning merely as servant of the monarch. The merchants retained their skills at buying and selling in political life, which became extremely corrupt.

Money was flowing into Britain from overseas: from India, where the East India Company had a monopoly on trade in tea, silks and spices; from the Caribbean, where slave labour on sugar plantations produced immense fortunes. Perhaps the most lucrative trade was that in African slaves. They were bought by English captains from African or Arab middle-men in exchange for guns, tools, cloth, alcohol; they were shipped to the Americas, sold for labour on the cotton and sugar plantations, the ships returning home with cargoes of colonial produce. It began in 1562, and by the eighteenth century had turned the ports of England into thriving centres of commerce. That success and the prosperity of America was built on some fifteen million victims of an African holocaust.

The new wealth did not greatly affect the 90 per cent of British people working in agriculture, a substantial number of whom still spent their lives precariously close to want, but it transformed the cities, providing the capital required for major urban development and for large-scale investment in the infrastructure. Canal building began

to facilitate the transport of heavy goods such as coal or iron; work began on improving roads. In 1700 it took over a fortnight to get from London to Edinburgh: by 1800 the journey by coach took three days.

(ii) *The Age of Enlightenment: Hogarth, Pope, Swift*

The eighteenth century is known in Europe as the Age of Enlightenment. The name comes from the belief held by many humane thinkers and artists of the time that human reason could bring light into the darkness of the world, that it could prevail over tyranny, ignorance and superstition. In Britain the reign of Queen Anne (1702-14) is often called the Augustan age because it was considered as distinguished in literature as that of the Roman Emperor Augustus, during whose reign Virgil, Horace, Ovid lived. It was an age badly needing light. Political life was corrupt; women were in law the property of their menfolk; over 200 crimes were punishable by public execution; the average life expectancy was 35 years. However, the middle classes were becoming better educated; perhaps half a million of the six million population could read. Puritanism had encouraged the reading of the bible and of religious tracts; city women now had more time as many household commodities formerly made at home - such as cloth, soap, candles, beer - were now purchased. Women were generally excluded from public and commercial life, and those who could afford to buy books began to enjoy reading about the world their fathers and husbands moved in. The upper echelons of servants were by then also literate, and took up the habit of reading from their mistresses. A new market thus arose for a new type of literature. Newspapers became popular, as commerce required up-to-date information; journalists were needed; writing became a livelihood. Since the 1650s, coffee houses had provided customers not only with the fashionable drink, but also with newspapers, and became a meeting place for businessmen and gentlemen interested in politics, good conversation and literature. The court was no longer the centre of the country's intellectual life, but London's coffee houses. As in Arab countries today, coffee houses were not open to women.

Joseph Addison (1672-1719) and Sir Richard Steele (1672-1729) catered both for the new and the traditional readers with their newspapers, *The Tatler* founded in 1709 and *The Spectator* of 1711. They set out to improve public taste by providing information and discussing with wit and originality a multitude of topics from Milton to appropriate make-up for ladies. The writer Samuel Johnson (1709-84) undertook the enormous task of producing *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) to standardise spelling, pronunciation and explain the etymologies of words. He worked on it with six clerks for nine years; he defined 40,000 words, illustrating their usage with 100,000



quotations. Many of the definitions illustrate the author's sense of irony, for instance - "Lexicographer: A writer of dictionaries, a harmless drudge." Like Goethe, Dr Johnson had his Eckermann: James Boswell used a detailed record of Johnson's conversations to write a fascinating biography of the humorous and brilliant man of letters.

William Hogarth (1697-1764) was a painter and dedicated educator. His work was a new departure in English painting: his pictures were not made for churches, palaces or the big country mansions; he did not paint for wealthy patrons, but for the market, for a mass public, producing cheap engravings of his works. Hogarth was the first English painter to use satire: contemporary society was his theme. He painted several series of pictures telling an instructive story for a didactic purpose. *The Rake's Progress* is the tale of a foolish young man ruined by too much money; *Industry and Idleness* contrasts the fates of two apprentices, one of whom becomes a judge, the other a murderer; *Marriage à la Mode* warns against marrying for money. Hogarth recognizes the precariousness of success, but also of virtue; he shows how close success and failure are, how easy it is to slip down on to the road to ruin. He never denounces the failures, the criminals, the doomed, the mad depicted in his works, but brings the viewers to recognize themselves in these figures.

Alexander Pope (1688-1744), one of the great poets and wits of the century, was an autodidact, the son of a Catholic London shopkeeper. He wrote for the small, well-educated traditional reading public, but gave them unusual fare. He excelled in mock-heroic poetry, in which he wittily imitated the dignified form of classical epics in writing about trivial contemporary issues, with satiric effect. Thus his *Rape of the Lock* (1714) would have reminded his cultured readers as of the Roman rape of the Sabine women, but it was written to persuade two families who were good friends of his to resolve a foolish quarrel about a stolen lock or curl of hair. It presents an ironic portrait of the life of the age. In the *Dunciad* of 1743, a verse satire, he denounces dunces, dullness and pedantry in the arts and sciences by celebrating the goddess Dullness in her kingdom of confusion and bad poetry, and describing famous people of the past and present who come to pay homage at her court. Pope's *Essay on Man* of 1734 is a philosophical poem investigating nothing less than the nature of the universe, the world and human beings; it comes to the conclusion (with which Shakespeare might have agreed) that the latter are "the glory, jest [joke] and riddle of the world".

In the works of Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), one does not encounter many human beings who could be described as "the glory" of the world. In *Gulliver's Travels* he has

a character sum them up as "the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth." Swift began his literary career in London as a scathing satirist, like his friend Pope, but circumstances forced him to write for a very different and much broader public. He was born of English parents in Dublin, where he was educated. He then lived in London and wrote for the Tory party, but he failed to obtain government office partly because he had displeased Queen Anne with his *Tale of a Tub* of 1704. This mordant satire of sectarianism and self-righteousness is a tale about three sons, representing the Catholic church, the Church of England and the Puritans or Dissenters, who quarrel incessantly about a coat their father had bequeathed them. Though Swift claimed he was only satirising the church of Rome and the Dissenters, but not the Anglican Church, the head of that institution did not agree, and she was right.

Swift had to return to Ireland where he became Dean of Saint Patrick's Protestant Cathedral in Dublin. There he was confronted with the grim realities of colonial rule and proceeded to make them the theme of his writings. To make sure what he wrote could be generally understood, he read his texts aloud to his two manservants, altering them if they could not follow. He wrote a series of pamphlets in 1722 against a British government plan to introduce an inferior coinage to Ireland; these were such a devastating exposure of official corruption and exploitation of the country that the measure had to be withdrawn. He called them the *Drapier's Letters*, writing in the name of a small Dublin cloth seller or shopkeeper: they made him a hero to the poor of Ireland. He wrote the most extraordinary piece of satire in the literature having witnessed three years of famine and destitution in the mid 1720s. He called it: *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of the Poor in Ireland from being Burdensome, and for making them Beneficial*. Swift was a master of masks, and here he imitates the voice and mind of the *Schreibtischmörder*, the bureaucratic exterminator, the kind who had drawn up plans to deal with the native peoples of the Americas, or the troublesome Irish. The proposal presented by this philanthropic entrepreneur is that the poor should sell their infants as food to their landlords, since they had nothing else with which to pay their rents. The message of the text is that a landlord system - and the government that allows it to drive the rural people into starvation - is criminal, murderous and cannibalistic. The light emanating from such writing was painful, and many closed their eyes to it.

Swift's most famous work, known to millions of children who have never heard of him, is *Gulliver's Travels* of 1726. The sea-captain Gulliver recounts his adventures in the land of the tiny Lilliputians, in the land of giants, on the floating island of the

scientists Laputa, and in the land where the horses are civilised and humans (Yahoos) bestial. Swift through Gulliver confronts his readers with an experience similar to his own when in Ireland he encountered the image of Britain seen in the Irish mirror: disconcertingly different to that admired in London. Gulliver is forced to reappraise himself and his impact on those around him, to see himself from the perspective of the Lilliputians as a threat and a burden. Their pomp and circumstances, their wars and heroic feats - in no way different to those of Gulliver's nation - seem grotesquely trivial from Gulliver's point of view. The kindly giants are appalled at Gulliver's report about his nation's system of government. It is the ingenuity of a satirist who found himself in an ambivalent and paradoxical position: a champion of Ireland's rights, yet in the colony as a high official of an alien state church forcibly maintained by a miserably poor peasantry adhering to the persecuted Catholic church. The third adventure satirises the foolishness, vanity and corruptibility of the learned: some scholars enthralled by Swift's exposure of the scoundrelism of politicians have been less amused and impressed by this section. In the last adventure Swift conducts an evolutionary experiment: the horse develops into *equus sapiens*, our tribe into *homo Yahoensis*, a particularly unpleasant breed capable of reason but without it.

(iii) *The novel: Defoe, Richardson, Fielding*

Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) was the son of a London butcher; the family were Dissenters. He joined the army in 1688, prepared to fight for the "Glorious Revolution", and was incensed that parliament after its victory continued to discriminate against Dissenters despite their support. In 1702 he wrote a pamphlet on the subject: *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* in which, pretending to be an Anglican, he satirically advocated a radical "final solution" to the problem and for which he was pilloried and imprisoned. (The pillory was a wooden frame to which wrongdoers were attached for public exhibition). On his release he struggled to make a living as journalist, pamphletist and secret agent for any cause and anybody who would pay him.

His troubles came to an end when, at the age of almost sixty, he published *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719. He used the form of the personal diary - many Puritans had the habit of keeping a record of their spiritual progress - claiming the journal was authentic. The alleged diary of a man who survived shipwreck on an uninhabited South Sea island for 28 years appealed greatly to almost the entire reading public. It was a new genre: the first English novel. (The term 'novel' comes from the Italian *novella* and originally was a tale about some recent or new occurrence; it then came to be used of

lengthy fictitious narrations purporting to describe the fate of real individuals). Gulliver's adventures are clearly invented for satirical purposes; Crusoe's, however, are presented as genuine autobiography. Crusoe, like Gulliver, is a practical man of business, cautious, religious-minded and disciplined: he is no exceptional hero, but an Everyman of the middle-class world. He is not seeking salvation like Bunyan's Christian, or knowledge like Faust, or honour like Don Quixote, but survival. The novel shows that an Englishman endowed with pragmatic virtues and some luck can prevail against the cruel fate of solitary confinement. The systematic understatement of the narration, an effective means of characterising the main figure, heightens the credibility of the fiction. Crusoe's little island economy is self-sufficient: he hunts, domesticates wild animals, learns how to farm and make a calendar; how to make fire, pottery, flour; how to build a house, a boat and make clothes. This had a special appeal to urban readers living in a society with considerable division of labour and specialisation of work. The fascination of *Crusoe* lies in the masterly realism with which the creation of the island kingdom is recorded, in the skillfully structured drama of events, in the accounts of how Crusoe gradually overcomes his fear and despair and achieves a stoical serenity and acceptance of God's will, in the strange combination of humorous self-irony and self-deception shown in this unique portrait of an upright "self-made man", the slave-owner.

Another work of major interest is his *Journal of the Plague Year*, presented as an eye-witness account of the epidemic of bubonic plague in London in 1664-5. Furthermore the novel *Moll Flanders* of 1722: the heroine, a London woman transported to America for theft, relates the story of her loves and life of crime. Though Moll tells us she is now repentant, there is no trace of awareness of guilt in her account: the psychology is that of a business woman whose prime aim is to avoid failure and poverty, and who takes calculated risks in the process.

Samuel Richardson (1689-1761) wrote three novels which contributed decisively towards the development of the genre. He was a Dissenter and a printer who was once asked to produce a volume of letters which could serve as models for people unskilled at expressing themselves. This gave him the idea for a novel: *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* of 1740, whose heroine Pamela is a young country girl working as maidservant in London and whose letters home tell her story. The girl's mistress has died; the son tries to seduce Pamela, who sees through and resists all his efforts. This brings him to fall in love with her and to marry her. A serving girl as heroine was unheard of in polite literature; so was the outcome: her marriage to the gentleman; so was the pathos of the narrative and the attention to detail in describing the day to day

life of a domestic. The sophisticated public made fun of the novel, accusing the author of elevating calculated deviousness to the rank of virtue. There is undoubtedly an element of ambivalence in the novel: it is difficult for the reader to accept that Pamela can genuinely love the man who is trying so hard to ruin her. But Richardson had taken up an issue of crucial importance to the tens of thousands of young women working in domestic service: that they were frequently considered fair game by the gentlemen in the families and in such cases had virtually no redress. It is no wonder that this novel was acclaimed by the new female readership: the novel provides an illustration of the Calvinist doctrine that virtue is rewarded in this life, that worldly success is a sign of God's grace - but by implication it also calls that doctrine into question, in making very clear what the normal outcome of such a situation would have been, whereby the ruined serving girl might have been just as virtuous but less lucky than Pamela.

Just as Defoe made use of his experience as a journalist, Richardson his 'Letter-Writing Made Easy' brochures, so too did Henry Fielding (1707-54) draw on his daily work as material for his comic novels. His duties at court as a magistrate made him familiar with the world of crime, and in *The Life of the Late Mr Jonathan Wilde the Great* of 1743 he presents the life of a criminal recounted from the criminal perspective, which demonstrates that the thinking of great politicians, generals and lawbreakers can be remarkably similar. In *Tom Jones* of 1749 he describes the manifold adventures of a young man born outside marriage, with no further assets than his cheerful personality, who manages to win the wealthy young lady of his dreams. Fielding's work stands in the tradition of the picaresque tale about rogues and criminals. He does not question the principles of the society of his time, but in all his writing exposes the ease with which those principles can be subverted by unscrupulous people who are masters at the art of creating false appearances.

In the theatre, John Gay's *Beggar's Opera* is similar in direction but more radical. Gay set out to attract a popular audience, and he therefore included popular songs of the time in the opera. All the characters are criminals, and their operations are portrayed as a business, the directors having the best of relations with their counterparts in government, police and courts. It was suitable material for Brecht to use for his *Dreigroschenoper*.

CHAPTER 3: 1760-1914 - LITERATURE IN THE ERA OF INDUSTRIALISM -  
ROMANTICISM AND THE NOVEL

*(1) 1760 - 1830: The Industrial Revolution*

*(i) The condition of England*

James Watt was a Scottish mechanic who began experimenting with the steam engine around 1760. The principle of the steam engine was known in antiquity; it was rediscovered by Leonardo da Vinci in the renaissance; but only in mid eighteenth century Britain was there such a need for faster production that it was taken up and put to use in industry. Up to then, machinery had been driven by the power of water or wind; with the harnessing of steam a quantum leap in manufacturing production became possible. The new machinery was first used in mines, the iron and textile industries. Production in these cotton factories or "mills", as they were called, took place on a large scale; the small workshops of local craftsmen became obsolete as the mass-produced goods were considerably cheaper. The innovations led to an upheaval on an unprecedented scale, with dramatic social consequences. Large numbers of rural labourers who were displaced when landowners turned to the profitable sheep-farming rather than labour-intensive tillage flocked into the new industrial cities seeking work in the new factories where, together with their women and children, they worked long hours for miserable wages and lived in appalling squalor. Industrial manufacturing brought Britain enormous new wealth and enormous new poverty.

The period was also one of political tumult: in 1783 the American colonies became independent; in 1789 there was revolution in France, in 1798 attempted rebellion in Ireland. There was much sympathy in Britain among intellectuals for the French principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, which led the British government to suppress radical publications and forbid workers' organisations. But when France began to export its revolution, to blockade Britain during the Napoleonic Wars of 1790-1815, and to threaten British India and other possessions, enthusiasm for France declined.

(ii) *The radical democrat Tom Paine*

Conditions in industrial Britain led, not surprisingly, to a flowering of critical writings. Thomas Paine (1737-1809) was the son of a corset-maker; he lost his job as a customs official for campaigning for better wages for his colleagues. He left for America, where with his pamphlet *Common Sense* of 1776, he persuaded the colonists that only independence could be the aim in the conflict with Britain. Having held office in the new American government, he returned to England in 1787. When the French revolution took place in 1789, he went to Paris and helped to draft the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens*. He published his famous *Rights of Man* in England two years later, in which he defended the French revolution. He argues that human beings have basic rights by virtue of their existence as humans, that these natural rights have been usurped by tyrannical rulers supported by the aristocracy, whose position in society derives from wars of plunder, and by the churches, who keep the people in ignorance and through fear of hell terrorise them into submission. He advocates for Britain a constitution like that of America and France to guarantee human rights; he demands reform of parliament, taxation of wealth, division of the big estates, and money hitherto spent fighting rival nations in Europe to be used to educate and house the poor at home. 50,000 copies were sold; Paine had to flee to France. There he was elected to the Convention, but was imprisoned by Robespierre when he refused to support the execution of the king. While in prison and under the threat of the guillotine, he wrote *The Age of Reason*, a passionate critique of the Christian churches and a defence of deism, written in powerful, simple language for the common people. It led in Britain and America to a vicious campaign against Paine's personal character which destroyed his reputation with pious Americans and respectable British citizens. He was the bravest and most courageous advocate of those rights in which British people of today take such pride, but for which during his lifetime, he was declared an outlaw. In 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft, the wife of his friend William Godwin, published her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, demanding education and equality for women for the benefit of both men and women.

Thomas Malthus (1766-1834), clergyman and economist, was also a radical, but of a very different sort. In his *Essay on the Principle of Population* of 1798 demanded the abolition of welfare for the poor, arguing that to artificially enable those to survive who could not support themselves was to violate the laws of nature. Today similar cases are made in the name of the regulatory force of the market. Robert Owen (1771-1858) was a philanthropic factory owner in Manchester, who not only treated his workers with humanity, providing them with good housing, education and medical care: he

energetically advocated legislative reform, which his *New View of Society* of 1813 achieved, though the early Factory Acts were ineffective due to lack of monitoring. William Cobbett (1763-1835) took up the cause of rural workers in his *Rural Rides* of 1830.

*(iii) Romantic Literature and Painting during the Industrial Revolution*

The first phase of industrialism coincides in Britain with the era of Romanticism in literature and painting. The term "romantic" derives from "romance" or story of adventure and imagination. It is applied to the arts in Britain between 1760 and 1830, to a movement very different from the classical rationalist period of the earlier 18th century. One of its central themes was nature - the free elements, unspoiled countryside, the mountains, the sea, far from the squalor of industrialism. Romantic artists were interested in the past, in remote and exotic societies, in gypsies, in children, in the psyche, in the supernatural. But it would be a mistake to imagine that they turned their backs on reality.

*(a) The Scots writers Burns and Walter Scott*

Some of the great early figures were Scottish: Macpherson, who made Celtic poetry known to Europe; Robert Burns, who wrote his poems in Scots English; and the inventor of the historical novel, Walter Scott. Through them a nostalgic Scottish culture became popular in England after the last attempt by the Stuarts to achieve Scottish independence had been defeated. Robert Burns (1759-1796) was the son of a small tenant farmer, who in 1786 published his first poems in order to make enough money to emigrate to Jamaica. However, the works in Scots English were so successful that he could afford to stay at home. The sources of his poetry were the language and songs of the rural people. Like Heinrich Heine, he created works which in their apparent simplicity and naturalness seem to be timeless folk poetry.

Walter Scott (1771-1832) was born in Edinburgh and studied law. As a young man he became interested in German *Sturm und Drang* literature, some of which he translated. He loved the Scottish countryside and its inhabitants, from whom he tirelessly collected stories and songs. Scott was fascinated by the heroes of the Celts and Vikings, by the knights and crusaders of the Middle Ages, the royal families of Europe, the Scottish chieftains of the past and by tales of spirits and terror of all ages. This is the



material of his poetry. When it began to be eclipsed by the fame of Byron, he turned to novel writing on the same themes. Among his best known works are the *Waverley* novels of 1814, *Ivanhoe* of 1819, *Castle Dangerous* of 1831. He was the first to illustrate the thesis that people are formed by their social and historical environment; he used his great learning to create authentic local colour, and is a master of descriptive scene-setting and background, though not of plot.

(b) *The painters Blake, Constable and Turner*

Britain produced three unique Romantic painters: the prophetic William Blake, the landscape painter John Constable and the sea painter William Turner. William Blake (1757-1827), was a rebel, a mystic, a painter and poet in the tradition of Milton. His work met with little appreciation during his lifetime: only fifty years after his death did it begin to receive due recognition. He was the son of a London shopkeeper, was not sent to school, but apprenticed at an early age to a well-known engraver. He later studied painting, but rejected academic traditions, and indeed all authority. He had little time for most of his famous contemporaries, endured poverty for much of his life, admired by a small band of faithful friends. He abhorred the oppression and misery suffered by the poor, hailed the French revolution, studied the mystical teachings of Jakob Böhme and Swedenborg, and created in his prophetic works a mythological cosmos of his own. His extraordinary illustrations of the biblical *Book of Job* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* allow visual access to this world which the difficult texts do not readily give. His *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794) have made him known to a wide readership: powerful images are the effective vehicle of his profound thinking. "The Tiger" is one of the best known: here is the fifth stanza -

When the stars threw down their spears  
And water'd heaven with their tears,  
Did He smile His work to see?  
Did He who made the lamb make thee?

John Constable (1776-1837), the son of a miller in Suffolk, spent his life studying and painting the rural countryside in which he had grown up, a very unfashionable topic at the time. His pictures do not depict the momentous changes at work in Britain: his landscapes with water mills, meadows, rivers show people doing work which had not changed for centuries. What was different was the painter's focus: to the most ordinary of rural activities, he brings the eye of the scientist and the imagination of the discoverer, finding new techniques to adequately portray the peace, serenity and tradition of this intact rural community, a way of life now threatened. There is not a

trace of sentimentality in these pictures. Constable did not care about fame, nor did he find much in England: it was in France that the quality of his work was recognized.

If Constable's art was disregarded, that of William Turner (1775-1851) gave rise to early fame and furious rejection by traditionalists. He would take a traditional historical subject, such as Hannibal crossing the Alps, and transform it into a study of the elemental forces of nature, of light, of energy. Storms at sea, fires, mountain blizzards were observed and studied at first hand, sometimes at the peril of his life. There is a painting called *The Slave Ship*, steam ships play a dramatic role in many seascapes, one of his most famous works is *Rain, Steam and Speed: The Great Western Railway*. But it is above all his consuming interest in the unleashed powers of nature, his scientific studies of light, colour and movement, his dramatically new ways of seeing things, and his awareness of the great contest between man and nature for domination which show that his work is a product of the new age.

(c) *The poets Wordsworth, Keats, Byron, Shelley*

Wordsworth (1770-1850), Coleridge (1772-1834) belong to the older generation of Romantic poets, both outliving the best known of the younger generation. Wordsworth has much in common with Constable: what the countryside of the south of England was to Constable, the Lake District was to him. Wordsworth and Coleridge were ardent supporters of the French revolution, and welcomed the prospect that tyranny and oppression would be overthrown. Those hopes were dashed when the revolutionary French armies under Napoleon threatened England. But the new vistas of freedom brought them to break with the literary conventions of their time. They published *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, which marked a new departure in poetry. Their programme was to seek simplicity of language; the subject matter was to be taken from ordinary life. Coleridge describes it thus: "The characters and incidents were to be such as will be found in every village and its vicinity, where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them or to notice them, when they present themselves." The focus was to be subjective, to highlight the emotions which moments of intense perception arouse in the mind of the poet, the universal significance of which his unique gift allows him to record. The rather cumbersome but programmatic title of one of Wordsworth's best poems illustrates this: the ode "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood". This is also the focus of short ballad-like poems such as the famous *Daffodils*, which ends as follows after three stanzas describing the unexpected sight he came upon of "hosts of golden daffodils" bordering a lake:

I gazed - and gazed - but little thought  
 What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft when on my couch I lie  
 In vacant or in pensive mood,  
 They flash upon that inward eye  
 Which is the bliss of solitude;  
 And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
 And dances with the daffodils.

Wordsworth lived into old age and become the nation's poet laureate, though the work for which he is remembered was written in his earlier years. His friend Coleridge had a troubled life, his opium addiction undermining health and energy. One of his masterpieces "Kubla Khan" came to him in a dream. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", a riveting poem in ballad style, tells of the curse a sailor brought on his ship, which is becalmed near the equator until the arrival of a ghost ship, whereupon most of the crew die of thirst and terror. The curse is broken when the sailor in his deepest agony becomes aware of the beauty of fish playing on the surface of the moonlit sea, but he is condemned to travel the world and tell all he meets of his fate.

The three great poets of the younger generation of Romantics are Lord Byron (1788-1824), Shelley (1792-1822) and Keats (1795-1821): their works are among the finest in the literature. Keats served an apprenticeship to a surgeon, but gave it up to devote his short life to poetry. When he died, only five years after he had begun to write, the value of his legacy was only evident to his friends. He told them to put on his tombstone: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water". His friend Shelley contradicted this in his splendid elegy "Adonais":

He lives, he wakes - 'tis Death is dead, not he.

Shelley did much to ensure that Keats' work became well known, and it soon attained great popularity. Still today his odes are to be found in almost every anthology of English poetry, for example "To a Nightingale", "On a Grecian Urn", "To Autumn", "On Melancholy".

The serenity of "To Autumn" is exceptional in his work:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness!  
 Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;  
 Conspiring with him how to load and bless

With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;  
 To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,  
 And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core ... .

This peaceful scene of plenty and comfort is untouched by pain or want; it could be a Constable landscape.

The other odes can remind one of Schubert's music. The extraordinary intensity of images and language derives from an acute awareness of the brevity of life, the transience of happiness and beauty, the closeness of death. The ode "On a Grecian Urn" is a meditation on a paradox. The vessel designed for the ashes of the dead is called a "foster-child of Silence and slow Time"; the scenes painted with such liveliness on it are frozen, the music we see being played is silent, the sacrifice being prepared incomprehensible. But it is this shadow-form of life which guarantees its permanence:

When old age shall this generation waste,  
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou sayst,  
 `Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all  
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

Byron and Shelley were radicals who intervened in the conflicts of their day, denouncing tyranny, corruption and hypocrisy - and satirising the older generation of Romantic poets. Byron's maiden speech of 1812 in the House of Lords was made in defence of weavers who faced the death penalty for having destroyed mechanically-driven looms which were ruining them. He died of fever on his way to join Greek insurgents determined to free their country from Turkish rule. Shelley was expelled from university for writing a pamphlet advocating atheism; he wrote a mordant satire called *The Masque of Anarchy* after the Peterloo riots of 1819, when government troops charged a peaceful crowd demonstrating for political reform, killing many. He uses the form of the medieval allegory to expose the alleged defenders of law and order as fomenters of vice and anarchy. (Brecht adapted the poem to describe the newly founded west German state after 1948, in which so many former Nazis held high office). Shelley's magnificent "Ode to the West Wind" is Turner-like in the drama and meticulous observation of the impact of the wind on the elements through the four seasons. The last lines addressed to the "Spirit fierce" reveal the hope inspiring the poem - the hope of a new dawn of freedom:

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe,  
Like withered leaves, to quicken a new birth;  
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!  
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,  
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

This urge for freedom and new horizons led the younger generation of Romantic poets, like many others before them, to turn to the exotic allurements of the East; they were fascinated by the simplicity and wisdom of folk tales, legends and myths; they were attracted by the themes of melancholy, dreams and death. The many cries in their poems for peace, sleep and serenity read poignantly in the knowledge that all three men died tragically in their youth: Keats of tuberculosis at the age of 26; Shelley drowned a year later aged 30, a copy of his friend Keats' poems in his pocket; Byron died of malaria aged 36 while supporting Greek independence. Shelley and Byron lived highly unconventional lives, giving rise to such scandal that they had to leave England for ever. Byron's life was the stuff of his own poems: a rebel who unexpectedly inherited a peerage; physically handicapped, handsome, the lover of many women including his half-sister; a man whose name was anathema to the conservative and established, who became a cult figure across Europe, seen in particular by the young as a heroic genius contending with passion, lyricism, satire and drama against the evils of his time in a struggle for freedom, truth, justice and beauty.

## *(2) 1830-1870 The Golden Age of Industrial Capitalism and of the Novel*

### *(i) Parliamentary reform*

By the 1830s steam-driven machinery had come into general use in manufacturing; in the 1840s it was applied to transport with the invention of the railway and steamships. Huge investments had been made from the 1860s in building and improving roads; a system of canals had been constructed linking rivers to make transport for heavy goods cheap and fast. By the 1850s Britain's infrastructure had been transformed.

The 1830s brought decisive political change in Britain. In 1832 electoral reform extended the franchise to city householders: there were now 670,000 voters instead of 220,000 in a population of 14 million. The parliamentary monopoly of landowners and landed merchants came to end; the Whig Party was voted into power representing the

new industrialists and merchants interests who now shared power with the landowners. Members of Parliament received no payment, so they all had to be wealthy enough to be able to reside in London without earning an income. In 1834 the industrial faction was able to have new Poor Laws passed under which the destitute only received help if they entered the hated work houses. But factory law reform was also passed with the help of the landowning parliamentary faction, whom it did not hurt: the working day was limited, child labour reduced, an inspection system introduced. A Chartist Movement (the name derived from Magna Carta) demanded franchise for workers, but was defeated having no support from any faction. Sanitary law reform was passed unanimously after cholera epidemics had become frequent and it was seen that infectious diseases did not respect class boundaries. The major scientific discovery made by Charles Darwin was that of evolution: that plants and animals have a history, are the product of development, and that progress is determined by a process of natural selection and the survival of the individuals best adapted to the changing environment. Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published in 1859: it was as decisive a step towards understanding our genesis as the deciphering of the genetic code in our own time. The pervasiveness of competition in the industrial world had made it easier to recognize the competition principle in nature. The discovery was also used (but not by Darwin) to argue against helping the vulnerable in society on the grounds that this contravened nature's law that only the fittest should survive.

(ii) *The Novelists*

(a) *Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley*

During the period of industrialisation in Britain, women novelists played a central role; however, only one of them (Elizabeth Gaskell) took as her theme the great changes taking place in the country. Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823) was one of the "Gothic" novelists whose books treat of romantic medieval ruins, uncanny castles, haunted abbeys, spirits, guilt, revenge and crime. She wrote of horrors, but her novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) was about those endured by an orphaned girl in sixteenth century Italy who was the victim of a sinister Italian nobleman's wicked designs. Another famous novel that owes something to the Gothic tradition is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*. Mary Shelley, the poet's wife, was the daughter of the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, who died giving birth to her. Mary Shelley's father was the radical philosopher William Godwin, a friend of William Blake's. Both Williams believed, as did Mary Wollstonecraft, that the French revolution would bring equality to women, in particular equality in education and equal rights within marriage. The novel owes its existence to the exceptionally miserable weather

during the summer of 1816, when the Shelleys were with Byron in Switzerland, all three writing ghost stories to pass the time, as they were confined to the house. - Scientists now believe that the extraordinary cold was caused by fallout after a huge volcanic eruption in Indonesia. - Byron produced the first English vampire story; Mary Shelley the classic tale of science gone out of control. Frankenstein is a Swiss scientist who brings a creature to life which he has constructed from corpses. The creature has supernatural powers, but is terrible in appearance, yet has the normal human desire for friendship and love. When it realises it is not going to find these, it begins to hate its creator. Frankenstein breaks his promise to create a woman for it, lest a whole race should arise from the union. The monster thereupon murders those his creator loves and hunts Frankenstein around the world, finally to the North Pole, where he dies and the monster disappears. The name Frankenstein is well known today; most of those familiar with it believe it is the name of a monster brought to destructive life by an irresponsible scientist. Few people know who wrote the story, and that Frankenstein in that tale is not the monster, but its maker. Is it perhaps a sign of supreme success for a writer's character to achieve a life of its own in people's minds independent of its author and the work which gave birth to it?

*(b) Jane Austen*

Jane Austen (1775-1817) had no partiality for such horror stories, though she comments ironically on them in her novel *Northanger Abbey*. She wrote about the small world she knew: the rural gentry of England and their lives. She was the daughter of a country clergyman, and thus situated on the fringe of the rural upper classes with sufficient contact to allow her detailed and detached observation of their attitudes and conventions. Through her father, she also had considerable insight into their finances - the clergy received tithes or tax from their parishioners, and were generally better informed about the monetary affairs of their people than any modern tax inspector could ever hope to be. The society Austen observes so acutely was as yet untouched by industrialism; though the Napoleonic wars were the dominant political force of the time, they do not figure in her books - despite the fact that her two brothers participated in them. She wrote six novels, all of which focus on well educated young women of good family but no great fortune, and the efforts made by themselves or their parents to find a suitable husband, that is to say one with the fortune they do not have. Young women of this class had no means of earning a living other than working as a governess; this meant giving private tuition to the children of well-to-do families, a position as dependent as that of the servants, but bringing much greater isolation and a very modest wage. Austen's heroines all eventually succeed in finding the right husband; they are

cured of romantic notions or "sensibilities" and take the sensible option; they learn that what is needed for a good marriage is mutual respect and affection - and comfortable circumstances. Austen's plots are splendidly crafted; she characterises masterfully through dialogue; the narrative comment is detached and ironic. *Pride and Prejudice* of 1813 and *Sense and Sensibility* of 1811 are today her most popular novels. Walter Scott greatly admired her writing, but though her books were well received, she was not recognized as one of the great novelists of the period until long after her death.

Two novelists of the next generation continued her realistic genre: William Makepeace Thackeray and Anthony Trollope, the former portraying urban and rural fashionable society and its hangers-on, the latter mainly rural upper classes. Thackeray (1811-63) became famous for his novel *Vanity Fair* of 1847-8. The title comes from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*: the market or fair where the world buys the goods it esteems, most of them unworthy or vain. In *Vanity Fair* we get a splendid panorama of English society around the 1820s. The two main figures are women. One is the Victorian ideal: virtuous, docile and none too bright; the other (Becky Sharp) attractive, intelligent, of humble birth and no fortune at all. She must make her way in the world by herself; the novel shows how she survives through unscrupulous tricks and opportunism, cleverly exploiting the vanity and snobbery of the foolish and the gullible, and beating the rogues and scoundrels at their own game.

(c) *The Brontë Sisters*

It is a strange paradox that some of the most passionate novels of English literature were written by three young women of Victorian England who lived solitary lives in a parsonage in one of the most isolated areas of the country. Their experience of the urbane world was minimal, their imaginative and emotional capacities exceptional. The Brontë sisters Charlotte, Emily and Anne were the daughters of an Irish clergyman who was given a parish in the Yorkshire moors. As their mother died when they were children, all five girls were sent to a boarding school run by a clergyman who half starved the pupils physically and with regard to the intellectual fare offered, who imposed cruel discipline and kept them in unheated rooms in winter. After the two elder girls contracted tuberculosis and died, the three others were brought home. As children they entertained themselves by writing, inventing two imaginary kingdoms and filling about a hundred self-made notebooks with stories about them. When they grew up the question of earning a living arose. Their talented brother ruined his life and died young: this wild and sad character was one of his sisters' sources of knowledge of the world.



Another came from Charlotte's time teaching in a school in Brussels, where she fell in love with the director, and from her work as a governess in England. The sisters published a volume of poetry, which was a complete failure; they opened a school, to which nobody came; but the novels, written under male names, caused a sensation.

Charlotte (1816-55) published *Jane Eyre* in 1847; Emily (1818-48) *Wuthering Heights* the same year, and Anne (1820-49) *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in 1848. In marked contrast to Dickens's female characters, the women created by the Brontë sisters are sensitive, proud, independent-minded and passionate; they seek to determine their own fate against tremendous odds. The wild and barren landscapes of the Yorkshire moors provide an extraordinary backdrop to the drama which the Victorian world otherwise kept well hidden behind heavy curtains and locked doors. The characters are not those the reading public expected. *Wildfell Hall* was published in the year of the revolution in Europe, it was itself something of a revolution in that it presents as a heroine a woman who has left her husband, a man of shameful character who humiliated and ill-treated her, and with the help of her brother taken up residence on her own in a remote area of Yorkshire. *Jane Eyre* is an orphan and a charity school child; she accepts work as governess to a child born outside marriage, living in the same house as the father; she finally marries that man, who wanted to marry her while his mad wife was still alive; Jane accepts him although he has been blinded and crippled in his vain attempt to save his first wife from a fire. How far removed this is from the marriages with which Jane Austen's novels end! The main character in *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff, is a gypsy who does not find full acceptance in his adopted family and whose injured pride and love for that family turn into a destructive mania, destroying the daughter who, though she loves him, rejects him for social reasons. Emily Brontë never left her village but for a few days; she wrote this one book before she died of tuberculosis at the age of thirty. Her sister Charlotte called her a grandchild of the Titans, the oldest Greek gods. She produced one of the greatest novels we have in English.

(d) *Charles Dickens*

Many of the reforms which came about in the mid century were helped by a new type of novel enjoying much popularity - the novel of social criticism. There was a much wider market for literature: a lower-middle class public who could afford to buy cheap magazines containing serialized novels, or who borrowed books from the newly established penny lending libraries. Charles Dickens (1812-70) made his name as a

novelist in writing for this public. His own experiences in early youth formed him as a writer. He had had a hard childhood with little formal education; his father was imprisoned for debt and the 12-year old had to work in a boot-polish factory, a traumatic experience which formed the basis for the indictments in his works of cruelty to children and exploitation. He became a reporter, and began writing sketches, which were illustrated by the caricaturist George Cruikshank and by "Phiz". His first work *The Pickwick Papers* is not a social novel, but belongs to the picaresque genre. It was produced in 20 instalments for a sports club journal beginning in 1836, and was at once highly successful. It recounts various adventures of Mr Pickwick and his friends during their travels around England: these include a manipulated election, an unfortunate incident in which Mr Pickwick is thought by a lady of rather advanced years to have proposed marriage, a court case brought by her for breach of promise of marriage, a period in a debtor's prison when Mr Pickwick refuses to pay the damages she was awarded, and many other developments concerning people from a variety of walks of life. The structure of the novel is determined by its mode of publication: it had to be written to a monthly deadline; each episode had to form a unit and to build up to a climax likely to induce the reader to purchase the next instalment. Under such conditions planning and composition suffered; sentimentality, pathos and melodrama could get out of hand. However, Dickens' great gift for memorable characterisation, for caricature, for dialogue flourished, and *Pickwick* and its characters soon became a household word across Britain.

The next of the 15 novels was *Oliver Twist*. This takes up the issue of workhouses and the treatment of the poor. It is the story of an orphan boy sent after the death of his destitute young mother to the workhouse, where he is nearly starved to death. The famous scene in which Oliver commits the crime of asking for more food is a masterly satire tearing away the mask of respectability behind which tyrannical authorities hide heartlessness, greed and cruelty. However, the nature of the story changes after the impassioned exposure of the condition of paupers and exploitation of apprentices: the second half is pure melodrama. Oliver has fallen into the hands of a gang of thieves, is pursued by an evil character intent on his downfall, who turns out to be his half-brother. So the hero's mother was not after all a "fallen woman" but a respectable married lady of good family; the tale ends with Oliver being adopted by a kindly wealthy gentleman: a happy personal ending obliterates the wider perspective with which the novel begins but leaves unresolved. This is a recurring pattern in Dickens' work; the Swiftian satire, for instance, of the legal system at the beginning of *Bleak House* drifts off into a sensational tale of secret guilt, rediscovered children, and virtue rewarded. Unforgettable accounts of tyranny endured by children in the family and at school are to

be found in *Nicholas Nickleby*, in *David Copperfield*, a partly autobiographical novel, in *Hard Times*, in which the harshness of the industrial world is contrasted with the free and imaginative world of the circus.

Dickens' historical novel *A Tale of Two Cities* contrasts London and Paris in 1789. Its brilliant portrayal of the cruelty of French aristocrats is balanced by accounts of the macabre cruelty of the revolutionary guillotine women; the novel has formed generations of British people's impressions of the French revolution, and provided a vivid illustration of the theories of the conservative writers Carlyle and Edmund Burke on the subject. As in *Hard Times*, so long as the poor are helpless victims, they are defended with a flaming sword; if they organise, for example, in a trade union or resort to physical force against their oppressors, then they are seen as sinister conspirators driven by base motives and foreign agents.

Dickens' novels have many weaknesses, but they provide an extraordinary vista of middle-class Victorian England and a panorama of memorable characters, who if encountered in youth, people one's mind forever.

(e) *Benjamin Disraeli, Elizabeth Gaskell*

Benjamin Disraeli, prime minister in 1868 and from 1874-1880, a personal friend of Queen Victoria's, was also a novelist, whose *Sybil or the Two Nations* (1845) presents the dangers of a divided country split into two warring factions, the rich and the poor. Though as a conservative Disraeli might perhaps be expected to have a sharp eye for the abuses of the industrialists, one of the meanest characters of the work belongs to his own party of titled landowners. Unlike Dickens, he does not demonise organised working class radicals. Disraeli's Chartist is shown to behave reasonably under the given unacceptable circumstances. That is not to say that the Chartists' campaign for suffrage is considered justified - the message to those in power is: legislate against crass exploitation if revolution is to be prevented.

Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-65) married a Manchester parson, and after the death of her baby son, took up writing and the cause of impoverished workers of the city. *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* 1848 and *North and South* of 1855 brought her into contact with Dickens, who helped to get her work published in serial form. These two novels present the terrible conditions to which the working classes of the industrial cities were subjected. The workers she portrays are shown to be good kindly people,

who under unbearable strain can become involved in violent crime. Mrs Gaskell's novels were not written for the poor, who were by and large illiterate, but as a warning to the masters that their extensive exploitation of the workforce was short sighted, dangerous to themselves and to society as a whole. Mrs Gaskell's social novels reflect her situation: they show intimate knowledge of the family situation of the poor, but the workplace does not appear, nor is the wider economic and political context presented. That is why, as with Dickens, the general social problem with which the novels begin gradually fades out of sight, the focus shifts to the fate of the individuals, to the love story, to the achievement of personal happiness for the characters while the prospects for their class have been lost to view.

(f) *George Eliot*

George Eliot (1819-80) was another novelist who, like the Brontë sisters and the French writer George Sand, believed they could only hope to succeed as writers if they adopted male names: her real name was Mary Ann Evans. She is the most intellectual and erudite of novelists before James Joyce. In her youth she was a fervent Evangelical Protestant until she came in contact with David Friedrich Strauss's *Leben Jesu* (1836) and Ludwig Feuerbach's *Wesen des Christentums* (1841), which she translated into English. Feuerbach argued that religion was a human phenomenon, the gods being projections or images of human hopes and fears. She became editor of a well-known journal, and lived with a critic and writer (George Henry Lewes) until his death without marrying him; when she was sixty she married a clergyman twenty years her junior. This would have been an unconventional lifestyle for anybody in Victorian England, not to mind for a woman; ironically her marriage caused more scandal than did her relationship with Lewes.

Her first novel, *Adam Bede* of 1859, made her reputation. It is set in traditional rural England among the country people she knew so well; it deals with the fate of an unmarried girl who murders her baby and is saved from execution at the last minute. The treatment is utterly un-Victorian: there is no black and white character drawing; both the seducer and the murderer retain our sympathy at the end. Ordinary human weakness, not vice, lead to the tragedy. The heroine is a Methodist preacher - Eliot, the Feuerbach disciple, can paint marvellous portraits of deeply religious people. The next novel, *The Mill on the Floss* of 1860, describes how a miller's daughter comes to grief because of being different. The character of the girl is rendered with great insight and skill, but concessions are made to convention and intrinsic problems eliminated by

means of melodrama. *Silas Marner* of 1861 shows how the bitterness of a village weaver wrongly accused of a crime and driven from his village is overcome when he adopts an abandoned baby girl. *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* of 1871 is generally regarded as Eliot's best novel. It is an epic portrait of the life of a small city recounted through four narratives, each focusing on a different social level, all sections subtly and intricately woven together. The only groups not represented are the working classes.

### (iii) Victorian Essayists and Painters

The term "Victorian" is applied to England during Queen Victoria's reign to describe the self-righteous, repressive and authoritarian culture of the middle classes who prided themselves on the wealth and position the nation achieved through the industrial revolution and on Britain's leading position in the world as the major industrial power, major sea and colonial power. They saw themselves as paragons of Christian decency and a model for the world. A learned and articulate form of conservative cultural criticism arose around the mid-century. Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-59) was a politician and historian, His *History of England* on the 17th century is a proud narration of the nation's progress, which is seen in terms of its wealth and technology, whose perpetuity he confidently predicts. The price paid for this progress by the many is not his theme. He spent some years in India in an official position, where he set up a system of education designed to make Indians useful civil servants. His programmatic *Minute on Education* of 1835 is imbued with a blind faith in the supremacy of British culture and contempt for the Indian; it became the blueprint for colonial education.

But cracks began to appear in the intellectual temple of Victorianism. Matthew Arnold (1822-88) poet, educationalist and clergyman, spent his life contending in rather solemn and humourless writing against the philistinism of the nation. He saw middle class religiosity as narrow and hollow conventionalism and deplored the shallowness of prevailing literary taste. He did much to improve the public schools of Britain, giving the sciences, history and modern languages their place in the curriculum. In his *Study of Celtic Literature*, which was hailed in Ireland, he describes distinctive features of the various nations, declaring that of "the" Celts to be their spirituality and creativeness, in contrast to the mere material orientation of the Saxons. John Stuart Mill (1806-73) worked for the East India Company; he wrote on political economy, on logic, on positivism and in 1869 an essay against *The Subjection of Women*.

Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) was a brilliantly original Scottish writer greatly influenced by German literature and philosophy. He denounced the destructive profiteering of the rich, the dominance of money in modern society, and held up the medieval world with its fixed structures and stability as an organic and healthier form of community. (There was little knowledge and less interest at that time in the living conditions of the medieval peasantry.) He was highly sceptical about democracy, believing that history is made by heroic individuals, by great men of vision such as Cromwell, Napoleon and Frederick II, who may rule despotically but do so in the interest of the people, whereas elected politicians manipulate their ignorant voters and rule to safeguard their selfish interests, thus condoning injustice and putting the nation at risk of serious social conflict.

John Ruskin (1819-1900), an influential art critic, believed that the arts were the most powerful remedy against the fetish of money. William Morris (1834-96) was a critic of the shoddiness of mass-produced goods and the founder of a style of new simplicity and art in everyday life. He designed everything from houses to wall paper, and his name became synonymous for elegant handcrafted products which differed pleasantly from the bombast of cluttered Victorian interiors with their heavy furniture, triple curtains and grand pianos draped with plush lest the legs should give rise to improper associations.

The painters of the Pre-Raphaelite school rejected classical art as their model; they turned to the artists living before Raphael, as did the corresponding German school, the *Nazarener*, and sought to emulate the piety, craftsmanship and simplicity of the medieval painters of the Holy Family. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82), the son of an Italian professor, founded the school in London in 1848. John Everett Millais (1829-96), Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98) paid meticulous attention to historical accuracy of costume and scene; the craftsmanship is remarkable; a strange combination of sentimentality, sensuality and morbidity is typical of their work. This was to influence continental *art nouveau* or *Jugendstil*. These artists were faced with a very difficult task: to represent spirituality in a King Midas situation, where everything the English middle class touched seemed to turn to gold. Their solution was to turn their backs on that reality. The result was that the movement degenerated into an ornamental style, fulfilling a purely decorative function, painting life in glowing colours to gloss over the coldness and harshness of the world.

(3) 1870 - 1914 Economic decline; literature of the *fin de siècle*

(i) *International competition*

Britain's great prosperity began to falter around 1870. A severe agricultural crisis set in, sending the value of land tumbling. American steamships now brought agricultural produce to Britain from the huge mechanised farms of the prairies which was far cheaper than British corn. Furthermore, Britain had for decades been exporting its technology to other countries; they had now caught up and were beginning to outstrip Britain, having branched into decisive new areas of research - the Germans for instance were pioneers in chemistry. They also began trying to establish themselves as colonial powers: the scramble for Africa began among the European powers, with correspondingly aggressive chauvinistic and indeed racist theories appearing in justification of the British empire. In 1876 Britain had 250 million colonial subjects; in 1900 320 million; in 1914 390 million.

By 1880 two-thirds of the population of Britain were town-dwellers; nearly 70% were employed in commerce and only 10% in agriculture. 1867 brought the vote to all urban householders; in 1870 elementary education became compulsory; a popular press began to provide entertainment for the now literature masses. The Labour Party began to agitate for social insurance and a government for the working classes; women agitated for the vote. The authority of the Victorian establishment had collapsed with the economic slump and the appearance of European competitors, though its power was still immense.

(ii) *Late 19th century literature*

(a) *The novel: Butler, Harding, Conrad*

Literature reflects this change. Critical novels appear: *The Way of All Flesh*, a novel by Samuel Butler (1835-1902), studies the mechanisms of self-deception, the cruelty and destructive influence of the authoritarian Victorian father in the family, as Heinrich Mann was to do in *Der Untertan*. In his negative utopian novel of 1873, *Erewhon* ("Nowhere" backwards), and *Erewhon Revisited* of 1901, Butler satirises the worldliness of ecclesiastical institutions, the criminal stupidity of the legal system, and the hypocrisy of all who profit from these. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) turned to rural England, to an area he calls Wessex, the Anglo-Saxon kingdom, in which ancient mythologies are still powerful. The nature he depicts in his poems and novels, and

which his characters have to contend with, is no longer a refuge from the misery caused by industrial society: it is itself an archaic force against which man's reason cannot hope to prevail. The heroine of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was profoundly shocking to the conventionally moral: Tess is an intelligent and passionate country girl who has a child outside marriage, and is hanged for having murdered its father, who betrayed her. For Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), an immigrant of Polish origin, the dangers of tropical seas, of life in the merchant navy and the jungles of darkest Africa were the themes. He spent a decade at sea before he turned to writing. *Lord Jim* (1900) *Heart of Darkness* (1902), *The Secret Agent* (1907) are among his best works and are extraordinarily gripping stories of men's reactions in desperate circumstances.

(b) *The revival of the drama: Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw*

The aestheticism of the Pre-Raphaelite painters, of Ruskin and Morris was one way of coping with the uncertainties of the times. Another was to make light of them. This Oscar Wilde (1856-1900) did in his dramas with supreme ability. He was born in Dublin, and like George Bernard Shaw, of Anglo-Irish stock; in Ireland they were regarded as being more English than Irish, and in England vice versa. Having a foot in two worlds and belonging in neither is probably the best training for a dramatist. They both looked sardonically at the pleasant and respectable image Victorian England liked to project of itself, and proceeded to dismantle it. They saw everything from inside and outside at the same time; they saw both sides of the case and accepted neither; they presented the world upside down and back to front and got the public to agree that they were right. Oscar Wilde's dramas are comedies of manners sparkling with brilliant wit: *The Importance of Being Earnest* of 1895 is his masterpiece. Shaw said: "He plays with everything; with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theatre." Wilde delighted in a sophisticated society life of exotic elegance; it came to a tragic end in 1895 with prosecution for homosexuality and imprisonment. The "Ballad of Reading Gaol", a poem about prison life while a murderer awaits execution, and *De Profundis*, written in prison to the man who had brought him there, reveal a substance, wisdom and humanity which is also to be found in his beautiful fairy tales.

Shaw (1856-1950) used his wit and gift for entertainment to provoke the public to think. He was a social democrat, a pacifist, an inveterate and skilled educator. He created a large reading public for his plays, and made the theatre a vehicle for entertaining social criticism on the widest range of subjects, which it had not been since the days of John Gay. He got into trouble with the censor in 1894 over *Mrs Warren's*



*Profession*, whose theme - prostitution - fell under the Victorian taboo on sex. In his *Major Barbara* of 1907 a Salvation Army woman has to learn from an arms manufacturer skilled at presenting self-interest in the guise of patriotic duty that poverty is the worst of crimes. *John Bull's Other Island*, dealing with Ireland and its troubles, was rejected by Yeats' Abbey Theatre in Dublin as it contested every faction's views of its grievances and remedies. *Saint Joan* of 1924 was written after the discovery in France of the records of Jeanne d'Arc's trial. Only an Anglo-Irishman could have thought of confronting chauvinist Britain with a heroine who had put an end to British ownership of large parts of France; this foreign Catholic woman is presented as the first formulator of national identity, something which British imperialists at the time believed was their personal invention. But lest the Catholic Irish should feel too smug about the figure, she is presented as the first Protestant, whose sainthood lies in her heroic insistence on following her own inspiration and if necessary in defying misguided ecclesiastics even of highest rank. Her saintliness is convincing because she does not like to speak about it, because she makes mistakes, and because she remains a sceptical, intelligent, modest and simple countrywoman throughout. It is ironic that perhaps the best literary portrait of a Catholic saint was produced by an agnostic socialist of Protestant background.

(c) *Children's Literature*

The second half of the nineteenth century saw a new genre of literature: children's books. Some famous eighteenth century works now regarded as such were written for adults. By the 1800s all middle and lower-middle class women could read, as could servants such as nannies; the popular religious tracts read by these women in the eighteenth century had given way to lighter material. Now it was the children's turn to read for fun. *Tom Brown's Schooldays* of 1857 by Thomas Hughes was the first of a genre also read with pleasure by those boys whose parents could not afford expensive education in the so-called public schools. Children were offered exciting tales of far away. Romantic historic adventure stories about Scotland were written by Robert Louis Stevenson, but his *Treasure Island* was even more thrilling, telling of pirates and buried treasure. *The Coral Island* of 1858 by the fur trader Robert Ballantyne describes the adventures of shipwrecked English children on a South Sea island which they discover is inhabited by good and bad savages. The former are those who have been converted to Christianity, the latter those pursuing terrible traditional pagan customs such as burying people alive, cannibalism and so forth. Needless to say, the brave English schoolboys prevail and are proud to see how grateful the good savages are for the privilege of contact with British civilisation. *King Solomon's Mines*, published in 1885 by Rider

Haggard, is the first adventure story set in Africa. It is a gripping tale of the search for priceless treasure hidden in tribal territory ruled by an evil priestess and cruel usurper; it is undertaken by three brave Britons with their Zulu servant in southern Africa - where huge diamond and gold mines were indeed very soon to be discovered by Cecil Rhodes.

The clergyman Charles Kingsley produced *The Water Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby* in 1863; it describes with pathos and humour the sad life of a little boy apprenticed to a cruel chimney-sweep, how he runs away, falls into a river, becomes a water-baby and begins a new life in the underwater kingdom. Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* of 1855 tells of a journey to South America with Sir Francis Drake in the reign of Elizabeth I, of encounters with the notorious Catholic Inquisition, of frightful cruelties perpetrated by Spanish colonisers on the unfortunate natives and of the heroic adventures of the brave British lads, who come home with a Spanish galleon and a princess. Rudyard Kipling was the greatest writer on empire themes, his masterpiece *The Jungle Book* of 1894 recounting the adventures of an abandoned Indian baby adopted by jungle animals and who ultimately becomes their leader. Kipling's jungle is not the savage place of *The Heart of Darkness* where only the fittest survive: it is inhabited by a large and orderly community bound by ancient rules which are generally observed. The characterisation of the animals is unforgettable. White people do not appear. - Kipling's notorious poem "The White Man's Burden" of 1899 was addressed to the Americans who had just embarked on their first imperial undertaking in the Philippines. It combines aggressiveness, contempt for the native peoples of the colonies and self-pity, indicating Kipling's awareness that the empire as he had known and loved it was under threat.

*Alice in Wonderland* of 1865 was written by an Oxford lecturer of mathematics who called himself Lewis Carroll. Alice dreams she falls into a well and finds a world at the bottom inhabited by rather odd characters such as playing cards come to life, a Mad Hatter, a disappearing Cheshire Cat and a Mock Turtle. Alice becomes in turn a giant and a mite, but though perplexed by all these events, she behaves with the politeness and good sense expected of a young lady even in somewhat illogical and absurd situations. Of course the normal world has provided plenty of material for practice. Another tale of children leaving their ordinary world is *Peter Pan* of 1904 by the Scottish playwright James Barrie, where three children and their nurse, a Newfoundland dog, are brought to the Never-Never Land by Peter Pan, who can fly, and the fairy Tinker Bell.

The only woman producing children's stories at the turn of the century in England was Beatrix Potter (1866-1943). She wrote for very small children. Her charming tales of bunnies, pussy cats and squirrels together with her delightful illustrations have enchanted not only toddlers, but their bigger sisters, parents and grandparents right through the twentieth century, whereas the dated imperial adventure stories are now only read by academics. Another classic, but written for somewhat older children, is *The Wind in the Willows* of 1908 by Kenneth Grahame, presenting the adventures of four respectable country gentlemen, the toad, water rat, badger and mole of Toad Hall. Foolish weaknesses such as a love for poetry, or a passion for tearing through the countryside in stolen cars endanger their position in polite society at a time when the inferior sorts of animals such as ferrets and weasels are just waiting to take over; but the worthy four prevail. Alan Alexander Milne (1882-1956) brings toys to life in *When We Were Very Young* of 1924 and *Winnie-the-Pooh* of 1926, both written for his small son. The forgetful bear Winnie-the-Pooh, the timid and fearful piglet, the learned owl, the hypochondriac donkey Eeyore, the busy bunny, and the kangaroo mummy Kanga with baby Roo have all sorts of comical adventures in which they are helped and comforted by the little boy Christopher.

## CHAPTER 4: THE LITERATURE OF MODERN BRITAIN

*(1) 1914-1945: The age of catastrophe and revolution in the arts**(i) The new post-war world*

Never had the ambivalence of civilisation become so devastatingly evident as in the period of the two world wars, when unprecedented technical and administrative progress was employed in the service of unprecedented barbarism. During the first world war, three quarters of a million British soldiers were killed and two million wounded. At the end of the nineteenth century, gas had made city streets safe by banishing the darkness of night; it now became one of the cruellest and quietest killers in the battlefields. Mechanisation had come to dominate all areas of production in civil life; it now moved into the realm of destruction with machine guns, tanks, lorries. The destructive vehicles were no longer restricted to the land and the surface of the sea, but could attack from the air and underwater with planes and submarines. The carnage of trench warfare in France, the scale of devastation caused worldwide, the successful manipulation of national public opinion through hatred campaigns skilfully propagated by the governments - all this had a profound impact, shaking traditional expectations, beliefs and self-awareness to the core.

The economic impact of the war on Britain continued this process. The victorious soldiers had been promised "a country fit for heroes": the heroes now had to contend against massive long-term unemployment during the inter-war decades: unemployment caused by loss of markets for British exports, by the decline of the traditional industries, and by the collapse of the American economy in 1929. Conservatives were shaken by the victory of the revolution in Russia, by that of the war for independence in Ireland, and of the Labour party at home, which came to power for the first time in 1924. They were also unsettled by emergence of a new lifestyle. Domestic servants were becoming hard to find and therefore more expensive, as employment was expanding within the distributive sector offering alternative work in offices and shops. The new car industry introduced the assembly line in the factories; for those in work, consumer goods such as bicycles and radios became affordable; the popular press grew, selling not so much information as entertainment; the cinema provided employed and unemployed alike with amusement, drama and dreams; the advertising industry fed on the new media and

began to promote consumption. The introduction of a water supply in working class housing took the hard labour out of washing, reducing one of the most formidable class barriers: smell. The availability for those in work of cheap smart clothing began to reduce visible class distinctions, though the audible one of accent remained pronounced. In short: the features of the world we know today were beginning to emerge.

The economic turmoil of the period had its counterpart in scientific discoveries. The Newtonian world of physics, which had supplied such a comprehensible system of universal order for over two centuries, was displaced by Einstein's relativity theory: dizzying abysses in both micro and macro worlds opened up, the understanding of which was henceforth the reserve of specialists. Darwin's hotly contested theory of the evolution of species was finding empirical confirmation through the work of paleontologists; Sigmund Freud's studies of the human psyche proved that rationality and morality constitute but a tiny layer of our minds, precariously striving to control the a-moral unconscious in which untamed aggressiveness and selfish drives predominate.

Much of this development had been anticipated in the arts; the clearest evidence that with the First World War an epoch had come to an end is to be found there. There was a radical break with the conventions of nineteenth century art; the new artists saw themselves as an avant-garde advocating modernism. However, few of the major pioneering figures in the visual arts, literature, music and dance were British. The pioneers in painting were French, German and Russian. The Impressionists of the pre-war generation had sought through conveying an impression of what they depicted to come closer to its nature - they had learnt much from the great English artist William Turner. The German Expressionists of the first decades of the century studied van Gogh: they knew they had to abandon convention if they were to find adequate expression for the violent conflicts in which individuals and nations found themselves embroiled. They experimented with the art styles of primitive societies, the primitive qualities of their own giving rise to a new respect for less developed cultures. They used colour as the composition of their paintings required, regardless of whether the objects depicted had these colours in reality. They abandoned perspective, they fragmented form, distorted figures in order to give authentic expression to the nature and character of what they painted or modelled. They abandoned the traditional tonality in music. During the war, the radical Dada group was founded in Zurich, whose members rejected all artistic tradition as accomplice to the murderous barbarism they were witnessing. The Surrealists lived mainly in Paris in the early 1920s; they employed new techniques to gain access to different levels of reality, such as those of the individual and collective unconscious, by abandoning the fetters of logic and convention. (Britain produced one

great modern sculptor: Henry Moore (1898 -1986), the son of a miner, and became the adopted country of Jacob Epstein (1880-1959), who took up residence in London in 1905.)

However, the majority of writers everywhere continued to use the old forms, though the subject matter reflected the new situation. In Britain H. G. Wells (1866-1946) had already begun to write popular science fiction in 1895 with *The Time Machine* ordinary mortals shunt around freely between the ages with the help of a mechanical invention permitting the exploration of past and future. John Galsworthy (1867-1933) wrote *The Forsyte Saga*, a trilogy tracing the history of a successful Victorian entrepreneur. All of these novels have been turned into films, as have E. M. Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, *A room with a View*, *Howards End*, and *A Passage to India*. The latter gives a non-imperial, non-Kiplingesque view of the British in India, written from the perspective of an Indian doctor. But, interesting though these works be, they are not representative of the direction which literature was taking.

*(ii) Irish innovation in modern English literature:*

*(a) The poet W. B. Yeats*

It is one of the ironies of twentieth century English literature that the best dramas, the greatest poetry, and the most extraordinary novels were written by Irishmen who had grown up in the small, poor and isolated colony in the shadow of England. In no other case did the writers of a British colony have an impact on the literature of the "motherland", not to mind become its avantgarde - how can this phenomenon be explained?

Ireland was exceptional in several respects. It was the only European country to have been colonised; at the end of the nineteenth century, it seemed to have become assimilated to Britain and anglicised; at the same time, the colonial features of British rule were disappearing. The land of Ireland had been confiscated during the course of the colonial wars and given to English (Protestant) landlords: their position was now undermined by two factors: firstly by the fall in agricultural prices, due to American competition, which made land ownership unprofitable; secondly by the growing resistance of the peasantry to the unacceptable conditions of a colonial system of land tenure. The Land War of the 1880s led to the end of landlordism, and the peasants were granted the right to purchase the land they worked.

A few young people who had grown up in big country houses in the west of Ireland now began to take an interest in the peasantry that had put an end to their fathers' privileges, some of them even learning Irish. To their astonishment they found that the illiterate, impoverished people living in the lonely rural areas where the Irish language had survived spoke Gaelic with virtuosity and sophistication; that they stood in a rich oral tradition of literature, their poetry, songs, legends and epics going back over a thousand years and had been linked with the European classical tradition since the days of the Irish Christian missionaries there during the "Dark Ages". Some of these Anglo-Irish people translated into English the Old Irish epics and poetry which German scholars had edited during their seminal work on Celtic languages: others published collections they had made of Gaelic legends, religious poetry, folk poetry and songs. This literature was thus made known to the general Irish public who no longer spoke Irish, and who had therefore lost contact with the heritage passed on through that language. They had also lost respect for all things Gaelic, as the schools which the British had set up in Ireland banned everything Irish from the curriculum. The hidden agenda was that the Irish had no history, no language, no literature, no music worthy of study: that lesson had been thoroughly internalised. It took the authority of the Anglo-Irish, of young writers and artists from the big colonial houses, to counteract the self-contempt of the native Irish and to bring them to study their language and heritage.

One of the leading figures in the Irish cultural movement was the poet, playwright and essayist William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), an Anglo-Irish Protestant of an old family in the west of Ireland. Yeats was inspired by his studies of Irish folklore, of Blake's poetry, of eastern mysticism and occult writings of all ages; he was drawn into politics by a noble-hearted old man who had fought against Britain in his youth, and by a beautiful young woman involved in the radical movement for independence of the present. Yeats set out to establish a new literature for the country which would unite the two factions, the Protestant settlers and native Catholic Irish, by drawing on the pre-Christian heroic past, with which he hoped both sides could identify. He revitalised English poetry by fusing his rich and erudite language with forms, sound patterns and rhythms of Gaelic, and with themes of Irish mythology. His early poems brought him a wide audience; his play *The Countess Cathleen* caused a sensation when first performed in Dublin in 1899 - the political allegory in which the countess sells her soul to the devil in order to save the starving people incensed some nationalists, who objected to the devil being involved in the saving of the Irish.

The philistines in Irish nationalist politics caused Yeats increasing problems when he became director of the Dublin Abbey Theatre. This was set up as a theatre for the

nation, and it had a significant impact on Irish politics. Yeats' experience of the narrowness dominating in some nationalist factions led to a new type of poetry: the beautiful Irish landscapes and Celtic legends give way to a Swiftian tone, devoid of ornament but for the honed and incisive phrases with which his opponents are described and exposed. Once independence had been attained in 1921, Yeats became a member of the Irish Senate, where he put up a valiant fight for tolerance. Ireland had been partitioned as the price of independence for the large part: it was now divided into one Catholic and one Protestant state, so the reconciliation of the two cultures which he had striven for did not take place. He became increasingly disenchanted with democracy, for a time even inclining towards the theories of Mussolini. His mature poetry (which brought him the Nobel prize) shows the master of images and language reflecting with immense learning and extraordinary imagination on the great themes of disillusionment, love, death, old age, folly and the nature of poetry, in which he draws on the rich personal experience of a life of activity for the arts which was also a life devoted to the service of his country.

*(b) The Dramatist J. M. Synge*

Yeats dominated the cultural life of Ireland during his long lifetime, bringing many talented people to develop their abilities. One of these was the dramatist John Millington Synge (1871-1909). It is not surprising that the theatre flourished at the beginning of the century in a country where momentous change and conflict were visible on the horizon. Synge, like Yeats, came from an Anglo-Irish family that had lost their land. Yeats met him in Paris, and sent him to the Aran Islands off the west of Ireland to learn Irish. There Synge lived among a small community of fisherfolk whose lifestyle had not greatly changed over the previous thousand years. He knew that it was the archaic way of life which had preserved the wealth of folk tradition, and that both language and culture were disappearing, eroded by the modernisation of Ireland. Though there is not a word about politics in any of his plays, they were nonetheless a *politicum* of the first order. *Riders to the Sea* was performed in 1904. The one-act play is set on the Aran Islands; the action centres around the drowning of a widow's last remaining son. It is a masterpiece with qualities of a Greek tragedy in its apparent simplicity and fatalism. Hitherto Irish country folk had appeared on the stage only as objects of comedy or farce presented for the amusement of urbane London audiences. Here the playwright had found material for tragedy among the poorest of the poor; no kings, no patricians were the protagonists, but a humble woman pitted against poverty and the sea; the poetry of the play derives from the skilful rendering of an impression in English of the Irish speech of the people. The public was electrified.



However, Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, written three years later, angered so many of the first play's supporters that it had to be performed under police protection. It is a brilliant comedy about a young man who mistakenly believes he has killed his tyrannical father, who is adulated by the village girls as long as they only hear of his deed, but condemn him as a criminal when they see him justifiably defend himself. The magnificent wit and colour of the language comes from the country people's Irish speech and from medieval Irish literature, which Synge had studied and translated. But both language and female characters were denounced by the rioters as being un-Irish and unwomanly; the ironic study of heroism was regarded as an insult to the nation's martyrs. The Anglo-Irishmen Yeats and Synge had taught the public to appreciate the dignity of humble people, to recognize noble qualities in the destitute; now the public had become addicted to seeing such admirable figures on stage, and reacted with fury to representations of foolishness, inconsistency and self-deception.

(c) *The dramatist Seán O'Casey*

The playwright Seán O'Casey (1884-1964) also came from a Protestant family loyal to the crown, but he was born into a Dublin tenement, and grew up in great poverty, half blind and with hardly any formal education. The bible, Shakespeare, the lively speech of the poor of Dublin, the Irish language (which he taught himself) and his vision of a socialist independent Ireland were his inspiration. He did for the people of the city what Synge had done for those of rural Ireland. His three tragedies about life in Dublin during the war of independence and civil war (*Juno and the Paycock*, *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *The Plough and the Stars*) are satirical dramas, which incensed so many of those they were written for that O'Casey left Ireland. They are studies of people taking the easy way out, opting for high-flown rhetoric and failing to act according to their much vaunted principles when the need arises. The language of the tragedies is that of the inhabitants of the Dublin tenements, containing rich elements of comedy, and demonstrating the resilience, integrity and good sense underlying the weaknesses they have in common with those in charge of them. O'Casey's *Autobiographies* (1963) are of great literary and historical interest.

(d) *The novelist James Joyce*

James Joyce (1882-1941) did not come from Anglo-Irish stock, but was born in Dublin into an impoverished Catholic middle class family still able to give him a good education. He experienced the first decade of the Irish literary revival as a young adult,

but was not involved. He left for Europe in 1904 and spent the rest of his life writing about Dublin, using his great erudition and his knowledge of European philosophy and literature to create a new narrative form in which to record the life of his native city, and to expand the limits of the English language to give adequate expression to what he found. His position as an Irishman poised between two cultures, his escape to a safe distance from both of them, his extraordinary sense of language and form, his unshakeable belief in himself, his loyal wife and a generous patron made his unique achievement possible.

Sixteen publishers rejected his cycle of short stories *Dubliners*, which finally appeared in 1914. They are composed with consummate skill, and demonstrate what could have happened to Joyce had he been forced to remain in Dublin. Unlike the Anglo-Irish writers, he would have had to work for a living in depressing circumstances resembling those described in the stories. Apparently insignificant incidents illuminate the moment when the characters are caught in the nets that will tie them down forever. The stories portray lower-middle class childhood, adolescence, working life in subaltern positions in city offices, and the plight of getting by with no employment; they offer devastating insight into the religious, cultural and political life of a deprived and intensely hierarchical authoritarian society in which the poor and sensitive individual has no chance. The world of *Dubliners* reminds one of Kafka's, another acute observer on the periphery of a powerful nation. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) is a *Bildungsroman* with a difference: the difficult journey through childhood and adolescence of the main figure Stephen Dedalus ends with his refusing to serve his church and fatherland, deciding to take flight into exile in order to develop himself as an artist. But the narrator makes it clear that Dedalus may end up like his famous namesake of antiquity, whose wings did not withstand the heat of the sun, putting an end to flight and freedom of his son Icarus.

The novel *Ulysses* (1922) is a landmark in modern literature. It describes an ordinary day in Dublin (16 June 1904: the day Joyce met his wife Nora) from within the minds or stream of consciousness of three people; it is modelled on Homer's *Odyssee*. The modern Ulysses is the Jew Leopold Bloom, a Dublin travelling salesman; Penelope is his unfaithful wife Molly, and Telemachus his friend the student Stephen Dedalus, who reminds Bloom of his dead son. The comparison is an ironic comment both on the heroes of antiquity and on the daily routine of a modern man who does not quite belong in the world he was born into. - The choice of a Jew as his main character was Joyce's reaction to an outburst of anti-Semitism in Limerick in 1904. *Ulysses* is a great irreverent mock-heroic comic novel, which was banned in Ireland, England and

America as blasphemous and indecent. It imitates and parodies literary styles, political ideologies, ecclesiastical rituals and texts past and present; it imitates and gently mocks our mode of silent uncensored associative so-called thinking. It ends happily in so far as it can be said to end at all, as it breaks off in the middle of a sentence in Molly Bloom's ten page inner monologue presenting her disjointed recollections of the day's amorous adventures, her thoughts, memories and associations as she falls asleep.

Joyce spent the next seventeen years of his life writing *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), which stretches the form of the novel and language itself to utmost limits. The title is taken from an Irish ballad about a dead man being resurrected to life when, during a fight at his funeral, a bottle of whisky spills over him. Death and resurrection on a cosmic level are the themes of the work. It follows the dreams of a Dublin publican throughout one night; these dreams are merged with the collective unconscious and experience of the human race. It is an epic of past, present and future, of death and the life to come, of everything and nothing: a gigantic play with words from a dozen languages. In *A Portrait of the Artist* Stephen is confronted with the dilemma that Irish people (including those who speak no Irish) are not really at home in English. Joyce mastered English as few Englishmen had done before him; in *Finnegan's Wake* he may be said to have expropriated English. Through the virtuosity of his language and the radical renewal of the novel form, he forced the world to recognize itself in the minute record of the life of a handful of unexceptional Irish people, to recognize itself in the mirror of a small backward country on the edge of Europe.

*(iii) American literary innovators in Britain: T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound*

The poet, dramatist, literary critic and Nobel prize winner Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) was born in St Louis, educated in Harvard, Paris and Oxford, and in 1915 took up permanent residence in Britain, where he sought the intellectual culture he felt was lacking in America. His disillusionment with the post-war world became the theme of his writings; he devised manifold means of adversely comparing the modern world of "Hollow Men" (the title of a work) with the civilisations of the past. Yeats proceeded in a similar fashion in disfavouredly comparing the aristocratic Anglo-Irish leaders of the eighteenth century with the small-minded native Irish politicians he saw in power in his own time. Joyce, on the other hand, makes use of classical comparisons in order to enforce a change of perspective regarding both periods, but not in order to disparage the present. In his long poem *The Waste Land* (1922) Eliot uses the topos of the quest for the Holy Grail to demonstrate the barrenness of modern life without Christianity. (The story of the Holy Grail is a medieval legend about the search for the lost vessel used by

Christ at the last supper, in which his blood was gathered at the crucifixion, and which was found by Arthur's purest knights). Eliot combines the Grail material with legends of fertility rites. The narrator of *The Waste Land* is Tiresias, the blind prophet of antiquity, who sees where the sighted do not because he is blind to the illusions of the world, and who moves freely back and forth across space and time unaided by any time machines. As with Yeats' later poetry, and Joyce's two novels, ordinary readers need much academic machinery to help them understand the learned allusions, though as a poet of the modern city, Eliot's works need no footnotes or explanations and fascinate with their originality and power of language and imagery.

Eliot wrote verse dramas in the manner of Greek tragedy, using the chorus as vehicle for the lessons of the piece. His *Murder in the Cathedral* of 1935 treats of a medieval subject: the murder in 1170 by Henry II of Archbishop Thomas à Beckett in Canterbury Cathedral, and here the stylised form corresponds to the solemnity of the material. But this is hardly the case in *The Cocktail Party* of 1949, where verse is used for a comedy of manners set in upper-class drawing rooms advocating a true Christian way of life and the renunciation of consumerism. As a creator of images, Eliot ranks among the most distinguished artists of his time; as a literary critic, his work is of the highest order. In his philosophy he has much in common with the cultural pessimist Spengler (author of the *Untergang des Abendlandes*) and with Stefan George in his view of the prophetic role of the artist. He shares with Ernst Jünger anti-Semitism, admiration for elites and rejection of democracy, but differs from Jünger in that he does not glorify war and did not support fascism.

Eliot's American friend Ezra Pound (1885-1972) was such an enthusiastic supporter of Mussolini's that he remained in Italy during the war doing English language broadcasts. For this his victorious countrymen had him incarcerated in a mental asylum until 1961. He was another foreign poet of influence who lived for a time in London and did much to propagate the work of Joyce and Eliot. He founded the Imagist movement, condemning sentimentality and effusiveness, advocating clarity and comprehensible images in poetry, common speech, and strict economy in writing. (He cut Eliot's first draft of *Waste Land* radically when it was submitted to him for advice). His best known lyrical work is the long poem, *The Cantos*. The American painter and novelist Wyndham Lewis, who had lived in England since childhood, shared his political and literary views.

(iv) *Innovative British novelists:*

(a) *D. H. Lawrence*

David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930) was another writer to fall victim to the lure of fascism. He was the son of a miner who, due to the influence of his strong-minded mother, continued his education to become a teacher. He found the new world he entered alien and repelling in its conventionality; he believed that civilisation had lost its elemental force and driven passion underground, from whence he resolved to liberate it. *Ulysses* broke with a tabu in including bodily functions in the story and in following the hero into the lavatory; Lawrence opened the door to the closet in which sexuality had been hidden away. His theme was new; the form of his novels is traditional. *Sons and Lovers* of 1913 is an autobiographical work describing a gifted young man's attempts to break free of his mother's influence, to find a woman capable of understanding him and of liberating his sexuality. What strikes one today on reading the novels is not the emancipation of sex but the masculinity cult, which is unpleasantly coupled with a cult of the (male) artist. There is throughout a naive identification between narrator and main figure; equally naive is the stereotyping of women as either frigid and cultured (and thus incapable of understanding the physical needs of the Artist) or sensual and stupid (and incapable of understanding his emotional and intellectual needs). When his next novel *The Rainbow* (1915) was forbidden as indecent, Lawrence became increasingly bitter and left England in 1919. He went to Italy, where he encountered the Fascist movement; to Australia, and then to Mexico. There he wrote *The Plumed Serpent* in 1926. It describes how an Irish widow finds fulfilment in Mexico with the leaders of a new religious cult celebrating the ancient Aztec gods, the primeval values of blood and soil, and sexual liberation through complete subjection of the woman's individuality. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* of 1928 had to be printed privately: even in 1960 Penguin Books had to face a court case when they published the complete text. The novel contrasts the wasted and barren landscape around a mine with the sanctuary of a forest in which Lady Chatterley meets a man from the village who has fled society. Their sexual fulfilment is the basis for genuine love; she defies social conventions and her paralysed and tyrannical intellectual husband for the gamekeeper. Lawrence, the prophet of vitality and of the "life-urge", died of tuberculosis, the scourge of the poor, at the age of forty-five.

*(b) Virginia Woolf*

The novelist and literary critic Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) experimented with the form of the novel along Joycean lines, using the new techniques for very restricted subject matter. Journeys through the civilisations and millenia were not for her, nor was the prophetic stance of the London-American poets. Discretion and reticence were part of her background, so too were subtlety and sophistication. Her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, was a distinguished writer and critic; she had a circle of friends among the leading intellectuals of the time who called themselves the Bloomsbury Group. Her two best novels are *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). She makes skilful use of the stream of consciousness method, allowing the reader direct insight into the mind of the characters and the flux of their thoughts, emotions and associations; the now invisible narrator is the most omniscient the novel ever had. In *Mrs. Dalloway* we follow the main figure, a middle-aged society lady whose husband is a member of parliament, during the course of one day. She shops in London preparing for a reception she is giving for distinguished guests, and acts as hostess during the party. Loneliness and isolation are the central theme, which is deftly elaborated. A chance meeting with a friend she loved in her youth brings her to reflect on her present arid life; interwoven is the story of a man who has gone mad because of his war experiences and now taken his life because of the inability of those around him to help him come to terms with his trauma. *To the Lighthouse* further develops the technique of the inner monologue in a novel about two incidents ten years apart in the life of a family: a trip to a lighthouse on an island and the completing of a painting. In this novel the peace-making abilities of the mother of the family prevail many years after her death: reflection, change and reconciliation are achieved. Virginia Woolf did not in her own life succeed in overcoming the depressions which tormented her at regular intervals: she drowned herself in 1941.

*(c) Aldous Huxley*

Like Woolf, Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) came from a well-known family; he could not share his scientist grandfather's confidence in the future of society. In his novel *Point Counter Point* of 1928 he satirically depicts contrasting individuals in high society, exposing their shallowness, arrogance, incompetence and duplicity. It is what he called a novel of ideas, which presents and discusses theories. His best known work is *Brave New World* of 1932, based on an acute analysis of the direction western society was taking. It describes a negative utopia in the seventh century after the birth of Ford,

in which by means of advanced technology total control over the human race has been achieved, and war and violence eradicated. Different castes of human beings are produced in the laboratory, each type designed to carry out specific types of work, everybody unquestioningly accepting their place in the hierarchy, as emotions, thought, memory and the arts have been eliminated, and thus all sources of autonomy. Sex, psychopharmica and consumption keep everybody happy. The nature of the new world is illustrated through a character whose genetic manipulation has gone wrong and who has retained a disposition for questioning, and through the portrait of a savage from the pre-Ford era living on a reservation. It is a novel the science-fiction quality of which has been reduced since its publication and its relevance therefore disturbingly heightened.

(d) *George Orwell*

The novelist and essayist George Orwell (1903-50) whose real name was Eric Blair, was born in India and joined the imperial police force in Burma. He found himself unable to identify with his position and quit. In the bad times of the early 1930s he took casual jobs in kitchens and was for a while homeless. He describes that period in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. He became a socialist and fought on the republican side in the Spanish civil war. There he encountered the dictatorial practices of the Soviet regime through the orthodox communists. Two novels depict socialists turned tyrants: *Animal Farm* of 1945 and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* of 1949. These works are not modernist: the narrative technique is traditional which has made them accessible to a wide audience. Their popularity cannot only be attributed to their propaganda uses in the cold war against the Soviet Union; *Brave New World*, after all, was directed against the other side, and was also very widely read. *Animal Farm* is a political fable describing how one tyranny is replaced by another: the animals of the farmyard drive away their human masters, but come to be dominated by the most intelligent animals, the pigs. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a grim and powerful book: a negative utopia depicting the total control established by the all-pervasive monolithic party over an impoverished and utterly crushed people. The two dissidents who think they have managed to escape surveillance are destroyed by being forced to betray each other. Orwell's essays on unemployment, on mining, on the social welfare system between the wars remind one of Defoe's best reporting and documentations: they illustrate the writer's humanity, integrity and constitute a moving tribute to those he writes about.

## *(2) Literature after the Second World War*

### *(i) Yet another new world*

The shattering of old certainties, begun in the first decades of the twentieth century, continued after 1945. If the first world war seemed to threaten European civilisation, the weapons of destruction developed and used during the second world war posed a threat to life itself on the planet. Since 1945 people have had to live with the knowledge that a few world leaders have the ability and power to annihilate the human race, the American government having in 1945 demonstrated at the cost of two Japanese cities what atomic bombs could do. The extent of the slaughter during the war exceeded the imaginable: up to eighty million people may have been killed worldwide - perhaps twenty million in the Soviet Union alone, the great majority civilians. The atrocities committed in the east by Japanese armed forces defied belief, but it was even more incredible that one of the most cultured peoples of Europe should have acquiesced to the systematic robbing and murdering of a minority which had lived among the nation for hundreds of years.

Britain's position as a world power was further diminished as a result of the war. It had incurred huge debts to the United States, which now emerged as the foremost economic and political power worldwide. After the first world war, Britain had lost Ireland; in 1948 it lost India, which precipitated the end of the empire. The colonies had had to provide troops for both wars; they had been trained to fight and told the war was being fought for freedom and justice. After 1945 the British government could no longer withstand the national movements seeking to attain for the colonies the freedom so many Indians and Africans had died for while fighting for Britain.

People came to terms with these traumas and losses because they had to concentrate on the rebuilding of the nation in the years immediately after the war, and then because of the great prosperity which set in during the 1950s. The Labour government elected in 1945 introduced the "welfare state", which offered its citizens free health care, free education and social security in unemployment, sickness and old age, all financed by taxes. It adopted Keynesian policies, stimulating the economy through state spending. The state became a major economic force, by 1960 employing about a quarter of the workforce, spending about 40% of the gross national product, and investing heavily in research, much of it military. The trade unions had become very powerful and wages had increased sufficiently for average earners to be able to afford luxury consumer goods. A boom set in due to widespread purchases of fridges, washing machines, televisions and cars. In order to produce all these goods and run the new



services, the government offered work to citizens from the former colonies. The factory workers, bus drivers, nurses, shopkeepers and restaurant owners from the Caribbean, India, Pakistan and Hong Kong brought the empire to Britain, and changed the face of British cities. The empire also came to Britain in the form of the Northern Ireland troubles, which began in 1968.

From the 1960s hostility towards the immigrants arose, increasing once the economic boom had ended and Britain's serious economic problems began in the 1970s. Electronics were now the leading industry, not car manufacturing, and here Britain had fallen far behind America and Japan. Multinational corporations bought themselves into Britain, rationalisation of production set in, leading to wholesale elimination of unskilled jobs and high structural unemployment. The Thatcher government cut state spending drastically; poverty and homelessness rose sharply, while the top two-thirds of society became increasingly affluent.

The experience of the second world war and the subsequent radical social changes had a profound impact on people's *Weltanschauung*. It expressed itself in an underlying unease at the evident precariousness of existence, and in an unprecedented focus on the individual - from the 1970s, on the young individual. France, which had suffered the humiliation of German occupation, became the centre of existentialism. Sartre and others denied that there was any meaningful purpose to existence; they argued that human beings had been thrown into the world and that it was up to them to provide sense to their existence. The sense which many found from the 1960s was conspicuous consumption. An active and vociferous minority of students of Europe and America opted for a reassessment of their parents' activities during the previous generation and questioned all forms of authority: patriarchal, academic, ecclesiastical and political. They defied convention; experimented with sex, with drugs; they opted for the music of the American ghettos and the back streets of Liverpool - sex, drugs, and the music soon became big business.

(ii) *The absurd theatre: Samuel Beckett*

The *pendant* to the philosophy of existentialism was the theatre of the absurd, which presents every possible attempt to attribute sense to life as ludicrous. The major innovator of post-war literature was Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). He was an Anglo-Irishman, born and educated in Dublin who went to live in Paris where he became a friend of Joyce's; he joined the French Resistance against the Nazis. The precariousness of life he again experienced after the occupation when he was stabbed one night by a mad *clochard* and very nearly died. The world he presents is one that has been devastated: the people in it are old, crippled, destitute; they are victims, and some of them tyrants at the same time - they are pathetic, nasty, clownishly comical, disgusting and occasionally moving. They hope, mostly in vain, for the end of a senseless and painful existence, and their greatest nightmare is that it might start all over again.

Forty publishers rejected Beckett's first novel *Murphy*. He wrote it while living in London with no job, no money and frequent depression. The main character is in just that situation, sits naked and motionless for hours on end in a rocking chair. Acquaintances decide to organise his life for him, but he escapes to an asylum for the insane, is threatened with dismissal from the institution for having fraternised with an inmate, but prevents his expulsion by dying in a gas explosion. He has stipulated that his ashes be sent in a paper bag to his birthplace, Dublin, but due to unfortunate circumstances they end up on the floor of a London pub. The novel made little impact.

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was hailed by French critics at its first performance in Paris in 1953, and established his reputation as a dramatist. Like most of his works, it was first written in French and later in English. *Godot* is a two-act play about two tramps who wait in vain for an unknown dignitary for an unstated purpose in a desolate wasteland, who are aware of the pointlessness of their waiting but are unable to leave as they have nothing else to do. An Irish scholar summed up his impression of the first performance saying that it is a play in which nothing happens - twice. But that same critic (Vivian Merier) greatly enjoyed the comedy, the grotesque and macabre elements of the play. *Godot* has been performed before prison audiences: they appreciated the drama at a very direct level - as an absurd and realistic farce. Third world audiences can relate to it in a similar fashion, recognizing the boredom, humiliation and despair of poverty, and the resilience of those who nonetheless survive. The play has a moving lyrical dimension in the dialogues, when the tramps engage in conversation in order to pass the time; it has elements of slapstick; nowhere is its satire more devastating than in

the monologue of the mad slave Lucky when he has been ordered by his master to think and produces scraps and fragments of philosophy, scholarship, poetry and theology, working himself up into a frenzy of anguish as he performs his "turn" under the tyrant's whip.

Beckett's plays became increasingly minimalist. In *Endgame* the main figure Hamm is blind and paralysed; his parents Nell and Nagg are housed in rubbish bins; in *Krapp's Last Tape* there is only one character and he does not speak but listens to a tape of his own voice; in *How It Is* of 1961 one nameless character lies face down in the mud and cannot speak, the other man has forgotten how to talk; the last play *Not I* features a mouth and a listener. Beckett goes just as far as Joyce did in abandoning the literary conventions: he eliminates character, place, time, motivation, story. As he put it: "No subject, no verb, only a little heap of dust." Readers who are familiar with the classical French dramas of Racine, with the philosophy of Descartes and with Christian theology will recognize in his plays and novels a satiric comment on, an ironic tribute to, and the travesty which the experience of the twentieth century has made of these venerable concepts and their language. One needs no learning to appreciate the grim farce Beckett sees in the human condition, the grotesque attempts of men and women to overcome loneliness through sexual relations, the macabre wit with which they come to terms with the unbearable. In a world whose population is expanding like the universe, where distance is no longer an obstacle to communication, and the term itself perhaps the catchword of the era, Beckett's great theme is the monadic, terrifying and incurable isolation of the individual.

The next generation of playwrights in Britain made their own variations on the theme. Harold Pinter (born in 1930) enacts in *The Birthday Party* of 1960 and *The Homecoming* of 1965 the banalities of everyday life, the hollowness of relationships, and he shows that violence lurks just under the surface. John Osborne (born in 1929) brought a new type of character on stage: the belligerent young man. In *Look Back in Anger* of 1956 a working class university graduate who has been granted a scholarship under the new free education system finds that the world into which he has moved is alien, dominated by "the old gang" and requires a conformity he is not prepared to give. He therefore opts to run a sweet stall on the market instead of going into the professions. Regular violent quarrels with his wife, who is from a well-to-do family, bring her to leave him, but she returns after having given birth to his child, accepting him as he is and her own subjection. The main character is an unpleasant anti-hero: he is taut with aggression, has a flair for bitter tirades, uses violent language, and is a tyrannical macho. The play was an inspiration to a generation of young writers.

*(iii) The novel*

The novel *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* of 1955 by Alan Silitoe (born in 1928) also portrays a non-conformist. The narrator is a jailed Nottingham youth recounting how he has come to be where he is. He comes into money for the first time after his father's death, so once the life assurance has been used up, he tries stealing. Convicted of burglary, he develops his athletic skills in prison and therefore wins the favour of the prison director, who allows him to train freely outside the institution. The youth deliberately loses the race against the other prison teams, and thus his chances of early release. He will not pander to authority, valuing the defiant assertion of his independence of mind over freedom bought at the price of mental servitude. The novel of the defiant outlaw anticipates the anti-authoritarian movement of the 1960s; it corresponds to the music of the Beatles.

The novels attaining the rank of world literature in the second half of the century were Russian and Latin American. Britain has produced a host of talents. Some, like Evelyn Waugh (1903-66), wrote entertainingly and with gentle irony of the elegant world that had gone, or satirically of the bizarre customs of America (*The Loved Ones*); P.G. Wodehouse (1881-1975) and Graham Greene (1904-91) wrote very popular novels, among them ingenious detective stories and comic works. Laurence Durrell (1912-96), who worked in the British diplomatic service and lived most of his life in the Middle East, published the four novels of his *Alexandria Quartet* in 1960: each presents the fate of a powerful Coptic family from a different perspective; together they constitute an epic of life in the eastern Mediterranean when it was still dominated by British influence - influence which the disastrous British intervention in the Suez crisis of 1956 had finally brought to an end. Jean Rhys (1894-1979) was born in the West Indies; her sixth novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* of 1966, is partly set there. It tells the story of the mad wife in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the first Mrs Rochester, a Creole heiress whose mind gives way under the pressures of the decaying planter society whose newly freed slaves despise her as half belonging to them. Rhys took up and developed the theme of the women novelists of the nineteenth century: she was over sixty before she won recognition for her remarkable achievement. William Golding (1911-93) was awarded the Nobel prize for his novels in 1983. His first remains the best known: *The Lord of the Flies* of 1954. It is a bitter comment on Ballantyne's *Coral Island* of 1858. Golding's British boys survive a plane crash on an uninhabited island having left home due to the threat of nuclear war. Far from creating a "little England" on the island, as in Ballantyne's book, most of them revert to cruel, primitive barbarism and the worship of Beelzebub.

The century ends as it began, with a disproportionate number of Irish writers, this time from Northern Ireland. Again they are the product of major upheavals: of thirty years of social and political turmoil in the province. The Irish troubles have given rise to numerous dramas: one of the dramatists is likely to remain a figure of relevance - Brian Friel, born in 1929 into a Catholic nationalist family of Derry. His *Freedom of the City* was inspired by Bloody Sunday in 1972, when a forbidden non-violent nationalist demonstration against internment in that city was attacked by the British Army, leaving 14 dead. The play studies the various masks of respectability people are so adept at creating for themselves. Among the poets, Seamus Heaney (born 1939) is the best known, having recently won the Nobel prize for literature - Ireland's third this century, after Yeats and Beckett.

## GLOSSARY FOR CHAPTER 1

**Allegory:** from the Greek, meaning to speak in pictures. A literary device in which abstract concepts such as virtue or vice are characterised as people.

**Alliteration:** a pattern achieved in verse through selection of words beginning with similar sounds.

**Common Law:** the unified law system imposed by William the Conqueror; it no longer varied from region to region as in Anglo-Saxon times. The term can also mean case law (i.e. judge-made law) as against codified law.

**Crusades:** wars undertaken in the Middle Ages at the request of the pope to drive the Arabs from the "Holy Land".

**Danegeld:** money paid to the Danes or Vikings in tribute or to prevent further attack.

**Domesday Book:** a survey of the wealth of England undertaken in 1086 by William the Conqueror to assess his subjects' abilities to pay tax (dome = judgement).

**Epic:** from the Greek *epos*. A long narrative poem on a heroic subject such as Homer's *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid* or the *Nibelungenlied*.

**Feudalism:** the medieval system of government in which all land was vested in the monarch, who granted its use to his noble subjects in return for their service.

**Heroic couplet:** called 'heroic' as used in 18 century to translate Homer's heroic epics into English; they are pairs of rhyming verses in iambic pentameter.

**Iambic pentameter:** verse with five measures per line, and the words chosen so that a short syllable is followed by a long one.

**Magna Carta:** a constitutional document of 1215 which limits the power of the monarchy by defining the rights of the subjects.

**Middle Ages (adj. medieval):** a Renaissance term used to describe the period lying between two golden ages, as the scholars believed: that of classical antiquity and their own time

**Middle English:** the English spoken between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries.

**Old English:** the Germanic language spoken by the Anglo-Saxons.

**Serf:** an unfree rural labourer not allowed to leave his master's land and obliged to perform services for him

QUESTIONS TO CHECK YOUR STUDY OF CHAPTER 1  
MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

- (1) Sketch the role of the Christian monasteries in Anglo-Saxon England.
- (2) What sort of work was *Beowulf*?
- (3) Who was the Venerable Bede?
- (4) Why do we remember Alfred the Great?
- (5) How did Norman England differ from Anglo-Saxon England?
- (6) What were a) *The Domesday Book*; b) Magna Carta
- (7) What do we mean by Mystery Plays?
- (8) What sort of work is *Everyman*?
- (9) Outline what you know about *Piers Plowman*.
- (10) What is special about Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*?

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS FOR CHAPTER 1

A. FROM *PIERS PLOWMAN* BY WILLIAM LANGLAND

[Context: a group of pilgrims need a guide; Piers offers to accompany them provided they first help him to sow his field. He says:]

"So come along now, all you men who live by food and drink - lend a hand to the man who provides you with it, and we will finish the job quickly."

"By Heavens!" said a knight, "this fellow knows what's good for us! But to tell the truth, I've never handled a team of oxen. Give me a lesson, Piers, and I'll do my best, by God!"

"That's fair offer," said Piers. "And for my part, I'll sweat and \*toil for us both as long as I live, and gladly do any job you want. But you must promise in return to guard over Holy Church, and protect me from the thieves and wasters who ruin the world. And you'll have to hunt down all the hares and foxes and boars and \*badgers that break down my hedges, and tame falcons to kill the wild birds that crop my wheat."

Then the knight answered courteously and said, "I give you my word, Piers, as I am a true \*knight; and I'll keep this promise through thick and thin and protect you to the end of my days."

"Ah, but there's one thing more I must ask you," said Piers. "Never ill-treat your \*tenants, and see that you punish them only when Truth compels you to - even then, let Mercy assess the fine, and be ruled by \*Meekness, and at all costs have no truck with \*Fee. And if poor men offer you gifts, don't ever accept them - it may be that you do not deserve them, and will have to pay them all back at the \*years's end, in a perilous place called Purgatory!"

"And take care also that you never ill-use your serfs. It will be better for you in the long run, for though they are your underlings here on earth, they may be above you in Heaven, in greater happiness, unless you lead a better life than they do. For Our Lord said: `When thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher.' And it is very hard to tell a knight from a serf when he comes to lie in the \*church-vaults - so lay that to heart.

"And you must always speak the truth, and show contempt for all tales that are told you, except such as are wise, and \*apt for rebuking your workmen. Have nothing to do with \*jesters and don't listen to their tattle, least of all when you sit at meals in your hall. For believe me, they are the Devil's \*minstrels!"

"Now, by St James," the knight answered, "I'll abide by your words for ever."



(*Piers Plowman*, translated into modern English prose by J.F. Goodridge, Penguin 1984, pp 81-2.)

GLOSSARY -\* *knight*: Ritter; *to toil*: to labour; *badger*: Dachs; *tenant*: Pächter; *fee*: (here) corruption, bribery; *church-vault*: Gruft; *apt for*: suitable for; *jester*: joker; *minstrel*: musician and entertainer

Please comment on the passage, covering the following points in your answer:

(a) According to the romantic courtly ideal of chivalry, the good knight was bound to fight for the church, to fight for and serve his lord loyally, to help any lady in distress, to behave honourably towards women, to defend his honour against attack. Compare this with the duties of the knight as Piers presents them.

(b) What motive does Piers offer as to why the knight should follow his advice? Comment.

(c) Medieval society was very hierarchical. Which statements of Piers' would Langland's listeners probably have found most startling? Explain your answer.

## B. FROM CHAUCER'S *CANTERBURY TALES*

The following passage is from the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* and describes a Parson; before and after this passage come accounts of corrupt, worldly clerics:

A holy-minded man of good renown

There was, and poor, the *Parson* to a town,

Yet he was rich in holy thought and work.

He also was a learned man, a clerk,

Who truly knew Christ's gospel and would preach it

Devoutly to parishioners, and teach it.

\*Benign and wonderfully diligent,

And patient when \*adversity was sent

(For so he proved in great adversity)

He much disliked extorting \*tithe or fee,

Nay rather he preferred beyond a doubt  
 Giving to poor parishioners round about  
 From his own goods and Easter offerings.  
 He found sufficiency in little things.  
 Wide was his parish, with houses far asunder,  
 Yet he neglected not in rain or thunder,  
 In sickness or in grief, to pay a call  
 On the remotest, whether great or small,  
 Upon his feet, and in his hand a \*stave.  
 For noble example to his sheep he gave,  
 First following the word before he taught it,  
 And it was from the gospel he had caught it.  
 This little proverb he would add thereto  
 That if gold rust, what then will iron do?  
 For if a priest be foul in whom we trust  
 No wonder that a common man should rust;  
 And shame it is to see - let priests take stock -  
 A shitten shepherd and a snowy flock.  
 The true example that a priest should give  
 Is one of cleanness, how the sheep should live.  
 He did not set his \*benefice to hire  
 And leave his sheep encumbered in the \*mire  
 Or run to London to earn easy bread  
 By singing masses for the wealthy dead,  
 Or find some Brotherhood and get enrolled.  
 He stayed at home and watched over his \*fold  
 So that no wolf should make the sheep miscarry.  
 He was a shepherd and no mercenary.  
 Holy and virtuous he was, but then  
 Never contemptuous of sinful men,  
 Never disdainful, never too proud or fine,  
 But was discreet in teaching and benign.  
 His business was to show a fair behaviour  
 And draw men thus to Heaven and their Saviour,  
 Unless indeed a man were obstinate;  
 And such, whether of high or low estate,  
 He put to sharp \*rebuke to say the least.  
 I think there never was a better priest.  
 He sought no pomp or glory in his dealings,  
 No scrupulosity had spiced his feelings.  
 Christ and His Twelve Apostles and their lore  
 He taught, but followed it himself before.

(Translated into modern English by Nevill Coghill, *The Canterbury Tales*, Penguin 1951/1980, pp 32-3.)

GLOSSARY \* *benign*: gütig; *adversity*: bad times, Not; *tithe*: a church tax amounting to one tenth of one's produce or income; *stave*: stick; *flock*: herd, Gemeinde; *benefice*: living or parish; *mire*: mud; *fold*: herd, community; *rebuke*: Zurechtweisung; *lore*: (here) teaching

Comment on the passage, covering these points in your answer:

- (a) What are the positive features of this priest which Chaucer underlines? Comment.
- (b) What criticism of the clergy does the passage contain?
- (c) What do you think are the key verses of the passage? Explain your choice.

QUESTIONS TO CHECK YOUR STUDY OF CHAPTER 2  
ENGLISH LITERATURE FROM RENAISSANCE TO ENLIGHTENMENT

- (1) Sketch the reasons why feudal society gave way to absolutism.
- (2) Characterise the implications of the discoveries of Copernicus and Galilei.
- (3) What are Francis Bacon and Thomas More remembered for?
- (4) Outline the conditions in Renaissance England which made it possible for Shakespeare's unique talent to achieve its fulfilment.
- (5) What kinds of drama did Shakespeare write, and why are they of such special interest?
- (6) What do the Puritan writers Bunyan and Milton have in common; where do they differ?
- (7) Sketch the reasons for the civil war in the 1640s; how was England ruled after the restoration of the monarchy?
- (8) In how far does William Hogarth's work constitute a new departure in English painting?
- (9) Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* was written for adults, but it has become a children's book. Can you imagine why?
- (10) Characterise the novels of Defoe, Fielding, and Richardson.

## WRITING ASSIGNMENT FOR CHAPTER 2

Read either one Shakespeare play or one eighteenth century novel, and write an essay recording your experience: the reasons for your choice, whether you find you have chosen well, where you had difficulties, how you resolved them and what you learnt from the work.

QUESTIONS TO CHECK YOUR STUDY OF CHAPTER 3  
ENGLISH LITERATURE IN INDUSTRIAL BRITAIN

- (1) How does the industrial mode of manufacturing differ from the previous method?
- (2) Why did it produce so many literary critics?
- (3) Characterise the work of the main romantic poets and painters.
- (4) Outline the contribution to literature made by the Scottish writers Robert Burns and Walter Scott.
- (5) Contrast the novels of Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters.
- (6) What sort of audience did Charles Dickens write for, and what do you think made him so popular?
- (7) Compare the work of Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot.
- (8) Characterise the theatre of Oscar Wilde
- (9) Do George Bernard Shaw's plays have anything in common with Wilde's?
- (10) Outline the different types of children's books of the later 19th century.

## WRITING ASSIGNMENTS FOR CHAPTER 3

(A) WILLIAM BLAKE

## LONDON (1794)

I wander through each dirty street  
 Near where the dirty Thames does flow  
 And mark in every face I meet  
 Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every man,  
 In every infant's cry of fear.  
 In every voice, in every ban,  
 The mind forg'd manacles I hear,

How the chimney sweeper's cry  
 Blackens o'er the churches' walls.  
 And the hapless soldier's sigh  
 Runs in blood down palace walls.

But most the midnight harlot's curse  
 From every dismal street I hear,  
 Weaves around the marriage hearse  
 And blasts the new born infant's tear.

GLOSSARY - *mark*: notice; *woe*: great sorrow; *ban*: curse; *mind forg'd*: made by the mind; *manacles*: Handfesseln; *chimney sweep*: small children had to climb up inside the chimneys of the big houses to clean them until legislation in the 1840s stopped the practice; *hapless*: wretched; *harlot*: prostitute; *hearse*: Leichenwagen; *blasts*: withers, destroys

Please comment on the poem "London", covering the following issues in your answer:

- (a) Comment on the details selected in Stanza 1 to characterise London
- (b) Classify the impressions conveyed in Stanza 2 and comment on what they contribute and why you think they were chosen
- (c) What is the link Blake makes between the chimney sweep and the church, and the soldier and palace?
- (d) Can you see any link between the harlot, marriage and the new-born?
- (e) Outline the criticism Blake is making here and try to place his views in the context of his time.

## (B) CHARLES DICKENS

### COKETOWN

(from the novel *Hard Times* of 1854)

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of buildings full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next. ...



The streets were hot and dusty on the summer day, and the sun was so bright that it even shone through the heavy vapour drooping over Coketown, and could not be looked at steadily. \*Stokers emerged from low underground doorways into factory yards, and sat on steps, and posts, and palings, wiping their \*swarthy visages, and contemplating coals. The whole town seemed to be frying in oil. There was a \*stifling smell of hot oil everywhere. The steam-engines shone with it, the dresses of the \*Hands were soiled with it, the \*mills throughout their many stories \*oozed and trickled it. The atmosphere of those Fairy palaces was like the breath of the \*simoom: and their inhabitants, \*wasting with heat, toiled \*languidly in the desert. But no temperature made the melancholy mad elephants more mad or more sane. Their wearisome heads went up and down at the same rate, in hot weather and cold, wet weather and dry, fair weather and foul. The measured motion of their shadows on the walls, was the substitute Coketown had to show for the shadows of the rustling woods; while, for the summer hum of insects, it could offer, all the year round, from the dawn of Monday to the night of Saturday, the whirr of shafts and wheels.

GLOSSARY \* *to trail*: schleppen; *to uncoil*: hinauswinden; *stokers*: Heizer; *swarthy visages*: blackened faces; *stifling*: suffocating, erstickend; *Hands*: workers; *mills*: factories; *simoom*: a hot dust-laden desert wind

Please comment on this passage, covering the following points in your answer:

- (a) Pick out the images used in this passage; why do you think Dickens chose these particular ones?
- (b) Comment on the use of repetition in the second half of the first passage.
- (c) Discuss the narrator's point of view towards what is described.
- (d) What impact is that narrative approach likely to have on the reader?

QUESTIONS TO CHECK YOUR STUDY OF CHAPTER 4  
ON THE LITERATURE OF MODERN BRITAIN

- (1) Outline the changes in Britain's position in the world after 1945.
- (2) Sketch some of the factors leading to the radical break with tradition which we find in the arts from the beginning of the century, but in particular after World War I.
- (3) Can you explain why the Irish were able to produce avant-garde literature in the early twentieth century?
- (4) Compare the work of the poets Yeats and T.S. Eliot.
- (5) Describe the dramas of Synge and O'Casey.
- (6) Sketch the development in the work of James Joyce.
- (7) Contrast the work of D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf.
- (8) Compare the negative utopian novels of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell.
- (9) Outline Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: discussing the new departure it represents.

## WRITING ASSIGNMENT FOR CHAPTER 4

JOYCE: DUBLINERS (1914)

From: "A Little Cloud"

[The short story describes Little Chandler, a clerk with literary ambitions, who is about to meet an old friend who he believes is now a successful journalist in London.]

As he sat at his desk in the \*King's Inns he thought what changes those eight years had brought. The friend whom he had known under a shabby and \*necessitous guise had become a brilliant figure on the London Press. He turned often from his tiresome writing to gaze out of the office window. The glow of a late autumn sunset covered the grass plots and walks. It cast a shower of kindly golden dust on the untidy nurses and \*decrepit old men who drowsed on the benches; it flickered upon all the moving figures - on the children who ran screaming along the gravel paths and on everyone who passed through the gardens. ...

When his hour had struck he stood up and took leave of his desk and of his fellow-clerks punctiliously. He emerged from under the feudal arch of the \*Ing's Inns, a neat modest figure, and walked swiftly down Henrietta Street. The golden sunset was \*waning and the air had grown sharp. A horde of \*grimy children populated the street. They stood or ran in the roadway, or crawled up the steps before the gaping doors, or squatted like mice upon the thresholds. Little Chandler gave them no thought. He picked his way deftly through all that \*minute \*vermin-like life and under the shadow of the \*gaunt spectral mansions in which the old nobility of Dublin had \*roistered. No memory of the past touched him, for his mind was full of a present joy. ...

Little Chandler quickened his pace. For the first time in his life he felt himself superior to the people he passed. For the first time his soul revolted against the dull inelegance of Capel Street. There was no doubt about it: if you wanted to succeed you had to go away. You could do nothing in Dublin. As he crossed Grattan Bridge he looked down the river towards the lower quays and pitied the poor \*stunted houses. They seemed to him a band of tramps, huddled together along the river-banks, their old coats covered with dust and soot, stupefied by the panorama of sunset and waiting for the first chill of night to bid them arise, shake themselves and begone. ...

GLOSSARY \* *The King's Inns*: an old Dublin building in which many lawyers work; *necessitous*: poor, needy; *decrepit*: weak, worn out; *waning*: losing strength, decreasing; *grimy*: dirty, rußig; *minute*: very small; *vermin*: Ungeziefer; *gaunt spectral mansions*: ausgemergelte gespenstische Herrenhäuser; *stunted*: verkümmert; *to roister*: in Pracht leben.

Comment on the extract from "A Little Cloud" including the following points in your answer:

- (a) Pick out some of the phrases used in the first extract which you would not have thought of using and discuss what they add to the text.
- (b) Discuss the imagery used in the second passage to describe the people and the slum buildings which were formerly inhabited by the wealthy.
- (c) Discuss the description of the houses in the third extract.
- (d) These passages characterise the main figure through showing us what he notices and what he does not see. Sum up what we learn about Little Chandler and his situation.

## FOR FURTHER READING

*General Histories of Literature:*

Barnard, Robert. *A Short History of English Literature*, Oxford (Blackwell) 2nd ed. 1994. Highly recommended.

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