20th century Novels

The end of Queen Victoria’s reign and the accession of Edward VII (1901) truly marked the end of an age and of a century in which the novel rose to literary supremacy. On the eve of the twentieth century, England had passed several relatively peaceful decades since the Napoleonic era. The military excursions of the Crimean War (1854-1856), the Sepoy Rebellion in India (1857), a war with China (1857-1858), and the Boer War in South Africa (1899-1902) in no way prepared the empire for the global struggle that began in 1914 in the reign of George V and lasted as the Great War (now, World War I), until 1918. This and other military conflicts of the twentieth century left clearly discernible marks upon the development of the English novel. World War II (1939-1945), the most cataclysmic for England, is also the most notable of the conflicts but not the longest. Wars, “police actions,” and skirmishes in the distant corners of the empire, from Suez (1956) or Palestine (1949) to the Falkland Islands (1982), and extending temporally from the Boer War to the Argentinian conflict, may have matched in sporadic intensity but not in overall bitterness the continuing Anglo-Irish struggle, begun many centuries ago and marked in the twentieth century by the Easter Rising (1918), the partition of Ireland (1922), and the move to Commonwealth status (1937) and to Republic (1949) for the South.

World War II, however, justly overshadowed all other military events of the twentieth century and exerted such an influence on the course of the English novel that the number of fictional works about Britain’s “finest hour” has grown astronomically since 1945. World War II may have passed into cultural memory, but it remained, for whole generations, a recent event of personal history that also marks the beginning of the “postmodern” world. Shortly after the war, beginning around 1947, the empire was virtually dismantled, and more than one billion people throughout the world gained political independence.

The Proletarian Novel and the Novel of Social Criticism

The British economy was sapped by expensive modern warfare, the rapid dissolution of the empire, and the immigration of large numbers of the middle class; it was plagued by taxation (marked by the establishment of the first modern social security system, in 1912, and later by the socialistic British welfare state, 1945-1951), devastated by the Great Depression of 1929 and the wholesale destruction of property in the Battle of Britain and the subsequent saturation bombing of London, and eroded by massive unemployment and the steady devaluation of the pound sterling. These events and their economic effects form a background for the rise of the proletarian novel and the novel of social criticism of the 1950’s and subsequent decades, including works by Kingsley Amis (1922-1995), John Braine (1922-1986), John Wain (1925-1994), and Alan Sillitoe (1928-2010), who are now known as the Angry Young Men.

Social issues that occasioned the protests of the Victorian novelists were largely resolved during the last decades of Victoria’s reign, ceased to have the same importance in the years when Edward VII was monarch (1901-1910), and, except for the extension of the voting franchise to women (1928), became legally moot in the early years of George V’s reign. A divergent set of social issues replaced them for twentieth century novelists such as John Galsworthy (1867-1933), H. G. Wells (1866-1946), Arnold Bennett (1867-1931), and George Moore (1852-1933). Galsworthy, for example, captured the decline and disintegration of Victorian/Edwardian pillars of the middle class into the “lost generation” of the 1920’s, and in so doing raised lapsarian questions that contribute to a “modernist” sensibility. Wells, apart from his socialist propaganda, also examined the possibilities of dehumanization and the inevitable destructiveness of the retrograde evolution of English class, social, and scientific structures. Bennett and Moore, like Galsworthy, pilloried the bourgeoisie and Victorianism generally, and both imported techniques from the French naturalistic novel to do so. Although French and other Continental writers exerted considerable influence on the cultural development of the English novel from roughly the mid-nineteenth century onward (one finds such influences extending from the novels of George Eliot to those of Henry James), it is noteworthy that the anti-Victorian writers should employ the naturalistic technique of Balzac and Zola in their novelistic experiments.

The form of the novel, as established in the eighteenth century, had evolved but had not drastically changed throughout the nineteenth century. With the influx of the French aesthetic, symbolist, and decadent literature in the 1890’s, and the experiments of Bennett and Moore, the stage was set for more radical experiments with the English novel, experiments that centered primarily on the traditional focus of the novel, character, and subordinated all else to it. One must look to the Anglicized American, Henry James (1843-1916), as a primary source for the experimental novel, even if James did remain clearly within the confines of the English novelistic tradition. By emphasizing such elements as angle of narration, the capturing of actual experience and the way people are, the primacy of individual psychology, and the disappearance of the traditional hero, James prepared the way for further experiments by Joseph Conrad, James Joyce (1882-1941), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930), and Lawrence Durrell (1912-1990), among others. In their fiction variations on the modernist questions of ultimate meaning, individual responsibility, and elemental issues of guilt, moral alienation and dehumanization, and atonement find enduring expression as each writer searches for individual answers to similar questions. Whether the scope of the search is global, as in Conrad’s settings throughout the empire, or intensely local, as in Joyce’s Dublin, Lawrence’s Nottinghamshire, or the mind of Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, it is the same inner search. In the light of the experimental novels of the twentieth century, *Tristram Shandy* no longer seems the oddity it once appeared to be.

Differing from the vast quantity of twentieth century English novels written in the authorized veins of bourgeois or antibourgeois traditions, the abundant novels of adventure, detection, mystery, romance (in all senses), espionage and humor—all forms in which society is reflected and sees itself—the experimental novel provided a different sort of novelistic focus, the novel of social criticism and satire in which the protagonist is no longer concerned with a place in society but is, as his or her American cousins have been since the days of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, most frequently an outsider who seeks to preserve and justify alienation from a disordered and dissolving society and culture. Set adrift from intellectual, social, religious, and cultural stability and identity, the interbellum generation (1918- 1939) and the postwar or postmodern generations consistently emphasize the futility of human community under the social contract. Not only the Angry Young Men but also their predecessors, successors, and contemporaries such as Ronald Firbank (1886-1926), Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966), George Orwell (1903-1950), William Golding (1911- 1993), Graham Greene, and John le Carré engage in social criticism and satire that ranges from assailing the societal, mechanistic, technocratic trivializing of human dignity to asserting the necessity of a solitary quest for personal ethics in an era that lacks an ethical superstructure and in which organized religion is one among many residual elements of limited use.

Multiculturalism in the Novel

Beginning in the last half of the twentieth century, a reinvigorated strain of fiction came to reflect the growing ethnic diversity of England’s people and their multicultural character and global concerns, as many Commonwealth writers and expatriates chose England as their residence and principal forum. In addition, the growing genre of postcolonial fiction gave writers from the former British colonies new themes, genres, and readers. Three writers of the 1980’s amply illustrate this diversity. Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki in 1954; his family moved to England in 1960. Ishiguro’s first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), is narrated by a Japanese widow, a survivor of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, who is living in England. *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) is the story of an old Japanese painter oppressed by guilt over the prostitution of his art in the service of Japanese imperialism. With his universally acclaimed third novel, *The Remains of the Day* (1989), winner of the Booker Prize, Ishiguro made a bold leap; here his first-person narrator is an English butler in the mid-1950’s, a figure at once comic and poignant. The first-person narrator of *When We Were Orphans* (2000) is also an Englishman, but one who grew up in colonial Shanghai in the 1930’s. *The Unconsoled* (1995) is Ishiguro’s exploration of a dreamscape so ambiguous that it thoroughly upsets traditional narrative concepts. The main character, Mr. Ryder, finds that his conflicted past and his insecurities about his future transform everything he encounters into a surreal dream of reality. This defamiliarization from the real is one of the universal themes that Ishiguro gravitated toward in rejection of the earlier emphasis on the lapse between Japanese and English cultural identities. In either case, his fiction cautions that “we tend to think we’re in far more control than we are.” This confusion about identity and lack of control is fully realized in Ishiguro’s dystopian novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005), which won the Arthur C. Clarke Award for the best British science fiction novel of the year.

Salman Rushdie, born in Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1947, was educated in England. His novel *Midnight’s Children* (1981) views the partition of India and the creation of the independent Muslim state of Pakistan through the lens of Magical Realism. The novel was chosen, on the fortieth anniversary of the Booker Prize, as the Best of the Booker, the best of the novels ever to have won the coveted prize. *Shame* (1983) covers much of the same territory. Rushdie achieved international notoriety with his Joycean novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), a great wheel of a book that was condemned by Muslim fundamentalists for what they considered blasphemous treatment of the Qurãn and of the life of Muhammad. In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), a children’s book written for adults as well, Rushdie, threatened with death and forced into hiding, answers his critics with a celebration of storytelling and the unconstrained imagination. His return to the context of improbable reality in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995) offers readers a heightened emphasis on storytelling as a theme. Rushdie returned to the theme of partition with *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), set in Kashmir, but he set *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008) squarely in the fifteenth century, in Italy, and in the realm of fantasy.

V. S. Naipaul (1932-2018), a Trinidadian-born British writer whose heritage is Indian, is a leading figure in postcolonial literature and the winner of the 2001 Nobel Prize in Literature. His novella,*In a Free State* (1971), the first book by a writer of Indian descent to win the Booker Prize, is set in a newly independent East African country, modeled on Kenya, which became independent from Great Britain in 1963. *A Bend in the River* (1979), also set in Africa, is narrated by an Indian shopkeeper who fits in neither with the Africans nor with their former colonizers. In *Half a Life* (2001) and its sequel *Magic Seeds* (2004), Naipaul depicts an Indian writer who moves to London and then to Africa. Naipaul has been criticized by postcolonial theorists for his apparent sympathies with the colonizers rather than with the colonized, but his Nobel citation praised him “for having united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories.”

Women writers have used fiction to tell neglected stories in multicultural Great Britain. Beryl Gilroy (1924-2001) was born in what was then British Guyana, now the independent nation of Guyana. She traveled to Great Britain to study at the University of London, and she became a teacher, a psychotherapist specializing in the needs of black women and children, and a writer. Her first novel for adults, *Frangipani House* (1986), is set among the elderly in Guyana, and *Boy-Sandwich* (1989) depicts the experiences of young black boys in Great Britain’s large cities. Bangladeshi British author Monica Ali (born 1967) shows the struggles faced by women in London’s Bangladeshi neighborhoods in *Brick Lane* (2003), which was adapted as a feature film in 2007. *White Teeth* (2000), by Zadie Smith (born 1975), is about the moral and psychological struggles of immigrants, and her *On Beauty* (2005) explores the life of a mixed-race family.

Less emphatically concerned with diversity issues, A. S. Byatt (born 1936) and Julian Barnes (born 1946) seem to have inherited the position of authorial status occupied by the writers of the 1950’s through the 1970’s. Their novels exhibit such sophisticated strategies that in some cases, such as Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984) and *Arthur and George* (2005), they are considered “post-postmodern.” Byatt’s works tend to focus on intellectual problems characteristic of past eras, such as allegorical representation common to the Renaissance, evidenced in *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), and deistic wrangling over biblical stories, in *Babel Tower* (1996). Byatt translates these pedantic puzzles into contemporary English life, providing relevance for both the society she writes about and the history of ideas that influences them. She often combines modern and historical characters in one novel, as in the Booker Prize-winning *Possession* (1990) and *The Biographer’s Tale* (2000), both of which tell the stories of intellectual figures from history and the scholars who study them.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Ian McEwan (born 1948) emerged as one of the leading writers of the English novel. The author of several novels as well as short stories, screenplays, poetry, a play, an opera, and books for children, he won the Booker Prize for *Amsterdam* (1998), a novel about a composer and a newspaper editor struggling with moral questions, hatred, and vengeance. A feature film adaptation of *Atonement* (2002), McEwan’s most popular work, was released in 2007. This novel also deals with the consequences of making moral missteps. His 15th novel *Machines Like Me* was published in 2019.

The English novel, then, to paraphrase William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet,* holds the mirror up to society and shows the very age and body of the time, its form and pressure. Even a brief sketch of the varied patterns of societal influences on the development of the English novel demonstrates that the novel is of all literary forms the most responsive to the changing emphases of an evolving society. Whether in overt reaction to the values of a society, in praise of them or in criticism of them, the novel consistently presents the society as the individual must confront it, explains that society to itself, and helps society to define itself.