Literature at the Turn of the Century (1890 - 1918)

Late Victorianism

The last decade of the nineteenth century saw the development of a number of movements which amounted to a rejection of the principles of Victorianism. Early Victorian writers, responding to the social changes due to the shift from an agricultural to an industrial society and the decline of traditional religious beliefs, adopted a moral aesthetic and maintained that literature should provide fresh values and an understanding of the newly emerging society. Novelists such as Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot examined complications of forming a personal identity in a world in which traditional social structures were breaking down. Social mores were their subject and realism their form of expression.

By the 1870s, opposing what by now was perceived as a repressive aesthetic, writers began to reject any obligation to produce moral art, as exemplified in the theoretical works of Walter Pater, such as *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). In fiction, this impulse took various forms, among them a return to prose fantasy as displayed in the works of Robert Lewis Stevenson (*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, 1886) and Lewis Carroll (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865). In his dystopian novel *Erewhon, or, Over the Range* (1872), Samuel Butler criticized the stringent morals of his time. The late Victorian period also saw a more searching realism, accompanied by the emergence of the so-called 'problem novel' in which the institution of marriage and traditional relations between the sexes were re-examined. In the words of the novelist George Gissing, it was an era of "sexual anarchy"; an era in which the laws governing sexual identity and behavior were no longer valid. The 'fallen woman' was replaced by the 'new woman.' Once the door closed behind Ibsen's Nora, social structures oppressing women became the theme of plays by Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, and novels by George Moore and Thomas Hardy.

One of the most widely read and respected English novelists, Hardy created an important artistic bridge between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The influence of Charles Darwin's recently published *Origin of Species* (1859) on his thought, and his subsequent loss of orthodox religious faith affected all of his writings. Although his novels were uneven in skill, when he stayed in the rural settings of his youth and focused on relations between the sexes, they took on a tragic power rarely equaled by other English novelists. He is credited with introducing fatalism into Victorian literature -- a pessimistic assessment of humanity's ability to cope with a changing social environment. In two of Hardy's final novels, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1896), his bleak and open treatment of sexuality and marriage caused such an outrage among the puritanical Victorian public that he was deeply disillusioned. Hardy abandoned fiction, and for the rest of his life wrote only poetry.

At about the time Hardy was active as a novelist, the French writer Emile Zola formulated a branch of literary realism called naturalism, which reflected many of Hardy's concerns as a novelist. The terms naturalism and realism are often used almost interchangeably, but there is a significant distinction between them: while naturalists supported the realists' aim of careful observation and mimetic depiction of the outer world, their view of the human condition and specific method of writing was strongly indebted to advances in the natural sciences, specifically the impact of Darwin's theory of evolution. In their biologistic view, the human animal was a creature conditioned by influences beyond his or her control and therefore largely devoid of free will or moral choice; a creature shaped by external factors such as heredity, environment, and the pressure of immediate circumstances. In this respect, the premises of the naturalists have gained a reputation for pessimism. Their method was indebted to the natural and social sciences as well: according to Zola, the writer was to work as an objective 'experimenter' whose function was to observe and record the chain of cause and effect dispassionately and impersonally, without moral judgments. A further formative influence on naturalism can be found in the social consequences of the Industrial Revolution. The misery of the working classes in urban slums became one of the naturalists' favorite themes in analyzing the human condition.

A rebel Victorian novelist who was strongly influenced by naturalism was George Gissing. In *New Grub Street* (1891) and *The Nether World* (1889), Gissing portrays the grinding effects of poverty. The subjects of many of his twenty-two novels were the poor and the shabby genteel, a world earlier described by Dickens but treated more seriously by Gissing. Gissing's arguably most memorable novel, however, *The Odd Women* (1891), dealt with the new woman, this time as an 'odd' or unmarried woman -- the feminist Rhoda Nunn, whose principles are tested by the attractive ex-radical, Everard Barfoot. In an interesting twist of literary convention, a woman who does not 'fall' dies in childbirth, and the new woman adopts the child. Gissing's work marks a transition from Victorian realism to a grimmer realistic mode. He was influenced by French and Russian novelists, but English Victorian propriety denied him the freedom of literary naturalists on the continent. He wrote about and lived among the lower classes, but at the same time he was not one of them, and his ideal remained the life of scholarly seclusion evoked in *By the Ionian Sea* (1901) and his last novel, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903).

Naturalism was prominent in drama as well. 'Free' theaters were established throughout Europe for the presentation of naturalist plays, exploring new techniques of acting and production and making use of the potential of artificial lighting. The unsavory, often shocking, but theatrically effective products of naturalism found an expression in the title chosen by George Bernard Shaw for a collection of his dramas, *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* (1898). Shaw began his career as a novelist, publishing in socialist journals. He was active in socialist and anarchist political movements, and in 1883 he became a founding member of the Fabian Society, an influential socialist organization. Although his novels found little favor with the critics and the public, Shaw began to reach a wide audience through his magazine articles and reviews. His first play, *Widowers' Houses*, was produced in 1892 and was followed in rapid succession by *The Philanderer* (1893), *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893), *Arms and the Man* (1894), *Candida* (1893), and *You Never Can Tell* (1895), which were all published together in *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant*. To make his published plays more accessible to the reading public, Shaw added novelistic stage directions and lengthy prefatory essays revealing his mastery of English prose. During the first decades of the twentieth century, Shaw wrote his greatest and most successful plays: *Man and Superman* (1904), *Major Barbara* (1905), and *Pygmalion* (1913). Although Shaw won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1925 and went on writing plays almost until his death at the age of 94, none of the later plays enjoyed the same kind of success as these earlier works. His influence on twentieth century drama, however, was profound, revolutionizing the overwhelmingly melodramatic Victorian stage with dramas of ideas.

Another form which the reaction against Victorianism took was the literary movement known as 'decadence.' An early influence on the movement was the erotic poetry of Algernon Charles Swinburne, which shocked the Victorian reading public in the seventies and eighties. The preoccupation with sensation shown by Swinburne and Dante Gabriel Rossetti led to the literary decadence of the 1890s, epitomized by Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé*, which he wrote in French for the actress Sarah Bernhardt in 1893. This was followed by Wilde's most famous play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895).

In its ideology of 'aestheticism,' a belief in the notion of art for art's sake, decadence was also a reaction against naturalism. In literary history, the term decadence specifically applies to a late nineteenth century movement marked by supposedly amoral sentiments, extensive use of sensual or exotic imagery, and aestheticism. A number of the principles of decadence are reflected in Wilde's famous novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Aestheticism was cultivated in particular by the circle of writers associated with the Rhymers' Club and the periodical *The Yellow Book* (1894-97) (which also published the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley), among them Wilde, Arthur Symons and Ernest Dowson. It is this group of writers more than any other which is associated with the turn of the century: the term *fin de siècle* in art and literature is applied primarily to the movements of decadence and aestheticism.

The Twentieth Century

No sharp dividing line separates the nineteenth from the twentieth century. One of the most highly respected poets of the twentieth century, for example, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, was a member of the Rhymers' Club during his early twenties. His fame goes beyond his association with this literary movement, however, and in his later years his early aestheticism was replaced by a commitment to social truth and responsibility and a dedication to the Irish cause. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1922. Yeats was considered the greatest poetical influence of the time by T. S. Eliot, whose "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1909-11) is regarded as the first significant "modernist" poem.

Until the outbreak of World War I, prose fiction also continued to dominated by a group of writers who had already achieved distinction during the nineteenth century, among them Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, H. G. Wells and Henry James, who became a British citizen shortly before his death. Except for Hardy, who abandoned the novel in disgust after the critical reception of *Jude the Obscure*, all remained extremely active in fiction. H. G. Wells's most famous science fiction novels, for example, among them *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Invisible Man* (1897) and *The War of the World* (1898), all appeared in the last years of the nineteenth century. Although Wells later wrote a number of serious novels in the naturalist tradition, all but forgotten now, his early science fiction continues to be enjoyed by a wide audience.

By contrast, the Anglo-American Henry James was a writers' writer, psychologically penetrating and technically innovative. His recurring theme was the innocent American abroad, but he made of this seemingly simple story numerous personality studies of psychological complexity. In the words of Joseph Conrad, he was "the historian of fine consciences," especially those of women--wealthy young Americans seduced by the culture and duplicity of Europe and European men, like Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). In these studies, he develops the restricted point of view consistently, characterizing his figures through effective dramatic scenes. His use of ambiguity through layers of narrative perspective is unmatched, especially in his classic tale of the uncanny, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Three novels of the last phase of his career alone would probably have assured James' lasting fame: *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). His impressionistic examination of consciousness in these late novels laid the groundwork for the narrative technique of 'stream of consciousness,' a term coined by his brother, the philosopher William James. As a result, the experiments of modernism are deeply indebted to the work of James.

Joseph Conrad greatly admired Henry James, as did most of the important writers of the generation who followed him. Conrad's first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, appeared in 1895, but his most famous works did not appear until the turn of the century. In *Lord Jim* (1900), *Heart of Darkness* (1902), *Nostromo* (1904) and *The Secret Agent* (1907), Conrad proved himself a master of intricate structure, sustained irony and the sophisticated manipulation of point of view. Conrad often employed a narrator who filtered all the action for the reader, but in *Nostromo*, considered by many to be his finest novel, he dispensed with this technique. He was particularly adept at delineating the suffering consciousness, and besides the clash between native cultures and European civilization, his subjects were the effects of isolation and moral deterioration on the individual.

Another primary concern of writers of this period was sexuality and sexual mores. Above all it was D. H. Lawrence who abandoned the traditional concerns of the English novel -- manners and morals and society -- to portray sexual relations as a decisive element in human behavior. As a result of his frank portrayal of his favorite subject, two of his major novels, *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), were temporarily banned. Lawrence's forthright depiction of sexuality, however, was an integral part of his crusade against the constricting and sterile values of modern civilization. His importance, and his continuing fame, depend less on technical accomplishments than on his subject matter. His earlier novels such as *The White Peacock* (1911) and *Sons and Lovers* (1913) did not go beyond the bounds of what was deemed acceptable, but with the publication of *The Rainbow*, Lawrence's name began to be associated with sexual license and literary scandal. Methuen, the publisher, was prosecuted and all the copies of the novel were confiscated. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Lawrence's last major novel and an expression of his belief in the possibility of personal fulfillment through sexual relations, was not published in England in an unexpurgated edition until 1961.

The novelist E. M. Forster was also concerned with questions of sexuality in his novels, although in his works the subject receives a much more subtle treatment than in Lawrence's. The only novel he ever wrote which treated the subject of homosexuality frankly, *Maurice* (pub. 1971), did not appear until after his death. Forster began his literary career in 1903 as a writer for *The Independent Review*, a liberal periodical with anti-imperialist sympathies. His first novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), explored the emotional and sensual deficiencies of the English upper middle class, a theme he was to repeat in the novels that established his reputation as one of England's leading novelists, *A Room with a View* (1908) and *Howard's End* (1910). The last novel he wrote, *A Passage to India* (1924), is probably also his most enduring. It is both an examination of the social codes and barriers that thwart communication and frustrate human feeling, as well as sharp diagnosis of the less than perfect relationship between the Indians and their English overlords. He eventually gave up writing novels because, as he suggested, of the obligation to write about marriage.

Forster was a member of the Bloomsbury group, the most important member of which was Virginia Woolf. Woolf was instrumental in the development of modernism. Her first two novels *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919), were conventional in form, giving little hint of the experiments to come, but in 1919 she also published the essay "Modern Fiction," which anticipated her later experiments and served as a manifesto of literary modernism:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad of impressions -- trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms [....] Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?

Woolf later playfully asserted that "in or about December 1910" -- the date of an important exhibit of modern French art -- "human nature changed." This statement emphasizes how the modernist impulse in literature paralleled anti-traditionalist movements in 'modern' art, beginning with cubism and abstract art in the early years of the new century. Modernism was influenced as well by developments in psychology and anthropology, especially the work of Freud and Jung and Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890); it stressed the active role of the unconscious mind and the importance of the irrational, and made use of myth as thematic material. The pioneers of literary modernism in prose, notably Woolf and James Joyce, rejected traditional narration, replacing it with impressionistic techniques such as stream of consciousness, in which internal experience rather than outward 'reality' is the focus and conventional chronology and causality all but vanish.

For at least a century, realism had been the dominant literary mode in the Western world. When in the twentieth century theoretical physics began to question the causal model of the universe and made room for the random and the relative in the dominant world view, realism ceased to be a compelling force as a literary doctrine. It was not until the 1920s, however, that the framework of the Victorian novel was disrupted for good with the appearance of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, both published in 1922. In these seminal works of literary modernism, the rejection of traditional literary forms and values of Victorian literature begun in the last decade of the previous century is complete, establishing the narrative techniques which will be integral to twentieth century literature.