

# The Twentieth Century

54. The Social Background
55. The Literary Background – Trends in 20th Century Poetry, Novel, Literary Criticism and Drama
56. 20th Century Poetry – The Edwardians or The Transitional Poets – The Georgians and W.B. Yeats – Imagism – Inter-War Poetry and T.S. Eliot
57. The Novel – English Novel before the War – Joseph Conrad – The Inter-War Novel – D.H. Lawrence – Stream of Consciousness Novel – Virginia Woolf and other Women Novelists
58. Drama – Prose Drama and Galsworthy – Poetic Drama and T.S. Eliot – Some Other Dramatists.
59. Literary Criticism – T.S. Eliot as a Critic
60. Essay and Miscellaneous Prose

## SOME IMPORTANT DATES

1901. Accession of Edward VII
1910. Accession of George V
- 1914-1919. World War I
- 1939-1944. World War II
1936. Death of George V – Accession of Edward VIII and his Abdication – Accession of George VI
1953. Death of George VI – Accession of Elizabeth II

**Urbanisation and Its Evils.** The year 1890 may be regarded as a landmark in the literary and social history of England. It ushered in an era of rapid social change, and this change is to be noticed in every sphere of life. By the last decade of the 19th century, there was a complete breakdown of the agrarian way of life and economy. It meant the end of rural England, and the increasing urbanisation of the country. Industrialisation and urbanisation brought in their wake their own problems. There have risen problems like the problem of over-crowding, housing shortage, a significant increase in vice and crime, fall in the standards of sexual morality, and a rapidly increasing ugliness. The atmosphere has increasingly grown more and more somky and noisy, and city slums raise their ugly heads on all sides. There has been a loosening in sex taboos and an increase in sexual promiscuity, for public opinion does not operate at a check in a crowded city. Early 20th century poetry vividly reflects all these evil effects of industrialisation. Ennui and boredom of city life and its agonising loneliness are all brought out by poems like the *Waste Land*. However, the change has been beneficial in one respect at least; it has brought about a more healthy pattern in social relations. The Victorian ethics of competition and money-relationship has given place to a new concept of social responsibility and social morality. The new age has seen the emergence of the concept of the welfare state; the society or the state is now held responsible for education, health and well-being of the individual. "Dvorce today carries no moral stigma comparable to that of exploiting the poor, or of ill treating a child." The sphere of social morality, in terms of public good, has expanded at the expense of private morality.

**The Spirit of Questioning.** The century ushered in an era of moral perplexity and uncertainty. The rise of the scientific spirit and rationalism led to a questioning of accepted social beliefs, conventions and traditions. In matters of religion it gave rise to scepticism and agnosticism. No doubt there was much questioning, much criticism of traditional beliefs in the Victorian cra also, but the Victorian writer was not critical of the very fundamentals, of the very basis of his social and moral order. On the whole his attitude was one of acceptance. Dickens and Thackeray are both critical writes, but they criticise only a few evils inherent in their social system. Basically, they accept their way of life, and are proud of it. By the end of the 19th and the begining of the 20th century, we find writers, like Shaw, Wells and Galsworthy, criticising the

\* The novelist tried to delph deeper inside the character instead of studying physical appearance of the character. <sup>901</sup>  
 History of English Lit.

very basis of the existing social economic and moral system. As R. A. Scott-James puts it, "the 20th century has, for its characteristic, to put everything, in every sphere of life, to the question and, secondly, in the light of this scepticism, to reform, to reconstruct, — to accept the new age as new, to attempt to mould it by conscious, purposeful effort." The wholesale criticism of the existing order from different angles and points of view, often opposite and contradictory, has increased the perplexity of the common man. Baffled and at bay, he does not know what to accept and what to reject.

**Interest in the Sub-Conscious.** This atmosphere of perplexity, confusion and anxiety has been further accentuated by the long strides forward that the study of psychology has taken since the times of Freud. Freud emphasised the power of the unconscious to affect conduct. Intellectual convictions, he pointed out, were rationalisations of emotional needs. Human beings are not so rational as they are supposed to be; their conduct is not guided and controlled by the conscious, rather it is at the mercy of the forces lying buried deep within the unconscious. His followers, like Jung and Bergson, have carried Freud's formulations to their logical conclusion. In this way, a new dimension has been added to the assessment of human behaviour and more and more emphasis is being laid on the study of the unconscious. The abnormal is no longer regarded as a sign of degeneracy; it is now recognised that even the normal are abnormal and neurotic to some extent. This has had a profound influence on 20th century moral attitudes, specially in matters of sex. Thus Freud and his followers have shown conclusively that repressed sex instincts are at the root of much neurosis and other signs of abnormality. His theory of "the Oedipus Complex" has caused a sensation it is being freely exploited by 20th century writers. The study of the sub-conscious, even the unconscious, is a major theme of modern literature. Intellect is no longer regarded as the means of true and real understanding, an emphasis is placed on feeling and intuition. Rationalism, and along with it Humanism, is at a discount. T. S. Eliot, for example, rejects rationalism and pins his faith on the superhuman as contrasted with the purely human.

**Changing Pattern of Human Relationships.** As a result of the teaching of modern psychology, man is no longer considered as self-responsible or rational in his behaviour. The theory of the Oedipus Complex, mentioned above, has had a profound impact on private and family relationships. Jealousies are recognised where no such imputations would have been made previously. *Hamlet* has been interpreted by Eliot in terms of the "Oedipus Complex", it is the theme of one of D. H. Lawrence's major novels and mothers and supposed to be jealous of their daughters-in-law. Sexual renunciation has ceased to be a theme of literature, interest in sex-perversion has grown, and there is a free and frank discussion of sex. Victorian taboos on sex are no longer

operative. There is a break up of the old authoritarian pattern in family relationships, the assessment of the relative roles of the sexes has changed, woman has come to her own, and the notion of male superiority has suffered a serious blow. "The war of the generations", of the old and the young, has resulted in a re-orientation of parent-child relationship. The greater mobility resulting from the automobile and the railway train has also weakened the authority of the old over the young and increased the rootlessness of man. This root-lessness has brought in its wake its own problems and frustrations. Eliot's *Waste Land* reveals a harrowing consciousness of this phenomenon of 20th century city life.

**Revolt against Authority : Note of Anxiety.** The First World War further strained the authoritarian pattern of family relationships and increased tensions and frustrations. The reaction of the post-war world has been to suspect all manifestations of authority. It may be called an era of revolt against authority. Political and religious scepticism, general disillusionment, cynicism, irony, etc., have become the order of the day. The dictum "Power Corrupts" is a symbol of the revolt of the post-war generation. The temper of the age is "anti heroic," and "action" and "success" in a worldly sense have become questionable values. Interest has shifted from the "extrovert" to the "introvert". "Neurosis" and spiritual gloom are widespread. Economic depression, unemployment, overpopulation, acute shortages, etc., have increased the hardship of life, and caused stress and strains and nervous breakdowns. The hero in the inter-war novel is a person, to whom things happen; he is an "anti-hero", "a neurotic", a "cripple" emotionally, if not physically. There is an atmosphere of moral unease and uncertainty, a collapse of faith in the accepted patterns of social relationships and a search for new patterns.

**Collapse of Old Values and Ideals.** Though there has been an occasional revival of Christianity even in the orthodox forms, as in the works of T.S. Eliot and Graham Greene, the 20th century under the impact of science and rationalism has witnessed a gradual weakening of religious faith. Religious controversies no longer exercise any significant influence on public issues. Moral and ethical values are no longer regarded as absolute. Philosophy and metaphysics, instead of concerning themselves with the nature of God, show a keen interest in the study of the nature of man. To Freud man is a biological phenomenon, a creature of instincts and impulses; to the Marxist he is an outcome of economic and social forces. The pessimism and despair of the age is seen in the picture of man, "as but the outcome of chance collocation of atoms." Gone are the days of the Victorian optimism when man was regarded as essentially rational, acting in his best interests, which, his reason was supposed to teach him, were identical with social good. The same perplexity and uncertainty is to be seen in the field of political theory. Socialism and internationalism have replaced the old Victorian notion of the supremacy of the whites. The entire gamut of imperial relations has undergone a revolutionary change.

Nationalism is no longer regarded as enough, and imperialism has come in for great deal of criticism. The relations between the nations of the world must be based on equality and mutual respect and not on the old basis of political subjection and imperial supremacy. The empire instead of remaining a matter of pride, as in the days of Kipling and Tennyson, is looked down upon with a sense of guilt. Thus E. M. Forster in his *Passage to India* advocates relationships between nations, as well as between individuals, based on equality and the felling heart. Eliot advocates that England's literary isolation should end and he views English literature as a part of European literary tradition extending from Homer onwards. Cosmopolitanism is the order of the day, and emphasis is laid on the study of comparative literature, comparative mythology, religion, etc. Nationalism is thus in conflict with internationalism and efforts to reconcile the two have so far met with little success.

**Search for New Patterns.** The disintegration of faith and traditional beliefs has led writers like D. H. Lawrence, to seek refuge from uncertainty and perplexity, in some, "mystic religion of blood", and W. B. Yeats to build up a personal "System" out of a strange fusion of magic and occultism. T.S. Eliot searches for his pattern in the close similarity between myths of different people, and the European literary tradition. Authoritarian systems have found favour on the continent, and Marxism with its emphasis on class war has had a large following even in England. Marxism has provided many with the vision of a New Society which will replace the present one in the not too distant future. As Arthur Koestler emphasises, every period has its own dominant religion and hope, and Marxist Socialism has become the hope of the early 20th century. Marxism has had a profound impact on social organisation. The aristocracy, already degenerate and corrupt by the end of the 19th century, has lost practically all power and prestige with the turn of the 20th century. There has been an immense increase in social mobility, the profit motive is condemned, and prestige goes with merit and education, and not with birth. Attention has been focussed on social and economic problems, and planned development is favoured so that there may be no extreme poverty side by side with great wealth. Thus the search for a "system" or "pattern" has resulted in the emergence of Marxism and the concept of economic planning.

**Multiplication of Books : Decline in Quality.** The modern age has witnessed a phenomenal rise in literacy. Cheap books, magazines, papers, etc., have been pouring out in their tens of thousands with the result that the spread of education has been almost universal. However, there has been a visible decline in quality. The old culture of the people expressed in folk-song, dance, rustic craft, etc. has been destroyed. The cinema, the radio, the popular literature, full of crime or love stories, have exploited the people for commercial purposes. There has been an increase in vulgarity, brutality and coarseness. Human relationships have been coarsened and

cheapened; man has become incapable of finer and subtler emotional responses. Further, the cinema, the television, and the cheap novel have fostered a kind of day-dreaming and a proportionately weakened grasp of reality. "Many people live fantasy existences derived from the shadow lives of the screen." This lowering of tastes has had an adverse effect on art and literature. Bad art and cheap literature, "pot boilers", have become the bane of the new age. The exploitation of the youth for commercial (as well as political) purposes has tended to assign to them a spurious importance, and hence the antagonism of the old and the young has been accentuated. It has become a century of the revolt of youth. Vigorous experiments are being made in the field of music and other fine arts and literature, but this is a symptom of the break-down of cultural continuity rather than of cultural vigour.

### Modern Literature : Its Representative Character

Generally speaking, the modern writer is intensely conscious of his social *Milieu* does not fail to reflect it in his works. To what extent the new age is reflected in the literature of the period would be examined in the following chapter.



P.T.O.

The writer of this era searched for new patterns and new manners of expression. Marxism, Modernism, Post Modernism were attended by the writers and Aristocracy was degenerated by the end of the era. There was an experiment in Modern Era.