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# UNIT 1 THE ENGLISH NOVEL : MODERNISM AND AFTER

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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In the previous Block, we studied E.M Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924). In this Block we shall study a novel published in 1961. What happened to the development of the novel in the interim? What kinds of novels were written between the two World Wars and after?

This unit is an introductory one and it gives us a background to the modern English novel. It is about the major shifts in literary perspective which marked the fiction written after the Second World War. It also discusses the outstanding narrative modes of post-War fiction along with examples of prominent authors and texts. This Unit will give you a feel of the literature written during these times and will help you understand better the issues raised by Muriel Spark in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.

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## 1.1 BACKGROUND

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English literature of the early twentieth century is marked by a definite sense of transition. Two significant fiction writers, Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence, identified 1910 and 1915 respectively as the years when the human character changed and the old world order collapsed. From then onwards, we may say, the parameters of thought and writing underwent drastic changes, signalling the advent of Modernism.

Modernist writing exploded the long-preserved myth of universal human nature. It acknowledged the breakdown of the pre-industrial way of life and economy and was influenced by urbanisation, destruction of reason, and the resultant uncertainties of the first World War. These issues loomed large in the consciousness of the writers whose works reflected apocalyptic, crisis-centred views of history. Literature conveyed the sense of bleakness, alienation, disintegration, futility and anarchy that had engulfed the human psyche. As a result, undertones of extreme self-consciousness, introversion and scepticism crept into literature. Elements of the anti-representational came to the fore as poetry revelled in *vers libre* or *free verse* and the novel took to the stream-of-consciousness narrative.

The end of World War II brought about the birth of what W.H. Auden in 1947 called "the age of anxiety". The nightmarish realities of the battlefield had imprinted themselves on the psyche of man who had to come to terms with the destruction and desolation of the nuclear bomb, widespread massacres, new borders and fallen regimes. The sense of holocaust dominated the sensibility of the years that followed. The post-War world marked, in a way, the end of Modernism with the deaths of literary giants like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and

W.B. Yeats. A new strain of liberalism was born and Lionel Trilling, in his book *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), called for moral realism that would embody the tragic sense of life that literature should reflect.

In fiction lay the possibility of sensitive expression of human scepticism which was higher than politics and deeper than a social report. Literature saw the world in its human multiplicity and variety, and was capable of portraying the contradiction and ambiguity that lay beyond the parameters of ideology and certainty. One important aspect of this new strain of writing was the variability of human nature which novels dealt with against the characteristic backdrop of the working or lower middle-classes. The protagonists moved along in life imbued with a sense of alienation and beset by a sense of anguish.

Novelists and their protagonists were seen to possess a strange sense of purposelessness which prevented them from comprehending reasons for their existence. Samuel Beckett's writing, which initiated the "Theatre of the Absurd", went a long way in reinforcing this particular tendency which revolutionised trends in contemporary writing. The mathematical term "surd", which stands for what cannot be expressed in finite terms of number and quantity, came to symbolise the amorphous attitudes that the literature of the times tended to reflect and underlined the fact that realism was no longer a reliable entity.

We have to make a distinction here between the "old" *avant-garde*, which faded away in the 1940s and the "new" *avant-garde* which is postmodernist. Modernism in literature, to put it succinctly, reveals a breaking away from established patterns, traditions and conventions, and tries to offer fresh perspectives on the human being's position and function in the universe by experimenting greatly with form and style.

Postmodernism is an extension of the preceding trends and is rather amorphous in nature. Such writing consciously rejects symbols of authority and adopts an eclectic approach. It contains techniques like expressing random, unaccountable experiences that guide acts of creativity, parody and pastiche with their imitative undertones; and the element of chance also plays a significant role. The *nouveau-roman* and the anti-novel also surface as manifestations of postmodernism. Plot, action, narrative and analysis of character are often seen to be extraneous as the novel is taken to be a medium that portrays the individual version and vision of things. Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Samuel Beckett had shown post-War writers the way in this particular regard.

This gave rise to the allied cult of the anti-novel in which a sustained plot was absent and which was characterised by detailed analysis of objects, many repetitions, variations of the time sequence, and erratic beginnings and endings. The fiction of the 1950s was experimental and had shades of the anti-ideological and the realistic. Strong social concerns came to engross the attention of the fiction writers. Alongside these, we also notice that writers tended to place man within a community.

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## 1.2 MODES OF NARRATION

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In this section of the Unit we look at some of the most significant modes of fiction in the post-World War scenario. The outstanding exponents of these modes, along with their representative works, also find a mention within this section.

### 1.2.1 Narratives of Nostalgia

Fiction in Britain showed diversity and resilience in the 1950s. A kind of atavistic nostalgia impelled some writers to look for man's origins and his lost innocence, and displayed a yearning for the good, old days. These impulses were often mythologised and what emerged was a distinct distaste for civilisation, materialism, industrialism and progress, and a conscious creation of the cult of the "noble savage". William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), *The Inheritors* (1955) and *Pincher Martin* (1956), along with Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), belong to this category of fiction. They embody the timelessness of a myth representing the pessimistic vision of the human predilection towards evil which lies at the other end of innocence. Conversely, Aldous Huxley depicted a utopian way of life in *Island* (1966).

### 1.2.2 Roman-Fleuve

The *roman-fleuve* also achieved popularity as it consisted of a series of novels, each a separate, unified piece in itself, but interrelated as some characters reappear in each successive work. Initiated by Balzac and Zola, the tradition finds an exponent in C.P. Snow with his *Strangers and Brothers* sequence (1940-70), which is a document of English social history from 1925; in Henry Williamson's *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* (1951-69) in fifteen volumes; and Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1951-76) in twelve volumes.

### 1.2.3 Political Narratives

Political allegory was one of the modes that fiction turned to after the War. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) is one of the first of these works of the post-war era. It is ostensibly an animal fable but, between the lines, it satirizes the totalitarianism that threatened to engulf the world. The book is an allegory of Stalin's treachery with Trotsky, his betrayal of the revolutionary cause and his subsequent strategies for survival. In another novel, *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949), Orwell reiterates the same idea against a framework of power equations, the weapons of propaganda, the scheme of terror and authoritarianism. It is an example of the anti-utopian fable that contains the spirit of the perverted realism of the times.

John Osborne's play *Look Back In Anger* (1956) gave currency to the term "angry young man". This is used to describe protagonists who were not angry in the strict sense of the term but were only disgruntled with themselves and their shabby environment. Despite the writer vociferously disclaiming the label, the term has come to define those who choose to defy established norms and mores. Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim* (1954) is perhaps the best illustration of this sort of novel and the protagonist Jim's anger is directed both against himself, for being trapped, as against those who have trapped him in a world of hypocrisy and convention.

### 1.2.4 Narratives of Morality

The modern condition is portrayed sensitively in the works of Graham Greene. Set against seedy landscapes, his writing focuses on espionage, treachery, moral and political confusion that pervades the real world. Greene usually focuses on some ambiguous moral issue as "the heart of the matter" in his major novels. In *The Confidential Agent* (1939) it is pity, and later in *The Human Factor* (1978) it is gratitude. Greene, a Catholic, explained that the significance of religion in a novel lay in the fact that it upheld the factor of the human act in fiction and his post-war work is a testimony to this belief. Nihilistic undertones can also be identified in Greene's writing which often describes the strange effects of good causes and the self-destructive tendencies in the compassionate. *The Heart Of The Matter* (1948) and *The End of the Affair* (1951) are two examples of this proclivity or tendency.

### 1.2.5 Ironic Documentary

An outstanding exponent of ironic documentary—another post-war trend—is Evelyn Waugh. Resorting to parody and farce, he is a satirist whose characters value themselves a bit too highly and are then made to face absurd situations. Waugh can be considered the chief creator of "black humour" in modern British fiction. In *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957) is contained an account of an artist whose creative powers have deserted him and who undertakes a sea voyage to recover from this debility. Recovery comes in the form of hallucinations as he struggles to overcome the combined effects of personal ill-health, drugs and the rough seas. These hallucinations comprise the novel which is also a self-portrait of its creator; a Waugh/Pinfold entity that sees escape in these visions. Waugh's world is one of comic absurdity in which his characters lack psychological depth and live through chaotic situations that lie beyond any moral law. This technique serves to emphasize the sense of alienation and meaninglessness that characterise the modern world.

## 1.2.6 Comic Realism

Anthony Burgess, a Catholic like Graham Greene, is known for his comic realism and his interest in language and etymology. His chief thematic concerns were the sense of sin and a consciousness of disaster on the social plane. His two well-known works, *The Clockwork Orange* (1962) and *The Wanting Seed* (1962), are apocalyptic fables that satirise human absurdity. The former is set in a socialist society where, among other ills, language has declined and Alex, the hooligan narrator, is de-emotionalised with the result that his devotion to music, the aesthetic recourse of this otherwise violent personality, is lost forever and he comes to symbolise a typically conformist member of a socialist regime.

## 1.2.7 Voices of Women

The 1950s are marked by a proliferation of women writers whose works seem to rise from the changed realities following the catastrophic experience of the War. The post-war social, economic and cultural patterns radically altered the nature of reality for women, bringing in its wake new opportunities for them. The questions of identity, career, sexual and economic freedom, became issues for conscious decisions rather than being subjects for hope and speculation. Women novelists like Doris Lessing and Iris Murdoch reflect these concerns in their works. Their sensibility, transmuted with great finesse into their creations, is reflected in the ability to conceive women characters who neither totally conform to, nor are they in sustained conflict with, their masculine counterparts. They appear as personalities with an identity of their own and symbolise a microcosm of historical and personal conflicts that affect society. Muriel Spark's writing is also a testimony to this rich and diverse trend in twentieth century fiction.

Lessing's fiction usually takes up the concerns of identity and art in an environment where systems collapse and require an evolution of consciousness. Her first novel, *The Grass is Singing* (1950), is concerned with the conflict between White interests and Black survival in an Africa torn apart by apartheid. Her formidable five-volume "Children of Violence" sequence (1952-69) is an account of the protagonist's initial sense of non-existence in the flux of history to her gradual admittance and procurement of a place in it. The sequence takes up the contradictory concerns of being and nullification at the same time, thereby symbolising the predicaments of countless modern-day women. *The Golden Notebook* (1962) is a remarkable portrait of a woman for whom personal identity and a sense of incompleteness create a crisis of self. This crisis has wider connotations as it reflects the moral and intellectual crises of the age. Lessing's characters seem to be in danger of drowning in the collective political and psychological consciousness but are able to claw their way back from disintegration through a reintegration of consciousness.

Iris Murdoch's works, displaying her talent for humour, are marked by a sense of alienation, degeneration and protest. Her first novel, *Under the Net* (1954), contains debates about the nature of language through Jake, a writer cast in the mould of the anti-hero, who is concerned with his own silence and his equation with the world. He comes to symbolise the writer's interest in portraying a new moral philosophy that upholds the supremacy of good above all else. *The Sandcastle* (1957) is set against the background of an English school. The Headmaster has a brief extra-marital affair with an artist commissioned to do a painting for the school. Ultimately fear triumphs, as his sense of duty, obligation and socially-dictated pragmatism come in the way of any long-term commitment. Murdoch's characters either stand steadfast in their commitment and become morbidly grim or vacillate between experiences due to the absence of fixed patterns in their lives. In this contrast lies her philosophy of life which, by portraying the spectacle of human drama, emphasizes the nature and power of goodness.

Muriel Spark's novels are clever and entertaining as they reflect humour and irony. Not only does her writing arouse the reader's sensibility and emotion, but it also stimulates the intellect by piecing experience into patterns which characters identify with or seek to assimilate. The conflict between good and evil overshadows events as her fictive characters struggle to comprehend truth and values. Her latest novel, *Reality and Dreams* (1996), and almost all her other works are living testimonies of her philosophy of life. Aspects of her writing will be discussed in greater detail in Units 2, 3 and 4.

### 1.2.8 Detective Fiction

Another mode of fiction that deserves mention is the detective story. It involves crime, usually an insoluble murder, a variety of suspects, and a seasoned detective who finds the solution with impeccable logic and reasoning. A number of writers are known for this sophisticated form of fiction. Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham, Agatha Christie and P.D. James worked on certain basic formulas with necessary modifications and laid stress on characterisation and social comment. Others like Elisabeth Ferrari, Lionel Black and Colin Dexter experimented freely as they were influenced by the tough and ruthless detectives of the American crime novels and police procedures.

### 1.2.9 Vision Literature/Science Fiction

The "vision literature" of the Middle Ages, which explored the metaphysical world of heaven, hell and purgatory, saw its manifestation in the post-war era in the form of science fiction. It aspired to explore the unknown. The trend, set very much earlier by Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein* (1818), continued after the War and the spectre of the nuclear bomb haunted the minds of many. H.G. Wells' *The Shape of Things To Come* (1933) typified this kind of writing. Isaac Asimov wrote a wide variety of such fiction, notable amongst which is *I Robot* (1957). John Wyndham, in the 1950's, published a series of novels that amalgamated old-fashioned romance with modern science fiction by depicting ordinary people caught up in desperate struggles for survival. His outstanding contributions are *The Kraken Wakes* (1953) and *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957). Arthur C. Clarke is another major writer of the times and is specially known for *Childhood's End* (1953) and *The City and The Stars* (1956).

Modern fiction oscillates between voices that endeavour to explore new aesthetic avenues of expression and others that seek to critically represent contemporary life. David Lodge, in his book *The Novelist at the Crossroads* (1969), sums it up remarkably well by asserting that the novelist has arrived at a metaphoric crossroad as his/her legacy is a mixture of many trends and traditions. The writer has to choose between the traditional paths of realism or the untrodden ones of experiment. Despite misgivings, post-war fiction has thrived as an authoritative profile of artistic, cultural and intellectual viewpoints of the times.

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## 1.3 LET US SUM UP

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In this Unit we have read about the literary scenario after the two World Wars. We have looked at the subsequent emergence of the trends of Modernism and Postmodernism and have seen the immense variety and vitality that contemporary fiction displayed.

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## 1.4 QUESTIONS

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1. Trace the development of modern English fiction with specific reference to the major shifts in literary perspective.
2. Discuss the outstanding modes of British fiction written after the second World War.
3. Identify the essential features of fiction written by women during the post-war years.

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## 1.5 SUGGESTED READING

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1. Frederick R. Karl, *A Reader's Guide to The Contemporary English Novel*, London : Thomas and Hudson, 1972.
2. David Lodge, *The Novelist at the Crossroads*, London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971.
3. Malcolm Bradbury, *Modernism*, Penguin, 1991.
4. Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, Penguin, 1993.