

Historical Background

The Modern and Postmodern Periods (1901–Present)

At dusk on August 3, 1914, Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, clutching the telegram announcing the German invasion of Belgium, walked to the window, looked over a darkening London and said: “The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.” The next day, Britain declared war on Germany.

World War I and Its Long-Lasting Effects

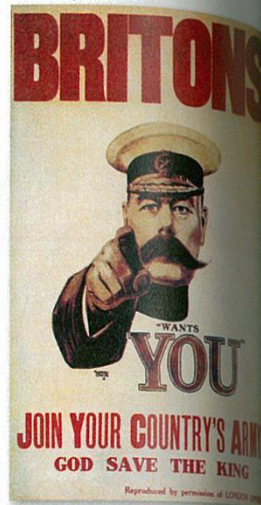
Many said that the war would be brief, with the troops coming home by Christmas. Instead, the war lasted four long years and 750,000 British soldiers never came home at all. World War I, and the flaws in the treaty with which it was finally settled, influenced much of what followed in the twentieth century.

Germany, for example, wanting to get Russia out of the war and thereby win a victory on the Western Front, transported Lenin to St. Petersburg. There, he led the Bolshevik Revolution that altered the course of Russian and European history.

The war also encouraged Irish nationalists to fight for independence in 1916 while the British army was engaged in France. Their attempted rebellion failed and deepened the hatred between the British and Irish. In 1922, the Irish achieved a measure of independence in the south, but fighting between Catholics and Protestants in the northern, British provinces prolonged the bloodshed for the rest of the century.

The Treaty of Versailles, which settled World War I, led to economic collapse and near-anarchy in Germany, paving the way for Hitler to exact revenge on the Allies.

The horrific slaughter of the war and the crippling effects of the Great Depression forced England into a passive role in the 1930s. Once the mightiest nation in the world, England looked on as a re-armed Germany amassed territory in Europe, and as Japan, perceiving Western powers as weak, occupied much of China.



World War I recruiting poster

TIMELINE

1901 Edward VII becomes king. ▶

1903 Orville and Wilbur Wright build first successful airplane.

1905 Germany Albert Einstein proposes theory of relativity. ▶

1914 Britain enters World War I ▶

1917 Austria Sigmund Freud publishes *Introduction to Psychoanalysis*.

1917 Russia Czar overthrown; Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, seize power. ▶

1918 Women over thirty achieve right to vote in Great Britain.

1920 India Mohandas Gandhi leads nonviolent protests.

1922 Irish Free State formed.

1922 James Joyce publishes *Ulysses*.

World War II and the Loss of the Empire

The aggression of Germany and Japan led inevitably to World War II. When Hitler's armies overran Europe, the English stood defiantly alone, shielded by the English Channel and the Royal Air Force. It was, Winston Churchill said, “their finest hour.”

In 1942, Russia blunted the German advance, America was in the war, and the tide turned against the aggressors. After nearly six years of struggle, England emerged from the war victorious, battered, and impoverished.

England's former colonies became independent countries. The Indian subcontinent, where Gandhi had led an independence movement, was divided into the nations of India and Pakistan in 1947.

The imperial British lion gave a dying gasp in 1956 when Britain, France, and Israel invaded Egypt to keep control of the Suez Canal. However, the United States intervened, the Egyptians kept the Canal, and British troops came home to a country ashamed of its government's actions.

Suez was forgotten in the cultural upheaval of the nineteen sixties when British fashion and British rock musicians carried the flag around the world in a kind of cultural conquest. Also, writers from England's former colonies were engaged in their own re-conquest, enriching English literature.

As the century closed, the violence in Northern Ireland seemed to be ending. Also, England pondered its involvement with Europe, not accepting the common currency, the Euro, but cooperating in drilling a tunnel under the English Channel.

Do Sir Edward Grey's words still have a prophetic ring? Many thought the lamps came on again when the Berlin Wall fell. However, countries cobbled together in the aftermath of World War I—Yugoslavia and Iraq—have been the sites of bitter conflict.



The Spitfire fighter played a major role in defending Britain during World War II.

Key Historical Theme: Conflicts and the Loss of Empire

- England emerged victorious but weakened from World War I, which influenced events in Europe for years to come.
- England was on the winning side in World War II as well, but it was weakened further and gradually lost all its colonies.

Essential Questions Across Time

A Time of Rapid Change (1901–Present)



What is the relationship between literature and *place*?

England in the twentieth century is, of course, a geographic place—an island nation ravaged and rebuilt to an unprecedented degree. It is also a geopolitical place—a “mother country” that stood as a land of hope and glory to many citizens of her far-flung empire. Lastly, it is a place of imagination, a realm of letters and literature fed by the ever-changing English language.

In what ways are the “three Englands” reflected in literature?

The Land Itself The English landscape was untouched by the terrible destruction of World War I. However, the real devastation was human, as an entire generation of young men was wiped out. The physical and psychological damage of the war is documented in poems by soldier poets.

Postwar Growth and Materialism The most obvious change in the landscape after the war came with the automobile. More people could afford cars, and ribbons of highway covered the landscape. Accompanying this economic growth was a materialistic attitude on the part of many, perhaps inspired by the war’s devastation. In his story “The Rocking-Horse Winner” (1926), D. H. Lawrence criticizes such materialism and reveals a stylish home as a place haunted by the need for “more money.”

World War II and the Blitz The Blitz, from the German *blitzkrieg*, “lightning warfare,” refers to the German bombing of English cities during World War II. Large sections of London were destroyed by bombs and rockets, but nothing could break what a song hailed as “London Pride.” Elizabeth Bowen’s story “The Demon Lover” reflects not so much the actual damage as

ESSENTIAL QUESTION VOCABULARY

These Essential Question words will help you think and write about literature and place:

generation (jen’ er’ a’ shən) *n.* all the people born and living at the same time

materialism (mə’ tīr’ ē’ əl’ iz’ əm) *n.* belief in comfort, pleasure, and wealth as the highest values

colonial (kə’ lō’ nē’ əl) *adj.* of or relating to the colony or colonies of a mother country

the psychological aftershocks of this assault. Her wartime London is truly a haunted place. From the ashes, a new London emerged. Other changes were more problematic. The mill and mining country of the north was no longer the economic heart of the country. Wealth concentrated in the south as banking and technology took command. The economic divide between the rusting north and the booming south grew wider as the century ended. The poet Ted Hughes, a northerner, portrays in his work a vision of nature as both glorious and cruel. That vision may be related to the north-south divide.

The England of Hope and Glory In addition to an economic divide, Britain felt the effects of racial and colonial divisions. In V. S. Naipaul’s story “B. Wordsworth,” England is the distant land of hope and glory to those living in colonial Trinidad, but the dream may be an empty one.

Until 1950, the typical English man or woman was seen as fair-haired, blue eyed, and Anglican. When people of color, British citizens from the former colonies, began to move to England, the English had to deal with unprecedented diversity. In “Midsummer XXIII,” Caribbean poet Derek Walcott writes about riots prompted by racial prejudice.

The Realm of the English Language Walcott also raises questions about the English language itself. To whom does the language and its literary tradition belong? Can writers from former colonies and elsewhere in the world find a home in that language and tradition? The evidence, starting with Walcott’s own brilliant work, indicates that the answer is yes.

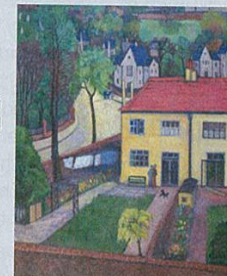
The BRITISH TRADITION

CLOSE-UP ON HISTORY

Planned Town, Unplanned Poet

Sir Ebenezer Howard (1850–1928) was a British social thinker who helped invent the concept of the suburbs. In *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1902), Howard described a new kind of planned town surrounded by a ring of farmland. This garden city, as he called it, would combine the advantages of a city with those of the country. Welwyn Garden City, one of the first examples, was built after World War I and inspired the “new towns” that the British government built after World War II. Howard’s ideas also inspired Walt Disney’s original design for the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT) in Florida.

Unplanned by Howard was the fact that Glyn Maxwell, a talented young poet and playwright, would grow up in a planned town. Humorously calling himself the “Shakespeare of Welwyn Garden City,” Maxwell often alludes to Welwyn in his poetry. He has also been known to stage what he calls “large pageant-like shows” in his parents’ garden. Given Maxwell’s skilled use of poetic forms, perhaps it is true that Sir Ebenezer’s talent for planning influenced him after all.



TIMELINE

1927: United States
Charles Lindbergh flies solo to Paris. ▼

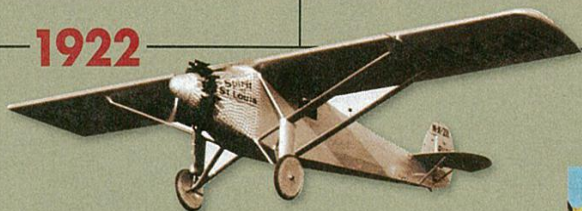
1939: Europe
Hitler invades Poland; World War II begins. ▶

1939: Britain enters World War II. ▼

1940: Winston Churchill becomes prime minister. ▶

1941: United States
Japan bombs Pearl Harbor; United States enters World War II. ▲

1922



1943



How does literature shape or reflect *society*?

In what ways did literature reflect new social freedoms?

Women as Bicyclists At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, the craze for cycling swept England and the Continent. Cycling required a drastic change in the way women dressed. The new freedom in clothing was, however, only a part of the change in pre-World War I England. The strongest social movement of the time was the campaign for women's right to vote. The Suffragettes, women who crusaded for the vote, chained themselves to buildings and went on hunger strikes when arrested. Their victory was slow in coming, but by 1918 women over the age of thirty could vote.

Women as Writers The work of novelist Virginia Woolf revealed a new freedom that women were finding in literature as well. Woolf's experimental fiction broke new ground, and her nonfiction explored the social conditions that would help women succeed in the arts.

The bicycle as product and the right to vote as principle were part of the century-long process of loosening the rigid rules of class, propriety, and morality that had bound the Victorians. This process applied to such areas as access to higher education, health care, marriage laws and customs for ordinary people and the monarchy, home ownership, pensions, and working conditions.

How did writers respond to social crises?

War and Social Change The war of 1914 put most questions of social change on hold, but the men who were "demobbed" (demobilized or discharged) and the women who had coped without them were not going to settle for the old ways. As soldier-poet Siegfried Sassoon wrote of one patrol, "night's misery is ended." However, the years-long "misery" of the war would not be forgotten by those who returned. The

aristocracy would have to make do with many fewer servants as men and women found work in new industries (automotive), new jobs (radio), and new forms of entertainment (movies). Higher hemlines and shorter hair signaled that women were freer than ever.

Writers and Politics Then came the 1930s, called by poet W. H. Auden "a low dishonest decade." Auden and fellow poets Louis MacNeice and Stephen Spender responded to such crises as The Great Depression and the Spanish Civil War. In that conflict, the Communist and Fascist tyrannies sparred, foreshadowing the conflict that would come in World War II. Especially shocking was the Nazi-Soviet treaty, a cynical pretense at peace by the totalitarian powers. Men and women on the left and the right were sickened by the callousness of it. Left-wing writer George Orwell, who fought in Spain, would later attack totalitarianism of all kinds in books like *Animal Farm* and *1984*.

Speeches and Poems When war broke out, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill rallied the people for the supreme effort required of them. His radio broadcasts and other speeches—"I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat"—were classics of their kind. The war indeed brought blood and tears, and the bombs and rockets made all the British combatants and casualties. Literary descendants of the World War I soldier poets, writers like Keith Douglas and Alun Lewis, recorded the cost of conflict.

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THE CHANGING ENGLISH LANGUAGE, BY RICHARD LEDERER

Britspeak, A to Zed

At the end of World War II, Winston Churchill tells us, the Allied leaders nearly came to blows over a single word during their negotiations when some diplomats suggested that it was time to "table" an important motion. For the British, table meant that the motion should be put on the table for discussion. For the Americans it meant just the opposite—that it should be put on the shelf and dismissed from discussion.

This confusion serves to illustrate the truth of George Bernard Shaw's pronouncement that "England and America are two countries divided by a common language."

When an American exclaims, "I'm mad about my flat," he is upset about his tire. When a Brit exclaims, "I'm mad about my flat," she's not bemoaning the puncture of her "tyre"; she is delighted with her apartment. When a Brit points out that you have "a ladder in your hose," the situation is not as bizarre as you might at first think. Quite simply, you have a run in your stocking.

With the increasing influence of film, radio, television, and international travel, the two main streams of the English language are rapidly converging like the streets of a circus (British for "traffic circle"). Nonetheless, there are scores of words, phrases, and spellings about which Brits and Yanks still do not agree.

TIMELINE

1943

1945: Japan The United States drops atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. World War II ends as Japan surrenders. ▼



1947: India and Pakistan gain independence.

1948: Middle East Israel established.

1949: China Mao Zedong establishes People's Republic. ▲



1955: United States Martin Luther King, Jr., leads civil rights bus boycott. ▶



1957: Russia Sputnik I, first satellite, launched.

1961: Germany Berlin Wall built.

1963: United States President John F. Kennedy assassinated. ▶



1964: Vietnam American involvement in the Vietnam War grows.

1964

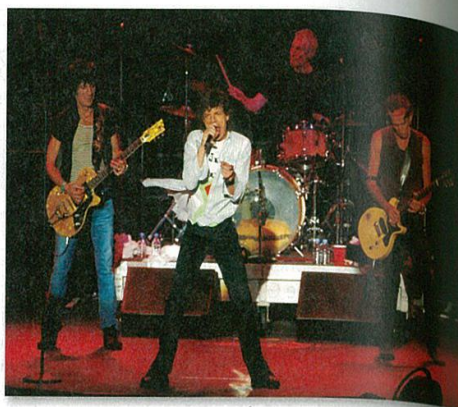
As soon as the war had ended, however, Churchill was voted out of office and the returning veterans and the survivors of the bombings demanded a new kind of welfare state. Recovery was slow and England was struggling when the twenty-five-year-old Elizabeth became Queen in 1952. She reminded many of Victoria, another shy young woman who had become queen more than a century before, and suddenly things looked brighter.

How did music and literature respond to social changes?

Music and Literature in the Sixties Things were at their brightest in the next decade: the swinging sixties. The Greek philosopher Plato once said: "When the modes of music change, the walls of the city are shaken." The walls were rocked by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Not as famous as these songwriters and singers, poets like Ted Hughes and Peter Redgrove nevertheless opened their minds and their styles to a wide range of new influences.

The pendulum slowed in the eighties. Margaret Thatcher, a Conservative Party member and the first female prime minister, reversed many of the socio-economic changes of the previous twenty-five years. Early in her administration, the army and navy crushed Argentina's attempt to seize the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic. This was the final flick of the imperial lion's tail. She was succeeded by fellow Conservative John Major, but the Labor Party came back into power with Tony Blair's election in 1997.

Literature Celebrates Diversity More capitalistic, more technological, and much more multiracial, the England of Tony Blair entered the twenty-first century in style. That style was maintained in literature as well, as Zadie Smith's acclaimed first novel, *White Teeth* (2000), welcomed the new millennium with a comic celebration of diversity.



The Rolling Stones in performance

ESSENTIAL QUESTION VOCABULARY

These Essential Question words will help you think and write about literature and society:

propriety (prō pri' ē tā) *n.* display of proper manners or behavior

aristocracy (ar i stā' krā sē) *n.* ruling class; nobility

fascism (fash' iz' əm) *n.* type of government ruled by one party, which puts down all opposition



What is the relationship of the writer to *tradition*?

In the twentieth century, the English literary tradition became more accessible and more inclusive. It was more accessible because inexpensive editions of books and the Internet made all of English literature instantly available for writers and readers. It was more inclusive because writers from the former colonies were now enriching the tradition.

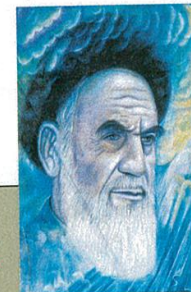
How did writers connect with and renew traditions?

Poet as Prophet It was an "outsider," for example, who, following the examples of Romantic poets Blake and Shelley, continued the tradition of prophetic poetry. Irish poet William Butler Yeats summed up the fears of the century in "The Second Coming": "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold . . ."

New Uses for Traditional Forms Twentieth-century writers found new uses for traditional forms such as the sonnet. In twentieth-century hands, the sonnet dealt with experiences undreamed of by the Elizabethans. The radical change in subject matter and tone can be seen by comparing sonnets written by two different World War I poets. The young and dashing Rupert Brooke wrote, in "The Soldier," of the idealism that spurred many of his generation. However, Wilfred Owen's sonnet "Anthem for Doomed Youth" tells what happened when those idealistic young men encountered the turmoil of the Western Front: "What passing bells for those who die as cattle?"

Echoes of Romanticism Although Ted Hughes's lyric "The Horses" differs in many ways from William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," we can still hear an echo of Wordsworth in Hughes's celebration of nature and his distrust of cities.

The Blossoming of the Modern Short Story The modern short story was invented in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, however, it became a global genre. Just a few examples will show how authors were setting their tales everywhere and anywhere in the world: James



TIMELINE

1964



1967: The Beatles release *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. ▲

1969: United States Apollo 11 lands on moon. ▼



1975: North Sea oil production begins.

1972: Britain imposes direct rule on Northern Ireland.



◀ 1977: Africa Djibouti, last remaining European colony, granted independence.



1979: Iran Ayatollah Khomeini overthrows Shah. ▶

◀ 1979: Margaret Thatcher becomes first woman prime minister.

1985

Joyce in the streets of Dublin, Joseph Conrad in the jungles of the Malay Archipelago, and Doris Lessing on the Rhodesian veldt.

The subjects of these stories are as varied as their settings. Joyce writes about the coming of age of an infatuated boy. D. H. Lawrence, in "The Rocking-Horse Winner," tells a chilling story of twisted love and destructive greed. Elizabeth Bowen's "The Demon Lover" links both of the World Wars in a few evocative pages. Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer deal with the thorny cultural and racial problems of a fading empire.

How did well-crafted poetry capture an unruly world?

A Sestina on "The Troubles" Poets Seamus Heaney, from Northern Ireland, and Derek Walcott, from St. Lucia, both use well-ordered poetry to express the world's disorder. In the sestina "Two Lorries," Heaney writes of the lingering violence in Ireland resulting from an incomplete separation, violence known as "the Troubles." At first glance, a sestina, with its intricate pattern of repeated end words, seems like the wrong form for capturing such a gritty reality. In this poet's hands, however, the repetitions evoke a repeated nightmare of violence that cannot be shaken.

In "Midsummer XXIII," Walcott writes about the violent racism experienced by people of color in "antic England." Like Heaney's, his poem is deeply rooted in the English poetic tradition—it is filled with allusions to earlier work—but also expresses bitter contemporary realities.

What happens to literary traditions in tumultuous times?

Traditions change, especially in times of conflict, but they also endure and connect a living present with a vital past. T. S. Eliot said that any individual talent is best understood in terms of the tradition within which that talent is working. Eliot, who served as an air-raid warden during the Blitz, wrote his poem "Little Gidding" during that dark time. This work links a perilous present to the literary past by invoking Shelley and Milton and the recently deceased Joyce and Yeats, a communion of writers. It invokes them at "the intersection of" a "timeless moment" that somehow contains both past and present—"the timeless moment" of a work of art.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION VOCABULARY

These Essential Question words will help you think and write about the writer and tradition:

inclusive (in klōō' sīv)
adj. tending to include; taking everything into account

evocative (ē vāk' ə tiv)
adj. calling up a particular image or reaction

allusions (ə lōō' zhənz)
n. indirect references



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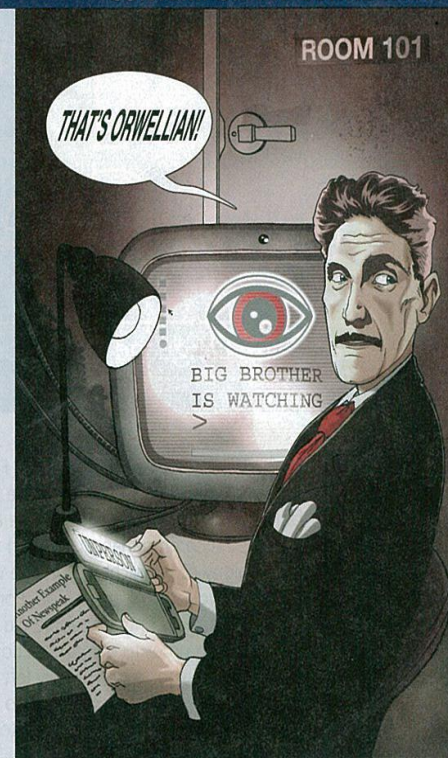
CONTEMPORARY CONNECTION

George Orwell: More Relevant Than Ever!

Big Brother, *Newspeak*, and *doublethink* are words that probably sound familiar because you hear them frequently. They were all coined in the 1940s by British author George Orwell for his novel *1984* (published in 1949). After World War II, Orwell was alarmed by a trend toward repressive totalitarian rule. Believing that language is the first weapon dictators use to seize power, he employed his own words as a warning. In the futuristic tyranny portrayed in his novel, words are used to obscure and destroy meaning:

- The official language, *Newspeak*, has been stripped of meaning.
- The tyrannical ruler is deceptively named *Big Brother*.
- Dissenters face torture in the innocently named *Room 101*.
- Citizens are adept at *doublethink*, the ability to accept blatant contradictions, as in the government declaration "War is Peace."

Sixty years later, these terms and others coined by Orwell still ring true. In fact, Orwell's own name is used as an adjective, *Orwellian*, to describe this kind of abuse of language. Pundits, reporters, citizens, and bloggers alike use Orwell's words to criticize Orwellian practices. The year 1984 has come and gone, but Orwell's words live on.



TIMELINE

1985

1986: Soviet Union
Nuclear accident occurs in Chernobyl. ▶



1989: Germany
Berlin Wall torn down; reunification of East and West Germany follows. ▶



1994: South Africa
Nelson Mandela elected president. ▶

1991: Eastern Europe
Soviet Union dissolved.

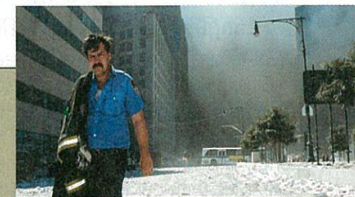
1997: United Kingdom
signs Kyoto Protocol against global warming.

1997: Tony Blair
becomes Prime Minister.

2001: United States Hijacked planes crash into the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and a field in rural Pennsylvania. Thousands of lives are lost. ▶



◀ **2004: Tsunami** devastates Southeast Asia.



Present