

Age of Hardy

A group of little geniuses followed by Age of Tennyson for forty years 1887-1928 are called Age of Hardy.

The Eighteen – Nineties

Oscar Wilde was attracted by the theories of Walter Pater especially on Aesthetic Movement. Wilde's wit was more than a display of verbal gymnastics. The fairy tales *The Happy Prince and other short stories* are blemished with sophistication. *De Profundis* and *the Ballad of Reading Gaol* are affecting one. He was incapable of absolute sincerity and simplicity.

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

The greatest novelist of the later Victorian period was Thomas Hardy. He has written tragedies.

Characteristics of Hardy's Writings

Hardy thinks that there is some malignant power which controls this universe, and which is out to thwart and defeat man in all his plans. It is especially hostile to those who try to assert themselves and have their own way. Thus his novels and poems are, throughout, the work of a man painfully dissatisfied with the age in which he lived. Hardy has created a fictional town "Wessex" through his novels. His novels exhibit *Destiny is Character*.

The great novels of Hardy are *The Woodlanders, The Return of the Native, Far From the Madding Crowd, The Mayor of Casterbridge, Tess of the D'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure*. Though most of Hardy's novels are tragedies, yet the role of tragedy becomes intensified in *The Return of the Native, Tess and Jude*.

The last chapter of *Tess* outraged the religious conscience of 1891; to-day it offends the aesthetic conscience by its violation of our critical sense of order and imaginative sufficiency. Hardy had said enough in *Tess* before the beginning of the last chapter. As it stands, the novel is a masterpiece, but it is scarred by an unhappy final stroke, the novel is a masterpiece, but it is scarred by an unhappy final stroke.

Jude the Obscure, though a very powerful novel is spoiled by Hardy's ruthlessness. At no time are Sue and Jude permitted to escape the shadowing hand of malignant destiny. They are completely defeated and broken. As a writer of tragedies Hardy can stand comparison with the great figures in world literature, but he falls short of their stature because he is inclined to pursue his afflicted characters beyond the limits of both art and nature. In the use of pathos Hardy is a past master. As for Hardy's style, his prose is that of a poet in close contact with things. In his evocation of scenes and persons, his senses bring into play a verbal incantation that relates him to the pre-Raphaelites. He describes characters and scenes in such a manner that they get imprinted on the memory.

The main contribution of Hardy to the history of the English novel was that he made it as serious a medium as poetry, which could deal with the fundamental problems of life. His novels can be favourably compared to great poetic tragedies, and the characters therein rise to great tragic heights. His greatest quality as a writer is his sincerity and his innate sympathy for the poor and the down-trodden. If at times he transgressed the limits of art, it was mainly on account of his deep compassion for mankind, especially those belonging to the lower stratum.

Poets of Transition

A. E. Houseman (1859-1936)

Alfred Edward Houseman was a great classical scholar. He wrote much of his poetry about Shropshire, which like Hardy's Wessex, is a part of England, full of historic memories and still comparatively free from the taint of materialism. Out of his memories of this place, Houseman created a dream world, a type of arcadia. His most celebrated poem, *Shropshire Lad and Last Poems* deals with the life of the Shropshire lad who lives a vigorous, care-free life.

Houseman was disgusted with the dismal picture which the modern world presented to him, but he did not possess a sufficiently acute intellect to solve its problems. However, in some of his poems he gives an effective and powerful expression to the division in the modern consciousness caused by the contrast between the development of the moral sense and the dehumanised world picture provided by scientific discoveries.

Robert Bridges (1840-1930)

Robert Bridges, though a twentieth century poet, may be considered as the last of the Great Victorians as he carried on the Victorian tradition. He is not a poet of the modern crisis except for his metrical innovations. Belonging to the aristocracy his work is also concerned with the leisured and highly cultivated aristocratic class of society. In his poetry we find beautiful descriptions of English landscapes, clear streams, gardens, songs of birds. Even his greatest poem, *The Testament of Beauty*, does not contain any consistent treatment of deep philosophy.

The importance of Bridges in modern poetry, however, is in his metrical innovations. He was lover of old English music and many of his early lyrics are obviously influenced by the Elizabethan lyricists, especially Thomas Campion. He was a remarkable prosodist, the first English poet who had a grasp of phonetic theory.

The lyrics of Bridges like *A Passer-By, London Snow, The Downs*, are marked by an Elizabethan simplicity. In the sonnets of *The Growth of Love*. In his greatest poem, *The Testament of Beauty*, he has given beautiful expression to his love for 'the mighty abstract idea of beauty in all things' which he received from Keats. Here he has also sought to 'reconcile Passion with peace and show desire at rest.' In his poetry Bridges thus transcended rather than solved the modern problems by his faith in idealism and the evolutionary spirit. He has no sympathy for the down-trodden and less fortunate members of humanity, and so whenever he deals with a simple human theme, as in the poem *The Villager*, he reflects the mind of the upper class which has lost touch with common humanity. Bridges is, therefore, rightly called the last *Great Victorian*, and his greatest poem, *The Testament of Beauty*, the final flower of the Victorian Spirit.

John Masefield who has been **Poet Laureate** has been composing poems for the last forty years, but he has not attained real greatness as a poet. As a young man he was a sailor, and so most of his early poetry deals with life at sea and the various adventures that one meets there. The poems which give expression to this experience are contained in the volumes *Salt Water Ballads* (1902) and *Ballads* (1906). In 1909 he produced his best poetic tragedy—The Tragedy of Nan. After that he gave up writing on imaginative themes, and produced poems dealing with the graver aspects of modern life in a realistic manner, e.g. *The Everlasting Mercy, The Widow in the Bye-Street Dauber, The Daffodil Fields*. All these poems narrate a stirring story with an excellent moral. Now he is looked upon as one of the 'prophets' of modern England.

Dramatists

George Bernard Shaw

The greatest among the modern dramatists was George Bernard Shaw. He was born and brought up in Ireland, but at the age of twenty in 1876 he left Ireland for good, and went to London to make his fortune. At first he tried his hand at the novel, but he did not get any encouragement. He read Karl Marx, became a Socialist, and in 1884 joined the Fabian Society which was responsible for creating the British Labour Party. He was also a voracious reader, and came under the influence of Samuel Butler.

Shaw wrote his plays with the deliberate purpose of propaganda. In most of his plays, Shaw himself is the chief character appearing in different disguises. Other characters represent types which Shaw had studied thoroughly. The only exceptions are *Candida*, *Saint Joan* and *Captain Shotover in Heartbreak House*. But mostly the characters in his plays are mere puppets in his hands taking part in the conflict of ideas. In all his plays he is a propagandist or prophet. He criticises mental servitude, moral slavery, superstition, sentimentalism, selfishness and all rotten and irrational ideas. As his plays are concerned with ideas, and he is a staunch enemy of sentimentalism, he passes by the subtler, finer elements in the individual, and fails to arouse emotions. But in spite of his being the severest critic of contemporary society, his inherent sense of humour, joviality and generous temperament produced no bitterness. His frankness and sincerity compelled the people to listen to him even when he provoked, exasperated and shocked many of them.

All the plays of Shaw deal with some problem concerning modern society. In *Mrs. Warren's Profession* Shaw showed that for the evils of prostitution the society, and not the procuress, was the blame. In *Widower's House* he again put the blame on society, and not on the individual landlord for creating abuses of the right to property. In *Man and Superman* Shaw dealt with his favourite theme that it is the Life Force which compels woman to hunt out man, capture and marry him for the continuation of the race. In *Getting Married* he showed the unnaturalness of the home-life as at present constituted. In *The Doctor's Dilemma* he exposed the superstition that doctors are infallible. In *John Bull's other Island*, the hero talks exactly like Shaw, and the Englishman represents the worst traits in English character. *Caesar and Cleopatra* has no particular theme, and that is why it comes nearer to being a play than most of Shaw's works. In *The Apple Cart* Shaw ridiculed the working of democratic form of government and hinted that it needed a superman to set things right. In *Back to Methuselah* he goes to the very beginning of things and forward as far as thought can reach in order to show the nature of the Life Force and its effect on the destiny of Man. It was in *St. Joan* that Shaw reached the highest level of his dramatic art by dealing in a tragic manner a universal theme involving grand emotions.

W. B. Yeats (1865 – 1939)

William Butler Yeats was one of the most important of modern poets, who exerted a great influence on his contemporaries as well as successors. He was an Irish, and could never reconcile himself to the English habits and way of thinking. Yeats was anti-rationalist. The important works of Yeats *The Land of Heart's Desire* and *The Countess Cathleen*.

John Millington Synge (1871-1909), who graduated from Dublin, spent a number of years among the peasants of Ireland. Synge exercises strictest economy in his plays, and he rarely admits a superfluous word. *His Riders to the Sea (1909)*, which is one of the greatest tragedies written in the twentieth century, is considered by some critics as too harrowing and ruthless.

His comedy, The Shadow of the Glen, aroused much protest because in it the heroine, an Irish woman, is shown as proving unfaithful to her husband. The people of Ireland could not tolerate this as they thought that Irish women were more virtuous than English women.

The Playboy of the Western World, in which he gave an impression that Irishmen were capable of glorifying as murderers, provoked riots. But it proved to be very popular because it gives an impressive representation of Irish peasant phrases which the author had heard on the roads, or among beggar women and ballad-singers around Dublin.

Sean O'Casey's play ***Juno and the Paycock*** (1925) which placed him, along with Synge, at the head of the Abbey Theatre dramatists. His later plays ***The Silver Tassie*** (1928) and ***Within the Gates*** (1933) are full of satire on modern society, especially its injustice to the under-privileged.

Lady Gregory (1852-1932) made several experiments in her dramatic work. Like Yeats she drew much of her material from the folk-lore of her country, and also wrote Irish historical plays. Her best known pieces are the ***Seven Short Plays*** (1909). The characters in her plays, who are mostly peasants, are more human than in the plays of Yeats or Synge, and the audience get a thrill of joy on account of the sweet savour of the dialogue.

Other Playwrights

J. M. Barrie did not belong to any school of dramatists. The best of his work is marked by imaginative fantasy, humour and tender pathos. His most characteristic and original play is ***The Admirable Crichton*** (1902), a drawing-room comedy in which the family butler is the hero

Barrie also wrote ***A Kiss for Cinderella***, a fantasy; *Dear Brutus* which tries to prove that character is destiny. In all these plays Barrie shows himself as a past master in prolonging our sense of expectancy till the end of the last act. Moreover, no one since the Elizabethan era, has so effectively suggested the close proximity of the fairyland with the visible world.

Barrie's last and ***most ambitious drama was The Boy David*** (1936) in which he has given a fine picture of the candid soul of boyhood. As the play deals with a story from the Bible, which is well-known, Barrie could not here effectively make use of the element of surprise, which is his strongest point in other plays.

John Galsworthy (1867-1933)

Galsworthy belonged to the front rank of the novelists of his time. He was exactly the contemporary of Arnold Bennet. In his novels he tried to hold the balance between opposed ideas or between characters with opposite tendencies. ***In his preface to The Island Pharisees***, Galsworthy contrasts these opposite elements in society. His novels which are collectively called ***The Forsyte Saga, The Man of Property*** (1906), ***The Country House*** (1907), ***Fraternity*** (1909) and ***in The Patrician*** (1919), ***In Chancery*** (1920), ***To Let*** (1921), ***The White Monkey*** (1924), ***The Silver Spoon*** (1930) are the famous works of Galsworthy.

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

Kipling's view of life and his range of subjects were rather similar to Conrad's. Like Conrad, he very much admired the strong, brave, silent man, but unlike Conrad's his is the slightly wistful admiration of the intellectual, who has wanted very much to be a man of action, and never succeeded in becoming one. He was born in India and after being educated in England he returned to India at the age of seventeen and became the editor of an Anglo-Indian paper. He derived the material for his early stories—***Plain Tales from the Hills, Under the Deodars. Soldiers Three*** from his experiences in India. Of his novels, the important are ***The Light that Failed*** (1890), ***The Naulakha*** (1892), ***Captain Courageous*** (1897), ***and Kim*** (1901). Like Defoe, he borrowed from all great writers, and his opening sentences are the most wonderful in literature.

H. G. Wells (1866-1946)

Among the writers of twentieth century Herbert George Wells was the greatest revolutionary, Wells was the first English novelist who had a predominantly scientific training, and who was profoundly antagonistic to the classics.

The novels of Wells fall into three divisions:

- **scientific romances**
- **Domestic novel,**
- **Sociological novels.**

Scientific romances, Wells stands unrivalled; they are masterpieces of imaginative power. His first scientific romance was *The Time Machine (1895)*, in which the hero invents a 'time machine', which enables him to accelerate the time consciousness and project himself into the future. Here is also described in a most vivid manner the grim picture of the earth divided between a master race and their resentful serfs, the Marlocks, belonging the sub-race.

His next work, **The War of the Worlds (1898)**, deals with the theme of the invasion of the earth by the people living on the planet Mars. They spread destruction by the use of a death-ray, but they are ultimately defeated on account of their lack of immunity from bacteria. In this way the earth is saved.

The other scientific romances written by Wells were *The Island of Dr. Moreau (1896)*, *When the Sleeper Wakes (1899)*, *The First Man in the Moon (1901)* and *The Food of the Gods (1904)*. These were the most exciting scientific thrillers which ever appeared in English fiction, and in them Wells anticipated various forms of warfare including the atom bomb.

Wells then turned to **Domestic Fiction**. He was thoroughly familiar with the life in London suburbs, which he described with enthusiasm in *Kipps (1905)*, a comedy of class instincts. This novel is full of satire and humour typical of Wells. In *Tono Bungay (1909)*, Wells gives a most remarkable picture of the disintegration of English society in the later nineteenth century and the advent of the new rich class. In *Anna Veronica (1909)* which is the full-length study of a modern young woman. There is the first attempt in English fiction at a frank and open treatment of sex relationship. *In Love* and *Mrs. Lewisham (1910)*, and *The History of Mr. Polly (1910)*, Wells gives us realistic, humorous and sympathetic studies of the lower middle class life, with which he was quite familiar.

He then started a series of **Social Novels** dealing with great social problems confronting the men of his time. This series includes *The New Machiavelli (1911)*, which is a study of political and sociological creeds in the guise of a biography; *Mr. Britling sees it Through (1916)*, a study of the reaction of the people to the First World War; *The Undying Fire (1919)* which is a religious and satiric fantasy; *Mr. Blettsworthy on Rampole Island (1928)* and *The Autocracy of Mr. Parham (1930)*, an attack on capitalism.

Wells believed that human civilisation can survive only if people discipline their instincts by means of reason. He also visualised a World State to which nations must owe allegiance. He was looked upon by the post-war world as teacher, prophet and guide. His greatest weakness was that being too much scientific minded, he lacked spiritual wisdom. He was undoubtedly the most intellectual of the ancestors of the modern novel.

Arnold Bennett (1867-1931)

Bennett was more concerned with the craft of fiction and was not disposed to preach in his novels. The spectacle of life, which Bennett presents in his novels, is not drab or diseased. On the other hand he interprets it romantically as 'sweet, exquisite, blissful, melancholy. He never regrets that life has lost its glamour and pines for the past glory of Greece and Rome.

On the contrary, he finds sufficient grandeur in the modern everyday life of the Five Towns, his native district, which he has made as famous in English fiction as Hardy's Wessex.

Bennett wrote three most popular novels—*The Old Wives Tale (1908)*, *Clayhanger (1910)* and *Riceyman Steps (1923)* which place him high among English novelists. His other novels are *Buried Alive (1908)*, and *The Card (1911)*, which are first-rate humorous character novels; and *The Grand Babylon Hotel (1902)*, which provides good entertainment. Above all, he writes in a style which is simply delightful. No doubt, Bennett won the hearts of his readers and became the most popular novelist of his time.

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924)

Chief among those who used the technique of Henry James was Conrad, a Pole, who wrote exquisite English. He was gifted with great love for his fellow creatures, and through it he acquired an unusual insight in all that was going on around him. Being a sailor he spent twenty years of strenuous life in the ship or the port. All this experience revealed to him one central problem of human nature, that is, the tension between our higher and lower selves. As his own sailor's life provided him with the memory of mistakes, humiliations and corrections under authority, he took a sort of morbid interest in people whose souls are harassed and tormented by other. Moreover, as a sailor learns the histories of people at second hand, in hotels, clubs etc. Conrad developed the plots of his novels through a third person as if in conversation, in which the voice and personality of the narrator becomes extremely suggestive quite apart from the story he is telling.

The themes of Conrad's novels transcend temporary and material interests. Unlike some of the contemporary novelists he scorned to expose social abuses, or laugh at social prejudices. He lived on his past, which on account of the lapse of years invoked in him nobler qualities, especially his capacity for intellectual sympathy and single-heartedness. He was thus always true to himself and to the characters he created.

The masterpieces of Conrad are *The Nigger of the Narcissus (1898)*, *Lord Jim (1900)*, *Typhoon (1902)*, *Nostramo (1904)*. These series cover an immense range of human activity. We have in them man's conflict with the internal sea, his avarice for fabulous wealth in a mine, and the tribal wars between savages. The characters in them are not refined or fashionable people; they become slaves to their peculiar idiosyncrasies. Conrad in all his novels exhibits the great ideals of impartiality, practical wisdom, sense of fitness and freedom sentimentality, which earned for him the admiration of his English readers.

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)

Hopkins who died in 1889, but whose poems were not issued during his lifetime, and who only became widely known after his friend Robert Bridges edited the collection in 1918, exerted a great influence on modern English poetry. The poems of Hopkins were so eccentric in style that Bridges dared not publish them till thirty years after his death. *Hopkins had tried to revive the 'sprung rhythm'*, the accentual and alliterative measure of Langland and Skelton, which had dropped out of use since the sixteenth century. In this rhythm there are two currents, the undercurrent and the overcurrent, which are intertwined. The poems of Hopkins are about God, Nature and Man, and all of them are pervaded with the immanence of God. His greatest poem is *The Wreck of Deutschland*, which is full of storm and agony revealing the mystery of God's way to men. All his poetry is symbolic, and he means more than he says. Some of his lyrics are sublime, but the majority of his poems are obscure. It is mainly on account of his theory—sprung rhythm, and inscape, that he has exerted such a tremendous influence on modern poets.
