

Exploring the Evolution and Influences of English Literature in the 20th Century: A Concise Overview

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Abstract

Irish writers were especially important in the twentieth-century, including James Joyce and later Samuel Beckett, both central figures in the Modernist movement. Americans, like poets T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound and novelist William Faulkner, were other important modernists.

Literature as a whole grows and changes from generation to generation. It is not static, but dynamic because each age has its own particular point of interest and its own way of feeling and thinking about things. It is the comprehensive essence of the intellectual life of nation. We may distinguish one age or the other by pointing out certain trends and movements that shape the one age or the other. But what happens when we set to analyse the 20th century? We are lost into the vagueness of variety and quality of literary works that have been produced in this age. The reason for this variety and complexity of English literature is the impact of various foreign influences and ideologies on it. No other life or literature has been affected so much by exotic tastes and ideologies as English literature. In the present age science, Psychology, Politics, Philosophy and Anthropology all have invaded over literature and so are responsible for its complexity. The other reason for the upheaval in literature is the complexity of feverish and fretful life of a mechanized man which is reflected in his thoughts and literature.

KEY WORDS Evolution , Psychology, Politics, Philosophy and Anthropology

Modernism: Exploring Narrative Experimentation and Stream-of-Consciousness Writing in Twentieth-Century English Literature

The Importance of a Language.

It is natural for people to view their own first language as having intrinsic advantages over languages that are foreign to them. However, a scientific approach to linguistic study combined with a consideration of history reminds us that no language acquires importance because of what are assumed to be purely internal advantages. Languages become important because of events that shape the balance of power among nations. These political, economic, technological, and military events may or may not reflect favorably, in a moral sense, on the peoples and states that are the participants; and certainly different parties to the events will have different interpretations of what is admirable or not. It is clear, however, that the language of a powerful nation will acquire importance as a direct reflection of political, economic, technological, and military strength; so also will the arts and sciences expressed in that language have advantages, including the opportunities for propagation. The spread of arts and sciences through the medium of a particular language in turn reinforces the prestige of that language. Internal deficits such as an inadequate vocabulary for the requirements at hand need not restrict the spread of a language. It is normal for a language to acquire through various means, including borrowing from other languages, the words that it needs. Thus, any language among the 4,000 languages of the world could have attained the position of importance that the half-dozen or so most widely spoken languages have attained if the external conditions had been right. English, French, German, and Spanish are important languages because of the history and influence of their populations in modern times; for this reason they are widely studied outside the country of their use. Sometimes the cultural importance of a nation has at some former time been so great that its language remains important long after it has ceased to represent political, commercial, or other greatness. Greek, for example, is studied in its classical form because of the great civilization preserved and recorded in its literature; but in its modern form as spoken in Greece today the Greek language does not serve as a language of wider communication.

The Importance of English.

In numbers of speakers as well as in its uses for international communication and in other less quantifiable measures, English is one of the most important languages of the world. Spoken by more than 380 million people in the United Kingdom, the United States, and the former British Empire, it is the largest of the Western languages. English, however, is not the most widely used native language in the world. Chinese, in its eight spoken varieties, is known to 1.3 billion people in China alone. Some of the European languages are comparable to English in reflecting the forces of history, especially with regard to European expansion since the sixteenth century. Spanish, next in size to English, is spoken by

about 330 million people, Portuguese by 180 million, Russian by 175 million, German by 110 million, French by 80 million native speakers (and a large number of second-language speakers), Italian by 65 million. A language may be important as a lingua franca in a country or region whose diverse populations would otherwise be English present and future 3 unable to communicate. This is especially true in the former colonies of England and France whose colonial languages have remained indispensable even after independence and often in spite of outright hostility to the political and cultural values that the European languages represent. French and English are both languages of wider communication, and yet the changing positions of the two languages in international affairs during the past century illustrate the extent to which the status of a language depends on extralinguistic factors. It has been said that English is recurrently associated with practical and powerful pursuits. Joshua A. Fishman writes: "In the Third World (excluding former anglophone and francophone colonies) French is considered more suitable than English for only one function: opera. It is considered the equal of English for reading good novels or poetry and for personal prayer (the local integrative language being widely viewed as superior to both English and French in this connection). But outside the realm of aesthetics, the Ugly Duckling reigns supreme."¹ The ascendancy of English as measured by numbers of speakers in various activities does not depend on nostalgic attitudes toward the originally English-speaking people or toward the language itself. Fishman makes the point that English is less loved but more used; French is more loved but less used. And in a world where "econo-technical superiority" is what counts, "the real 'powerhouse' is still English. It doesn't have to worry about being loved because, loved or not, it works. It makes the world go round, and few indeed can afford to 'knock it.'"² If "econo-technical superiority" is what counts, we might wonder about the relative status of English and Japanese. Although spoken by 125 million people in Japan, a country that has risen to economic and technical dominance since World War II, the Japanese language has yet few of the roles in international affairs that are played by English or French. The reasons are rooted in the histories of these languages. Natural languages are not like programming languages such as Fortran or LISP, which have gained or lost international currency over a period of a decade or two. Japan went through a two-century period of isolation from the West (between 1640 and 1854) during which time several European languages were establishing the base of their subsequent expansion.

The Future of the English Language.

The extent and importance of the English language today make it reasonable to ask whether we cannot speculate as to the probable position it will occupy in the future. It is admittedly hazardous to predict

the future of nations; the changes during the present century in the politics and populations of the developing countries have confounded predictions of fifty years ago. Since growth in a language is primarily a matter of population, the most important question to ask is which populations of the world will 1 Joshua A. Fishman, "Sociology of English as an Additional Language," in *The Other Tongue: English across Cultures*, ed. Braj B. Kachru (2nd ed., Urbana, IL, 1992), p. 23. 2 Fishman, p. 24. A history of the English language 4 increase most rapidly. Growth of population is determined by the difference between the birth rate and the death rate and by international migration. The single most important fact about current trends is that the Third World countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America have experienced a sharp drop in mortality during the twentieth century without a corresponding drop in the birth rate. As a result, the population of these areas is younger and growing faster than the population of the industrialized countries of Europe and North America. The effect of economic development upon falling growth rates is especially clear in Asia, where Japan is growing at a rate only slightly higher than that of Europe, while southern Asia—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh—is growing at a rate more than twice as high. China is growing at a moderate rate, between that of Europe and southern Asia, but with a population in excess of one billion, the absolute increase will be very high. According to a recent United Nations analysis, by 2050 the United States will be the only developed country among the world's twenty most populous nations, whereas in 1950 at least half of the top ten were industrial nations. The population of the less developed countries is expected to grow from 4.9 billion in 2000 to 8.2 billion in 2050, while the more developed countries will hold at 1.2 billion.³ India is expected to replace China as the world's most populous nation in half a century, with a concomitant growth in Hindi and Bengali, already among the top five languages in the world. The one demographic fact that can be stated with certainty is that the proportion of the world's population in the economically developed countries will shrink during the next half century in comparison with the proportion in the presently developing countries. Since most of the native speakers of English live in the developed countries, it can be expected that this group will account for a progressively smaller proportion of the world's population. Counteracting the general trend somewhat is the exceptional situation in the United States, the only country among the more developed ones that is growing at slightly more than a replacement rate instead of actually declining. If the future of a language were merely a matter of the number who speak it as a first language, English would appear to be entering a period of decline after four centuries of unprecedented expansion. What makes this prospect unlikely is the fact that English is widely used as a second language and as a foreign language throughout the world. The number of speakers who have acquired English as a second language with near native fluency is estimated to be between 350 and 400 million. If we add to first and second language speakers those who know enough English to use it more or less effectively as a foreign

language, the estimates for the total number of speakers range between one and one and a half billion. In some of the developing countries that are experiencing the greatest growth, English is one of the official languages, as it is in India, Nigeria, and the Philippines. The situation is complex because of widely varying government policies that are subject to change and that often do not reflect the actual facts (see § 229). Although 3 Barbara Crossette, "Against a Trend, U.S. Population Will Bloom, U.N. Says," *New York Times* (February 28, 2001), Section A, p. 6. English present and future 5 there are concerted efforts to establish the vernaculars in a number of countries—Hindi in India, Swahili in Tanzania, Tagalog in the Philippines—considerable forces run counter to these efforts and impede the establishment of national languages. In some countries English is a neutral language among competing indigenous languages, the establishment of any one of which would arouse ethnic jealousies. In most developing countries communications in English are superior to those in the vernacular languages. The unavailability of textbooks in Swahili has slowed the effort to establish that language as the language of education in Tanzania. Yet textbooks and other publications are readily available in English, and they are produced by countries with the economic means to sustain their vast systems of communications. The complex interaction of these forces defies general statements of the present situation or specific projections into the distant future. Among European languages it seems likely that English, German, and Spanish will benefit from various developments. The breakup of the Soviet Union and the increasing political and economic unification of Western Europe are already resulting in the shifting fortunes of Russian and German. The independent states of the former Soviet Union are unlikely to continue efforts to make Russian a common language throughout that vast region, and the presence of a unified Germany will reinforce the importance of the German language, which already figures prominently as a language of commerce in the countries of Eastern Europe. The growth of Spanish, as of Portuguese, will come mainly from the rapidly increasing population of Latin America, while the growth in English will be most notable in its use throughout the world as a second language. It is also likely that pidgin and Creole varieties of English will become increasingly widespread in those areas where English is not a first language.

The trends and movements in twentieth-century English literature witnessed significant developments and diversification. Here is Modernism, Postcolonial Literature, Feminist Literature, Postmodernism etc.

Twentieth-century literature saw the rise of modernism, characterized by experimentation with narrative techniques, fragmented structures, and stream-of-consciousness writing. Notable authors include T.S.

Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce. Recommended books: "The Waste Land" by T.S. Eliot, "To the Lighthouse" by Virginia Woolf, "Ulysses" by James Joyce.

The Complexity of Modern Poetry: Fusion of Cultures and Linguistic Devices in 20th Century Literature

Modern poetry has become a mirror of complex and pulsing civilization and its keynote is 'difficulty' or even 'obscurity' because learning today has become multifarious and to the vast sphere of European learning has been added and blended with the mythological, Philosophical, religious columns of the orient, of India, China and Japan. All this tangled mass is lodged in the poetry with as much zest as was shown by poets like Donne Johnson and Browning. The suggestive power of poetic diction has been carried to an extreme limit and irony, paradox, pun, ambiguity, the juxtaposition of diverse and contrary words and images have become a part and parcel of the poetry of our difficult age.

The aim of the modern poet is economy, the use of minimum possible words for producing maximum effect and highly elliptical diction where each word is charged with a wealth of meaning. The distortion of language is so violent, indeed in its comparison even the wildest linguistic 'rape' of Hopkins has lost their sanctity and even words have been telescoped and merged together in order to express the exact configuration of the thought processes, their turn and tangled webs- Joyce demanded at least the whole of reader's life time for the comprehension of its meaning. Similar Process has also been at work to break and remold the structure of verse of preparing a true, complex and many-sided mould for complex thoughts and feelings. Especially, after the world wars all illusions, on which men's belief rested war shattered. T. S. Eliot in his wasteland describes the suffering and conflicts of humanity in the nightmarish atmosphere of the present age.

The Crisis of Modernity: A Fragmented Reality and the Search for Meaning

Postmodern literature challenged traditional narratives and questioned notions of truth, reality, and authorship. Writers like Samuel Beckett, Italo Calvino, and Jorge Luis Borges embraced metafiction and intertextuality. Recommended books: "Waiting for Godot" by Samuel Beckett, "If on a winter's night a traveler" by Italo Calvino, "Ficciones" by Jorge Luis Borges.

D.H. Lawrence revolted against the industrial civilization and wished to return to the primitive tradition which was close to nature. Post war period was of universal madness. Aldous Huxley in his famous novel 'Point Counter Point' represents the spiritual vacuum that the modern man was possessed with. Virginia Woolf, unable to reconcile herself with the wretched life of the modern man committed suicide for she was caught between the two worlds. 'One dead' other too powerless to be born. She exploited the problems of death, life, time and personality.

Neitzsche in his "Thus Spake Zarathustra" declared, can it be possible, this old saint in the forest has not yet heard that god is dead. Since then the number of men of or whom god in dead is ever increasing. Out of step with nature with self and with the laws of historical evolutionary growth, the modern man has gone out of focus. "In the spiritual crisis of Modern man", Paul Brunton has left out the open secret, "how at very hour of its grandest trial, when it has won the supreme conquest over the material things and subtle forces, world civilization turned into a tragedy. The modern who for long pitied his ancient and medieval fathers is now himself to be pitied. There is a ground for declaring that the modern man has become a modern idiot or misfit in a world he himself has created as well as destroyed."(Brunton, 2003)

The Theater of the Absurd: Portraying Human Helplessness and Existential Absurdity

Modern drama also bears of the profound impact of the deep and baffling problems of the world or modern age. There was a European development. "The theater of the Absurd", following the disillusionment caused by the world war. It and particularly by the world War II The phrase 'theater of the Absurd' was coined by Martin Esslin (Drama critic of B.B.C .) who after studying some playwrights points out the key themes as the dread, anguish, lack of communication, estrangement, alienation, self-crises among the human beings. Ionesco, a Romanian dramatist defines: 'Absurd is that which is levied of Purpose..... cut off from his religion, metaphysical and transcendental roots, Man is lost, all his actions become senseless absurd, of bitter.'

These playwrights dramatized the philosophy of bitter helplessness of man abandoning logical construction plausible characterization and precise or poetic language. All the elements of the play exhibit the same senselessness and irrationality that they find in human affairs. Their theater 'has announced arguing about the absurdities of human condition, it merely presents it is being, that is, on terms of concrete stage images of existence.

Literary Movements of the Twentieth Century: Postcolonial Perspectives and Feminist Narratives

With the decline of the British Empire, postcolonial literature emerged, exploring themes of identity, displacement, and cultural clashes. Writers like Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie, and Jean Rhys examined the effects of colonialism. Recommended books: "Things Fall Apart" by Chinua Achebe, "Midnight's Children" by Salman Rushdie, "Wide Sargasso Sea" by Jean Rhys.

The twentieth century witnessed a significant surge in feminist literature, addressing gender inequality, women's rights, and patriarchy. Prominent feminist writers include Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and Margaret Atwood. Recommended books: "A Room of One's Own" by Virginia Woolf, "The Bell Jar" by Sylvia Plath, "The Handmaid's Tale" by Margaret Atwood.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the trends and movements in twentieth-century English literature reflect its evolution into a universal and diverse field, influenced by various 'isms' from around the world. The complexity and obscurity of the literature of this modern era continue to highlight its rich and multifaceted nature. Contemporary authors like Zadie Smith, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Ian McEwan continue to contribute to the literary landscape, exploring a wide range of themes and styles. Their works, such as "White Teeth," "Never Let Me Go," and "Atonement," exemplify the vibrant and ongoing legacy of twentieth-century English literature.

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