

Unit - V  
Sem - VI<sup>th</sup>

# HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

## CHAPTER 44

### TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE: POETRY (GENERAL)

Introduction—Poetry: 1880-1920, 1920-30, 1930 to the present day.

The long shadows of two World Wars of 1914-18 and 1939-45 lie across the present century. Science and technology have transformed our lives. The motor car, the aeroplane, the wireless and television have brought the world together in a sense never dreamt of before. The cinema has almost ousted the theatre; even where the tradition of the stage is strong enough to survive, it has infected the technique of the drama, even of the novel.

The political consequences of the first World War were communism in Russia and as a reaction against this, totalitarianism in Germany and Italy. The second World War split the world into two blocs, the East dominated by Russia, the West by America. Apart from the little wars going on in South-east Asia, Middle East, and Africa, the world today is living under the threat of a third global and nuclear war whose consequences are too horrible to imagine.

England which before the first Great War was capitalist is now a full-fledged Welfare State. By huge borrowings from USA she is maintaining a high standard of living, but 'the condition of England' question is as acute as ever. Strikes, total or go-slow, are menacingly frequent. Her empire has been liquidated and she has been reduced to the status of a second class power. Though still a leading member of the Commonwealth, she is desperately trying to be integrated in the European Community. The British are now content to be less British and more European. Their proud isolation from Europe is on the way out.

English literature before the first World War was firmly rooted in the Victorian Age. Poetry, drama and prose fictions were all in a flourishing state. Poetry could boast such names as Hardy, Bridges, Housman and Yeats who had begun to write before the 19th century was out. Hardy's monumental *Dynasts* came in 1909. In the early years of the present century came the 'Georgians' Bottomley, Abercrombie, Masfield, Gibson, Davies and de la Mare.

Drama was in a still healthier state when the present century

opened. Shaw, Galsworthy and Barrie were its shining lights, supported at a lower level by Pinero, Jones and Granville Barker. Yeats and Synge created and developed an independent Irish theatre at Dublin. The Novel in the early years of the century was close behind the drama with such writers as Meredith, Hardy, Anthony Hope, Galsworthy, Wells, Kipling, Bennett and Conrad.

All this brilliant activity was interrupted, if not shattered, by the war of 1914-18. The flower of British youth including those who would have produced good literature died in battle. War induced a neurosis. There was a sense of loss, disenchantment, frustration. The younger generation revolted against Victorian ideals, and when after the war they took up their pens they smote hard against what they called the cant and humbug of traditional standards of life and art. Aggressive realism became the hall-mark of 'modern' literature. There was complete anarchy in poetry. The realistic novel became subjective, sex-ridden, and freakish (*Ulysses*, *Mrs. Dalloway*). The drama was not so adversely affected. The great masters Shaw, Galsworthy, Barrie held the stage during and after the war, and when they died or aged, their place was taken by popular entertainers like Noel Coward, Terence Rattigan, J.B. Priestley and others. Nevertheless the literary brilliance of the older school faded away from the stage.

By the 20s a sense of cultural crisis had gripped the serious writer. In the prevailing moral confusion he felt lonely and isolated from the society at large which was indifferent to good art. Popular journalism boosted 'cheap' literature and encouraged hostility to anything that savoured of instruction. The serious writer had two choices: either to compromise his principles or to cease writing altogether. An old liberal, like Forster, followed the latter course, while others like Maugham and Huxley jumped on to the popular bandwagon by making in their fiction the necessary concession of sex interest—an interest that is patently forced. Literature was commercialised.

It must be remembered, however, that not all the consequences for literature were caused by the war. English literature of the 20th century, whether simply 'modern' or distinctively 'modernist' has been fed to a great extent in theme as well as in technique by continental writers. Ibsen's impact on drama dates from the 90s of the 19th century. The French realists Guy de Maupassant and Emile Zola, and the Russian writers Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Chekhov, whose works were translated early in the twentieth century, have exercised a marked influence on the English novel. The technique of 'modernist' poetry headed by T.S. Eliot has been borrowed from the French symbolists Verlaine, Mallarmé, Baudelaire, La Fontaine, etc. Besides, English literature has been profoundly affected by the philosophy of Bergson (French), the psychology of William James (American) and the analytical psychology of Freud (Austrian). Bergson's 'élan vital' became Shaw's 'life-force'. His emphasis on intuition as opposed to intellect and reason led to D.H.

Lawrence's cult of the flesh. James's conception of consciousness as a river or stream with submerged and floating memories and constantly changing impressions of the external world resulted in the "stream of consciousness" novel of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, through the work of Marcel Proust. Freud's theories of infantile sexuality (Oedipus complex), suppressed sexuality, dreams, the unconscious, the sub-conscious, neurosis and insanity gave a new dimension to the novel. Sex and psychology became the stock themes of many novelists.

### Poetry: 1880-1920

As has been indicated above, modern poetry was not exclusively a product of the war. The period roughly from 1880 to 1920 was one of transition during which the main-stream was Victorian, but it was crossed by other currents, more or less definitely modern. The foundations of modern or more specifically 'modernist' poetry were laid during this transitional period. This may be seen in the work of Fitzgerald and Swinburne, both of whom were rebels, the one in his melancholy hedonism and the other in his pagan animality. The decadents of the 'art for art's sake' school were directly descended from Swinburne and the French symbolists. Hopkins acclaimed as the first of the moderns was dead in 1889 and Hardy, adopted patron of the moderns, owed nothing to the Victorian tradition. The Edwardians and the Georgians had begun to seek new ways of expression, but they went no further than avoiding Victorian diction. The notable Georgians Bottomley, Abercrombie, Masfield, Gibson, Davies, De la Mare were 'modern' in the limited sense of poets who showed either marked realism like Masfield and Gibson or had the tight texture of Bottomley and the rugged and harsh metres of Abercrombie. The Georgians were 'modern', but not 'modernist'—a term reserved for those of the younger generation who were anti-romantic in spirit and violently opposed to Victorian diction. They professed stern realism and insisted on common or colloquial speech.

The leaders of the modernist school were two Americans; Pound and Eliot. Anti-romantic in spirit they drew their inspiration from the symbolists. The symbolists believed in indirect statement as opposed to direct, and in free association of ideas as opposed to logical sequence. In addition, they used certain objects as symbols to convey their meaning. From the symbolists also they borrowed their invention of *vers de libre* or 'free verse'.

From symbolists was derived the *Imagism* of Pound. Imagism insisted on definite clear-cut images of sense perceptions, especially visual perceptions without any romantic vagueness. It also eschewed thought and reflection. Pound's imagist anthology appeared in 1914. Though supported by Eliot and Edith Sitwell, Imagism had a very short vogue. Except in eschewing thought it is difficult to see how Imagism differs from other good poetry. And in eliminating thought it doomed itself to sterility. In actual fact Pound's imagist poems are not without thought. "Thoughtless" poetry is a contradiction in

terms. Realising how impracticable his theory was, he abandoned it to write his interminable cantos.

Then came the war. There was a spate of war poetry, most of it of little importance and now forgotten, the only exceptions being the poems of Sassoon and Wilfred Owen who was killed in war in 1918. His *Strange Meeting* between two dead soldiers (representing the two sides) is perhaps the most intensely tragic poem of the time.

The war had induced a mood of depression as well as a revulsion of feeling against European civilisation. In this atmosphere were published Eliot's satirical poems styled *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917). Hopkin's *Poems* appeared in 1918 and Owen's *Poems* in 1920. These three were much more than mere pointers; they embodied the spirit of modernist poetry. This spirit was further defined in the "new criticism" of Eliot, Richards and Leavis; Eliot's *Sacred Wood* (1920) and the periodical *The Criterion* (1922-29); Richards's *Principles of Criticism* (1924) and Leavis's periodical *Scrutiny* (1932-53).

### Poetry: 1920-30

Modernist poetry was inaugurated by Eliot's *Waste Land* in 1922 which is as significant a landmark in English poetry as *The Lyrical Ballads*. In this Eliot uses all his resources of wit, irony, and bathos to produce a horrifying report on the decayed civilisation of Europe. Its symbolist technique and esoteric allusions make it hard reading, and few can honestly say they have understood the whole of it. Its general drift, however, is clear. However bleak the prospect pictured in it, the *Waste Land* is not without gleams of hope of salvation. The process of this salvation is worked out in *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and the *Four Quartets* (1944).

Edith Sitwell is less concrete in her images of modern vulgarity. She sought escape from it in the private paradise of her aristocratic childhood. Though a prominent modernist, her poetry lacks conviction.

The principles underlying modernist poetry have been comprehensively expounded by Eliot in his critical essays.\* They may be briefly stated as follows:

(a) Poetry is objective or impersonal. Poetry is not a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. It is not an expression of personality, rather it is an escape from personality.

(b) Poetry should express 'unified sensibility' i.e., intellect and emotion combined, as in Donne and other Metaphysicals.

(c) Poetry should be symbolist or indirect in statement, but its images should be precise and clear-cut, without any vagueness.

\*The theory behind these principles had been propounded by T. B. Hulme who was killed in action in 1917.

(d) Serious poetry need not be solemn. To avoid 'high seriousness' it should combine the serious and the comic. Hence the need to counterpoint the formal with the colloquial, and to use all the resources of irony, wit, paradox, song, clowning, etc.

(e) Poetry should be free from the shackles of metrical regularity. The poet is free to write as he chooses, to adapt his verse to the rhythm of his thought.

The 20's were the most exciting as also the most confused period of English poetry. The furious controversy between the rebels and the traditionalists produced more heat than light. The new poetry became an affair of a coterie. In denouncing Victorian poetry and trumpeting the superiority of the new, this coterie adopted a petulant, arrogant, and vainglorious attitude that only served to irritate many readers. Apart from the fact that this poetry dealt with themes that were unpoetic—steam engines, factories, warehouses, etc.—it expressed complexities of thought and feeling which the readers had never known before. More disconcerting was the language and style of modernist poetry. Forgetting Coleridge, the modernists raised colloquial speech to an absolute, and rejecting the discipline of metre they substituted 'free verse' which has practically abolished the distinction between prose and poetry. Much of the modernist poetry is chopped prose arranged in lines to resemble verse. In the hands of some, poetry became a puerile pastime, as for example, in the eccentricities of Cummings—his typographical designs and 'creative dislocation of grammar' etc.

In the midst of this poetic anarchy the older poets continued to write their poems in the traditional manner. Their major achievements during this decade were Hardy's *Late Lyrics*, Bridges's *Testament of Beauty*, and Yeats's *Tower*. The war and its aftermath—the blundering treaty of Versailles—gave their work a graver tone, but they retained their idealism. Only Hardy struck a note of despair.

### 1930 to the Present Day

The 30s opened with world-wide economic depression and its attendant ruin and misery. Hitler and Mussolini threatened the political stability of Europe and Japan that of Asia. In the late 30s came the Spanish civil war between communism and fascism. Against this background of gloom arose a group of young poets, all born between 1904 and 1909, and bound together by ties of friendship and similarity of outlook. They were Auden, Lewis, Spender and Macneice. Young, gifted, and keenly sensitive, they came to believe that literature was a futility if not harnessed to a social or political purpose. Marxist in leaning, they saw in Communism a panacea for the world's ills. Auden led the group with his revolt against bourgeois ideals, and they all preached communism through their poems. Their poetry has no intrinsic value. It is journalism, mere political propaganda. Their technique is a continuation of Eliot's in its queer rhythms, contemporary imagery,

and mixture of the serious and the comic. Though disciples of Eliot, they differed from him in important respects. They were left-wing in politics against Eliot's right-wing. Eliot found peace in religion; they denounced religion. Above all, Eliot's verbal austerity was beyond them.

While they were shouting their arguments and rhetoric, came the second World War. The horrible reality of death and doom brought a new awakening. The poets became introspective and brooded upon the mystery of life and death. A new note half romantic, half religious, was struck by Dylan Thomas, a Welsh poet younger than the Auden group. Like them he belonged to the Eliot tradition, and his middle poems are as obscure as any modernist's but his earlier and later poems recall Wordsworth in their pantheism and deep sense of unity of all life and Nature. Though not religious in the formal sense, he also struck a religious note. In a crisis even atheists turn believers. The war and its horrors (remember Hiroshima and Hitler's gas chambers) had created a crisis of unprecedented magnitude. It was natural for people to seek the sanctuary of faith. Dylan Thomas came up with this faith—

And Death shall have no dominion

Dead men shall rise again, Lovers may be lost, not love.  
The force that through the green fuse drives the flower  
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees  
Is my destroyer.

And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose  
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

Dylan Thomas became the leader of this "war-time romanticism" and the chief poet of the 40s. His passionate lyrics had brought emotion back to poetry, which in the hands of Eliot and his followers had become too intellectual.

As the propagandist poetry of this Auden group had lost its appeal and no new school of poetry had arisen after the war, the new romanticism continued and became the mode of the younger poets. The poetic revolution of Eliot had lasted far too long, and the poets as well readers of poetry were sick of it. It had been merely destructive; it had produced little of permanent value. It was time the poets thought of construction.

In this work of construction the English poets were greatly benefited by the example of American poets. While much of English poetry produced during the late 40s was just so much trash, American poetry during the same years had taken long strides forward. The American poets had kept to the traditional ways of poetic discipline—metrical regularity, simple and direct speech. Comradeship in arms had brought the two nations together as never before, and the young English poets were only too willing to learn from their transatlantic brethren. The impact of American poetry

on English poets had a most beneficial effect in the direction of technique. The poets of the 50s and 60s are not only romantic in spirit but also traditional in technique—regular rhythms and simple, direct expression.

To sum up, the communistic poetry of Auden and his associates is on its last legs. Auden went to America in 1939 and became religious; his friends and fellow travellers have become less aggressive. There are as yet no signs of a fresh revolt and the romantic trend continues. Though the future cannot be predicted we may hope that the romantic tradition has returned to stay.