

THE RETURN OF THE ANTI-HERO

English Literature from the 1950s onwards

A very definite new trend in English Literature, in novels and especially in plays, began to emerge from the 1950s onwards. This was the return of the “anti-hero”, and was to become the dominant feature of writing through the 1950s to the 1970s.

In order to examine exactly what an “Anti-Hero” is, it is necessary to look back on what had gone before.

The Hero in World Literature

The literature of all countries at all times has always told stories of heroes and their heroic deeds. These heroes have represented the people they lead, and have taken part in historical events, epic journeys and wars. There are stories of real, historical heroes, who have actually lived and there are tales of mythical heroes, often used as symbols. There are several fictional heroes who came to prominence in the ballads, poems and later novels of more modern times.

All these heroes have had certain features in common, including the following:

- The hero does some great deed of physical strength and great courage
- The hero overcomes great difficulties and saves people’s lives
- Often the heroic deed is a one-time event, after which the hero returns to a normal life.

The first hero was probably named after the Greek Goddess, Hera. It was Heracles who lived, acted and died doing glorious deeds in the name of the goddess, and for the glory of the Greek Nation. Later heroes were mythical men like Jason and his fight against the Argonauts.

The Old Testament of the Bible is full of heroes whose deeds serve to illustrate the glory of the Israelites: the strength of Samson, the skill of David in killing the giant Goliath are examples. By the time of the New Testament, the heroic deeds of Jesus do not come from his physical strength. Jesus is a hero because of his miracles and his more spiritual deeds.



The Statue of Robin Hood at Nottingham Castle

The Hero in English Literature

The Earliest Heroes

The earliest heroes in English Literature come from the Middle Ages and include Sir Gawain and his battle with the Green Knight; Robin Hood and his fight against the wicked Sherriff of Nottingham who was taxing the peasants; and King Arthur and his noblemen of the Round Table.

Gradually in the years between these different writings, the nature of the hero has been changing from simple strength in battle to nobility of character. All these national heroes possessed the main characteristics of heroism:

- they performed outstanding deeds;
- they risked their very lives for the sake of others rather than for their own glory;
- They were all victims themselves.
- They were all men.

The 18th & 19th Centuries

Just prior to the Romantic Age writers like Henry Fielding, Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe wrote early novels featuring “heroes” who were not quite in the same style as the classic heroes of old. Some of their heroes – Tom Jones, for example - were not as noble and brave in their deeds as the Classical hero. They did their good deeds more by accident than intent. They were meant to be comic symbols or a satire on certain aspects of 18th Century society

Many of the Romantic writers of the 19th Century looked back to elements of the heroic myth. A new kind of hero emerged in the writings of Lord Byron. Through his life and his work, his great fame and his early death, Lord Byron became the Romantic “superstar” of the age. His appearance, his personality and his ideas were all used to form the idea of the “Byronic hero”. The most important of these show the “Byronic hero” as

- Tall, dark and handsome
- Some kind of romantic flaw (like his deformed foot)
- Adventurous
- Passionate for freedom
- Disobeying all the “normal” rules about social behaviour
- A very unconventional love life
- Poetic love for nature
- A gloomy or melancholy side to his emotions
- Likely to die young
- A passionate supporter of ordinary, poor people
- “Mad, bad, and dangerous to know.

However, along with Byron, women writers began to emerge: The Brontës, Jane Austen, George Eliot. As a result, in literature, both men and women could be portrayed as “heroes”.

The Anti-Hero is nothing new?

It is possible to argue that the “anti-hero” is nothing new. In the 16th Century, Marlowe’s “Dr Faustus” and Shakespeare’s “Richard III” could be described as “anti-heros”, as could Becky Sharpe in Thackeray’s 19th Century “Vanity Fair”, and many of the leading characters in early 20th Century novels. However, these “anti-heros” would always pay the price for their misdeeds. It was a basic rule of society, and also of literary correctness, that anyone guilty of unacceptable social behaviour must, in the end, be punished. (*See Thackeray—Pages 32-33*)

“Protagonist” or “Hero”?

In modern literary criticism the word “protagonist” was often used to replace the word “hero” – because there had been a change in the nature of the leading character. The “protagonist” was now much more complex. A lot of Victorian literature portrayed brave heroes fighting to create the British Empire, and hundreds of novels were published about wars in foreign countries.

However, it was the more complicated protagonists who survived the passing of time. The Pip and Nicholas Nickleby of Dickens; the Maggie of George Eliot; the Tess of Thomas Hardy. As the 20th Century dawned, with writers like Henry James and Joseph Conrad, the hero, or protagonist was now a psychologically much more complex character.

The Emergence of the Anti-Hero in the 1950s

In the 1950s, a new genre of literature appeared, where the “protagonist” is the opposite of the hero; in fact, he is called the “anti-hero.” Some key works of this kind to be considered below are:

- “**Lucky Jim**” (1954) – a novel by Kingsley Amis
- “**Look Back in Anger**” (1956) – a play by John Osborne
- “**Room at the Top**” (1956) – a novel by John Braine
- “**The Entertainer**” (1957) – a play by John Osborne

There were two major non-literary causes which influenced the appearance of the “anti-hero” literature of the 1950s. These were:

- The Suez Canal Crisis (1956)
- The “Angry Young Man” Movement

The Suez Canal Crisis

In 1956 everything changed in Britain. The Egyptians decided to take over the Suez Canal. It was in their country, it was important to their economy and they were angry that the British and French were jointly claiming all the income. Egyptian soldiers moved in and took control.

Britain immediately did a secret deal with Israel and France, and a joint army invaded Egypt. Britain, said the British Government, is a great world power, and cannot possibly allow a little country like Egypt to get away with such an insult.

The rest of the world was shocked at this invasion of a sovereign country. The United Nations ordered Britain to leave Egypt. Britain refused. The Americans immediately withdrew all financial support from Britain (still suffering from the costs of World War 2). The economy in Britain collapsed. Britain was forced to give in and leave Egypt.

This was a great psychological blow to Britain. The British Empire was no longer a world power. The country could be told what to do by America. Britain was a poor country without any power. It was disastrous for politics, disastrous for Britain, and disastrous for Britain’s image in the world.

The “Angry Young Man” Movement



In 1954, Kingsley Amis published “**Lucky Jim**”, a novel that gave new life to the tradition of the English comic novel. The “hero”, Jim Dixon, was a young teacher at a small University. His life was made comically difficult because of the society around him – old-fashioned, class-conscious, boring, very “stiff-upper-lip” English society. He wanted his life to change, and he wanted society to get modern and up-to-date, but everything was stuck in the old-fashioned way. This was a novel about a young intellectual who was badly behaved, broke the rules of Society, and generally did not conform to the accepted standards of behaviour. Jim Dixon – Lucky Jim – was amongst the first of the modern “anti-heroes”.

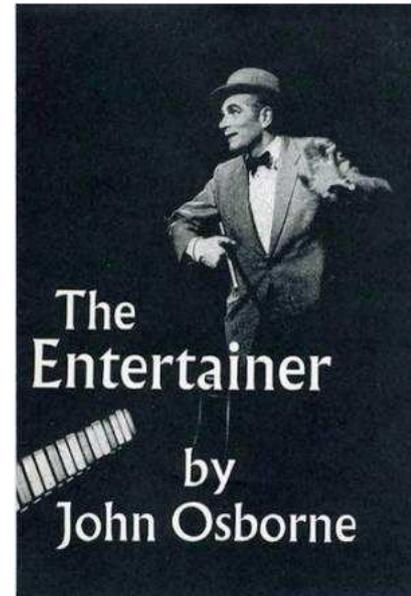
The actor Ian Carmichael in the famous drunk episode from the film version of “Lucky Jim”

In 1956 the playwright, John Osborne, wrote **“Look Back in Anger”**. Its protagonist, Jimmy Porter, was as “anti-hero” in the same way as Lucky Jim. But this was not a comic attack on English society like the novel, This was an angry and bitter attack on the whole British way of life.

Jimmy Porter lacks all the typical heroic features:

- he is neither strong nor brave;
- he is completely self-centred;
- he fights for his own sake, certainly not for others.
- He is not a brave young man, he is an “angry young man”

The play had enormous success. The phrase “angry young man” came to represent a whole new generation of English writers – novelists and playwrights. They were angry about old-fashioned, class-conscious society. They were angry about the way Britain was governed. They were angry about Society.



John Osborne’s next play was called **“The Entertainer”** (1957). The “hero” was Archie Rice – an old music-hall comedian. The action took place in an old theatre which was falling apart. The audience was getting smaller and smaller. Archie Rice’s jokes were old and not funny. His life was falling apart. He was “brave and heroic” because, in spite of everything collapsing around him, he carried on telling his jokes and performing – but he was an “anti-hero” because it was all a waste of time. (The decaying theatre was a symbol of Britain itself - once elegant, once full of glamour and laughter and fun, but now with a smaller than ever audience, losing money and falling apart.)

The same depressed atmosphere appears in John Braine’s novel **“Room at the Top”** (1957). This is about a working-class “hero” called Joe Lampton. He is an inferior character, sarcastic and cynical. He says he represents “life as it is” and he achieves his success through lying, cheating and going to bed with the bosses’ daughter.

The Anti-Hero soon becomes a Villain

From these inferior, sarcastic and cynical “anti-heroes” , it is just a short step to being a complete villain. Gradually this kind of “anti-hero” disappeared from English Literature. As the 1950s moved into the 1960s the world changed. The British economy gradually recovered, British society rapidly changed with more wealth and more equality, the British government became more open and Britain found a new role in world politics. By the 1980s the “angry young men” had become “angry middle-aged men” and even “angry old men” and literature moved on.

The Return of the Hero?

Perhaps Society has always needed the example of a true hero to inspire us, or perhaps to give us some kind of comfort. Proper “heroes” and “heroines” may still exist, even in corrupt and cynical societies. The ongoing popular successes of films like “Superman”, “Indiana Jones” and the whole James Bond series suggest the True Hero is still alive and well – even if he is currently living in the cinema and not literature.

POST MODERNISM

-an introduction

Students of all the arts – literature, music, painting, and all the other arts - can see how things change as time passes. The ideas, subjects, philosophy and literary style of Shakespeare's 17th Century society are very different from Dickens's 19th Century. The 18th Century Europe that Jonathan Swift made fun of was very different from the early 20th Century Europe that the American, Henry James wrote about.

These different ideas, different worries and different writing styles are usually placed into various categories. These categories are given different names to indicate the general style of a particular period of time.

However, it is very important to remember that nothing in life is quite so organised and neat as to fall into "exact" categories. It is impossible to give an "exact" date when the Classical movement ended and the Romantic movement began. These changes did not happen overnight – they were gradual, and they over-lapped.

In very general terms, English Literature and the other arts have seen a number of different styles and periods, and they are usually listed as:

Medieval
Renaissance
Classical
Romantic
Realism
Modernism
Post-Modernism

The Romantic Age

The "Romantic" age gradually faded away in the second half of the 19th Century. The Gothic novels, the romances of Walter Scott's novels, the wild Yorkshire Moors of "Wuthering Heights" – all these seemed old-fashioned and out-of-date as the world moved into "modern" times: steam trains, large areas of coal-mines, whole towns being created around cotton mills.

Realism (1860 – 1920)

The age of "Realism" saw Charles Dickens writing about poverty, crime and abuse of children. Thomas Hardy's novels showed that under the surface of simple "romantic" village life there was crime, injustice and greed. In Joseph Conrad's novels the "romantic" and noble ideas of European Empires bringing religion and civilisation to Africans and others was often not noble, but, in reality, was based on cruelty and vice.

"Realism" reached its peak during the First World War. Ten million soldiers killed – and the War Poets no longer writing poems of glory and honour, but questioning the Latin words carved on hundreds of War Memorials throughout Europe: "Dulce et decorum est pro Patria mori"

Modernism (1890 – 1940)

But "Modernism" did not start with the First World War. Before the end of the 19th Century there were painters in France whose works were "modernist" The music of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" (1910) was "modernist" and caused a riot in Paris .

In English literature the novels of Joseph Conrad had gradually changed from “realism” to “modernism” And Society itself had gradually changed. So, what exactly were these changes? What was “new” or “modern” in European society?

Society had changed . Because of the World War, the relationship between “servants” and “masters” was changing Women were gaining equality with men.

Religion had changed. The writings of Charles Darwin questioned the whole basis of Creation

Philosophy had changed. The writing of Friedrich Nietzsche and others changed the nature of thought and belief.

Psychology had changed. The writings of Sigmund Freud changed the way we looked at people’s behaviour.

The Modernist artists and writers were not part of any organised movement. They worked in many different groups and as individuals. There were a lot of sub-divisions inside Modernism:

Impressionism
Expressionism
Symbolism
Existentialism

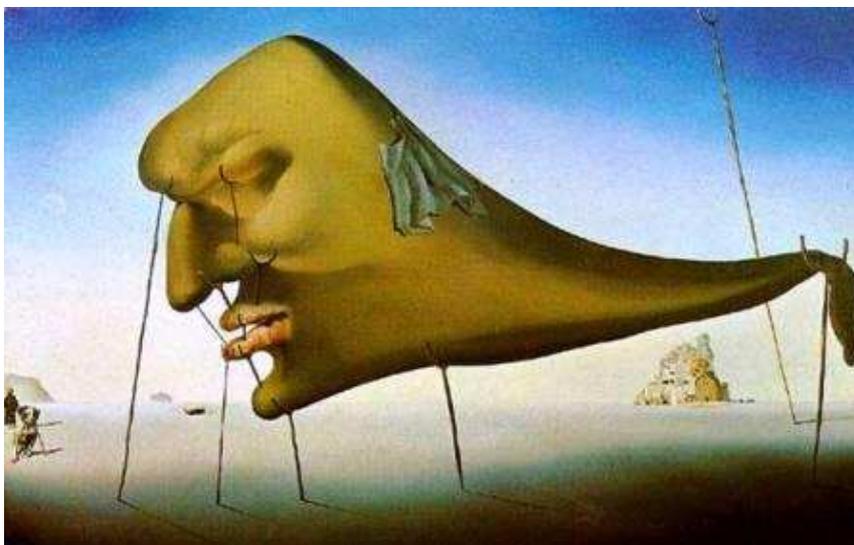
And a whole lot of other “isms”

“Modernism” saw great changes in the subjects and literary style of early 20th Century writers. “Modernist” writers did not follow the old rules.

Poetry was freed from the rules of rhyme, metrical balance, orthodox development of themes. Poets like T.S.Eliot (“The Waste Land”) and the American, Ezra Pound (“The Cantos”) wrote “free verse”.

Novelists ignored the old rules of logical plot development and characterisation and created “stream of consciousness” novels (e.g. James Joyce’s “Ulysses”)

Playwrights no longer followed the rules of time and place – and plays could now have actors talk directly to the audience and have all kinds of “non-real” things happening on-stage. (However, this was not a big thing in English playwriting. Most of the experimental “modernist” plays were written by American like Eugene O’Neill and Thornton Wilder, and – most importantly – by German playwrights like Bertholt Brecht. British Theatre (unlike British novels and poetry) was not much influenced by “modernism”



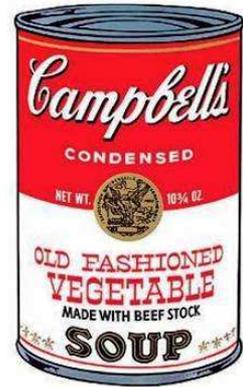
Artists like Picasso and Salvador Dali painted works without any rules of colour and harmony.

Salvador Dali's modernist painting called "The Dream"

Post-modernism (1950 onwards)

From the end of the Second World War onwards, Society underwent a major change once again. In the 1950s an American critic (an otherwise unknown writer called R.P. Blackmur) invented the word “Post-Modernism” to describe the “new” styles in literature, music and the arts.

By the 1980s the word “Post-Modernism” was being used to describe almost everything in the arts. However, no one was very sure exactly what it meant. Obviously “post” modernism meant those things that came “after” the “modernists” – but was it really a change? Or was it just a development?



The famous painting by Andy Warhol

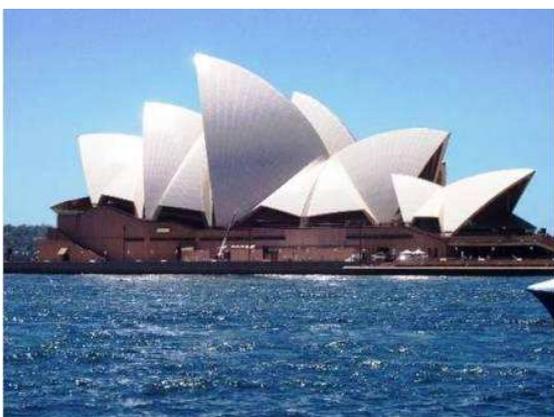
There were a few things that were different. “Post modernist” artists

- Did not worry about the “big” issues like the meaning of life
- Made gentle fun of the things that caused “anguish” to the modernists
- Were full of irony
- Were full of self-mockery
- Were happy to get involved in popular culture
- Reflected the high capitalism of the second half of the 20th Century
- Used the high-technology of the times
- Returned to older values of art being something to look at, not something that had to carry an important “message”.

Some of the more obvious and outstanding examples of post-modernism in the arts are:

Art: Examples are the paintings of Andy Warhol (the famous picture of a tin of Campbell’s Condensed Soup, or the multi-coloured images of Marilyn Monroe), and recent examples where a dead sheep in a tank, or a pile of bricks have been exhibited as art.

Music: The composer John Cage created the ultimate in Post-Modernism with his piece of music called “ 4 minutes and 16 seconds”. The pianist sits at the piano and the orchestra sits on the platform for four minutes and 16 seconds in absolute total silence. The “sounds” of this silence – the shuffling of feet, the occasional cough, the scraping of a chair – these are the sounds that make “music”



Architecture:

In building design the post modernists have moved away from the bare, concrete, heavy functional buildings so loved by the Soviets. Examples like the Sydney Opera House show a building that is a piece of artistic beauty simply as a building in addition to serving its purpose as an opera house. In London there is a block of offices called the “Gherkin”, because the building is designed in the shape of a gherkin. It works as a group of offices, but it also makes a visual piece of art.

Sydney Opera House, designed by the Danish Architect Jorn Utzon .

Literature: “Modernism” in English Literature was a style very noticeable in English novelists and poets. However, English playwrights remained very traditional in the first half the 20th Century and were not much influenced by “modernism” In the second half the century there seems to have been a reverse: English novelists carried on writing in the same style, while English playwrights strongly embraced “Post-Modernism”.

Theatre: “Post Modernism” is very strong in the world of Theatre. Post-modernist writers like Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter have had an important influence on world theatre. Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot” and Harold Pinter’s “The Caretaker” are the most famous examples of this.

Post-Modernism—serious art? Or just a joke?

It is impossible to make final judgements on the importance of Post-Modernism – simply because we are living in the Post-Modernist age. Post-modernism does create a question: Is this “serious” art, or is it a joke – but a joke that that makes us focus on what art is really about?

There are critics who say that the paintings, the dead sheep, the pickle-shaped buildings, the concerts with no music and the plays where nothing at all happens for hours on end – all these things are jokes and nothing to do with art. We are all being fooled – like the Emperor and his New Clothes in Hans Andersen’s fairy-story. We all believe they are “art” because there are critics who tell us this IS “art”.

There are others who say the Post Modernists are making us look at the things around us, making us think again about the values of society, forcing us to look at life in a new and important way.

There are even some who are now talking about “Post-Post-Modernism” !