# LITERARY TRENDS AND CRITICISM IN POST-WAR BRITISH FICTION

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*Abstract*

The present paper displays a few aspects characteristic for the major literary trends, topics and authors in post-war British literature. Designed to provide a brief outline of the period, it is focused on modernist and postmodernist writers, emphasizing the authors' interest for aesthetic and social matters, or for the modern novel regarded as a process of communication. The literary trends approached in this paper dwell upon some major themes such as the alienation of the individual, who tries to find comfort in a world that has lost its moral values and traditions or the destruction caused by technology. Modernist and postmodernist characteristics also mixed non-fiction with fantasy, blurring the lines of reality. If the writers of the 1950s were more concerned with older storytelling methods, the following decades brought about a change in the narrative climate of the epoch and the new writers revived the novel and employed different literary styles.

**Keywords: criticism, literature, trends, realism, fiction.**

The history of the twentieth-century literature is analyzed from two major perspectives: Modernism and Postmodernism. In this context, British critics proved to be more concerned with social class and conduct, trying to convey one main idea: to tell a meaningful story about an individual, placing him in his social environment. In the fifties, British fiction was moving towards several directions, without dwelling upon one in particular: realism, experimentalism, fantasy or metafiction. It was also reflecting a desire to reconstruct the novel and to face a dimension of anxiety and evil. A few representative names of the epoch were James Joyce, Virginia Woolf or William Faulkner. They focused on the human intellect and on man's behaviour in isolation.

Experimentalism underlined the importance of individual psychology and freed the novel from the bondage of the socio-historical context. It meant to create an illusion of wholeness moving away from reality. The fiction writers began to oscillate between the realistic attitude towards the material world and the experimental self-questioning. There were also many writers who, in the attempt of renewing the novel and adjusting it to the political climate of post-war Britain set forth a new trend – that of realism. The books belonging to this period tried to make other modes of thought possible and shifted the reader's interest from aesthetic adventure to literary conservatism. It was not regarded as a rejection of modernist experiment, but it rather represented the necessity of underlining the power of history in fiction.

Further on, the post-war years brought about a new philosophy or lifestyle - existentialism. This type of literature conveyed somber messages or emptiness of existence. The representatives of this trend consider that the individual is alone in a chaotic world where he experiences the loss of significance and certainty. Placed in such

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an abyss of nothingness, one is faced with the possibility of free choice, of deciding for oneself, of joining the good or the evil side of existence. A decade later, in the 1980s, magic realism replaced some older literary trends. These books combined realism and fantasy, focusing on fairy tales, on dreams and inexplicable events. Imagination was brought into the limelight, as the authors considered it as a main element in the process of creation. The books they wrote conveyed a special message: they represented the figments of imagination and not the output of some well-thought and organized plan. Therefore, these young writers could not decide upon a proper ending so they let it open, allowing the reader to make personal interpretations.

In the 1950s, the element of class was very popular in the climate of post-war literature. Considering the fact that the authors of the epoch left only dead-ends to the future generation, the young writers had to reorganize and focus on traditional narrative formulas. As a consequence, warnings and rumours regarding the *death of the novel* emerged for the first time. However, there was a human need for literary narrative and no decline in interest in what concerns reading or writing fiction. Authors turned to writing about real experience, to the so-called *life writing*. The unity of a text was rendered by its destination rather than by its origin. But this destination could not be personal, as the reader had no history of biography. Therefore, as one of the famous literary critics of the epoch has underlined, the birth of the reader may happen only at the cost of *the death of the author*.

After having studied Roland Barthes's conception regarding the death of the author, the British novelist and literary critic David Lodge, reached the conclusion that for the readers, language is the element that matters, that *performs*, and not the author. By removing the author, the modern text is transformed and the temporality is changed. The text is a mixture of a variety of writings, it is a combination of signs, and life only imitates the book. Along with the death of the author, there is no point in trying to decipher a text. Therefore, it is important to discover the author, because once he/she is identified, the text may be explained.

The young writers of the 1950s, avoided technical innovation and concentrated on older storytelling methods. They were also concerned with the idea of insularity. It was displayed in fiction as a reaction against experiment or as a return to traditional conventions. As the famous literary critic Bernard Bergonzi demonstrated, the novels belonging to the period above-mentioned, dealt mostly with English social history, examining the relevance of its past. Other representative figures of the epoch, concerned either with the characteristics of the traditional novel or with formal innovation are: Iris Murdoch and Graham Greene respectively William Golding, John Fowles or Anthony Burgess. According to Malcolm Bradbury's classification, we distinguish five categories of novels: the chronicle novel, the social novel represented by Kingsley Amis, the comic-ironical novel, the philosophical or visionary novel (characteristic for William Golding's style of writing) and the experimental "art" novel of John Fowles. "Fowles so beguiles us with uncertainty in his fiction, so tantalizes us with a variety of possible outcomes, that we



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read his novels and short stories eagerly to find out what happens in the end. Will Frederick Clegg, the twisted clerk in The Collector rape Miranda, the attractive young woman he has taken captive? Alternatively, will he take pity on her and let her go? Will Nicholas Urfe, the main character of The Magus make his way safely through the "godgame" that the mysterious Maurice Conchis has chosen to play with him? Will Charles Smithson, one of the main characters in The French Lieutenant's Woman leave his fiancée, Ernestina Freeman for Sarah Woodruff, a woman whose haunting eyes draw him to her, just as the sirens' songs lured sailors to shipwreck? And what about Sarah, the novel's other main character? After making love to Charles in an Exeter hotel, will she drift into prostitution in London, or survive in some more respectable situation? Such questions as these arise in all of Fowles's novels, and the reader's curiosity about the answers does not always stop short of prurience." [1]

The seventies were seen as a bridge between the sixties and the eighties. It was a decade focused not only on British fiction but on foreign literature as well. Some critics claimed that the novel has turned into a business, into a commercial dimension, encouraging the prize-oriented fiction. The new generation of writers that emerged by the middle of the seventies changed the climate of the period because they proved a deep interest in the everyday subjects, in the dark side of normal life, in psychological strangeness. They merged fantasy with realism, removed the old structures and eroticized the novel. The eighties revived the novel and brought along a multitude of new points of view and literary styles.

Another great revival in theory was represented by the new forms of critical approach such as deconstruction, reception theory or feminism. As theory formulates a need of constant debate, one must possess knowledge in order to support particular standpoints as well as alternative positions in conflict with these arguments. Literary theory was closely related to the political scene of the epoch, and that is why writers before the 20th century related their literary output to the existent historical context. But as time passed by, they shifted their interest and decided to allow modern modes of thought to govern the way they read literary texts. Even if all readers and critics belong to the same community, they interpret texts from different points of view triggering thus, controversy in literary studies. Therefore, they give birth to a continual literary debate, by claiming that one choice is right and another one is wrong - and this is not a sign of weakness, but rather a sign of vitality and vigour. Literary criticism was regarded as having two major branches: historical criticism and the New Critical tradition. Adepts of the latter literary period tended to give the author a diminished role in the account of literature, unlike the Romantic theorists who were concerned with the genius of the author. When the author and the work are not clearly delimitated confusion emerges; the voice of the work cannot be identified with the voice of the author. The writer is just an interpreter of this independent public object governed by conventions and known as literary text. According to some modernist views the novel must have the kind of effect on the reader that life has. Therefore, as life does not report to you in organized narration



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the novel lets you into its secrets more or less gradually. The novelists' intention is to make the reader forget about the fact that the author exists. The term New Criticism defines the critical theory that has dominated Anglo-Saxon literary criticism while its percepts must be understood as critical positions and not as the truth about literature. According to New criticism, every text is autonomous. History, psychology, author's intention and reader's private experience are all irrelevant. This literary trend argues that each text has a central unity and the responsibility is to discover this unity. The reader's job is to interpret the text telling in which ways each of its parts contributes to the central unity. The primary interest is in themes. A text is spoken by a narrator who expresses an attitude which must be defined as ironic, straightforward or ambiguous. Judgments of the value of a text must be based on the richness of the attitude and the complexity of the text. Each writer follows some personal steps when creating a novel. David Lodge considers that a novelist should not reveal all its meanings at the first reading. He even claims: "As I write, I make the same demands upon my own text as I do, in my critical capacity, on the texts of other writers. Every part of a novel, every incident, character, word even, must make an identifiable contribution to the whole … On the other hand, I would not claim that, because I could explicate my own novel line by line, that is all it could mean and I am well aware of the danger of inhibiting the interpretative freedom of the reader by a premature display of my own as it were, "authorized" interpretation. A novel is in one sense a game, a game that requires at least two players, a reader as well as a writer. The writer who seeks to control or dictate the responses of his reader outside the boundaries of the text itself, is comparable to a card player who gets up periodically from his place, goes round the table to look at its opponent's hand and advises him what cards to play."[2]

An essential element in the development of literature is the distinction between literary theory and criticism. Firstly, literature may be regarded either as a simultaneous order or as a series of words arranged in chronological order. Secondly, the reader observes an oscillation between the study of literary principles and the study of literary works of art. There have to be some principles of selection related to the creation of a literary work. Those who deny the importance of criticism can be called unconscious critics. They reject modern literature, merely taking over traditional standards. Because more often than not, they lack perception and the ability of expressing personal opinions many academics prefer to take for granted the verdict of older critics instead of judging for themselves a piece of literary work.

Literary theory and criticism is closely related to linguistics. Literature represents the study of language and of its principles, of the writer's choices concerning the syntax and rhetorical figures. The critic or the creative writer can consider the situation of the contemporary novelist either aesthetically or institutionally. They can adopt a descriptive or prescriptive tone in their text. Unlike Romantic or Modernist writers, contemporary authors focused on communication, irrespective of the style they followed – realist or non-realist, fiction or metafiction. Due to the emergence of state-of-the-art techniques



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and means of communication such as computers, videos or fax machines, and also because of their greater professional involvement, contemporary writers became more and more engaged in a process of communication with an actual audience.

**Conclusions**

In the post-war period many British authors showed a deep interest in aesthetic and social matters rather than focusing on politics. Some of them tried to cultivate their own voices while others manifested a deep dissatisfaction and despair with respect to the British society. However, this epoch was marked by a number of excellent critics and novelists including Kingsley Amis, William Golding, Iris Murdoch or Anthony Burgess. The world of theatre was also revolutionized due to the plays of John Osborne or Samuel Beckett. These playwrights were appreciated for their imagery and technical mastery or for the methods employed to depict the alienated human condition. Among the contemporary writers, the most notable and worth mentioning are John Fowles and David Lodge. The *New Criticism* period had a major contribution to our understanding of a work of literary art. Such a work approaches the ideal of a self-sufficient microcosm. It represents an object of criticism to the extent that all major interpretative clues lie within the work and not in the author's biography.

To sum up, the emergence of the modern novel as a form of communication is based on its formal complexity and difficulty. The so-called revolution of the word is regarded as more important than any political revolution. As mentioned above, there have been many writers who have written fiction that responds to the moral and philosophical crisis of the century. Postmodernism, also known as experimental fiction nowadays, deals with the conventions of classic realism, guaranteeing the development of the novel as a literary form.

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[2] Lodge, David, 1997, *The Practice of Writing*, Penguin Group, London, pp. 15

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