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The Modern Age

History

In 1901 Queen Victoria died and her son Edward VII succeeded her, it marked the beginning of Edwardian age, an era marked by fun, he reintroduced parties and decorated Buckingham Palace, class distinctions were still strong, there was a huge gap between the rich and the poor, people became more aware of their rights so they started demanding for them.

Even though Britain still was the greatest power on earth, its power was being challenged by technical innovation in France and Germany and by the industrial competition of America. With an agreement, Britain and France could pursue their interests in Egypt and Morocco: it helped the creation of a new alignment; Britain could count on France and Russia in any conflict against Germany, Austria and Italy.

Liberals were divided in two parts: the ones who supported the traditional liberal values and the new liberals, who were in favour of certain forms of state intervention in social life; among the new liberals, David Lloyd George thought that the government had the duty to look up for the poor.

In terms of rights, during this period the suffragettes started to fight for their right to vote: in 1903, Emmeline Parkhurst founded the Women's social and political union. At the beginning they were quite peaceful, but then they became more revolutionary or even terrorists, they held large protest marches in London, often were arrested for their behaviour. Once they were in prison, they kept on fighting through hunger strikes, so they were often forced-fed through tubes. In Great Britain women over 21 gained the right to vote in 1928.

Even women in America started to demand their right to vote, but the name 'suffragette' in America is not used. Also in America women started fighting in the second half of the 19th century, similarly to Britain, they started to feel the need to gain their right to vote, in 1848 a famous convention was held in Seneca's falls, near New York: Elizabeth Katy Stanton was the one who presented a document called "*the declaration of sentiments*", similar to the *Declaration of Independence* (each man was entitled to specific rights), the rights assured to men in the Declaration of Independence was not exclusively for them but even for women.

During WWII, women gathered in front of the White House to protest, shouting things, interrupting politicians who were speaking, and some people sympathised for them and helped them, other people did not support their cause so they hit women or threw things to them. In America, they were allowed to vote in 1920.

WORLD WAR I

George V was the king during WWI, he belonged to the House of Hanover and the war was against Germany, he decided to change his name into Windsor.

At the beginning people were excited to fight because it was their opportunity to prove the world their value, there was a sense of patriotism, but then they changed their mind seeing how many people were dying for a useless cause.

The empire made its contribution sending troops from the dominions and also volunteers from Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Conscription was introduced in 1916, that meant that even if you didn't want to fight the government forced you to.

At the beginning people willingly decided to join the army, then they were compelled by the government.

Women replaced men in their civilian jobs, which contributed to their fight for their rights.

The bloodiest battle in British history took place on the Somme: this is the perfect example of the war of attrition, where huge battles were fought only to kill soldiers and wear down the enemy.

It's a war fought in trenches in awful conditions, life was very stressful because of mud, lack of hygiene, boredom and fear of gas: soldiers relieved themselves through superstition, religion, poetry, letters and drink. Most of the soldiers died as they were fighting, the ones who survived suffered from a disease called by doctors "shell shock", which allude to the psychological effect of shell explosions, people kept been haunted by the things that they had seen or they had done, so they often committed suicide.

1917 was the year in which the stress reached its climax: George V changed the name of the royal family, the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia, the Italian army collapsed at the battle of Caporetto, the United States joined the conflict.

The day of the armistice, the 11th of November, was known as "Poppy Day" because poppies were one of the few flowers who grew on the battle field. In 1919 the peace treaty was signed in Versailles by the Allied powers. President Wilson proposed 14 points to work out the peace and prevent future wars: he also presented a plan to set up the League of Nations, with its headquarters in Geneva, but USA didn't join.

AMERICA

When people discussed this period, they used the label "American golden age", but Sawyer defined it as a gilded age (the thin layer of gold hidden several issues): on one hand, America is a wealthy and rich nation, but on the other hand poverty is widely spread. The assembly lines which allowed workers to dedicate themselves to a specific task increased the productivity but also hit them from a psychological point of view. Journalists, known as muckrakers (unpleasant truths) tried to raise people awareness to these problems. If initially the government had this philosophy that believed that they shouldn't intervene in people's life, then politicians started to propose reforms that had to help people (progressivism). The leader of this movement was Theodore Roosevelt. They believed in the superiority of American culture and they had to impose it in their colonies (white man's burden).

Americans didn't want to be part of WWI, but then the ship Lusitania was sunk by a German submarine and there were some Americans on board, so they took part in the conflict.

The "red scare", the fear of socialism, led to imprisonment and persecution of political activists: Sacco and Vanzetti's case was very popular since death penalty was applied to them. Americans felt angrier and angrier towards immigrants, a feeling of xenophobia started to arise among Americans.

This is the period of prohibition, the 18th amendment prohibited the production, distribution and importation of alcohol, because it was considered to blame for all the crimes that were committed. Actually, this prohibition encouraged the illegal traffic of alcohol (speakeasy).

The Wall Street crash: the infamous Black Thursday, in which people lost their money and savings, they had no money to buy food and spent hours in the bread lines to receive free rations of food. Some people were so ashamed to not being able to support their families and did not want to exploit this helping.

Franklin Roosevelt tried to solve this situation with the new deal: the 3 aims of this deal were relief, recovery and reform. He spread these ideas recording "fireside chats".

America had to face the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl (an environment disaster, the lands were turned into deserts, the wind blew the dust, animals started to die,...). All the people from Texas and New Mexico had to emigrate towards the West, especially in California.

THE INTER-WAR YEARS

The empire started to become harder and harder to control so it crumbled down. White colonies (Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa) were granted independent, but they kept their allegiance to the crown through the Commonwealth.

Gandhi fought for the independence and the right to vote in India.

After George V, Edward VIII came to the throne, who fell in love with an American twice divorced woman so he was forced to abdicate.

George VI succeeded the throne, he is the father of Queen Elizabeth II, he had a stutter (impediment of speech) and he needs to deliver a speech in which announces that England is taking part to WWII so he was helped by speech therapist.

Sir Winston Churchill wrote a lot of politic speeches and knew how to get the message across and played an influential role during WWII.

IRELAND

Lots of people died because of the Irish potato famine.

The Easter rising is a rebellion that happened in Dublin in April 1916, due to the fact that Home rule (supposed to grant self-governance within the UK but it also supposed to divide Ireland, people were not happy that this rule was not respected because it was the first step towards independence, also Irish people weren't happy because this rule was granted only in the south) was suspended until the end of the war.

The leaders of the rebellion were supported by Germany.

After the war, Southern Ireland became independent, who fought wanted the inclusion of Northern Ireland but they were defeated and didn't gain those territories.

The age of anxiety, relevant thinkers

The first half of XX century was marked by anxiety, by the questioning of all the past beliefs, nothing felt right anymore, objectivity itself was questioned by writers, they felt overwhelmed by a feeling of **emptiness**, in Victorian age there were no values to believe in.

The symbol of modern cities could be used to describe their emptiness: people back then in modern cities felt **alone** and **alienated** even if they were surrounded by other people.

They were **cynical** towards society and government, they distrusted society because soldiers felt like their efforts for the war were useless.

There was a sense of **spiritual loss**: religion offered little comfort, Nietzsche said "God is dead", he was not celebrating the death of god, he was afraid for a society without a morality; Nietzsche saw the death of god by two points of view: men, without god telling them what to do, could be free and creative; it could also be dangerous because human being needed some values and moralities, so he was afraid to fall in despair.

Ruthlessness: slow dissolution of the empire into the commonwealth, England had to grant independence to some colonies, people didn't know whereas these countries were English or not, they felt a sense of non belonging.

Conflict between younger generations and older generations: younger generations didn't feel connected anymore to older generations (parents) (Mrs. Dalloway).

Freud discovered human consciousness as something quite complex, our mind is made up of several layers. Present and past seemed to coexist because we are the result of what happened to us in the past.

Jung continued Freud's studies, supporting the collective unconscious: he believed that members of the same community shared a cultural memory even if they are not fully aware of this, they can see the world in some ways because they inherited this vision from the community they live in.

Einstein demonstrated that time is relative, time depends on circumstances and has subjective dimension, so people felt like the world lost its stability.

William James and Henry Bergson discussed this concept of time.

William James was the father of American psychology; he coined the expression "stream of consciousness", which finds a practical explanation through interior monologue.

He compared human consciousness to a stream constantly flowing: our thoughts are overlap, they are blend all at once.

Even time is perceived as a flow, time is a not chronological sequence of independent units, life is experienced in a continuous way.

Bergson made a distinction between historical time (clock time, it is external and linear) and psychological time (product of our mind, it is internal and non linear, time depends on the individual and on the circumstances, everything is subjective and depends on the perception of everyone). These time dimensions all blend together.

Frazier said that Christianity and pagan religion were more similar than different.

Modernist literature

Writers tried to come up with a new form to describe this controversial period. They wanted to rebel against past and the hope they had in 19th century, they needed something revolutionary. One of the main features of these novels is strictly related to that concept of time.

Focus on psychological time

They were interested in psychology in general, so even the structures of the novels written during this period change, historical time disappears, so linear plots disappear as well. A novel cannot be a linear subsection of facts, what we are interested in are maybe just a minutes of someone's life, the main focus is the person's mind, we are not interested in facts anymore.

Indeed, stories usually start in medias res, never in the beginning, they beginning in the middle of things, at some vital point of the story and sometimes the novel is set on just one single day, because a few minutes are all that it takes to explore the inner life of the one character we are interested in.

We do not really have an ending.

Interior monologue

It is used to describe on page what earlier defined as interior conscience.

It is like a window that the writer opens in the reader's mind and all that the reader hears is the character's voice.

They can be short sentences or long periods, words that can be missing, thoughts are much faster than any other kind of elaboration, one thought may interrupt another.

There are two types of monologues:

The indirect interior monologue: everything is mediated by a third person, it is used by Virginia Woolf and it is easier. The narrator is not there to give his opinion or to change the character's words, he is there to make sure that we understood something, that the grammar allows us to understand what he is thinking. He is invisible but he is like a guide and he is in charge of the organisation of the character's words.

The direct interior monologue: there are 2 subgroups, used by Joyce, the first is with 2 levels of narrations (mixture of 1st and 3rd person narrator, that talks about external events), the other with 1 level of narration (1st person narrator, no interruptions, disorganised thoughts). This does not require the mediation of another narrator, it is unstructured and free.

There are 3 categories of writers:

- **Pre modernists:** focused on the development of characters, challenged traditional structure
- **Real modernist writers:** Woolf and Joyce, experimented with the language, their novels are hard to read
- **Second generation of modernist** writers: Orwell and Huxley, they went back to linear structures, they wanted to send a message and they were socially engaged, they wanted to highlight social problems, such as dictatorships, scientific progress and mass media, they are easier to understand but are modernist for their content

War poetry

War poetry are poetries written by young British soldiers during WWI. Back then, they wrote poems about war with a civilian aim, but now there is a descriptive aim, they explained how the war actually

worked. We have vivid and shocking descriptions of the war, living conditions were awful, people fought and died, the long periods of waiting were stressing and sometimes people suffered from mental breakdowns and committed suicide.

They wrote poems to warn people about the atrocity of the war.

Emotional outlet: they needed a way to express their emotions, poetry was therapeutic

They decided to write poetry because they couldn't be completely honest in the letters they sent back home because generals often read them, they also kept secret diaries.

Most of these poems started out as Georgian poetries, which is the kind of poetry written during the reign of George V, marked by romanticism and conservatism. The first poems are actually romanticised, are patriotic and war is described as something that could make them heroes, they joined the army willingly because they thought the war could be over soon.

Rupert Brooke is the first poet who wrote this kind of poetry (war is a cleansing experience) and died in a ship to Gallipoli; he was used in a propagandist way.

SECOND PHASE

Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen described the horrors of the war.

Sassoon is famous for his documentary style, even though some things he talked about were unpleasant, the truth needed to be discussed; his motto is "no truths unfitting". His style is angry. He was highly criticised in GB because of his lack of patriotism.

Owen

His poetry is moving and angry, is about feelings and compassion.

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

He was extremely sensitive, shy, introverted and devout, he believed in God thanks to his mother. During war, he loses his faith towards the Church because he thought that church leaders were more politicians than politicians themselves. The church was not helping the people at home during war, he kept believing in God and people should have found a more intimate way to relate with God. When he was working as an English teacher in France, he felt like he wasn't fulfilling his duty so he went back to England, enlisted to the army and sent back to France to fight.

He was disgusted by the behaviour of his fellow soldiers, some of the soldiers were rude and not elegant, so he didn't get along with the other soldiers, but then he became attached to other soldiers. He talked about this relationship but also about traumatic experiences, such as being blown up in a trench, he survived but there was a dead body lying right next to him, so in a poetry he talked about how he felt being trapped for 3 days with a dead body next to him. He started to suffer from shell shock (PTSD), so he was sent to Scotland, where there was Craig Lockhart hospital, where he met Sassoon. Sassoon was the one who encouraged Owen to write poems, so in the following months Owen wrote lots of poems, all about the war, with Sassoon's support.

Owen decided to go back to the front because he felt guilty towards his fellow soldiers, who kept on fighting the war. Sassoon threatened him because he did not want him to go back, so he went back without telling him. He died 7 days before the armistice.

He was getting ready to get his collection of poems published but Sassoon made sure that nobody would have forgotten him and published this collection.

Owen also wrote a sort of preface, in which he explained what "war poetry" was for him: soldiers are not superheroes, they are ordinary men who could get scared, cry and could die, he had great admiration for these people, he also said that Georgian poetry couldn't be used to talk about war, so he came up with a new style, something to describe the horrors of war. These poems are not about the glorification of war, his focus is on suffering and pain and wanted to make sure that something like that would never happen again. There is no poetry in war, the poetry lies in the pity of war.

A true poet must warn.

Style:

- Graphic descriptions of the horrors of war: raw imagery

- Addresses the reader directly: personal pronoun “you” is found
- The use of present tense: conveys a sense of urgency and seems to still have effects on the present
- Pararhyme: consonant sounds are the same, vowel sounds are different (guttural sounds)
- Narrator is a passive observer, he describes what he sees and acts like a witness

DULCE ET DECORUM EST

There are two kinds of handwriting: the manuscript is written by Owen, but there are some corrections made by Sassoon. There are 4 irregular stanzas, the total of lines is 28, some scholars say that the poetry is actually made up of two sonnets but there are some irregularities, Owen uses the irregularities to convey this sense of agony and anxiety, even by the rhythm point of view.