The Turn of the centuries or

Late Victorian to Modernist Literature

1870-1901

Historical & Social Background

After the Civil War the United States began to recover economically. Germany too united into one empire under the 'Iron Chancellor', Otto von Bismarck, and emerged as a major military and naval power.

During these years Britain lost a lot of its international commerce to both the United States and Germany and ceased to be the 'workshop of the world'.

Nevertheless it survived as the world's banker, with the pound sterling considered the international currency.

As an imperial power, Britain became more aggressive and suspicious of its rivals. **The Boer War** (1899-1902), fought against the Dutch Boer settlers in South Africa and eventually won after some humiliating defeats, aroused great bitterness.

Scientific scholarship on biblical texts and contemporary theories concerning the geological development of the earth had already caused some intellectuals to have religious doubts.

In 1959 **Charles Darwin** published *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. Historians, philosophers, and scientists were all beginning to apply the idea of evolution to new areas of study of the human experience. Traditional conceptions of man's nature and place in the world were, as a consequence, under threat.

The economic crisis of the 1840s was long last. But the fierce political debate that led to the **Second Reform Act** of 1867 and then to the battles for the rights of women were accompanied by a growing crisis of belief. The destruction of many traditional beliefs and assumptions was accelerated at the beginning of the 20th century. Authority – strict fathers, dominant husbands, powerful politicians – was something to be suspicious of; at the same time there was a decline in the Victorian sense of individual responsibility. The breakdown was mostly contributed to by the following factors:

- **The Women's Suffrage Movement** pursued mildly violent action to secure political rights for women before and during the First World War. The term *suffragette* comes from the word *suffrage*, which means the right to vote. Suffragettes carried out direct action such as chaining themselves to railings, setting fire to the contents of mailboxes, and smashing windows.
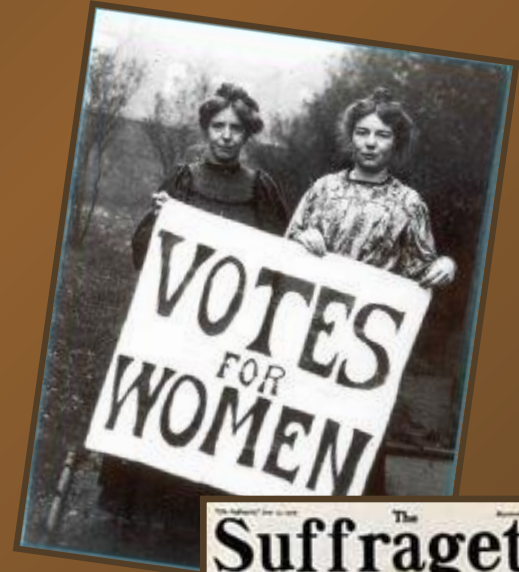
Emmeline Pankhurst later wrote in her autobiography that:

"this was the beginning of a campaign the like of which was never known in England, or for that matter in any other country.....we interrupted a great many meetings......and we were violently thrown out and insulted. Often we were painfully bruised and hurt."

- Humanity was considered – for example by the German socialist philosopher Karl Marx (1818-1883) – much more economic and social terms than in religious terms.
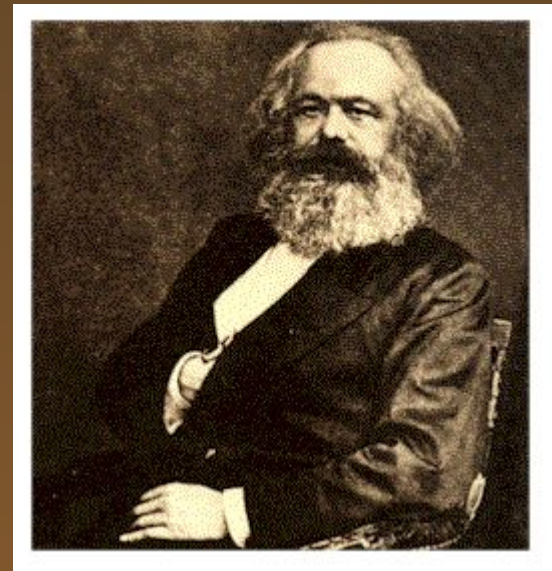
- Humanity was now seen as part of the natural and was investigated in a sceptical scientific spirit. Psychologists, in particular **Sigmund Freud** (1856-1939), showed that a person's actions could be motivated by unconscious and irrational forces in the human personality.
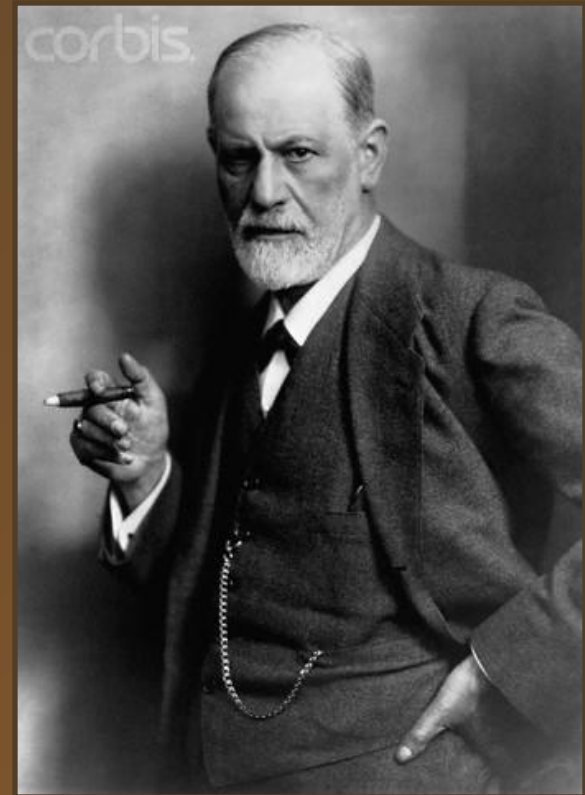
- The First World War showed the incompetence of the older generation – its politicians and generals.

- In 1857 desertion was also made grounds for divorce (as well as adultery and cruelty), and proceedings were taken out of the hands of Church Courts.

  The First World War is often regarded as the point dividing the 'old' world from the modern world.

In the novel *Kangaroo* (1923), **D.H. Lawrence** wrote:

'It was in 1915 the old world ended. In the winter 1915-16 the spirit of the old London collapsed; the city, in some way, perished, perished form being the heart of the world, and became a vortex of broken passions, lusts, hopes, fears, and horrors. The integrity of London collapsed and the genuine debasement began, the unspeakable baseness of the press and the public voice...'
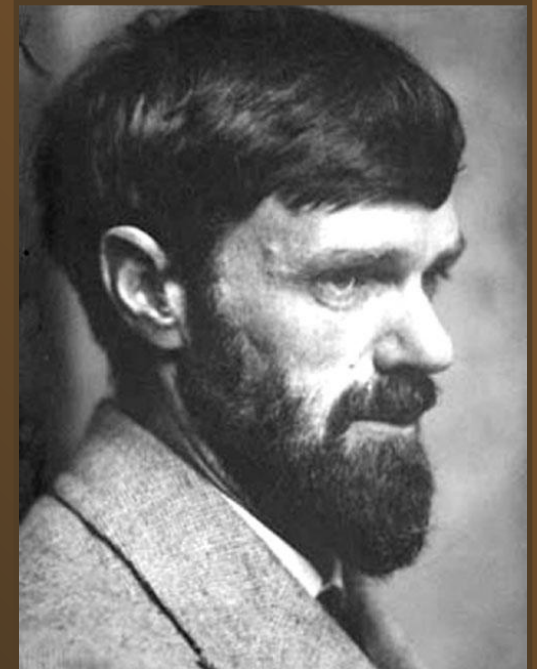
In the 70s of the 19th century most writers on social problems (repeating the Enlighteners' mistake) believed that science multiplied by science would be enough to sweep away all human miseries. Men of science were greatly admired.

But gradually during the last decades of the 19th century disillusionment in this outlook implanted doubts to the faultless nature of European civilization.

All this led to growing pessimism in literature, which obviously fell into two major trends:

• **the realistic one** which developed the realistic traditions of Dickens and Thackeray and are best represented by J. Galsworthy and Hardy with their interest in human society and nature;

• **the other trend**, collectively known as the literature of *fin de siècle* or Decadence, (*de* 'down' + *cadere* 'to fall'), or Modernist, represented by O. Wilde, R. Kipling, H. Wells, R.L. Stevenson and others who preferred to escape from reality into the world of dreams and fantasy, into the realm of beauty and adventure.

The Aesthetic Movement of the originated from earlier intellectual opposition to materialism and industrialisation. The phrase *fin de siècle* came into use denoting a preoccupation with a widespread faltering of self-confidence, a new edginess, uncertainty about the future.

Among writers, such a climate might have been supposed to favour a mood of realism, and so it did; *but the commonest reaction was withdrawal, a retreat into nostalgia, exoticism, fine writing, bell-lettres'.*

Aesthetes insisted that art should be a fusion of psychic and sensuous ecstasy. It should aim only at beauty and not concern itself with moral purpose or social practicalities. The Aesthetic outlook can be defined as 'Art for Art's Sake'. *The Picture of Dorian Grey* by Oscar Wilde is an exploration of the idea that art and beauty has nothing to do with morality.

On the whole, as a concept 'modernism' is easier to employ than to define. It refers to all the radical remakings of arts that went in Europe before 1914, and can be described as 'nothing can be taken for granted in literary form'. Modernism provided philosophical background for different kinds of aesthetic movements in art: *symbolism, futurism, expressionism, surrealism, cubism, imagism, etc.*

The Victorian Theatre

The 1890s became the outstanding decade of dramatic innovation:

• Oscar Wilde crowned his career as a playwright with one of the few great comedies in English, *The Importance of Being Erneast* (1895).

• The influence of Henrik Ibsen was helping to produce a new genre of 'serious problem plays'.

• J.T. Grein founded the Independent Theatre in 1891 to foster such work.

- Bernard Shaw not only freely used hid plays **as a vehicle for his social thinking** but also

- made them **readable as well as actable** (he expressed his ideas not only through individual characters, but also through the setting of the play as well. Moreover, in the preface he usually portrayed the characters and described the settings in detail along with giving profound comment and remark in the text).

The Novel

Late Victorian fiction may express doubts and uncertainties, but in aesthetic terms it displays a new sophistication and self-confidence.

Realism continued to flourish, sometimes encouraged by the examples of European Realists and Naturalists such as George Gissing and Émile Zola. This type of novel was best represented by John Galsworthy, Thomas Hardy, Henry James, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope and George Meredith.
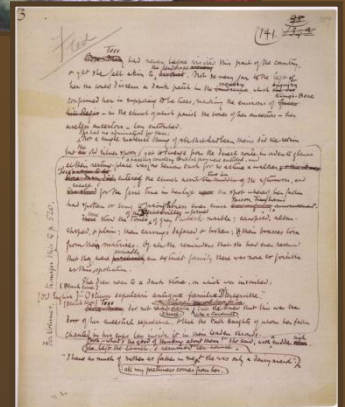
The New Fiction

The closing years of the century were a period of literary experiment and innovation. New periodicals were started, directed at the growing popular audience brought into being by universal education; they provided a great opportunity for writers. Traditional literary genres were also directed to new ends. There was a growing taste for the romance, the tale set in other times and other places, which offered the imaginative escape from an unlovely present.
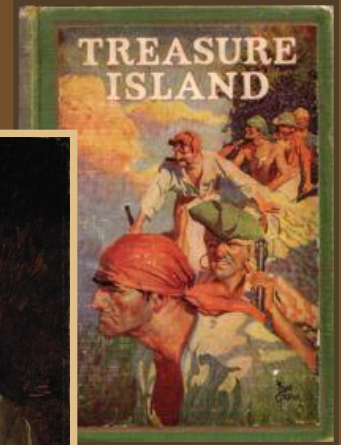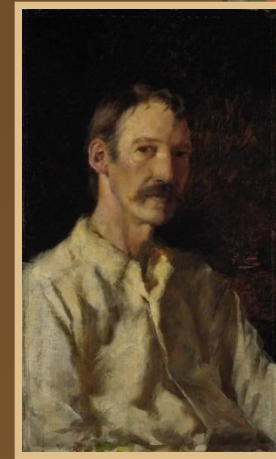
In fiction the *fin de siècle* mood of withdrawal from everyday reality and the pursuit of a higher world of myth and art of imagination led to a taste for:

- **fictional romances** is best represented by Robert Luis Stevenson, 'the fabulous invalid', who also presented an archetypal image of *Doppelgänger* in his *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886)

• **apocalyptic and pessimistic sci-fi romance**, which was directed not at remote areas but at the future, brilliantly represented by Herbert Wells;

• **colonial literature** with its taste for the exotic, a fashion set by Rudyard Kipling.

- **Aesthetic novel**, represented by Oscar Wilde with his *Dorian Grey* and *Fairy Tales*.
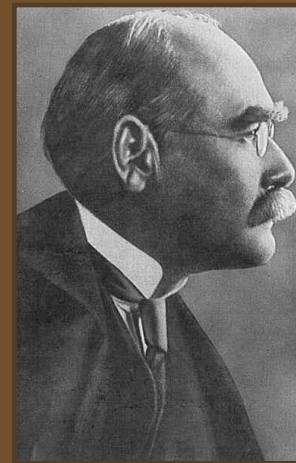
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