

Core 311

UNIT 1

B. Literary Features of the THE INTER-WAR YEARS

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (1918-39)

This period was almost completely overshadowed by the two World Wars—the after effects of the first and the forebodings of the second. After the Treaty of Versailles attention in England was still mainly concentrated on foreign affairs—the growing pains of the new League of Nations, uncertainty in the Middle East, and troubles in India and Ireland. The Treaties of Locarno (1925) diminished, at least temporarily, anxieties in Europe, and home affairs began again to dominate English political thought. The General Strike of 1926 was a major manifestation of the post-War slump, which culminated in the 'depression and its problems of want and unemployment, which made the early thirties a period of great distress, particularly for the industrial areas. Foreign problems again came to the fore with the rise to power of the Nazis in Germany, and from 1934 until 1939 there was mounting tension abroad, and at home a gradual return to prosperity as industry was geared to rearmament. Spiritually the period saw the immediate post-War mood of desperate gaiety and determined frivolity give way to doubt, uncertainty of aim, and a deeper self-questioning on ethical, social, and political problems, until the outbreak of hostilities in 1939, followed by the critical situation after the evacuation of Dunkirk, enabled the nation to achieve a new unanimity of purpose.

LITERARY FEATURES OF THE AGE:-

1. The Breakdown of Established Values:-

Of no period is it more true to say that the spirit of the age is perfectly reflected in its literature. Novel, poetry, drama, and miscellaneous prose, all mirror the perplexity and uncertainty of aim which sprang from the post-War breakdown of accepted spiritual values. The multiplicity of reactions to the contemporary situation is equalled by the variety of literary work. It is significant that in the literature of our period there is an attempt to find new values in political thought, and politics and psychology are indeed essential clues for the interpretation of the inter-War literary scene.

2.The Resurgence of Poetry:-

The pre-War years had seen a relative eclipse of poetry, and the dominance of the novel and drama as literary forms. The demand, long before expressed by Yeats, for a new and living poetical tradition was met between the Wars in his own work and in that of the new poets—T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Cecil Day Lewis, and Louis MacNeice. Poetry again became a vital literary form closely in touch with life, and if it did not oust the novel from its primacy it certainly outstripped the drama.

3.Variety of Technical Experiment:-

It is doubtful whether any period of English literature saw experiments so bold and various as those of the inter-War years, A natural corollary of the quest for new values and for a new vital tradition was the desire for new forms and methods of presentation, and in all the major literary genres the age produced revolutionary developments.

4. The Influence of Radio and Cinema:-

Though it is impossible to assess with any accuracy the effect on literature of these two inventions, there can be no doubt that the rapid development of two such important media had an enormous impact. In so far as the radio brought literature into the home, in the form of broadcast stories, plays, and literary discussion, and opened up an entirely new field for authors, its influence was for the good. On the other hand, the great quantity and variety of poorer radio entertainment readily accessible for more than two-thirds of each day almost certainly reduced the time devoted to reading. The same may be said of the cinema, which, for many people, became the main form of leisure activity, while, in spite of the numerous screen adaptations of novels, it can scarcely be claimed that the cinema has done as much as the radio to stimulate literary interest. At the same time it must be remembered that film techniques were the basis of a number of experiments in the novel.

5. The Speed of Life:-

In the inter-War years life generally was lived in an atmosphere of hustle and restlessness never before known. At work and at play the demand was for more and faster action, stronger and more violent stimulus, and the general atmosphere thus created was by its very nature inimical to the cultivation of literary pursuits, which necessarily demand a degree of calmness of spirit and leisure of mind.

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