Course III: Major Lieterary Movements

1. Romanticism

The late 18th century was a period of revolutionary change across Europe. The Enlightenment, or Age of Reason, had fostered the scientific advances that brought about the Industrial Revolution, as well as the various philosophical ideas that had led to the political revolutions in North America and France. The effects of growing industrialization and urbanization on society had a significant impact on the way that many people lived and worked.

During the Renaissance and the Enlightenment periods, humankind and reason were the twin focuses of cultural interest. But in the early 19th century, the individual came to the fore. Partly as a reaction to the cool rationality of the Enlightenment, a movement in the arts arose, which placed emphasis on subjective feelings and faculties such as intuition, imagination, and emotion. This movement became known as Romanticism.

Romantic literature

Romanticism had its roots in the German Sturm und Drang movement, from which the writers Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller emerged. In this transition from the classical style of the Enlightenment to 19th-century Romanticism, they introduced the idea of an unconventional protagonist whose actions are less important than his thoughts and feelings. This "Romantic hero" later became more of an antiestablishment figure, epitomizing the rebellious spirit of the period, and a recurrent character in the growing number of novels that appeared at the time. By the mid-19th century, Romanticism had spread across Europe to Russia, and writers such as Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, and Ivan Turgenev developed the idea into that of the "superfluous man," whose unconventional ideas isolate him completely from society.

Another characteristic of Romantic literature was an affinity with the natural world. English poets such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge offered an antidote to the industrial age by portraying the beauty and power of nature, and celebrating the innocence and impulsiveness of childhood. A similar reaction to urbanization was evident in the work of American transcendentalist writers Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman who evoked the spirit of humanitarian liberty, culminating in their call to go "back to nature."

Gothic novels

However, many Romantic writers recognized that nature (and human nature) also has a dark side, and can arouse feelings of terror as well as pleasure. This fascination with the destructive power of nature, and even the supernatural, inspired the genre that came to be known as gothic literature. The tone was set in Germany by Goethe's play *Faust*, and the short stories by E. T. A. Hoffmann, but the genre was most eagerly adopted by English novelists, such as Mary Shelley, who wrote *Frankenstein*. Elements of the gothic run through many Victorian novels, often stressing the untameable nature of a Romantic hero in a wild landscape, as in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, or the grotesque characters in grim urban surroundings that feature in the works of Charles Dickens. The genre also became popular in the US, as exemplified by Edgar Allan Poe's tales of the macabre; it also influenced the style adopted by Herman Melville in his haunting short stories and *Moby-Dick*.

History and identity

As society industrialized, levels of literacy increased, and literature was no longer solely for an educated elite. Novels in particular reached a mass readership in 19th-century Europe and the US, and many were made available in serial form. Especially popular were historical novels by the likes of Walter Scott, Alexandre Dumas, and James Fenimore Cooper, which catered to an urban public's desire for romance and adventure, but included graver fare such as Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. There was also an appetite for folk stories and fairy tales which, like historical novels, were often specific to a culture. This focus on regional traditions chimed with the era's growing nationalism.

In addition to a broader readership, increased literacy spawned a greater variety of authors, most noticeably a generation of women such as the Brontë sisters and George Eliot of England, who (albeit under pseudonyms) pioneered a female perspective in literature, and the first freed slaves, such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Solomon Northup, who gave a voice to oppressed black people. ■

2. Naturalism

Naturalism was a literary movement that evolved in mid-19th-century France, in reaction to the sentimental imagination of Romanticism. Rather than depicting an idealized world, naturalism focused on the harsh lives of those in the lowest social strata. It had much in common with realism, which sought to present an accurate

evocation of ordinary life, as exemplified in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Naturalism had similar literary ambitions and used detailed realism, but was rooted in the theory that humans are unable to transcend the impact of their environment. Therefore, naturalist authors applied quasi-scientific. The leading figure of the naturalist movement was the French writer Emile Zola.

3. Realism

By the mid-19th century, the novel was firmly established as the predominant form of literature, with an unprecedented number of readers creating demand for new fiction across the world. No longer restricted to a cultural elite, reading had become a popular pastime, and readers increasingly sought books that were relevant to their own experiences and the world they lived in.

Realism gains momentum

The portrayal of believable characters and stories had been pioneered by the earliest novelists, such as Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding, and in the 19th century the trend toward ever greater authenticity continued, resulting in contemporary fiction about ordinary people and their everyday lives. This literary approach, known as "realism," began in earnest in France, where a generation of writers—uncomfortable with the tendency of Romanticism toward idealization and dramatization—sought to depict familiar scenes and characters as accurately as possible. One of the first to embrace the style was Honoré Balzac, whose monumental series of stories *La Comédie Humaine* was intended to provide an encyclopedic portrait of society, revealing the principles governing individual lives and their effects. This grand vision inspired not only French realist novelists such as Gustave Flaubert, but also a literary genre that spread across the Western world. By the latter half of the 19th century, elements of realism—and in particular the depiction of human preoccupations and fallibilities—could be found in novels from as far apart as Russia, Britain, and the US.

Authors enhanced the realism of their novels by various means. Some used the *roman à clef*, presenting historical events as fiction; others wrote from an omniscient narrator's perspective, enabling them to describe the thoughts and feelings, as well as the actions, of the characters. This emphasis on internal characterization developed into psychological realism, a subgenre that Russian authors in particular adopted, including Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

Social protest

In striving for authenticity, many writers turned their attention to the lives of working people rather than the middle classes. In contrast to the depiction of the humdrum existence of a character like Madame Bovary, Victor Hugo and Charles Dickens showed in graphic detail the grim conditions of the peasantry and industrial working class, not only for literary effect, but also as a form of social and political commentary. Others, including Emile Zola, emphasized the role that social conditions play in shaping character.

From gothic to fantasy

The focus on the harsh, squalid realities of working-class life contributed to a gradual shift in perspective toward the dark side of city life. One result was the development of the gothic tradition that became known as urban gothic, epitomized by Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The hope that this distressing era of dirt, disease, and death might be transformed for the better by advances in science enthralled the public and inspired authors such as Jules Verne and Arthur Conan Doyle to write "scientific romances." These precursors of science fiction had plots that featured invented discoveries and technologies, presented as if they were real.

A taste for the fantastical was also a prominent feature in the growing number of children's books that appeared at this time, notably in the "nonsense" fantasy of Lewis Carroll's surreal *Alice* novels. This strange, adventurous material began a "golden age" of children's literature, which included perennial favorites, such as Rudyard Kipling's collection of fables *The Jungle Book* and the more down-to-earth yarn of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain.

Symbolist expression

Some writers argued that art should represent beauty and depict sensual pleasure rather than suffering. Writers of this Aesthetic movement used an indirect style influenced by the symbolism of French poets such as Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé. The symbolists had reacted against what they saw as the prosaic description of realist novels, instead emphasizing the importance of metaphor, imagery, and suggestion. Symbolist poets also explored new means of expression, experimenting with poetic techniques, which were later to inspire the coming generation of Modernist writers. ■

4. Modernism

The dawn of the 20th century was characterized by an almost worldwide feeling of optimism that this was a cultural turning point—a stately progress from the pessimism that typified the end of the 19th century toward a more vibrant, modern era. Industrialization and empire-building had brought prosperity—to the Western world at least—and with it the hope of creating a better, more fair society. At the same time, new scientific ideas, such as Sigmund Freud's concept of the unconscious and Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, influenced the way that people thought about themselves and the world.

However, the new century turned out to be a turbulent one, as hopes for the future were first shattered by the catastrophic carnage of World War I, and then, after a brief period of hedonistic confidence, dashed by a global economic depression and the rise of Nazism and fascism, which resulted in World War II.

Modernism

In the world of literature, the new century was characterized by a move away from gritty realism to distinctly modern forms and genres. Taking their cue from the French symbolists, poets such as Ezra Pound developed a new style that stretched the conventions of verse. In 1922 *The Waste Land*, by Anglo-American poet T. S. Eliot, captured the disillusionment of the age.

Novelists also found a variety of new means of expression. Influenced by existentialist philosophy and the new theories emerging in the field of psychology, Franz Kafka created a fantastic and often nightmarish world of the alienated individual in modern society, while in Japan Natsume Sōseki pioneered a similar genre of first-person "I-novel."

Another form that was adopted by modernist novelists was the "stream of consciousness" novel. Although this approach was not a new idea, it was given a particular boost by psychological theories, and it provided Irishman James Joyce with the framework on which he built his modernist style, first in *Ulysses* and then more experimentally in *Finnegans Wake*.

Modernism also featured in more conventional prose narratives. German author Thomas Mann, for example, took the Bildungsroman, or formative, rite-of-passage story, and reshaped it into a modern form, first in the novella *Death in Venice*, and later in his masterpiece *The Magic Mountain*.

A warring world

It was not only ideas that shaped the literature of the 20th century, but also events. World War I (1914–18) inevitably had a profound effect, which is most obviously seen in the work of poets, such as Wilfred Owen, who served in the British army. However, there was also the "lost generation" of American writers who had come of age during the war, which included T. S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Although writing ostensibly about the heady days of the 1920s, Fitzgerald portrays the world beneath the superficial and ephemeral Roaring Twenties in *The Great Gatsby*, evoking a mood that anticipates the Great Depression of the coming decade. The 1920s also saw the rise of a generation of African-American writers, whose authentic depictions of their lives contrasted with the popular portrayal of the black entertainers of the Jazz Age.

In Germany and Austria too, there was a brief period of postwar optimism that was captured vividly by novelists such as Alfred Döblin, but this was as short-lived as elsewhere in Europe and the US. Hitler's rise to power forced many writers and artists to flee into exile until the end of World War II. The repressive Nazi regime was hostile to "degenerate" modern art, and so too was the newly formed Soviet Union under Stalin, drawing to a close a century of great Russian writing. In China the end of four millennia of dynastic rule inspired a generation of nationalist writers.

The detectives

Popular fiction flourished in the first half of the 20th century and the detective genre in particular appealed to a mass readership. Pioneered by Victorian writers such as Wilkie Collins in the UK and Edgar Allan Poe in the US, detective fiction really came into its own with Scotsman Arthur Conan Doyle's creation of Sherlock Holmes. This marked the beginning of a long line of fictional sleuths, as diverse as British writer Agatha Christie's genteel Miss Marple and Hercules Poirot, and the hard-boiled Philip Marlowe, hero of American author Raymond Chandler's dark and tangled noir novels of the 1940s. ■