

## The Modern Age (1901-1952) > the Context (BRITAIN AND EUROPE)

When Queen Victoria died in 1901, her son became king as Edward VII (1901-1910). He was 59 when he succeeded his mother as Britain's monarch. His reign marked a period of social change and reform. Edward embodied the new culture, he modernized the monarchy and brought new life and a sense of fun to the royal court. He redecorated Buckingham Palace where he held balls.

Edward proved a skill diplomat when he signed an agreement with France in 1904, the *Entente Cordiale*. It established mutual agreement that Britain could pursue its interests in Egypt and France in Morocco. The King's diplomacy helped Britain to establish itself in a new alignment of European countries: Britain would count on France and Russia in any conflict with Germany, Austria and Italy.

The Liberal Party won the General Election of 1906. Perhaps the most important consequences of the 1906 general election was the election of 29 members of the new Labour Party.

Socially, class distinctions of Victorian society were well preserved and defined. Social reforms started in the field of education and welfare.

One of the main cause of poverty was old age. Many old people had no other choice but to go into workhouses. The introduction of the old age pension for those with an annual income of under £21 a year, partially changed that.

The *Children's Charter* (1906-1908) was a series of laws helping children; free meals were given to poor children, regular medical inspections in schools were started, children were banned from public houses and not allowed to beg.

Another major cause of poverty was unemployment. In 1909 minimum wages were fixed and in 1911 were given benefits such as free medical treatment and sickness benefits. Government had responsibility towards the poor. The different beliefs between the House of Lords and the House of Commons caused a storm in Parliament and, as a result, The *Parliament Act* (1911) made it impossible for the Lords to reject a bill about money.

In 1900 women were still second-class citizens and were not allowed to vote. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a woman's destiny was still to marry young, stay at home and have children. In 1903 Mrs Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). The "suffragettes", as they were called, wanted women to have the vote and soon won massive publicity for their cause. They held marches in London, chained themselves to railings, broke windows, hit and spit at policemen. Numerous militants were sent to prison and went on hunger-strike. Women aged 30 and over would gain the vote in 1918 thanks to "The Representation of the People Act". In 1928 the franchise was extended to women over 21, on the same terms as those for men.

"Home rule" for Ireland had been a problem since the 1880s. Southern Catholics, who wanted an independent republic of Ireland wholly separated from Britain, rose in open rebellion. A group of rebels, led by Eamon de Valera and Sinn Fein nationalist party, impatient with Britain and unwilling in many cases to fight for Britain in the Great War, took decisive action. The rebellion was crushed and the leaders executed, but the problem was not solved as the IRA (Irish Republican Army) resorted to terrorist tactics. Years of bloody conflict between the Irish and the British in Ireland led to the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922. This process also led to the partition of the island as the six counties of Ulster chose to remain part of the United Kingdom. When George V (1910-36) ascended the throne, all the sources of turmoil came to the surface.

Trade unionism started to develop and was a further occasion for unrest. These years saw particularly violent clashes between capital and labour.

The First World War brought to an abrupt and horrifying end the illusion that problems could be solved peacefully. The First World War involved the rivalry between Austria and Russia for influence in the Balkans, the rivalry between Britain and Germany for commercial and naval supremacy, animosity between France and Germany after the Franco-German War of 1870. France and Germany sought to strengthen themselves with allies, Germany forming the *Triple Alliance* with Austria-Hungary and Italy while France making an

alliance with Russia and, afterwards, with Britain (*Triple Entente*). The war of attrition dragged on with all the horrors of trench warfare, terrible new military technology such as tanks, machine guns and gas. The USA joined the war in 1917 and Germany was finally defeated one year later. On the 11<sup>th</sup> November 1918 an Armistice was signed, a ceasefire announced and this was followed by a Peace Treaty (Treaty of Versailles) leaving empires destroyed, national boundaries shifted and economic hardships. A million young men died and the depression and unemployment of the post-war years brought poverty and hunger.

During the war time women had widened their field of activity and many were reluctant to go back to the traditional role of housekeeper. Women's emancipation began.

In the years after the First World War Britain fell into economic and industrial decline. One of the most seriously affected sectors was the mining industry. In 1926 the owners of the mines tried to solve the problem by reducing the workers' pay and increasing their working hours. The miners reacted angrily and announced a general strike. The strike initially paralysed Britain, especially the transport network, but the government acted quickly and firmly to end the strike. One week later, miners abandoned the struggle and its members went back to work.

Britain had to face problems within the Empire, as well. The colonies claimed their independence and in 1926 the Dominion Imperial Conference in London declared them autonomous but united by a common allegiance to the Crown and freely associated to the British Commonwealth of Nations. India was not mentioned in the Statute and in 1920 India Mahatma Gandhi had started a policy of non-violent protest against the British government which led to the complete independence of India in 1947.

Britain and the rest of Europe were also hit by the Great Depression which followed the Wall Street Crash in October 1929. By the end of 1931 about 3 million men were unemployed, mainly in the industrial towns of the north, south Wales and central Scotland. However, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was founded in 1922.

The economic difficulties of the 1920s and 1930s created a fertile climate for the rise of totalitarianism in Europe.

Britain was reluctant on first instance to be involved in another war against European totalitarianisms. However, the German invasion of Poland in 1939 finally pushed the Prime Minister into action and Britain declared war on Germany. The war saw the allied powers (France, Britain and later Russia and USA) against the Axis powers (Germany, Italy and Japan). In April 1940 the Prime Minister Chamberlain was replaced by Winston Churchill. The popular response to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 was overwhelming. The Second World War was fought on a matter of principle, for the ideal of defending democracy against totalitarianism. The war continued and spread into global conflict with Japan's attack on pearl Harbour in 1941 bringing the USA into the war. In 1942 the Nazis decided to rid Europe of all Jews. This gave rise to one of the greatest crimes in the history of mankind: the Shoah (or Holocaust) which was the systematic state-sponsored killing of six million Jewish men, women and children, and of millions of others, including Gypsies, homosexuals and political opponents. The Nazi killing program was carried out through the creation of death camps like Auschwitz where the Nazis used gas chambers to exterminate large groups of victims at a time with poison gas. After another long and bloody war, the Allies finally achieved victory in Europe in 1945, followed by victory in Japan after the atomic bombs launched on Hiroshima and Nagasaki forced Japanese into surrender. The general attitude was that democracy must be defended at all costs. The Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, managed to overcome all difficulties and gather strong popular support after a famous speech, he led the country to victory. Movements of Resistance occurred during the War almost in every occupied country and played an important role in defeating Nazi Germany. At the end of the war, survivors of the camps faced a long and difficult road to recovery. During the Nuremberg Trials, many Nazis were convicted of crimes against humanity and some were sentenced to death.

After the Second World War, the Conservative Party (lead by Churchill) lost the elections and was replaced by the Labour Party which was determined to transform British society. The difficult years of post-war reconstruction boldly tackled five questions: the reform of schooling, a commitment to full employment,

family support, a national insurance and a national health service. At the same time, key sectors of the economy (the Bank of England, the power, steel and railway industries) were nationalised.

### **The Modern Age (1901-1952)> the Context (THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA)**

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the United States transformed from a relatively “young” nation with a past of colonial dependence followed by pioneering expansion into one of the most powerful nations in the world.

As the new century began, the United States was developing into the world’s leading industrial power. Millions of immigrant workers and farmers arrived and made it possible to boost some economic processes such as a national rail network, aviation, modern industrial processes and the cinema industry. Much of this progress, however, was achieved at the cost of corruption and exploitation of workers.

President Theodore Roosevelt, elected in 1901, was a driving force of reform. He passed legislation to limit the power of monopolies and trusts, protected natural wealth by establishing several natural parks and regulated the railroads. US also took over the construction of the Panama Canal. A national income tax was established and direct election of US Senators to Congress, in 1920 women were granted the right to vote. Not everybody shared in the civil rights and in the opportunities that America offered (for example African-American).

In 1917, after Germany closed the seas to American ships, the US entered the First World War and greatly contributed to defeat Germany. The US helped to negotiate a peace treaty that included a plan for the creation of a League of Nations to maintain peace and cooperation between the nations of the world. After the war, America experienced a massive economic boom. Americans enjoyed a period of carefree wealth, partying, music and dancing, known as “The Roaring Twenties”. People spent money on commodities such as radios, holidays, Henry Ford’s cars and entertainment (thanks also to the development of the cinema industry of Hollywood).

Optimism and prosperity came to a sudden end with the Wall Street Crash of 1929, marking the beginning of a worldwide Great Depression that was to last 10 years. Bank failures, speculation, overproduction of goods were among the major causes of the Great Depression. Many people became unemployed and homeless. The election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 brought an upturn in the American economy. He introduced the “New Deal” policy which placed regulations on the stock market, banks and business, offered assistance to the poor and repealed the “Prohibition Act” of 1920 which had made the production and consumption of alcoholic drinks illegal.

The years of depression brought increasing political tension in Europe and other parts of the world leading to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. The US entered the war in 1941. Two decisive turning points occurred when the allied forces invaded Sicily (1943) and when they landed on the Normandy coast (D-Day 1944). President Harry S. Truman ordered the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

By the end of the war Europe was devastated, industry and agriculture were in ruins and the population was on the brink of starvation. In 1948 President Truman set up the Marshall Plan which was intended to rebuild the economies of western Europe and prevent the spread of communism.

After the war, the relationship between the US and the Soviet Union changed and two different international alliances were founded: the NATO in 1949 and the Warsaw Pact in 1955. Nearly all European nations aligned into one of the opposing camps. This alignment continued throughout the Cold War (1945-1991) which was the nonviolent conflict between the US and the USSR until the fall of the Berlin Wall and end of the Soviet Union.

### **Cultural Context in Europe**

One of the main aspects of the period from a cultural point of view was the international character of many of its features. The dilemma in America and Europe was one of belief. The cultural response ranged from social commitment to either total rejection of conventions and traditions or nostalgic clinging to them. The experience of the horror of the war was conveyed in the poetry of soldiers who went through it.

The general tendency to question all past values and beliefs and to move from objectivity to subjectivity was brought about by various new theories. British intellectuals and writers were greatly influenced by ideas coming from other European countries (philosophy - Nietzsche, Freud, Schopenhauer-, science – Einstein-, figurative arts - Picasso, Cubism, Futurism-, music - Schoenberg-).

The shattering experience of the First World War dealt a further blow to uncritical faith in progress, the social system and the validity of its institutions. The new outlook on life emphasised the individual human being, the individual sensibility and the individual consciousness as opposed to accepted social order, social values and social ideals.

In the arts, the search for new models to represent the new perception of reality found expression in a broad European and American movement known as Modernism.

### **Literary context**

In the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the reaction against the realistic tradition of Victorian fiction dominated; writers shifted their interest to the problem of representing individual consciousness under the influence of the new psychological theories. They were mostly concerned with the search for techniques to portray the complexity of the inner life of the individual and the way to portray human consciousness which was now seen as a flux in which past, present and future coexisted.

In Modernist fiction, the very existence of objective reality was questioned; the main emphasis was on how to communicate subjective experience. The most important technical innovation was the shifting of the point of view from the external narrator to the minds of the characters. The result was that the narrator disappeared from Modernist fiction. Reality was described through the subjective responses and reflections of the different characters. This new technique was called **the stream of consciousness**.

Modernist novels often dealt with trivial events occurring over a very short period of time and revolved mainly around the sensations, dreams and recollections of the characters.

The major novelists of the period are: James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, E. M. Forster.

The novelists of the 1930s ignored Modernism in favour of traditional realism but enlarged the novel's scope to include contemporary political issues such as the rise of totalitarian states. Two major examples are George Orwell and Aldous Huxley.

Concerning poetry, the general picture of the poetry of the period is a **fragmented** one.

Modernism reached England in the form of the Anglo-American movement of Imagism whose leading figure was Ezra Pound. They wanted to use the language of common speech, create new rhythms, be free in the choice of subject matter, use precise and clear imagery.

In the 1930s many poets shared the political commitment of the decade.