

Modernist Period

1902-1965





Politics

- Peace with France (finally)
- Elizabeth II takes the throne
- WWI and WWII occur in a single generation
- Britain fought like a lion — alone, for quite a long time — against socialism



The Church

- Secularism, paganism and ancient Eastern religions experience a resurgence
- The movement away from objective truth and toward subjective experience increased
- Religion was seen by many as “an opiate for the masses”



➤ The 20th Century saw both terrifying war and a time of peace and prosperity unknown until then



Political Developments

- The sinking of the Titanic, followed by two world wars within a generation, shell-shocked all of Western Civilization
- The collective horror inflicted by totalitarian dictators — and the cost of freedom — broke the will of the British to enter into conflict after WWII
- Fascination with the plight of the poor was suspended for a short time, but returned toward the end

Show clip
from "Titanic"

Economic Developments

- The huge losses of young British officers — most from the aristocracy and gentry — resulted in a loss of heirs for these families, which then withered (the “Barefoot Contessa”)
- There was a shuffling of land and wealth over the next few decades
- The human toll of WWI and WWII took much of the working-age men in Britain
- With a lack of men for husbands, women went to the workforce
- America became the world’s greatest economic power

Show clip from "Titanic"

Social Developments

- Social mobility and fluidity increased
- The ever-present threat on home soil made people treasure the sweetness of life
- There was a genuine sense of unity and nationalism, thanks to leadership of Winston Churchill
- Women were given the vote



Social Developments

Show clip
from "Narnia"

➤ Paintings, music and literature reflected the realities of war during the first half of the century.

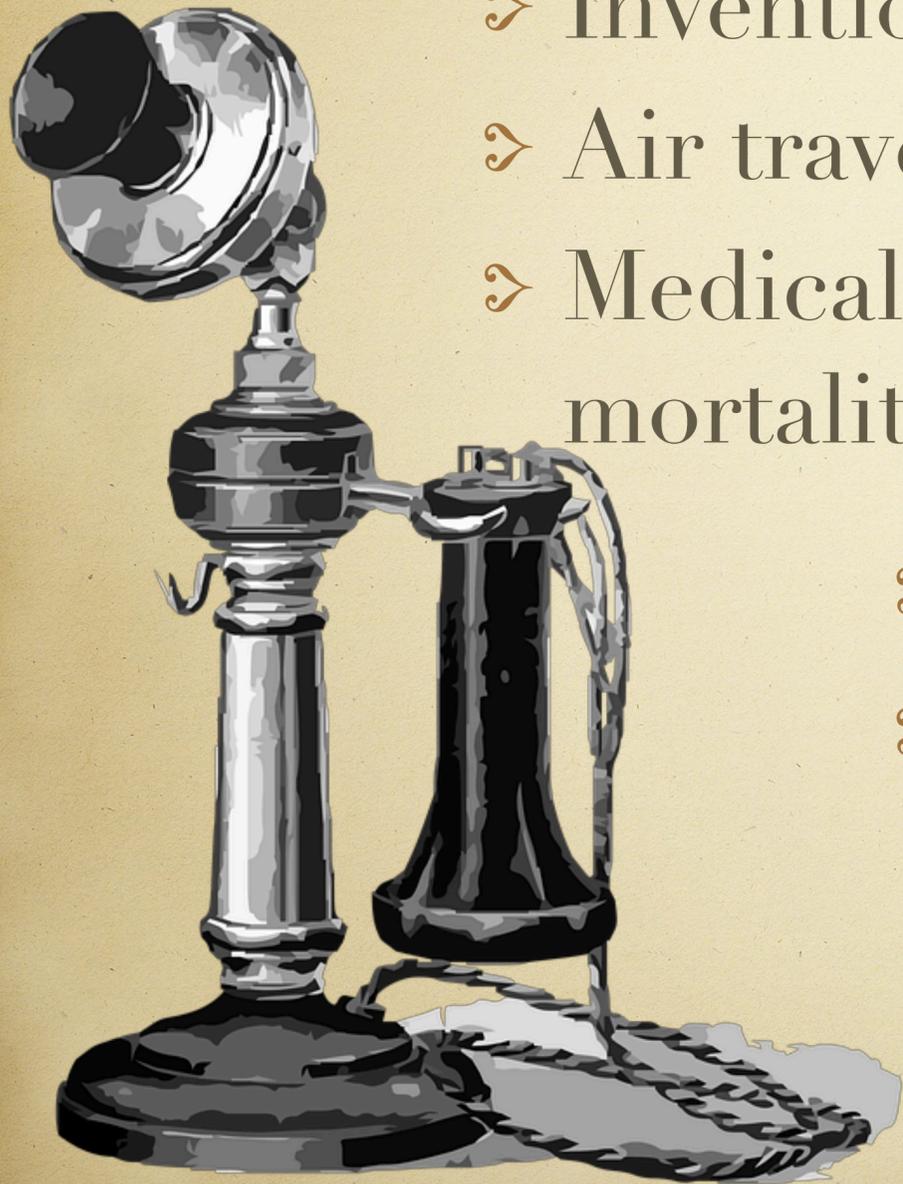
➤ The Great Depression greatly affects Britain



endiaries in a Suburb, 1941; Henry Carr

Inventions Changed Society

- Inventions now focused on consumers
- Air travel, telephones, radios are all widely enjoyed
- Medical technology booms: life spans lengthen, infant mortality rates decline, people are healthier
- automobiles become mainstream
- electric light extends hospital & factory hours, introducing the night shift



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- Televisions become mainstream
- Global news was immediate



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Literary Developments

- A preoccupation with the inner self and consciousness
- Less regard for nature and history than previous periods
- Formerly taboo subjects were treated as “refined art forms”
- Intellectuals and artists believed the Victorian way of doing things was a cultural dead end
- Experimentalism and individualism became virtues, not vices
- Standards were fluid; the value of a book or essay was no longer objective, but subjective

Literary Developments

- The “starving artist” was a social meme
- Poetry experienced a minimalist approach to language: much of the poetry of the day was short, sparse, deconstructed
- Rhyme, meter, and other rules of poetry began to dissolve
- Irony and “layers of meaning” emerged
- Psychoanalysis went mainstream thanks to Sigmund Freud
- Magazines became more widespread among the middle class

New Literary Forms

- Psychological thrillers
- Mistaken identity adventures
- Crime & spy novels
- Dystopian novels
- Same-sex romances (Daphne du Maurier's "Rebecca")

Characteristics of Modernist Prose

- Paperbacks were being printed, bringing literature of all kinds to the public inexpensively
- A rejection of history and conservatism
- Experimentation and innovation with form
- A break with tradition in favor of interpretation
- A move toward uncertainty, away from security

Major Fiction Works

- *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (psychological thriller, James McCain, 1934)
- *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (mistaken identity, Patricia Highsmith, 1955)
- *Murder on the Orient Express* (mystery, Agatha Christie, 1934)
- *Our Man in Havana* (spy novel, Graham Greene, 1958)
- *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (detective novel, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 1902)
- *Brave New World* (dystopian novel, Aldous Huxley, 1932)
- *Ulysses* (epic by James Joyce, 1922)

Major Fiction Works

- *1984* and *Animal Farm* (dystopian novel, George Orwell/Eric Blair, 1949, 1945)
- *Murder Must Advertise* (detective fiction, Dorothy Sayers, 1933)
- *And Then There were None* (crime thriller, Agatha Christie, 1939)
- *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (psychological thriller, Shirley Jackson, 1962)
- *The Chronicles of Narnia* series (fantasy allegory, C. S. Lewis, 1950-1956)
- *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (fantasy epic, J. R. R. Tolkein, 1937-39)

Characteristics of Modernist Poetry

- Confusion and desolation were being explored, with nightmarish effect
- Beautiful poetry also flourished, with emphasis again on nature, family, and the preciousness of life
- Poetry becomes less specific, more abstract
- The world was getting “smaller,” thus exploring cultures around the world increased

Major Works of Poetry

- “The Waste Land,” by T.S. Elliot
- “Memory,” William Butler Yeats
- *18 Poems*, by Dylan Thomas
- *The Hawk in the Rain*, Ted Hughes
- *Death of a Naturalist*, Seamus Heaney