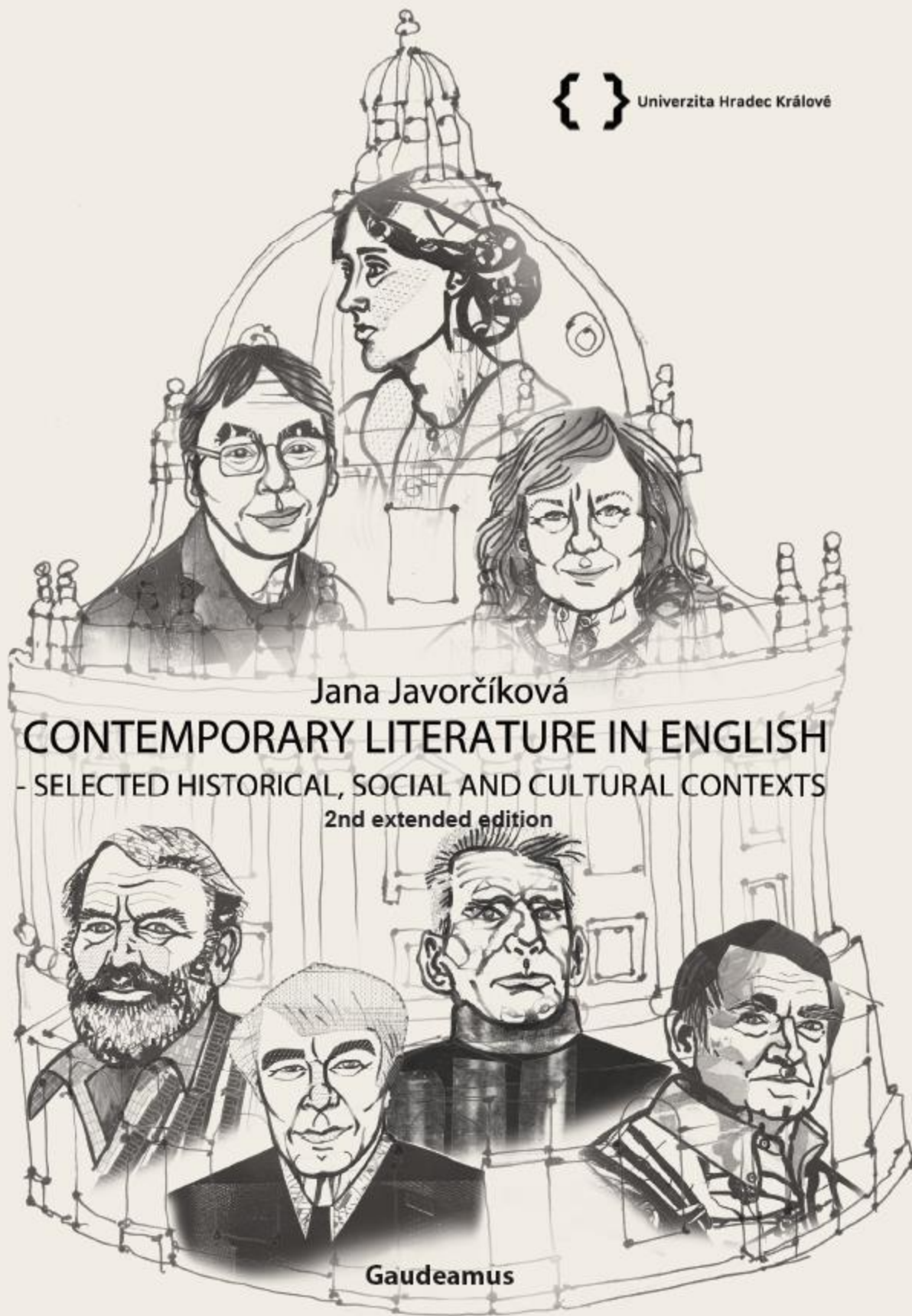




Univerzita Hradec Králové



Jana Javorčíková

CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

- SELECTED HISTORICAL, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

2nd extended edition

Gaudeamus



University of Hradec Králové

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IN ENGLISH —
SELECTED HISTORICAL, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL
CONTEXTS**

2nd extended edition

A textbook

Jana Javorčíková

Gaudeamus

2014

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© Mgr. Michaela Lenčová

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ISBN 978-80-7435-474-8

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INTRODUCTION

In my capacity as an instructor of literature at a teacher training and interpreter training university I have encountered numerous handbooks, coursebooks, guides, histories and almanacs of English literature and literary terminology that, I feel, adequately feed the hunger of readers for factual or analytical information about any conceivable period of English literature. However, none of these otherwise quality sources seemed, scopewise or contentwise, perfectly fit for a teacher and interpreting training format of studies and, therefore, this coursebook attempts to fill the gap and serve as a companion to a semester-format comprehensive course. Based on a fifteen-year-experience with students' frequently asked questions about how to analyse various pieces of art and how to grasp them critically and academically, I have compiled several critical essays that, I hope, contain what every graduate student in teaching and interpreting programmes and teachers of literature ought to know about literature in general and specifically about contemporary English literature and its contexts. As a consequence, this coursebook does not aim to divert students' attention from the multiplicity of quality primary and secondary sources, including interpretative and comparative studies in literary theory, history or criticism, but bring them to a further extension of their knowledge.

The layout of the book is based on the assumption that the aim of a university student of literature is not an accumulation of information (even though some whos, wheres and whens help to understand the context of literature) but on the ability to see individual pieces of art in their historical, social and cultural context and correlation, to understand why a particular book was written and how it enriched its readers in various literary and historical periods. I also sincerely wish that this publication will show the students the story of literature as an amazing and thrilling trip to the world of fiction, which sometimes represents a chain of logical consequences, but at othertimes quite random outcomes of unpredictable, even disconnected events. If readers, after reading these essays, will be hungry for more information and eager to read both for pleasure and to obtain a more objective scope of information, then the book will have completely accomplished its mission.

The first part of the book (*Selected Problems of Literary Theory, History and Criticism in the Context of Contemporary English Literature*) focuses on the theoretical background of contemporary English literature.

The second part of the coursebook, entitled *Literary Genres, Trends, Movements and Significant Individuals*, introduces a set of critical essays that clarify selected issues of post-war English literature, such as the revolt of the Angry Young Men movement, problems of decolonization and postcolonial literature, the state of traditional British values such as royalism, patriotism and conservatism at the beginning of the new millennium, multiculturalism in Great Britain and many others and their reflection as seen by famous present-day authors. Here I would like to thank Dr. Ivan Zelenka who contributed into this collection with his essay *Few Reliable Certainties—Beckett's Theatre of the Absurd*. I believe this format of selected essays serves the purposes of this book better than an attempt to write a concise story of contemporary English literature because it kills several birds with one stone—informs about the historical, political, cultural and social aspects of some of the major literary movements and also pinpoints important literary-critical aspects of discussed writings. The third part (*Guide to Organizing Literary Studies*) provides a methodological tool for organizing one's literary studies and serves as a practical manual to analysing various literary genres and types of writings. Appendices A, B, C and D provide students with specific course-related texts and materials.

I hope the readers will find this publication both digestible and practical in their literary studies and that it will enhance their habit of reading for pleasure and information as well as help them to become acquainted with the world of literature.

*Written with love to those
who understand
that literature
helps people
to survive.*

Jana Javorčíková,
Banská Bystrica, Slovakia

PART I — SELECTED PROBLEMS OF LITERARY THEORY, CRITICISM AND HISTORY IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH LITERATURE

1.1 'CONTEMPORARY' 'ENGLISH' VERSUS 'MODERN' 'BRITISH' LITERATURE

In this chapter we try to answer some of the following questions:

- *What is the essence of modernity?*
- *What is literature and what are some of its new forms and genres?*
- *How does the nationality of authors influence the literary canon?*
- *What is the difference between a course in Modern British Literature and Contemporary English Literature?*

If somebody explores various courses of English literature, they might come up with a puzzling multiplicity of names most of which oscillate around variants of 'Modern British Literature' and 'Contemporary' or 'Present-day' 'English literature'. The difference between these names, however, is not only a linguistic one; it also illustrates the very essence of the subject of study of the literature written by authors living in Great Britain and Commonwealth countries in the present. In this chapter we thus attempt to shed some light on three questions:

- (1) What does the term 'modern'/'contemporary' denote?
- (2) Who nowadays qualifies as a 'British'/'English' author?; and, finally
- (3) What types and variants of traditional genres qualify as 'literature' nowadays?.

The problem of **modernity** in literature has already been deeply-discussed in the world of academia. Generally, the attribute 'modern' or 'modernist' tends to be used with literature written shortly after 1900 (sometimes as early as in the 1880s) and expanding until 'now'. This present, however, depends on the position of the speaker/writer and thus can denote the 1970s as well as the second decade of the 21st century. The first literary movement that extensively used the atmosphere of modernity and identified itself and 'modern' in its title while divorcing itself from the

previous, old-fashioned movements and trends was **Modernism**, defined as a "...comprehensive but vague term for a movement (or tendency) which began to get under way in the closing years of the 19th century and which has had a wide influence internationally during much of the 20th century." The same author points out a surprisingly vague periodization of Modernism; he raises the question whether "...the modernist movement is actually over" while also suggesting that Modernism might have been "played out by the late 1940s" when "**postmodernism** started" (Cuddon, p. 515). This somewhat ever-lasting modernity is especially present in the titles of many academic courses offered nowadays by various universities worldwide. One, for example, can study various alternatives of Modern Literature (such as Modern Irish Poetry, Early Modern Drama and Literature and many others), starting with literature written in the 1890s and finishing with literature of a permanently ever-changing "present days" of the 21st century, which now may indicate a span of more than 120 years. Therefore, some teachers prefer the replacement of the attribute 'modern' by a more universal 'contemporary'.

Many scholars assume that modernity refers more to the type of writing than to its relative 'recentness'. 'Modern' may refer to the usage of 'modern' techniques, styles of writing and new topics. However, if one takes modernity as an attribute of 'modern times', characterised by the usage of mass-media (radios and televisions), mass-transportation (cars, trains) and mass-production, then the period before the First World War, could also be classified as 'modern'. When taking all these aspects into consideration, a course in Modern literature could contain a good portion of Modernist, Postmodernist and perhaps also Post-postmodernist authors (Welsch, p. 1) to provide students with minimum satisfactory context for 'modernity'.

The 'problematical' nature of the term 'British' literature also stems from the **nationality** of its authors. With regard to various alternative literature that could fall under the category 'English/British' literature, such as American, 'old Commonwealth', Caribbean or African literature, it is very difficult to determine who actually would qualify as a representative author nowadays. (compare: Otrisalová – Gazdík, 2012; Hevešiová – Kiššová, 2008). Even the seemingly unproblematic word 'British' is obscure as it actually refers to something that is actually a "...subject of the United Kingdom; historically to the dominions, colonies, protectorates, mandates, and other

territories ruled or administered by the United Kingdom when it was an imperial power.”¹ Such a definition to some readers sounds too imperialist, stressing the subordinate position of the other English-speaking countries to Great Britain. Therefore, many coursebooks avoid the usage of the word 'British' in their titles and actually prefer the term 'Anglophonic' or 'English' literature, author and novel. For example *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature* (1990) in its title refers to 'English' literature even though it deals with authors from George Orwell (born in 1903 to an English family living in India) to Nobel-Prize-awarded Indo-Trinidadian English author Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul (born 1932) and includes many Commonwealth authors or authors born, raised, living or active outside of Britain. In many continental European courses of British/English literature however, the original meaning of the word British is lost, and it is used to denote literature written mostly by English-speaking-and-writing authors born in England or in its former colonies and writing about England-related experience.

Apart from the cultural connotation of the word 'British', it is also problematical when one tries to apply it to a wide range of authors. If we take nationality and citizenship as the decisive point as to who is and who is not a British author, then novelists (such as Henry James), who was born in America but spent most of their artistic life abroad, in England, would classify as 'English' authors. On the other hand, this criterion would cast out many authors such as, for example, the Nobel Prize winner Doris Lessing who was English but born out of Britain. Many authors such as Salman Rushdie and Caryl Phillips (born in India) Kazuo Ishiguro (born in Japan), Christopher Hope (born in Johannesburg and grew up in Pretoria), Angus Wilson (born in South Africa) whose fiction, however, is England-related would also not qualify.

We assume the best approach would be to get away from strict exclusivity and focus on the works of art of the **'potentially' British authors**. If an author devotes most or the majority of his or her artistry to England-related topics and there exists any biographical connection that ties him or her to Britain (for example, Britain is their ancestral birthplace or they lived some substantial part of their lives there), we can understand them as 'English' authors. This opinion is shared by many editors of

¹ Relates to : 'British' In <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British>>.

encyclopaedias nowadays who take English literature as that revolving around its '**main geographical centre**' (Rogers, p. 6), i. e. Great Britain.

The third problem of the British/English literature is genre-related. Most readers understand, when the term **literature** is discussed, that it means mostly traditionally respected books of prose, poetry and drama. Thus writings of Shakespeare, Milton and Pope are literature; bus tickets, graffiti, inaugural addresses (however poetic or well-written) are not. Nevertheless, there are many documents that fall in between these categories, for example, George Orwell's political pamphlets. Moreover, recent years have dramatically broadened the traditional types and media of writings. For example, there are various forms of computer and internet-related documents, such as **zines** (internet journals), **blogs**² and internet novels called **hypernovels** and internet poetry that have not been known before, and literary scholars still have not reached the final verdict whether these new genres qualify as 'literature'. What then is the difference between a **literary** and **non-literary text**?

Cuddon defines **literature** as "...a vague term which usually denotes works which belong to the major genres: epic, drama, lyric, novel, short story, ode" (Cuddon, p. 472). This definition, however, ignores many of the modern genres formed by a new medium that, perhaps in a short time, might also belong to the body of literature. Thus we might need to go back to the first definition of literature by the first literary critic, **Aristotle**, who in the **Poetics** tried to define tragedy (one of the first literary genres) "...as long as [it] employs language artistically enhanced (Aristotle, p. 11). Eagleton further explains that "...literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language, deviates [it] systematically from everyday speech (Eagleton, p. 2). It is thus language that makes the difference between literary and non-literary text. Eagleton uses this example to illustrate his point: "If you approach me at the bus stop and murmur 'thou still unravished bride of quietness', than I am instantly aware that I am in the presence of the literary. I know this because of the texture, rhythm and resonance of your words are in excess of their abstractable meaning—or as the

² A blog, a blend of the term *web log*, is a type of website maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video; entries are commonly displayed in reverse-chronological order and are often interactive (What is a Blog: In <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>>.).

linguists might more technically put it, there is a disproportion between the signifiers and the signifieds. Your language draws attention to itself, flaunts its material being, as statements like 'Don't you know the drivers are on strike?' do not" (Eagleton, p. 2). The **context** and the **language** that draws attention to itself are thus two quite reliable phenomena that help to decide between literary and non-literary texts.

A course of contemporary English literature thus, paradoxically, can have a very amorphous nature. If students attempt to study a course of Modern British Literature (or alternatively Contemporary English Literature), they may actually find themselves studying literature which is more than one hundred years old, written by authors from all around the world, born, raised and living anywhere but in Britain and find that the texts they read in class are far from traditional historical genres, such as poetry, prose and drama, rather such forms as text message poetry, comics and hypernovels.

If you were interested in this chapter, you might also find interesting these essays and studies:

ARISTOTLE. 1968. *Poetics*. London : Prentice Hall, 1968. 307 p.

EAGLETON, T. 1983. *Theory of Literature—An Introduction*. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota, 1983. 244 p. ISBN 0-8166-1238-2.

WELLEK, R. – WARREN, A. 1966. *Theory of Literature*. London : Penguin, 1966. 375 p.

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Recenzenti: Prof. PhDr. Jaroslav Kušnír, PhD.
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Jazykoví korektori: Paul Wood, Bc.
Michael Eliot Dove, Bc.

Technická úprava: Jana Javorčíková

Náklad: 200 kusov

Vydanie: druhé doplnené a rozšírené vydanie

Rozsah: 222 strán

Formát: B5

Rok vydania: 2014

Vydalo nakladateľství Gaudeamus, Univerzita Hradec Králové jako svou 1414 publikaci.

ISBN 978-80-7435-474-8