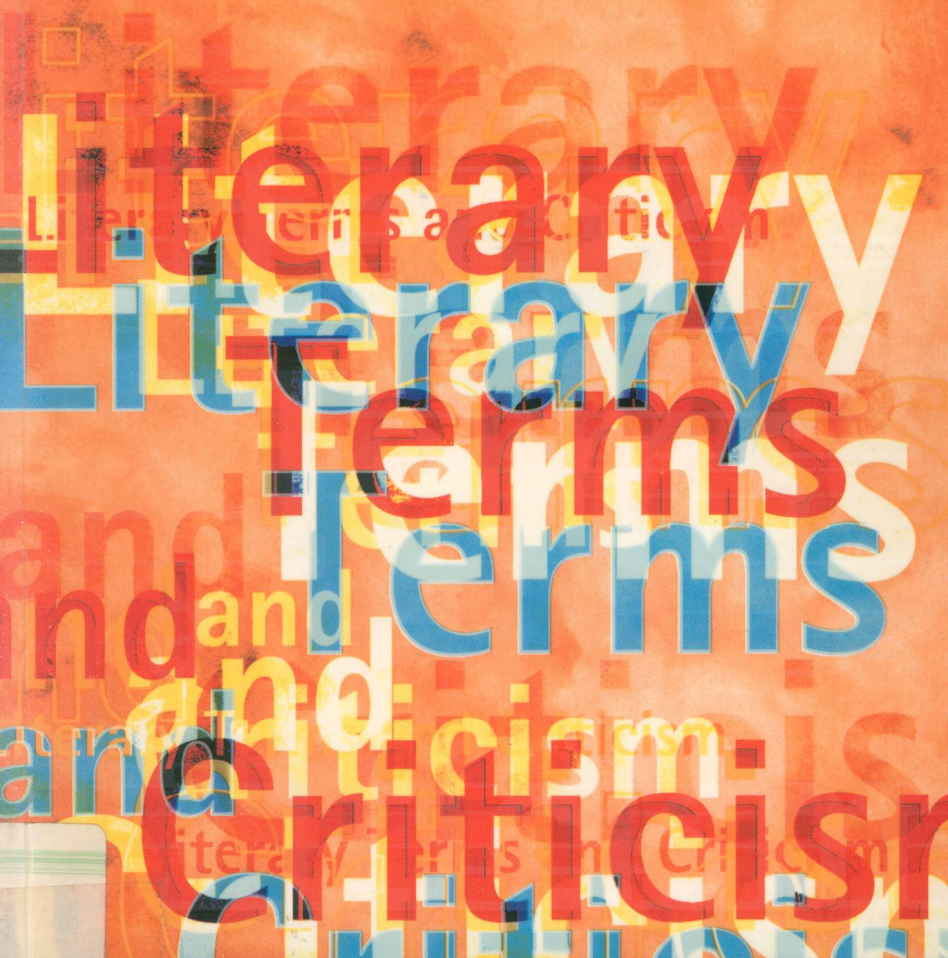


John Peck & Martin Coyle

# Literary Terms and Criticism

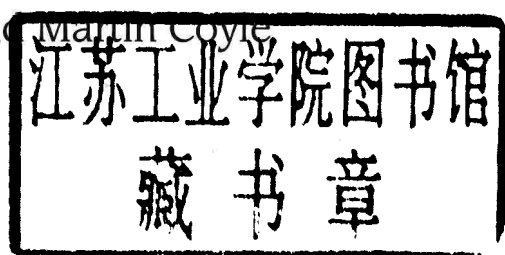
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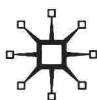
# Literary Terms and Criticism

Third Edition

John Peck and Martin Coyle



palgrave



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# General editors' preface

EVERYBODY who studies literature, either for an examination or simply for pleasure, experiences the same problem: how to understand and respond to the text. As every student of literature knows, it is perfectly possible to read a book over and over again and yet still feel baffled and at a loss as to what to say about it. One answer to this problem, of course, is to accept someone else's view of the text, but how much more rewarding it would be if you could work out your own critical response to any book you choose or are required to study.

The aim of the literature titles in this series is to help you develop your critical skills by offering practical advice about how to read, understand and analyse literary texts. Each volume provides you with a clear method of study so that you can see how to set about tackling texts on your own. While the authors of each volume approach the problem in a different way, every book in the series attempts to provide you with some broad ideas about the kind of texts you are likely to be studying and some broad ideas about how to think about literature; each volume then shows you how to apply these ideas in a way which should help you construct your own analysis and interpretation. Unlike most critical books, therefore, the books in this series do not simply convey someone else's thinking about a text, but encourage you and show you how to think about a text for yourself.

Each book is written with an awareness that you are likely to be preparing for an examination, and therefore practical advice is given not only on how to understand and analyse literature, but also on how to organise a written response. Our hope is that although these books are intended to serve a practical purpose, they may also enrich your enjoyment of literature by making you a more confident reader, alert to the interest and pleasure to be derived from literary texts.

John Peck  
Martin Coyle

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# How to use this guide

*Literary Terms and Criticism* is a practical guide to the study of English literature. This revised third edition includes all the entries from the previous editions together with a number of additional critical terms, such as 'Canon', 'Postmodernism' and 'Postcolonial criticism'. Section 1 and section 6, dealing with recent developments in critical theory, have been updated, and we have also revised the further reading. Our main intention, however, remains that of offering practical advice on how to come to grips with the texts and authors you are studying.

The guide itself is both a dictionary of literary terms and a critical handbook. It resembles other such dictionaries in that it attempts to provide essential information on a wide range of literary topics. It differs from other dictionaries, however, in that we have tried to produce a book that meets the particular needs of students at school, college and university. This means that the overall structure of the book, the range and kind of terms included, and the approach adopted within the individual entries, are somewhat unorthodox as compared to other guides to literary terms.

First, the overall structure: the standard approach is to provide a straightforward alphabetical listing of terms. This should make things easy to find, but a list of terms is not all that helpful if you are not entirely sure what you are looking for. We have, therefore, divided the book into six sections – a 'survey of literature', 'Poetry', 'Drama', 'The novel', 'Critical concepts', 'Critical positions and perspectives'. If, for example, you are studying a novel, you might find a number of useful ideas simply by browsing through the Novel section. If you know exactly what you are looking for, the quickest way of finding the relevant entry is to consult the Subject index at the back of the book. Our own experience as students was that we were not only puzzled by specific terms, such as 'metaphysical poetry', but also lacked broader ideas about literature. The Poetry, Drama and Novel sections, therefore, begin with introductory essays that might help you understand the characteristics of the major genres.

These introductory essays, along with the survey and the introductory essay on criticism in the final section, are intended to provide a sense of the broad picture. They are followed by more specific entries, alphabetically arranged. We should point out that this is not an all-inclusive guide: we do not include terms such as 'limerick' which are not in any way central to the academic study of literature. The exclusion of minor terms has allowed us room to include period terms such as 'Renaissance poetry' and 'the eighteenth-century novel'. These are not, strictly speaking, literary terms, but they are descriptive terms that students encounter. It seemed more important to cover the terms and ideas you are likely to meet, even to the extent of including a separate entry on Shakespeare, than to worry too much about maintaining a pure approach. The intention is to provide helpful information that is directly relevant to your studies.

This idea was also uppermost in our minds in determining the approach adopted within each entry. We do not attempt to cover the entire history of any term, nor do we attempt to list all the authors who have chosen to work in a certain mode. In their place we have substituted critical discussion, attempting to provide guidelines for your study of literature. Underlying many of the definitions is the idea that literature attempts to come to terms with, or order, the complexity, or disorder, of experience. You may find this idea limiting, but it should prove useful in helping you to find your critical feet. Our hope is that the definitions will show you how to get started, but really this is a guide to grow out of as you become more confident and learn how to develop and express your own ideas about literature.

Probably the best way to use this book is to browse through it, stopping at whatever catches your attention. But, as we have said, there is a Subject index which should enable you to find a specific term quickly. In addition there is an Author index. Most of the major authors in English are discussed in the guide: by following up the entries in the Author index you should discover some quite useful guidelines about how to approach and discuss an individual author. The major shortcoming of most guides to literary terms is that they so often fail to tell you what you want to know; our hope is that we have gone at least some way towards providing the kind of basic information and critical discussion that you are likely to find useful.

In preparing this new edition of *Literary Terms and Criticism* we have particularly focused our attention on sections 5 and 6 which deal with 'Critical concepts' and 'Critical positions and perspectives'.



What we have sought to do is to revise as many of the new terms and critical ideas of poststructuralism, feminism, Marxism, New Historicism, Cultural Materialism and modern psychoanalytic criticism as we feel are useful and accessible to students embarking on the serious study of literature. We are conscious of the difficulty of some of this new material but also of its importance to students. Very often you will find that an idea discussed in section 5, under critical concepts, is discussed further in section 6, the critical positions section. The two sections are intended to be complementary and to raise more complex ideas than in the preceding sections of the guide. Much of the basic critical material you will need as a student is set out in the first four sections, which are intended to provide a clear introduction to how to study a literary text.

We should like to thank those who have helped us in the preparation of this revised edition. In particular, we are extremely grateful to the reviewers of the previous edition for their helpful additions and suggested revisions and also to the many students who have written to us explaining what they find useful about the book. We are also grateful to Palgrave for offering us the opportunity to prepare this new edition.

*Cardiff University*

John Peck  
Martin Coyle



# Contents

<i>General editors' preface</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>How to use this guide</i>	viii
1 English, American and postcolonial literature: a brief survey	1
2 Poetry	14
3 Drama	86
4 The novel	114
5 Critical concepts	141
6 Critical positions and perspectives	177
<i>Further reading</i>	222
<i>Author index</i>	229
<i>Subject index</i>	235

# 1 English, American and postcolonial literature: a brief survey

LITERARY criticism is primarily concerned with discussing individual works of literature. The most important thing is to read and reread the books you are studying, trying to decide what they are about and how they work. It is also useful, though, to have some broader ideas and information about literature. In particular, an awareness of the larger context into which any work fits can help you understand the individual text you are studying. There are, in fact, two contexts in which any work can be seen: a generic or genre context, and a historical context.

**Genre** means a type or class of literature. The main generic division today is into poetry, drama and the novel, but in earlier times the major genres were recognised as epic, tragedy, lyric, comedy and satire. The logic behind these divisions is straightforward: all works of a certain kind have a great deal in common and are therefore grouped together under these broad headings. The advantage of knowing about these divisions is that they tell us what sort of text we are dealing with. Many of the definitions in the following sections provide information about the genres and, on a smaller scale, the modes an author might choose to write in. A mode is a recognised type or kind of work within a genre, such as the sonnet or the realistic novel. The way in which the definitions should prove helpful is that if, for example, you have been reading some sonnets but do not know how to start discussing them, the definition of sonnet should indicate the most important characteristics of the mode. The definitions, then, should provide a starting-point in telling you what to expect and what to look for. They should also help you identify what is distinctive about specific works of literature, for much of an author's originality and, indeed, interest lies in what he or she adds to the established conventions and patterns of the genre and mode within which he or she is working.

Every work of literature has a generic context. In addition, every work has a **historical context**: that is, it belongs to a particular

historical period. Writers at a given time tend to have similar concerns and, often, similar values. An awareness of the historical context of a writer, then, should tell you what you can expect to encounter in, say, an eighteenth-century poet as opposed to a romantic poet. This again provides a starting-point for looking at a work; and, once more, seeing what a text has in common with other texts, in this instance texts written at around the same time, should help you see more clearly the ways in which a specific work is distinctive. Many of the definitions in the following sections focus on individual genres at particular times, such as the eighteenth-century novel or modern poetry, but it is also useful to be aware of the broad historical pattern of literature. What follows here, therefore, is a simple historical survey of literature in English.

English literature begins with **Old English** or **Anglo-Saxon** literature, which mainly belongs to the period before the Norman Conquest in 1066. The language in which it is written is more like German than modern English. The greatest single poem is *Beowulf* (probably written around 700), which can be described as either an epic or tragic poem. A king's hall is threatened by a monster called Grendel. Beowulf comes to help, and kills the monster and its mother. Fifty years later a dragon attacks his own kingdom: Beowulf kills it, but dies himself. One way of making sense of this story is to use a simple critical idea that we can apply to a great many literary works: we can say that what the poem is about is Beowulf's attempt to establish and maintain order in a threatening and disordered world. In other words we can look at the poem in terms of its larger meaning and pattern, seeing how it makes use of a tension between the ideas of order and disorder. The same pattern is in evidence in other works from this period, such as the prose *Chronicles*, Christian poems such as 'The Dream of the Rood', and 'The Battle of Maldon'. The last of these, like *Beowulf*, is a narrative poem, the major mode in Old English literature, and similarly sets an ideal of loyalty to one's lord against the violence of enemy forces that invade the land.

**Middle English** or **medieval literature** belongs to the period 1066 to about 1550 (dates for literary periods can only ever be approximate). The outstanding writer is Geoffrey Chaucer. In this period there are narrative poems (such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, fourteenth century; and Chaucer's works, including *The Canterbury Tales*, around 1400), lyric poetry, and drama (the miracle and morality plays). Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the literature of this

period is that it is markedly Christian. It is also often very sophisticated. A familiar pattern is the gap between the Christian ideal and the reality of life in this imperfect world. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* can be looked at in this way: the ideal is a devout band of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, all acknowledging the greatness and authority of God, but the reality is a motley group of characters, with numerous flaws in their personalities, who tell stories that reveal what an untidy and problematic world we live in. An ideal of religious order is thus set against the reality of everyday disorder. It is important to recognise, however, that Chaucer is a comic poet: he is amused by humanity's folly, but not troubled by it. Confident that God's order prevails, he can enjoy the imperfections of fallen man and woman, weighing them against the ideals of Christianity.

A different emphasis appears in the writings of women mystics such as Julian of Norwich. As in her *Revelations of Divine Love* (around 1400), the stress falls upon the inward need to understand God's love in the face of doubt and evil. There is a struggle to achieve stasis in a turbulent world. That turbulence is seen in events such as the Black Death of 1348 and the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, but also in the overthrow of Richard II as king in 1399 and the Wars of the Roses (1455–85). Like other writers, such as Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich seeks to establish a more individual understanding of religion in the context of a changing society and world.

The notion of an ideal Christian existence is still in evidence after the medieval period, for example in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1596), which presents Christian knights on journeys through life encountering all manner of temptations. This essentially religious view of experience starts to disappear, however, during the period that follows medieval literature. This is the period around the beginning of the seventeenth century and is one of the richest eras in English literature: it is the time of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Donne, Jonson and many other outstanding poets and dramatists. This is often referred to as the **Renaissance** period in English literature (approximate dates are 1500 to 1660), but one can also talk about modern literature starting at this time: from about 1600 onwards the language resembles the language we use today, and this in itself indicates that the works are referring to a world which we can identify with in some way, a world where there is a new stress on individuality and inwardness, as, for example, in the soliloquies in Shakespeare's plays.

The literature of the Renaissance is so rich because society was changing in such a fundamental way: the world was becoming much more complex, with the whole economic and social fabric of society changing. A great gap opens up between those religious ideals which had previously dominated society's thinking and a new sort of dynamic society which no longer found it possible to focus on other-worldly concerns in the same way as had been the case in the past. What we thus find in Renaissance literature is a tension between a traditional order and disruption of this order. It is this tension which is at the heart of such Shakespeare plays as *Hamlet* (1600) and *King Lear* (1605): the old order is dislodged and displaced by the new self-interest of a new sort of worldly-wise person. Not that the old order should be seen as somehow perfect. It is only recently that critics have begun to recognise how women, for example, were excluded from the dominant political order. There were exceptions such as the Countess of Pembroke, the sister of Sir Philip Sidney, as well as other courtly women writers, but, with the obvious exception of Elizabeth I, few women enjoyed real power or managed to have their voices heard.

The central historical event in the seventeenth century, the Civil War of 1642–51, embodies a similar conflict between old and new, between the king's traditional status and authority and new forces who wish to wrest power from the king and change the social order. This tension between an old order and disorder is also evident in Milton's choice of theme for his epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667): the rebellion of Adam and Eve against God. Deceived by Satan, they are expelled from Eden with its ideal order and have to confront the reality of life in our disordered world.

Like medieval writers, seventeenth-century writers still recognise God as the only true source of order, even though so much of their attention is on how people are distracted and tempted by worldly ambition and secular concerns. Towards the end of the century, however, the focus of literature becomes almost entirely secular. Explicitly religious poetry all but disappears and is replaced by social poetry, for example the poetry of John Dryden and Alexander Pope. The period from about 1660 to 1790 is in addition characterised by the rise of the novel, a genre which concentrates on social life, in particular on the lives of individuals in a complex society. What the poets and novelists (such as Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding) of the **eighteenth century** are interested in is in seeing whether

harmony and balance can be created within society. The tension that is in evidence in their works, however, is between this notion of the desirability of social order and their awareness of the inevitability of disruption to that order by individuals. Here again it proves useful to look at the literature of a period in terms of a pattern of the tension between order and disorder, seeing how the writers deal with the gap between how things could or should be in society and how they really are.

Social order, however, is not a very exciting, or even realisable, idea, although it continues to be at the heart of many subsequent works of literature, particularly at the heart of realistic novels, such as those of Jane Austen, who was writing around 1800, and George Eliot, whose novels were published between 1859 and 1876. The period in which Austen writes is known as the **romantic** period, though Austen herself seems a slightly anomalous figure in the literature of this time (roughly 1790 to 1830), when there was a reaction against the social philosophy of eighteenth-century literature with its stress on regulation and social manners.

The romantic period is one of the great ages of English poetry, with Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Byron and Shelley all publishing around 1800. Unlike earlier writers, the romantics do not turn to God as the source of order, nor is order sought in society: what the romantics seek is to find a harmony in life which is at one with a pattern that can be found in the natural world. At the same time there is a great stress on the imagination: the source of order becomes internal, as in the work of Wordsworth, where there is a stress on how his mind interacts with what he sees in the natural world, so that some pattern and harmony is created in life. Wordsworth is aware, however, that this vision is a rare thing, that it might be illusory, and that life for the most part is disordered, puzzling and fragmented.

Initially inspired by the French Revolution of 1789, but also perhaps by pressure for political reform in England as early as 1760, the romantics seem to be figures of rebellion, figures writing against the old order of things. This is certainly the case in earlier works, in particular in the poems of Blake, with his attacks on organised religion and social organisations such as marriage. But later, after 1820, after the first burst of radical energy and after the Revolution has turned sour, there is a movement away from such radicalism (though not in Blake) towards a much more conservative position, or a looking

back to how things were. As with so many writers, what we often find in the romantics, then, is a complex, shifting tension between notions of order and disorder.

**Victorian literature** develops from, rather than reacting against, romantic literature, and the poets of this age (1830 to the end of the century), such as Tennyson and Browning, are the heirs of the romantics. They cannot, however, sustain the romantics' confidence in the autonomy of their own imaginations. There is no longer the same ability to create a vision of order and unity. Instead, there is a far more dominant impression of the world as fragmented, of life being too complicated and painful for any real sense of order to be found. The feeling of confusion and despair that characterises a lot of Victorian poetry has much to do with the religious doubts and uncertainties of the period. Literature might have been explicitly secular from the late seventeenth century onwards, but it is only in the Victorian period that a certain traditional religious confidence disappears, and, with the disappearance of this confident faith in a controlling deity, the world begins to seem much more confusing, depressing, and even chaotic.

The loss of religious confidence in the Victorian period goes hand in hand with other striking changes. This is, for example, the period of massive social reform, of the increasing industrialisation of towns and cities, and of a world-wide expansion of trade as Britain built an empire. But it is also a period of intellectual change. In 1859 Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* appeared. Its theory about the evolution of the human species ran entirely counter to established religious belief. The world was no longer, it seemed, governed by divine providence but by science. In 1848 Karl Marx published *The Communist Manifesto* and then, in 1867, his work on social and economic class struggle, *Das Kapital*. Finally, in the late Victorian period, comes Sigmund Freud's work on psychoanalysis examining the way in which the human psyche operates. In place of the old certainties about the way in which human life fits into the pattern of existence there are new, disturbing ideas about human beings and the darker, hidden aspects of their social and psychological selves.

In addition, society itself was becoming increasingly complex, something that is reflected in the Victorian novel. The Victorian period is the great age of the novel, possibly because this was the only form that could expand enough to cope with the scale and complexity of Victorian society as it expanded and changed. The



great novelists of the age are Charles Dickens and George Eliot, both of whom seek to create a full and intricate picture of a complex social world. They are fully aware of the disorder, injustices and hardships of the world they live in, yet at the same time there is a confidence in their writing that the novel can confront the whole of life.

It is a confidence that subsequent novelists cannot sustain. As we move towards the twentieth century we find an increasing sense that life is overwhelmingly confusing and complicated. In **late nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature**, for example in the novels of Hardy, Conrad, Joyce, Woolf and Lawrence and in the poetry of T. S. Eliot and Yeats, there is a feeling that the world has become so baffling that it is impossible to make sense of it, particularly as the decline, and in many cases the total eclipse, of religious faith robs writers of any secure perspective or framework of shared values from which they can interpret and make sense of experience. The central historical event of the early years of the twentieth century is the First World War (1914–18), a war so terrifying and tragic that it seems to sum up a world that is closer to chaos than to any sane order.

Yet the early twentieth century is a period of extraordinary creativity in all the arts – not only in poetry and the novel, but also in music and painting, and even drama is revitalised after many years of stagnation. What this points to again is the fact that rapid social change, an alteration in the whole structure of society, almost always stimulates the production of great art. In Europe we can point to such figures as Picasso, Ibsen and Stravinsky, but we should also recognise the extraordinary flowering, for example, of Irish art in the works of Yeats and Joyce. Or, in the novel, there is the achievement of Dorothy Richardson, Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf, all experimenting with new ways of representing experience.

The text that perhaps best exemplifies the age is T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (1922), which presents a vision of a fractured society where the poet can find no order or consolation. As with so many works of the period it is innovative and experimental in form: it seems to be built out of fragments of poetry, reflecting a world where the artist can no longer impose confident and comprehensive control over the facts he encounters. A term often applied to the formally innovative works of this period is **modernist**: modernist works, such as Eliot's, Woolf's or Joyce's, are often difficult to read, but they become less difficult if we see that the difficulty simply enacts the problems the artist is having in making sense of the world.

T. S. Eliot was an American, and at this time it makes sense to start looking at British and American literature together. We could trace a lengthy history for American literature, but as far as most readers are concerned **American literature** really comes to life around 1850. Significant works are the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the poems of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, but it is perhaps most rewarding to focus on the development of the American novel from about 1850. The most important texts in this context are Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Unlike the English novel, which emerges from and comments on a long-established society, the American novel is not immersed in society in the same sort of way. Instead it often takes the form of a symbolic journey, which can be a journey into the unknown territories of the mind. American novels are often referred to as 'romances', for the writers, unlike their English counterparts, tend to turn their backs on society and go off into conjecture, dream and myth.

What we witness in the second half of the nineteenth century, then, is the development of a distinctively American novel. As American literature moves into the twentieth century, however, it establishes a closer link with European culture. This is first evident in the novels of Henry James, published between 1875 and 1904, which present the lives of young American idealists and their experiences in the English social world. Later novelists such as Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner, while having distinctively American qualities, are heavily indebted to the example of Joyce, but it is a two-way exchange, for the American poets T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound are domiciled in London and help shape the whole course of English poetry at this time.

After the modernist era, however, which can be said to come to an end in the 1920s, American literature is by and large far more adventurous than British literature. The reason for this would seem to be that the First World War had a profound effect on British society and on the whole of British culture and thinking. The old imperial Britain was already dying before the war, but the war led to a much weaker Britain on the world stage. The general strike of 1926 perhaps sums up much of the mood of depression, a mood increased by the collapse of the American stock exchange in 1929. In Europe there were the first signs of the growing power of Hitler. Not surprisingly, then, writers in the 1930s were much more concerned with the daily