

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**TCLC 190**

TOPICS VOLUME



# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the Works of Various Topics  
in Twentieth-Century Literature, including Literary  
and Critical Movements, Prominent Themes and  
Genres, Anniversary Celebrations, and Surveys  
of National Literatures**



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## Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 190

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# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Topics Volume

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## Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

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Brossard, Nicole. "Poetic Politics." In *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, edited by Charles Bernstein, 73-82. New York: Roof Books, 1990. Reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Vol. 127, edited by Janet Witlec, 3-8. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2003.

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# Country House Literature

Literature using the setting of the English country house as backdrop.

## INTRODUCTION

The setting of the English country house or manor has long been used by authors and poets as a metaphor for English society. Country house literature utilizes the symbol of the rural estate to celebrate the rich history of England. It has also been used to explore political, cultural, and socioeconomic changes that threaten the established order, and in many works of literature the country house setting has been the background against which changing moral and social conventions are examined. In country house poems, plays, and fiction, changes in the social and moral order often facilitate the decline of the old aristocratic and intellectual order and the emergence of a new one; this new order is often perceived as lacking in a true appreciation for the enduring values represented by the ideal country estate.

The country house motif gained popularity with the poetry of seventeenth-century England, particularly in the work of Andrew Marvell and Ben Jonson, and it continues to be a staple of English literature into the twenty-first century. Many critics believe that the genre reached its apex in the early twentieth century. At this time, industrialization and devastating conflicts such as World War I brought about major cultural, socioeconomic, and political changes in the Western world. During this period of violent upheaval and cultural change, authors such as Henry James, George Bernard Shaw, T. S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf harkened back to the romantic appeal of the English country house, regarding it as a symbol of a way of life that had largely faded from existence.

Critics view the country house as a vehicle to explore a number of significant themes, including change, community, isolation, loss of innocence, dissolution of the old order, and the vitality of the new generation. A major thematic thread in country house literature is the conflict between art and morality; in these works, the idealization of the high culture and aesthetic beauty of the English country house is ruined by the decadence of the old aristocratic order or the corruption of the new one. Isolation is also a recurring theme. As characters withdraw or are forced from public life, they take refuge at their country estates, which protect them from

the temptations and condemnation of the modern world. In a larger sense, the country estate is viewed as a symbol of England threatened by war or by its own loss of energy and purpose. Community is another central theme in country house literature. The privileged life on a country estate provides a number of social opportunities in a limited setting, characterized by strict customs and purpose. The country house also provides a buttress against a rapidly changing society; as time passes, the country house epitomizes a sense of family, history, tradition, and stability. The theme of the outsider is also prevalent in these works. In a genre of Irish literature known as Big-House literature, the Anglo-Irish country houses built by Protestant landlords in previous centuries represent the oppression of the Catholic majority.

In American literature written by authors such as Henry James and Sinclair Lewis, Americans are both attracted to and repulsed by their visits to English country houses. Although the American characters featured in such works harbor an envy of, as well as an appreciation for, the beauty and privilege represented by the English country house, they also reject the way of life represented by the country house as something that is incongruous with the American embrace of progressivism, innovation, and change. With the decline of the country house in the late twentieth century, authors continued to utilize it symbolically. According to critic John Lucas, the image of the country house "has always held a powerful grip on the English imagination, on how the English like to imagine England."

---

## REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

Robert Barnard

*Death by Sheer Torture* (novel) 1981

*The Skeleton in the Grass* (novel) 1987

*The Mistress of Alderley* (novel) 2002

Mary Elizabeth Braddon

*Lady Audley's Secret* (novel) 1862

Joyce Cary

*To Be a Pilgrim* (novel) 1942

Wilkie Collins

*Woman in White* (novel) 1860



Maria Edgeworth  
*Castle Rackrent* (novel) 1800

T. S. Eliot  
*Bunt Norton* (poem) 1936  
*The Family Reunion* (play) 1939  
*East Coker* (poem) 1940

E. M. Forster  
*Howards End* (novel) 1910

Aldous Huxley  
*Crome Yellow* (novel) 1921

Christopher Isherwood  
*The Memorial* (novel) 1932

Henry James  
*The Portrait of a Lady* (novel) 1881  
"The Author of Beltraffio" (short story) 1884  
*The Princess Casamassima* (novel) 1886  
*The Spoils of Poynton* (novel) 1897  
*The Awkward Age* (novel) 1899

Rudyard Kipling  
*Puck of Pook's Hill* (short stories) 1906  
*Rewards and Fairies* (short stories) 1910

D. H. Lawrence  
"England, My England" (short story) 1915  
*Lady Chatterley's Lover* (novel) 1928

Violet Martin and Edith Somerville  
*An Irish Cousin* (novel) 1889  
*The Real Charlotte* (novel) 1894  
*The Big House of Inver* (novel) 1925

Andrew Marvell  
"Upon Appleton House" (poem) c. 1651-1657

Sean O'Faolain  
"Midsummer Night Madness" (short story) 1932

Vita Sackville-West  
*The Edwardians* (novel) 1930

Tom Stoppard  
*Arcadia* (play) 1994

George Bernard Shaw  
*Heartbreak House* (play) 1919

Evelyn Waugh  
*A Handful of Dust* (novel) 1934  
*Brideshead Revisited* (novel) 1945

Virginia Woolf  
*Orlando* (novel) 1928  
*Between the Acts* (novel) 1941

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## OVERVIEWS

### Malcolm Kelsall (essay date 1993)

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[In the following essay, Kelsall analyzes the country house motif in the works of several major authors, including Henry James, Virginia Woolf, Evelyn Waugh, E. M. Forster, and T. S. Eliot.]

In a short story, 'The Author of Beltraffio', Henry James tells of a young American author's discovery of the English country house. The American records how he saw England as if the reproduction 'of something that existed primarily in art or literature. It was not the picture, the poem, the fictive page, that seemed to me a copy; these things were the originals, and the life of a happy and distinguished people was fashioned in their image.' By choosing an outsider as his centre of consciousness, James draws attention to the way the country house tradition is preserved by onlookers; and by selecting a writer, he indicates how much the house is seen through the spectacles of books, not as it is (whatever that may be) but as the imagination wishes to perceive it.

The naïve outsider of this tale is only one step removed from James himself. His *Notebooks* tell of a typical country house visit:

I went down into Somerset and spent a week at Midlney Place, the Lady Trevilian's. . . . Very exquisite it was (not the visit, but the impression of the country); it kept me a-dreaming all the while I was there. . . . It was the old houses that fetched me—Montacute, the admirable; Barrington, that superb Ford Abbey, and several smaller ones. Trevilian showed me them all; he has a great care for such things. These delicious old houses, in the long August days, in the south of England air, on the soil over which so much has passed and out of which so much has come, rose before me like a series of visions.<sup>1</sup>

This passage shows a strange mixture of snobbery and romantic gush. Like Pope before him, James likes to drop a noble name. But the nobility are here no longer seen as public figures. Trevilian's role is that of a show-

man and custodian of ancient houses, and before James's enraptured gaze these 'delicious' places dissolve first into dream, then into 'a series of visions'. But it is more than a portrait of the aesthete as a young man that James offers. He is an artist looking for future material. He goes on: 'I thought of stories, of dramas, of all the life of the past—. . . It is art that speaks of these things.' He means both the writers of the past and his own writings. The *Notebooks* are contemporaneous with *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881).

The fictional 'author' of Beltraffio had soon discovered that the ideal vision of the English country house had no correspondence with the life of the people within. The tragic story tells of a struggle between an aesthetic father and a philistine and puritanical mother. Her sick son is allowed to die rather than grow to maturity under the influence of his father. Thus the fertility of the house is extinguished in a sterile conflict between art and morality. The tale is typical of the country house theme in James. His subject is the idealisation of the high civilisation, culture and aesthetic beauty of the English house as both perceived and created by a sensitive, literate consciousness; and the contrast between that ideal and the men and women of a decadent and dying order. There is Mertle in *The Awkward Age* (1899), the crystal cage of Newmarch in *The Sacred Fount* (1901), Matcham in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), and, best known and most sinister, Bly in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), where the ghosts of Gothic fiction have found a home in England with a vengeance and corrupt even the age of innocence. 'Your lady's chaste' wrote Jonson of religious Penshurst, but in James's country house adultery is the fashionable pursuit, and the new religion is that of Mammon. The weekend parties of 'The Real Thing', 'The Death of the Lion', 'Broken Wings', 'The Two Faces', are parodies of the old idea of the happy community.<sup>2</sup>

The old order is in dissolution. The country property of England is up for sale, and the contents of the stately homes of old are on the march to the auctioneer's room and the museum. Old Mr Longdon in *The Awkward Age* is shocked by the promiscuous renting out of Mertle. It is a sign of the times, 'this sudden invasion of somebody's—heaven knows whose—house' and the 'violation' of the 'home' 'just for money'. Medley, in *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), is rented by the promiscuous Italian of the allegorical title for three months only, who gets a musty old place cheap. Even Gardencourt, that second Eden demi-paradise of *The Portrait of a Lady*, has passed from English to American hands. The very furniture in *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897)—the 'spoils' of the title—is twice packed into removal vans before being ultimately destroyed at the burning of the house, now owned by 'philistines'. Perhaps only Mr Longdon of Beccles is the exception that proves the rule, for here 'the long confirmation of time'

represented by the house corresponds to the morality of the owner 'The "taste" of the place . . . was nothing more than the beauty of his life':

Beyond the lawn the house was before him, old, square, red-roofed, well assured of its right to the place it took up in the world. This was a considerable space—in the little world, at least, of Beccles—and the look of possession had everywhere mixed with it, in the form of old windows and doors, the tone of old red surfaces, in the style of old white facings, the age of old high creepers, the long confirmation of time.

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This has something of the effect Edwin Lutyens strove for at Deanery Garden, or Lutyens and Jekyll together at Great Dixter.

But it would be sentimental to see such a Jamesian passage as normative, however much it expresses a longing in the artist and in the age. It is the very lack of the 'right to place' of the possessors of the great houses that creates the imperative to aestheticise the house itself, its 'works of art and furniture', and to separate the intrinsic value of the artistic ideal from the manifest decadence of the possessing classes. It is the problem of the relation (if any) between taste and morality to which James obsessively returns, for taste itself is not a guarantee of morality. Mrs Gareth in *The Spoils of Poynton* has made her home the most 'complete work of art' in England, but to preserve that art all normal humanity and mundane morality are sacrificed to the pietistic contemplation of arranged perfection. Poynton is 'an impossible place for producing; no active art could flourish there but a Buddhistic contemplation'. Mrs Gareth chooses a woman as the inheritor of the house, for her son is unworthy, but Fleda Vetch is not chosen because a woman is fertile, but for her taste. She is offered only 'the long lease to a museum'. It would make her, like Miss Havisham, a bride of death, and like Satis House, Poynton too burns. The beautiful objects, pursued around the countryside like some antiques roadshow, are consumed as well. 'Poynton's gone?' asks Fleda, to which the ironic reply from a common workman is, 'What can you call it, miss, if it ain't really saved?' The word 'miss' draws attention to Fleda's maiden situation, and the phrase 'really saved' is laden with implications. Does the mere existence of a house, even in all its beauty, truly save it? Houses are not museums. As soon as one speaks of saving them, they are, in a sense, already 'gone'.

The question, who shall inherit Poynton, is one aspect of the larger issue Lawrence was to raise. Who shall inherit England? If 'England' was the country house, to whom shall that tradition be handed on, and in what way? It is put acutely by James in *The Princess Casamassima*, a programmatic, even allegorical, novel which raises the social issue directly. It is the story of a young

revolutionary socialist, Hyacinth Robinson, the bastard offspring of the nobility, raised in shabby gentility on the very verge of the London underworld, whose violent purposes are blunted by his visit to the great house of Medley. Lost between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born, he kills himself.

The corruption of the old order is not in doubt. It is the Princess, at the great house, who says of English high society:

It's the old régime again, the rottenness and extravagance, bristling with every iniquity and every abuse . . . ; or perhaps even more a reproduction of the Roman world in its decadence, gouty, apoplectic, depraved, gorged and clogged with wealth and spoils, selfishness and scepticism, and waiting for the onset of the barbarians.

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This brings the Gothic and classical traditions together, explicitly linking the Jacobin revolution in France with the fall of Rome before the barbarians. The country house is part of the 'spoil' of the fall of the empire, and she is speaking to Hyacinth, a 'Jacobin', who is even now committed to the overthrow of the aristocracy. The adulterous Princess is herself the very embodiment of the corruption she describes, a collector of lovers as well as of bibelots, and for her there is an added 'Gothic' frisson in bedding revolutionaries.

The Princess is, perhaps, a little *outré* in her attitudes. It is the 'continental' aristocracy that she represents. England had prided itself in avoiding the excesses of the *ancient régime*. James, accordingly, offers by way of comparison Inglefield, the home of the ironically named Lady Aurora (a socialist gentlewoman). But it is Dickens's Chesney Wold again where 'the rain drips, drips, drips from the trees in the big dull park':

When one's one of eight daughters [Lady Aurora exclaims] and there's very little money (for any of *us* at least) and nothing to do but to go out with three or four others in mackintoshes, one can easily go off one's head. Of course there's the village, and it's not at all a nice one, and there are people to look after, and goodness knows they're in want of it; but one must work with the vicarage, and at the vicarage are four more daughters, all old maids, and its dreary and dreadful and one has too much of it, for they don't understand what one thinks or feels or a single word one says to them. Besides, they *are* stupid, I admit, the country poor; they're very very dense.

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This is the nadir of the old idea of community, whether feudal, or Morris's socialism, before the cold, wet light of novelistic realism. It is dreary plodding around with old maids in the rain doing good to the poor, and 'goodness knows they're in want of it'. These unmarriedable

virgins (themselves complaining of want of money) are intellectually as well as biologically sterile. Lady Aurora does not represent a new dawn, even though she is heralded by one of the recipients of her charitable attention as 'one of the saints of old come to life again out of a legend'. She is ashamed of being rich, and of the life of 'parties and races and dances and picnics and cards and life in great houses', but depressed by her mundane charities. Thus she flirts with the idea of socialism and wonders why 'the lower classes didn't break into Inglefield and take possession of all the treasures in the Italian room'. Those treasures mean nothing to her.

The paradox of the novel is that the inheritor of the treasures of the rich, in an imaginative sense, is a member of those very lower classes. Hyacinth Robinson is shut out from what he imagines is the exquisite fineness of a loftier world by poverty and bastardy. But he aspires in his imagination, and expresses his longing by his work, for he is the kind of craftsman who of old turned the idea of the beautiful house into reality. His is the 'exquisite art' of the bookbinder, and he imagines connoisseurs in future ages handling his work with admiration. He is, like Morris, an arts and crafts socialist. But it is one of the many tragic ironies of this story that in the great library at Medley he finds the books on the shelves thick with the 'dust of centuries'. The owners of great houses have no use for culture. He sits down at a magnificent desk there to practice his penmanship, and finds that he has nothing of value to write. His penmanship is beautiful. But it is form empty of content.

It is through Hyacinth's ravished consciousness that we see the 'treasure house of Medley' in an episode James uses as the fulcrum of the novel. It is one of the most elaborate, longest and most formally developed of country house descriptions. As the living body of the house dies, the literary tradition becomes intensely self-reflexive as the spirit of things enters the imagination. It is as if James gave full rein to that naïve tendency to gush he indulges sometimes *in propria persona*, but this is now firmly contained within the creative matrix of fiction as Hyacinth is substituted for himself. The young artist wakes to the dawn and to Medley—his first visit to the country and to a great house—and his first hours are spent in a rapturous exploration of this brave new, and old, world.

At one end of the garden was a parapet of mossy brick which looked down on the other side into a canal, a moat, a quaint old pond (he hardly knew what to call it) and from the same standpoint showed a considerable part of the main body of the house—Hyacinth's room belonging to a wing that commanded the extensive irregular back—which was richly grey wherever clear of the ivy and the other dense creepers, and everywhere infinitely a picture: with a high-piled ancient russet roof broken by huge chimneys and queer peep-holes and all manner of odd gables and windows on different

lines, with all manner of antique patches and protrusions and with a fascinating architectural excrescence where a wonderful clock-face was lodged, a clock-face covered with gilding and blazonry but showing many traces of the years and the weather.

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This is the English country house as natural, organic form, an accretion of love and time, the historical process mellowed and harmonised, beautiful like a picture. The weathered clock-face makes this scene an emblem of time, or rather timelessness, for the last thing Hyacinth asks is 'what o'clock?' He sees blazonry and gilding weathered by years, and in the love for the patina the climate has created one forgets the social significance of the golden coat of arms which spoke once of power, pride of rank and forceful possession. So too the moat is now indistinguishable from a canal (or is it a pond?) for successive stages of landscape gardening (jumbled in Hyacinth's enthusiastic ignorance) have turned a defensive boundary into a formal ornament, and then into a naturalised element. So too the house has undergone many developments of sprouting chimney and gable and window, like England itself, and this long-mellowed organic process will blunt the thrust of Hyacinth's revolutionary purpose.<sup>3</sup> Now dense ivy climbs over all, naturalising the house by uniting it with the English green of the garden (it might be Tintern Abbey as Wordsworth saw it), but suggestive too in James of that picturesque decay which characterises the condition of a declining nation. Thus Hyacinth's room looks out from the back of the house. In class terms, the proletarian guest has been given an inferior lodging, and in symbolic mode, this lover of old houses has an outlook which is retrospective.

As the young socialist forgets to look forward at Medley, he is moved to tears of love by the recollections of the old. 'His whole walk was peopled with recognitions; he had been dreaming all his life of just such a place and such objects, such a morning and such a chance.' The word 'dream' is an obvious warning that this is something of a romantic rapture, like Catherine Morland at Northanger, but it is a far more intense romanticism than hers. It is more like Adam's dream, as Keats described it. He awakes that spring morning, and finds the dream true. Here are old books and great tapestries speaking of deep learning and high culture. Sheltered in the garden is a Chinese pavilion, whose very wallpaper depicts, in symbolic image, the unity of civilisation among a leisured class, for it shows the ancient ritual act of the communal tea ceremony. Such a retreat, too, a Pliny might have enjoyed in his classic villa. Hyacinth recalls an earlier 'vision':

the vision of societies where, in splendid rooms, with smiles and soft voices, distinguished men, with women who were both proud and gentle, talked of art, literature and history.

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Here, now in the flesh, is the Princess herself, whose beauty recalls something he has seen 'in a statue, in a picture, in a museum', and whom he perceives in a transcendental moment seated at a piano, playing for him alone.

Two or three times she turned her eyes on him, and then they shone with the wonderful expression which was the essence of her beauty; that profuse mingled light which seemed to belong to some everlasting summer and yet to suggest seasons that were past and gone, some experience that was only an exquisite memory. . . . That was the beginning of the communion—so strange considering their respective positions—which he had come to Medley to enjoy.

(22)

This gives, and yet denies. There is a plangent yearning for the perfection of civilisation, that 'serenity of success' and 'accumulation of dignity and honour' which are the prerogative of the highest achievement of rank and culture (this could be Burke on Marie Antoinette), and yet the recognition that this is only a dream, or rather, as the text suggests, a memory of something that was once present and has all but been lost.

It is an almost mystic experience. The word 'community' has now become 'communion'. Jonson at Penshurst, and Morris at Kelmscott, had seen the great house harmonising the divisions of society. For writers like Pope that society had been smaller. His feast of reason and flow of soul had embraced only like-minded men of rank. Now it is a community of two, and as the number shrinks the numinous word 'communion' inflates the significance, as if the laying on of the rhetoric, like supreme cosmetics, may conceal the cracks in the skin beneath. It is for Hyacinth an almost religious moment, a revelation of what civilisation might be, yet it trembles on the verge of mere sordidness. The Princess is an adulterous flirt, playing with the young man's sensibility out of idle curiosity. She belongs not to a world of high culture, but to a class which is 'idle, trifling, luxurious'.

There is a constant interplay at Medley (as at Northanger) between 'dream' and 'reality', but here it is the imaginative world which has the higher value. The house itself is dead, kept alive only by sympathetic vision. The 'vast high hall' is the setting only of Hyacinth's solitary supper, served by an 'automatic' butler; the chapel is a 'queer transmogrified corner'; the tapestries for 'show'; the library deep in dust; the whole place going cheap because 'musty', as the Princess says. The old order is passing away in bad smells and tales of ghosts, and transitory promiscuity of possession. Yet the cultural inheritance is passed on in the realm of the imagination. It is as if, separated from what Hyacinth knows is the 'want and toil' which had