

原版文学核心概念丛书



# 当代文学的 核心概念

Key Concepts in  
Contemporary Literature

Steve Padley

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# KEY CONCEPTS IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Steve Padley

*Key Concepts in Contemporary Literature* offers a comprehensive overview of the literature and critical debates of the period since 1945. Setting texts in their historical, political and cultural contexts, it demonstrates how literature has dealt with and been shaped by the changing face of the modern world. Divided into three clear sections, the volume serves to introduce the significant literary movements, themes and developments of the period since the Second World War and covers a full range of novels, poetry and drama as well as providing a guide to the major critical theories of recent times.

Features include:

- An accessible and full overview of the texts, contexts and criticism of the contemporary period
- An alphabetical format that makes information quick and easy to find
- Cross-referencing and further reading suggestions that provide additional resources for study

Acting as the perfect accompaniment, this is an invaluable guide to anyone navigating their way through the contemporary era and the literature that defines it.

Steve Padley is an Associate Lecturer with the Open University. He has held a teaching fellowship at Robinson College, Cambridge, and has also been a research fellow and Director of Studies in English at Wolfson College, Cambridge.

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近年来,文学研究的理论和方法取得了不少新的进展。为了帮助文学专业学生及广大文学研究者、爱好者迅速而有效地掌握文学研究的核心概念和背景资料,外教社特从 Palgrave 出版社遴选引进了这套权威、实用的“原版文学核心概念丛书”。

本套丛书堪称浓缩的文学百科辞典,各分册大多按研究主题分为不同板块,每一册都按字母表顺序列出精选的核心词条,词条下大多附有补充书目,书后基本附有编年史、参考文献和索引,个别分册还根据实际需要设置了习题。丛书文献丰富,语言精炼,编排合理,查阅方便,是不可多得的文学类学术工具书和阅读参考资料。

相信本套丛书的引进将满足我国广大文学专业的师生及其他文学研究者、爱好者的需求,有力推动我国文学研究的发展与繁荣。



# Key Concepts in Contemporary Literature

Steve Padley

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# General Editors' Preface

The purpose of **Palgrave Key Concepts in Literature** is to provide students with key critical and historical ideas about the texts they are studying as part of their literature courses. These ideas include information about the historical and cultural contexts of literature as well as the theoretical approaches current in the subject today. Behind the series lies a recognition of the need nowadays for students to be familiar with a range of concepts and contextual material to inform their reading and writing about literature.

But behind the series there also lies a recognition of the changes that have transformed degree courses in Literature in recent years. Central to these changes has been the impact of critical theory together with a renewed interest in the way in which texts intersect with their immediate context and historical circumstances. The result has been an opening up of new ways of reading texts and a new understanding of what the study of literature involves together with the introduction of a wide set of new critical issues that demand our attention. An important aim of **Palgrave Key Concepts in Literature** is to provide brief, accessible introductions to these new ways of reading and new issues.

Each volume in **Palgrave Key Concepts in Literature** follows the same structure. An initial overview essay is followed by three sections – *Contexts*, *Texts*, and *Criticism* – each containing a sequence of brief alphabetically arranged entries on a sequence of topics. *Contexts essays* provide an impression of the historical, social and cultural environment in which literary texts were produced. *Texts essays*, as might be expected, focus more directly on the works themselves. *Criticism essays* then outline the manner in which changes and developments in criticism have affected the ways in which we discuss the texts featured in the volume. The informing intention throughout is to help the reader create something new in the process of combining context, text and criticism.

John Peck  
Martin Coyle

# General Introduction

There are a number of difficulties inherent in constructing an overview of a literary historical period, some of which are attenuated when the period in question is the contemporary. Most notably, periodisation is a particularly problematic concept; many modules on literature degree courses focus on specific centuries, decades or other time-scales: 'the 19th-century novel', for example, or 'poetry of the 1930s'. There is inevitably something arbitrary or artificial about this kind of categorisation, however. Literary styles and preoccupations do not change neatly at the turn of a century or on the transition into a new decade. Writers do not stop writing in one way at the end of one literary historical period and start writing differently at the beginning of the next. Nevertheless, some degree of chronological structure is usually considered the most appropriate way of restricting the number of texts or authors studied to a selection representative of a given literary era.

The periodisation of contemporary literature introduces further complications. The term 'contemporary' denotes an open-ended period, up to and including the present day, but there is a marked lack of consensus about when the period can definitively be said to have begun. Numerous modules dealing with aspects of contemporary British and other English literatures are included in undergraduate and graduate degree courses at the time of writing. Some take 1945, the year in which the Second World War ended, as the starting-point; others see the 1960s, a period of immense social and cultural change in Britain and elsewhere, as a more relevant date at which to begin. The Cambridge University undergraduate course on contemporary literature is one of a number that covers an even shorter time-span, from 1979 to the present, possibly reflecting a belief that radical developments in literary theory and criticism in the last two decades of the 20th century have had a fundamental impact on the ways in which texts have come to be read, interpreted and understood.

Persuasive arguments can be offered for all of the above attempts at periodisation, not least because different literary genres or aspects of literary study undergo significant changes at different times. For the purposes of this book, I have opted to take the end of the Second World War as the point at which the contemporary period began. This is largely because of the extent to which the impact and implications of that conflict on British social, political and cultural life continued to resonate

throughout the rest of the 20th century and beyond. At this point, I should make it clear that I have chosen to make British literature the main focus of this book, and explain the rationale behind that decision. Ideally, it would be desirable to trace the development of all literatures written in English since 1945, but the resulting volume would either be impossibly long or wholly inadequate in the depth of its coverage. Although this book will touch briefly on literary developments elsewhere – the rise of postcolonial writing, for instance, or the impact of Irish writing in the period – I have taken the view that to provide a detailed overview of the literature of one country will prove more useful to the reader than a book that tries to cover the literature of the entire English-speaking world. Readers requiring a different focus will, inevitably, refer to other literary guides, such as the volume on postcolonial literature in this series.

The period since 1945 has been one of substantial change in Britain, in areas such as social structure and class hierarchy, gender identity and the role of women (and men), sexual behaviour and personal relationships, moral values, attitudes towards the family, multicultural experience, and imperial decline. In all of these areas, the influence of the Second World War, and the widespread determination to recreate British society on more egalitarian lines that was inspired by the experience of wartime national cohesion, has been sustained and far-reaching; as will be shown later, this postwar consensus went largely unchallenged until the emergence of Thatcherism in the late 1970s. Chapter 1 of this book, 'Contexts', discusses the contextual background of the postwar era, and attempts to give some indication of the ways in which key political, social and cultural events of the period influenced and affected literary themes, ideas and styles.

Novels, poems and plays since 1945 have reflected the changes that were taking place in Britain in the post-Second World War period, though not always in straightforward or easily recognisable ways. The legacy of the Second World War, especially the Holocaust, and the American A-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that finally brought the conflict to a close, informed much of the literature of the period, both explicitly and implicitly, against the backdrop of the developing state of Cold War between the Allies and the USSR. In the first decade or so after the war, literature, reflecting a general sense of national psychic exhaustion resulting from the traumas and deprivations of the war years, seemed to withdraw from direct involvement with large-scale political and international concerns. Thereafter, however, writers became more prepared to engage imaginatively with the war and what it meant, especially as the full extent of the Holocaust became apparent. Social and

cultural changes, and marked shifts in attitudes towards sexual identity and behaviour, including gender relationships, were also widely debated in post-Second World War literature. In addition, increased immigration, brought about initially by the need for a larger workforce to tackle the massive task of national reconstruction, gradually turned Britain into something approaching a genuinely multicultural society by the end of the 20th century. This transformation was not easily achieved, nor was it universally welcomed – racism has been a recurrent problem in British society over the period – but by the turn of the 21st century, second- and third-generation immigrants were more confident in their identity, and were making a huge contribution to many aspects of British life. Over the same period, Britain was undergoing a rapid and often painful process of imperial decline, the price paid for American intervention to ensure the successful prosecution of the war. These themes were strongly reflected in the literature of the second half of the 20th century.

The demographic identity of contemporary British writing was changing, too. Extension of opportunity in further and higher education led to the emergence of writers from working-class backgrounds; women writers also benefited in this respect, and from the rise of feminism; black British writers engaged with the ramifications of the migrant experience and the shift to a postcolonial world order. Scottish, Irish and Welsh writing, national literatures that had historically struggled for wider acceptance in the canonical literary tradition, also flourished, energised by an increasing emphasis on culturally and politically marginalised perspectives.

One consequence of the greater diversity of British writing for the student or general reader of contemporary literature is the difficulty of selecting, from the vast amount of published material, which texts and authors can most profitably be studied to gain a sense of the main developments in the period's fiction, poetry and drama. The middle chapter of this book, 'Texts', discusses the key themes, literary movements and styles of writing that characterise British literature in the postwar period, with some reference to developments elsewhere, where these have had a particular influence on British writing. The individual entries in this section are dictated to some extent by those authors whose work was already being widely studied on contemporary literature courses in universities at the time of writing. I have also attempted, however, to include discussion of the work of other authors who have not yet received that degree of recognition.

Another of the difficulties inherent in writing about or studying contemporary literature is the lack of historical distance against which to judge the works one reads; texts that may seem in the early 21st

century particularly significant in the themes they explore and their stylistic techniques, may have faded from view 10 years on. Similarly, it is not always possible to anticipate how works and authors that did not receive serious attention at the time might be reassessed with the benefit of hindsight. For that reason, I have attempted to include discussion of the work of writers who have not yet received widespread academic and critical acknowledgement, but may well do so in the future.

The contemporary period of British literature, as defined above, is characterised by an increasing sense of democratisation, of challenges, from previously marginalised constituencies, to the values and judgments that historically had governed the formation of the literary canon. Developments in literary theory and criticism, especially from the late 1960s onwards, have enhanced and facilitated such challenges, raising fundamental questions about the ways in which texts can be read and interpreted, or even whether they can be interpreted at all in any meaningful sense. The different critical and theoretical approaches that have dominated the contemporary period are outlined in the final chapter of this book, 'Criticism', with a particular emphasis on those that came into being in the last 30 or so years of the 20th century.

The three chapters of this book should not be regarded as separate entities, however. Literature is shaped and informed by the historical moment and the social world in which it is created, disseminated and read. Contextual background is immensely useful for an understanding of the themes and preoccupations explored by a particular text, though it should always be remembered that literary texts are not historical documents. The worlds they depict are fictions, imaginative recreations of the social reality that they address. Literary criticism and theory offers us possible ways of reading and interpreting texts by focusing on different aspects of the fictional worlds they create: what they have to say about gender relations, class structures, questions of race or ethnicity, sexual identity and orientation, or many other aspects of human experience. They may also, as in various structuralist, poststructuralist and postmodernist approaches, question the validity of any given interpretative position, and the idea that meaning can be fixed and determinate, positions that earlier critical and theoretical approaches tended to take for granted.

Chapter 1, 'Contexts', offers a number of perspectives that might be used as a point of reference to inform a particular reading of a given text. The entry for 'migrant experience and multiculturalism', for example, charts the historical process, starting with the first waves of postwar immigration, by which ethnic and cultural diversity became a fundamental characteristic of life in Britain in the early 21st century. The

contextual information here could usefully underpin a reading of a novel such as Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), a significant text in British literature in the post-imperial period. Like his protagonist, Karim Amir, Kureishi was born to an Indian father and an English mother, and his novel engages with second-generation immigrant experience from a particularly complex perspective. *The Buddha of Suburbia* is set partly in the suburban areas around London and partly in the city itself, and focuses on Karim's quest to establish a sense of identity in the light of his mixed-race background, and the experience of living in Britain, at a time when the idealism of the 1960s had given way to disillusionment and a growing sense of social unrest, often manifested in racial tension. The novel's emphasis on immigrant life and the conflicts between traditional Asian religious and cultural expectations, on the one hand, and the attitudes and values that defined contemporary British society, on the other, opens it up to readings that draw on post-colonial critical and theoretical approaches that are among those explored in Chapter 3, 'Criticism'. Such approaches demonstrate how Western perceptions of non-Western races, societies and cultures are predicated on a sense of the non-Western as a subordinate, inferior 'other'. It was by creating constructions of the colonised as inherently inferior that Western powers maintained their control in the imperial period, according to the postcolonial critic Edward Said. Kureishi's novel shows numerous ways in which Western assumptions about the non-Western 'other' survived the long process of imperial decline. Karim's first acting role, for example, is that of Mowgli in a theatrical adaptation of Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. Not dark enough for the part, he is forced by the white English director, Shadwell, to 'black up' and wear a loin-cloth, ironically reinforcing the Kiplingesque stereotype.

However, *The Buddha of Suburbia* also usefully demonstrates that literary texts can be open to a variety of readings, something that should be borne in mind when looking at a text through any given critical perspective. The novel also has much to say about issues of gender, and the ways in which these relate to questions of race and ethnicity: Jamila, Karim's political activist cousin, is forced into an arranged marriage; Karim's English mother is abandoned by her husband, precipitating a psychological breakdown: the role of women in the novel could, therefore, be productively explored through feminist critical procedures. Changes in sexual behaviour and perceptions of sexual identity in the post-Second World War era are also addressed in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, most notably in the mirroring of Karim's ethnic hybridity by his bisexual orientation. As a consequence, the novel could also be read in the light of approaches rooted in gender theory, or gay and lesbian crit-

icism. *The Buddha of Suburbia* is in many ways a characteristic example of contemporary British fiction; it reflects the diversity of late-20th-century life and refers to some of the key social and cultural changes of the period, leaving it open to a multiplicity of potential critical readings, none of which can be regarded as final. The various forms of literary criticism outlined in the final section of this book should be thought of as offering possible ways of reading and interpreting a text, all of which may have some validity, depending on which aspects of the text are the centre of critical focus.

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