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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

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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

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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

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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

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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 judgements 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

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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 postcolonial 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 loincloth, 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-

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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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1 Contexts: History, Politics, Culture

Introduction

At the conclusion of the Second World War in 1945 the public mood in Britain reflected a desire for social change, not least to provide restitution for the sacrifices made by those on the home front as well as those in the armed forces. The British people had felt the effects of war to a severe degree: sustained aerial bombardment had inflicted widespread damage on major cities; men were dispersed to the various theatres of war; women moved out of the domestic sphere to support the war effort on the land, in factories or in the services; and family units were broken up as children were evacuated to safer locations. The privations endured during wartime led to demands that social iniquities and inequalities would be corrected in the future. Planning for a fairer society had begun as early as 1942, with the publication of the Beveridge Report, which advocated the creation of a Welfare State to improve healthcare and education and to alleviate poverty. The report's recommendations for a National Health Service, national insurance and family allowances were taken up after the Labour Party's surprising landslide victory in the 1945 general election, ousting Britain's wartime political leader, Winston Churchill. Initially, there seemed to be grounds for optimism that the necessary social and economic changes would be achieved, but Labour's promised radicalism failed to materialise: its parliamentary majority was slashed to a mere five seats in 1950, and in the following year the Conservatives returned to power, remaining there until 1964. The change of government did not affect the political commitment to the postwar settlement, however, and up to the late 1970s the major parties shared a belief in the Welfare State as the cornerstone of social policy.

While the consensus about the direction of British society remained relatively unchanged for over three decades after the Second World War, Britain's international status was more problematic. The economic consequences of war, together with America's rise as a world power, were major factors in the decline of Britain's imperial status. The United States had made a vital contribution to the winning of the war, and its

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prosperity, at a time when ravaged European nations were counting the cost of military conflict, enabled it to offer assistance in postwar reconstruction, through which it could guide the future economic direction of Western Europe to the benefit of American interests. Britain, on the other hand, was conceding its former imperial territories, with Indian independence in 1947 the most notable example. Nevertheless, the extent of Britain's reduced world role was not fully recognised until 1956, when the government's attempt to counter Egypt's nationalisation of the Suez Canal was halted by America's threat of economic sanctions against the pound. The government's humiliating climb-down confirmed a shift in the international balance of power that had first become apparent with the beginning of the Cold War between America and the Soviet Union in the late 1940s. As Russia extended its influence in the 1950s and 1960s, seeking to challenge America's nuclear dominance, European nations found themselves caught between two antagonistic superpowers, a situation that continued until the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. During the Cold War, nuclear proliferation on both sides fostered anxiety throughout Europe, leading to the establishment of protest movements such as CND (the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) in Britain.

On the domestic front, despite the undoubted achievements of the Welfare State, the promise of 'fairness for all' was far from being fulfilled by the end of the 1950s. Public confidence in the political establishment, shaken by Suez, was further weakened by defections from the intelligence services, revelations that British officials Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean and Kim Philby had been spying for the Soviet Union, and sexual scandals involving senior government figures and prostitutes, in the Profumo affair of 1963. In the following year the Conservative government was defeated, and Labour returned to power. For a time, under Harold Wilson's modernising leadership, Britain recovered its self-confidence, both politically and culturally, but even though it was returned with a larger majority in 1966, the Wilson government's radical ambitions were hindered by economic crises that culminated in devaluation of the pound in 1967. Although relative stability was restored, the Conservatives, under Edward Heath, won an unexpected election victory in 1970.

The economic downturn that began in the late 1960s intensified throughout the following decade, presenting serious fiscal problems, first to the Heath administration. Industrial action by miners and other key workers resulted in energy shortages, leading to the introduction of a three-day working week in 1973–4 that was the main factor in the downfall of the government. Labour fared little better from 1974 to 1979,

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under Prime Minister Wilson and his successor James Callaghan, eventually being forced to seek assistance from the International Monetary Fund, conditional on spending cuts that proved highly unpopular. Growing industrial unrest in 1979 led to a succession of strikes by public sector workers in the so-called 'winter of discontent'. Throughout the 1970s governments also faced other internal problems: social and racial tensions in the inner cities; rising poverty and unemployment; an intensification of the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland; and pressures for moves towards devolution in Scotland and Wales. The 1979 general election was, however, a political watershed, with the Conservative victory under Margaret Thatcher heralding a rejection of the political consensus that had remained in place since 1945.

Thatcherism, the doctrine that dominated British politics for the next decade, advocated a shift to a free-market economy, with as little state intervention as possible, and reorganisation of the Welfare State on free-market principles. State control of industries and utilities gave way to privatisation, and the manufacturing sector was no longer to be relied upon as the main provider of jobs and national productivity. Legislation to limit the power of the unions was introduced as a response to the recurrent industrial unrest of the 1970s. The most serious consequence of the change of political direction was a rapid increase in unemployment, which rose to around 3 million by the early 1980s, an unprecedented figure in the postwar era. Public services suffered from under-investment; riots in Bristol, Toxteth, Brixton and Moss Side testified to severe social problems; and manufacturing industries went into decline. For some people, however, the 1980s was a decade of affluence, with large amounts of money to be made from privatisation of national utilities and in the City. The Conservatives maintained a stranglehold on political power, increasing their majority in the 1983 election, on a wave of jingoistic feeling engendered by the emphatic defeat of Argentinean forces one year earlier, and retaining control comfortably in 1987. By the end of the 1980s the political landscape had changed irrevocably, forcing the political Left to rethink its core values. The Labour Party, after much bloodletting, began to present a more cohesive alternative, and Thatcher's abrasive style began to lose its appeal even within her own party, while new measures such as the community charge (or 'poll tax') provoked organised public protest and opposition. However, it was her refusal to countenance closer political and economic union with Europe that eventually brought about her downfall in 1990, when she resigned after narrowly surviving the first round of a leadership challenge.

John Major replaced Thatcher, and though he fought off Labour's challenge in the 1992 election, divisions over Europe and economic diffi-

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culties continued to pose serious problems for the Conservatives. A series of political and sexual scandals brought into question the probity of ministers and MPs. At the same time, the process of change within the Labour Party was accelerating under the leadership of Tony Blair, who built on the modernising work of his predecessors, Neil Kinnock and John Smith. The party under Blair moved closer to the centre-ground of British politics, establishing closer ties with business, and distancing itself from its historical alliance with the trade unions. The Labour landslide victory in the 1997 election was widely expected, though the scale of the Conservatives' defeat – their worst in electoral history – surprised many, even 'New Labour', as it now called itself.

British politics had undergone a huge transformation by the end of the twentieth century. Like Margaret Thatcher, Blair imposed his personal stamp on government, with a style of leadership close to the American 'presidential' model. What was also different about this Labour administration, compared to its postwar predecessors, was the retention of free-market principles. Those who hoped for a return to the ideals of the postwar consensus were to be disappointed, though there was an increased commitment to improving health and educational provision. Blair's government also benefited from greater economic stability than previous Labour administrations had enjoyed, and although change for the better had not been as noticeable as many had hoped, Labour was in a strong position to repeat the landslide of 1997. This was duly achieved in 2001, only months before the attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September changed international and domestic politics as profoundly as had the Second World War. In the reprisals that followed, and particularly in the war with Iraq that began in 2003, Britain was America's staunchest ally; in the aftermath of '9/11' Britain's international status was more dependent than ever on its relationship with the United States. The Iraq war proved to be an issue of lasting significance, with mass demonstrations against the government's support for American action and British military involvement in the conflict. Arguments about the legality of the war dominated British politics in the early years of the 21st century, and the extent of public opposition to the war was reflected in the substantial reduction of Labour's majority in the 2005 general election, which brought the party its third consecutive victory.

Shortly after Labour began its historic third term – the first time the party had won three elections in a row – Britain became a target for international terrorism. On 7 July 2005, 52 people were killed in a series of suicide bomb attacks on the London transport system. The bombers, who were linked to the Muslim fundamentalist group al-Qaeda, and

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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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