

**Women Writers, 1950s-1960s,
Modern English Literature 1890-1960s
Autumn 2018, Dr. Eglantina Rempfort**

Historical Context:

”10 years after the end of the war [...] the most striking changes in social *mores* and external fashions take place which were to give the post-war world a totally distinct set of attitudes from those of the thirties”

(Harry Blamires, *Twentieth-Century English Literature*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986, 210.)

Social Changes, 1950s:

Protest marches around England **in support of** nuclear disarmament / various political causes (1956 Suez Crisis, Hungary) / legislation for sexual equality (homosexual practices)

Social Changes, 1960s :

Return of Labour to power: 1964, Harold Wilson PM

Increased migration from the Commonwealth → multi-racial society

Muriel Spark (1918-2006), *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1962)

Spark was born in ..; she converted to Catholicism; her later work is more didactic
- turned towards Catholicism to see life as a whole rather than as a series of disconnected happenings

set in: 1930s - Edinburgh (modern-day *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age novel)

protagonists: Miss Jean Brodie (a revolutionary/reactionary teacher)

and the Brodie set

narrative revolving around a love triangle between Miss Brodie, Mr Lowther and Mr Lloyd

some of the main themes: emotional (in)security, sexuality, intimacy, emotional / sexual corruption

Iris Murdoch (1919-1999), *Under the Net* (1954)

Murdoch was born in Dublin (father a Presbyterian from the Northern, mother an Anglican from the Southern part of Ireland); she was conscious of the fact that both her parents belonged to minority religious / social groups in Ireland.

Her novels revolve around characters who desire freedom; her characters have to realise that in order to find personal freedom they need to accept life's variety.

- *picaresque* novel set in London (swift moving action involving a high number of characters)

- protagonist: Jake Donaghue (writer and translator)

- one of the main themes: the tension between non-conformity – conformity

Doris Lessing (1919-2013), *The Grass is Singing* (1950)

Lessing was born in Persia (today's Iran) from where the family travelled on to Southern Rhodesia (today's Zimbabwe)

Many of her most famous novels describe women's experiences in colonial societies - themes: victimisation and psychological disintegration

the novel is set in: Rhodesia

protagonists: Mary Turner, Dick Turner, Moses, Charles Slatter and Tony Marston

main theme: Mary Turner's struggle for freedom and independence

Mary's unhappy childhood: father's alcoholism, mother's oppressiveness, death of siblings, loveless young adulthood

→ she feels lonely and emotionally impoverished

Mary's marriage to Dick Turner (an unsuccessful farmer): efforts on her part to reinvent herself in the relationship

Dick is always away on the farm, Mary runs the house (in an increasingly authoritarian manner), she becomes physically and emotionally oppressive towards slaves and servants.

Some of the main themes: isolation; social prejudice and hatred; physical fear; sexual and physical oppression; sexual and social disgust combined with sexual and social desires.

Conclusion:

In the analysed works above all three writers describe the **struggle** on the part of the **protagonist's or protagonists'** to **achieve emotional and/or sexual freedom** in an environment that **they** perceive as oppressive.