The Tragic Note and Pessimism in Twentieth Century British Novel
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ABSTRACT
The twentieth-century British novel reflects a profound sense of tragedy and pessimism, shaped by the tumultuous events and existential crises of the era. This paper examines the themes of tragedy and pessimism in British literature, analyzing how historical events, social changes, and existential angst influenced the narrative tone and thematic concerns of British novels during this period. The World Wars emerged as pivotal events that permeated British literature with a sense of despair and futility. Novels such as Regeneration (1991) by Pat Barker and Brave New World (1932) by Aldous Huxley depict the horrors of war, societal breakdown, and the erosion of individual freedom, reflecting a pessimistic view of human nature and society. Social dislocation and the decline of the British Empire further contributes to the tragic note in 20th-century British novels. Writers like Joseph Conrad and E.M. Forster grapple with themes of imperialism, cultural clash, and the moral ambiguities of colonial rule, conveying a sense of disillusionment and moral decay. Existentialist themes also play a significant role in shaping the pessimistic tone of British novels. The rise of psychological realism allows British novelists to delve into the complexities of the human psyche, portraying characters grappling with inner demons and existential crises. Novels such as Mrs. Dalloway (1925) by Virginia Woolf and Women in Love (1920) by D.H. Lawrence exemplify this psychological depth, conveying a sense of pessimism about the human condition. Thus, the 20th-century British novel is characterized by a tragic note and themes of pessimism, reflecting the profound social, political, and existential challenges of the time.
INTRODUCTION

The 20th century was a period of profound upheaval and transformation, marked by two devastating world wars, rapid social change, and existential crises. In the realm of literature, particularly in British novels, this tumultuous backdrop often gave rise to narratives characterised by a tragic note and themes of pessimism. This introduction seeks to explore the reasons behind the prevalence of such themes in 20th-century British novels, highlighting key historical, social, and philosophical factors that shaped the literary landscape of the era.

The tragic note and pessimism evident in 20th-century British novels can be attributed to a confluence of factors, each contributing to a sense of disillusionment, existential angst, and despair. The aftermath of the World Wars, particularly World War I, left an indelible mark on British society and literature, casting a shadow of trauma, loss, and disillusionment. Novels written in the wake of these conflicts often grapple with the horrors of war, the senselessness of violence, and the existential crises faced by individuals in the aftermath of such cataclysmic events. Moreover, the decline of the British Empire and the erosion of traditional social structures further contributed to a sense of dislocation and alienation in 20th-century British literature. Writers confronted the moral ambiguities of imperialism, the breakdown of social norms, and the loss of faith in established institutions, reflecting a pervasive sense of pessimism about the trajectory of human civilisation.

Existentialist thought also exerted a significant influence on 20th-century British novels, prompting writers to explore themes of existential despair, alienation, and the search for meaning in a seemingly indifferent universe. The works of authors such as Samuel Beckett, Virginia Woolf, and Albert Camus grapple with the absurdity of human existence, the inevitability of suffering, and the inherent cruelty of fate, conveying a sense of existential angst and pessimism about the human condition. Furthermore, the rise of psychological realism allowed British novelists to delve into the complexities of the human psyche, portraying characters struggling with inner demons, existential crises, and the limitations of human consciousness. Novels such as Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf and The Waste Land (1922) by T.S. Eliot exemplify this psychological depth, conveying a sense of pessimism about the fragility of human identity and the inability to escape the constraints of one’s own mind.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The tragic note and pessimism evident in 20th century British novels are the product of a complex interplay of historical events, social changes, and philosophical currents. These novels serve as poignant reflections on the human condition, confronting readers with the harsh realities of war, societal upheaval, and the existential dilemmas of modern life. Through their exploration of themes such as trauma, alienation, and existential despair, 20th century British novels offer profound insights into the complexities of human experience and the enduring quest for meaning and redemption in a world fraught with uncertainty and despair.

The emergence of this tragic note can be attributed to World Wars, particularly World War I and World War II, had a profound impact on 20th-century literature, contributing to themes of pessimism in novels in several ways. The sheer scale of death, destruction, and suffering experienced during the World Wars left deep scars on individuals and societies. Many soldiers returned from the frontlines physically and psychologically wounded, grappling with trauma, survivor’s guilt, and disillusionment. Novels written in the aftermath of the wars often depict characters who are haunted by their experiences and struggle to make sense of a world shattered by violence and loss. This pervasive sense of trauma and disillusionment contributes to an overall atmosphere of pessimism in these works.

The World Wars exposed the futility and absurdity of war, as well as the inability of humanity to prevent or mitigate the catastrophic consequences of conflict. Novels written during and after the wars often reflect this sense of absurdity, portraying characters who are caught up in larger geopolitical forces beyond their control. The senselessness of war and the breakdown of traditional values and moral frameworks contribute to a feeling of existential despair and pessimism in these novels. The World Wars led to the collapse of numerous ideologies and belief systems, including nationalism, imperialism, and faith in progress and civilization. The horrors of the wars shattered any illusions of human advancement and exposed the dark side of human nature. Novels written in the aftermath of the wars often explore the consequences of ideological disillusionment, portraying characters who grapple with a loss of faith in the ideals they once held dear. This collapse of ideologies contributes to a sense of moral and existential nihilism in many works of 20th-century literature.

In the aftermath of the World Wars, many people felt a profound sense of disillusionment and alienation from mainstream society. The rapid social, cultural, and technological changes that occurred during the 20th century further contributed to feelings of dislocation and uncertainty. Novels written during this period often depict characters who feel adrift in a world they no longer recognize, struggling to find meaning and connection amidst the chaos and upheaval. This pervasive sense of alienation and disorientation contributes to the overall pessimistic tone of many works of 20th-century literature. The World Wars had a profound impact on 20th-century literature, contributing to themes of pessimism through their portrayal of loss and trauma, the sense of futility and absurdity, the collapse of ideologies, and the postwar disillusionment and alienation experienced by many individuals and societies. These themes are
central to many novels written during and after the wars, reflecting the profound impact of this tumultuous period on the human psyche and collective consciousness.

METHODOLOGY

This paper examines the themes of tragedy and pessimism in British literature, analyzing how historical events, social changes, and existential angst influenced the narrative tone and thematic concerns of British novels during this period. The World Wars emerged as pivotal events that permeated British literature with a sense of despair and futility. Novels such as Regeneration (1991) by Pat Barker and Brave New World (1932) by Aldous Huxley depict the horrors of war, societal breakdown, and the erosion of individual freedom, reflecting a pessimistic view of human nature and society. Social dislocation and the decline of the British Empire further contributes to the tragic note in 20th-century British novels. Writers like Joseph Conrad and E.M. Forster grapple with themes of imperialism, cultural clash, and the moral ambiguities of colonial rule, conveying a sense of disillusionment and moral decay.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Important for the rise of this tragic milieu is Darwin’s theory of evolution, particularly the concept of natural selection, had a profound impact on the intellectual landscape of the 19th and 20th centuries. In the realm of literature, his ideas influenced the development of pessimism in several ways. Before Darwin, many people found solace in religious beliefs that provided explanations for the origin of life and humanity’s place in the world. However, Darwin’s theory challenged these religious narratives, suggesting instead that life had evolved through natural processes over millions of years. This erosion of religious certainty left many feeling adrift in a world seemingly devoid of inherent meaning or purpose. It created a sense of human insignificance. Darwin’s theory emphasized the continuity of life forms and the interconnectedness of all living beings. This perspective, often termed “Darwinian nihilism,” suggested that humans were not special creations but rather products of blind natural forces. This realization contributed to a sense of human insignificance and alienation, themes that are often central to pessimistic literature. Humanity’s relationship with nature has to be fundamentally reevaluated in light of Darwinian evolution. Following Darwin, some believe that humans are essentially animalistic, which is consistent with his claims in “The Origin of Species” (1859) and “The Descent of Man” (1871) that humans are related to and descended from other animals. Humanity after his proposition is understood to be “ineradicably” animal (1963:284). This viewpoint challenges conventional notions of human superiority and emphasises our shared biological inheritance with other organisms, underscoring the idea that humans are intricately entwined with the animal kingdom. This suggests that humanity evolved from so-called “lower animals” (1871: 9-11.) The idea put out by Darwin that “natural selection” is the source of both animality and humankind. Darwin states that the emergence of a species and an individual are both equally significant components of the vast chain of events that our brains will not
acknowledge as the product of random chance. Jacques Derrida argues in the fourth session of his seminars on The Beast and the Sovereign that, “the Darwinian assault on human exceptionality is the one most desperately resisted by humanity” (2009: 130-131).

Darwin’s emphasis on competition and survival of the fittest also influenced literary portrayals of human society. Many novels of the 20th century, influenced by Darwinian ideas, depicted a world characterized by competition, conflict, and struggle for survival. This portrayal often underscored the darker aspects of human nature and societal dynamics, contributing to a sense of pessimism about the human condition. The Origin of Species advocate the need for survival through power. In The Origin of Species, Darwin aims to present a materialistic explanation for the evolution of organic life. He asserts that the diversity of life forms, including various species, arises from the continual variation among organic individuals and their struggle for survival:

As many more individuals of each species are born than can possibly survive; and as, consequently, there is a frequently recurring struggle for existence, it follows that any being, if it vary however slightly in any manner profitable to itself, under the complex and sometimes varying conditions of life, will have a better chance of surviving, and thus be naturally selected. From the strong principle of inheritance, any selected variety will tend to propagate its new and modified form. (Darwin, 1859:5)

Within the shorter span of the publication of this book, Britain got involved in Boer War (11 October 1899 – 31 May 1902). This war led to damaging consequences for Britain. Before Britain could set its home in order, they jumped into World War I. In The Origin of Species, Darwin writes: “from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows” (490). According to Darwin life emerges from the struggle for existence, implying a state of conflict in nature. While Darwin doesn’t extensively explore the implications of this conflict on humanity in his book but certain passages suggest its potential socio-political and imperialistic connotations.

Darwin’s theory of evolution played a significant role in shaping the intellectual climate of the 20th century, including literature. His ideas contributed to a sense of pessimism by challenging traditional beliefs, emphasizing human insignificance, highlighting conflict and struggle, and raising existential questions about the nature of existence. These themes are often central to the novels of the 20th century, reflecting the influence of Darwinian thought on the development of pessimism in novels in the 20th century.

Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher of the 19th century, had a profound influence on 20th-century literature, particularly in the development of existentialism and nihilism, which often explore themes of pessimism. Here are
some ways in which Nietzsche’s ideas contributed to pessimism in 20th-century novels. For Friedrich “pessimism ... is older and more original than optimism … Pessimism is the consequence of knowledge of the absolute illogic of the world-order” (Joshua Foa Dienstag, 2004:87). Nietzsche initially ascribes the doctrine to Democritus that "the world [is] without moral and aesthetic meaning” and calls this idea “the pessimism of accidents” (qtd in Dienstag, 87). Nietzsche famously proclaimed the “death of God” and critiqued traditional religious and moral systems as oppressive and outdated. His ideas challenged the belief in objective moral truths and questioned the foundations of Western civilization. This critique of traditional values created a sense of nihilism, where meaning and value were seen as subjective and contingent upon individual interpretation. Many 20th-century novels reflect this nihilistic perspective by portraying characters who grapple with the absence of overarching meaning or values in their lives. Nietzsche introduced the concept of the “Übermensch” or “Overman,” a transcendent individual who creates their own values and meaning in a world devoid of inherent significance. This idea resonated with existentialist writers of the 20th century who explored themes of existential despair, alienation, and the search for authenticity. Many novels of the period feature characters who struggle to find meaning in a world that seems indifferent or hostile to their existence, echoing Nietzschean themes of existential angst and pessimism.

Another concept Nietzsche introduced is the idea of “eternal recurrence,” which suggests that the universe and all events within it recur infinitely. This notion can evoke feelings of nihilism and despair, as it implies the futility of human actions and the inevitability of suffering and repetition. Some 20th-century novels incorporate elements of eternal recurrence, either explicitly or thematically, to explore the existential dilemmas faced by their characters and to convey a sense of pessimism about the human condition. Nietzsche also emphasized the importance of the “will to power” as a driving force behind human actions and aspirations. This concept underscores the inherent struggle and conflict in human existence, as individuals seek to assert their power and assert their values in a competitive world. Nietzsche was captivated by Arthur Schopenhauer’s work The World as Will and Representation (1818). Schopenhauer presented a profoundly pessimistic perspective on existence, centered around his concept of “Will” — an unconscious, relentless, and irrational force driving the universe. This cosmic Will is evident in every individual through instincts like the sexual drive and the innate urge for self-preservation, which are pervasive throughout nature. It serves as a fundamental cause of human suffering, as it is inherently insatiable. Thus the essential nature of the “Will” is tragic and the main cause of suffering. Thus all human efforts are will lead to more pain and suffering.
Many novels of the 20th century depict characters engaged in various power struggles, both internal and external, reflecting Nietzschean themes of existential tension and pessimism. Nietzsche’s ideas on nihilism, the Übermensch, eternal recurrence, and the will to power profoundly influenced 20th-century literature, contributing to themes of pessimism and existential angst. His critique of traditional values and emphasis on individual autonomy and struggle provided fertile ground for novelists to explore the complexities of human existence and the search for meaning in a seemingly indifferent universe.

Among the greatest of the twentieth century novelists who encapsulated this tragic tone in his works is Thomas Hardy. Hardy is often regarded as a pessimist due to the bleak and fatalistic worldview present in much of his work. Hardy’s novels often feature characters who are subject to the whims of fate and circumstance (Tragic Fatalism), leading to tragic outcomes. Whether it’s Tess Durbeyfield in Tess of the d’Urbervilles (1891) or Jude Fawley in Jude the Obscure (1895), Hardy’s protagonists seem doomed from the start, facing insurmountable obstacles and inevitable downfall. A Pair of Blue Eyes (1872), the tragic fate of the novel’s protagonist is framed as an individual overwhelmed by a relentless and violent fatal logic which is unyielding to human agency. In The Dynasts, the world is propelled forward by an Immanent Will, utterly blind, devoid of kindness and full of cruelty “Loveless, Hateless!-past the sense Of kindly-eyed benevolence” (qtd in Fergal McGrath, 1928:33). This fatalistic worldview suggests a pessimistic view of human agency and the possibility of overcoming adversity. Hardy’s narrative consistently leans towards tragedy or adversity, often depicting the individual’s downfall either through the inescapable grip of mortality or the workings of malicious schemes. His concept of “crass casualty” which alludes to Hardy’s poem “Hap” where the narrator mourns that human affliction stems not from a malevolent deity but from the mundane cruelties embedded in the passage of time (James Gibson, 1976: 9).

“Chance” as well as “Struggle and Competition” emerge as two pivotal aspects of existence within Hardy’s post-Darwinian universe. John Glendening argues that Hardy’s fiction deals with “the random, contingent character of the post-Darwinian world and the loss, death, and limitation of freedom that occur there” (2007: 67).

Hardy’s writing is influenced by naturalistic principles, which emphasize the role of external forces, such as environment and heredity, in shaping human destiny. Characters in Hardy’s novels often find themselves trapped in a web of social constraints and biological determinism, unable to escape their predetermined fate. This deterministic worldview contributes to a sense of pessimism about the potential for individual autonomy and free will. Hardy lived during a period of rapid social and technological change, yet his novels often express skepticism about the notion of progress. Instead of viewing
progress as inherently positive, Hardy highlights its negative consequences, such as the displacement of rural communities, the erosion of traditional values and the alienation of individuals from their natural environment. This critical stance towards progress reflects a pessimistic view of human civilization and its impact on the natural world. Hardy’s work explores existential themes such as the meaninglessness of existence, the inevitability of suffering, and the indifference of the universe. Characters in his novels grapple with existential questions about the purpose of life and the existence of a benevolent higher power. This existential angst contributes to a sense of pessimism about the human condition and the inherent cruelty of existence.

Overall, Thomas Hardy’s pessimism stems from his portrayal of a world where individuals are powerless to change their fate, society is governed by deterministic forces, and existence is marked by suffering and uncertainty. While his novels may be bleak and tragic, they offer profound insights into the complexities of human experience and the fragility of human existence.

Virginia Woolf’s work can certainly be complex and at times melancholic, labeling her solely as a pessimist would be an oversimplification. Woolf’s writing often delves into the depths of human consciousness, exploring themes of identity, perception, and the intricacies of human relationships. However, there are aspects of her work that can be interpreted as reflecting a pessimistic outlook. Like many modernist writers, Woolf grappled with existential questions about the nature of existence and the meaning of life. In novels such as Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse (1972), characters confront the existential angst of living in a world where meaning is elusive and uncertainty reigns. This sense of existential doubt and alienation can be interpreted as reflecting a pessimistic view of the human condition. Woolf’s own struggles with mental illness, particularly depression, are reflected in her writing. Characters such as Septimus Warren Smith in Mrs. Dalloway and Rhoda in “The Waves” (1931), struggle with psychological turmoil and existential despair. Woolf’s portrayal of mental illness and its impact on individual lives can be seen as highlighting the darker aspects of human experience and conveying a sense of pessimism about the possibility of achieving inner peace and stability.

Woolf was critical of the social and gender norms of her time and her writing often reflect a sense of disillusionment with society. In works such as A Room of One’s Own (1929) Woolf examines the limitations placed on women’s creativity and autonomy, highlighting the injustices and inequalities inherent in patriarchal society. This critique of societal norms and structures can be interpreted as reflecting a pessimistic view of human progress and the possibility of social change.
However, it's important to note that Woolf’s writing is multifaceted and often defies easy categorization. While she grappled with themes of existential angst and social critique, her work also contains moments of beauty, insight, and resilience. Woolf’s exploration of the complexities of human experience, her innovative narrative techniques, and her profound empathy for her characters suggest a more nuanced understanding of her worldview beyond mere pessimism.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The themes of tragedy and pessimism permeate many twentieth-century British novels. Authors like Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf, and others often explore the darker aspects of human existence, depicting characters struggling against fate, societal constraints, and the inherent cruelty of the world. Through their narratives, they reflect on the complexities of life, the inevitability of suffering, and the fragility of human aspirations. These novels serve as poignant reminders of the harsh realities of the human condition, offering profound insights into the human psyche and the existential dilemmas that confront individuals in the modern world.

FURTHER STUDY

This research still has limitations, so it is necessary to carry out further research related to the topic The Tragic Note and Pessimism in Twentieth Century Novel in order to perfect this research and increase readers' insight.

REFERENCES


