

# 7 The twentieth century, 1939–2004

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This chapter brings the story of English literature in its historical context from the beginning of the Second World War in 1939 to the present day. As we approach the contemporary, it is more difficult to say with any accuracy what are the determining contexts and prevailing trends of English literature. This is partly because it is more difficult to settle on what are the major texts and major issues of this period. It is possible, however, to recognise that there have been huge changes in British society and culture since 1939, most notably the effects of the Second World War, the decline of the British Empire, the rise and fall of the welfare state, the liberalisation of sexuality and gender roles, and the influence of immigration and devolution on contemporary meanings of English and British national identity. These changes have affected English literature since 1939 in various ways, most notably in the turn against modernism after the war, the emergence of post-modernism, the increased significance of women's writing and writing by ethnic minorities in Britain, and the renewed emphasis on the condition of England. This chapter is an attempt to explain the relationship between these new trends in English writings and their historical contexts.

## Chronology

	HISTORY AND CULTURE	LITERATURE
1939	Outbreak of Second World War British forces arrive in France Evacuation of children from London	T. S. Eliot, <i>The Family Reunion</i> Robert Graves, <i>The Long Weekend</i> James Joyce, <i>Finnegans Wake</i> Jan Struther, <i>Mrs Miniver</i>
1940	Winston Churchill succeeds Neville Chamberlain as British Prime Minister (PM) British forces forced to evacuate from France through Dunkirk Battle of Britain – the battle for air supremacy	Dylan Thomas, <i>A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog</i> Graham Greene, <i>The Power and the Glory</i>
1941	USA and USSR (Allies) enter the war against Germany and Japan (Axis) Rowntree Report on Poverty	Noel Coward, <i>Blithe Spirit</i>
1942	Battle of El Alamein – British forces defeat the Germans in North Africa	Eliot, 'Little Gidding'