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Introduction

Although people often associate the Victorian era with famous novels such as *Great Expectations* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, poetry and drama were not neglected genres. This unit begins with Oscar Wilde and goes on to cover some of the most important nineteenth-century poets. The remainder of the lessons deals with writers of many types, from World War I to the present day.

You will want to point out the continuation of both Romantic and realistic perspectives from the nineteenth century to the present day. Despite the pessimism that easily results from the horrors of economic depressions and wars, there seems to be something in the human spirit that clings to hope and beauty and refuses to abandon ideals.

Lessons focusing on the twentieth century and the opening years of the twenty-first include the stream-of-consciousness technique that originated with writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf and exerted a powerful influence on modern fiction. Mid-century the phenomenon of theater of the absurd at least temporarily revolutionized drama. The empire of which the British were once so proud was presented in a different light by writers who emphasized injustices at the heart of imperialism and consequences that have endured until the present day.

When we think about writers of recent decades, it is nearly impossible to determine whom future generations will see as great. Only time can tell which literary works will fall completely out of print and which will endure as classics. The concluding lesson encourages students to become acquainted with writers who are receiving significant critical acclaim today.

While fostering a quick acquaintance with a variety of writers is a good idea, it is usually beneficial to include major works in a study of recent literature. Your choice of specific titles will depend on your students' interests and abilities. Two strong possibilities for nearly all classes are *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley and *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. Huxley's book provokes discussion of government control, family values, and chemically induced bliss. *Lord of the Flies* leads to considerations of factors that prevent humanity from deteriorating into depravity and violence.

As your students complete their tour of the British literary tradition, you will want to emphasize shared values and concerns that transcend national boundaries.

Oscar Wilde

Directions: Oscar Wilde made a career of poking fun at society and the foibles of the late nineteenth-century English. He was a master of the aphorism, a short statement that makes a single point in a memorable way. Read the following aphorisms. Think about the ways they comment on the Victorian era and apply to our own lives today.

From *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

1. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them?
2. The truth is rarely pure, and never simple.

From *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

3. There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.

From *The Soul of Man under Socialism*:

4. Democracy means simply the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people.

From *Sebastian Melmoth*:

5. A thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it.

From "The Decay of Lying":

6. Art never expresses anything but itself.

From *The Critic as Artist*:

7. Ah! Don't say that you agree with me. When people agree with me I always feel that I must be wrong.
8. There is no sin except stupidity.

From *Lady Windermere's Fan*:

9. I couldn't help it. I can resist everything except temptation.
10. All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his.

Winston Churchill's Oratory

Directions: In May of 1940 Winston Churchill, prime minister of the United Kingdom, delivered a speech to the House of Commons in Parliament. It is frequently titled "Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat." Read his concluding paragraphs, and answer the questions.

... it must be remembered that we are in the preliminary stage of one of the greatest battles in history, that we are in action at many points in Norway and in Holland, that we have to be prepared in the Mediterranean, that the air battle is continuous and that many preparations have to be made here at home. In this crisis I hope I may be pardoned if I do not address the House at any length today. I hope that any of my friends and colleagues, or former colleagues, who are affected by the political reconstruction, will make all allowances for any lack of ceremony with which it has been necessary to act. I would say to the House, as I said to those who've joined this government: "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat."

We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I will say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark and lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: victory. Victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival. Let that be realised; no survival for the British Empire, no survival for all that the British Empire has stood for, no survival for the urge and impulse of the ages, that mankind will move forward towards its goal.

But I take up my task with buoyancy and hope. I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail among men. At this time I feel entitled to claim the aid of all, and I say, "Come then, let us go forward together with our united strength."

1. What was the central purpose of the speech?
2. What attributes of the speaker are evident in his words and phrases?
3. How do you think the speech affected the listeners in the House of Commons?
4. What rhetorical devices are evident?

