

Topic Page: [Durrell, Lawrence](#)

Definition: **Durrell** from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary*

 [pronunciation](#)

Lawrence Durrell 1912–1990 Eng. nov. & poet

Summary Article: **Durrell, Lawrence**

From *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Literature: The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*

Lawrence Durrell bridged high modernist and postmodern fiction. His primary contribution to twentieth-century writing is his lush and experimental prose, which works in tandem with minimalist plots, carefully planned formal experimentation, and his revisions to the novel form. He is unique in British fiction for his peculiar position in between most major movements and for a style that contradicted predominant aesthetic tastes yet was popular and celebrated.

While terse prose and realism dominated late interbellum writing, Durrell produced lush and surreal fiction, marking him as an early English surrealist and one of the most successful. In contrast to the surrealists, he immediately abandoned their communist ideology for anarcho-individualism, and his writing remained densely allusive and highly crafted in the modernist tradition, in many ways akin to the work of Djuna Barnes and Henry Miller. While he was often criticized as apolitical, Durrell's individualist politics – similar to Herbert Read's “Politics of the Unpolitical” – led to unique representations of World War II. The war appears in relation to the characters and location, rather than the reverse. George Orwell denounced this as “a return to the 20s” (1937), meaning that such work failed to respond to social circumstances. Nonetheless, Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* appears to borrow from the bohemian section of Durrell's *Pied Piper of Lovers*, and Durrell responded in his second novel, *Panic Spring* (Gifford 2008a).

Durrell's 16 novels are all set in “exotic” locations, ranging from India to the Mediterranean and North Africa. Several others remain unpublished. Yet, he was not pandering to British colonialist tastes. Nearly all locations in his works, except Istanbul, are places where he had extended residences. He integrates a darkly ironic sense of empire, but his works are often subjected to postcolonial critiques of imperialism (Manzalaoui 1962).

Durrell's fame peaked with his *Alexandria Quartet*, four novels that stylistically rebut the angry young men. He went on to Hollywood film projects, which proved incompatible with his experimental style. His later fiction became less popular in proportion to its increasing social critiques and experimental style. His *Revolt of Aphrodite* (1974), a pair of science fiction novels, uses a complex formal structure to critique a “Big Brother”-like transnational corporation that operates independent of politics and the state. This work demonstrates Durrell's admiration for Orwell's *1984* but also his sense of Orwell's limitations for focusing on the nation state. Durrell's anarcho-individualism is akin to yet incompatible with the socialist stance Orwell took against fascism, capitalism, and communism. Durrell's *Avignon Quintet* (1992), his last major work, uses a highly complex structure and overtly postmodern aesthetics to integrate his interest in Eastern philosophy and religion with the destruction caused by World War II.

Durrell was born in India in 1912 and was sent “home” to England in 1923 by parents who had never been there. He left 12 years later, residing in Britain infrequently, but served Britain in several diplomatic

capacities. Ubiquitously known as a British colonial writer, Durrell fell foul of a migrant law aimed at reducing immigration from India and Pakistan in 1968, after which he could not enter Britain without a visa (Ezard 2002). He was a British non-patrial without the right to enter or settle. Durrell lived primarily in the Mediterranean from 1935 until his death in 1990.

Durrell began publishing poetry in 1931, and his first novel, *Pied Piper of Lovers* (1935), recounts his Indian childhood and unwanted relocation to England (Gifford 2008a). He moved to the Greek island Kerkyra in 1935 and wrote his next two novels, *Panic Spring* (1937) and *The Black Book* (1938). The latter strongly influenced English surrealism and was banned in Britain and the United States. Richard Aldington, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, and Henry Miller are alluded to heavily in these first novels; Miller and Eliot praised *The Black Book* exceptionally. Durrell's lifelong interest in and deep familiarity with Elizabethan drama is also evident.

Durrell was in Greece during the German and Italian invasions in World War II, initially on Kerkyra, then in Athens as senior press officer to the British Embassy, Kalamata as director of the British Institute, and finally evacuated to Crete. Much of his work involved producing anti-fascist propaganda (Stephanides 2008). As with his friend George Seferis, the Nobel Laureate in the Greek government in exile, Durrell evacuated to Cairo during the bombardment of Crete. He was senior press officer during the war in Cairo and relocated to Alexandria where he served the British Foreign Office in intelligence and propaganda. There he knew Olivia Manning, who housed his first wife in Jerusalem when their marriage failed. In the postbellum period, Durrell rapidly returned to Greece with the British Foreign Office on Rhodes during the accretion of the Dodecanese islands to Greece. He was then in Argentina during Péron's first term, in Yugoslavia under Tito, and on Cyprus during Enosis, where he finished the preparatory work for the *Alexandria Quartet* while working as the director of public relations for the British government. He fled Cyprus and abandoned his home when he became a target of bombings. He subsequently completed the four books of *The Alexandria Quartet* between 1957 and 1960 after settling in southern France in 1956.

In 1957, Durrell's *annus mirabilis*, he published *Justine*, the first volume of *The Alexandria Quartet*; *White Eagles over Serbia*, a spy thriller set in the Balkans; *Bitter Lemons*, his semi-fictional life on Cyprus; and his first collection of Antrobus stories, a satire of the British Foreign Office. These are his most famous works, particularly *Justine* and *Bitter Lemons*. The *Quartet* is set in the years surrounding World War II in Egypt. Its style is densely allusive, and the first three volumes repeat the same scenes from different perspectives with conflicting senses of truth; the fourth volume temporally progresses but refuses to resolve the multiple narratives. The *Quartet* aimed to redirect the modern novel form by emphasizing spatial and allusive structures, which disjoined the ordering impulse of stream of consciousness and psychological development. After significant revisions, the four books appeared in a final omnibus edition in 1962. While its allusive and psychoanalytic contents are modernist, its narratological and formal innovations are linked with postmodernism (Herbrechter 1999 Skordili 2002). Postcolonial work on the *Quartet* began immediately (Manzalaoui 1962, and it was significant in early gay and lesbian studies criticism (Boone 1989).

Durrell's political context remains overlooked, and most critical work assumes he was naive with regard to indigenous cultures and supported imperialism. Recent scholarship differs. Haag 2004 demonstrates that the Hosnani family in the *Quartet*, part of Egypt's Coptic minority, strongly resembles the Jewish family of Durrell's third wife, Claude Vincendon (Menasce), an Alexandrian Zionist who edited his novels while writing her own comic novel of wartime Alexandria, *The Rum Go*, and a Zionist novel, *A Chair for*

the Prophet. The resemblances are strong with regard to Zionist support for the creation of Israel, and “Whenever Chaim Weizmann, leader of the World Zionist Organisation and the eventual first president of Israel, visited Alexandria, he would ‘invariably’ stay at the home of Baron Felix de Menasce” (Haag 2004). This significantly impacts postcolonial readings, although Durrell shifted his Zionist sympathies after his wife's death in 1967. After Israel's occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and Golan Heights in the same year, Durrell abandoned his Zionist filmscripts and novel, and did not resume such projects.

In 1968, Durrell published the first volume of *The Revolt of Aphrodite*, his second major novel series, although this was not well received. Like Orwell's *1984*, it depicts a world-controlling international firm that dominates national governments and mass culture, commodifying both. The novel series reflects Durrell's early anarcho-libertarian views in relation to Miller and Herbert Read (Gifford 2008b).

In 1974, Durrell began his most ambitious novel series, *The Avignon Quintet*, completing it in 1985. Although the third volume, *Constance*, was nominated for the Booker Prize, the series was not received as well as his earlier works. The writing was highly experimental for the time and is demanding for the reader, during a period of mainstream return to realism. Nonetheless, the *Quintet* marks a major development in postmodernism (Herbrechter 1999).

Durrell also wrote travel narratives, though these are typically described as “foreign residence books.” *Bitter Lemons* is the most famous, and was awarded the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize. Despite its opening assertion that “this is not a political book,” it is Durrell's most political travel work and was written after he fled Cyprus and during the Suez crisis while living with Claude Vincendon. Durrell is notably bitter about British colonial policy in the book, but his sympathy for the Turks, Greeks, and British has made it difficult for any group to accept. In tandem with Egyptian reactions to *The Alexandria Quartet*, *Bitter Lemons* receives much postcolonial critique. In both works, the tensions between irony, critique, and colonial bias are debated and no satisfactory conclusion has been reached in scholarship (Hitchens 1997 [1989]).

Durrell was first influenced by the literary milieu of London, but early trips to France shifted his focus to European literature. He was also active as a poet, particularly in the first half of his career. He read widely and deeply in psychoanalysis, beginning in the early 1930s, which influenced his plots, themes, and narrative structures (Skordili 2002).

In 1935, Durrell began a 45-year correspondence with the American writer, Henry Miller, which led to significant interactions with the artists in the Villa Seurat circle and surrealism. Durrell developed strong ties with Greek modernists at the same time and, after moving to southern France, became active in French literary circles.

Durrell's influence is broad. Anthony Burgess's second wife Liliana Macellari translated *Justine* into Italian in 1959, and mutual allusions appear in their works. Similarly, Julio Cortázar's first wife Aurora Bernárdez translated the *Quartet* into Spanish while he wrote *Rayuela*, which incorporates passages from Durrell (Sligh 1998). A. S. Byatt alludes to the *Quartet* in *Possession*, and Kathy Acker quotes from it in her cut-and-paste novel *Don Quixote*. William S. Burroughs also praised the work at the 1962 International Writers' Conference and used it in his own cut-up work. M. G. Vassanji borrows several of Durrell's character names in his novels and drew the title for his *No New Land* (1991) from Durrell's translations of Cavafy. The influence of Durrell's late fiction is less clear, although allusions to his *Avignon Quintet* are numerous. Despite his unique political associations and heavy reliance on psychoanalytical and philosophical thought, Durrell's primary impacts on twentieth-century literature remain stylistic and

formal.

SEE ALSO: Colonial Fiction (BIF); Miller, Henry (AF); Modernist Fiction (BIF); Orwell, George (BIF); Politics and the Novel (BIF); Postmodernist Fiction (BIF); World War II in Fiction (BIF)

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