



THE IMAGE OF ROMANIAN SOCIETY AND ROMANIAN LITERATURE DURING THE INTERWAR PERIOD

Mirabela Rely Odette CURELAR

Associate Professor PhD

„Constantin Brancusi,, University of Târgu Jiu

Abstract:

The society and Romanian literature underwent a process of intense diversification and experimentation. From the exploration of modernist aesthetics to the revival of nationalism and traditionalism, this period was a fertile time for literary production, characterized by a complex interplay of national identity, modernism, and political ideology. Many of the themes and stylistic innovations from this period continue to resonate in Romanian literature today.

Keywords:

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**Contact details
of the
author(s):**

mirabelacurelar@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The interwar period in Romania (1918-1939) was marked by significant political, social, and cultural transformations. Following the end of World War I, Romania underwent a process of territorial expansion, with the acquisition of Transylvania, Bessarabia, and Bukovina, which greatly influenced the country's social fabric.

These territorial changes were accompanied by modernization efforts, the rise of national identity, and a burgeoning cultural scene. However, the period also experienced political instability, social inequality, and the emergence of authoritarian movements that would shape the country's future. This article explores the image of Romanian society during the interwar period by examining its political, economic, social, and cultural characteristics.

MAIN TEXT

I. Political Landscape and National Identity

The interwar period in Romania began with the country emerging as a Greater Romania after the Great Union of 1918. The incorporation of the provinces of Transylvania, Bessarabia, and Bukovina into Romania's borders significantly altered the political landscape. These territories



brought in new ethnic groups, such as Hungarians, Germans, Ukrainians, and Jews, which contributed to the country's ethnic diversity. This shift created tensions between different nationalities, but also served as a catalyst for the development of a stronger Romanian national identity.

Politically, Romania struggled to establish stability. The interwar period saw a series of unstable governments, ranging from democratic to authoritarian regimes. King Carol II, who ruled from 1930 to 1940, attempted to create a more centralized and personalist rule, ultimately dissolving the democratic system and establishing a royal dictatorship in 1938.

During his reign, there were attempts to manage the complex ethnic issues, but also a rise in nationalist and extremist ideologies, such as the Iron Guard, a fascist movement that became increasingly influential.

The political fragmentation of the period was also influenced by the constant tension between the left-wing and right-wing ideologies. The Communist Party, although largely underground, began to gain traction, while the far-right groups, like the Iron Guard, opposed the liberal-democratic order. This political polarization led to an increasingly radicalized society, setting the stage for the eventual rise of communism after World War II.

II. Economic Development and Social Inequality

Economically, Romania during the interwar period faced a series of challenges, despite its agricultural potential and strategic position in Europe. The Great Depression of the 1930s had a severe impact on Romania's economy, deepening the gap between rich and poor. While Romania was an agrarian society with a large rural population, industrialization was slow and uneven. Major industries, such as oil production (Romania was one of the world's leading oil producers at the time), textiles, and construction, were concentrated in a few urban centers.

In the rural areas, the majority of the population lived in poverty. The agrarian reform of 1921, which aimed to distribute land to peasants, had mixed results. Although it initially gave many peasants access to land, it did not fully solve the problem of landlessness or improve agricultural productivity. The inequality between urban and rural areas remained significant, with rural populations facing a life of subsistence farming and limited access to education and healthcare.

Romania's urban centers, particularly Bucharest, Cluj, and Iași, experienced rapid growth in the interwar period. These cities became vibrant cultural hubs, but they also suffered from overcrowding, poor infrastructure, and social stratification.

The emerging middle class, particularly in the cities, began to experience new opportunities for social mobility, but the wealth gap was still striking.

III. Social Movements and Cultural Flourishing

The interwar period in Romania witnessed a flourishing of intellectual and cultural life, which contributed to shaping the image of Romanian society during this time. A new generation of writers, artists, philosophers, and political thinkers emerged, many of whom were deeply influenced by the European avant-garde movements. Figures such as Mircea Eliade, Eugen Ionescu, and Lucian Blaga became prominent in literature, philosophy, and theatre, while painters like Nicolae Săftoiu and Constantin Brâncuși earned international acclaim.

Romanian intellectuals engaged in vibrant debates about nationalism, modernization, and identity. A significant intellectual movement was the development of “Romanianism,” a philosophical and cultural trend that sought to assert the uniqueness of Romanian culture while engaging with modern European intellectual currents. At the same time, the development of



Romanian nationalism played a prominent role in the political landscape, influencing both the far-right movements and the official state ideology.

Culturally, the interwar period in Romania was marked by a tension between tradition and modernity. In urban centers, the growth of the middle class led to a flourishing of cultural institutions, such as theaters, cinemas, and literary salons. However, in rural areas, traditional customs and values prevailed. (Manasia 2023: 79). This contrast between the cosmopolitan urban centers and the traditional countryside was a defining feature of Romanian society at the time.

IV. The Rise of Extremism and Authoritarianism

The interwar period in Romania was also characterized by the rise of extremist political movements, most notably the Iron Guard, a fascist and ultranationalist group that gained significant influence during the 1930s. The Iron Guard was deeply anti-Semitic and sought to restore Romania to what they considered a purer, more traditional version of the nation. The group's radical rhetoric and violent actions, including political assassinations and pogroms, contributed to the growing instability of the country.

In response to these extremist movements and the increasing instability of democratic politics, King Carol II established a royal dictatorship in 1938. The dictatorship aimed to suppress political pluralism and unite the country under a centralized, authoritarian regime. However, this period of centralized power did little to resolve Romania's underlying economic and social problems, and it failed to curb the influence of extremist groups, such as the Iron Guard. In 1940, Carol II was forced to abdicate, and Romania entered a period of intense political turmoil that eventually led to the country's alignment with Nazi Germany during World War II.

The interwar period in Romanian literature (1918–1939) was a time of significant cultural and intellectual development, marked by a diversity of literary movements, the rise of modernism, and a rich exploration of national identity. This era followed Romania's Great Union in 1918, when the country saw significant political and social changes that deeply influenced its artistic output.

1. Modernism and the Avant-Garde Movement

During the interwar period, Romanian literature was deeply affected by modernism, which sought to break away from traditional forms and explore new ways of expressing individual consciousness, urbanization, and the complexities of modern life (Manasia 2020: 6). The avant-garde movement, which was particularly strong in Romania, reflected radical innovations in literature, often challenging conventions of narrative and structure.

Key figures:

- **Urmuz** (1883–1923) – One of the most important figures of Romanian avant-garde literature, known for his absurd and nonsensical short prose works. His writings, which often dealt with the breakdown of language and traditional literary forms, had a strong influence on the Romanian absurdist literature.
- **Marin Sorescu** and **Gellu Naum** were also active in the avant-garde movement.

2. The Rise of Symbolism and Expressionism

Romanian literature was heavily influenced by European movements like Symbolism and Expressionism during the interwar period. These movements sought to explore the inner world of human emotions, desires, and subconscious through symbolism, often using distorted or exaggerated images to convey deeper meanings.

Key figures:



- **George Bacovia** (1881–1957) – A prominent poet associated with Symbolism, known for his melancholy, gloomy, and introspective works. Bacovia's poetry, such as "*Plumb*" (Lead), often reflects themes of isolation, despair, and a sense of existential weight.
- **Ion Barbu** (1895–1961) – A mathematician and poet, Barbu's works are characterized by intricate symbolism and complex imagery, blending mathematics with poetic form.

3. Nationalism and Traditionalism

At the same time, the interwar period saw a significant revival of Romanian nationalism in literature. Writers and intellectuals sought to explore and celebrate Romania's cultural heritage, its folklore, and its rural life. This movement was often associated with the rise of conservative and nationalist political ideologies.

Key figures:

- **Mihail Sadoveanu** (1880–1961) – Known for his epic novels set in rural Romania, Sadoveanu's works celebrated the traditional peasant life and explored national identity. His most famous work, "*Baltagul*" (The Sword), is a powerful narrative about justice, honor, and tradition in rural Romania.
- **Liviu Rebreanu** (1885–1944) – Rebreanu's novels, such as "*Ion*", are considered essential in Romanian literature. They examine the lives of rural people, their struggles with social structures, and the tensions between modernity and tradition.

4. The Literary Journals and the Role of Intellectuals

During this period, the interwar Romanian intellectual scene was also deeply shaped by influential literary journals and periodicals that allowed writers to engage with contemporary social and political issues. Journals such as "*Contemporanul*" and "*Vremea*" played a crucial role in promoting modernist and nationalist ideas.

- **Eugen Lovinescu** (1881–1943) – A literary critic and historian, Lovinescu was an advocate for modernism and played a key role in shaping Romanian literary criticism. His journal, "*Viața Românească*", was instrumental in the development of modern Romanian literature.

5. The Influence of Foreign Literature

Romanian writers during this period were heavily influenced by European trends (Manasia 2016: 26). Many were familiar with the works of French, German, and Russian writers, and sought to integrate these influences into their own works. The influence of French symbolists like Baudelaire and Mallarmé was especially prominent, as well as the Russian revolutionary literature.

6. Social Realism and Political Literature

In the later years of the interwar period, social realism began to gain prominence, especially as left-wing ideologies became more visible in Romania. Literature became a tool for political expression, with writers addressing issues such as class struggle, the rights of the working class, and the social implications of industrialization, and "social prejudices" (A-M DUDĂU, 1/2025, 129).

CONCLUSION

In the interwar period, Romanian literature underwent a process of intense diversification and experimentation. From the exploration of modernist aesthetics to the revival of nationalism and traditionalism, this period was a fertile time for literary production, characterized by a complex interplay of national identity, modernism, and political ideology. Many of the themes and stylistic innovations from this period continue to resonate in Romanian literature today.



The interwar period in Romania was a large fresco (A-M DUDĂU, 1/2025, 131) of one of contrasts—marked by both cultural flourishing and political instability, economic growth and deep social inequality. The expansion of Romania’s borders following World War I brought new opportunities and challenges, and the country struggled to establish a stable democratic system amidst rising extremism and authoritarianism.

Despite the challenges, the interwar period laid the foundations for Romania’s modern identity, with significant contributions to art, literature, and intellectual life. However, the political and social divisions of the time ultimately paved the way for the establishment of a communist regime after World War II. The image of Romanian society in this period is one of complexity—caught between tradition and modernity, unity and division, hope and despair.



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