

ENGL 7/8296, Studies in the British Novel:
Modernism, Then and Now
Carey Mickalites

Modernism in literature and the arts constituted an often radical response to local and global transformations, upheavals, and catastrophes: World Wars, the rise and fall of empires, economic depression, accelerated growth in mass communications and spectacular forms of representation (radio, cinema, advertising), new theories of psychology and society, to name but a few. As a revolutionizing aesthetic form in its own right, the modern British novel was no exception. The authors we'll read variously saw Victorian and Edwardian fiction as rigidly conventional and sought to challenge its formal assumptions by expanding what the novel form might be capable of doing. In addressing several major works, we will take up innovations that include impressionism, the literary art of visual surfaces, experiments in the *Bildungsroman*, the radical renewal of realism's possibilities, and other influential aesthetic designs on what it means to live in the modern world. As that suggests, modernists often straddled a belief in the social autonomy of literature on the one hand, and a critical engagement with the material world on the other. This tension will be one of our recurring themes throughout the seminar. And we will conclude by looking at an example of twenty-first century fiction that makes a self-conscious return to modernist experiment in the wake of a once fashionable postmodernism.

Some of our guiding questions might include: How is the impressionism of Conrad and Ford a strangely appropriate way to represent imperial capitalism? How does Joyce refashion the *Bildungsroman* such that the self is a product of narrative style (rather than the other way around)? How does Lewis's fiction advocate for a theory of a modernist art of surfaces rather than subjective depth, and how is that an argument against the excesses of impressionism and mass culture? How does Woolf revitalize realism with her experimental designs on consciousness and the everyday, and how does that bear out a critique of empire and patriarchy? Why does the apparent exhaustion of early modernist experimentation lead writers as different as Beckett and Rhys to develop comically apocalyptic late-modernist styles and modes of subjectivity? And, in light of that exhaustion, why do contemporary writers like McEwan seem compelled to write in a by-now familiar modernist style?

Primary Works:

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*
Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier*
James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*
Wyndham Lewis, *Tarr*
Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*
Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight*
Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*
Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

Secondary readings (provided) might include Jesse Matz's work on Impressionism, Andrew Goldstone on modernist autonomy, Justus Nieland on the weird social affects of modernism, as well as examples of art and cultural criticism from the modernist period itself.