

ENGL 7/8291: Modern British Novel
Spring 2016
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British Modernism: Literary Experimentation and Social Critique
(1900 – 1940)

This course takes a two-pronged approach to modernist British fiction. We'll read a range of novels (and shorter prose pieces) that develop new and experimental styles and forms of literary expression. At the same time, we will examine those aesthetic developments as attempts to critically understand or challenge the social and political conditions in which they took shape.

The authors we'll read variously saw Victorian and Edwardian fiction as stale and rigidly conventional, and sought to break away from its forms and their underlying assumptions regarding the capacity of language to represent "reality," the linearity of time, a privileging of consciousness and rationality over the unconscious, as well as the regulating functions of social mores. As that last phrase suggests, aesthetic experimentation in the period (concerned with "how" literature works) responds to a rapidly changing social, political, intellectual, and material landscape.

Questions to guide our thinking might thus include: How is the impressionism of Conrad and Ford a strangely appropriate way to represent imperial disillusionment and the uncanny, unpredictable forces of investment capitalism? How does Joyce refashion the *Bildungsroman* such that the self is a product of narrative style (rather than the other way around)? Why do Lewis and Barnes see the equation of humans and animals as comic? How and why does Woolf experiment with a transgender literary imagination to challenge a long history of English patriarchy? How do writers as diverse as Beckett and Rhys express a late-modernist sense of exhaustion following the proliferation of new forms and styles by the previous generation?

Primary Works:

(Note: Most of the primary works for the course are considered canonical, and are often found on syllabuses and comprehensive exam reading lists.)

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*
Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier*
James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*
Wyndham Lewis, *The Wild Body*
Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*
Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*
Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*
Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight*

*Possible Secondary work (excerpts from):

Jesse Matz, on *Impressionism*
Edward Comentale, on *the Avant Garde and British Modernism*
Justus Nieland, *Feeling Modern*

*I will circulate additional theoretical and critical materials electronically.