

ENGL 7/8291: Modern British Novel
Spring 2016
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British Modernism: Literary Experiment and Social Critique
(1900 – 1950)

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

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 bourgeois social mores. As that last phrase suggests, aesthetic experimentation (concerned with "how" literature works) in the period 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 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 modernist fiction produce its own theory of modernist art, and how is it an argument against the excesses of impressionism and mass culture? How and why does Woolf experiment with a transgender literary imagination to challenge a long history of English patriarchy? How is Waugh's return to realism (as a mode of comic satire) a version of anti-modernism? Why does the apparent exhaustion of early modernist experimentation lead writers as diverse as Beckett and Rhys to develop radically new late-modernist styles and modes of subjectivity?

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, *Orlando*
Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies*
Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight*
Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*

*Possible Secondary Work:

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

I will also electronically circulate critical work by Conrad and Ford, selections from the avant garde journal *Blast*, and other materials.