

The Modern Period in British Literature

~1901 to ~1939

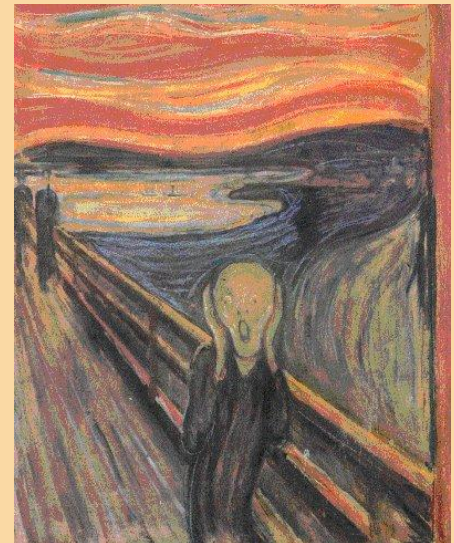
but who's certain about these things?

“beyond the Pale”

- Literally means outside of “civilized” English enclave in medieval Dublin
- Metaphorically means standing outside of conventional boundaries (law, behavior, class, gender, etc.)
- Symbolically represents literary modernism—art going **beyond boundaries** of thought, style, propriety, genre, etc.

Alienation and exile

- Many of the great Modernist writers were **outsiders** (Irish, immigrants, expatriates, exiles): Joyce, Eliot, Lawrence, Conrad
- Sense of **alienation** and outcast status from mainstream, middle-class, late Victorian British values—
more doubt creeps in
- Cultural “chip on the shoulder”



Sources of anxiety

- Death of Victoria, ineffective Edwardianism, outbreak of World War I
- Warfare: WMDs, killing from distance and from air, shell shock, 8% of British population killed or wounded
- Psychology: understanding and accepting that not all minds are 'normal' and that all identities are constructed—we are ALL counterfeiting.
- Science: increasing evidence of evolution, new physics, “uncertainty principle,” “relativity”
- Religion: old answers don't seem to fit new and uncertain times. Nietzsche: “God is dead.”

The War

- England in debt
- Horror and impersonality of war
- Class dynamic shifted as lower classes took on more during war
- Women empowered
- Post-war desolation, depression, enervation—the “Lost Generation”



“The Butcher’s Bill”

Country	Men mobilised	Killed	Wounded	POW's + missing	Total casualties	casualties in % of men mobilised
Russia	12 million	1.7mill	4.9mill	2.5mill	9.15mill	76.3
France	8.4 mill	1.3mill	4.2mill	537,000	6.1mill	73.3
GB + Empire	8.9mill	908,000	2mill	191,000	3.1mill	35.8
Italy	5.5mill	650,000	947,000	600,000	2.1mill	39
USA	4.3mill	126,000	234,000	4,500	350,000	8

Two views

The Soldier

*If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.*

*And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.*

--Rupert Brooke



Wilfred Owen, “Dulce et Decorum Est”



Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed
through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame, all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! — An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime. —
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin,
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs
Bitter as the cud

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, —
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,

**The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
*Pro patria mori.***

Changing Assumptions

- Women's **suffrage**—campaign to give women independent political existence
- Slipping away of colonial empire and consequent reduction of British influence and power
- Irish Rebellion (1916)
- Class struggles after the War



People were dying for their revolutions...



POBLAcht NA H EIREANN.
THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT
OF THE
IRISH REPUBLIC
TO THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND.

IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN: In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.

Having organised and trained her manhood through her secret revolutionary organisation, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and through her open military organisations, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, having patiently perfected her discipline, having resolutely waited for the right moment to reveal itself, she now seizes that moment, and, supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe, but relying in the first on her own strength, she strikes in full confidence of victory.

We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people. In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty; six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on that fundamental right and asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State, and we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the cause of its freedom, of its welfare, and of its exaltation among the nations.

The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women, the Provisional Government, hereby constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.

We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, whose blessing we invoke upon our arms, and we pray that no one who serves that cause will dishonour it by cowardice. The Irish nation must, by its valour, to sacrifice themselves for the freedom to which it is called.



Literary modernism goes beyond the Pale...



- “Make it new!”
- “Make it different!”
- “Make it difficult!”

“Make it new!”

- **Resentment** at close-mindedness and complacency of late Victorian culture
- Increasing **fragmentation** and insecurities lead to **cynicism** and distrust of “pat” solutions—doubts no longer resolved by faith
- Nature replaced with the impersonalism of cities, the **sterility** of wastelands...
- Sense that the “givens” are no longer good, that the moorings have been eroded away
- **Imagist poetry** instead of Victorian expansiveness
- “The Second Coming” instead of “Ulysses”

or to replace the Victorian style that **Joyce** described as “a namby-pamby jammy marmalady drawersy (alto-là) style with effects of incense, mariolatry, masturbation, stewed cockles, painter’s palette, chitchat, circumlocutions, etc., etc.”

With Eliot’s

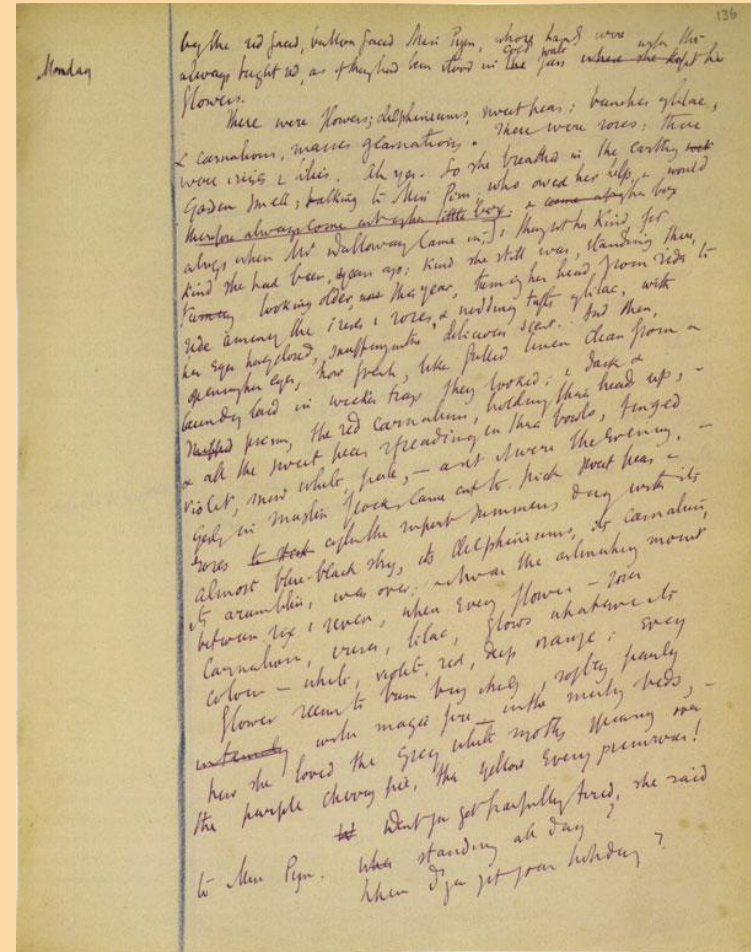
“The perpetual task of poetry is to make all things new. Not necessarily to make new things.”

“Make it different!”

- Emergence of *vers libre* (free verse) to replace prescribed metric forms
- Attack on and dismantling of Victorian literary proprieties: language, sex, form, even typography (see *Blast!*)
- “Anxiety of influence”—effect of tradition on individual writers, trying to get out from under the perceived weight of the past

It's hard to say what genres are typical

- The short story and the novel
- The critical essay
- The manifesto
- The imagist poem
- A kind of narrative poem



“Make it difficult!”

- Sense that “**intellectual**” literature had to be different from that which pleased the masses—takes Swift’s **highbrow/lowbrow** distinction even further. Modernists believed that art had to be perceived as elitist and ‘hard’ to have value.
- Bring in **anthropology, mythology, psychology, science**—challenge readers’ knowledge and expectations
- “**Stream of consciousness**”—attempts to recreate the thinking of characters in works, to find a literary equivalent for how minds work