

ENGLISH LITERATURE – 20th Century

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20th CENTURY

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20th Century

Background

The Twentieth Century represents a break from the preceding centuries, not only because of the emergence of globally-encompassing total war, but because the technologies developed during this time made human tampering with fate, human history, and nature a matter of the touch of a button. Sweeping political change and social movements characterize the twentieth century, and they provide much of the underlying tension and motivation in the literary works of the time. While one might imagine that the century's preoccupation with self-awareness would lead to evidence that consciousness of self was, in fact, heightened, the events of the period would argue just the opposite to be true. Consumerism and materialism co-opt self-consciousness by reducing spirituality itself to a commodity. At least these were the insights of the late twentieth century. Perhaps they were simply the self-evident truths of a planet of Peter Pans who use the promise of technology to gain power of nature in order to provoke disruption – not just in the status quo, but in processes that were, in the past, known to be inviolable law (of nature, of humanity).

Many of the highest literary creations of the twentieth century were powerfully contorted by the distresses of society, political conflict, and personal questioning of the meaning of existence. These witnesses to our extreme social discomfort would be such as Beckett, Yeats tormented by the issues of Irish English conflict, Eliot writing out the loss of faith in a small apocalyptic epic, Hardy and Lawrence, very differently assassinating the mediocrity of their own time. The early part of the century, of course, saw the high bloom of Modernism, aspects of which we have already reviewed: the work of Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust in France, Thomas Mann in Germany. Modernism, an aesthetic substitute for the lost harmony cosmos of Alexander Pope or John Donne, acquired through art the simulacrum of a better world no longer believed in.

Discussion Questions

1. Beckett and Joyce represent two opposite styles of writing. Both Irishmen—but consummate writers of English—the one is stripped down and absurdist, while the other is prolix, and brimming over with allusive meanings and implications. Would you say that these are two representative ways of responding to the complexity of the twentieth century world climate? Which style seems to you to do its expressive work better?
2. In her novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, and elsewhere, Virginia Woolf puts into play her view of the fractured and pulsive nature of human perception. Consciousness is broken down into what we know is true; we are constantly alert, in innumerable registers, to many coordinate sensations, from which we pass from one to another without rest, until death. Does Woolf's project, to write out this state of consciousness, seem to you peculiarly part of the self-awareness of the twentieth century literary mind?
3. Yeats and Eliot, at various points in their writing, pay tribute to the aristocratic ideals which are fading in their century. Yeats is attracted to the pride and dignity of some of the old families of Ireland. Eliot pays tribute to the beauties of a class society in which everyone knows, and values, his place—the world view of Alexander Pope. Among the major twentieth century English writers do you see any strong tendency toward the opposite view from that of Yeats and Eliot? Does the Marxist perception, of a classless society and human economic equality, play any part in the major literature of the century?

James Joyce

The significance of James Joyce. James Joyce (1882-1941) carried the novel form into the twentieth century, and in so doing renovated the English language, and the sense of the global complexity of twentieth century society. After Joyce, fiction could not revert to the more innocent narratorial form of Dickens or Austen.

The Life of James Joyce. James Joyce was born in the Dublin suburb of Rathgar, as the eldest of ten surviving children. His family was at that point relatively prosperous, having inherited from a lime and cork business, and not long after Joyce's birth, his father having been made a rate collector for the city of Dublin, the family removed to an upscale suburb. That situation, however, was to prove short lived, for Joyce's father, though talented, had difficulty earning a living, or controlling his drinking, which was the ultimate reason for the family's slide into poverty. Consequently the family moved from home to home, each one successively shabbier. Joyce studied voraciously to break from what he considered to be the intellectual shabbiness of Dublin. This was not easy, though he did indeed manage to acquire an education: first at Clongowes Wood College, a Jesuit boarding school, then at Belvedere College, Jesuit also, and finally at University College, Dublin, which he entered in 1898. Dublin, however, soon lost all charm for Joyce, and in 1902 he moved to Paris, intending to study medicine, and though he found it too difficult, following medical lectures in French, he was from that time on essentially a foreigner to Ireland. In rejecting Dublin, he embraced continental Europe, and sought to shape his mind into a new way of thinking, and in doing so to reinvent literature. To do so required a fervent and unwavering belief in his own genius, which his circle of friends found trying at times. For over a decade he taught English in Trieste, and for twenty years, at the invitation of Ezra Pound, he lived in Paris.

The Work of James Joyce. Joyce's first significant work, *Dubliners*, dates from 1914, and concludes with the story 'The Dead,' one of his finest pre-experimental short stories. His greatest work, *Ulysses*, was first published in book form on February 2, 1922, on Joyce's fortieth birthday. The book contains innovations in organization, style and narrative technique that have influenced countless other writers; Joyce wove together mythical themes from many cultures, explored the sexual subconscious with what was then great daring, and stretched verbal and syntactical ingenuity almost to the breaking point; so that it is, perhaps, no great wonder that Joyce had difficulty with publication, his novel having been judged obscene by the U.S. Post Office, and banned from circulation in England and the United States. Eventually, bans were lifted and the book circulated more freely, public sentiment turning sharply in favor of the text. Joyce's last major work, *Finnegans Wake* (1939), took him fourteen years to write, and strives to encapsulate a world history in the dreams of a certain publican named Humphrey Earwicker. In that last novel Joyce presses the power of verbal daring, allows metaphor, pun, allusion, erudite or scatological reference to explode, and to this day remains a rich mine for interpretation and fascination.

Evaluation of James Joyce. Joyce brought language out as the center of the verbal creative act, and though he always had a distinct narrative to tell, dislocated as it sometimes seems, it was the way he told that narrative, cunning, punning, that made his work a new threshold for literary development in the West.

Reading

Primary source reading

James Joyce, *Ulysses*, London, 2010. Penguin edition.

Secondary source reading

Ellman, Richard, *James Joyce*, Oxford, 1982).

Further reading

Kenner, Hugh, *Joyce's Voices*, London, 1978.

Suggested paper topics

1. Gabriel, in 'The Dead', is a fully developed form of the character Joyce imagined as himself. In Joyce's first published set of tales, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914), one Stephen Daedalus, later a major figure in *Ulysses*, assumes the personality which will become Gabriel's: detached, wistful, forced to learn his own artistic mission as an observer of life. That is the personality that will make of Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses* a fit base for explorations, through a language made up of languages, puns, and allusions to the whole frame of human history. As

the title of that epic search indicates, Homer's Odysseus (Ulysses, through Latin) is the final everyman, virtuous and vulgar in all the essential mixtures, but at the same time an observer, like Gabriel and Stephen. The Gabriel personality will tightly link 'The Dead' to *Ulysses*. *How does Joyce make use of Homer's work?*

2. Is literature a direct reflection of its time? Or has literature a history that is basically independent of its time? (I recommend a look at Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), as an aid to understanding how literature is felt and created from within the practitioner standing in a long line of predecessors.) The spur of this question, in the case of Joyce, is *where did he come from? Whom did he make use of in his writing? What is the unique contribution of his own imagination?*

Excerpt <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4300/4300.txt>

He added in a preacher's tone: --For this, O dearly beloved, is the genuine Christine: body and soul and blood and ouns. Slow music, please. Shut your eyes, gents. One moment. A little trouble about those white corpuscles. Silence, all. He peered sideways up and gave a long slow whistle of call, then paused awhile in rapt attention, his even white teeth glistening here and there with gold points. Chrysostomos. Two strong shrill whistles answered through the calm. --Thanks, old chap, he cried briskly. That will do nicely. Switch off the current, will you? He skipped off the gunrest and looked gravely at his watcher, gathering about his legs the loose folds of his gown. The plump shadowed face and sullen oval jowl recalled a prelate, patron of arts in the middle ages. A pleasant smile broke quietly over his lips. --The mockery of it! he said gaily. Your absurd name, an ancient Greek! He pointed his finger in friendly jest and went over to the parapet, laughing to himself. Stephen Dedalus stepped up, followed him wearily halfway and sat down on the edge of the gunrest, watching him still as he propped his mirror on the parapet, dipped the brush in the bowl and lathered cheeks and neck. Buck Mulligan's gay voice went on. --My name is absurd too: Malachi Mulligan, two dactyls. But it has a Hellenic ring, hasn't it? Tripping and sunny like the buck himself. We must go to Athens. Will you come if I can get the aunt to fork out twenty quid? He laid the brush aside and, laughing with delight, cried: --Will he come? The jejune jesuit! Ceasing, he began to shave with care. --Tell me, Mulligan, Stephen said quietly. --Yes, my love?

Thomas Hardy

The Life of Thomas Hardy. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was born in Higher Brockhampton, east of Dorchester, in Dorset. His father was a stonemason and builder. Hardy was basically home schooled by his mother, for the first years of his life. Then he went on to the Academy for Young Gentlemen in Dorchester, where he picked up a reasonable knowledge of Latin. At the age of eleven, he left school, for lack of tuition money, and apprenticed himself to an architect. (This period of practical work was to resonate out widely into his mature novels, in which architectural structures play a large symbolic role.) In 1862 Hardy entered King's College, London, in order to professionalize his skills at architecture. At the same time, however, Hardy was finding himself surer of his literary skills, and even vocation, and was beginning to earn enough, from his writing, to justify a change in career. His career decision, to leave architecture for writing, led Hardy down the path of large fate-filled novels in which the English landscape played a major role. In that landscape the forces of nature proved *powerful* antagonists to humanity, as did the human prove to himself, when from within him fate time and time again turned against him. Hardy composed his dark Wessex novels throughout the later 19th century, then in his last three decades turned increasingly toward lyric poetry. In his last volume of poetry, *Poems of 1912-13*, he celebrated the passing of his first wife, the true love of his life.

The Work of Thomas Hardy. In his own time Hardy was especially recognized as a powerful novelist, whose quite bleak view of life was perfectly set in the gloomy landscapes of what he—summoning up the Anglo Saxon name of a tract of several western countries—called Wessex. Across the bleak stretches of *Wessex*, stony and hilly and half cultivated, Hardy's characters tend to trudge through their difficult agricultural lives, a wary eye forever out for the rough dictates of fate, the depression of an uncertain market, and the age old weight of the human condition. A great fictional world is built out of these severe ingredients, and embodies itself in absorbing works such as: *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), or *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Hardy's poetry, which is equally bleak in outlook—penetrated by the agnostic thinking of Darwin and the geologists—seemed to Hardy his own greatest skill. His poetic procedure is often metrically old fashioned, but strangely complex and realized. Here is the beginning of 'A Broken Appointment':

*You did not come,
And marching Time drew on, and wore me numb.
Yet less for loss of your dear presence there
Than that I thus found lacking in your make
That high compassion which can overbear
Reluctance for pure lovingkindness' sake.*

Hardy's poetry compels us with a tone which, though largely conventional in prosody, stops us with harsh chunks of thought, rough hewn words (*Powerfuller*, in 'Hap') and a consistently bleak world view which sharply marks itself off from Hopkins and the earlier Romantics. Hardy also looks closely at the harsh realities of social existence, with a sense for the bitter in the daily. What poem could capture the paradoxical pain of virtue lost more spittingly than 'The Ruined Maid'? This dramatic dialogue plays ironically, and bitterly, on the social outcasting of members who break the moral conventions of the community, but are hiddenly admired—for some of the perks that go with crossing the line.

Reading

Primary source reading

Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, ed. Wilson, Kindle book, 2003.

Secondary source reading

Gatrell, Simon, *Hardy and the Proper Study of Mankind*, London, 1993.

Further reading

Pinion, J. B., *Hardy the Writer: Surveys and Assessments*, Basingstoke, 1990.

Suggested paper topics

1. How does Hardy's work reflect the post WWI world? Is his pessimism and dark tone a reflection of his world, or simply part of his personality? How does that tone come out in poetry? Is he a better craftsman in prose fiction or poetry?
2. Can you see Hardy's architectural background in some of his fiction? Does it appear in the structure of an entire work, or in a preoccupation with structures, within his work?

Excerpt http://fiction.eserver.org/novels/mayor_of_casterbridge.html

One evening of late summer, before the nineteenth century had reached one-third of its span, a young man and woman, the latter carrying a child, were approaching the large village of Weydon-Priors, in Upper Wessex, on foot. They were plainly but not ill clad, though the thick hoar of dust which had accumulated on their shoes and garments from an obviously long journey lent a disadvantageous shabbiness to their appearance just now.

The man was of fine figure, swarthy, and stern in aspect; and he showed in profile a facial angle so slightly inclined as to be almost perpendicular. He wore a short jacket of brown corduroy, newer than the remainder of his suit, which was a fustian waistcoat with white horn buttons, breeches of the same, tanned leggings, and a straw hat overlaid with black glazed canvas. At his back he carried by a looped strap a rush basket, from which protruded at one end the crutch of a hay-knife, a wimble for hay-bonds being also visible in the aperture. His measured, springless walk was the walk of the skilled countryman as distinct from the desultory shambling of the general labourer; while in the turn and plant of each foot there was, further, a dogged and cynical indifference personal to himself, showing its presence even in the regularly interchanging fustian folds, now in the left leg, now in the right, as he paced along.

What was really peculiar, however, in this couple's progress, and would have attracted the attention of any casual observer otherwise disposed to overlook them, was the perfect silence they preserved. They walked side by side in such a way as to suggest afar off the low, easy, confidential chat of people full of reciprocity; but on closer view it could be discerned that the man was reading, or pretending to read, a ballad sheet which he kept before his eyes with some difficulty by the hand that was passed through the basket strap. Whether this apparent cause were the real cause, or whether it were an assumed one to escape an intercourse that would have been irksome to him, nobody but himself could have said precisely; but his taciturnity was unbroken, and the woman enjoyed no society whatever from his presence. Virtually she walked the highway alone, save for the child she bore.

Lawrence, D.H.

The Importance of D. H. Lawrence. Poet, painter, novelist, cultural critic, D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930) was an exceptionally acute critic of the problems with bourgeois modern society, and a powerful counteragent to the too self-conscious literary world of Joyce or Proust, with their narratological experiments. His novels and poetry introduced, into western literature, a new rediscovery of the pagan world in its full richness.

The Early Life of D.H. Lawrence. D. H. Lawrence was born in the mining community of Eastwood, in Nottinghamshire. He was the fourth child of John Lawrence, a barely literate miner, and of a beloved mother, who, though formerly a grade school teacher, had been forced by family poverty to do manual work in a lace factory. Consequently Lawrence was obliged to begin his education at the local elementary school, Beauvale Board School, where he studied from 1891-98. Having proven himself an excellent student, he was the first graduate of the school to be given a scholarship leading to further work at Nottingham High School. (While at the High School, Lawrence made friends with a school chum, with whom he shared books and enthusiasm for books: Lawrence's substitute for the literate family background in which many British writers were embedded.) From 1902-06 Lawrence enrolled at the University College of Nottinghamshire. Throughout his educational development, Lawrence was writing poems and short stories, some of the latter of which were to morph into Lawrence's major novels.

Lawrence's literary career. Much of Lawrence's literary career was carried on while he was traveling. (By 1919 he had essentially abandoned England, and set off on travels, in Europe, Australia, The United States, and Mexico, which were congenial to his imagination, and freeing from an England he was coming to hate, especially for its squalor and pettiness.) In 1912 he married Frieda Weekley, née Richtofen, then the wife of one of Lawrence's Professors; the two left England in 1919, heading for Germany, then Italy, then throughout a lifetime marriage to those parts of the world in which Lawrence felt he could still discover something of the primal beat of humanity.

D. H. Lawrence's Work. The work of D.H. Lawrence from the beginning strikes out on a tone of great personal independence, willed freedom from the hyper sophisticated modernism of Joyce and Proust. Lawrence is out to discover the true presence of existence in his writing, and attempts to do so in vivid poetry, like 'Snake,' of which the following is an excerpt:

*He reached down from a fissure in the earth-wall in the gloom
And trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down, over the edge of
the stone trough
And rested his throat upon the stone bottom,
And where the water had dripped from the tap, in a small clearness,
He sipped with his straight mouth,
Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack long body,
Silently.*

In a long succession of novels—*The White Peacock*, 1910; *Sons and Lovers*, 1913; *The Rainbow*, 1915; or *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, 1928—Lawrence works the territory of passion, the powerful urges of sexuality emerging from the earth itself, the shallowness of civilization and its conventions—and occupies a position, in the literary culture of his time, of pornographer or at best scandal maker. The legal manoeuvres surrounding the attempted publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which was long considered obscene and unprintable, make the point forcefully. Could Lawrence have imagined that the freeing of the passions, which he promoted, would in our time turn into the indifference of 'sex and violence.'

Reading

Primary source reading

D.H.Lawrence, *Sea and Sardinia*, ed. Kainins, Kindle edition, 1999.

Secondary source reading

Meyers, Jeffrey, *D.H. Lawrence: A Biography*, London, 1990.

Further reading

Bell, Michael, *D. H. Lawrence: Language and Being*, Cambridge, 1991.

Suggested paper topics

1. Does D. H. Lawrence's work seem 'explicit and shocking' today, as it did in its own time? Your answer in the negative will, naturally, require explaining. What has changed in literary tastes, and cultural tolerance, since Lawrence's time?
2. What do you think of Lawrence's desire to return to simpler and more archaic life forms, where the blood flows strongly and sexually in the veins? Can you see why the guardians of social order were shocked by his perspective? Can you see why he was aggressively resentful toward the work of Joyce and Marcel Proust?

Excerpt <http://www.gutenberg.net.au/ebooks01/0100181.txt>

Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen. This was more or less Constance Chatterley's position. The war had brought the roof down over her head. And she had realized that one must live and learn. She married Clifford Chatterley in 1917, when he was home for a month on leave. They had a month's honeymoon. Then he went back to Flanders: to be shipped over to England again six months later, more or less in bits. Constance, his wife, was then twenty-three years old, and he was twenty-nine. His hold on life was marvellous. He didn't die, and the bits seemed to grow together again. For two years he remained in the doctor's hands. Then he was pronounced a cure, and could return to life again, with the lower half of his body, from the hips down, paralysed for ever. This was in 1920. They returned, Clifford and Constance, to his home, Wragby Hall, the family 'seat'. His father had died, Clifford was now a baronet, Sir Clifford, and Constance was Lady Chatterley. They came to start housekeeping and married life in the rather forlorn home of the Chatterleys on a rather inadequate income. Clifford had a sister, but she had departed. Otherwise there were no near relatives. The elder brother was dead in the war. Crippled for ever, knowing he could never have any children, Clifford came home to the smoky Midlands to keep the Chatterley name alive while he could. He was not really downcast. He could wheel himself about in a wheeled chair, and he had a bath-chair with a small motor attachment, so he could drive himself slowly round the garden and into the fine melancholy park, of which he was really so proud, though he pretended to be flippant about it. Having suffered so much, the capacity for suffering had to some extent left him. He remained strange and bright and cheerful, almost, one might say, chirpy, with his ruddy, healthy-looking face, and his pale-blue, challenging bright eyes. His shoulders were broad and strong, his hands were very strong. He was expensively dressed, and wore handsome neckties from Bond Street. Yet still in his face one saw the watchful look, the slight vacancy of a cripple. He had so very nearly lost his life, that what remained was wonderfully precious to him. It was obvious in the anxious brightness of his eyes, how proud he was, after the great shock, of being alive. But he had been so much hurt that something inside him had perished, some of his feelings had gone. There was a blank of insentience. Constance, his wife, was a ruddy, country-looking girl with soft brown hair and sturdy body, and slow movements, full of unusual energy. She had big, wondering eyes, and a soft mild voice, and seemed just to have come from her native village. It was not so at all. Her father was the once well-known R. A., old Sir Malcolm Reid. Her mother had been one of the cultivated Fabians in the palmy, rather pre-Raphaelite days. Between artists and cultured socialists, Constance and her sister Hilda had had what might be called an aesthetically unconventional upbringing. They had been taken to Paris and Florence and Rome to breathe in art, and they had been taken also in the other direction, to the Hague and Berlin, to great Socialist conventions, where the speakers spoke in every civilized tongue, and no one was abashed.

Woolf, Virginia

The upbringing of Virginia Woolf. Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was born in London, into a highly literate family, crowded with siblings from Virginia's parents' previous marriages. Virginia's father was Sir Leslie Stephen, an accomplished academician and scholar, who founded the to this day prestigious *Dictionary of National Biography*. Virginia and her sister were on the whole educated at home, and though Virginia resented that her brothers were sent away for schooling, later to University, while she remained at home, still she seems to have enjoyed her robust and stimulating family. (She remembered particularly the pleasure of family vacations to St. Ives, Cornwall, when the whole group would be creatively at ease by the sea shore.) In 1895, however, Virginia's mother died, and Virginia suffered the first of what were called her nervous breakdowns. She was devastated. In 1904 this trauma was to be repeated, with equal force, by Virginia's father's death, which left her in collapse. What we may tend to consider bipolar disease, today, may have had another explanation, childhood sexual abuse; though this interpretation is questionable.

Education and career life. Virginia's higher education consisted of correspondence courses offered by The Ladies' Department of King's College, a reasonable sprinkling of language and history. It must be said, though, that the truly educational driver in Virginia's life was the family's removal to Bloomsbury, shortly after Sir Leonard's death. Once in that new social milieu, Virginia found herself surrounded by artists and writers—but also by thinkers like Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, John Maynard Keynes, the economist. Her mind unfolded not only into the creative potential of language, but into the issues of man in the universe. On a more fleshly unfolding, this was a time not only for the marriage of Virginia Woolf, to Leonard Woolf (in 1912), but for Virginia's love affair with the classy writer, Vita Sackville-West. The Bloomsbury group, as the leading figures in this cultural community were called, were distinctively liberal, in political and moral terms.

The Work of Virginia Woolf. Virginia Woolf is best known for her novels, which figure as part of the Modernist movement—fellow writers being Mann, Joyce, Proust—but she comes at her world descriptions with a distinctive slant. For one thing Virginia Woolf sees the world, quite naturally, from a woman's perspective, both through the lens of women characters and from her own standpoint, as background narrator. Already in her early essay on 'Modern Fiction' she heralds a new sensibility in the writers of her time. The narrator and the personae of her characters are no longer viewed as substantial shaping forces, but rather as composites of sense experience and flow. (Woolf does not work on the assumption of an integral character.) This optic makes itself vivid in such great later novels as *To the Lighthouse* (1927), in which the shimmering reflections of light on the sea reinforce the modes of flickering sense experience which appear to construct the personal universes of the main characters. The bias toward her own gender, as the model for perception, quite naturally leads Virginia Woolf into complex presentations of women as literature. This tendency is perhaps at its most noteworthy in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). The story concerns one day in the life of a woman of some social standing who is preparing a dinner party. In the course of the preparation her mind fantasizes every detail of the coming event, including the elaborate past histories of many of the guests to be, histories which blend into a wide ranging canvas/picture of British society before the First World War.

Reading

Primary source reading

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, London, 1990.

Secondary source reading

Clements, P. and Grundy, Isobel, eds. *Virginia Woolf: New Critical Essays*, London, 1983.

Further reading

Bell, Quentin, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography i: Virginia Stephen*, London, 1972.

Suggested paper topics

1. Both Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater subscribe to a philosophy of sensations and flux, and share—do you agree?—a view of the way an observer puts together some kind of visual whole, in writing. Are both of these writers fundamentally secular? Is there any aperture, in their writing, for a religiously transcendent perspective?

2. Does Virginia Woolf experiment fictionally as much as do Joyce and Proust? Is *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, a challenge to daily perception? Is it possible to construct a valid narrative out of elements of perception, as Virginia Woolf presents them in *To the Lighthouse*?

Excerpt <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0200331.txt>

He--for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it--was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters. It was the colour of an old football, and more or less the shape of one, save for the sunken cheeks and a strand or two of coarse, dry hair, like the hair on a cocoanut. Orlando's father, or perhaps his grandfather, had struck it from the shoulders of a vast Pagan who had started up under the moon in the barbarian fields of Africa; and now it swung, gently, perpetually, in the breeze which never ceased blowing through the attic rooms of the gigantic house of the lord who had slain him. Orlando's fathers had ridden in fields of asphodel, and stony fields, and fields watered by strange rivers, and they had struck many heads of many colours off many shoulders, and brought them back to hang from the rafters. So too would Orlando, he vowed. But since he was sixteen only, and too young to ride with them in Africa or France, he would steal away from his mother and the peacocks in the garden and go to his attic room and there lunge and plunge and slice the air with his blade. Sometimes he cut the cord so that the skull bumped on the floor and he had to string it up again, fastening it with some chivalry almost out of reach so that his enemy grinned at him through shrunk, black lips triumphantly. The skull swung to and fro, for the house, at the top of which he lived, was so vast that there seemed trapped in it the wind itself, blowing this way, blowing that way, winter and summer. The green arras with the hunters on it moved perpetually. His fathers had been noble since they had been at all. They came out of the northern mists wearing coronets on their heads. Were not the bars of darkness in the room, and the yellow pools which chequered the floor, made by the sun falling through the stained glass of a vast coat of arms in the window? Orlando stood now in the midst of the yellow body of an heraldic leopard. When he put his hand on the window-sill to push the window open, it was instantly coloured red, blue, and yellow like a butterfly's wing. Thus, those who like symbols, and have a turn for the deciphering of them, might observe that though the shapely legs, the handsome body, and the well-set shoulders were all of them decorated with various tints of heraldic light, Orlando's face, as he threw the window open, was lit solely by the sun itself. A more candid, sullen face it would be impossible to find. Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one! Never need she vex herself, nor he invoke the help of novelist or poet. From deed to deed, from glory to glory, from office to office he must go, his scribe following after, till they reach whatever seat it may be that is the height of their desire. Orlando, to look at, was cut out precisely for some such career. The red of the cheeks was covered with peach down; the down on the lips was only a little thicker than the down on the cheeks. The lips themselves were short and slightly drawn back over teeth of an exquisite and almond whiteness. Nothing disturbed the arrowy nose in its short, tense flight; the hair was dark, the ears small, and fitted closely to the head.

Samuel Beckett

The Life of Samuel Beckett. Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) was born near Dublin. He came from an ardent Anglican Church of Ireland family. His father was a very successful quantity surveyor, and the family lived in a comfortable town house with a tennis court, surrounded by green spaces, and walkways where Samuel used to walk and talk with his father. The tenor of Beckett's childhood seems to have been comfortable and creative. His first schooling was at Earlsford House School, a neighborhood play school; from there he graduated to Pontora Royal School, where his considerable skills at cricket began to declare themselves. From 1923-1927 Beckett studied at University College, Dublin, majoring in French, Spanish, and Italian, and proving to be a record winning cricketer. In the year after graduation he was contracted to teach English in the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris—where he made the acquaintance of James Joyce, whose research assistant he would soon be, working with the master on the recondite references of *Finnegans Wake*--and then the following year he returned to earn his M.A. in Dublin. In 1937, Beckett settled permanently in Paris, where he was to become a fixture of the literary culture of the city. He was at this time beginning his practice of writing in French, then translating his work into Irish-inflected English. His first works, *Proust* and *Murphy*, were published at this time. He is best-known for his plays, especially *Waiting for Godot* (1948), and *Endgame* (1957). Beckett focuses his dramatic work on fundamental questions of existence and nonexistence, the mind and the body; and in fighting with the French Resistance during the War—for which he received the *croix de guerre*—he proved the breadth of his commitment to the cause of a humanity, which he so often portrays bleakly. It was this complexity and humanity of vision which lay behind the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Beckett in 1969.

The Work of Samuel Beckett. Beckett, as noted, became not only a research assistant but a close friend of James Joyce, a fellow Irishman and writer. As their relationship developed, Beckett grew increasingly awed by Joyce's ability to synthesize vast ideas and references, until it occurred to Beckett, who was already well launched in his writing career, that his own path might be the polar opposite of Joyce's. Beckett's drive was ultimately to be toward minimalism and absurdism, as it became called, to reduce the immense proliferation of words, places, and things, which stud the long novels of Joyce, and to strip down plot and narrative to their essentials—a couple of old men talking about meaninglessness—as in *Waiting for Godot*—and speaking in language stripped to the barest essentials of communication. We can track this progression to the minimal through the increasingly austere, and fascinating of Beckett's plays: *Waiting for Godot* (1953), *Endgame* (1955), and *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958). These plays, like Beckett's fictions—*Murphy* (1938) or *Molloy* (1951)—were typically composed in either English or French (usually the case) and then translated into the other language, by Beckett. (Beckett's preference for French, as he explained, had a simple explanation: he wanted to write 'without style,' and that was easier for him in a language which was not his native language. In the end it is astonishing that Beckett was able to create, out of style-less language and minimalist plots, a set of texts and plays which is rivetingly interesting.

Reading

Primary source reading

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot; A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*, New York, 2011.

Secondary source reading

Pilling, John, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*, Cambridge, 1994.

Further reading

Knowlson, James, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, London 1996.

Suggested paper topics

1. Do you see a connection between Beckett's practice of writing in two languages, often translating himself from one to the other, and the 'minimalism' of his plays, which grow increasingly bare and stark? Does his bilingualism lead to a paring down of language and thought?
2. Beckett is a thinker, as well as a writer. On the surface his 'philosophy of life' may seem obvious. But is it? Are there elements of hope? Irony? And if so, what are they based on? Does his pessimism seem to you rooted in a particular tradition?

Excerpt http://archive.org/stream/samuelbeckett031321mbp/samuelbeckett031321mbp_djvu.txt

Beckett's patient concern with bicycles, amputees, battered hats, and the letter M; his connoisseurship of the immobilized hero; his preoccupation with footling questions which there isn't sufficient evidence to resolve; his humor of the short sentence; his Houdini-like virtuosity (by preference chained hand and foot, deprived of story, dialogue, locale) : these constitute a unique comic repertoire, like a European clown's. The antecedents of his plays are not in literature but to take a rare American example in Emmett Kelly's solemn determination to sweep a circle of light into a dustpan: a haunted man whose fidelity to an impossible task quite as if someone he desires to oblige had exacted it of him illuminates the dynamics of a tragic sense of duty. ("We are waiting for Godot to come Or for night to fall. We have kept our appointment and that's an end to that. We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?") The milieu of his novels bears a moral resemblance to that of the circus, where virtuosity to no end is the principle of life, where a thousand variations on three simple movements fill up the time between train and train, and the animals have merely to pace their cages to draw cries of admiring sympathy that ...

W. B. Yeats

The Importance of William Butler Yeats. William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), though Irish, proved to be the outstanding force in English language poetry in the twentieth century. He won the Nobel Prize for poetry, in 1922, and served two years as an Irish senator, in the last years of his life. We might say that his work constituted a major enlargement of the culture of English literature for an entire century.

The Life of William Butler Yeats. William Butler Yeats was born in Sandymount, County Dublin, but the family soon moved to the beautiful region of Sligo, which was to be the sympathetic cultural matrix of Yeats' upbringing. Both his father and mother inherited well, and the family was both prosperous and highly artistic. Yeats' father was a successful painter, and Yeats' siblings supported a creative atmosphere, which played a decisive role in the development of Yeats' own poetic sensibility. As an infant, in 1867, Yeats' family moved to England for a couple of years—to help the Father in his painting career—but moved back to Dublin. Yeats himself was then enrolled in Erasmus Smith High School—where his work was mediocre, his Latin tolerable but his spelling very bad. From 1884-86 Yeats was enrolled in an Art School—he too had vivid painting skills, though, oddly enough, he was tone deaf. In 1887 the family returned to England. (One sees, in this back and forth traveling, the genesis of the complex relation Yeats developed, toward Ireland and England. It has been said that a person is formed by the kind of world he/she lives in at the age of twenty. For Yeats, that period in the mid-eighties coincided with the strong push for Irish Home Rule, and for true independence from Britain; Yeats was deeply sensitive to the issues, and in a complex way a strong Irish Nationalist.) As he matured, Yeats found many of his best energies going into Irish culture, his increasingly subtle poems with historical richness, his founding—with Lady Gregory and others—of the Irish Literary Theater, his repeated efforts to win the Irish Nationalist Maud Gonne, for his wife.

The Work of William Butler Yeats. The early work of Yeats, in poetry, tended to a sentimental Irish Romanticism, drawing on Celtic mythology and nationalism. The soft lapping melodies of 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' (1890) show the young Yeats gifted at the writing of traditional verse, still far from his mature style.

*I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee;
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.
And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where
the cricket sings; There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.*

But by, say, 'The Second Coming,' 1920, Yeats turns his deep appreciation of mysticism, the apocalyptic, and social critique into powerful and complex lines:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

Much of the mystery of Yeats' greatness is embedded in these lines, whose tone is unrivalled in English poetry, except by Blake, when it comes to isolating the terror of an age and of the human condition.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats, ed. Finneran, New York, 1996.

Secondary source reading

Macrae, Alisdair, *W.B. Yeats: A Literary Life*, London, 1995.

Further reading

Foster, Roy, *W.B. Yeats: A Life, i. The Apprentice image, 1865-1914*, Oxford, 1997.

Suggested paper topics

1. Politicians and poets are often very different from one another. But is Yeats an exception? Does he know how to convert his political ardor into powerful poetry? How does he do it?
2. The poet W.H. Auden criticized Yeats for dabbling, throughout his life, in mysticism and the occult. To Auden that seemed a childish pursuit. Do you see to what uses Yeats put those concerns, in his poetry? What poetic resource do you see, in Yeats' personal mythology of the tower, pern, and gyre?

Excerpt <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/never-give-all-heart>

*Never give all the heart, for love
Will hardly seem worth thinking of
To passionate women if it seem
Certain, and they never dream
That it fades out from kiss to kiss;
For everything that's lovely is
But a brief, dreamy, kind delight.
O never give the heart outright,
For they, for all smooth lips can say,
Have given their hearts up to the play.
And who could play it well enough
If deaf and dumb and blind with love?
He that made this knows all the cost,
For he gave all his heart and lost.*

Auden

The Life of W. H. Auden. W.H. Auden (1907-1973) was born in York. His father was a physician, and his mother was trained as a nurse. In 1908 the family moved to Birmingham, where Auden's father was to become a Professor of Public Health. Auden's relation to his father was close and important; in his father's well stocked library Auden read devotedly as a young person, especially in psychoanalytic literature. It was expected, at this time, that Auden would become a mining engineer, for he was directly interested in geology, and in the culture of mining. (In his first year of University he was to major in Geology, though by the second year he had switched to English.) Auden's first formal education took place at St. Edmund's School in Surrey, where Auden first made the acquaintance of his mentor and lover to be, Christopher Isherwood. In 1925 Auden enrolled at Christ Church, Oxford, where he built on his erotic relation with Isherwood, and entered with gusto into the wider, and idea fraught, literary milieu. He became close friends with brilliant young writers and thinkers like C.Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, and Louis MacNeice, all of whom were not only reshaping British poetry, but thinking intensely about the larger issues of their time, which was preoccupied with its own pre-war social crises, and with the still quite fresh implications of a new social system, the Communism which to some degree fascinated all of these young men. Upon graduation, Auden traveled to Europe, where his observations of the brutal preparations for WW II, and of the social injustices pursuant on the Depression in Europe and Britain, led him (like most of his closest intellectual friends) to support the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War, and for a long time to espouse the politics of the far left, Communism above all. All his life, however, Auden was a practicing Anglican, as well, of course, as a prolific poet whose major works appeared between the mid-thirties and 1960, and by the end of his writing career his humanism and love of peace had increasingly taken on the guise of religious intensity. By the time of his death he had given full expression to the bias for religious transcendence, which had only occasionally come to the front in his earlier thinking.

The Work of W.H. Auden. It will be noted that Yeats died in 1939, the year of the outbreak of WW II. Hardy died ten years earlier. Although both writers were increasingly pessimistic, as they aged, neither of them had the special pressure of a global war to factor into their pessimism. Auden's life segued directly into the inter-war years of the 30's, then into the Great War itself, and fully into the Cold War. If you look through the Auden poems in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* you will see that almost all of the included pieces deal somehow with the Second World War, or with the collateral damage done by it. The Age being ushered in, during the period of World War II, has been called the Age of Anxiety. Auden's book of that title, *The Age of Anxiety*, which though published in 1947 was full of poems from the previous decade. You can feel the force of that Age in much of Auden's work, and as he sits "in one of the dives/on Fifty-Second Street/Uncertain and afraid..." he is the quintessential intellectual of the forties, open and hopeful, but surrounded by devastating military/political hatred. No poetry written in English so vividly catches the spirit of that time.

Reading

Primary source reading

Selected Poems of W.H.Auden, ed. Mendelson, New York, 2007.

Secondary source reading

Carpenter, Humphrey, *W.H. Auden: A Biography*, London, 1981.

Further reading

Smith, Stan, *W.H. Auden*, Oxford, 1985.

Suggested paper topics

1. Look into the relation between Communism and Anglican Christianity in Auden's thought. What were Auden and his elite Oxford friends looking for, when in the twenties they followed the God of Russian Communism? Was it simply a new form of the Christian God?
2. Auden's father was a mining engineer, and Auden was from early on destined to a career as an engineer. In later life he wrote a lot of poetry about geology. Can you trace some strands of scientific interest throughout his poetry? How does he use his experience of science in his writing?

Excerpt**poets.org/poetsorg/poem/i-walked-out-one-evening**

*As I walked out one evening,
Walking down Bristol Street,
The crowds upon the pavement
Were fields of harvest wheat.
And down by the brimming river
I heard a lover sing
Under an arch of the railway:
'Love has no ending.
'I'll love you, dear, I'll love you
Till China and Africa meet,
And the river jumps over the mountain
And the salmon sing in the street,
'I'll love you till the ocean
Is folded and hung up to dry
And the seven stars go squawking
Like geese about the sky.
'The years shall run like rabbits,
For in my arms I hold
The Flower of the Ages,
And the first love of the world.'
But all the clocks in the city
Began to whirr and chime:
'O let not Time deceive you,
You cannot conquer Time.
'In the burrows of the Nightmare
Where Justice naked is,
Time watches from the shadow
And coughs when you would kiss.
'In headaches and in worry
Vaguely life leaks away,
And Time will have his fancy
To-morrow or to-day.
'Into many a green valley
Drifts the appalling snow;
Time breaks the threaded dances
And the diver's brilliant bow.
'O plunge your hands in water,*

Eliot, T. S.

The Life of T.S. Eliot. Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) was born in St. Louis, Missouri. He had four sisters and one brother. His father and mother were of old East Coast patrician stock, but had for several generations been fixtures of St. Louis higher society. Eliot's father was President and Treasurer of the Hydraulic Press Brick Company. Young Thomas' childhood was spent essentially in reading, from his father's library. Cursed with a congenital double inguinal hernia, which would plague him all his life, Eliot was in pain much of the time when he was very young, and was able to conquer this condition with reading. (He was for a long time obsessed with Wild West adventures!)

The Education of T.S. Eliot. From 1898-1905 Eliot was a student at Smith Academy, where he studied Latin, Greek, French and German. Subsequently he attended Milton Academy, then enrolled at Harvard as an undergraduate, where he studied for three years (1906-09), getting his B.A. after just three years. In the following years, Eliot studied both at Oxford and in Paris—where he heard lectures by Henri Bergson. In 2011-2014 Eliot returned to Harvard, where he worked on Indian philosophy and Sanskrit, and wrote his doctoral dissertation on F.H. Bradley's notion of the knowledge of the external world. (Eliot earned a Ph.D. but the degree was never granted, as he never returned from England for the necessary viva voce final oral exam.) From this point on Eliot's education was pretty much education in life. In 1927 he became a naturalized British citizen. He began, while in England, both to work in a bank and to teach at several private schools, and finally, after a lucky meeting with Geoffrey Faber, the London publisher, Eliot took up a position as Editor with Faber, a position in which he remained from 1925-1965. Among the array of educational experiences, for Eliot in these years, was the formation of a powerful relationship with Ezra Pound, and a long and unhappy marriage.

The Work of T.S. Eliot. In 1914, Eliot met Ezra Pound in London, and a long creative relation grew from that point. Eliot firmed up his critical stance, which he had been trying out in essays, and in 1917 published a keystone essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' in which he lays out ideas about literature which he retained for his whole creative life. Not much later he published incisive essays on the English metaphysical poets, in which he reinforced his earlier thinking; his critical stance held that poetry is a traditional skill, that it is not about emotion but about escape from emotion, and that a mature world view—Eliot was deepening in his own Anglo-Catholicism all this time—was indispensable for significant writing. In the major creative works, which surrounded these critical arguments, Eliot digs deeply into the expression of the great traditions of spiritual experience, and into a precise and originally trimmed metric. A flow of great poems marks his maturing: 1911, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'; 1922, 'The Wasteland'—Eliot's mini epic, and one of the century's greatest works; 1927, 'The Journey of the Magi'; 1930, 'Ash Wednesday'; 1943, 'The Four Quartets.' Throughout these works, and Eliot was a perfectionist but not hugely prolific, Eliot dug into themes of personal identity, social disintegration, the quest for meaning, especially transcendental religious meaning. His final achievement is of limited dimensions—a number of his plays could be mentioned—but of huge insight into the meanings and weaknesses of his own age.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Collected Poems of T.S. Eliot, 1909-1962, New York, 1991.

Secondary source reading

Ackroyd, Peter, *T.S. Eliot*, London, 1984.

Further reading

Gordon, Lyndall, *Eliot's New Life*, London, 1988.

Suggested paper topics

1. Do you see Eliot's 'Wasteland,' and his general conversion to monarchy and Anglo-Catholicism, as responses to the post-WW I climate of the England he adopted? Or does Eliot just use those enviroing conditions as vehicles for poetry?

2. Eliot wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on philosophical questions of our knowing of the outer world. Do you see a philosophical turn of mind permeating his poetry? You might review *The Four Quartets* in relation to Eliot's metaphysics and theology.

Excerpt <http://www.bartleby.com/198/9.html>

*WHEN Mr. Apollinax visited the United States
His laughter tinkled among the teacups.
I thought of Fragilion, that shy figure among the birch-trees,
And of Priapus in the shrubbery
Gaping at the lady in the swing. 5
In the palace of Mrs. Phlaccus, at Professor Channing-Cheetah's
He laughed like an irresponsible fœtus.
His laughter was submarine and profound
Like the old man of the sea's
Hidden under coral islands 10
Where worried bodies of drowned men drift down in the green silence,
Dropping from fingers of surf.
I looked for the head of Mr. Apollinax rolling under a chair
Or grinning over a screen
With seaweed in its hair. 15
I heard the beat of centaur's hoofs over the hard turf
As his dry and passionate talk devoured the afternoon.
"He is a charming man"—"But after all what did he mean?"—
"His pointed ears ... He must be unbalanced,"—
"There was something he said that I might have challenged." 20
Of dowager Mrs. Phlaccus, and Professor and Mrs. Cheetah
I remember a slice of lemon, and a bitten macaroon.*

Discussion questions

1. The foregoing set of entries is based on the assumption of a canon of great writers of English literature. Does there seem to be an axis of central or defining works, that constitute a canon of the best, or is there nothing of that sort, only a variety of "interesting" works written in England and its cultural orbit, in English?
2. What role do you see for the Christian religion in the evolution of English literature? At what points in our entries has this role been most conspicuous? At what points has it dwindled? Based on our entries, what direction would you see for the future development of this relation between English literature and Christianity?
3. Do you see the Romantic movement—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, et al.—as a decisive turning point in the development and direction of English literature? (We have pushed this perspective, but doubtless there are various ways to plot the development of English literature.) Or if you were to write a developmental history of English literature, would you look for any large scale scheme at all?
4. Pick one author from each Unit we have studied, and briefly place him or her in his/her historical/cultural context. When you have completed this job, take a look at the general relationship between literary texts and historical setting. Is historical setting a useful framework for explaining the nature of literary works?
5. Is English literature strongly marked by optimism about the human condition—that is, belief that humanity is good, the world surrounding mankind is benign, and there is a purposefulness in the universe? Or is there a strong thread of pessimism, in English literature, in all of the above regards?