

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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ENGLISH LITERATURE – 20th Century

The Twentieth Century represents a break from the preceding times, 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 converse to be true. Case in point: the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Communism seemed to usher in a freedom from totalitarianism and the threat of globalized war. In retrospect, the “Cold War” seems to have been a time of unique structure--freedom when accompanied by corruption and chaos is not freedom at all. 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).

James Joyce (1882-1941) *The Dead*; *Ulysses* (B, 2498-2573)

James Joyce was born in Dublin, son of a father who, though talented, had difficulty earning a living. 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. In rejecting Dublin, he embraced continental Europe, and sought to shape his mind into a new way of thinking, and in doing so reinvent literature. To do so required a fervent and unwavering belief in his own genius, which his circle of friends found trying at times.

Joyce’s first significant work, *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, dates from 1914, and concludes with the story “The Dead.” His greatest work, *Ulysses*, was first published in book form on February 2, 1922, Joyce’s fortieth birthday. The book contains innovations in organization, style and narrative technique that have influenced countless other writers; and yet for all that Joyce had difficulty with publication; his work was considered obscene by the U.S. Post Office. Eventually, bans were lifted and the book circulated more freely (2500). 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.

Question: What is the connection between The Dead and Ulysses?

This question has a schoolish ring to it, but goes to the heart of Joyce’s development. Here is my answer. 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 Daedalus in *Ulysses* a fit base for explorations, through a language made up of languages, puns, and allusions, of 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*.

Comparative Literature:

1. Our first reflection concerns literary/cultural history. 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?* The last writer we read, Gerard Manley Hopkins, was just leaving the world as Joyce entered it, but do they seem to belong to the same cultural thread? (Certainly both writers were “experimental” in form, but is that the end of their mutual connection?) Or is the dramatic cultural explosion of the 20th century, described at the beginning of this unit, enough to account for major changes in literary style? Reflection on this concrete instance will be a portal to thinking through the entire critical question of *the place of literature in culture*.

2. In *Ulysses*, as the title indicates, Joyce intends to wade deeply into ancient Greek myth. Most of the characters and scenes in the novel play off against counterparts in Homer’s *Odyssey*, which is the epic of a quasi hero’s return to his home, after struggles in war, temptations en route, and a host of self-doubts. Familiarize yourself with these parallels, but then consider what can be the reason for this kind of use of older myth in a modern text. Does this kind of inter-textual reference permit Joyce to enrich his own text? To add extra layers of meaning to his own work? Does this last question raise yet another: is literature in some sense about literature, more than it is about life? Suggested reading: *Hereditas: Seven Essays on The Modern Experience of the Classical*, 1964, ed. Frederic Will.

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) *Endgame*(B, 2661-2688)

Samuel Beckett was born near Dublin. He came from an Anglo-Irish Protestant family. Beckett received a B.A from Trinity College, Dublin, and after teaching English abroad, he returned to earn his M.A. in Dublin in 1931. In 1937, Beckett settled permanently in Paris, where he wrote in French, then translated his work into Irish-inflected English. He is best-known for his plays, especially *Waiting for Godot* (1948), and *Endgame* (1957). Beckett focuses his work on fundamental questions of existence and nonexistence, the mind and the body.

Endgame has, at the heart of it, a vexed relationship between master and servant. They bicker and clearly dislike each other; yet they stay together despite their claims to end it all --to leave, die, or simply depart. The overall sense of the play is tragicomic, and it fits well with an absurdist world, where existentialist ideas can be seen at every turn.

Question: What is the meaning of the title, Endgame?

The term, of course, is drawn from chess, and refers to the final moves of a match, when checkmate is being prepared by one of the two contestants. Who is checking whom in Beckett’s play, or does the title simply refer to the dead end of existence, where the meaninglessness of everything makes itself clear? Is there in this play any ray of light that would open the staged events to a sliver of meaning? Nell and Nagg hold onto a furtive set of memories of their former joy together. Clov discusses the possibility that he and Hamm are becoming meaningful, then rapidly dismisses the possibility. Hamm indulges in a long tailor joke, and in rendering it serves us a small portion of (dirty) joie de vivre. Finally, if we are trying to consider any element of light in the play, we might remember that *Endgame* is a kind of absurdist vaudeville show, thus does not take itself dead seriously. Perhaps Beckett is also laughing at the exaggerated desolation of the scene he depicts?

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Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) *Poems* (B, 2317-2315)

Thomas Hardy did not take the path of privileged education at Oxford and Cambridge, nor did he become a world traveler or adventurer. His early 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—like *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891)—throughout the later 19th century, then in his last three decades turned increasingly toward lyric poetry. We are reading a small but intense selections from those poems.

Question: What marks Hardy off, as 20th century lyricist, from Hopkins and the Romantics?

This is both a technical question, about Hardy's use of the English language for poetry, and a question about the change in cultural atmosphere that begins to set in with the turn into the 20th century. (We took up the same issue, also in regard to the work of Hopkins, in discussing Joyce's work.) Hopkins experiments in metrics, and manipulates syllables and stresses, so as to accumulate startling emphases and instants of revelation. Hardy, on the other hand, 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 lost virtue loss more spittingly than "The Ruined Maid"?

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W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) *Poems* (B, 2386-2422)

William Butler Yeats, like Jonathan Swift, was born in Ireland, and like Joyce and Swift remained throughout his life devoted to the cause of Irish independence from British occupation. Nonetheless Yeats spent his life both in Ireland and England, where he was at the center of an active literary scene. In both cultures he worked with native folklore, ancient mythical themes, and the social power of poetry. Romantic, passionate, he married and had two children, but remained throughout life devoted to the image of one woman, Maude Gonne, with whom a single night of love testified to their bond.

Question: Can you see any consistency among the many styles Yeats displays throughout his writing career?

"The Stolen Child," and "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" show us Yeats under the thrall of Irish folklore, and of a dreamy Romanticism. These poems date from the 1890's. Poems like "Easter, 1916" or "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," put us in the creative stance of political rebellion and the dignity of patriotic honor. Late poems like "Sailing to Byzantium" or "Byzantium"—written in 1927 and 1932—take us both into Yeats' complex personal mythology—perns and gyres, his philosophy of history—and into the subtle

worship of art, as a dictating factor in culture. Once again, the question: *can you see a binding stylistic theme among the poems of this volatile career in language?*

Comparative Literature:

1. Both Yeats and William Blake created personal mythological systems. We passed over that issue above, in mentioning Blake. His *The Four Zoas* (begun 1797) incorporates much of the cosmic drama of Blake's mythical scheme. The full fledged cosmology, embodied there, is Blake's effort to recreate the cosmos in language. Yeats' *A Vision* (1925) was his full fledged account of a philosophy of history encapsulated in the form of a widening and contracting gyre, Yeats' geographical image for the development of human history. The challenge of this Comparative Literature entry is to "compare" the two systems of world-explanation on display here, and to evaluate their successes as material for poetry.

2. Comparative literature is typically concerned with the theoretical question: What is literature? To consider what poetry is, specifically, you need to examine what metaphor is. What is Yeats doing with the metaphor of "Leda and the Swan," (2405). What is he managing to say through the metaphor of the Father God, the raped Leda, the "white rush" of the swan, and finally "Agamemnon dead," that he could not otherwise have said? (Let's say, could not have said in the languages of history, of the concatenation of events, and even of the religious perspectives that tie God in one way or another to creation?) What Yeats is able to say, of that metaphorical kind, is hard to discuss, and constitutes the material of the "metaphysic of literature." Suggestion, drop in on a classic of philosophical analysis *Metaphor and Reality* (1962) by Philip Wheelwright. You will be startled by the layers of meaning unfolding around the act of poetry.

Auden (1907-1973) *Poems* (B, 2689-2704)

W.H. Auden was educated at Oxford, and brought up into a thriving but rebellious London literary culture, with friends like C.Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, and Louis MacNeice, all of whom were reshaping British poetry. His observations of WW II, and of the social injustices pursuant on the Depression in 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. All his life, however, Auden was a practicing Anglican, and by the end of his writing career his humanism and love of peace had increasingly taken on the guise of religious suggestion. He gives back a complex, multi-styled reflection of his time.

Question: What marks Auden's poetry off from that of other modernist poets like Hardy and Yeats?

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 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, and I believe you can feel the force of that Age in Auden's work, as he sits "in one of the dives/on Fifty-Second Street/Uncertain and afraid..." *Is Auden, then, more pessimistic than Hardy and Yeats?*

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Nadine Gordimer(1923-) *The Moment Before the Gun Went Off*(B, 2718-2721)

Nadine Gordimer, a white South African and life long analyst of the social and human issues of her country, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991. Her work has been both historical/critical, much of it inspired by the work of the Hungarian Marxist Gyorgy Lukacs, and fictional. Her novels reflect a deep concern with the social culture of her apartheid torn country, and yet, as our Norton Anthology remarks, Gordimer does not in the end put social concerns before art. She believes that narrative is what makes sense of human reality, and ultimately triumphs over ideology of any kind.

Question: What kind of comment on life and art does the short story before us illustrate?

We shift, with this assignment, to a tightly wrought short tale. (Here's a sub question, already: what relation has such a short tale to a lyric poem—say one with a similar ironic/bitter tone by Thomas Hardy?) The tone of the narration is dry and precise, full of detailed observations of personal traits and local behaviors. (For example, the description of the way Van der Vyver 'hides any change of expression round his mouth behind a thick, soft moustache, ...by always looking at some object in hand, leaf of a crop fingered, pen or stone picked up..' (2719). The story is brief, but is it able to extract a view of life and art from its packed details? Your answer will surely be yes: will it include the implicit power of art to bring order to the chaos of human experience? *Does this story help us to make sense of life?*

Comparative Literature:

1. Nadine Gordimer lives and writes in a politically charged apartheid era environment, and observes that "politics is character in South Africa," in other words that politics infiltrates deeply into the personal/social structure of life there. At the same time, however, she keeps a broadly humanistic eye on the scene around her, and emphasizes the power of art to give shape and meaning to the stresses of social events. In this latter conviction she aligns herself with proponents of art for art's sake—check our Egan, *The Genesis of the Theory of Art for Art's Sake* (1921)—who privilege the aesthetic view of life over the ethical or the rational. You might want to explore this rich aesthetic tradition. How better can you start than with the classic *History of Aesthetic* (1901) by Bernard Bosanquet?

2. The comparatist is often involved with the issue of genres, and of the inherent relevance (or lack of it) of the genus (novel, lyric, drama, short story, epic) in the shaping of a given work. (There is a fine study of this issue of genre importance in literature: Emil Staiger, *Grundbegriffe der Poetik* (1946), English translation 1991.) What, to bring this issue down to cases, do you make of the generic being of a small short story like Gordimer's? How is her piece different from a lyric poem? How is it different from a novel—say a novel unpackaging the tight network of events her story compresses?

Walcott (1930-) *Poems* (B, 2770-2776)

Derek Walcott was born on the Caribbean island of Santa Lucia, educated at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, and has taught extensively in the United States, especially at Boston University. In 1992 he received the Nobel Prize for Literature, and joins the Norton Anthology as part of the laudable effort to widen the sense of English literature, to reach beyond the borders of England itself to colonized parts of the former British Empire. The English of his poems ranges freely between the Queen's own and island patois.

Question: How does Walcott, as poet, relate to the mainstream western literary tradition?

This question arises because Walcott, of mixed racial heritage—African, Dutch, English, and with a language background in French creole—is both outside and inside the traditions of British literature. Though Walcott is very conscious of the complexities of his own heritage—cf. "A Far Cry from Africa"—and though he is critical of the British colonial heritage on the ground, he adores the English language and literature of British tradition. The best test case, for trying to answer our question, is *Omeros* (1990),

Walcott's Caribbeanized epic drawn from Homer and Homeric themes. What happens to Homer in that transition? How does Walcott's work relate to that of Homer, the founder of the Western epic tradition?

Comparative Literature:

1. Homer's creations, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, have been translated, recreated, reevaluated in every age. Virgil himself, in the *Aeneid*, developed his profound vision of Roman destiny by remaking Homer's work. Kazantzakis, in his *Odyssey* (1958), created a massive modern version of the work of Homer. Lyric and dramatic poetry have been saturated with reworkings of Homeric themes. Suggestion: look into the network of interpretations of Homer, in the West, and put Walcott's original linguistic remaking in its literary historical setting.

2. The English language has adopted many forms at different times and in different cultures. Think back to *Beowulf*, half English, half Germanic in language. Think of Dryden's poetry, seemingly so close to us, but in diction and tone no easy read for a 21st century American. Then think of Walcott's *Omeros*, with its nuggets of patois, or the mariner's island slangs in "The Schooner *Flight*." Can you see unpredictable futures ahead for English, as the global community tightens, communication means sharpen, and the borders between languages—as, for instance, between American English and Puerto Rican Spanish—blur away.?

Essay Questions for Unit 5

1. We have noted, in the introduction to this Unit, the prominence of threatening global conflict in the 20th century. Literature of the time inevitably reflects these dark issues. In the material of the present Unit where do you most clearly find this reflection? Which of the writers we have read here seem most attuned to the dark concerns of his/her time?

2. Consider the poetry of Hardy (b. 1840), Yeats (b. 1865), and Auden (b. 1907.) You note that Auden was born almost 70 years after Hardy, and over 40 years after Yeats. Can you see the difference in historical experience between the first two poets and Auden? Does that difference reflect itself in style or view point? What if you add the poetry of Walcott (b. 1930) into the equation? How does this change your view point onto Auden's situation as poet?

3. Joyce and Beckett are both Irish expatriates, virtually exiles when compared to another Irish writer, Yeats, who was an Irish statesman to the end. What do you see in common to the works of Joyce and Beckett which you read in this Unit? Do they still seem to be writing inside the tradition of "British literature?" What about Gordimer and Walcott, then, neither of whom was British? Do *they* seem to write within the tradition of British literature? Or—and this raises the question of our entire class—is British literature just a small element in the large body of creations within the English language?