

Out of the wasteland: the First World War and modernism

By Suzanne Lynch

The evolution of modernist literature was intimately bound up with the shock and devastation of the war

In April 1940, as the Second World War intensified, British novelist Virginia Woolf gave a lecture to the Workers' Educational Association in Brighton. Outlining her views on literature to the group of would-be writers, she highlighted the war that had taken place more than 20 years earlier as the defining moment for writers of her generation. "Then, suddenly like a chasm in a smooth road, the [Great] war came," she wrote, in an essay that was to be later published as *The Leaning Tower*.

The Great War from 1914 to 1918 was a defining moment in European and world history. But it also had a profound effect on the cultural and literary sensibilities of a generation.

The war itself had spawned a new wave of literary output. Poets such as [Siegfried Sassoon](#), [Wilfred Owen](#), and Ivor Gurney fashioned a new form of poetry, as they attempted to give expression to the horrors of trench warfare. Descriptions of the "monstrous anger of the guns" and the "shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells" as Owen described war in his poem, *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, communicated the realities of war to the audience at home. Literature became the primary medium through which the experience of modern warfare was articulated and disseminated.

But the First World War also shaped literature in other ways. The evolution of "modernism" – the cultural and literary movement that emerged in the early-20th century – was intimately bound up with the shock and experience of the First World War. The notion of defining a literary period, of retrospectively imposing a set of common characteristics on a disparate group of writers or texts, is notoriously risky.

But writers of the period were acutely aware of the sense that they were part of a cohesive modernist movement. Poets such as [Ezra Pound](#) and TS Eliot, and writers such as [James Joyce](#), DH Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, were profoundly self-conscious about what they were trying to achieve.

Modernism was an attempt to find new ways of capturing experience and identity, ways that would prioritise the individual and the interior mind, and push the boundaries of language and form to its limits. The focus was on experimentation and newness, and abandonment of the fixed point of view, driven by a restlessness with regard to the traditional structures of 19th-century realism. While indications of a new cultural form were evident from the first decade of the century, particularly in the work of the Italian futurists and the early experimental works of writers such as Joyce, Woolf and Eliot, by the 1920s modernism reached its zenith, with the publication of key works such as Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1928).

This modernist turn was reflected in other art forms. In music, a tentative experimentation was evident in the work of turn-of-the-century composers such as Debussy, who, in works such as the impressionistic *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, stretched the traditional tonal system.

By the early decades of the 20th century, this had given way to whole-scale atonalism and an abandonment of traditional rhythmic strictures that could be seen in such works as Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, performed on the eve of the First World War

In the visual arts, the departure from traditional realist styles evident in the great French impressionist painters of the late 19th century, paved the way for the abstract experimentation of Kandinsky, Matisse and Picasso, who explored the notion of form and representation in new ways in the early 20th century.

Feeding into this artistic experimentation was the devastation of the war. As works such as Vincent Sherry's *The Great War* and the *Language of Modernism* show, the linguistic and representational inventiveness of modernism was rooted in the experience of war, as writers attempted to form a new perspective on the disillusionment and devastation of the Great War.

The chaos and devastation of the first World War – which saw a mass loss of life on an unprecedented scale – sent writers and artists struggling to find new forms of representations, new ways of expressing an experience that had shattered a continent.

Eliot's 'The Waste Land'

In April 1914, just three months before the outbreak of war, a young American poet from Harvard arrived in [England](#). TS Eliot was already emerging as a significant poetic presence, having been identified by American poet Ezra Pound, who was to remain a close collaborator and friend. In 1915 his first significant poem, *The Lovesong of J Alfred Prufrock*, was published, but it was *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, that solidified Eliot's reputation.

Widely regarded as the most influential poem of the 20th century, the 432-line poem is a work permeated by the shadow of the First World War. The title of the poem is a barely-veiled allusion to the devastation of the war; the poem itself, a metaphor for the devastated landscape of post-war [Europe](#).

Its famous opening line, an ironic rewriting of the opening image of Chaucer's prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, contains a sense of what is to come in this sad, desolate work.

*April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.*

From here, the poet leads the reader through a complex, fragmented literary terrain, as the poem tries to hold up a mirror to post-war life.

The opening stanza locates the poem in a post-war world as it describes a hazy image of a summer in [Germany](#), the mention of an "archduke" immediately evoking memories of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, whose assassination sparked the beginning of the first World War.

Oblique references to the war surface throughout the poem.

*Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.*

The ghoulish image of crowds flowing across the bridge, as "each man fixed his eyes before his feet", evokes the erasure of the individual in a mechanised, post-war world, as well as the faceless crowds of the trenches.

References to classical literature are juxtaposed with glimpses into modern London life, as the poet presents a sordid, empty image of contemporary London, one of perpetual decay and sexual gratification. "That corpse you planted last year in your garden/Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?" asks an unknown voice, wafting in and out of the text.

The Waste Land is the archetypal modernist text. The poem is richly allusive – the work is constructed around fragments of literature – "heap of broken images" as described in the first verse.

Its use of literary traditions and texts as a source for experimentation is a typically modernist trope – a technique given its fullest expression in Joyce's *Ulysses*, published the same year, which uses Homer's *Odyssey* to create the ultimate modernist character, Leopold Bloom.

Eliot himself was later to praise Joyce's use of myth in *Ulysses*. "It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history," he wrote in a 1923 essay.

Stylistically, *The Waste Land* was revolutionary for its time, rejecting the standards of form and rhyme, in favour of uneven lines, clipped stanzas, and scraps of quotations. The disjointed form reflects the chaos and disillusionment of post-war life that the poem is trying to evoke.

The lack of a single poetic voice, and the mix of high and low styles throughout the work underlines the absence of a single, teleological presence in the work, perhaps signalling the absence of one unifying God-like presence in a post-war, post-religious world that has been torn apart by the Great War.

Woolf, war and modernism

If Eliot was giving voice to a new revolutionary style in poetry, prose writers were experimenting with new ways of writing fiction.

The leading figures of literary modernism were also profoundly affected by the first World War. One such figure was British novelist Virginia Woolf.

Woolf was born into an upper-middle-class, late-Victorian literary world, and the spectre of 19th-century realism was a presence with which she battled throughout her life both as a writer and as a woman, as she tried to forge a feminist and modernist voice. An avid reader and admirer of some of the great writers of the 19th century such as Dickens and Tolstoy, she nonetheless found the realist style restrictive and inadequate. Her 1919 essay *Modern Fiction* elucidates what she and many of her contemporaries were trying to achieve. In their attempt at “catching life”, her literary predecessors were too bound up with form and design, Woolf argued.

She believed individuals did not experience life the way it was presented by realist novelists, through an omniscient narrator observing external details. Instead, “the mind, exposed to the ordinary course of life, receives upon its surface a myriad impressions . . . From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, composing in their sum what we might venture to call life itself.”

Novelists, Woolf wrote, should “record the atom as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they come . . . however disconnected and incoherent.” In this regard she praises James Joyce for attempting “to come closer to life” by focusing on the interior mind, and erasing an overarching, omniscient narrator from his fiction.

In novels such as *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) Woolf explored this new technique, as she used the stream-of-consciousness technique to represent modernity.

Both novels are also intricately concerned with war.

Mrs Dalloway tells the story of a single day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, the wife of a British MP, as she prepares for a party that evening in her London home.

Septimus Smith, a shell-shocked British soldier, acts as a double to Clarissa Dalloway throughout the novel, a character whom she never meets despite both sharing the same city on the same day. According to Woolf’s own notes, she wanted to present “the world seen by the sane and the insane side by side” but as the novel progresses it becomes clear how, in post-war London, civilians and veterans alike are indelibly marked by war.

As the toll of Big Ben, the symbol of British hegemony, echoes through the city, connecting the inhabitants on the summer day, reminders of the war are everywhere. “The war was over,” declares the ambiguous narrator, before adding – in a passage imbued with irony – “except for someone like Mrs Foxford at the embassy last night . . . or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed; but it was over; thank Heaven – over. It was June. The King and Queen were at the Palace. And everywhere, though it was still so early, there was a beating, a stirring of galloping ponies, tapping of cricket bats.”

The sense that the ongoing social norms of British upper-class life cannot suppress the horrors of the recent war surface in the final scene, when reports of the ambulance carrying Septimus Smith intrude into Mrs Dalloway’s party. Similarly, through its persistent use of stream of consciousness, the novel suggests that the familiar temporal measures of time and history, symbolised by the ringing of Big Ben, are insufficient. A new form of representation, a new focus on the interior clock of the mind is needed to encapsulate modern experience.

The Great War is also a central theme of *To the Lighthouse*. Completed three years after *Mrs Dalloway*, the novel is divided into three sections. The first, *The Window*, is an elegiac depiction of a Victorian family on holidays by the sea, based on Woolf’s own childhood holidays in St Ives in Cornwall.

The second, *Time Passes*, an experimental interlude that describes the desertion and destruction of the old, rustic holiday home by the forces of nature, and the third, *The Lighthouse*, a return to the scene of the first section, but a scene that has been radically altered following the death of the matriarch Mrs Ramsay.

As references to the first World War begin to surface in the second and third section, it becomes rapidly apparent that *Time Passes* is a metaphor for the war. The death of Mrs Ramsay’s son Andrew is rendered in

parenthesis, the sad irony barely concealed: “[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.]”

War, in *To the Lighthouse*, is something that happens offstage, a barely-registered event that nonetheless has a profound effect on the action.

To the Lighthouse also explores the cultural and societal changes brought about by the first World War. It not only casts a shadow over the characters of the novel, but also shepherds in a new era of social and cultural change. By equating the Great War with the winds of change destroying and dismantling the Ramsay family’s great Victorian house, the *Time Passes* section suggests the first World War destroyed the social mores of 19th-century England.

For Woolf, Eliot and others, the impact of the war was multifaceted. As a watershed in world history, it was significant not just in terms of the enormous loss of life and its implications for international diplomacy, but also for its impact on society.

The breakdown of class structures and the liberation of women in society – British women won the right to vote in 1919 in part due to their contribution to the war effort while their husbands and brothers were away at war – were direct outcomes of the Great War.

Similarly, the war signalled the beginnings of the breakdown of the Age of Empire as British colonies began their move towards independence.

Reflecting this jump into modernity was part of the challenge of modernism. The impact of the war was felt in every strata of society. Coming to terms with its legacy was one of the major preoccupations with modernist writing, as writers and artists responded to an event that was the defining moment of their generation.

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