

MODERN IRISH LITERATURE

IN ENGLISH

1890 – 2010s

Introduction

There can be no dispute that Ireland's extraordinary wealth of literary talent through the centuries has greatly exceeded what might be expected from a country of its size. The names of such Irish writers as Jonathan Swift, Oliver Goldsmith, Maria Edgeworth, Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Seamus Heaney and Brian Friel read like a much recited and loved litany from the annals of world literature.

Irish characters haunt the corridors of the imagination like family ghosts, randomly filling the quietest of spaces with their greatest moments. Think of the "slight" Christy Mahon not quite believing his luck as he enraptures a group of County Mayo women with an embellished tale of how he "murdered" his father in "a cold, sloping and stony devil's patch of a field." Or the pompous and cosmopolitan Gabriel Conroy, staring at the falling snow from his hotel window in Dublin and suddenly overcome with a sense of his personal failures after his wife's tragic revelations of a self-sacrificing lover in the west of Ireland. Or, again, the tragi-comic tramps Vladimir and Estragon mirroring the boredom, futility and 'familiar' eccentricities of human life as they struggle to play games, talk and insult one another while waiting for the enigmatic Mr. Godot.

The classes on modern Irish literature focus primarily on the socio-political aspects of Irish writing from 1880 to 2010. They are designed to both complement the courses on Irish society, politics and history, and to introduce the reader to the intimate relationship between politics and imagination, one of the most exciting and enduring topics in Irish literary commentary.

The course is a broad chronological survey, examining writers and key representations of Ireland within their contemporary contexts and assessing the chief socio-political motivations and implications underpinning these national portraits.

A number of lessons should be clear by the end of the course. First, Irish literature is not a rarefied aesthetic zone but an active interpreter and interrogator of socio-political realities and, in turn, an active mobiliser of cultural ideals.

For example, literature has played a significant role in shaping cultural and political nationalism in the late 1800s with poems and plays forged from an indigenous mythology and living folk culture. Literature has provoked riots over national self-representation in the Abbey Theatre in the early 1900s with comically subversive portraits of Irish life. And writers were instrumental in challenging a repressively conservative social milieu in the newly independent Ireland of the 1930-50s with bleak stories of disenchantment. Contemporary writing continues to challenge us to consider the dilemmas associated with a swift transition from tradition to modernity in Irish society, especially in relation to gender, the role of the church and our sense of identity.

A second lesson that should be clear by the end of the course is that writers appropriate or modify or reject previous literary conventions and images to accommodate their own engagement with social change. The natural progression of movement and counter-movement across generations make this an inevitable aspect of any national tradition.

For example, Yeats's glorification of blood sacrifice in pre-revolutionary Ireland is challenged by Sean O'Casey who, after the bloodshed of the 1916 Rising, War of Independence and Civil War, questions the role of eloquence and violence in Irish life. The romanticisation of the primitive and eloquent peasantry by W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge at the turn of the century is checked by Patrick Kavanagh who articulates the spiritual and sexual desolation of a rural existence in mid-century Ireland. Eavan Boland redresses the marginalisation of women in literature by working in her criticism and verse to generate a 'complex self' within a poem in place of the traditional and inherited 'motif', 'ornament' or 'elements of style' seen in earlier Irish works.

Ireland has produced four Nobel Prize winners — W.B. Yeats, G.B. Shaw, Samuel Beckett and Seamus Heaney — in addition to a large number of writers internationally acclaimed for their eloquence and intelligence. While the course focuses on themes relevant to the socio-political angle, such as nationalism, cultural identity, history, place, tradition & modernity, representations of women, and 'eloquence and violence', students are reminded that it is the writers' gifts of imagination and insight which make the issues memorable in the first instance.

**MODERN IRISH LITERATURE IN ENGLISH:
1890 – 2010s**

Class Topics

Introduction: Cultural Nationalism – 1880-1910s

Romantic Ireland: Dreams and Responsibilities:
W. B. Yeats, Selected Poems

Romance and Rebellion: W. B. Yeats, Cathleen ni Houlihan

Eloquence & Independence:
J. M. Synge, The Playboy of the Western World

Cultural Options: James Joyce, The Dead

Politics and Revolution: Sean O'Casey, The Plough and the Stars

Reality Check: Patrick Kavanagh, The Great Hunger

Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man: Samuel Beckett, Krapp's Last Tape

A Viable State?: John McGahern, High Ground

Outside History: Eavan Boland, Selected Poems

Course Review

Assessment

Assessment Method	Percentage of Overall Mark
Midterm Exam	20%
Essay Assignment	40%
End of term Exam	40%

MODERN IRISH LITERATURE READINGS

Core Readings

W.B. Yeats	Selected Poems (Penguin) or New Oxford Student Texts: WB Yeats "Cathleen Ni Houlihan"
J.M. Synge	Playboy of the Western World and Other Plays (Oxford World's Classics)
James Joyce	Dubliners (Penguin)
Sean O'Casey	Three Dublin Plays (Faber & Faber)
Patrick Kavanagh	Selected Poems (Penguin)*
Samuel Beckett	Waiting for Godot (Faber & Faber) & Collected Shorter Plays (Faber & Faber)
John McGahern	High Ground or Collected Stories (Faber & Faber)
Eavan Boland	Collected Poems & Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman & the Poet in Our Time (Carcanet)

Extra Readings

Dermot Bolger (ed.)	Contemporary Irish Fiction (Picador)
Marina Carr	Plays 1 (Faber & Faber)
Seamus Deane	Reading in the Dark (Faber & Faber)
Donovan, Jeffares & Kennelly	Ireland's Women: Writings Past and Present
Peter Fallon/Derek Mahon (eds.)	Contemporary Irish Poetry (Penguin)
Brian Friel	Translations & Dancing At Lughnasa (Faber & Faber)
Seamus Heaney	Opened Ground: Selected Poems, 1966-1996 (Faber & Faber or FS&G)
Derek Mahon	New Collected Poems (Gallery Books)
John McGahern	Amongst Women (Faber & Faber)

General Criticism

Terence Brown	"Cultural Nationalism: 1880-1930" & "The Counter Revival: Provincialism & Censorship, 1930-65" Ireland: A Social and Cultural History (Fontana) The Literature of Ireland: Culture & Criticism (Cambridge University press, 2010)
Lucy Collins	Contemporary Irish Women Poets: Memory and Estrangement (Liverpool University Press, 2015)
Seamus Deane	A Short History of Irish Literature (Hutchinson, 1986)
Nicholas Grene	The Politics of Irish Drama (Cambridge University Press, 2000)
Declan Kiberd (and Mathews, P.J.)	Declan Kiberd Handbook of the Irish Revival (Dublin: The Abbey Theatre Press, 2015) The Irish Writer and the World (Cambridge University Press, 2005) Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation (Vintage, 1995)
Christopher Murray	Twentieth Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation (Manchester University Press, 1997)
C.L. Innes	Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1935 (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993)
Anthony Roche	Contemporary Irish Drama (Gill & Macmillan, 1994)