

Introduction to the Twentieth Century

- I. About literary periods
 - A. Historical and literary periods are always somewhat arbitrary
 - B. Romantic and Victorian Periods are approximate as well
 - C. If the French Revolution signaled a break with the past, so did the early Twentieth Century
 - 1. 1901 marks a new century on the calendar
 - 2. Queen Victoria dies in 1901 after the longest reign in British history
 - 3. Both of these suggested a time of change
- II. Early twentieth century milestones
 - A. Science and technology
 - 1. The Wright brothers achieve powered flight in 1903
 - 2. Einstein's *Special Theory of Relativity* is published in 1905 (with General Relativity following in 1915)
 - B. War, politics, and empire
 - 1. Two Great Wars redraw the maps of the world
 - 2. Upheavals in Ireland lead to the establishment of an Irish Free State (with some Irish counties remaining under British rule)
 - 3. The British Empire shrinks, as first Iraq, then in turn, Egypt, India, and Palestine become independent
- III. The Great War: 1914-1918
 - A. Similar to the French Revolution, it is a shattering event
 - B. War casualties in the British Empire were about 900,000 killed and two million wounded
 - C. It is a different war in both scale and the nature of its horrors, including:
 - 1. trench warfare
 - 2. machine guns
 - 3. poison gas
 - 4. aerial combat
 - D. Veterans were shattered in both mind and body
 - E. Poets such as Wilfred Owen (himself killed in action) catalogued war's brutality
 - 1. "The Show" depicts war's nightmarish landscape as if from a great height
 - 2. "Dulce Et Decorum Est" ironically inverts the Roman poet Horace's "How sweet it is to die for your country" by depicting the effects of chlorine and mustard gas
 - F. The Great War's effects on literature
 - 1. The cataclysmic shock of The Great War may have contributed to literary modernism
 - 2. Modernism attempts to represent artistically this break with the past
 - 3. The forms and subjects of the past seemed irrelevant to the new reality
 - 4. Poets such as T. S. Eliot and novelists such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf experiment with new literary forms
 - 5. These forms attempt to depict life in the twentieth century world
 - 6. Modern life is often marked by alienation and disillusionment