

THE IMPACT OF WORLD WAR I ON ENGLISH LITERATURE (POETRY)

Sevil Alasgar gizi Mammadova

Senior Lecturer, Department of Foreign Languages, Azerbaijan Technical University,
PhD in Philology

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0730-7256>

E-mail: sevil.mammadova@aztu.edu.az

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17516495>

Abstract: the First World War (1914–1918) radically changed not only political and social systems, but also literature. In English literature, this war created a powerful stage that reflected moments of trauma, loss, heroism, and the breaking of human psychology. War poets — Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, and others — shattered the traditional image of romantic heroism and showed the real horrors of war. In prose, authors such as Erich Maria Remarque (although German, his influence reached British writers), Virginia Woolf, and D.H. Lawrence described the devastating effects of war on society and the individual. The First World War radically changed English literature, destroying romantic images of war and giving rise to realistic, often pacifist positions. Wilfred Owen's poem "Dulce et Decorum Est" refutes the traditional heroic idea of war, while Siegfried Sassoon's poetry sharply criticizes society's indifference to war. Ford Madox Ford's novel *Parade's End* delicately reflects the disintegration of society, and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* delicately reflects the post-war psychological crisis. T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* has become a symbol of the moral collapse of an entire Europe. These works show that the war left a deep mark on English literature not only as a historical event, but also as a shaking of humanity, culture and morality.

Keywords: war, literature, poetry, change.

ВЛИЯНИЕ ПЕРВОЙ МИРОВОЙ ВОЙНЫ НА АНГЛИЙСКУЮ ЛИТЕРАТУРУ (ПОЭЗИЯ)

Мамедова Севиль Аласкер кызы

Старший преподаватель, кафедра иностранных языков Азербайджанский технический
университет, PhD

Аннотация: Первая мировая война (1914–1918) радикально изменила не только политические и социальные системы, но и литературу. В английской литературе эта война создала мощный пласт, отразивший моменты травмы, утраты, героизма и крушения человеческой психологии. Поэты войны — Уилфред Оуэн, Зигфрид Сассун, Руперт Брук и другие — развеяли традиционный образ романтического героизма и показали подлинные ужасы войны. В прозе такие авторы, как Эрих Мария Ремарк (хотя и немецкий писатель, его влияние достигло британских авторов), Вирджиния Вулф и Д.Г. Лоуренс, описали разрушительные последствия войны для общества и личности. Первая мировая война кардинально изменила английскую литературу, разрушив романтизированные образы войны и породив реалистичные, часто пацифистские позиции. Стихотворение Уилфреда Оуэна «Dulce et Decorum Est» опровергает традиционную героическую идею войны, в то время как поэзия Зигфрида Сассуна резко критикует безразличие общества к войне. Роман Форда Мэдокса Форда «Конец парада» тонко отражает распад общества, а «Миссис Дэллоуэй» Вирджинии Вулф — послевоенный психологический кризис. Поэма Т.С. Элиота «Бесплодная земля» стала символом морального краха всей Европы. Эти произведения

показывают, что война оставила глубокий след в английской литературе не только как историческое событие, но и как потрясение человечности, культуры и морали.

Ключевые слова: война, литература, поэзия, изменение.

INTRODUCTION

The First World War (1914–1918) was one of the most catastrophic events in modern history, reshaping not only the political and social landscape of the world but also its literary consciousness. English literature, in particular, provides a powerful record of the psychological, emotional, and cultural aftermath of the war. Writers and poets who had either participated in or witnessed the war directly translated their traumatic experiences into literary form, resulting in a radical transformation of language, style, and theme. Early patriotic idealism gave way to deep disillusionment, and the horrors of trench warfare inspired the emergence of modernist aesthetics characterized by fragmentation, symbolism, and psychological introspection.

The literature of this period became a mirror reflecting the spiritual desolation of humankind and the breakdown of traditional moral and social values. Figures such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, David Jones, T. S. Eliot, and Ford Madox Ford represent different literary responses to the same historical trauma, revealing how war both destroyed and redefined the creative imagination of the twentieth century.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a historical-literary and analytical-comparative method.

The research is based on:

Textual analysis of representative works such as *Dulce et Decorum Est* (Owen), *The General* (Sassoon), *In Parenthesis* (Jones), *The Waste Land* (Eliot), and *Parade's End* (Ford Madox Ford).

1. Contextual analysis of the social and historical background of the early 20th century, particularly the psychological and cultural effects of war.
2. Comparative approach — contrasting early war idealism (e.g., Rupert Brooke's patriotic tone) with the later modernist disillusionment and aesthetic fragmentation.
3. Interdisciplinary framework, integrating historical, psychological, and theological perspectives to understand how trauma, faith, and identity are reflected in literary form. Primary and secondary sources include poetry anthologies, critical studies (e.g., Catherine W. Reilly's *English Poetry of the First World War: A Bibliography*, 1978), and modernist literary theory.

Purpose and Objectives

The main purpose of this research is to analyze how the First World War influenced the thematic, structural, and stylistic development of English literature, and how it contributed to the emergence of modernist forms of expression. The objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the transformation of war representation from patriotic heroism to disillusionment.
2. To explore the psychological and emotional effects of war as reflected in poetry and prose.
3. To identify how modernist techniques—such as fragmentation, symbolism, and stream of consciousness—emerged as a response to war trauma.
4. To analyze the shift in the portrayal of social roles, especially those of women and soldiers.
5. To demonstrate how literary works of the period contributed to the reconstruction of post-war cultural identity.

Scientific Novelty

The scientific novelty of the research lies in its integrated interpretation of English war literature as both a historical document of trauma and a foundation of modernist aesthetics. Unlike previous studies that focus solely on individual authors or thematic motifs, this work:

1. Examines the direct causal relationship between wartime experience and literary innovation.
2. Reveals how poetic and prose structures themselves were reshaped by the psychological disintegration caused by war.
3. Highlights David Jones's "In Parenthesis" as a unique synthesis of lyricism, myth, and historical consciousness, bridging traditional epic form with modernist experimentation.
4. Demonstrates that post-war modernism in English literature was not only a stylistic revolution but also a moral and philosophical response to the collapse of civilization during the Great War.

RESULTS

The study concludes that the First World War profoundly transformed English literature by dismantling the old narrative structures and giving rise to new modes of artistic expression.

1. Shift of Tone and Theme: The transition from patriotic idealism (Brooke) to disillusioned realism (Owen, Sassoon) reflects the psychological evolution of a generation.
2. Birth of Modernism: Literary form itself underwent radical innovation—fragmented time, multiple voices, symbolic language, and mythic parallels became dominant.
3. Psychological Depth: Writers portrayed war not merely as physical destruction but as a crisis of identity, faith, and humanity.
4. Social Reflection: The war catalyzed discussions on gender, class, and the human condition, paving the way for post-war re-evaluation of values.
5. Enduring Influence: Modernist techniques established during and after the war—stream of consciousness, intertextuality, and mythic structure—became the defining features of 20th-century English literature.

Ultimately, the First World War served as both a destructive and creative force: it shattered illusions of progress and heroism, yet inspired a literary renaissance that sought new meanings in a disordered world.

The First World War was one of the most devastating conflicts of the 20th century and had a huge impact not only in the political-historical, but also in the cultural-literary spheres. English literature has highlighted themes such as the physical horror of war, psychological trauma, social cleavages, the breakdown of patriarchal structures, and idealism-disillusionment. The First World War (1914–1918) left deep traces not only in political and military history, but also in world literature. English literature is particularly noteworthy in this regard, because writers and poets who both participated in the battlefield and observed the changing face of society wrote about different aspects of the war. The description of this period in literature has developed in two main directions: the patriotic idealism of the early years of the war and the disillusionment (a feeling of hopelessness, deception) that arose during the war. In addition, the consequences of the war led to the widespread spread of modernist aesthetic forms (Eliot, 1922; Ford, 1924–1928). In her extensive bibliographic study, *English Poetry of the First World War: A Bibliography* (1978), Catherine W. Reilly lists 2,225 English poets, 532 of whom were women. Most of these women had served in the war effort (Red Cross, Voluntary Aid Detachment, etc.). The anthology *The Muse in Arms* (1917) included 52 poets, collecting 131 poems, and 20 of these poets had died

during the war. The war resulted in the deaths of an estimated 10 million soldiers and 7 million civilians, leaving deep scars on every continent.

The First World War gave rise to a strong emphasis in English literature on the following themes:

- a) the idealistic ideas of heroism and glory prevalent at the beginning of the war,
- b) the fear and death experienced at the front,
- c) the realities of gas attacks, forked roads, and miserable conditions, which were the subject of criticism and attrition. Wilfred Owen's poem *Dulce et Decorum Est* ironically exposes this idealism.

War poems and novels often focus on the depiction of death, physical and moral injury. Among poets, figures such as Owen and Siegfried Sassoon are at the forefront. The horror and social disintegration brought about by the war gave rise to a feeling that traditional prose and poetry forms were no longer sufficient, and authors began to write in new forms - fragmented time structures, individual streams of consciousness, interior monologue, alienation, symbolism, and fragmentation. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Virginia Woolf's *Parade's End* by Ford Madox Ford are examples of these. Themes such as poverty after the war, loss of family members, changing value systems, changing social roles of women, and clearer class differences were discussed. Psychological exhaustion, post-traumatic stress, and the difficulties of returning soldiers to adapt to civilian life were widely covered in literature. The exposure of the simplified and sometimes false air of war ideology, patriotism, and heroic propaganda is a frequent theme in literature. Works such as Sassoon's "The General" and Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth" illustrate this. The impact of war on literary form is manifested in the following aspects:

Fragmented concept of time and space: The plot lines of the works ceased to be straight and consistent; flash-backs, internal monologues, different points of view, psychological and memory scenes came to the fore.

Language and Imagery: Mirrored language, symbolism, mixed metaphors, often uncensored, explicit and sometimes disgusting scenes. Grotesque and horrific imagery are common in the poems.

Multiplicity of Voice and Perspective: War journals, letters, memoirs, individual voices and anonymous mass voices are combined; broader social and psychological portraits are created.

Aesthetic Revolution: The Modernist movement emerged in response to the trauma of the war; a departure from the traditional Victorian era in European and English literature.

In the early years of the war, poets such as Rupert Brooke portrayed the war through the prism of romantic heroism and patriotism. His sonnet "The Soldier" (1914) presents the death of a British soldier as a sacred sacrifice. This approach was an important ideological tool for strengthening the unity of the nation (Brooke, 1914). However, this tone began to conflict with reality as the war dragged on. Wilfred Owen is considered one of the most powerful realist poets of the war. His *Dulce et Decorum Est* vividly and shockingly depicted the horrific deaths caused by gas attacks. Owen used the Latin phrase "an old lie" to show that war was not a "sweet and glorious" act of heroism (Owen, 1920). Siegfried Sassoon was noted for his satirical style. His poem "The General" (1918) harshly criticized the irresponsibility of military leadership. Sassoon emphasized that war was destructive not only by the enemy, but also by internal mismanagement and political intrigue (Sassoon, 1918). Siegfried Sassoon, a fellow soldier and friend of Wilfred Owen, used his poetry to channel his anger and frustration with the war. His works often included

sharp criticisms of the incompetence and incompetence of military leadership. In "In Base Details" Sassoon satirically describes the indifferent attitude of high-ranking officers:

*"If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,
I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base,
And speed glum heroes up the line to death."*

Sassoon's "The General" similarly mocks the lack of support and incompetence of commanders:

*"'Good morning; good morning!' the General said
When we met him last week on our way to the line.
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine."*

David Jones's "In Parenthesis" (1937) is notable for its synthesis of prose and poetry. It presents the daily life, fear, and solidarity of soldiers in both realistic and symbolic language. The author uses folklore and religious motifs to depict war as both a historical and mythological event (Jones, 1937). As Jones himself noted, controversy over the genre of the work arose after its publication. Certain parts of the work read like narrative prose, while others resemble lyric poetry. In the preface, the author associates his work not with song, but rather with sculptural terms, and states that he creates a new "so-called form" from vague experiences. His initial activity as a painter also makes his orientation to these physical images understandable. The materials used by Jones are based on "visions, sounds, fears, hopes, smells, a whole complex of internal and external experiences, a landscape of a certain time and people." Therefore, the work seems to be a synthesis of different styles: on the one hand, it is a living copy of spoken language, and on the other, it is an example of a highly developed, dense and lyrical text. He emphasizes that he formed this work on the basis of "events he saw, heard and participated in". In this regard, the writing has both autobiographical content and historical, philosophical and even theological elements. The introduction to the work by T. S. Eliot in 1961 is of particular importance. Eliot here applies his own methods of composition – a mixture of myth, history, conversation, song and allusion – to Jones's poetry. After examples such as *The Waste Land* (1922), Jones's writing became more accessible to readers. Were it not for the experiments of Eliot and James Joyce, Jones's work might have seemed informal and overly complex to many. Against the backdrop of the modernist tradition, Jones manages to express the harsh realities of the First World War beyond the limits of traditional poetic forms. The structure of the poem is influenced by both the subject and the author's personal life. He was a Londoner, of Welsh and English descent, and a Roman Catholic. All of these cultural experiences shaped his poetic style. Although Jones did not speak Welsh, he saw his works, especially *The Anathemata* (1952), as a means of preserving Welsh heritage. The complexities of the work are made clearer by his commentary. References to ancient Welsh texts such as "Y Gododdin", "The Mabinogion", "Kulhwch ac Olwen" are clearly visible here. In addition, there are Latin allusions to the Roman invasion of Britain, ancient martial and heroic traditions. At the same time, poetic forms of Shakespearean times, signs of the Elizabethan era, the works of L. Carroll from the Victorian era, as well as modern slang are encountered. Thus, Jones creates a poetic text that is connected with time, but has a universal meaning, combining the languages and sounds of British history. The author's Catholic worldview also influenced the structure of the poem. He converted to Catholicism in 1921 - after leaving the army, and this is especially evident in the liturgical references. In the third section of the work, allusions to the Good Friday ceremonies and symbols of the struggle between light and darkness are widely used. In the

seventh section, a great mystery beyond human violence is revealed through the references to religious hours, and the approaching catastrophe is presented in a ritualistic context. As a result, Jones's work is a synthesis of personal experience on the one hand, and historical, religious, and cultural sources on the other. He extends the poetic tradition in a modernist spirit, bringing together both individual and collective memory. The war gave rise to new forms not only in poetry but also in prose. Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* tetralogy (1924–1928) shows the disintegration of English society, the changing class relations, and the deformation of the individual psyche in modernist ways. T. S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land" (1922) symbolizes the moral and cultural crisis of post-war Europe. Through fragmentation, polyphony, and mythological allusions, the author creates a poetic image of a devastated world. This work reflects the indirect but profound cultural consequences of the war (Eliot, 1922). On the eve of the First World War, English prose was largely focused on simple entertainment, shattered by the brutal realities of war. The post-war period saw a significant shift towards a more cynical and dismal prose, replacing the earlier romanticized views, focusing on the futility and horrors of conflict. This shift led to the rise of modernist and Georgian poetry, and memoirs of active service, which informed and reinterpreted the impact of war, both entertaining and disturbing the public. Whereas pre-war prose had been characterized by playfulness and superficiality, contemporary prose has been replaced by sadness and optimism. Thus, popular fiction before the war, such as the "pencil scares" and pulp fiction of the late 19th century, focused on shallow, exciting, and comedic stories. Prose was often characterized by flowery, sentimental language, a legacy of the Victorian era.

The impact of the war on prose, however, changed the subject matter entirely. The devastating experience of war led to a dramatic tonal shift in literature, moving from lighthearted stories to poignant reflections on pain, loss, and suffering. Literature became a way to process the profound changes and horrors of war, exploring themes of life, death, purpose, and sacrifice. Active service memoirs, which provided more direct and personal accounts of the war and informed a public eager to understand what was happening, came to the fore. The war brought with it more "gentle and R-rated" prose styles, as writers broke with Victorian sentimentality and embraced more realistic and often harsh depictions of war. This led to the emergence of new prose forms. As the war progressed and the reality of its horrors became clear, literature began to criticize the conflict more openly, although early enthusiasm for the war also prevailed.

CONCLUSION

The First World War brought about fundamental changes in English literature, both technically and thematically. The war undermined the idealistic, heroic imagery of earlier periods and shaped new regimes of language, form, and literary aesthetics. These effects were not limited to poetry, but also affected genres such as the novel, memoir, essay, and theater. The First World War was an important catalyst for the transition in English literature from patriotic romanticism to anti-war realism and from there to modernist aesthetics. While poets such as Rupert Brooke had defended ideas of heroism and sacrifice at the beginning of the war, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon exposed the horrors of war with realism. David Jones presented this reality in both historical and symbolic language, while Ford Madox Ford and T. S. Eliot created modernist images of the shattered world after the war. Thus, the First World War has a unique place in English literature not only as a theme but also as one of the fundamental causes of an aesthetic revolution.

LITERATURE

1. Brooke, R. (1914). *The Soldier*. In *1914 & Other Poems*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson.
2. Eliot, T. S. (1922). *The Waste Land*. London: Boni & Liveright.
3. Ford, F. M. (1924–1928). *Parade's End* [Tetralogy]. London: Duckworth.
4. Ford, F. M. (1924-1928). *Parade's End* [Tetralogy]. Published in London.
5. Jones, D. (1937). *In Parenthesis*. London: Faber & Faber.
6. Jones, D. (1937). *In Parenthesis*. London: Faber & Faber.
7. Owen, W. (1920). *Dulce et Decorum Est* [poem]. In: *The collected poems of Wilfred Owen*. London: Chatto & Windus.
8. Owen, W. (1920). *Dulce et Decorum Est*. In *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*. London: Chatto & Windus.
9. Reilly, C. W. (1978). *English Poetry of the First World War: A Bibliography*. London: Allen & Unwin.
10. Sassoon, S. (1918). *The General*. In *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*. London: William Heinemann.
11. Yeates, W. M. (1934). *Winged Victory*. London: Jonathan Cape.