**Literature of War: World War I and Now**

**Fall 2018**

**Newberry Library**

**Susanne Dumbleton**

The Arc of the Course

*The experience of war has inspired artists across human history, who record its pains and glories and puzzle out its meaning. In these months that mark the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I, we will study some of the masterpieces created by men and women who lived that war, then open some superb contemporary works that define struggles in our own time. Throughout we will ask whether the ideas beneath these works are universal to the human experience or particular to a given time or conflict.*

Week I: Enthusiasm and the Quest for Glory. (October 9)

Setup of the Seminar: Elements of war: causes; rationales; logistics; combatants and non-combatants; landscape; weaponry; gender issues, and the underlying sense of youthful enthusiasm; idealism; nationalism; patriotism, and camaraderie.

Review of the basic facts of World War I, including: roots in the rise of nationalism; the presence of a “Sense of Certainty;” the social and political nature of those who fought; the eastern and western “fronts.” Maps.

Close reading of poems of Rupert Brooke (The Soldier, p. 108); Julian Grenfell (“Into Battle,” p. 101); John McCrae (“In Flanders Fields,” p. 155); Alan Seeger (“I Have a Rendezvous with Death,” p. 105), and Wilfred Owen (“Dulce et Decorum est”, p. 141).

Introduction to civilian life through Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth (pp. 94-104).*

Viewing of early footage of *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

Viewing of images, including some from Newberry collection “from popular culture on the war,” at the seminar link at <http://www.susannedumbleton.com>

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Reading Assignment for Week 2

“This is not a case of Petty Right or Wrong,” by Edward Thomas (p. 15)

“Break of Day in Trenches,” by Isaac Rosenberg (p. 48)

“In the Trenches,” by Richard Aldington (p. 51-2)

“Exposure,” by Wilfred Owen (p. 55)

“Apologia Pro Poemate Meo,” by Wilfred Owen (p. 81),

“The Sendoff,” by Wilfred Owen (p. 44)

“Come on My Lucky Lads,” by Edmond Blunden (Handout)

*Testament of Youth* selection*,* by Brittain (pp. 232-244)

Consider maps and photos at the seminar links at <http://www.susannedumbleton.com>

Including materials from Newberry collection.

Week 2: Reality, Resilience, Remove. (October 16)

The emergence of two worlds—at home and away. Life as waiting; as obedience; as intimacy; as uncertainty; as ambition; as shock; as fear.

Close reading of the assigned poems and prose.

Viewing of middle sections of film, *All Quiet on the Western Front*

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Reading Assignment for Week 3:

“A Working Party,” by Siegfried Sassoon, (handout)

“The Death-Bed,” by Siegfried Sassoon, p. 220

“Base Details,” by Siegfried Sassoon, (handout)

“Futility” by Wilfred Owen, p. 54

“Dulce et Decorum Est,” by Wilfred Owen, p. 141

“Anthem for Doomed Youth,” by Wilfred Owen, p. 131

“Insensibility” by Wilfred Owen (handout)

“Aftermath,” by Siegfried Sassoon, p. 267

Read by Jeremy Irons <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZxYjogqB2E>

*Testament of Youth,* by Brittain, pp. 417-444

Maps and photos at <http://www.susannedumbleton.com>

Optional :

*Regeneration: “*Owen meets Sassoon” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuzRR3jVgS0>

Week 3: Demise of Optimism, Loss of Certainty. (October 23)

Heroism and skill grow, but growing sense of emptiness and deception fills the air, accompanied by disillusionment and separation from those who cheered. Societies transformed. The search for villain. Rebuilding? Or building a new world.

Close reading of the poems, journals and readings.

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Reading Assignment for Week 4:

*Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, (pp. 1-120).

Week 4: Civilian as Target/Unwitting Participant/Refugee. (October 30)

War now, somewhere. Slow recognition of new reality. Choosing to remain or flee. Defining family; defining “we” and “they,” and facing the question of personal responsibility.

Close reading and discussion of first half of *Exit West.*

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Reading Assignment for Week 5

*Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, (pp. 121-240 (end)).

Week 5: Commonalities and Distinctions. (Nov 6)

The personal impact of flight and disorientation. Fantasy, wish-fulfillment, reality. War as chaos, as challenge to personal identity and disruption of communal life*.*

Close reading and discussion of second half of *Exit West.*

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Reading Assignment for Week 6:

*The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen, chapters 1-10 (pp. 1-175).

Week 6: Agents and Double Agents. (November 13)

The blurring of lines: civilian, formal military, informal military, agents and double agents. The power of loyalty—to family, to an idea, to a sense of place. The nature of culture as shaping ideas and perceptions.

Discussion of *The Sympathizer*, with some reference to “”Strange Meeting” by Wilfred Owen*.*

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Reading Assignment for Week 7:

*The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen, Chapters 11-23 (pp. 176-335).

*Testament of Youth* by Brittain, pp. 642-661.

Week 7: The Complexity of National Identity. (November 27)

Choosing sides and blowing smoke. The question of the error of fighting current wars using strategies of older wars. The aftermath of war for those who survive.

Close reading and discussion of *The Sympathizer.*

Summary discussion based on an overview of poetry, autobiography, and fiction that have been considered of the question: what phenomena appear to be universal in the human experience of war and what appear distinctive to a particular conflict. What human conditions and traits seem to define how a person will react and behave?

**Required Readings:**

Brittain, Vera. (Selections) *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-*

*1925.* London and New York: Penguin Books, 1933. ISBN 0-14-012251-6.

Hamid, Mohsin. *Exit West.* New York: Riverhead Books, 2018. ISBN 978-0-5253-506-5.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *The Sympathizer.* New York: Grove Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-8021-2494-4.

Selected poems. *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry,* Ed. George Walter.

New York: Penguin Books, 2006. ISBN-13: 978-0-141-18190-5.

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