**BLITZ**

**Thumbnail**

The BLITZ during the Second World War both curtailed and provoked creative expression. Key figures of the modernist movement re-evaluated the politics underlying their aesthetics at this time. Others sought to portray the experience through forms and styles that reflected the sense of discontinuity and fragmentariness of war, or that critiqued state rhetoric and governmental propaganda. Literary critics have, variously, considered Blitz writing as a partial continuation of modernism’s tenets, or as a watershed event constitutive of late modernism and modernism’s end.

**Entry**

In World War II, the protracted bombing on the British home front by Germany made writing a difficult activity to sustain. Civilians were plagued by disruptions like food and paper shortages, and the BLACKOUT. These factors, among others, hindered creative writing and contributed to an overall decline in book production (Hewison). Concomitant with the decrease in new fiction titles, however, was an increase in short stories and anthologies. Not only was the discontinuous tempo of wartime life conducive to the production of shorter works; the form of short fiction itself was also seen to reflect the fragmentation of that time (Mengham).

Some of the most enduring texts of the period took the form of short stories. The works of Elizabeth Bowen, Henry Green and William Sansom capture, by turns, the horror and banality of the Blitz. Bowen’s celebrated collection, *The Demon Lover* (1945), took for its subject matter the surreality of wartime life, which she often conveyed through the presence and haunting of ghosts. Green and Sansom, who were part of the Auxiliary Fire Services in London, channeled their firefighting experiences into stories published in periodicals like *Penguin New Writing* (1940-1950) and *Horizon* (1940-1950).

Longer works of fiction, when they were produced, typically dealt with themes of spatial and temporal dislocation. These frequently mapped onto disjunctive or amnesic subjectivities. Patrick Hamilton’s *Hangover Square* (1941) looks back at the months between the Munich Agreement and the invasion of Poland through the eyes of a schizophrenic murderer. Green’s novel *Caught* (1943) culminates in a Blitz fire that knocks out the protagonist, who is unable to recall the experience thereon after. In Graham Greene’s spy thriller *The Ministry of Fear* (1943), an amnesic protagonist tries to decipher his unwitting involvement in a fifth columnist plot. Meanwhile, James Hanley’s *No Directions* (1943) renders the disorientation of the blackout through disembodied voices, obscured settings, and truncated sentences. In the immediate post-war period, the Blitz would continue to reverberate as an important topic in novels, notably in Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day* (1949), Rose Macaulay’s *The World My Wilderness* (1950), and Greene’s *The End of the Affair* (1951).

In poetry, the Blitz features prominently in the work of Dylan Thomas and Louis MacNeice, the latter of whom composed ‘Brother Fire’ (1944), a poem about fire’s simultaneously destructive and enthralling qualities. The poetics of the Blitz also inflected T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*; the section ‘Little Gidding’ is influenced by Eliot’s time as a firewatcher for Faber & Faber. Historical circumstances during the war were such that the bombings created new ruins, but they also uncovered older ones from the ancient past. This atmosphere of spatio-temporal distortion and palimpsest is found in H. D.’s poetic work ‘The Walls Do Not Fall’ (1941).

Many of these writers, traditionally neglected, have received renewed attention thanks to scholarship exploring the Second World War within the strains of late modernism. Critics have examined, in particular, the impact of socio-political circumstances such as the diminishment of British national culture (Esty) and the democratisation of literature alongside other media (Deer). Scholars have also explored the continued centrality of modernism to Blitz writing. Some have studied how and why World War II brought the underlying politics of modernism’s aesthetics to account (MacKay). Others have analyzed the way modernism’s themes and forms interpolated wartime writing through an ethics of recuperation or salvage (Mellor). Blitz writing has also been examined in relation to topics such as wartime psychoanalysis (Stonebridge) and home front propaganda (Piette).

References and further reading

Hewison, Robert (1977) *Under Siege: Literary Life in London 1939-45*, Newton Abbot: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

A study of the literary history of wartime London, this is an essential resource for understanding the contexts surrounding literary production during the Blitz.

MacKay, Marina (2007) *Modernism and World War II*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MacKay’s groundbreaking text unravels the way wartime lay bare and questioned modernism’s aesthetic practices.

Mellor, Leo (2011) *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mellor’s wide-ranging book considers how aspects of modernism were re-appropriated in wartime, particularly with regards to the movement of Surrealism.

Rawlinson, Mark (2000) *British Writing of the Second World War*, Oxford: Clarendon.

Rawlinson’s text demonstrates, in particular, how representations of death and the human body remained largely absent from aestheticizing descriptions of the Blitz.

Stonebridge, Lyndsey (2007) *The Writing of Anxiety: Imagining Wartime in Mid-Century British Culture*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

This book contextualizes and historicizes the psychoanalytical movement, and how its concerns with anxiety manifested in the works of wartime writers and artists.

Contributor: Beryl Pong**Paratextual material**

**BLITZ**

(link to website with historical information on the Blitz)

<http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/blitz>

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**BLACKOUT**

(image of a painting of the blackout)

<http://www.vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=64330>

Copyright: Imperial War Museum

**ELIZABETH BOWEN**

(link to short biography of Bowen)

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/76126/Elizabeth-Bowen>

Copyright: Encyclopedia Britannica

**HENRY GREEN**

(link to a book review of Green’s biography, but with good biographical information overall)

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=155147&sectioncode=21>

Copyright: Times Higher Education

**WILLIAM SANSOM**

(link to a short article in *The Independent* on Sansom’s work)

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/forgotten-authors-no-8-william-sansom-949090.html>

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***PENGUIN NEW WRITING***

(link to image of *Penguin New Writing* cover)

<http://farm5.staticflickr.com/4097/4875835714\_16685c901b\_z.jpg>

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***HORIZON***

(link to a book review on Connolly’s *Horizon*, with good background context)

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Cyril-Connolly-s--Horizon--5524>

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**PATRICK HAMILTON**

(link to a short entry on the life and work of Hamilton)

<http://www.penguin.co.uk/nf/Author/AuthorPage/0,,1000013827,00.html>

Copyright: Penguin Books

**MUNICH AGREEMENT**

(link to transcription of Munich Pact by Yale Law School)

<http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/munich1.asp>

**GRAHAM GREENE**

(link to BBC iPlayer radio programme, *Great Lives*, on Greene)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b012wjd1/Great\_Lives\_Series\_25\_Graham\_Greene/>

**JAMES HANLEY**

(link to an entry on the life and work of Hanley)

<http://www.faber.co.uk/article/2009/6/introducing-james-hanley/>

Copyright: Faber & Faber

**ROSE MACAULAY**

(link to a short bibliographic entry on Macaulay by Virago Press)

<http://www.virago.co.uk/author\_results.asp?sf1=data&st1=profile&exp=J-K-LS-T-UM-N-O&ref=e2007030616083445#bibliography>

Copyright: Virago Press

**DYLAN THOMAS**

(link to Thomas’s official website)

<http://www.dylanthomas.com/index.cfm?articleid=4458&splashpage=false>

Copyright: City and Council of Swansea

**LOUIS MACNEICE**

(link to entry on MacNeice on Poetry Archive with audio recording)

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=1559>

Copyright: The Poetry Archive

**T. S. ELIOT**

(link to biography and image of Eliot on website of Academy of American Poets)

<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/18>

Copyright: The Academy of American Poets

**‘LITTLE GIDDING’**

(link to Little Gidding’s relationship with Eliot via the website of Saint John’s Church in Little Gidding)

<http://www.littlegiddingchurch.org.uk/lgchtmlfiles/lgpeople2.html>

**FABER & FABER**

(link to Faber & and Faber’s official history)

<http://www.faber.co.uk/about/>

Copyright: Faber & Faber

**H. D.**

(link to brief biography and image of H. D. on website of Academy of American Poets)

<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/234>

Copyright: The Academy of American Poets

**PSYCHOANALYSIS**

(link to bibliography on psychoanalysis by Professor John Forrester)

<http://www.hps.cam.ac.uk/research/hpp.html>

**PROPAGANDA**

(link to propaganda art holdings at the National Archives, Kew)

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/theartofwar/prop/>