

A Tale of Two Nations: Irish and British Literary Identity in the Twentieth-Century

Important Dates to Consider:

1901	Queen Victoria dies
1914-1918	The Great War
1916	Easter Rising in Dublin
1916	Battle of the Somme, France
1921	Irish 'Free State' formed; outbreak of Irish Civil War
1939	UK declares war on Germany; Ireland remains neutral
1945	British Empire crumbles
1947	India and Pakistan formed
1949	Ireland breaks all political ties with British Commonwealth
1969	Violence in Northern Ireland begins; known as the 'Troubles'
1973	Ireland joins the EEC
1977	Punk movement in London begins
1982	Falkland War
1999	England leaves Hong Kong

Poems About National Identity to Consider:

25 Oct 1415, the Battle of Agincourt

Taken from *Henry V* (Shakespeare)

From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered—
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
For he that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother, be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition.
And gentlemen in England now abed
Shall think themselves accurst they were not here
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's Day

The Great War, 1914-1918

Rupert Brooke, "The Soldier"

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,

Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.
And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

Wilfred Owen, "*Dulce et Decorum Est*"

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of disappointed shells that dropped behind.

GAS! Gas! Quick, boys!-- An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime.--
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,--
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

Easter Rising, Dublin, Ireland, 1916

W.B. Yeats "Easter 1916"

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

That woman's days were spent
In ignorant good will,
Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill.
What voice more sweet than hers
When young and beautiful,
She rode to harriers?
This man had kept a school
And rode our winged horse.
This other his helper and friend
Was coming into his force;
He might have won fame in the end,
So sensitive his nature seemed,
So daring and sweet his thought.
This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vain-glorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,
Yet I number him in the song;
He, too, has resigned his part
In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

Hearts with one purpose alone

Through summer and winter, seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.
The horse that comes from the road,
The rider, the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute change.
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim;
And a horse splashes within it
Where long-legged moor-hens dive
And hens to moor-cocks call.
Minute by minute they live:
The stone's in the midst of all.

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice?
That is heaven's part, our part
To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.
What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death.
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead.
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a verse --
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

Battle of Britain, 1940

John Betjeman, "In Westminster Abbey"

Let me take this other glove off
As the *vox humana* swells,
And the beauteous fields of Eden
Bask beneath the Abbey bells.
Here, where England's statesmen lie,

Listen to a lady's cry.

Gracious Lord, oh bomb the Germans.
Spare their women for Thy Sake,
And if that is not too easy
We will pardon Thy Mistake.
But, gracious Lord, whate'er shall be,
Don't let anyone bomb me.

Keep our Empire undismembered
Guide our Forces by Thy Hand,
Gallant blacks from far Jamaica,
Honduras and Togoland;
Protect them Lord in all their fights,
And, even more, protect the whites.

Think of what our Nation stands for,
Books from Boots and country lanes,
Free speech, free passes, class distinction,
Democracy and proper drains.
Lord, put beneath Thy special care
One-eighty-nine Cadogan Square.

Although dear Lord I am a sinner,
I have done no major crime;
Now I'll come to Evening Service
Whensoever I have the time.
So, Lord, reserve for me a crown.
And do not let my shares go down.

I will labour for Thy Kingdom,
Help our lads to win the war,
Send white flowers to the cowards
Join the Women's Army Corps,
Then wash the Steps around Thy Throne
In the Eternal Safety Zone.

Now I feel a little better,
What a treat to hear Thy word,
Where the bones of leading statesmen,
Have so often been interr'd.
And now, dear Lord, I cannot wait
Because I have a luncheon date.

London, 1970s, punk movement

The Sex Pistols, "God Save the Queen"

God save the queen,

the fascist regime
God save the queen
She ain't no human being
there's no future
in England's dreaming
no future, no future, no future for you.

Julian Barnes, *England, England* (1998)

There were still old-timers around nostalgic for the British Empire [...] So where did that leave us now? With something called the United Kingdom which, to be honest and facing facts, didn't live up to its adjective. Its members were united in the way that tenants paying rent to the same landlord were united.

Questions to Consider:

How does literature influence national identity?

Must poetry/art be radical in nature in order to critique the nation-state?

What role do pseudonyms have upon personal identity?

How does diversity influence national identity?