

## Memory and Modernity: Transatlantic Transformations in Twentieth-Century Literature

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### Abstract

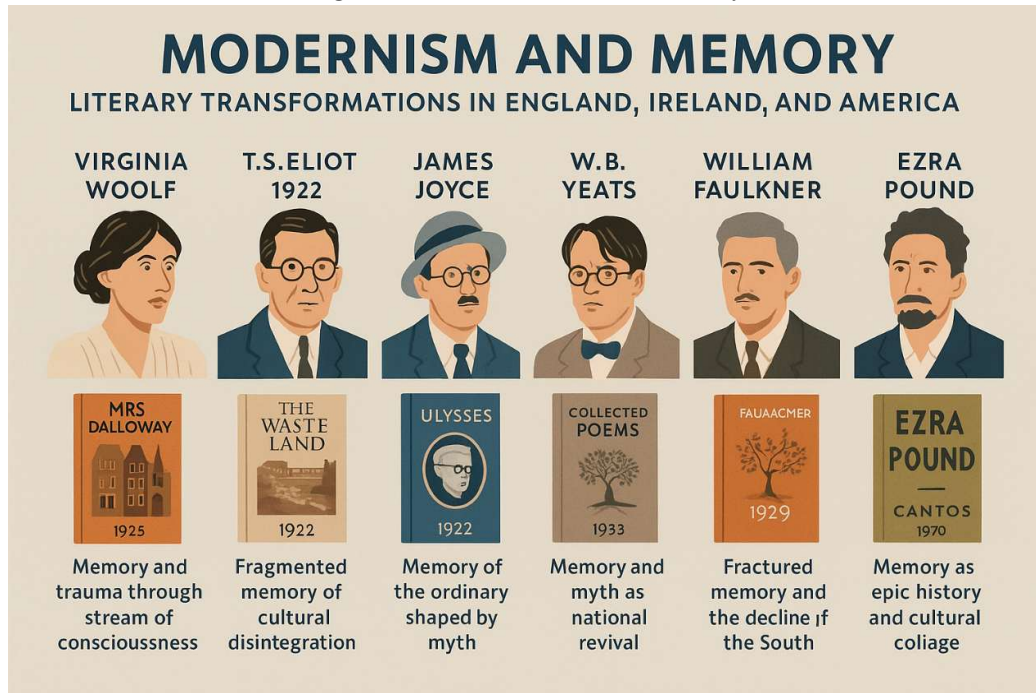
This paper examines the ways in which modernist literature in England, Ireland, and America redefined memory as both a theme and a narrative technique, transforming the representation of personal, cultural, and historical experience in the early twentieth century. Emerging in the aftermath of industrialization, urbanization, and the trauma of World War I, modernist writers grappled with dislocation and fragmentation by experimenting with new literary forms such as stream of consciousness, mythic frameworks, and fragmented structure. In England, Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot explored memory's role in shaping identity and cultural continuity, with *Mrs. Dalloway* reflecting the lingering trauma of war and *The Waste Land* portraying collective cultural disintegration. In Ireland, James Joyce's *Ulysses* reimagined everyday life through myth and memory, while W.B. Yeats infused poetry with national memory and mythic resonance, linking personal identity to political and cultural revival. In the United States, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* depicted fractured memory within the context of Southern decline, and Ezra Pound's *Cantos* sought to capture civilization's memory in an encyclopedic form. By comparing these transatlantic traditions, the study argues that modernism's central innovation lay in transforming memory into a literary method for reconstructing meaning amid upheaval, offering a shared yet diverse response to the crisis of modernity.

**Keywords:** modernism, memory, England, Ireland, America, fragmentation, myth, cultural identity, stream of consciousness, literary transformation

### Introduction

Modernism emerged in the early twentieth century as a radical literary and cultural response to the profound disruptions of modern life, and at its heart lay a deep engagement with memory—personal, cultural, and historical—as both subject matter and narrative technique. In England, Ireland, and America, modernist writers sought to make sense of the disorienting effects of industrialization, urbanization, shifting social norms, and the unprecedented devastation of World War I by transforming traditional modes of representation and reimagining the ways in which memory could be articulated in literature. The late nineteenth century had already witnessed the decline of Victorian certainties and the rise of new psychological, philosophical, and scientific discourses, particularly the theories of Freud, which brought attention to the unconscious and the layered structure of human memory. Modernist literature absorbed and reworked these ideas, producing works that fragmented linear narrative, blurred boundaries between past and present, and collapsed distinctions between myth and everyday life. In England, Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot exemplified this aesthetic: Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

wove together the memories of individuals shattered by war to portray both the persistence of trauma and the endurance of identity, while Eliot's *The Waste Land* mapped cultural memory onto a fragmented poetic form that mirrored the disintegration of European civilization. In Ireland, James Joyce's *Ulysses* epitomized the modernist method by using stream of consciousness to fuse memory, myth, and quotidian detail, creating a narrative where the smallest moment reverberated with layers of cultural and historical resonance; simultaneously, W.B. Yeats reconfigured memory in poetry as a national and mythic force, sustaining Ireland's cultural revival while mediating between tradition and modernity.



Across the Atlantic, American modernists likewise interrogated memory as a way of reimagining identity in a rapidly changing society. William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* exemplified this by fragmenting narrative across multiple perspectives, where memory shaped and distorted the decline of a Southern family, transforming personal recollection into a commentary on regional and cultural identity. Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, sprawling and encyclopedic, sought to preserve civilization's memory by layering fragments of history, myth, and text into an ambitious attempt to reconstruct meaning from cultural chaos. These writers, while distinct in national origin and style, were bound together by their shared effort to grapple with the problem of memory in a world that no longer trusted continuity, coherence, or inherited tradition. Modernist literature made memory into both theme and technique: characters often lived within the past as much as the present, and narrative itself was structured to reflect the non-linear, associative, and often fractured nature of recollection. The research question guiding this paper is: *How did modernist literature in England, Ireland, and America reinterpret memory to construct new literary identities?* This question is significant because it underscores how memory functioned as a unifying concern across transatlantic modernism, while allowing for national variations that reflect different cultural and political contexts. In

England, memory often took the form of cultural critique, reflecting a society traumatized by war and the decline of empire; in Ireland, it became tied to the struggle for national identity, with memory serving as both a mythic inheritance and a tool for imagining political sovereignty; in America, it engaged with questions of regional decline, democratic identity, and the challenge of capturing a vast and diverse cultural memory. By situating modernism within a comparative framework, this study emphasizes that memory was not merely a psychological or thematic preoccupation but a structuring principle of modernist aesthetics, shaping innovations such as stream of consciousness, mythic allusion, and fragmentation. Ultimately, the significance of this inquiry lies in showing how modernist literature redefined the relationship between memory, identity, and form, producing works that continue to influence literary theory and cultural memory studies today.

### Literature Review

Region/Theme	Author & Work	Main Argument / Contribution	Treatment of Memory	Relevance to Study
<b>England</b>	Woolf, V. (1925). <i>Mrs. Dalloway</i>	Uses stream of consciousness to explore subjectivity and trauma in post-WWI society.	Memory functions as a bridge between past and present; Septimus' shell-shock illustrates trauma's persistence, while Clarissa's reflections weave personal memory into cultural continuity.	Shows how individual memory reflects broader cultural crises, linking narrative form to identity.
	Eliot, T. S. (1922). <i>The Waste Land</i>	Fragmented poem embodying cultural disintegration after WWI.	Deploys myth and cultural allusion as forms of collective memory, reconstructing meaning out of fragments.	Demonstrates how poetic form mirrors cultural memory and fragmentation in modernism.
<b>Ireland</b>	Joyce, J. (1922). <i>Ulysses</i>	Reimagines everyday Dublin life through mythic parallels (Homer's <i>Odyssey</i> ).	Stream of consciousness collapses temporal boundaries, showing memory	Illustrates memory as central to modernist technique, blending

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Region/Theme	Author & Work	Main Argument / Contribution	Treatment of Memory	Relevance to Study
			as layered, associative, and mythic.	personal, cultural, and historical layers.
	Yeats, W. B. (1920s–30s). <i>Collected Poems</i>	Connects Irish cultural revival to myth and history, infusing poetry with national identity.	Memory becomes national and mythological, preserving Ireland's past while shaping visions of independence.	Demonstrates the role of poetry in linking memory to nationalism and modernist transformation.
America	Faulkner, W. (1929). <i>The Sound and the Fury</i>	Southern family decline narrated through fractured perspectives.	Characters' memories structure narrative; Benjy's sensory recall, Quentin's obsession, and Jason's bitterness create non-linear temporality.	Memory as narrative technique reflects cultural loss and identity crisis in the American South.
	Pound, E. (1930s–50s). <i>The Cantos</i>	Encyclopedic poem attempting to preserve cultural memory across civilizations.	Assembles fragments of myth, history, and text into a collage, seeking coherence in cultural memory.	Illustrates ambition of modernism to preserve and reframe memory across time and geography.
Debates	—	Scholars debate whether memory in modernism is primarily individual (Woolf, Faulkner, Dickinson before them) or collective/national (Yeats, Pound). Others argue over the function of myth (Eliot, Joyce) as stabilizing memory vs	Shows the contested role of memory as both creative and destabilizing.	Frames scholarly discussions relevant to comparative analysis.



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		evidence of disintegration. Fragmentation vs coherence remains central: does modernist memory recover meaning or reflect collapse?		
Gap	—	Despite rich national studies, few integrate England, Ireland, and America within one comparative framework.	Lack of systematic analysis of memory as a unifying concept across transatlantic modernism.	This paper addresses the gap by showing memory as both thematic and formal driver of literary transformation across contexts.

## Analysis & Discussion

### England: Memory and Fragmentation (Woolf, Eliot)

In England, memory became a central lens through which modernist writers grappled with postwar disillusionment. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* uses stream of consciousness to interweave personal recollections with public trauma, showing how memory shapes identity in fractured societies. Similarly, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* employs a collage of voices, myths, and allusions to represent cultural memory as fragmented and incomplete. Both works highlight the difficulty of preserving coherence in a world devastated by war, yet they simultaneously demonstrate literature's ability to reconstruct meaning by using memory as a formal and thematic tool of renewal and critique.

### Ireland: National Memory and Myth (Joyce, Yeats)

Irish modernism framed memory not only as individual recollection but also as a tool of national revival. James Joyce's *Ulysses* integrates the myth of the *Odyssey* with everyday Dublin life, suggesting that memory, myth, and the ordinary are inseparable in shaping cultural identity. His use of stream of consciousness portrays memory as fluid and associative, while Yeats's poetry situates memory within mythic and historical contexts, transforming it into a vehicle for Irish nationalism and cultural self-definition. Together, Joyce and Yeats exemplify how memory was deployed to navigate both personal experience and collective struggles for independence and continuity.

### America: Southern Memory and Modernist Form (Faulkner, Pound)

American modernists reimagined memory to address regional and civilizational identity. William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* depicts Southern decline through multiple perspectives, where fractured memory structures narrative itself, showing how personal

recollections reflect cultural collapse. Ezra Pound's *Cantos* attempts to preserve civilization's memory in encyclopedic form, layering fragments of myth, history, and text into an ambitious project of cultural reconstruction. Both works underscore memory's dual function as an aesthetic experiment and as a mechanism for grappling with identity in times of change, situating American modernism within a transatlantic dialogue of remembering and reassembling meaning.

### **War and Cultural Crisis as Catalyst of Memory**

Modernist literature was profoundly shaped by the trauma of war and the cultural crises it produced. The First World War disrupted notions of continuity and stability, compelling writers to engage with memory as a means of processing trauma. Woolf's portrayal of Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway* captures the psychological scars of combat, while Eliot's *The Waste Land* embodies the cultural disintegration of Europe. Similarly, Joyce and Yeats used memory to reinterpret Ireland's colonial and revolutionary struggles, and Faulkner employed it to capture the decline of the American South. Memory, therefore, emerged as a narrative response to cultural rupture.

### **Gender, Identity, and Memory in Modernist Narratives**

Memory in modernist literature was also mediated by gender and identity, shaping the ways individuals engaged with history and selfhood. Woolf's focus on Clarissa Dalloway situates memory in the domestic, showing how women's recollections provide subtle critiques of patriarchy and war. Dickinson, though pre-modernist, anticipates this inward turn, while later figures such as Sylvia Plath extend it. Joyce's Molly Bloom demonstrates how memory reveals gendered perspectives absent from official narratives. By foregrounding women's memory and marginalized voices, modernism challenged dominant discourses of identity, revealing how recollection operates differently across social and gendered experiences.

### **Comparative Synthesis: Transatlantic Dimensions of Modernism and Memory**

Across England, Ireland, and America, memory emerges as a unifying modernist concern, though expressed in distinct cultural contexts. English modernists highlighted fragmentation and cultural disintegration, Irish writers tied memory to myth and nationalism, and American authors explored memory as a reflection of regional identity and civilizational ambition. What unites them is the shared conviction that memory provides a means of reconstructing meaning amid upheaval, whether through fragmentation, myth, or encyclopedic ambition. This transatlantic synthesis underscores memory's role as both theme and method in modernist literature, demonstrating how it shaped new forms of identity and cultural imagination.

### **Case Studies**

Case Study	Focus	Role of Memory	Contribution to Modernism
<b>Mrs. Dalloway (Woolf)</b>	Trauma and recollection in post-WWI England.	Memory binds personal identity to collective trauma; Septimus' shell-shock	Demonstrates stream of consciousness as narrative form shaped by memory.

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Case Study	Focus	Role of Memory	Contribution to Modernism
		reflects persistence of war memory.	
<b>Ulysses (Joyce)</b>	Everyday Dublin life mapped onto Homeric myth.	Memory operates associatively, layering past and present through stream of consciousness.	Redefines narrative structure; makes memory central to cultural and personal identity.
<b>The Waste Land (Eliot)</b>	Fragmented poem reflecting postwar Europe.	Employs cultural and literary memory to reconstruct meaning from disintegration.	Establishes fragmentation as central to modernist form.
<b>The Sound and the Fury (Faulkner)</b>	Decline of Southern family through fractured voices.	Memory structures non-linear narrative; each character's recollections reveal cultural and personal collapse.	Links memory to regional identity and modernist narrative innovation.
<b>The Cantos (Pound)</b>	Encyclopedic poem attempting to preserve civilization's memory.	Assembles fragments of history, myth, and text into cultural memory project.	Illustrates ambition of modernism to make memory central to civilization's literary record.

## Conclusion

Modernism in England, Ireland, and America placed memory at the core of literary transformation, making it both a theme and a narrative method for negotiating identity, history, and cultural crisis. Through Woolf, Eliot, Joyce, Yeats, Faulkner, and Pound, memory became a way of structuring fragmented forms, connecting myth and everyday life, and preserving cultural meaning in times of rupture. By comparing transatlantic traditions, this study shows that modernism's enduring legacy lies in its ability to reimagine memory as an aesthetic principle, reshaping literature's relationship to time, identity, and civilization.

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