

In this course we will read several novels that emerged from World War I. Some are direct accounts in a memoir style of life at the front and in the trenches. Others recount life on the home front. We will read novels by English, French, and German writers, comparing their accounts, their aesthetic and thematic approaches to the trauma of the Great War. We'll learn about life both in the trenches and at home, and about how the war was shaped by – and came to reconfigure – notions of nation, race, sex, gender, class, violence, history, narrative, and the unspeakable. We will consider in particular how women were positioned before, during, and after the war; how masculinity was reconfigured in light of militarism, bravery and cowardice, shell-shock, and the end of hostilities; various theories of civilization and violence; and the challenges posed to writers, thinkers, and artists when it comes to representing the unspeakable – the unthinkable.

Objectives: This course will introduce students to a range of writing informed by World War I. It will enhance their competence in the historical realities of the war, its cultural contexts and impacts, and its characteristic narrative modes. Students will gain a broad sense of the differences in national traditions of writing about the war (British, French, German); how the war was understood in personal, psychological, national, and cultural terms; and what sorts of challenges its unprecedentedly cataclysmic violence presented to those who wished to represent it. As this is an upper-year course, students will continue to develop and hone the literary critical skills they have begun to nurture in lower-level courses. They will also learn how to integrate effectively contemporary and subsequent theoretical, philosophical, cultural, and historical materials into their understanding of the novels' aesthetic strategies and contents. Through experiential assignments, reflection, and literary-critical writing, students will emerge from the course both much better informed about the world's first encounter with "total war" and more fully equipped to engage with the aesthetics of violence.