

Articulating modernist  
values through  
memories of war in  
'good-bye to all that'



**ASSIGN  
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In his autobiography *Goodbye to All That*, Robert Graves recounts his life experiences from his earliest education, through the First World War, and up to his later time in Majorca where he writes in 1929. Graves acts as a Modernist by supporting the changing European social values of the 1920s, namely those of sexuality and Suffragette-inspired feminist ideals, anti-militant nationalism and media-stoked patriotic propaganda, and anti-imperialist and pro-self-determination sentiments. His support of these ideals is expressed in his writing through his marriage and British social connections, his position as a modern aesthete and literary figure, and from his experiences in post-War colonial Britain and in Ireland. Through his autobiography therefore, Graves uses present memory to reflect on and critique past cultural, national, and political values, becoming a persuasive flag bearer of 1920's Modernist values, and thus develops the historical phenomenon of memory as a past that is experienced in the present, as the present (Gerstein, 2-12-18).

Robert Graves is most effectively portrayed as a 1920's style Modernist in his indirect attack on Victorian cultural sentimentality, sexual pruderies, and patriarchal fixations, as shown in *Goodbye to All That*, and explores these Modernist views through his memory of events during and after his time in the trenches. These attacks are distinct from his implicit critiques of British militarism and Victorian-era politics, including notions of class hierarchy. Graves exemplifies the notion that 'memory is about the present' (Gerstein, 2-5-18) specifically by promoting the changing social values of the 1920s and its associated revisionist movement by highlighting, for example, his wife's ardent feminism, drawing on contemporary suffragette sentiments.

Nancy's "furious" (Graves, 272) reaction to their wedding, and her continually developing anti-male views as described by Graves, reflect the notion of 'present memory' as it contrasts the Victorian female archetype of 1914 with the increasingly feminist and modernist environment of the 1920s, when Graves is writing. The story of Lytton Strachey and its homosexual connotations in the "air-cushion...in Court" (Graves, 249), and indeed the frank discussions of his public schoolboy romance with Dick at Charterhouse, exemplify his rejection of Victorian "prudish prurience" and instead develop the modernist trope of "breaking the mold" (Gerstein, 2-7-18), paving the way for the Jazz Age, Bauhaus, and Weimar culture, for example.

Graves the British Army Officer ironically acts as a powerful critique of Victorian British, and indeed Europe-wide, notions of official patriotic nationalism and imperialism in remembering his Great War experience, doing so mainly as an "aesthete" and literary figure alongside such contemporaries as Siegfried Sassoon. The poetry of Graves and especially Sassoon that countered the "proper and patriotic" (Gerstein, 2-5-18) call to arms, the empire justification for a militaristic nationalism, and the aristocratic, 'public school bourgeoisie', did so ironically and euphemistically. This contrasts with such works as Aldington's "Death of a Hero" and to a degree the Little Mother text (Graves, 228), both of which parade such nationalistic slurs as duty, absolute victory, and other justifications as supplied by those who labelled figures like Graves as 'Defeatists'. Graves' narrative voice acts in a similar way to Remarque's in *All Quiet on the Western Front* when discussing how far apart the worldviews of the battlefield and the home-front are, especially when referring to the "war

madness” as both a “ foreign” and a “ newspaper” language (Graves, 228). Thus, we see Graves the writer attacking home-front notions of militarism, a media stoking public perceptions of “ frontline patriotism” (Gerstein, 2-7-18), and notions of upper class British duty and sentimentality.

British imperial sentiments left over from the Victorian era are critiqued by Robert Graves when recounting his time spent teaching at the King Fuad University in Cairo, in British-controlled Egypt, using memory in these instances to account for absurd imperial justifications (i. e. the “ White Man’s Burden”) and inter-national strife. Graves’ perception of his “ principle allegiance...to the High Commissioner” (Graves, 331) illustrates his negative view of colonial benevolence. Assurance of there being “ no Egyptian nation” (Graves, 332) shows another colonial mentality of imposing British nationhood upon a foreign land, contrasting with modernist sympathies for those whose Wilsonian ‘ national self-determination’ had been denied. To an extent as well, Graves’ experience during the Irish rebellion after his final return from the front shows a contemporary manifestation of colonial rebellion woven into international politics (Gerstein, 2-12-18). Graves is characteristically euphemistic with his descriptions, describing the “ constant clashes” as having “ little ill-feeling”, while his own Royal Welch “ made a joke of politics” (Graves, 279). This case acts also upon Graves’ multinational background, as he himself plays up his Irish ancestry during his time there. Overall, we see an external and internal recognition by Graves of the futility and absurdity of European national and imperial rivalries and conquests, and contributes to his criticisms of nationalistic slurs and political ‘ anti-defeatist’

movements. Here we see Graves the modernist attacking dated Victorian principles through his memory of times spent in the colonies.

In recounting his experience as a British Army Officer in World War I, Robert Graves employs the tools of present memory to effectively criticize pre-War Victorian socio-political and cultural sentiments through a Modernist, late-1920's lens. Graves does this by guiding the reader through his associations with the nascent feminist and anti-Victorian prudery movements, exploring how sexual norms were questioned and broken throughout the period.

Graves' literary contention with official patriotic nationalist slurs and the gulf of worldviews between the battlefield and the home-front offer insight into the Modernist trend of shifting societal focus from propaganda politics to art and aesthetics. Finally, Graves acts as a persuasive critic of the imperial justification in reliving his experiences in colonial Egypt and Ireland, drawing further upon Modernist sentiments regarding national self-determination and anti-imperial feeling. Thus, it is not unreasonable to characterize Graves as a Modernist who employed memory to describe and account for the changing political and cultural underpinnings of 1920's European society, and in turn provides meaningful interpretations of World War I phenomena beyond the mainstream pacifist or defeatist point of view at the time.