

## Impressionism in Art, Music and Literature

Impressionism is a style of painting that was popular in France towards the end of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth century. Manet, Monet and Renoir were leading painters in the movement. Samples of their work can be seen in the right. Impressionist art usually describes a scene or creates an atmosphere. Mood and feelings are more important than clarity. It is difficult to make out what is happening in the scene at the top right, although the strong lighting and sharp outlines in the foreground produce a feeling of energy and excitement, while the vague greenery in the distance has a sense of mystery.

There were also impressionist movements in music and literature.

Debussy sometimes wrote music which seemed to “float in air”, without a strong bass line, and sometimes without a clear sense of rhythm. When he wanted to suggest a sunken cathedral, he used thick textures to create grandeur, and carefully spaced chords to suggest bells ringing, while the sustaining pedal makes all the sounds merge together as if muffled by the sea.

James Joyce and Virginia Woolf sometimes wrote in a style called “stream of consciousness”, in which the characters’ thoughts tumble out and merge together, creating a general impression rather than a series of logical statements. Sentences and phrases are often short, sometimes with no verb, or with no clear link.

...even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall) do the same; can't be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life. In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June.

*Mrs Dalloway* (Virginia Woolf 1925)

### ASSIGNMENTS

- What is the mood of the extract above, and how is it created?
- Give examples of impressionist elements in Monet's 1886 painting of *Belle Ile* (middle right).



Music in the Tuileries (Manet 1862)



*Belle Ile* (Monet 1886)



*Girls at the piano* (Renoir 1892)