

# First World War and Poetry in English Literature

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## ABSTRACT

The Great War, and its seismic convulsion which ravaged the world between 1914 and 1918, exerted a profound influence on the rarefied realm of English poetry, ushering in a paradigmatic shift in the literary landscape. As the war's unprecedented devastation, its brutalising impact on human experience, and its corrosive effect on traditional social and moral norms, coalesced to create an existential crisis of unfathomable proportions, a new generation of poets rose, determined to capture the trauma, disillusionment, and the growing sense of cynicism and despair that characterised the zeitgeist of the war-torn era.

## FIRST WORLD WAR POETRY

At the beginning of the First World War the characteristic response to it was that to serve in the war was a matter of duty. Poetry was written in order to express a sense of honour and to celebrate the glories of war. A typical example is the first part of Rupert Brooke's *The Soldier*:

*If I should die, think only this of me:  
That there's some corner of foreign field  
That is for ever England.*

The poem is a romantic sonnet and is deeply patriotic. It almost celebrates the values of liberal culture of Brooke and his contemporaries which sees death as a sacrifice which all young men should freely make for the sake of their country.

## SOLDIERS AND POETS

The image of Rupert Brooke as a golden boy from a golden age persisted after his death (from blood-poisoning) on the way to the Dardanelles campaign. *The Old Vicarage, Grantchester (1911)*, with its famous lines:

*Stands the church clock at ten to three?  
And is there honey still for tea?*

...is an image of time that has frozen forever. *The Soldier* by Brooke was the last poem that glorified war unabashedly and provoked patriotism. Interestingly enough this was the first time when the soldiers going to war were writing back explaining the war in its actual horror and gore. Brooke's works contrast highly with that of Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum est*, the poem's title is taken from Horace's work *Dulce et Decorum est*:

*Let the boy toughened by military service  
Learn how to make bitterest hardship his friend,  
And as a horseman, with fearful lance,*

*Go to vex the insolent Parthians... .*

The original text glorifies war, martyrdom and sacrifice. However, Owen's work shows the actual emptiness and futility of war:

*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 march asleep. Many had lost their boots,  
But limped on, blood-shot. All went lame; all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind...  
To the children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: dulce et Decorum est  
Pro patria mori.*

Owen's masterpiece quite eloquently satirises the original work by Horace. Owen unmistakably captures the butchery and carnage, the indifferent cruor and the lingering sense of purposelessness. Owen's poetry prefigures the image of the wasteland which was to dominate post-First World War writing.

The horrors of the First World War marked the end of a phase of Western European liberal culture. In four years from 1914 to 1918, over nine million lives were lost from Europe, the British Commonwealth, and the USA. Deep psychological wounds were caused in the minds of the survivors and a physical and metaphysical wasteland was created across Europe. This desolation was increasingly reflected in the poetry of these years. It became difficult to continue to believe the narrative set by Brooke's *The Soldier*. There was a clear sense that the previous century and its values were, in fact, a 'corpse outleant', to use Hardy's phrase.

The reaction of poets such as Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, and Ivor Gurney was to write vivid and realistic poetry satirising the vain glory and incompetence of many in the officer class whose actions caused the unnecessary deaths of some of the finest young men. In poems such as *They* and *The General*, Sassoon was one of the first poets to point to the consequences of war for the maimed and disfigured soldiers who had to live with the horrors long after the war has finished.

The language of Sassoon's poetry is deliberately anti-romantic in its rejection of conventional poetic diction in favour of sharp and biting colloquialisms.

*'Good morning; good morning!' The General said  
When we met him last week on our way to the line.  
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,  
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.  
'He's a cheery old card,' grunted Harry to Jack  
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.  
But he did for them both by his plan of attack.  
(The General)*

Here Sassoon uses jaunty, upbeat technique which makes this poem even more satirical and impactful. Once again the futility and gore of war is clearly portrayed, not only that but the indifference of authorities is also depicted in this poem.

The poem carries within its lines a sense of dormant smouldering anger.

Similarly, Isaac Rosenberg, who was killed in 1918, gave in *Dead Man's Dump* one of the most graphic images of the waste of war:

*The plunging limbers over the shattered track  
Racketed with their rusty freight,  
Stuck out like many crowns of thorns,  
And the rusty stakes like sceptres old  
To stay the flood of brutish men  
Upon our brothers dear.*

Rosenberg quite masterfully depicts the senselessness of the fields with barbed wires, where soldiers are sent to get butchered mindlessly. The poem deals with a sense of emptiness and loneliness. The first hand account of the soldiers turned poets strips away wars of their glory and the authorities of their entitlement. Ultimately the champion of first hand account of World War One was to a great extent Wilfred Owen. After he died, among his papers a draft Preface was found for a future volume of poems. The most famous part of it is the following;

*This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War. Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My Subject is War and the pity of War. The poetry is in the pity...all a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true poets must be truthful.*

These lines by Owen still echo like the door slammed by Nora in the ending scene of *A Doll's House* and reinforce Shelley's famous lines that *poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world*.

## POST WORLD WAR ONE POETRY .

The aftermath of World War One marked a seismic shift in the literary landscape. The devastating conflict, which ravaged the world from 1914 to 1918, left an indelible mark on the collective psyche. The war's unprecedented brutality, the collapse of empires, and disillusionment of a generation gave rise to a new wave of poetry that was characterised by its stark realism, modernist experimentation, and searching introspection.

Post-world war one poetry, written by soldiers, civilians, and intellectuals, grappled with the shattered remnants of a world that had lost its innocence. Poets like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens responded to the crisis of modernity with innovative forms, fragmented narratives, and a deepening sense of existential crisis.

## WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS .

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot see the falconer  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world... .*

Like Thomas Hardy, W.B. Yeats is a poet whose poetry stretches across the whole period of the late Victorian and early Modern ages. However, Yeats's poetry undergoes more marked changes during these years than that of Hardy. Yeats is not as restlessly experimental as T.S. Eliot, but he is not as content as Hardy to work with traditional forms and poetic subject matter.

Yeats's famous poem *The Second Coming* was written in 1919, in the aftermath of World War One. Yeats was deeply troubled by the war's devastating consequences and subsequent collapse of social and moral

order. The poem reflects his concerns about the disintegration of civilization and the rise of chaos. The poem explores the idea of a world in frenzy and a loss of the social and moral fabric of human society. Disillusionment and loss of faith are recurring themes.

Here the 'second coming' is not predicting any merriment, it is warning about a more destructive time that lies ahead.

As the war progressed, Yeats's anti-war sentiment grew stronger. He became increasingly critical of the British government's handling of the war and its impact on the civilians. His poem "On Being Asked for a War Poem" (1915) expresses his reluctance to write patriotic verse.

In the final phase of his career, Yeats reconciles elements from both his earlier periods, fusing them into a mature lyricism, the poetry is less public and more personal. The later poems explore contrasts between physical and spiritual dimensions to life, *Among School Children* (also from *The Tower*) places the 'sixty-year-old smiling public man', now a senator in the newly independent Ireland among the new generation. His own uncertainties dominate the later poems, until his final words, in *Under Ben Bulbin* (1938) when he instructs the younger generation of Irish writers:

*Irish poets, learn your trade,  
Sing whatever is well made.*

## T.S. ELIOT .

T.S. Eliot, one of the most influential poets of the 20th century, captured the essence of the post World War One world in his poetry. The devastating conflict had left a profound impact on society, leading to widespread disillusionment, fragmentation, and a search for meaning. Eliot's poems, with their modernist experimentation and philosophical depth, reflected the chaos, disillusionment, and spiritual decay of the post-war world. One of the most famous works of T.S. Eliot *The Waste Land* quite evidently depicts the frenzy of war and the void that was created after it. World War One was famously referred to as a *war to end all the wars*, even this notion appears to be shattering in Eliot's 'The Waste Land', the poem doesn't hesitate to show the gloomy vacuum manufactured by this brutal, shameless and senseless slaughter of people. He satirises most of the classic texts and calls their ideas and ideologies to question.

*"April is the cruelest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain."*

In the aforementioned stanza, Chaucer's opening lines of *The Canterbury Tales* have been satirised-

*"Whan that April with his shoures soothe,  
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,  
And bathed every Verne in swich licour,  
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;*

Here Chaucer praises the onset of April as the long wait for spring is over now. Spring in itself signifies new birth, celebrations, merriment and harmony. In a devastatingly sharp contrast Eliot shows an April that is full of sorrow, loss and void. This in itself represents the contrast of transience and intransigence between the systems, rules and materialistic things made by humans for their own ease, they seem to outlive humans and eventually no one is left to avail these benefits. Those few who remain live with an unending all consuming void. This reference also depicts the indifference of nature to all the human

activities- it's the same April but because of the frenzy of war humans are disillusioned and are not at par with the natural cycle.

Eliot employs over 400 references from various classical, historical, philosophical, mythological and spiritual texts. By doing this he creates a sense of dislocation and distortion from the tradition- a tradition that had dreamt and promised a safer, merrier world.

Eliot's other poem like *The Hollow Men* (1925) is a seminal work that encapsulates the pervasive sense of aloofness and despair that followed the cataclysmic event of World War One.

*"We are the hollow men*

*We are the stuffed men*

*Leaning together*

*Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!"*

This opening stanza introduces the poem's central theme of emptiness and spiritual decay, and establishes the image of the "hollow men" as vacant, insubstantial, and lacking in thought or feeling. This poem exemplifies the Modernist movement's preoccupation with the fragmentation of society, the disintegration of moral frameworks, and the search for meaning in a post-war world.

The poem's titular referent, "The Hollow Men" denotes a vacuous, soulless populace inhabiting a world bereft of spiritual and moral moorings. This pervasive sense of cynicism and despondency constitutes a direct response to the calamitous consequences of World War One, which laid bare the abyssal depths of human nature and the fragility of societal norms.

His other works like *Ash Wednesday*, *Four Quartets* and *Prelude* revolve around the major themes of spiritual decay, disorientation, an all-consuming void and role of tradition.

Overall, Eliot's poetry is a powerful exploration of human condition, grappling with the complexities of modernity, spirituality, and the search for meaning in the aftermath of World War One.

## CONCLUSION

The poetic oeuvre emanating from the cataclysmic event of World War One constitutes a paradigmatic example of the devastating consequences of conflict on the human experience. The works of poets such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and T.S. Eliot serve as a testament to the pervasive sense of disillusionment, despair, and spiritual decay that characterised the war's aftermath.

These poets who were often soldiers themselves, bore witness to the atrocities of war and captured its impact on the human psyche with unflinching candor. Their poetry, marked by its vivid imagery, stark realism, and emotional intensity, conveys the sense of loss, grief and trauma that pervaded the war's aftermath, thereby underscoring the profound existential and ontological implications of conflict.

Furthermore, the poetry of World War One also reflects the broader cultural and social transformations that occurred during this period. The war marked a watershed moment in modern history, precipitating the decline of traditional social and moral norms, and the ascendancy of modernism and experimentation in art and literature.

In conclusion, the poetry of World War One constitutes a powerful and enduring testament to the human cost of conflict, offering a profound meditation on the human condition in the face of war and its aftermath. Through its exploration of the themes such as disillusionment, despair, and spiritual decay, the poetry of this era continues to resonate with readers even today, serving as a poignant reminder of the devastating consequences of conflict and enduring power of art to capture human experiences.