

# **The First World War and the War Poets**

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**The First World War, Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen,  
Siegfried Sassoon and Virginia Woolf's Septimus Warren  
Smith**

# The First World War in England

1914-1918

The war was not fought on the British territory but Britain had to send a large army overseas, to continental Europe, where the war was fought

Britain started appealing for **volunteers** until 1916: people joined the British army from the colonies, from Canada, Australia and New Zealand

In 1916 **conscription** was introduced with the **Military Service Act**: it was compulsory active service and it imposed conscription on all single men aged between 18 and 41, but exempted the medically unfit, clergymen, teachers and certain classes of industrial worker

With all men at war, women replaced them in their civilian jobs, which contributed to bringing about **women's suffrage** (1918 and then 1928)



# The First World War in England



**THE  
MILITARY SERVICE ACT,  
1916,**

APPLIES TO UNMARRIED MEN WHO, ON AUGUST 15th, 1915, WERE 18 YEARS OF AGE OR OVER AND WHO WILL NOT BE 41 YEARS OF AGE ON MARCH 2nd, 1916.

**ALL MEN** (NOT EXCEPTED OR EXEMPTED),  
between the above ages who, on November 2nd, 1915, were Unmarried or Widowers without any Child dependent on them will, on  
**Thursday, March 2nd, 1916**  
BE DEEMED TO BE ENLISTED FOR THE PERIOD OF THE WAR.  
They will be placed in the Reserve until Called Up in their Class.

**MEN EXCEPTED:**

SOLDIERS, including Territorials who have volunteered for Foreign Service;  
MEN serving in the NAVY or ROYAL MARINES;  
MEN DISCHARGED from ARMY or NAVY, disabled or ill, or TIME-EXPIRED MEN;  
MEN REJECTED for the ARMY since AUGUST 14th, 1915;  
CLERGYMEN, PRIESTS, and MINISTERS OF RELIGION;  
VISITORS from the DOMINIONS.

**MEN WHO MAY BE EXEMPTED BY LOCAL TRIBUNALS:**

Men more useful to the Nation in their present employments;  
Men in whose case Military Service would cause serious hardship owing to exceptional financial or business obligations or domestic position;  
Men who are ill or infirm;  
Men who conscientiously object to combatant service. If the Tribunal thinks fit, men may, on this ground, be (a) exempted from combatant service only (not non-combatant service), or (b) exempted on condition that they are engaged in work of National importance.

Up to March 2nd, a man can apply to his Local Tribunal for a certificate of exemption. There is a Right of Appeal. He will not be called up until his case has been dealt with finally.  
Certificates of exemption may be absolute, conditional or temporary. Such certificates can be renewed, varied or withdrawn.  
Men retain their Civil Rights until called up and are amenable to Civil Courts only.

**DO NOT WAIT UNTIL MARCH 2nd.  
ENLIST VOLUNTARILY NOW.**

For fuller particulars of the Act, please apply for Leaflet No. 64 to the nearest Post Office, Police Station, or Recruiting Office.  
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# The First World War in England

The bloodiest battle in the British history took place on the **Somme**, in northern France, in July 1916

The battle on the Somme was a perfect example of **war of attrition**, where huge battles were fought not to win strategic objectives or seize resources, but to kill soldiers and wear down the enemy

Soldiers retreated into **trenches** behind barbed wire, while machine guns, poison gas, tanks and aircraft were used

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0A136W6br\\_0&ab\\_channel=HistoricClips](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0A136W6br_0&ab_channel=HistoricClips)





# The First World War in England



*Gassed*, John Singer Sargent (1919)

# The First World War in England

## ***Gassed*, John Singer Sargent (1919)**

Sargent was an American painter who went himself to the front, in France in 1918, because he was commissioned this painting by the British Government.

Soldiers are all in line guided by a medical orderly.

They have bandages on their eyes because of the effects of gas.

Since they can't see, they are holding on to the shoulders of the soldier in front.

One has a leg raised, in an exaggerated posture.

One is swerving with his back to the viewers.

There are more lines of soldiers in the same conditions (on the right).

Bodies of dead and wounded soldiers are all around.

In the background, there is a football match going on.

→ reality of war

→ horrific impact of gas attacks

→ helpless and broken men whose fates are a mystery (will they recover? will they see again? will they survive?)

→ these horrors have become a constant presence that no longer interrupts the daily routine



# The First World War in England

## The Christmas Truce (1914)

It was an unofficial and impromptu cease-fire that occurred along the Western Front during World War I.

The countries of Europe went to war in the summer of 1914 with the belief that the conflict would be over by Christmas of that year. Within only a few months, however, hundreds of thousands of soldiers had been killed.

By December 1914 the reality of trench warfare had settled in: for those on the Western Front, daily life was miserable, but it was a misery that was shared by enemies who were, in some places, separated by 46 metres or less.

In early December an attempt was made to secure an official truce for the holidays. Pope Benedict XV had ascended to the papacy just a month after the beginning of war, and on December 7 he issued an appeal to the leaders of Europe “that the guns may fall silent at least upon the night the angels sang.” The leaders didn’t listen to the appeal, but the soldiers did.

On Christmas Day, German soldiers emerged from their trenches, waving their arms to demonstrate that they had no ill intent. When it became clear that they were not carrying weapons, British soldiers soon joined them, meeting in No Man’s Land to socialize and exchange gifts and some also played football.



# The First World War in England





# The First World War in England

Life in the trenches was very stressful because of mud, lack of hygiene, boredom and fear of gas

The soldiers relieved the stress by means of superstition, religion, poetry, letters and drink

“**Shell shock**” was the term used by doctors to allude to the psychological effect of shell explosions, blamed for the frequent cases of psychological disorders among soldiers. After the war, many of them suffered from **post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**

The horror of the trench life was recalled by the **War Poets**



# The First World War in England

The war reached its climax both at home and in the continent in 1917 and 1918:

- in July 1917 king George V changed the name of the British Royal family from Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, of German origins, into the British Windsor
- on 11th November 1918, at 11 o'clock, the war finished and the day has forever been commemorated as **Armistice Day**. It is also called **Remembrance Day** or **Poppy Day** because, once the war was over, the poppy was one of the only plants to grow on the battlefields. The poppy is nowadays the symbol of the people died in wars and of hope for a better future





# The First World War and the War Poets

Tommy and Arthur Shelby from the TV series *Peaky Blinders*



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Koo\\_djT6GH4&ab\\_channel=AllSCENES](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Koo_djT6GH4&ab_channel=AllSCENES)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNzQgKg7M8Q&ab\\_channel=TheLearningCurve](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNzQgKg7M8Q&ab_channel=TheLearningCurve)

# The First World War and the War Poets

The term “**shell shock**” was coined by the soldiers themselves.

Symptoms included fatigue, tremor, confusion, nightmares and impaired sight and hearing. It was often diagnosed when a soldier was unable to function and no obvious cause could be identified. Because many of the symptoms were physical, it bore little overt resemblance to the modern diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder. Among these physical symptoms there was tremor, loss of balance, headache





# The First World War and the War Poets

## The War Poets

When the war broke out, a lot of young men volunteered for military service

they saw war as an **adventure**  
undertaken for **noble purposes**  
and left Britain with a sense of  
**pride** and **exhilaration**



after the violence they experienced in  
war, this sense of enthusiasm was  
replaced by **doubt** and **disillusionment**

During the time they spent in the trenches, some soldiers started to improvise verses which were rough, obscene and genuine, because written on the spot.

Few of these poems were then known at home, but a group of them managed to represent **modern warfare in a realistic and unconventional way**, making readers aware of the horrors of war.

**MODERN:** they experienced something new, which could not be imagined in the previous century, thus had to find new and modern way of expressing what they felt

# The First World War and the War Poets



## RUPERT BROOKE

He attended the best schools in England and went to Cambridge.

He was a very **good student** and **athlete** and became popular especially for his **handsome looks**.

He joined the British army at the beginning of the war, but saw little of it because he died of blood poisoning in **1915**.



# The First World War and the War Poets

## RUPERT BROOKE

His premature death really influenced his consideration of war: he died before seeing the real horrors of it. For that reason, all his poems deals with a **patriotic and fascinating idea of war**:

- war is clean and cleansing
- idealism
- the only thing to suffer is the body
- there is a reward in death

His poems were published alongside his death, contributing to making him **immensely popular** and turning him into a new symbol of the **new Romantic hero** who inspired **patriotism** in the early months of the great war, when England needed a focal point for its sacrifice, ideals and aspirations.

# The First World War and the War Poets

## The Soldier

BY RUPERT BROOKE

If I should die, think only this of me:

That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is for ever England. There shall be  
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;  
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,  
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam;  
A body of England's, breathing English air,  
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,

A pulse in the eternal mind, no less  
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;  
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;  
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,  
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

## Il soldato Rupert Brooke

Se dovessi morire, pensa solo questo di me:  
che c'è qualche angolo di un campo straniero  
che è sempre Inghilterra. Dovrebbe esserci  
in quella ricca terra, una più ricca polvere nascosta una  
polvere che l'Inghilterra generò, a cui diede forma, rese  
consapevole  
diede, una volta, i suoi fiori da amare, le sue vie da  
esplorare,  
un corpo inglese, un'aria inglese che respira,  
lavata dai fiumi, benedetta dal sole di casa.

E pensa, questo cuore, liberatosi da tutto il male,  
una pulsazione nello spirito eterno, niente meno  
ritorna indietro i pensieri dati dall'Inghilterra;  
ciò che ha visto e ciò che ha sentito. I sogni felici come i  
suoi giorni;  
e la risata, imparata dai suoi amici; e gentilezza,  
in cuori in pace, sotto un cielo inglese.



# The First World War and the War Poets

## The Soldier

BY RUPERT BROOKE

THE BODY MAY PERISH,  
BUT IT IS NOT THE MOST  
IMPORTANT THING

If I should die, think only this of me:

BECAUSE OF  
HIS BODY

That there's some corner of a foreign field

That is for ever England. There shall be

In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;

A dust whom            bore, shaped, made aware,

Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam;

A body of England's, breathing English air,

Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,

A pulse in the eternal mind, no less

Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;

Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;

And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,

In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

THE BODY CAN BE  
BURIED ANYWHERE  
BECAUSE IT IS NOT  
IMPORTANT, IT IS THE  
VALUES OF AN ENGLISH  
SOUL THAT WILL LAST  
FOREVER

PERSONIFICATION

ROMANTIC AND  
IDEALISTIC

→ PATRIOTISM

# The First World War and the War Poets

## *The Soldier* by Rupert Brooke

→ the theme of WAR is introduced in the first two lines with the words *If I should die* (line 1) and the *foreign field* (line 2)

→ the theme of DEATH is, as well, introduced in the first line: death is not seen as something terrible, the poet doesn't stress the horrors of war that lead to the death of many soldiers. Death is described in terms of patriotism, heroism and immortality of the soul

→ the theme of the soldier seen as *dust* (lines 4 and 5), *body* (line 7), *heart* (line 9) and *spirit* (line 10): the body is not important in itself because it is just the external container of a soul which is so rich and valuable because it is an English soul.

The only moment the poet uses the word *body* (line 7) is when he refers to the living body, growing up in England and acquiring all the English values

→ there is a pause between line 8 and line 9: the tone of the first stanza is plain and the language is easier; the tone of the second stanza is more lyrical and harder to understand

→ parallelism between the end of the first stanza and the end of the second one: celebration of England and its values (through the sacrifice of its soldiers)



# The First World War and the War Poets

**Read the poem and do the following activities.**

1. Who is speaking?
2. Is the speaker afraid of death?
3. The speaker says his grave will be
  - a. in his home country.
  - b. in another country.
  - c. in heaven.
4. He says his body will enrich the soil because \_\_\_\_\_.
5. How does the poet view England?
6. What traditional qualities of the English does he emphasise?
7. List the images referring to death. What idea do they suggest?
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_
8. What is the view of war presented in the poem?

# The First World War and the War Poets



## WILFRED OWEN

He was working as a teacher in France when he visited a hospital for wounded and decided to return to England and enlist in 1915.

He was injured and hospitalised in Edinburgh to recover from **shell shock**.

Here he met Siegfried Sassoon, who encouraged him to continue to write poems.

He went back to war and was killed in German machine gun attack a week before the armistice



# The First World War and the War Poets

## WILFRED OWEN

His idea of war really differs from that of Brooke's.

Owen's poems deal with a **painful and accurate description of war**: he wrote about gas attacks, men who had gone mad and men who were clinically alive although their bodies had been destroyed.

He was especially famous for some technical innovations:

- “pararhymes”: half-rhymes where the consonants in two different words are the same but the vowels vary
- assonance (repetition of the same vowels) and alliteration (repetition of the same consonants at the beginning of words)
- These linguistic devices give the poems a sense of **haunting, gravity and moral force**

In the *Preface* to his collection of poems he wrote about his idea of war:

- his poetry doesn't deal with heroes or glory, honour, majesty, dominion, power
- his poetry only deals with war and the pity of war
- role of the poet as a truthful narrator, who has to warn the future generations of the horrors of war, even if he is powerless for the present generations

# The First World War and the War Poets

## PREFACE

This book is not about English poetry English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.

Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about  
might,                      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.**

Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.

(If I thought the letter of this book would last, I might have used proper names; but if the spirit of it survives—survives Prussia—my ambition and those names will have achieved fresher fields than Flanders. . . .)

[illegible]



# The First World War and the War Poets

## 'Dulce et Decorum Est' by Wilfred Owen

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 marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of disappointed shells that dropped behind.

GAS! Gas! Quick, boys!-- An ecstasy of fumbling,  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
And floundering like a man in fire or lime.--  
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,--  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori.

## DULCE ET DECORUM EST

Piegati in due, come vecchi straccioni, sacco in spalla,  
le ginocchia ricurve, tossendo come megere, imprecavamo nel fango,  
finché volgemmo le spalle all'ossessivo bagliore delle esplosioni  
e verso il nostro lontano riposo cominciammo ad arrancare.  
Gli uomini marciavano addormentati. Molti, persi gli stivali,  
procedevano claudicanti, calzati di sangue. Tutti finirono azzoppati; tutti orbi;  
ubriachi di stanchezza; sordi persino al sibilo  
di stanche granate che cadevano lontane indietro.

Il gas! Il GAS! Svelti ragazzi! -- Come in estasi annasparono,  
infilandosi appena in tempo i goffi elmetti;  
ma ci fu uno che continuava a gridare e inciampare  
dimenandosi come in mezzo alle fiamme o alla calce...  
Confusamente, attraverso l'oblò di vetro appannato e la densa luce verdastra  
come in un mare verde, lo vidi annegare.

In tutti i miei sogni, davanti ai miei occhi smarriti,  
si tuffa verso di me, cola giù, soffoca, annega.

Se in qualche orribile sogno anche tu potessi metterti al passo  
dietro il furgone in cui lo scaraventammo,  
e guardare i bianchi occhi contorcersi sul suo volto,  
il suo volto a penzoloni, come un demonio sazio di peccato;  
se potessi sentire il sangue, ad ogni sobbalzo,  
fuoriuscire gorgogliante dai polmoni guasti di bava,  
oscuri come il cancro, amari come il rigurgito  
di disgustose, incurabili piaghe su lingue innocenti --  
amico mio, non ripeteresti con tanto compiaciuto fervore  
a fanciulli ansiosi di farsi raccontare gesta disperate,  
la vecchia Menzogna: Dulce et decorum est  
pro patria mori.

# The First World War and the War Poets

## 'Dulce et Decorum Est' by Wilfred Owen

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, **●** cursed through sludge,  
→ Till on the haunting flares **●** turned our backs  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
**●** Many had lost their boots  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind:  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of disappointed shells that dropped behind.

GAS! Gas! Quick, boys!-- An ecstasy of fumbling,  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
And floundering like a man in fire or lime --

→ **●**  
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

→ If in some smothering dreams **●** too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If **●** could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,--  
My friend, **●** would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
|| The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est ||  
Pro patria mori.

"It's sweet and honourable"

pararhymes

alliteration

haunting rhythm

I. Physical toil and general description of the conditions of the soldiers: **quiet scene**

II. Gas attack: accurate description of war and its effects: **dynamic and rhythmic scene**

Nightmarish world and real nightmares ("shell shock")

Accurate description of death

III. Poet's warning to the present and future generations: **violent and brutal language**



# The First World War and the War Poets

**Read the poem and answer to the following questions.**

1. Read the poem and summarise the content of each stanza in your own words.
2. Describe the physical and psychological sufferings of the soldiers by quoting from the text.
3. Explain the theme and the message of the poem in your own words.
4. Write 10-12 lines to compare Owen's poem with Brooke's The Soldier. Analyse the following aspects:
  - soldier's mood
  - his attitude to war
  - the imagery employed
  - the poet's message.

# The First World War and the War Poets



## SIEGFRIED SASSOON

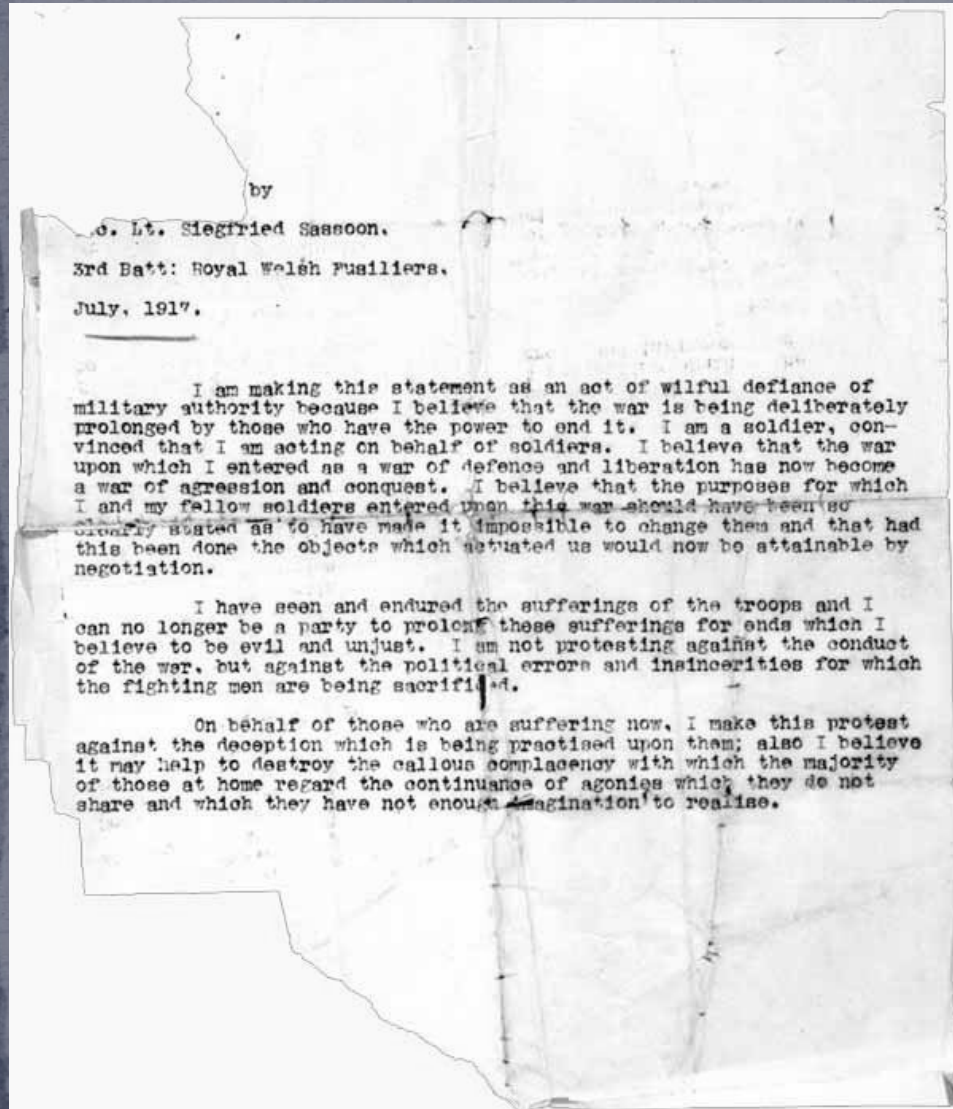
In 1915 he joined the war and was sent to France. His reactions to the reality of the war were bitter and violent and he expressed them through irony in his poems.

He publicly protested against the war, reading out his *A Soldier's Declaration* in the House of Commons in July 1917.

He could be accused by the Court Martial, but the review board was convinced that he suffered from “shell shock” and so he was saved.



# The First World War and the War Poets



*“I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this War, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest.”*

→ accusation                      against                      the  
government

→ extreme      conditions      of      the  
soldiers in the trenches

# The First World War: Virginia Woolf



## Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf (née Stephen) was born in 1882 in a middle class family of intellectuals.

Hers was an extended family: there was her father, her mother, her siblings (some of them were biological some were step-siblings).

Her mother, her step-sister and her father died when she was young and these deaths gave way to the manifestation of the **mental illness** that characterised all her life.

She didn't attend the best British schools (as her brothers did), which really pained her. Nevertheless, she met a group of intellectuals, known as **Bloomsbury Group**.



# The First World War: Virginia Woolf



In this group she met Leonard Woolf, who will later become her husband.

Her novels reflected the new style of the time, because she too adopted the technique of the **stream of consciousness**: the continuous flow of thoughts and sensations proper of the human mind.

She didn't write about the external life, but was rather interested in the **internal life** of her characters. She didn't deal with actions and events of History, but she wanted to write about the daily events of a normal life.

# The First World War: Virginia Woolf

“Examine for a moment **an ordinary mind on an ordinary day**. The mind receives a myriad impressions - trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.”

*Modern Fiction*, 1925



# The First World War: Virginia Woolf



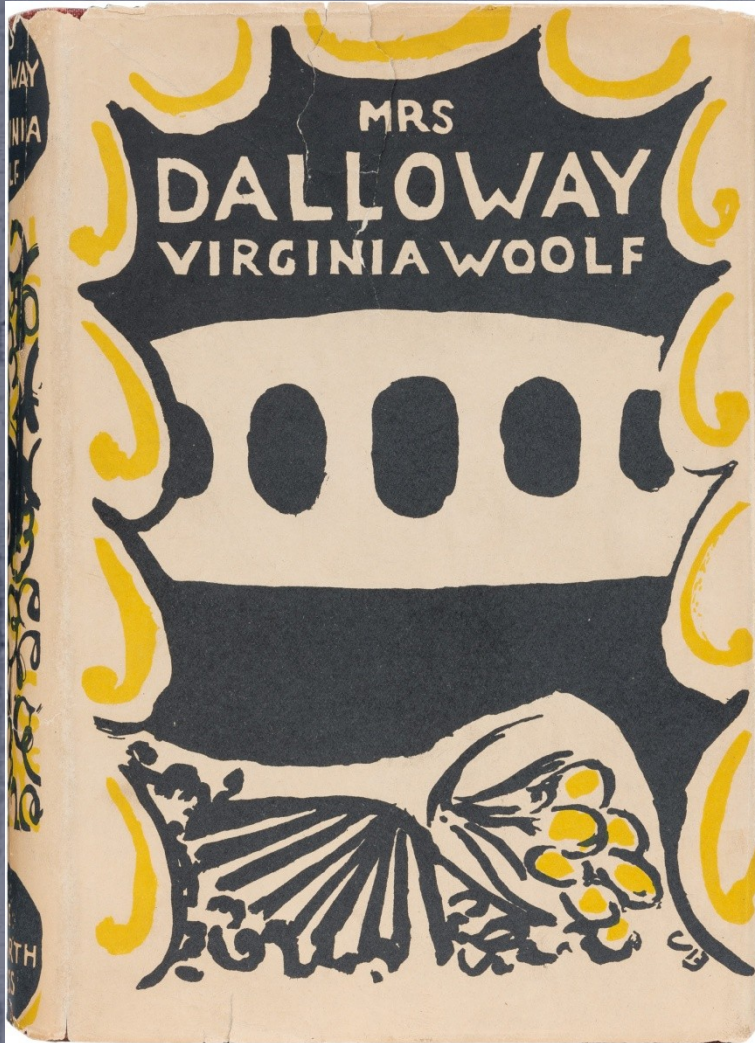
Her illness often struck: she suffered from **manic-depressive psychosis**. She used her illness to write, but all around her wanted her to recover, so the doctors suggested that she should move to the countryside.

She felt very sorry because she loved London and the city life, but eventually moved to the countryside and she settled in **Monk House**.

She spent there the last year of her life: those were the terrible years which anticipated WW2 and were threatened by Hitler in Germany (Leonard was a Jew).

In March 1941, she committed suicide: she filled her pockets with stones and plunged into the water of the Ouse river.

# The First World War: Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*



The story takes place during a day in June 1923: **Clarissa Dalloway** is going to organise a party for that evening and she goes out to buy some flowers for the party.

At the same time, **Septimus Warren Smith** and his wife Lucrezia are walking in a park: he is shell-shocked veteran of the first world war. He is really suffering from the effects of the PTSS and has to be seen by a doctor.

Mrs Dalloway comes back home and receives the visit of an old friend and lover: **Peter Walsh**. He has just come back from India, where he works as an official of the Empire.

While everyone is gettin gready for Mrs Dalloway's party, Septimus commits suicide by jumping out from the window of his room.



# The First World War: Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*

## Septimus Warren Smith

When Woolf wrote *Mrs Dalloway*, World War I had just ended in 1918, and though the United Kingdom was technically victorious in the war, hundreds of thousands of soldiers died fighting and the country suffered huge financial losses. *Mrs Dalloway* portrays the tragedy of the “lost generation” following World War I, like Septimus as a victim of PTSS.

A World War I veteran in his thirties, Septimus suffers from shell shock, or PTSS. He was once an aspiring poet, but after enlisting in the war for idealistic reasons and the death of his close friend and officer Evans, Septimus became unable to feel emotion. Septimus feels condemned by human nature and is often suicidal and thinks that he has been condemned by the world to die for his failure to feel. In his more intense hallucinations he imagines himself surrounded by flames, or as a prophet with a divine message.

The character of Septimus was modelled on the poet **Siegfried Sassoon**.

# The First World War: Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*

“I am making this statement as **an act of wilful defiance of military authority**, because I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this War, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest.”

*A Soldier's Declaration, S. Sassoon*

“A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. **Death was defiance.** Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death.”

*Mrs Dalloway, V. Woolf*



# The First World War: Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*

“Septimus was one of the first to volunteer. He went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square. There in the trenches the change which Mr. Brewer desired when he advised football was produced instantly; he developed manliness; he was promoted; he drew the attention, indeed the affection of his officer, Evans by name. It was a case of two dogs playing on a hearth-rug; one worrying a paper screw, snarling, snapping, giving a pinch, now and then, at the old dog's ear; the other lying somnolent, blinking at the fire, raising a paw, turning and growling good-temperedly. They had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other, quarrel with each other. But when Evans (Rezia who had only seen him once called him "a quiet man," a sturdy red-haired man, undemonstrative in the company of women), when Evans was killed, just before the Armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognising that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him. It was sublime. He had gone through the whole show, friendship, European War, death, had won promotion, was still under thirty and was bound to survive. He was right there. The last shells missed him. He watched them explode with indifference. When peace came he was in Milan, billeted in the house of an innkeeper with a courtyard, flowers in tubs, little tables in the open, daughters making hats, and to Lucrezia, the younger daughter, he became engaged one evening when the panic was on him--that he could not feel.”

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“There he was; still sitting alone on the seat, in his shabby overcoat, his legs crossed, staring, talking aloud.

Men must not cut down trees. There is a God. (He noted such revelations on the backs of envelopes.) Change the world. No one kills from hatred. Make it known (he wrote it down). He waited. He listened. A sparrow perched on the railing opposite chirped Septimus, Septimus, four or five times over and went on, drawing its notes out, to sing freshly and piercingly in Greek words how there is no crime and, joined by another sparrow, they sang in voices prolonged and piercing in Greek words, from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk, how there is no death.

There was his hand; there the dead. White things were assembling behind the railings opposite. But he dared not look. Evans was behind the railings!”



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"It is time," said Rezia.

The word "time" split its husk; poured its riches over him; and from his lips fell like shells, like shavings from a plane, without his making them, hard, white, imperishable words, and flew to attach themselves to their places in an ode to Time; an immortal ode to Time. He sang. Evans answered from behind the tree. The dead were in Thessaly, Evans sang, among the orchids. There they waited till the War was over, and now the dead, now Evans himself--

"For God's sake don't come!" Septimus cried out. For he could not look upon the dead. But the branches parted. A man in grey was actually walking towards them. It was Evans! But no mud was on him; no wounds; he was not changed. I must tell the whole world, Septimus cried, raising his hand (as the dead man in the grey suit came nearer), raising his hand like some colossal figure who has lamented the fate of man for ages in the desert alone with his hands pressed to his forehead, furrows of despair on his cheeks, and now sees light on the desert's edge which broadens and strikes the iron-black figure (and Septimus half rose from his chair), and with legions of men prostrate behind him he, the giant mourner, receives for one moment on his face the whole--"

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“Holmes was coming upstairs. Holmes would burst open the door. Holmes would say “In a funk, eh?” Holmes would get him. But no; not Holmes; not Bradshaw. Getting up rather unsteadily, hopping indeed from foot to foot, he considered Mrs. Filmer's nice clean bread knife with “Bread” carved on the handle. Ah, but one mustn't spoil that. The gas fire? But it was too late now. Holmes was coming. Razors he might have got, but Rezia, who always did that sort of thing, had packed them. There remained only the window, the large Bloomsbury-lodging house window, the tiresome, the troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out. It was their idea of tragedy, not his or Rezia's (for she was with him). Holmes and Bradshaw like that sort of thing. (He sat on the sill.) But he would wait till the very last moment. He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings--what did *they* want? Coming down the staircase opposite an old man stopped and stared at him. Holmes was at the door. “I'll give it you!” he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer's area railings.”

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