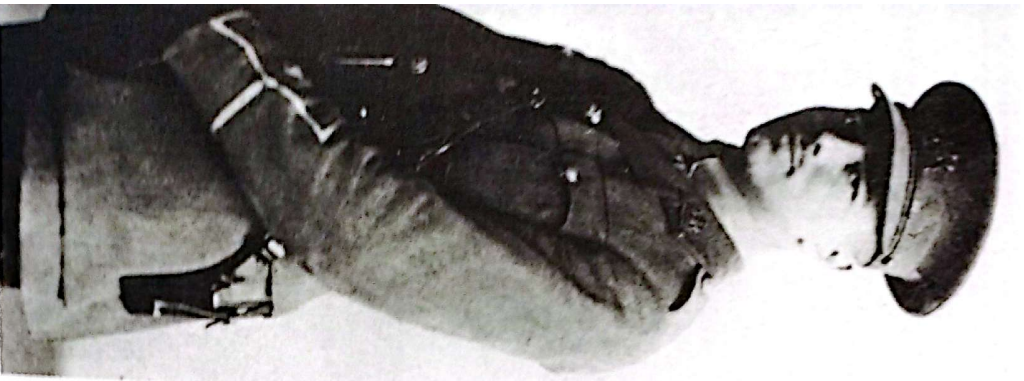


Wilfred Owen 1893-1918



Life and works

Born in 1893, Wilfred Owen was working as a teacher of English in France when he visited a hospital for the wounded and decided, in 1915, to return to England and enlist. The year 1917 was an important one: he was sent to France and saw his first action; in March he was injured and sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh to recover from shell shock. It was there that he met Siegfried Sassoon, who was also a patient and already had a reputation as a poet. He read Owen's poems, encouraged him to continue to write and introduced him to other literary figures. Owen returned to the front in August 1918. On 4th November 1918, just seven days before the armistice, he was killed in a German machine gun attack.

His poems are painful in their accurate accounts of gas casualties, men who have gone mad and men who are clinically alive although their bodies have been destroyed (→ T88). He is also noteworthy for the technical innovation of 'parathymes' – half-rhymes where the

consonants in two different words are the ^{same} but the vowels vary – as well as his extensive use of assonance and alliteration. These devices gave the lines of his poems a haunting quality, a gravity and moral force which make them suitable for any situation in which people must suffer and die.

In June 1918 Owen was preparing *Disabled* and *Other Poems* for publication. At that time, he was writing the 'Preface' to the book, words which have now become essential in discussing his work and much of the poetry of World War I: '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. 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.'

Wilfred Owen, 1916.

R.W. Newinson,
Trenches, 1914-15.
National Gallery of Canada.

Dulce et Decorum Est

Wilfred Owen
Poems
(1920)

4) 5.6

The following poem is based on the poet's experience of the horrors of war in the trenches and it is an attempt to communicate the 'pity of War' to future generations. The Latin title means 'it is sweet and honorable'; it is a quotation from the Latin poet Horace (1st century BC), who borrowed the line from the Greek poet Tyrtæus (7th century BC).

Bent double, like old beggars¹ under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags², we cursed through sludge³,

Till on the haunting flares⁴ we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge⁵.

Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod⁶. All went lame⁷; all blind;

Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots⁸
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines⁹ that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling¹⁰,

Fitting the clumsy helmets¹¹ just in time;

But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And floundring¹² like a man in fire or lime¹³ ...

Dim, through the misty panes¹⁴ and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning¹⁵.

15 In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,

He plunges¹⁶ at me, guttering, choking¹⁷, drowning.

If in some smothering¹⁸ dreams you too could pace

Behind the wagon that we flung¹⁹ him in,

And watch the white eyes writhing²⁰ in his face,

His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;

If you could hear, at every jolt²¹, the blood

Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs²²,

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud²³

Of vile, incurable sores²⁴ on innocent tongues, –

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest²⁵

To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est

Pro patria mori.

- | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1 beggars, Mendicanti. | 6 limped on, blood-shod. | 10 An ecstasy of fumbling. | 14 misty panes, Vetri (delle | 19 we flung, Gettummo |
| 2 knock-kneed ... hags, Con | 7 lame, Storti. | 11 Fitting the clumsy helmets. | 15 drowning, Affogare. | 20 writhing, Contorcere. |
| 3 le ginocchia che si toccano, | 8 hoots, Sibili. | 12 Mettendosi i goffi elmetti. | 16 He plunges, Si precipita. | 21 jolt, Sobbalzo. |
| 4 versando urine streghe. | 9 outstripped Five-Nines, | 13 was yelling out ... floundring. | 17 Barcollando (come la luce | 22 froth-corrupted lungs, |
| 5 sludge, Fango. | 10 Granate (contententi gas) | 14 lasciate indietro. | 18 smothering, Affannosi. | 23 bitter as the cud, Amaro come |
| 6 limping, Zoppi. | 11 lasciate indietro. | 15 Calce. | 16 di una candela che sta per | 24 sores, Piaghe. |
| 7 limping, Zoppi. | 12 lasciate indietro. | 17 Calce. | 18 di una candela che sta per | 25 zest, Entusiasmo. |
| 8 limping, Zoppi. | 13 lasciate indietro. | 19 Calce. | 20 di una candela che sta per | |
| 9 limping, Zoppi. | 14 lasciate indietro. | 21 Calce. | 22 di una candela che sta per | |
| 10 limping, Zoppi. | 15 lasciate indietro. | 22 Calce. | 23 di una candela che sta per | |
| 11 limping, Zoppi. | 16 lasciate indietro. | 23 Calce. | 24 di una candela che sta per | |
| 12 limping, Zoppi. | 17 lasciate indietro. | 24 Calce. | 25 di una candela che sta per | |
| 13 limping, Zoppi. | 18 lasciate indietro. | 25 Calce. | | |

The War Poets

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

the text and answer the following questions.

Did the view of war change during the conflict? What was life in the trenches like?

Who were the War Poets? What sense was their poetry made of?

Text Bank 74-75

When the First World War broke out, **thousands of young men volunteered** for military service (→ 6.2); most of them regarded the conflict as **an adventure undertaken for noble ends**. It was not until the slaughter of thousands of British soldiers at the Battle of the Somme in 1916 that this sense of pride and exhilaration was replaced by **doubt and disillusionment**. For the soldiers, life in the trenches was hell because of the rain and mud, the decaying bodies that rats fed on, the repeated bombings and the use of poison gas in warfare. Almost from the beginning, the common soldiers improvised verses which, precisely because they were the rough, genuine, obscene songs of the

trenches, did not reach the ears of the literate people living comfortably at home. However, there was also a **group of poets** who volunteered to fight in the Great War, actually experienced the fighting and in most cases lost their lives in the conflict. They **managed to represent modern warfare in a realistic and unconventional way**, awakening the conscience of the readers back home to the horrors of the war. These poets became known as the 'War Poets'. Their poetry can be considered modern because its subject-matter could not be conveyed in the 19th-century poetic conventions, and forced them to find new modes of expression.

Rupert Brooke 1887-1915

Life and works

Rupert Brooke was born in 1887 and was educated at Rugby School, where his father was a master, and then went to King's College, Cambridge. He was a **good student and athlete**, and became popular especially for his **handsome looks**. He was also familiar with literary circles like the Bloomsbury Group (→ 6.20) and came to know many important political, literary and social figures before the war. He joined up at the beginning of the conflict but saw little combat since he contracted blood poisoning and died in April 1915, on the Aegean Sea. He was buried on the Greek island of Skyros.

Brooke's reputation as a War Poet is linked to the **five sonnets of 1914**, in which he advanced the idea that **war is clean and cleansing**. He expressed an idealism about the conflict, in which the only thing that can suffer is the body, and even death is seen as a reward (→ T87). **Traditional not only in form**, his poems show

a **sentimental attitude** which was completely lost in the brutal turn that war poetry took in the works of the other War Poets, who lived to witness the horrors of trench warfare. The publication of Brooke's war sonnets coincided with his death in 1915 and made him **immensely popular**, turning him into a new symbol of the 'young 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.



of Rupert Brooke, 1913.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ the text and make notes about the following.

- 1 Brooke's education.
- 2 His experience of the war.
- 3 His view of war.
- 4 His popularity.

The Soldier

This poem is noted for its lyricism which, together with Brooke's handsome appearance and premature death, made him a favourite poet among the young people of his generation.

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 of¹ friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven².

1. James Prinsep Beadle, *Comrades*, published 4th January 1919.



¹ learnt of. *Learnt from.*
² heaven. *Cielo.*

READING COMPETENCE

READ the poem and match the highlighted words and phrases with their Italian translation.

- consapevole
- liberatosi da
- nascosta
- da

- 3 The speaker says his grave will be
 - A in his home country.
 - B in another country.
 - C in heaven.
- 4 He says his dead body will enrich the soil because
- 5 List the images connected with

- 8 List the images connected with the idea of home.
 - 1
 - 2
 - 3
- 9 Structural analysis
 - A a Petrarchan sonnet
 - B a Shakespearean sonnet