



# Modern poetry

Compact Performer - Culture & Literature  
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# 1. Tradition and experimentation

The first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century → a period of extraordinary originality and vitality in poetry.

A variety of trends and currents expressed the nature of modern experience:

- **The Georgian Poets**
- **The War Poets**
- **Imagist Poets**
- **Symbolist Poets**



Karl Moll, 'Twilight', ca 1900. Osterreichisches Gallery, Belvedere (Vienna).



## 2. The Georgian Poets

The Georgian poets → influenced by the Victorian Romantic tradition. Among them there was Rupert Brooke (1887–1915).

**THEMES:** **sympathy for English** elements, such as the **countryside** as an idyllic place;

**STYLE:** they employed **a conventional language** and remained **indifferent or hostile to the revolution in sensibility and technique** started by the Symbolists.

**AIM:** to celebrate some English values, to emphasize patriotism.



Rupert Brooke



Walter de la Mare



Edward Thomas



# 3. The War Poets



The War Poets (Wilfred Owen):

- experienced the fighting
- in most cases lost their lives in the conflict

**THEMES** → the **horrors of modern warfare** represented in an unconventional, anti-rhetorical way .

**STYLE** → unconventional. They used a violent, everyday language.

**AIM** → to **awaken the conscience of the readers** to the horrors of the war

They have elements in common with the poetry of Ungaretti.



## 4. Imagist Poets

**Modern poetry** officially **began with Imagism**, a movement which flourished between 1912 and 1917.

The name ‘**Imagiste**’ → invented by the American poet Ezra Pound (1885–1972).

### IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

(Ezra Pound, 1913)

**THEMES:** choice of any subject matter.

**STYLE:** short poems, constant use of **hard, clear and precise images**.

**AIM:** the poems usually contained **no moral comment**

This poetry has similarities with the Italian “ermetismo”.



# 5. Symbolist Poets

Symbolism → a movement started in France with Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857). It influenced the new poetry.

**THEMES:** poetry is considered an escape from emotion.

**STYLE:**

- **use of allusive language** and of association of words.
- **importance given to the 'sound' of words** (use of onomatopoeia, alliteration, assonance)
- use of **quotations from other literatures**, revealing cosmopolitan interests
- use of **free verse**

**AIM:** to evoke rather than state

The main representative was T.S Eliot, whose poetry has something in common with Montale. They both used the "objective correlative", where the description of a physical feature (a desolated landscape, for example) stands for a spiritual condition (a spiritual emptiness).



*Here is no water but only rock  
Rock and no water and the sandy road*

.....

*If there were water*

*And no rock*

*If there were rock*

*And also water*

*And water*

*A spring*

*A pool among the rock*

*If there were the sound of water only*

*Not the cicada*

*And dry grass singing*

*But sound of water over a rock*

*Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees*

*Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop*

*But there is no water*

**(from *The Waste Land* by TS Eliot)**

Merigiare pallido e assorto  
presso un rovente muro d'orto,  
ascoltare tra i pruni e gli sterpi  
schiocchi di merli, frusci di serpi.  
Nelle crepe dei suolo o su la vecchia  
spiar le file di rosse formiche  
ch'ora si rompono ed ora s'intrecciano  
a sommo di minuscole biche.  
Osservare tra frondi il palpitare  
lontano di scaglie di mare  
mentre si levano tremuli scricchi  
di cicale dai calvi picchi.  
E andando nel sole che abbaglia  
sentire con triste meraviglia  
com'è tutta la vita e il suo travaglio  
in questo seguitare una muraglia  
che ha in cima cocci aguzzi di bottiglia.

**(Eugenio Montale: *Merigiare pallido e assorto*)**



## ***The Soldier* by Rupert Brooke (1887-1915) page 235**

- Rupert Brooke studied in Cambridge. He belonged to the movement of **Georgian Poets**, who wanted a return to nature and simple emotions. He wrote five war sonnets in 1914 which celebrate **the heroic side of war**, and became famous for them. They were traditional in form and show a sentimental attitude. They inspired **patriotism** at the beginning of the war, differently from the poems written by the War Poets, who emphasized the horrors of life in the trenches. Brooke died young and only had a short experience of war.
- It's a Petrarchan sonnet.
- The soldier identifies with his country.
- He's not afraid of death because if he dies he will be remembered as a corner of English land in a foreign country.
- He is proud of being British; he uses images connected to the English landscape (*flowers, rivers, suns of home*) and to the English character (*laughter, gentleness*).
- He presents an idealised view of war, where death in battle is not regarded as a tragic experience but as a noble act.

## Comparison Ungaretti - Brooke

### Giuseppe Ungaretti – ITALIA

Sono un poeta  
un grido unanime  
sono un grumo di sogni

Sono un frutto  
d'innunerevoli contrasti d'innesti  
maturato in una serra

Ma il tuo popolo è portato  
dalla stessa terra  
che mi porta  
Italia

E in questa uniforme  
di tuo soldato  
mi riposo  
come fosse la culla  
di mio padre

Also Ungaretti in *Italia* (1916) expresses **a sense of belonging to his country**, of having been shaped by the same earth of which his countrymen are made, similarly to what Brooke expresses in *The Soldier*.

But while behind Brooke's sonnet we can feel the sense of an Empire and a strong nationalism, the Italian poet's attachment to Italy is a solitary one, as of a son clinging to his mother in a tragic hour.

Ungaretti, who volunteered as an infantry soldier and was at first full of hopes and patriotic ideals, soon realized the cruelty and harsh reality of war. So in his poems he denounced the meaningless of war contrasting death, violence and destruction with life, nature and human feelings.

His use of a **concise, unconventional language** is similar to the *War Poets*: he uses free verse and strong images.

## Wilfred Owen (1893 – 1918)

Wilfred Owen joined the army in 1915 and was sent to France to fight. He was injured and sent to the war hospital in Edinburgh to recover from **shell shock**. Here he met Sigfried Sassoon, another soldier and war poet. Owen returned to the front in 1918 and was killed in a German machine gun attack just seven days before the Armistice.

In his poems, differently from Brooke, he describes **the harsh reality of war**, with accurate accounts of gas attacks and of the physical and mental suffering of men.

He used **assonance, alliteration and onomatopoeia** extensively, which add to his poetry a particular gravity. Through the description of physical details he was able to convey a vision of horror and apocalyptic desolation.

## ***Dulce et Decorum Est (1920)***

This poem is based on the poet's experience of the horrors of war in the trenches. The Latin title means "it is sweet and honourable" and is a quotation from the Latin poet Horace. At the end of the poem these words are defined as "the old lie".

Owen's **message** is that there is nothing noble or decorous in war, but it just means degradation and death.

**Stanza 1:** the soldiers are retreating towards the trenches away from the front line. They are exhausted and demoralised struggling through the mud. They are bent over, coughing and blinded like old people.

**Stanza 2:** there is the description of a gas attack. The men try to put on their masks in the green light and the poet's friend is wounded. The sight of the dying friend returns in the poet's dreams.

**Stanza 3:** the poet describes his friend's horrible death from chemical warfare and conveys the message of the poem.

**Style:** there is a large use of alliteration, repetition and onomatopoeia, that underline the physical and psychological sufferings of soldiers.

(Words related to physical suffering: bent, knock-kneed, coughing, trudge, men marched asleep, limped, bloodshod, lame, blind, deaf, guttering, chocking, drowning.

Words related to psychological suffering: beggars, cursed, haunting flares, drunk with fatigue, yelling out)

The **verbs of movement** connote:

- suffering (*bent double, knock-kneed*)
- slow movement because of moral and physical exhaustion (*began to trudge, marched asleep, limped on, went lame*)
- convulsive movements because of panic (*fumbling, stumbling, floundering*)

The **similes and metaphors** used by the poet introduce the passage from the real world of the battlefield to an unreal, nightmarish, allucinatory world. The similes belong to the world of the supernatural and the fantastic, while the metaphors are connected to the areas of illness and disease (quote examples).

### Comparison Brooke – Owen

|                             | Brooke                    | Owen                             |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>The soldier's mood</b>   | Romantic, sentimental     | disenchanted                     |
| <b>His attitude to war</b>  | idealised                 | condemns it                      |
| <b>The imagery employed</b> | drawn from nature and joy | nightmarish                      |
| <b>The poet's message</b>   | Dying in war brings glory | War and patriotism are deceitful |