The outbreak of the First World War gave rise to a vast production of writing about war that had no precedent in the history of British literature. The theme of war was certainly not new to the literary world - the first major piece of writing known in the English language, Beowulf, is about a warrior hero fighting to defend his kingdom against a grotesque monster and is thought to date back to the eighth century; and war continued to arouse interest in writers through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to the Romantics, like Byron and Wordsworth. However, until the 1914-1918 war, war literature had been written by civilians who observed and reflected upon war from a distance, or at most visited battlefields after the fighting was over.

**Soldier Poets**

What was new in the war poetry of the First World War was that it was written by soldier-poets who experienced war first hand and were personally affected by the horror of war. Some of the soldier-poets survived but were psychologically and physically scarred for the rest of their lives. Siegfried Sassoon wrote in 1962 The rank stench of those bodies haunts me still while others died in action (Wilfred Owen and Charles Sorley whose most famous poem, When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead, was found in his army kit after he was shot during the Battle of Loos in 1915).

**War British Poets and Giuseppe Ungaretti**

Although the poets writing during the First World War are known collectively nowadays as the War Poets or the Soldier Poets, the themes and styles they used vary considerably. From the patriotism of Rupert Brooke, to the anger and protest of Sassoon and the compassion of Wilfred Owen, the range of emotions expressed through poetry is vast. Similarly, as the war progressed, the style and tone of the poetry changed. Initially heavily influenced by the conservatism, romanticism and sentimentality of Georgian poetry, the

1. Georgian poetry refers to poems written at the very beginning of the twentieth century, around 1910 when George V became king. It was inspired by country life and nature, rather conventional, sentimental and backward-looking, and lacking in the profundity of the Romantic poetry that had preceded it.

Con lo scoppio della Prima guerra mondiale ebbe inizio una vasta produzione di scritti sulla guerra senza precedenti nella storia della letteratura britannica. Il tema della guerra non era certo una novità nel mondo della letteratura: Beowulf, la prima composizione scritta conosciuta in lingua inglese, risale all’VIII secolo e tratta di un eroe guerriero che combatte per difendere il proprio regno da un mostro. Il tema della guerra continuò a suscitare l’interesse degli scrittori durante il Medioevo e il Rinascimento, fino ai poeti romantici come Byron e Wordsworth. Tuttavia, fino alla guerra 1914-1918 gli scritti sulla guerra erano opera di civili, che osservavano e riflettevano sul conflitto da una posizione distante o che al massimo si trovavano a visitare i campi di battaglia solo a combattimento terminato.

**Poeti soldati**

La novità della poesia di guerra della Prima guerra mondiale consisteva nell’essere opera di poeti soldati, che hanno sperimentato la guerra in prima persona, rimanendo personalmente colpiti dai suoi orrori. Alcuni dei poeti soldati sopravvissero al conflitto, ma rimasero psicologicamente e fisicamente segnati per il resto della loro vita (Siegfried Sassoon scrisse, nel 1962, Il rancido tanfo di quei corpi ancora oggi mi perseguita), mentre altri morirono in trincea (come Wilfred Owen e Charles Sorley, la cui poesia più famosa, Quando vedi milioni di morti senza bocca fu trovata tra i suoi averi, dopo che venne ucciso durante la battaglia di Loos nel 1915).

I poeti di guerra inglesi e Giuseppe Ungaretti Nonostante ai giorni nostri i poeti della Prima guerra mondiale siano conosciuti collettivamente con il nome di Poeti di guerra oppure di Poeti soldati, i temi e gli stilis usati variano considerevolmente. Dal patriottismo di Rupert Brooke alla rabbia e alla protesta di Sassoon e la compassione di Wilfred Owen, la gamma di temi e stili varia. In maniera simile, con l’avanzare della guerra cambiarono anche lo stile e i toni della poesia. All’inizio, molto influenzati dal conservatorismo, dal romanticismo e dal sentimentalismo della poesia georgiana, in un
poets later found that the constrictions of tradition and convention did not allow them to express the brutality of their experiences and began to write in a more innovative, more ‘modern’ style. Thematically similar to Giuseppe Ungaretti in their expression of the futility, suffering and hardship of war and the sense of brotherhood among soldiers, the British poets seem to be more forceful and brutal in their depiction of war and the condensed, suggestive style of Ungaretti contrasts sharply with their direct, at times extremely graphic descriptions.

RUPERT BROOKE

Rupert Brooke (1887-1915) was already a well-established poet when the war broke out and was one of the leading figures of the so-called Georgian poets, very successful at the time but now regarded as being rather minor and of lesser literary importance. Brooke was caught up in the initial enthusiasm for a war which, it was believed, would be short, painless and clear-cut and, in a rather affected, sentimental style, tends to glorify war and the romantic notion of sacrifice and heroism. His first collection of poetry, simply called Poems, was published in 1911 but it was for the five sonnets (Peace, Safety, The Dead I, The Dead II, The Soldier) that he wrote during the early months of the war that he became famous. However, he did not live to experience the real hardships of war as he died in April 1915 of septicaemia caused by a mosquito bite on his way to fight with his unit in Gallipoli.

The poem presented here, written in 1914, became famous for its patriotic stance and the heroic idea of sacrifice for one’s homeland. It is written as a sonnet which is Petrarchan in structure (fourteen lines divided into an octet followed by a sextet) but Shakespearean in its rhyme scheme with a slight variation in the sextet.

Rhyme Scheme: ABAB CDCD EFG EFG

Il soldato

La seguente poesia, composta nel 1914, divenne famosa per la sua forte componente patriottica e la sua eroica visione del sacrificio per la patria. Si tratta di un sonetto con struttura petrarchesca (14 versi divisi in un octet – una strofa di otto versi – seguita da un sextet – una strofa di sei versi) ma shakespiriana nel suo schema ritmico con una leggera variazione nel sextet.

Schema metrico: ABAB CDCD EFG EFG
If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is forever 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 the 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.

Se dovessi morire, pensa solo questo di me:
Che ci sarà un angolo di un campo straniero
Che sarà per sempre Inghilterra. Ci sarà nascosta
In quella terra ricca una polvere più ricca;
Una polvere che l’Inghilterra faceva nascere,
formava, cresceva,
Che, una volta, gli offriva i suoi fiori ad amare, i suoi sentieri ad esplorare:
Un corpo dall’Inghilterra che respirava aria inglese,
Lavato dai fiumi, benedetto dai soli di casa.
E pensa a questo cuore, liberato di ogni male,
Come un battito nella mente eterna, che ugualmente,
Da qualche parte, restituisce i pensieri donati dall’Inghilterra;
Le sue viste ed i suoi suoni, sogni felici come una giornata inglese;
E risate, apprese dagli amici, e la dolcezza,
Dei cuori in pace, sotto un cielo inglese.

http://www.rupertbrooke.com

1. The poet uses iambic pentameter, the traditional metre of English verse.
2. There is no reference to the emotions of death, only to the honour of dying for England.
4. The ‘turn’ or ‘volta’ of the sonnet begins with an imperative form involving the reader inviting him to imagine what it would be like in Heaven.
5. The use of the sonnet form and a regular rhyme scheme together with frequent repetition, particularly of ‘England’, and alliteration lend the poem a very formal, sombre tone.

IVOR GURNEY

Ivor Gurney (1890-1937) was generally recognised as a brilliant musician with a bright future as a composer but his studies at the Royal College of Music were interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War. He enlisted in the Gloucestershire Regiment and served at the war front in France for sixteen months during which he began writing poetry. In April 1915, he was injured but returned to fight as soon as he recovered; in 1918, he had a nervous breakdown and was officially discharged from the army. He suffered from severe mental disorders for the rest of his life and died in December 1937 after spending his last fifteen years in a mental home.

IVOR GURNEY

Ivor Gurney (1890-1937) era considerato un brillante musicista dal promettente futuro da compositore, ma i suoi studi al Royal College of Music si interruppero a causa dello scoppio della Prima guerra mondiale. Si arruolò nel Reggimento di Gloucestershire e servì l’esercito in Francia per sedici mesi, durante i quali cominciò a comporre poesie. Nell’Aprile del 1915 rimase ferito ma tornò a combattere non appena si riprese; nel 1918 ebbe un esaurimento nervoso che lo portò ad essere congedato dall’esercito. Soffrì di forti disturbi mentali per il resto della sua vita e morì nel dicembre del 1937 dopo aver trascorso in un ospedale psichiatrico gli ultimi quindici anni.
Pain

Pain, the poem presented here, is the second of a sequence of five sonnets known as Sonnets 1917 which were published in 1917 in his first collection Severn and Somme. It is immediately clear that the glorification of war seen in Brooke has been replaced by the brutal reality of suffering. The frequent repetitions (pain, grey) suggest the inability of language to capture the horror of war and the broken rhymes and verses, together with the unusual syntax, give the idea of the disorder and chaos of war and the mind’s inability to make sense of what is being experienced.

Rhyme Scheme: ABBA ABBA CDE CDE

Pain, pain continual; pain unending; Hard even to the roughest, but to those Hungry for beauty...Not the wisest knows, Nor most pitiful-hearted, what the wending

Of one hour’s way meant. Grey monotony lending Weight to the grey skies, grey mud where goes An army of grey bedrenched scarecrows in rows Careless at last of cruellest Fate-sending.

Seeing the pitiful eyes of men foredones, Or horses shot, too tired merely to stir, Dying in shell-holes both, slain by the mud.

Men broken, shrieking even to hear a gun. Till pain grinds down, or lethargy numbs her, The amazed heart cries angrily out on God.

From The Poetry of Shell Shock di Daniel Hipp, McFarland & Company, 2005

1. The repetition of the word pain gives the idea of the poet’s despair at the never-ending suffering.
2. To wend – an archaic word meaning to go on one’s way.
3. The image of scarecrows is particularly effective in conveying the idea of the soldier’s thin, gaunt, bedraggled look.
4. The use of at last seems to suggest that the soldiers are so fatigued by war that they have become resigned to even the cruellest of fate.
5. In death, the soldiers are deprived of their humanity and die as beasts.
6. The use of the preposition on is rather unusual and leaves the last line open to interpretation. Is he calling out to God for help, is he angry at God for allowing all this suffering, is he begging God to put a stop to the war?

Sofferenza

Sofferenza, la poesia presentata di seguito, è la seconda di una serie di sonetti conosciuti con il nome di Sonetti 1917, pubblicati nel 1917 all’interno della sua prima collezione Severn and Somme. La glorificazione della guerra presente in Brooke lascia qui spazio ad un brutale realismo che rispecchia la sofferenza vera e propria. Le frequenti ripetizioni di alcune parole (sofferenza, grigio) suggeriscono la difficoltà del linguaggio di catturare e riprodurre l’orrore della guerra; le rime e i versi spezzati, insieme alla sintassi inusuale della composizione, danno l’idea del disordine e del caos della guerra e dell’impossibilità della mente umana di dare un senso a ciò che sta vivendo.

Parafrasi

Il dolore costante è duro da sopportare, anche per i più duri, per non parlare di quelli affamati di bellezza. Né i più saggi né i più compassionevoli possono sapere cosa significa andare avanti così per una sola ora. Una monotonia grigia pesante aggiunge peso ai cieli grigi, il fango è grigio dove passa un esercito di spaventapasseri in fila, grigi e inzuppati, finalmente noncuranti di quello che il destino più crudele gli riserva.

Vedere gli occhi che ispirano pietà degli uomini anichiliti o i cavalli colpiti, troppo stanchi anche per cambiare posizione, che muoiono entrambi nelle buche create dalle bombe, uccisi dal fango. Uomini spezzati che urlano anche solo al rumore di un fucile. Finché il cuore, sorpreso, frantumato dal dolore, o intorpidito dalla letargia, non griderà con rabbia a Dio.

1. Il ripetizione del termine sofferenza dà l’idea della propria sofferenza indimenticabile.
2. To wend – un termine archaico che significa andare o camminare.
3. L’immagine di scarecrows è particolarmente efficace nel trasmettere l’idea del soldato magro, spogliato, brevettato.
4. L’uso di at last sembra suggerire che i soldati sono così affaticati dalla guerra che hanno abbandonato anche la propria resistenza alla più crudele volontà.
5. In morte, i soldati sono privati della propria umanità e muoiono come bestie.
6. L’uso della preposizione on è piuttosto insolito e lascia la fine della poesia aperta all’interpretazione. Ha egli chiamato Dio per aiuto, ha egli arrabbiato Dio per aver permesso tutto questo sofferenza, ha egli pregato Dio di fermare la guerra?
By 1917, the full extent of the dreadful consequences of the war had become clear and Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) was beginning to question whether all the pain and suffering was justifiable. He served as a second lieutenant and had many traumatic experiences during his time at the front that led him to being diagnosed with shell shock. He spent some time recovering in a War Hospital in Edinburgh where he met and became close friends with Siegfried Sassoon but returned to active service in France in July 1918. He was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery but did not survive to receive it as he was killed in action just one week before the Armistice was signed.

Dulce et Decorum Est

Owen’s most famous poem Dulce et Decorum Est (1917, published posthumously 1920) is memorable for its graphic representation of the hardship of being a soldier in the trenches of the battlefields and of the stark image of a fellow soldier dying in front of his eyes. The language is brutal, at times colloquial and direct and no longer the refined, rather affected style of Georgian tradition. It is written on the basis of the sonnet form but is broken up irregularly. It starts conventionally with an octet and a sextet following a regular rhyme scheme until the very last lines when the conventions of poetry seem to fall apart. It is as if the poem explodes from within as the poet attempts to deal with the atrocities of his experiences and climaxes in the final, very powerful line in which Owen defines the idea of the honour of sacrifice as a lie.

Rhyme Scheme: ABAB CDCD EFEF GH GH IJJ KLKL MNN

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WILFRED OWEN

Nel 1917 si percepivano ormai le spaventose conseguenze della guerra e Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) cominciava a domandarsi se fosse possibile giustificare tutto il dolore e la sofferenza che lo circondavano. In seguito alle esperienze traumatiche vissute durante il suo servizio da secondo tenente nell’esercito gli venne diagnosticato lo shock da combattimento. Fu ricoverato per qualche tempo in un ospedale di guerra ad Edimburgo dove conobbe e divenne molto amico di Sigfried Sassoon, ma nel luglio del 1918 riprese servizio combattendo in Francia. Gli venne conferita una medaglia d’onore per il coraggio dimostrato, ma non sopravvisse abbastanza per riceverla, in quanto rimase ucciso una settimana prima dell’armistizio.

Dulce et Decorum Est

La poesia più famosa di Owen, Dulce et Decorum Est (scritta nel 1917 e pubblicata postuma nel 1920), è significativa per la realistica rappresentazione della dura vita di soldato in trincea, nonché della cruda immagine del giovane commilitone morto di fronte ai suoi occhi. Il linguaggio è brutale, a tratti colloquiale e diretto, e non vi è più traccia dello stile raffinato e sentimentale della tradizione georgiana. Composta sulla base di un sonetto, si spezza in maniera irregolare. Comincia in modo convenzionale con un octet (una strofa di otto versi) e un sextet (una strofa da sei versi), seguendo un regolare schema ritmico fino agli ultimi versi, in cui sembra sparire qualsiasi convenzione poetica. Si ha infatti come l’impressione che la poesia esploda dall’interno nel momento in cui il poeta tenta di affrontare le atrocità delle sue esperienze e che raggiunga la climax nel verso conclusivo, in cui l’idea di onore del sacrificio viene definita da Owen come una vera e propria menzogna.

Schema metrico: ABAB CDCD EFEF GH GH IJJ KLKL MNN
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^1. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind^2,
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines^3 that dropped behind.

Gas! GAS!^4 Quick, boys! - An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime...

Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under I 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 gurgling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues^5,

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^6.

From AA.VV. La Guerra d’Europa 1914-1918 raccontata dai poeti, a cura di Andrea Amerio e Maria Pace Ottieri, Nottetempo, Roma, 2014

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1. Fatigue overcomes men to the point that they are unable to stay awake even while carrying out normal actions.
2. The parallel structure highlights how no one can escape the misery of war.
3. A reference to the kind of explosive shells (5.9 calibre) used by the Germans during the First World War.
4. Poison gas used to kill soldiers. When inhaled into the lungs, it gave the same effect as drowning.
5. The visual details of the man’s dying body are truly horrific.
6. This is a famous line from Odes (III,2,13) by Horace (65BC-8BC), a lyrical writer in Ancient Roman times. The line means It is sweet and right to die for your country.
SIEGFRIED SASSOON

Initially, Sigfried Sassoon (1886-1967) joined the British Army inspired by a sense of patriotism and was already in service when Great Britain entered the war in August 1914. However he soon became aware of the discrepancy between the jingo-fuelled picture of heroism and adventure that was being painted on his home soil and the reality of war that the soldiers experienced on the battlefield. He became the focal point of dissent, especially when he presented his Soldier’s Declaration in 1917 which advocated the discontinuation of hostilities. He survived the war and continued to write until his death in 1967.

Aftermath

Sassoon’s poem Aftermath was written in March 1919 shortly after the poet was demobilised. It is an exhortation on the part of the poet never to forget the suffering and the hardship of the soldiers and is a fine example of the use of the vernacular which was typical of the poet's style. It has three main stanzas with a regular but broken rhyme scheme which are divided by a parallel refrain.

Rhyme Scheme of the three main stanzas:
AABBC DDEEFF GHHGII

Have you forgotten yet?...
For the world’s events have rumbled on since those gagged days,
Like traffic checked while at the crossing of city-ways:
And the haunted gap in your mind has filled with thoughts that flow
Like clouds in the lit heaven of life; and you’re a man reprieved to go,
Taking your peaceful share of Time, with joy to spare.2

1. The pause after the question makes the reader stop and think before answering the question.
2. The first stanza looks to the present and the future and how life goes on while the second and third stanzas recall the hardships of war.

SIEGFRIED SASSOON


La poesia di Sassoon Dopo fu scritta nel marzo del 1919, poco dopo che il poeta aveva lasciato l’esercito. Si tratta di un’esortazione che il poeta rivolge a se stesso per non dimenticare mai la sofferenza e le difficoltà vissute dai soldati, e costituisce inoltre un perfetto esempio dell’utilizzo del dialetto, tipico dello stile del poeta. È composta da tre strofe principali dallo schema rimico regolare ma spezzato, ognuna intervallata da un ritornello parallelo.

Parafrasì
Non hai ancora dimenticato?...
Gli eventi del mondo continuano a scorrire anche dopo quei giorni difficili da accettare, come il traffico bloccato ad un incrocio. Ed il vuoto della mente tormentata da spettri si è riempito di pensieri che scorrono nel cielo illuminato dalla vita;
et tu sei un uomo a cui fu concesso di continuare a vivere e puoi prendere la tua parte di tempo e sperimentare la gioia.
But the past is just the same—and War’s a bloody game...
Have you forgotten yet?...
Look down\(^3\), and swear by the slain of the War\(^4\) that you’ll never forget.

Do you remember the dark months you held the sector at Mametz\(^5\)–
The nights you watched and wired and dug and piled sandbags on parapets?
Do you remember the rats; and the stench
Of corpses rotting in front of the front-line trench—
And dawn coming, dirty-white, and chill with a hopeless rain?
Do you ever stop and ask, ‘Is it all going to happen again?’

Do you remember that hour of din before the attack—
And the anger, the blind compassion that seized and shook you then
As you peered at the doomed and haggard faces of your men?
Do you remember the stretcher-cases lurching back
With dying eyes and lolling heads—those ashen-grey
Masks of the lads who once were keen and kind and gay?

Have you forgotten yet?...
Look up, and swear by the green of the spring that you’ll never forget.

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\(^3\) Notice the two opposite adverbs of direction—look down, towards the ground where those who died are buried; look up to the sky (last line) and the beauty of the natural world around us so that the tragedy and devastation of war will not be repeated.

\(^4\) It is a duty to those who sacrificed their lives never to forget what happened.

\(^5\) A small town in the Somme area of France where one of the largest battles of First World War WW1 took place.