For the soldiers who went off to fight in World War I, literature was the main form of entertainment. “In 1914 there was virtually no cinema,” writes historian Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory*; there was no radio at all; and there was certainly no television. Fussell continues, “Amusement was largely found in language formally arranged, either in books and periodicals or at the theater and music hall, or in one’s own or one’s friends’ anecdotes, rumors, or clever structuring of words.” For British soldiers in particular, writing poetry was one of the chief sources of pleasure. Britain formed its army with volunteers, and many of these volunteers came out of Great Britain’s high-quality public school system, the British equivalent of private preparatory high schools and col-

---

**Poetry of World War I**

“*I. Peace*”

“*III. The Dead*”

By Rupert Brooke


“I Have a Rendezvous with Death”

“Sonnet X”

“Sonnet XI”

By Alan Seeger

Excerpted from *Poems,* 1916

“Strange Meeting”

“Anthem for Doomed Youth”

“Dulce Et Decorum Est”

By Wilfred Owen

Originally published in 1920. Excerpted from *Wilfred Owen: War Poems and Others,* 1973

“They”

“Counter-Attack”

By Siegfried Sassoon

Originally published in 1918. Excerpted from *Collected Poems,* 1949

---

I have a rendezvous with Death/ At some disputed barricade,/ When Spring comes back with rustling shade/ And apple-blossoms fill the air—/
I have a rendezvous with Death/ When Spring brings back blue days and fair.

*From I Have A Rendezvous with Death by Alan Seeger*
leges in the United States. Many British soldiers were therefore well-educated men who appreciated poetry.

British soldiers had a special relationship with literature. British schooling was based on the idea that understanding the poetry of the past makes people good citizens. Thus, all British students were familiar with a wide range of poets, from ancient Greek poets to those more recent, such as British writer Thomas Hardy. Many soldiers carried with them to the front a standard volume called the Oxford Book of English Verse, a collection of

Rupert Brooke (1887–1915)

English poet Rupert Brooke is perhaps the most famous of the patriotic poets, poets who celebrated England’s entry into World War I. Born on August 3, 1887, to a family of educators, Brooke excelled at school. He became part of a circle of poets at Cambridge University who rebelled against the poetry of their parents’ generation and hoped to create new verses that were realistic, bold, and vital. They were known as the Georgian poets. Brooke published his first collection of poems in 1911 and made his name by contributing to Georgian Poetry, a book containing selected works by different poets, published in 1912.

Like many other educated young Englishmen, Brooke responded to the declaration of war in 1914 with patriotic fervor. He had tired of “a world grown old and cold and weary” and hoped to find glory in the war. His sonnets (fourteen-line poems) about the thrill of going off to war to fight for his country were published and became wildly popular in England. Brooke never saw action in the war; he was on his way to fight the Turks at Gallipoli when he contracted blood poisoning from an insect bite on his lip. He died on the island of Scyros in the Aegean Sea on April 23, 1915.

British poet Rupert Brooke.
(Corbis Corporation. Reproduced by permission.)
important poetry; others had recent publications of poetry sent to them. Such books were extremely popular at the front, for they provided a diversion from the horror and tedium of war. Fussell quotes the story of Herbert Read, who was mailed a copy of a book of verse by poet Robert Browning: “At first I was mocked in the dugout as a highbrow for reading The Ring and the Book, but saying nothing I waited until one of the scoffers idly picked it up. In ten minutes he was absorbed, and in three days we were fighting for turns to read it, and talking of nothing else at meals.”

Schooled in poetry, many British soldiers turned to writing poetry to record their reactions to the war. And as it turned out, World War I produced more poetry than any war before or since. Hundreds of volumes of war poetry were published; according to John Lehmann, author of The English Poets of the First World War, “There was a period, during and directly after the War, when almost any young man who could express his thoughts and feelings in verse could find a publisher and a public.” Poets—including Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Edmund Blunden, Alan Seeger (the rare American), Robert Graves, Isaac Rosenberg, and many others—recorded all the various ways that soldiers experienced the war, from the first longings for glory to the final sickening confrontation with death. Many of these poems are now forgotten, but many others—such as the ones included below—are still remembered and taught. These poems provide a fascinating view of the first modern war.

Alan Seeger (1888–1916)

The only major American war poet, Alan Seeger was born in New York City in 1888. Seeger attended Harvard College, where he dabbled in poetry and began to develop a reputation as a freethinker (someone who does not follow the conventions of his peers). After graduation he returned to New York City, but he grew to dislike life in America; he felt that Americans were uncivilized and incapable of enjoying life’s true pleasures, such as fine wine, good food, and art. In 1912 Seeger moved to Paris, France.

When World War I began, Seeger leaped at the chance to enlist in the French Foreign Legion, a division of the French army that accepted enlistments from foreigners. Seeger hoped to find in war the intensity and excitement that he craved. Seeger served in the foreign legion for nearly two years, seeing action in battles at Aisne and Champagne, but he was bored whenever he was out of battle. He soothed his boredom in part by writing poems; his only collection of poetry was published in 1916. On July 4, 1916, Seeger took part in one of the major battles of the war, the Battle of the Somme. Pushing forward on the first day of the attack, he was gunned down by German machine-gun fire, crawled into a shell hole, and died.
The poetry of World War I closely reflects the attitudes that many soldiers had toward the war. The first poems—including those by Brooke and Seeger—brim with the confidence of soldiers who believe that they are embarking on a glorious adventure. For the first year or two of the war, many poems spoke of honor, glory, and patriotism; they compared the duties of modern soldiers with those of warriors celebrated in the epic poems of the ancient Greeks. Yet the slowly dawning horror of the continuing war began to reshape war poetry, just as it reshaped the attitudes of everyone involved in the war. As the war wore on, poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon began to write bitter, cutting verses about the horror of war and the failure of patriotic visions. After 1916, writes Lehmann, “the dreams were shattered, and patriotism became a matter of grim endurance against all odds, of despairing hope almost buried beneath the huge weight of disillusionment, of the need not to be defeated existing beside the belief that it was increasingly not merely stupid but almost criminal not to negotiate an end to the slaughter.”

Things to remember while reading the poems of hope and glory by Rupert Brooke and Alan Seeger:

- The poems by Rupert Brooke and Alan Seeger hint at the attitudes poets had toward the war during the first period of war poetry, the period of hope and honor and glory. In these poems the poets speak of leaving the petty pleasures of civilian life for the exalted life of a soldier; they are romantic and hopeful.

- Literature and warfare went hand in hand during World War I. Many of the war poets composed their poems while sitting in the trenches waiting for a battle to begin; novelists and essayists also composed their works under the most difficult conditions. Reading was a common way of passing long hours between battles.

- Poetry can be difficult. Poets use uncommon and sometimes old-fashioned words to convey their ideas; they often refer to ancient myths or to other poems that most people today do not know. Poets condense meaning into tight knots of words, and it can be difficult to untie those
knots. But the very things that make poetry difficult also make it rewarding. It may help to read the poems several times or to read them aloud. Think of a poem as a puzzle and see if you can solve it.

“I. Peace”  
By Rupert Brooke

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,  
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,  
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,  
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,  
Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,  
Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,  
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,  
And all the little emptiness of love!  
Oh! we, who have known shame, we have found release there,  
Where there’s no ill, no grief, but sleep has mending,  
Naught broken save this body, lost but breath;  
Nothing to shake the laughing heart’s long peace there  
But only agony, and that has ending;  
And the worst friend and enemy is but Death.

“Ill. The Dead”  
By Rupert Brooke

Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!  
There’s none of these so lonely and poor of old,  
But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold.  
These laid the world away; poured out the red  
Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be  
Of work and joy, and that unhopec serene,  
That men call age; and those who would have been,  
Their sons, they gave, their immortality.

Who has matched us with His hour: Who has allowed us to be here at this important moment in history.  
Naught: Nothing.  
Save: Except.
Blow, bugles, blow! They brought us, for our dearth,
Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.
Honour has come back, as a king, to earth,
And paid his subjects with a royal wage;
And nobleness walks in our ways again;
And we have come into our heritage.

“I Have a Rendezvous with Death”
By Alan Seeger

I have a rendezvous with Death
At some disputed barricade,
When Spring comes back with rustling shade
And apple-blossoms fill the air—
I have a rendezvous with Death
When Spring brings back blue days and fair.

It may be he shall take my hand
And lead me into his dark land
And close my eyes and quench my breath—
It may be I shall pass him still.
I have a rendezvous with Death
On some scarred slope of battered hill,
When Spring comes round again this year
And the first meadow-flowers appear.

God knows ‘twere better to be deep
Pillowed in silk and scented down,
Where Love throbs out in blissful sleep,
Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath
Where hushed awakenings are dear. . .
But I’ve a rendezvous with Death
At midnight in some flaming town,
When Spring trips north again this year,
And I to my pledged word am true,
I shall not fail that rendezvous.

“Sonnet X”
By Alan Seeger

I have sought Happiness, but it has been
A lovely rainbow, baffling all pursuit,
And tasted Pleasure, but it was a fruit
More fair of outward hue than sweet within.
Renouncing both, a flake in the ferment
Of battling hosts that conquer or recoil,
There only, chastened by fatigue and toil,
I knew what came the nearest to content.
For there at least my troubled flesh was free
From the gadfly Desire that plagued it so;
Discord and Strife were what I used to know,
Heartaches, deception, murderous jealousy;
By War transported far from all of these,
Amid the clash of arms I was at peace.

“Sonnet XI: On Returning to the Front After Leave”
By Alan Seeger

Apart sweet women (for whom Heaven be blessed),
Comrades, you cannot think how thin and blue
Look the leftovers of mankind that rest,
Now that the cream has been skimmed off in you.
War has its horrors, but has this of good—
That its sure processes sort out and bind
Brave hearts in one intrepid brotherhood
And leave the shams and imbeciles behind.
Now turn we joyful to the great attacks,
Not only that we face in a fair field
Our valiant foe and all his deadly tools,
But also that we turn disdainful backs
On that poor world we scorn yet die to shield—
That world of cowards, hypocrites, and fools.

Things to remember while reading the poems of disillusionment by Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon:
• The following five poems by Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon take a very different view of war. These are poems
of harsh disillusionment. The authors seem to realize that there is no higher calling to war but merely a bitter struggle to survive.

- Though the romantic and optimistic poems of Alan Seeger and Rupert Brooke were very popular early in the war, the work of Owen and Sassoon was much more popular late in the war and afterwards. The change reflected in these poems is said to mark the emergence of modern literature, which focuses more on the perceptions of common people than earlier literature does.

“Strange Meeting”

By Wilfred Owen

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

With a thousand pains that vision’s face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
‘Strange friend,’ I said, ‘here is no cause to mourn.’
‘None,’ said that other, ‘save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,

Groined: Opened holes in.

That vision’s face was grained: The man’s face was etched with pain.

Flues: Chimneys of the tunnel.
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.

Wilfred Owen (1893–1918)

Unlike poets Alan Seeger and Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen wrote not of the glory of war but of the pity of war. Owen was born in Oswestry, England, on March 18, 1893, to a humble, religious family. Owen excelled at school and eventually attended the University of London, but he was forced to leave the university when he ran short of money. He worked for a time as a reverend’s assistant and as a schoolteacher, but he had not yet found his calling when he decided to enroll in the English army in the summer of 1915.

Owen served as an officer in the Second Battalion Manchester Regiment, and he saw plenty of action. Leading a regiment in a battle at Serre, he saw many of his men killed and wounded. These memories of battle would soon fuel an outpouring of poetry. In 1917 Owen was hospitalized with a concussion and shell shock (a term indicating that a soldier was so mentally distraught from fighting that he could no longer serve). At the Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland, Owen met poet Siegfried Sassoon. The two poets spurred each other on, and both created some of their greatest works while at the hospital.

Owen returned to active duty in September 1918 and was soon sent to attack some of the Germans’ strongest defensive positions on the Hindenburg line (a line of concrete-reinforced trenches built by the Germans). Owen earned a Military Cross (war medal) for his efforts, but he was soon killed in a battle on November 4, 1918, one week before the end of the war. Owen’s friends and admirers—including Sassoon—made sure that Owen’s poetry was published, and Owen is now considered one of the greatest of the war poets.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress. 
Courage was mine, and I had mystery, 
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery: 
To miss the march of this retreating world 
Into vain citadels that are not walled. 
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels, 
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells, 
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint. 
I would have poured my spirit without stint 
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war. 
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were. 
I am the enemy you killed, my friend. 
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned 
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed. 
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold. 
Let us sleep now. . . .’

“They”
By Siegfried Sassoon

The Bishop tells us: ‘When the boys come back
They will not be the same; for they'll have fought
In a just cause: they lead the last attack
On Anti-Christ; their comrades’ blood has bought
New right to breed an honourable race,
They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.’

‘We’re none of us the same!’ the boys reply.
‘For George lost both his legs; and Bill’s stone blind;
Poor Jim’s shot through the lungs and like to die;
And Bert’s gone syphilitic: you’ll not find
A chap who’s served that hasn’t found some change.’
And the Bishop said: ‘The ways of God are strange!’

“Anthem for Doomed Youth”
By Wilfred Owen

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
—Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, —
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.
What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls’ brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

“Counter-Attack”
By Siegfried Sassoon

We’d gained our first objective hours before
While dawn broke like a face with blinking eyes,
Pallid, unshaved and thirsty, blind with smoke.
Things seemed all right at first. We held their line,
With bombers posted, Lewis guns well placed,
And clink of shovels deepening the shallow trench.

The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs
High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps;
And trunks, face downward in the sucking mud,
Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled;
And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,
Bulged, clot ted heads, slept in the plastering slime.
And then the rain began—the jolly old rain!

A yawning soldier knelt against the bank,
Staring across the morning blear with fog;
He wondered when the Allemands would get busy;
And then, of course, they started with five-nines
Traversing, sure as fate, and never a dud.
Mute in the clamour of shells he watched them burst
Spouting dark earth and wire with gusts from hell,
While posturing giants dissolved in drifts of smoke.

He crouched and flinched, dizzy with galloping fear,
Sick for escape—loathing the strangled horror
And butchered, frantic gestures of the dead.

Patter out their hasty orisons: Speak their funeral prayers.
Shires: English country villages.
Pallor: Paleness.
Pall: Coffin.
Pallid: Lacking color or liveliness.
Posted: In position.
Grovelled: Crawled.
Saps: Covered trenches.
Blear: Blurred, dimmed.
Allemands: Germans.
Five-nines: Explosive shells.
Posturing giants: The poet is probably referring to the towers of smoke and dust that rise from shell blasts and are blown apart by the wind.
An officer came blundering down the trench:
‘Stand-to and man the fire-step!’ On he went . . .
Gasping and bawling, ‘Fire-step . . . counter-attack!’
Then the haze lifted. Bombing on the right
Down the old sap: machine-guns on the left;
And stumbling figures looming out in front.
‘O Christ, they’re coming at us!’ Bullets spat,
And he remembered his rifle . . . rapid fire . . .
And started blazing wildly . . . then a bang
Crumpled and spun him sideways, knocked him out
To grunt and wriggle: none heeded him; he choked
And fought the flapping veils of smothering gloom,
Lost in a blurred confusion of yells and groans . . .
Down, and down, and down, he sank and drowned,
Bleeding to death. The counter-attack had failed.

“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 tired, outstripped Five-Nines 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 flound’ring 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 wri
ging in his face,
British troops blinded by mustard gas in a German gas attack at Bethune, France, April 1918.

(Archive Photos. Reproduced by permission.)
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.

What happened next . . .

For many of the poets who fought in World War I there was no next. Rupert Brooke, Alan Seeger, and Wilfred Owen all died in the war, ending their brief careers as poets. Others spent the rest of their lives reliving and recounting their war experiences. Poetry, of course, went on, but it was changed forever by the war. The war killed millions of men, but it also killed off the kind of poetry that could urge men to die for honor and glory and love of country. Future poets would never again uncritically accept the romantic notions of warfare that existed before World War I. The great poetic works that came out after the war—especially T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land and Ezra Pound’s Cantos—all shared the ironic attitude displayed by Owen and Sassoon. (Irony is the use of words and images to convey something different from their literal meaning. For example, these poets often used beautiful poetic language to describe the demeaning effects of war.) Postwar literature of all sorts is filled with images of people who are alienated from grand ideas, lied to by bureaucracies, and who retreat into a shell of self-protection. The war novels of Erich Maria Remarque and Ernest Hemingway share in this sense of alienation and disillusionment (see the following excerpts from these novelists).
One of the most significant of the war poets, Siegfried Sassoon was also one of the few who survived the war. Sassoon was born on September 8, 1886, to a family steeped in the literary and artistic culture of late nineteenth-century England. He acquired a gentleman’s education and pursued the interests of a wealthy Englishman: poetry and foxhunting. His first collections of poetry, published between 1906 and 1916, were considered bland and uninteresting. But his activities in World War I soon shook this refined gentleman to his core and brought vitality to his writing.

Sassoon served as an officer in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, a British army regiment, and quickly earned a Military Cross (war medal) for valor in battle. But Sassoon saw more clearly than others the horror of war and the futility (hopelessness) of sending men into battles that meant certain slaughter. He published his first collection of war poems, titled *The Old Huntsman*, in 1917. Soon after, he wrote a letter condemning the British army leadership. He could have been court-martialed (prosecuted) for the letter, but he was instead diagnosed with shell shock (a term indicating that a soldier was so mentally distraught from fighting that he could no longer serve) and sent to the Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland. At the hospital, Sassoon met fellow poet Wilfred Owen; the two poets encouraged each other and wrote some of their best poems in the hospital. Sassoon’s poems address the horror and futility of war with a directness and an intensity rare in war poetry.

Sassoon survived the war and went on to create other works of real distinction. His trilogy of autobiographical novels, *Memoirs of George Sherston*, is considered one of the best accounts of the war. Sassoon also became actively engaged in politics, especially antiwar politics. He died on September 1, 1967.
Did you know . . .

- Of the four poets represented here, three died in the war: Alan Seeger, Wilfred Owen, and Rupert Brooke. Does knowing this change the way you understand their poetry?

- Wilfred Owen was killed just a week before the war ended. Literary scholars believe that he was one of the greatest of the war poets.

- Alan Seeger fought not with the American army but rather with the French foreign legion, a select fighting force made up of volunteers from all over the world.

For More Information

Books


Web sites
