

# Literature of World War One

How the poetry of WWI is unique

# Why is the poetry of WWI unique?

- We can consider the poetry and literature of any war as both a *historic* window on that war as well as a *cultural* insight into the mentality of the time
- There is no equivalent poetry of WWII. There are novels, but they are not the same thing, rather they are descriptive of the events
- The poetry of WWI is both extremely *modern* and both *political* in the sense that it exposed the futility of the age-old concept of the nobility of dying for one's country

# The English poetry of WWI

- There were many nationalities involved in WWI, English, German, French, American, Russian, etc.
- But, the English poetry that came out of WWI is unique. In Wikipedia there are analyses of the poetry of each country, that of most takes 5 pages, that of England takes over 50.
- The poetry of WWI had a profound influence on the subsequent culture of England and the West.
- It led to cynicism regarding governments and the development of concepts of liberalism and human rights
- Every poet and writer must consider the sometimes opposite effects of choosing the right word and rhyme and the message he wants to convey. Gory death cannot be described in glorified stanzas

# Effects of WWI

- Gen. Montgomery, who fought as an officer in WWI and a General in WWII, was asked what was the chief difference, and he answered that in WWI the lives of the men were expendable, while in WWII the officers had to treat the soldiers as people
- In WWI many young men had time on their hands sitting in trenches for days or weeks, there was no blitzkrieg as in WWII, so many wrote poetry
- In describing the horrific conditions they experienced in the trenches, they evinced a natural opposition to war that lasted until WWII (only 21 years later) and beyond

# Famous English poets of WWI

- Rupert Brooke (1887-1915)
- Siegfried Sassoon (1865-1967)
- Edmund Blunden (1896-1974)
- Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)
- Robert Graves (1895-1985)
- Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918)
- Herbert Read (1893-1968)

# Poets who glorified war

- At the beginning of WWI there were still a few poets who glorified war and were idealistic
- One such was Rupert Brooke:

## Grantchester

*“Stands the church clock at ten to three?  
And is there honey still for tea?”*

## The Soldier

*“If I should die think only this of me  
That there is a corner of a foreign field  
That is forever England.”*

- Fortunately he died early enough, in 1915 (from a mosquito bite) to avoid the worst suffering

# Wilfred Owen

- Wilfred Owen is perhaps the most famous of the WWI poets. Two of his poems have entered the canon of English literature

- Strange Meeting:

*“It seemed like out of battle I escaped  
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped  
Through granite which titanic wars had groined.....*

- Anthem for doomed youth:

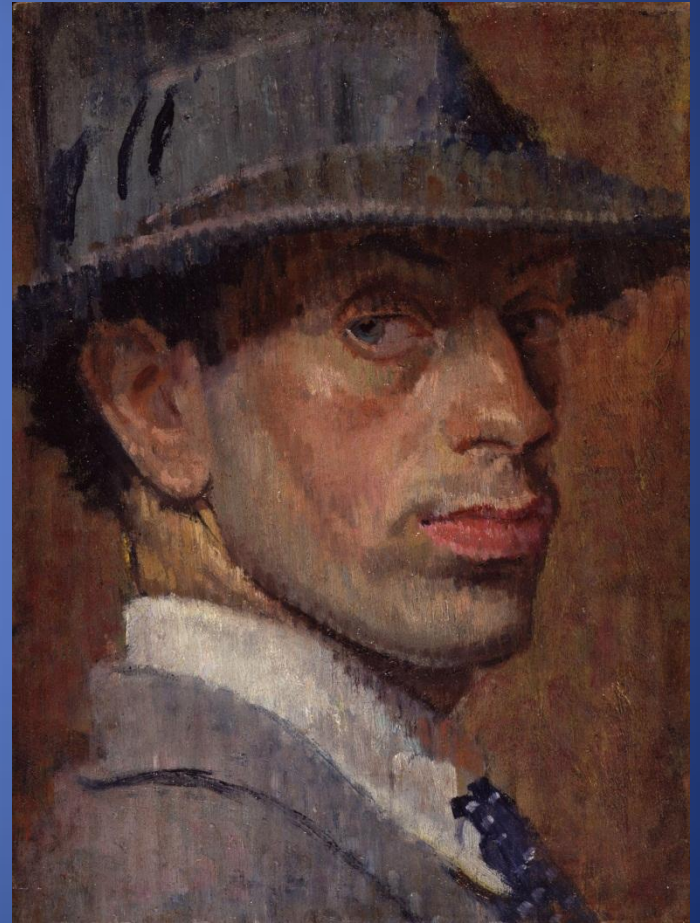
*“What passing-bells for those who die as cattle?  
- Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons....*

.....

*The pallor of girls’ brows shall be their pall  
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,  
And each slow dusk the drawing-down of blinds.”*

# Isaac Rosenberg

- Born Bristol 1890
- Studied art at Slade School London
- Enlisted in British Army 1914
- Fought in the trenches
- Killed at the age of 28



Self portrait 1915



## Examples of his poetry

### Marching

*My eyes catch ruddy necks  
Sturdily pressed back -  
All a red brick moving glint.  
Like flaming pendulums, hands  
Swing across the khaki -  
Mustard-coloured khaki -  
To the automatic feet.*

### Dead man's dump

*None saw their spirits' shadow shake the grass,  
Or stood aside for the half used life to pass  
Out of those doomed nostrils and the doomed mouth,  
When the swift iron burning bee  
Drained the wild honey of their youth.*

# Comparison with Owen

- Wilfred Owen is generally considered to be the greatest British poet of WWI. In his study *“First World War Poetry”* (Penguin 1979) Jon Silken compares Rosenberg with Owen:
- *“One of the principal differences in the Owen /Rosenberg contrast is that Owen’s poems are, in the main, recollected...Rosenberg’s lines do have fierce immediacy not present in Owen’s.”*
- *“Owen’s language narrates or carries the ideas; Rosenberg’s language is them, sensuously enacts them, and experiences them.”*

# Why was Rosenberg ignored?

- He was *Jewish* in WWI England
- He was *poor*
- He was a *private*, when all the other famous poets were officers
- He died *young* and in obscurity
- But he now has a plaque dedicated to him outside the Whitechapel Library



# Summary of the Poetry of WWI

- Wilfred Owen famously wrote:

*“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, honor, might, majesty, dominion or power, except War. Above all I am not concerned with Poetry, my subject is War, and the pity of War.”*

# Influential novels of WWI

- “*Goodbye to all that*” is a memoir by Robert Graves, published in 1929, of his time before during and after WWI, that as its title implies rejects the cosy, stable pre-war world. It was a very influential book.
- “*All quiet on the Western Front,*” is a novel by Erich Maria Remarque, a German author, also published in 1929, who experienced the trench warfare. It is a profoundly anti-war account and influenced many. It has been made into several movies.

# Other Literature

- *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* - Franz Werfel (1933)

This poignant novel based on real historical events unfolds the tragedy that befell the Armenian people in the dark year of 1915 when the Turks systematically exterminated their Christian subjects

- *A Farewell to Arms* - Ernest Hemingway (1929)

Set during the Italian campaign of WWI, the book, relates the story of US officer in the Italian ambulance corps and his love affair with an American nurse

# The long-term influence of the literature of WWI

- It opened people's eyes to the tremendous suffering and terrible treatment of soldiers by their own armies and leaders
- It emphasized the futility of war and the need for people to have a greater say in when wars are declared and how they are conducted
- It gave rise to an anti-war movement that is still with us today