

World War I Poetry: A Study of Three Poets

The Soldier, by Rupert Brooke (1914)

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 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.



Most poetry of World War I bears little resemblance to Rupert Brooke who fought in few battles and died of blood poisoning in 1915. Most British poets – and those are the poets we'll look at in this assignment – wrote of a much more painful war that scarred them and their generation for years to come. As Oxford English professor Dr. Stuart Lee has written, this Great War clearly impacted Great Britain in a way that no war since has affected the nation. He writes:

The First World War runs through the British modern-day psyche like no other conflict. On Remembrance Day Sunday thoughts (of those who have not fought) turn to the fields in Flanders and the slaughter of the Somme and Passchendaele more readily than Dunkirk, El Alamein, or Arnhem (unless, of course, the date is an anniversary of a specific battle). It has been described as Britain's 'Vietnam', where the true horror of War touched everyone and everything in the country, breaking through the class barrier and irreversibly altering the social structure of the nation. It also closely parallels Vietnam as it represents an overwhelming feeling of futility, in that so many lives were wasted for such little gain. Unlike the Second World War, which more easily falls into the "just war" definition of right versus wrong, the First World War appears as a conflict with aims that were quickly lost, degenerating to a war of attrition in unbelievable conditions.

Your assignment . . .

Locate and read the following poems:

Siegfried Sassoon

"Counter-Attack"
"Does it Matter?"
"Suicide in the Trenches"
"The Death-Bed"
"They"

Isaac Rosenberg

"On Receiving News of the War"
"Break of Day in the Trenches"
"God"
"Louse Hunting"
"Dead Man's Dump"

Wilfred Owen

"Apologia Pro Poemate Meo"
"Asleep"
"The Show"
"1914"
"The Letter"

Poetry Links

You can find these poems by searching their titles with the author's name. The links below contain links to some of the poems and short bios.

- Sassoon poems: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/siegfried-sassoon>
- Owen poems: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/wilfred-owen>
- Rosenberg poems: <http://www.english.emory.edu/LostPoets/Rosenberg.html>

Note-taking

Take notes in the margins and find some commonalities with ideas presented in Remarque's work. Think about what the poems describe, what poetic techniques (imagery, figurative language, etc.) the poets use to convey the meaning. Think about some of the themes in *All Quiet on the Western Front*: the futility of war, the value of comradeship, the inability of the soldier to return to "normal" life, the effects of stress on the soldier's psyche, the inhumanity and violence of warfare, among others. Create a chart that mirrors the format of the chart below (you will turn this in with your essay):

poem title/author	what it's about	lines worth noting	connection to <i>AQWF</i>

After completing your chart for the 15 poems (for some you will have more filled out, others less so), look for poems that extend the themes apparent in Remarque's work.

Essay Question

In what ways do these World War I poets reflect and extend the themes apparent in Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*? Choose three themes from *All Quiet*. Show how some of the poems develop a similar theme. Consider the poets'

- **Diction:** what kinds of figurative language do the poets use? What about imagery? How does this imagery/figurative language mirror Remarque's writing through Paul's narration.
- **Tone:** are the poems ironic, didactic, sardonic? Something else? How does this tone compare with Remarque's?
- **Message:** what are the poems' ultimate messages about war? How do the poems extend themes that Remarque presents in his novel?

Meeting Dates - Come at lunch.

Wed., Feb. 1 – Discussion of Sassoon's poems

Fri., Feb. 3 – Discussion of Rosenberg's poems

Tues., Feb. 7 – Discussion of Owen's poems

Thurs., Feb. 9 – Discussion of how to write the essay

Essay Format and Deadline

Double-spaced, typed, 12 pt. Times New Roman font; 1-inch margins on all sides; 5-6 pages. Give your essay a title. Use page references as you discuss *All Quiet on the Western Front*. For example, (*AQWF*, p. 17) Use parenthetical line number references where appropriate. For example, ("Does It Matter," lines 3-5). **Essay and your chart are due Wednesday, February 22** at the beginning of the period regardless of whether you are in school. You may use a Procrastinator's Permit if you wish. If you are absent February 22, you must use a Procrastinator's Permit to turn in your paper February 23 at the beginning of the period. No late papers will be graded. **You must also submit your essay (not your notes) to turnitin.com.** Failure to do so will result in your grade being lowered by at least two grades.