

**BEG-7**  
**Block-2**



ଓଡ଼ିଶା ରାଜ୍ୟ ମୁକ୍ତ ବିଶ୍ୱବିଦ୍ୟାଳୟ, ସମ୍ବଲପୁର  
**Odisha State Open University**  
Sambalpur

# **BAEG**

*BACHELOR OF ARTS (HONOURS) IN*  
**ENGLISH**

**20TH CENTURY BRITISH**  
**LITERATURE**

**20TH CENTURY POEMS**

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Odisha State Open University, Sambalpur, Odisha  
Established by an Act of Government of Odisha.

# **BACHELOR OF ARTS (HONOURS) IN ENGLISH (BAEG)**

**BEG-7**

**20<sup>th</sup> Century British literature**

**Block-2**

## **20<sup>th</sup> Century Poems**

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**Unit 1      T.S. Eliot “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”**

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**Unit 2      W.B. Yeats : “Second Coming”**

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**Unit 3      Wilfred Owen: “Strange Meeting”**

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## UNIT 1: T.S. ELIOT “LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK”

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### Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 About T.S. Eliot
- 1.3 Poem
- 1.4 Analysis
- 1.5 Check Your Progress
- 1.6 Let us Sum up

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### 1.0 OBJECTIVE

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After reading this poem you will be able to:

Examine the tortured psyche of the prototypical modern man—overeducated, eloquent, neurotic, and emotionally stilted. Prufrock, the poem’s speaker, seems to be addressing a potential lover, with whom he would like to “force the moment to its crisis” by somehow consummating their relationship. But Prufrock knows too much of life to “dare” an approach to the woman: In his mind he hears the comments others make about his inadequacies, and he chides himself for “presuming” emotional interaction could be possible at all.

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### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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The poem moves from a series of fairly concrete (for Eliot) physical settings—a cityscape (the famous “patient etherised upon a table”) and several interiors (women’s arms in the lamplight, coffee spoons, fireplaces)—to a series of vague ocean images conveying Prufrock’s emotional distance from the world as he comes to recognize his second-rate status (“I am not Prince Hamlet”). “Prufrock” is powerful for its range of intellectual reference and also for the vividness of character achieved.

Thomas Stearns Eliot OM (26 September 1888 – 4 January 1965) was a poet, essayist, publisher, playwright, literary critic and editor. Born in St. Louis, Missouri, to a prominent Boston Brahmin family, he moved to England in 1914 at the age of 25 and

went on to settle, work and marry there. He became a British subject in 1927 at the age of 39, subsequently renouncing his American citizenship.

Considered to be the single most important and unparalleled poet of the modern era, Eliot attracted widespread attention for his poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), which was seen as a masterpiece of the Modernist movement. It was followed by some of the best-known poems in the English language, including *The Waste Land* (1922), "The Hollow Men" (1925), "Ash Wednesday" (1930), and *Four Quartets* (1943). He was also known for his seven plays, particularly *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and *The Cocktail Party* (1949). He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948, "for his outstanding, pioneer contribution to present-day poetry".

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## **1.2 ABOUT T.S. ELIOT**

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### **Early life and education**

The Eliots were a Boston Brahmin family with roots in England and New England. Eliot's paternal grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, had moved to St. Louis, Missouri, to establish a Unitarian Christian church there. His father, Henry Ware Eliot (1843–1919), was a successful businessman, president and treasurer of the Hydraulic-Press Brick Company in St Louis. His mother, Charlotte Champe Stearns (1843–1929), wrote poetry and was a social worker, a new profession in the early 20th century. Eliot was the last of six surviving children. Known to family and friends as Tom, he was the namesake of his maternal grandfather, Thomas Stearns.

Eliot's childhood infatuation with literature can be ascribed to several factors. First, he had to overcome physical limitations as a child. Struggling from a congenital double inguinal hernia, he could not participate in many physical activities and thus was prevented from socialising with his peers. As he was often isolated, his love for literature developed. Once he learned to read, the young boy immediately became obsessed with books, favouring tales of savage life, the Wild West, or Mark Twain's thrill-seeking Tom Sawyer. In his memoir of Eliot, his friend Robert Sencourt comments that the young Eliot "would often curl up in the window-seat behind an enormous book, setting the drug of dreams against the pain of living." Secondly, Eliot credited his hometown with fuelling his literary vision: "It is self-evident that St. Louis affected me more deeply than any other environment has ever done. I feel that there is something in having passed one's childhood beside the big river, which is incommunicable to those people who have not. I consider myself fortunate to have been born here, rather than in Boston, or New York, or London."

From 1898 to 1905, Eliot attended Smith Academy, the boys college preparatory division of Washington University, where his studies included Latin, Ancient Greek, French, and German. He began to write poetry when he was fourteen under the influence of Edward Fitzgerald's translation of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. He said the results were gloomy and despairing and he destroyed them. His first published poem, "A Fable For Feasters", was written as a school exercise and was published in the Smith Academy Record in February 1905. Also published there in April 1905 was his oldest surviving poem in manuscript, an untitled lyric, later revised and reprinted as "Song" in *The Harvard Advocate*, Harvard University's student magazine. He also published three short stories in 1905, "Birds of Prey", "A Tale of a Whale" and "The Man Who Was King". The last mentioned story significantly reflects his exploration of the Igorot Village while visiting the 1904 World's Fair of St. Louis. Such a link with primitive people importantly antedates his anthropological studies at Harvard.

Eliot lived in St. Louis, Missouri for the first sixteen years of his life at the house on Locust St. where he was born. After going away to school in 1905, he only returned to St. Louis for vacations and visits. Despite moving away from the city, Eliot wrote to a friend that the "Missouri and the Mississippi have made a deeper impression on me than any other part of the world."

Following graduation, Eliot attended Milton Academy in Massachusetts for a preparatory year, where he met Scofield Thayer who later published *The Waste Land*. He studied philosophy at Harvard College from 1906 to 1909, earning a B.A. in 1909 and a M.A. the following year. Because of his year at Milton Academy, Eliot was allowed to take a B.A. after three years instead of the usual four. While a student at Harvard, Eliot was placed on academic probation and graduated with a pass degree (i.e. no honours). His B.A. was in an elective program best described as comparative literature, and his M.A. English Literature. Frank Kermode writes that the most important moment of Eliot's undergraduate career was in 1908 when he discovered Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. This introduced him to Jules Laforgue, Arthur Rimbaud, and Paul Verlaine. Without Verlaine, Eliot wrote, he might never have heard of Tristan Corbière and his book *Les amours jaunes*, a work that affected the course of Eliot's life.[20] *The Harvard Advocate* published some of his poems and he became lifelong friends with Conrad Aiken, the American writer and critic.

After working as a philosophy assistant at Harvard from 1909 to 1910, Eliot moved to Paris where, from 1910 to 1911, he studied philosophy at the Sorbonne. He attended lectures by Henri Bergson and read poetry with Henri Alban-Fournier.[4][20] From 1911 to 1914, he was back at Harvard studying Indian philosophy and Sanskrit.[4][21] Whilst a member of the Harvard Graduate School, Eliot met and fell in love with

Emily Hale.[22] Eliot was awarded a scholarship to Merton College, Oxford, in 1914. He first visited Marburg, Germany, where he planned to take a summer programme, but when the First World War broke out he went to Oxford instead. At the time so many American students attended Merton that the Junior Common Room proposed a motion "that this society abhors the Americanization of Oxford". It was defeated by two votes after Eliot reminded the students how much they owed American culture.[23]

Eliot wrote to Conrad Aiken on New Year's Eve 1914: "I hate university towns and university people, who are the same everywhere, with pregnant wives, sprawling children, many books and hideous pictures on the walls ... Oxford is very pretty, but I don't like to be dead." [23] Escaping Oxford, Eliot spent much of his time in London. This city had a monumental and life-altering effect on Eliot for several reasons, the most significant of which was his introduction to the influential American literary figure Ezra Pound. A connection through Aiken resulted in an arranged meeting and on 22 September 1914, Eliot paid a visit to Pound's flat. Pound instantly deemed Eliot "worth watching" and was crucial to Eliot's beginning career as a poet, as he is credited with promoting Eliot through social events and literary gatherings. Thus, according to biographer John Worthen, during his time in England Eliot "was seeing as little of Oxford as possible". He was instead spending long periods of time in London, in the company of Ezra Pound and "some of the modern artists whom the war has so far spared... It was Pound who helped most, introducing him everywhere." [24] In the end, Eliot did not settle at Merton and left after a year. In 1915 he taught English at Birkbeck, University of London.

By 1916, he had completed a doctoral dissertation for Harvard on "Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley", but he failed to return for the viva voce exam.[4][25]

## **Marriage**

Vivienne Haigh-Wood Eliot, passport photograph from 1920.

Before leaving the US, Eliot had told Emily Hale that he was in love with her; he exchanged letters with her from Oxford during 1914 and 1915 but they did not meet again until 1927.[22][26] In a letter to Aiken late in December 1914, Eliot, aged 26, wrote, "I am very dependent upon women (I mean female society)."[27] Less than four months later, Thayer introduced Eliot to Vivienne Haigh-Wood, a Cambridge governess. They were married at Hampstead Register Office on 26 June 1915.[28]

After a short visit alone to his family in the United States, Eliot returned to London and took several teaching jobs, such as lecturing at Birkbeck College, University of



London. The philosopher Bertrand Russell took an interest in Vivienne while the newlyweds stayed in his flat. Some scholars have suggested that she and Russell had an affair, but the allegations were never confirmed.[29]

The marriage was markedly unhappy, in part because of Vivienne's health problems. In a letter addressed to Ezra Pound, she covers an extensive list of her symptoms, which included a habitually high temperature, fatigue, insomnia, migraines, and colitis.[30] This, coupled with apparent mental instability, meant that she was often sent away by Eliot and her doctors for extended periods of time in the hope of improving her health, and as time went on, he became increasingly detached from her. The couple formally separated in 1933 and in 1938 Vivienne's brother, Maurice, had her committed to a mental hospital, against her will, where she remained until her death of heart disease in 1947.

Their relationship became the subject of a 1984 play *Tom & Viv*, which in 1994 was adapted as a film of the same name.

In a private paper written in his sixties, Eliot confessed: "I came to persuade myself that I was in love with Vivienne simply because I wanted to burn my boats and commit myself to staying in England. And she persuaded herself (also under the influence of [Ezra] Pound) that she would save the poet by keeping him in England. To her, the marriage brought no happiness. To me, it brought the state of mind out of which came *The Waste Land*." [31]

### **Teaching, banking, and publishing**

A plaque at SOAS's Faber Building, 24 Russell Square, London

After leaving Merton, Eliot worked as a schoolteacher, most notably at Highgate School, a private school in London, where he taught French and Latin—his students included the young John Betjeman.[4] Later he taught at the Royal Grammar School, High Wycombe, a state school in Buckinghamshire. To earn extra money, he wrote book reviews and lectured at evening extension courses at the University College London, and Oxford. In 1917, he took a position at Lloyds Bank in London, working on foreign accounts. On a trip to Paris in August 1920 with the artist Wyndham Lewis, he met the writer James Joyce. Eliot said he found Joyce arrogant—Joyce doubted Eliot's ability as a poet at the time—but the two soon became friends, with Eliot visiting Joyce whenever he was in Paris.[32] Eliot and Wyndham Lewis also maintained a close friendship, leading to Lewis's later making his well-known portrait painting of Eliot in 1938.

Charles Whibley recommended T.S. Eliot to Geoffrey Faber.[33] In 1925 Eliot left Lloyds to become a director in the publishing firm Faber and Gwyer, later Faber and Faber, where he remained for the rest of his career.[34][35] At Faber and Faber, he was responsible for publishing important English poets like W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and Ted Hughes.[36]

### **Conversion to Anglicanism and British citizenship**

The Faber and Faber building where Eliot worked from 1925 to 1965; the commemorative plaque is under the right-hand arch.

On 29 June 1927, Eliot converted to Anglicanism from Unitarianism, and in November that year he took British citizenship. He became a warden of his parish church, St Stephen's, Gloucester Road, London, and a life member of the Society of King Charles the Martyr.[37][38] He specifically identified as Anglo-Catholic, proclaiming himself "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic [sic] in religion".[39][40] About 30 years later Eliot commented on his religious views that he combined "a Catholic cast of mind, a Calvinist heritage, and a Puritanical temperament".[41] He also had wider spiritual interests, commenting that "I see the path of progress for modern man in his occupation with his own self, with his inner being" and citing Goethe and Rudolf Steiner as exemplars of such a direction.[42]

One of Eliot's biographers, Peter Ackroyd, commented that "the purposes of [Eliot's conversion] were two-fold. One: the Church of England offered Eliot some hope for himself, and I think Eliot needed some resting place. But secondly, it attached Eliot to the English community and English culture." [36]

### **Separation and remarriage**

By 1932, Eliot had been contemplating a separation from his wife for some time. When Harvard offered him the Charles Eliot Norton professorship for the 1932–1933 academic year, he accepted and left Vivienne in England. Upon his return, he arranged for a formal separation from her, avoiding all but one meeting with her between his leaving for America in 1932 and her death in 1947. Vivienne was committed to the Northumberland House mental hospital, Stoke Newington, in 1938, and remained there until she died. Although Eliot was still legally her husband, he never visited her.[43] From 1933 to 1946 Eliot had a close emotional relationship with Emily Hale. Eliot later destroyed Hale's letters to him, but Hale donated Eliot's to Princeton University Library where they were sealed until 2020.[44] When Eliot heard of the donation he deposited his own account of their relationship with Harvard University to be opened whenever the Princeton letters were.[22]

From 1938 to 1957 Eliot's public companion was Mary Trevelyan of London University, who wanted to marry him and left a detailed memoir.[45][46][47]

From 1946 to 1957, Eliot shared a flat at 19 Carlyle Mansions, Chelsea, with his friend John Davy Hayward, who collected and managed Eliot's papers, styling himself "Keeper of the Eliot Archive".[48][49] Hayward also collected Eliot's pre-Prufrock verse, commercially published after Eliot's death as *Poems Written in Early Youth*. When Eliot and Hayward separated their household in 1957, Hayward retained his collection of Eliot's papers, which he bequeathed to King's College, Cambridge, in 1965.

On 10 January 1957, at the age of 68, Eliot married Esmé Valerie Fletcher, who was 30. In contrast to his first marriage, Eliot knew Fletcher well, as she had been his secretary at Faber and Faber since August 1949. They kept their wedding secret; the ceremony was held in St. Barnabas' Church, Kensington, London,[50] at 6:15 am with virtually no one in attendance other than his wife's parents. Eliot had no children with either of his wives. In the early 1960s, by then in failing health, Eliot worked as an editor for the Wesleyan University Press, seeking new poets in Europe for publication. After Eliot's death, Valerie dedicated her time to preserving his legacy, by editing and annotating *The Letters of T. S. Eliot* and a facsimile of the draft of *The Waste Land*. [51] Valerie Eliot died on 9 November 2012 at her home in London.[52]

## Poetry

For a poet of his stature, Eliot produced a relatively small number of poems. He was aware of this even early in his career. He wrote to J.H. Woods, one of his former Harvard professors, "My reputation in London is built upon one small volume of verse, and is kept up by printing two or three more poems in a year. The only thing that matters is that these should be perfect in their kind, so that each should be an event." [59]

Typically, Eliot first published his poems individually in periodicals or in small books or pamphlets and then collected them in books. His first collection was *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917). In 1920, he published more poems in *Ara Vos Prec* (London) and *Poems: 1920* (New York). These had the same poems (in a different order) except that "Ode" in the British edition was replaced with "Hysteria" in the American edition. In 1925, he collected *The Waste Land* and the poems in *Prufrock* and *Poems* into one volume and added *The Hollow Men* to form *Poems: 1909–1925*. From then on, he updated this work as *Collected Poems*. Exceptions are *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939), a collection of light verse; *Poems Written in Early Youth*, posthumously published in 1967 and consisting mainly of poems published

between 1907 and 1910 in *The Harvard Advocate*, and *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917*, material Eliot never intended to have published, which appeared posthumously in 1997.[60]

During an interview in 1959, Eliot said of his nationality and its role in his work: "I'd say that my poetry has obviously more in common with my distinguished contemporaries in America than with anything written in my generation in England. That I'm sure of. ... It wouldn't be what it is, and I imagine it wouldn't be so good; putting it as modestly as I can, it wouldn't be what it is if I'd been born in England, and it wouldn't be what it is if I'd stayed in America. It's a combination of things. But in its sources, in its emotional springs, it comes from America." [61]

Cleo McNelly Kearns notes in her biography that Eliot was deeply influenced by Indic traditions, notably the Upanishads. From the Sanskrit ending of *The Waste Land* to the "What Krishna meant" section of *Four Quartets* shows how much Indic religions and more specifically Hinduism made up his philosophical basic for his thought process.[62] It must also be acknowledged, as Chinmoy Guha showed in his book *Where the Dreams Cross: T S Eliot and French Poetry* (Macmillan, 2011) that he was deeply influenced by French poets from Baudelaire to Paul Valéry. He himself wrote in his 1940 essay on W.B. Yeats: "The kind of poetry that I needed to teach me the use of my own voice did not exist in English at all; it was only to be found in French." ("Yeats", *On Poetry and Poets*, 1948).

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## 1.3 POEM

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"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

*S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse  
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.  
Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo  
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,  
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*

Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherized upon a table;  
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,  
The muttering retreats  
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels  
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:

Streets that follow like a tedious argument  
Of insidious intent  
To lead you to an overwhelming question ...  
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"  
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,  
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,  
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,  
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,  
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,  
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,  
And seeing that it was a soft October night,  
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time  
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,  
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;  
There will be time, there will be time  
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;  
There will be time to murder and create,  
And time for all the works and days of hands  
That lift and drop a question on your plate;  
Time for you and time for me,  
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
And for a hundred visions and revisions,  
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time  
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"  
Time to turn back and descend the stair,  
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair —  
(They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")  
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,

My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin —  
(They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”)  
Do I dare  
Disturb the universe?  
In a minute there is time  
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all:  
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,  
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;  
I know the voices dying with a dying fall  
Beneath the music from a farther room.  
So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—  
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin  
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?  
And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all—  
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare  
(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)  
Is it perfume from a dress  
That makes me so digress?  
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.  
And should I then presume?  
And how should I begin?

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets  
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes  
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? ...

I should have been a pair of ragged claws  
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!  
Smoothed by long fingers,

Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers,  
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.  
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,  
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?  
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,  
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,  
I am no prophet — and here's no great matter;  
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,  
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,  
And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,  
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,  
Would it have been worth while,  
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
To have squeezed the universe into a ball  
To roll it towards some overwhelming question,  
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,  
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—  
If one, settling a pillow by her head  
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all;  
That is not it, at all."

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
Would it have been worth while,  
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,  
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—  
And this, and so much more?—  
It is impossible to say just what I mean!  
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:  
Would it have been worth while  
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,  
And turning toward the window, should say:  
"That is not it at all,  
That is not what I meant, at all."

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord, one that will do  
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,

Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,  
Deferential, glad to be of use,  
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;  
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;  
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—  
Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old ... I grow old ...  
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?  
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.  
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves  
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back  
When the wind blows the water white and black.  
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

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## 1.4 ANALYSIS

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In 1915, Ezra Pound, overseas editor of Poetry magazine, recommended to Harriet Monroe, the magazine's founder, that she publish "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock".<sup>[63]</sup> Although the character Prufrock seems to be middle-aged, Eliot wrote most of the poem when he was only twenty-two. Its now-famous opening lines, comparing the evening sky to "a patient etherised upon a table", were considered shocking and offensive, especially at a time when Georgian Poetry was hailed for its derivations of the nineteenth century Romantic Poets.<sup>[64]</sup>

The poem's structure was heavily influenced by Eliot's extensive reading of Dante and refers to a number of literary works, including Hamlet and those of the French Symbolists. Its reception in London can be gauged from an unsigned review in The Times Literary Supplement on 21 June 1917. "The fact that these things occurred to the mind of Mr. Eliot is surely of the very smallest importance to anyone, even to himself. They certainly have no relation to poetry."<sup>[65]</sup>



## **The Waste Land**

In October 1922, Eliot published "The Waste Land" in *The Criterion*. Eliot's dedication to *il miglior fabbro* ("the better craftsman") refers to Ezra Pound's significant hand in editing and reshaping the poem from a longer Eliot manuscript to the shortened version that appears in publication.[66]

It was composed during a period of personal difficulty for Eliot—his marriage was failing, and both he and Vivienne were suffering from nervous disorders. Before the poem's publication as a book in December 1922, Eliot distanced himself from its vision of despair. On 15 November 1922, he wrote to Richard Aldington, saying, "As for *The Waste Land*, that is a thing of the past so far as I am concerned and I am now feeling toward a new form and style." [67] The poem is often read as a representation of the disillusionment of the post-war generation. Dismissing this view, Eliot commented in 1931, "When I wrote a poem called *The Waste Land*, some of the more approving critics said that I had expressed 'the disillusion of a generation', which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention" [68]

The poem is known for its obscure nature—its slippage between satire and prophecy; its abrupt changes of speaker, location, and time. This structural complexity is one of the reasons why the poem has become a touchstone of modern literature, a poetic counterpart to a novel published in the same year, James Joyce's *Ulysses*. [69]

Among its best-known phrases are "April is the cruellest month", "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" and "Shantih shantih shantih". The Sanskrit mantra ends the poem.

### **"Ash-Wednesday"**

"Ash-Wednesday" is the first long poem written by Eliot after his 1927 conversion to Anglicanism. Published in 1930, it deals with the struggle that ensues when a person who has lacked faith acquires it. Sometimes referred to as Eliot's "conversion poem", it is richly but ambiguously allusive, and deals with the aspiration to move from spiritual barrenness to hope for human salvation. Eliot's style of writing in "Ash-Wednesday" showed a marked shift from the poetry he had written prior to his 1927 conversion, and his post-conversion style continued in a similar vein. His style became less ironic, and the poems were no longer populated by multiple characters in dialogue. Eliot's subject matter also became more focused on his spiritual concerns and his Christian faith.

Many critics were particularly enthusiastic about "Ash-Wednesday". Edwin Muir maintained that it is one of the most moving poems Eliot wrote, and perhaps the "most perfect", though it was not well received by everyone. The poem's groundwork of orthodox Christianity discomfited many of the more secular literati.

### **Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats**

Main article: Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats

In 1939, Eliot published a book of light verse, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* ("Old Possum" was Ezra Pound's nickname for him). This first edition had an illustration of the author on the cover. In 1954, the composer Alan Rawsthorne set six of the poems for speaker and orchestra in a work titled *Practical Cats*. After Eliot's death, the book was adapted as the basis of the musical *Cats* by Andrew Lloyd Webber, first produced in London's West End in 1981 and opening on Broadway the following year.[76]

### **Four Quartets**

Main article: Four Quartets

Eliot regarded *Four Quartets* as his masterpiece, and it is the work that led to his being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.[4] It consists of four long poems, each first published separately: "Burnt Norton" (1936), "East Coker" (1940), "The Dry Salvages" (1941) and "Little Gidding" (1942). Each has five sections. Although they resist easy characterisation, each poem includes meditations on the nature of time in some important respect—theological, historical, physical—and its relation to the human condition. Each poem is associated with one of the four classical elements, respectively: air, earth, water, and fire.

"Burnt Norton" is a meditative poem that begins with the narrator trying to focus on the present moment while walking through a garden, focusing on images and sounds such as the bird, the roses, clouds and an empty pool. The meditation leads the narrator to reach "the still point" in which there is no attempt to get anywhere or to experience place and/or time, instead experiencing "a grace of sense". In the final section, the narrator contemplates the arts ("words" and "music") as they relate to time. The narrator focuses particularly on the poet's art of manipulating "Words [which] strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden [of time], under the tension, slip, slide, perish, decay with imprecision, [and] will not stay in place, / Will not stay still." By comparison, the narrator concludes that "Love is itself unmoving, / Only the cause and end of movement, / Timeless, and undesiring."

"East Coker" continues the examination of time and meaning, focusing in a famous passage on the nature of language and poetry. Out of darkness, Eliot offers a solution: "I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope."

"The Dry Salvages" treats the element of water, via images of river and sea. It strives to contain opposites: "The past and future / Are conquered, and reconciled."

"Little Gidding" (the element of fire) is the most anthologised of the Quartets. Eliot's experiences as an air raid warden in the Blitz power the poem, and he imagines meeting Dante during the German bombing. The beginning of the Quartets ("Houses / Are removed, destroyed") had become a violent everyday experience; this creates an animation, where for the first time he talks of love as the driving force behind all experience. From this background, the Quartets end with an affirmation of Julian of Norwich: "All shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well."

The Four Quartets cannot be understood without reference to Christian thought, traditions, and history. Eliot draws upon the theology, art, symbolism and language of such figures as Dante, and mystics St. John of the Cross and Julian of Norwich. The "deeper communion" sought in "East Coker", the "hints and whispers of children, the sickness that must grow worse to find healing", and the exploration which inevitably leads us home all point to the pilgrim's path along the road of sanctification.[citation needed]

## **Plays**

Main articles: Sweeney Agonistes, Murder in the Cathedral, The Rock (play), The Family Reunion, The Cocktail Party, The Confidential Clerk, and The Elder Statesman.

With the important exception of Four Quartets, Eliot directed much of his creative energies after Ash Wednesday to writing plays in verse, mostly comedies or plays with redemptive endings. He was long a critic and admirer of Elizabethan and Jacobean verse drama; witness his allusions to Webster, Thomas Middleton, William Shakespeare and Thomas Kyd in *The Waste Land*. In a 1933 lecture he said "Every poet would like, I fancy, to be able to think that he had some direct social utility . . . . He would like to be something of a popular entertainer and be able to think his own thoughts behind a tragic or a comic mask. He would like to convey the pleasures of poetry, not only to a larger audience but to larger groups of people collectively; and the theatre is the best place in which to do it." [77]

After *The Waste Land* (1922), he wrote that he was "now feeling toward a new form and style". One project he had in mind was writing a play in verse, using some of the

rhythms of early jazz. The play featured "Sweeney", a character who had appeared in a number of his poems. Although Eliot did not finish the play, he did publish two scenes from the piece. These scenes, titled *Fragment of a Prologue* (1926) and *Fragment of an Agon* (1927), were published together in 1932 as *Sweeney Agonistes*. Although Eliot noted that this was not intended to be a one-act play, it is sometimes performed as one.[12]

A pageant play by Eliot called *The Rock* was performed in 1934 for the benefit of churches in the Diocese of London. Much of it was a collaborative effort; Eliot accepted credit only for the authorship of one scene and the choruses.[12] George Bell, the Bishop of Chichester, had been instrumental in connecting Eliot with producer E. Martin Browne for the production of *The Rock*, and later commissioned Eliot to write another play for the Canterbury Festival in 1935. This one, *Murder in the Cathedral*, concerning the death of the martyr, Thomas Becket, was more under Eliot's control. Eliot biographer Peter Ackroyd comments that "for [Eliot], *Murder in the Cathedral* and succeeding verse plays offered a double advantage; it allowed him to practice poetry but it also offered a convenient home for his religious sensibility." [36] After this, he worked on more "commercial" plays for more general audiences: *The Family Reunion* (1939), *The Cocktail Party* (1949), *The Confidential Clerk*, (1953) and *The Elder Statesman* (1958) (the latter three were produced by Henry Sherek and directed by E. Martin Browne[78]). The Broadway production in New York of *The Cocktail Party* received the 1950 Tony Award for Best Play. Eliot wrote *The Cocktail Party* while he was a visiting scholar at the Institute for Advanced Study.[79][80]

Regarding his method of playwriting, Eliot explained, "If I set out to write a play, I start by an act of choice. I settle upon a particular emotional situation, out of which characters and a plot will emerge. And then lines of poetry may come into being: not from the original impulse but from a secondary stimulation of the unconscious mind." [36]

### **Literary criticism**

Eliot also made significant contributions to the field of literary criticism, strongly influencing the school of New Criticism. He was somewhat self-deprecating and minimising of his work and once said his criticism was merely a "by-product" of his "private poetry-workshop" But the critic William Empson once said, "I do not know for certain how much of my own mind [Eliot] invented, let alone how much of it is a reaction against him or indeed a consequence of misreading him. He is a very penetrating influence, perhaps not unlike the east wind." [81]

In his critical essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Eliot argues that art must be understood not in a vacuum, but in the context of previous pieces of art. "In a peculiar sense [an artist or poet] ... must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past." [82] This essay was an important influence over the New Criticism by introducing the idea that the value of a work of art must be viewed in the context of the artist's previous works, a "simultaneous order" of works (i.e., "tradition"). Eliot himself employed this concept on many of his works, especially on his long-poem *The Waste Land*. [83]

Also important to New Criticism was the idea—as articulated in Eliot's essay "Hamlet and His Problems"—of an "objective correlative", which posits a connection among the words of the text and events, states of mind, and experiences. [84] This notion concedes that a poem means what it says, but suggests that there can be a non-subjective judgment based on different readers' different—but perhaps corollary—interpretations of a work.

More generally, New Critics took a cue from Eliot in regard to his "'classical' ideals and his religious thought; his attention to the poetry and drama of the early seventeenth century; his deprecation of the Romantics, especially Shelley; his proposition that good poems constitute 'not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion'; and his insistence that 'poets... at present must be difficult'." [85]

Eliot's essays were a major factor in the revival of interest in the metaphysical poets. Eliot particularly praised the metaphysical poets' ability to show experience as both psychological and sensual, while at the same time infusing this portrayal with—in Eliot's view—wit and uniqueness. Eliot's essay "The Metaphysical Poets", along with giving new significance and attention to metaphysical poetry, introduced his now well-known definition of "unified sensibility", which is considered by some to mean the same thing as the term "metaphysical". [86][87]

His 1922 poem *The Waste Land* also can be better understood in light of his work as a critic. He had argued that a poet must write "programmatic criticism", that is, a poet should write to advance his own interests rather than to advance "historical scholarship". Viewed from Eliot's critical lens, *The Waste Land* likely shows his personal despair about World War I rather than an objective historical understanding of it.

Late in his career, Eliot focused much of his creative energy on writing for the theatre; some of his earlier critical writing, in essays such as "Poetry and Drama", [90] "Hamlet and his Problems", [84] and "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama", [91] focused on the aesthetics of writing drama in verse.

## Critical reception

### Responses to his poetry

The writer Ronald Bush notes that Eliot's early poems like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "Portrait of a Lady", "La Figlia Che Piange", "Preludes", and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" had "[an] effect [that] was both unique and compelling, and their assurance staggered [Eliot's] contemporaries who were privileged to read them in manuscript. [Conrad] Aiken, for example, marveled at 'how sharp and complete and sui generis the whole thing was, from the outset. The wholeness is there, from the very beginning.'

The initial critical response to Eliot's *The Waste Land* was mixed. Bush notes that the piece was at first correctly perceived as a work of jazz-like syncopation—and, like 1920s jazz, essentially iconoclastic." Some critics, like Edmund Wilson, Conrad Aiken, and Gilbert Seldes thought it was the best poetry being written in the English language while others thought it was esoteric and wilfully difficult. Edmund Wilson, being one of the critics who praised Eliot, called him "one of our only authentic poets". Wilson also pointed out some of Eliot's weaknesses as a poet. In regard to *The Waste Land*, Wilson admits its flaws ("its lack of structural unity"), but concluded, "I doubt whether there is a single other poem of equal length by a contemporary American which displays so high and so varied a mastery of English verse."

Charles Powell was negative in his criticism of Eliot, calling his poems incomprehensible. And the writers of *Time* magazine were similarly baffled by a challenging poem like *The Waste Land*. John Crowe Ransom wrote negative criticisms of Eliot's work but also had positive things to say. For instance, though Ransom negatively criticised *The Waste Land* for its "extreme disconnection", Ransom was not completely condemnatory of Eliot's work and admitted that Eliot was a talented poet.

Addressing some of the common criticisms directed against *The Waste Land* at the time, Gilbert Seldes stated, "It seems at first sight remarkably disconnected and confused... [however] a closer view of the poem does more than illuminate the difficulties; it reveals the hidden form of the work, [and] indicates how each thing falls into place."

Eliot's reputation as a poet, as well as his influence in the academy, peaked following the publication of *The Four Quartets*. In an essay on Eliot published in 1989, the writer Cynthia Ozick refers to this peak of influence (from the 1940s through the early 1960s) as "the Age of Eliot" when Eliot "seemed pure zenith, a colossus, nothing less than a permanent luminary, fixed in the firmament like the sun and the moon".[97]

But during this post-war period, others, like Ronald Bush, observed that this time also marked the beginning of the decline in Eliot's literary influence:

As Eliot's conservative religious and political convictions began to seem less congenial in the postwar world, other readers reacted with suspicion to his assertions of authority, obvious in *Four Quartets* and implicit in the earlier poetry. The result, fueled by intermittent rediscovery of Eliot's occasional anti-Semitic rhetoric, has been a progressive downward revision of his once towering reputation.

Bush also notes that Eliot's reputation "slipped" significantly further after his death. He writes, "Sometimes regarded as too academic (William Carlos Williams's view), Eliot was also frequently criticized for a deadening neoclassicism (as he himself—perhaps just as unfairly—had criticized Milton). However, the multifarious tributes from practicing poets of many schools published during his centenary in 1988 was a strong indication of the intimidating continued presence of his poetic voice."

Although Eliot's poetry is not as influential as it once was, notable literary scholars, like Harold Bloom and Stephen Greenblatt, still acknowledge that Eliot's poetry is central to the literary English canon. For instance, the editors of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* write, "There is no disagreement on [Eliot's] importance as one of the great renovators of the English poetry dialect, whose influence on a whole generation of poets, critics, and intellectuals generally was enormous. [However] his range as a poet [was] limited, and his interest in the great middle ground of human experience (as distinct from the extremes of saint and sinner) [was] deficient." Despite this criticism, these scholars also acknowledge "[Eliot's] poetic cunning, his fine craftsmanship, his original accent, his historical and representative importance as the poet of the modern symbolist-Metaphysical tradition".

### **Anti-Semitism**

The depiction of Jews in some of Eliot's poems has led several critics to accuse him of anti-Semitism. This case has been presented most forcefully in a study by Anthony Julius: *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (1996). In "Gerontion", Eliot writes, in the voice of the poem's elderly narrator, "And the jew squats on the window sill, the owner [of my building] / Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp." Another well-known example appears in the poem, "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar". In this poem, Eliot wrote, "The rats are underneath the piles. / The jew is underneath the lot. / Money in furs." Interpreting the line as an indirect comparison of Jews to rats, Julius writes: "The anti-Semitism is unmistakable. It reaches out like a clear signal to the reader." Julius's viewpoint has been supported by literary critics

such as Harold Bloom, Christopher Ricks, George Steiner, Tom Paulin and James Fenton.

In a series of lectures delivered at the University of Virginia in 1933, published under the title *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (1934), Eliot wrote of societal tradition and coherence, "What is still more important [than cultural homogeneity] is unity of religious background, and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable." Eliot never re-published this book/lecture. In his 1934 pageant play *The Rock*, Eliot distances himself from Fascist movements of the Thirties by caricaturing Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts, who "firmly refuse/ To descend to palaver with anthropoid Jews". The "new evangels" of totalitarianism are presented as antithetic to the spirit of Christianity.

Craig Raine, in his books *In Defence of T. S. Eliot* (2001) and *T. S. Eliot* (2006), sought to defend Eliot from the charge of anti-Semitism. Reviewing the 2006 book, Paul Dean stated that he was not convinced by Raine's argument. Nevertheless, he concluded, "Ultimately, as both Raine and, to do him justice, Julius insist, however much Eliot may have been compromised as a person, as we all are in our several ways, his greatness as a poet remains." [105] In another review of Raine's 2006 book, the literary critic Terry Eagleton also questioned the validity of Raine's defence of Eliot's character flaws as well as the entire basis for Raine's book, writing, "Why do critics feel a need to defend the authors they write on, like doting parents deaf to all criticism of their obnoxious children? Eliot's well-earned reputation [as a poet] is established beyond all doubt, and making him out to be as unflawed as the Archangel Gabriel does him no favours." [109]

### **Influence**

Eliot influenced, among many others, Seán Ó Ríordáin, Máirtín Ó Díreáin, Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, Hart Crane, William Gaddis, Allen Tate, Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill, Seamus Heaney, Kamau Brathwaite, [110] Russell Kirk, [111] George Seferis (who in 1936 published a modern Greek translation of *The Waste Land*) and James Joyce. [dubious – discuss]

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## **1.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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1. What is the significance of the epigraph in Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*? What do these two voices have in common?



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2. What is the significance of the mermaids in the last stanzas of The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock?

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3. In lines 15-25 of The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, what is being indirectly compared to what? How many details extend the metaphor?

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4. Why is T. S. Eliot's The Love Song of Alfred Prufrock considered a great poem?  
Note: the is difference between good and great: greatness implies higher significance

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5. Where does Prufrock want to take his companion in lines 4-7 in The Love Song of Prufrock?

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6. In The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, was Prufrock a typical man of his times or was he unusual?

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7. What is the third thing Prufrock knows in lines 68-75?

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8. Explain the cultural significance of the poem The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock by T. S. Eliot during the time it was written.

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9. How does Prufrock differentiate himself from Hamlet in The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock?

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10. What are two allusions in The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock?

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11. In T.S. Eliot's The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, where does the speaker want to take his companion/where does he want them to go?

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12. In The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, the speaker (Prufrock) compares the sunset to a patient etherized upon a table. Why do you suppose he would compare.

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13. What is a universal theme that is carried throughout T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*? Give two examples from the work that illustrate this theme.

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14. Why do you think Eliot opens *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* with an allusion to Dante's epic poem? Explain the parallels and contrasts.

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15. Can you restate the meaning of lines 129-131? When human voices wake us, what do we drown in, in *'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'*?

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## **1.6 LET US SUM UP**

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The title of the poem suggests that its content is enchanting about the ripe memories of love, the situation is quite contrary. The poem captures the unexpressed love and fragmented thoughts of the narrator. The narrator of the poem is a middle-aged man, who is in love with a lady but lacks the courage to express his feelings for her. The expressions of confusion and lack of courage remain at the core of the poem. Through his regret of aging and frustration of unfulfilled desires, the narrator also expresses that the time does not wait for anyone

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## **UNIT 2 : YEATS : “SECOND COMING”**

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### **Structure**

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 About William Butler Yeats
- 2.3 Poem
- 2.4 Analysis
- 2.5 Let us Sum up
- 2.6 Check Your Progress

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### **2.0 OBJECTIVE**

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After reading this poem you will be able to certainly mark the change in direction of the world, it would still be a change within the limits of all possible history, a movement between two alternatives but not a true escape. In Yeats model of history, it hardly matters what is at the center of the gyre, whether it is the figure of Jesus Christ or the figure of Sphinx, because, whatever it is, history will continue “turning and turning in the widening gyre”

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### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

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The poem is named after the Christian "Second Coming," which is the Biblical prophecy that predicts Jesus's return to earth to reign after the end of days. Yeats's poem describes a very different kind of "Second Coming": an apocalypse led by not Jesus Christ, but rather by a "rough beast" whose approach forms the poem's mysterious conclusion. Reflecting a widespread mood of disenchantment and alienation immediately after the first World War, the poem suggests that modernity represents a kind of chaos, the collapse of civilization rather than its apex

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### **2.2 ABOUT WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS**

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William Butler Yeats (13 June 1865 – 28 January 1939) was an Irish poet and one of the foremost figures of 20th-century literature. A pillar of the Irish literary establishment, he helped to found the Abbey Theatre, and in his later years served two terms as a Senator of the Irish Free State. He was a driving force behind the Irish Literary Revival along with Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn and others.

Yeats was born in Sandymount, Ireland, and educated there and in London. He spent childhood holidays in County Sligo and studied poetry from an early age, when he became fascinated by Irish legends and the occult. These topics feature in the first phase of his work, which lasted roughly until the turn of the 20th century. His earliest volume of verse was published in 1889, and its slow-paced and lyrical poems display debts to Edmund Spenser, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the poets of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. From 1900, his poetry grew more physical and realistic. He largely renounced the transcendental beliefs of his youth, though he remained preoccupied with physical and spiritual masks, as well as with cyclical theories of life. In 1923, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

## **Biography**

### **Early years**

William Butler Yeats was born in Sandymount in County Dublin, Ireland.[1] His father, John Butler Yeats (1839–1922), was a descendant of Jervis Yeats, a Williamite soldier, linen merchant, and well-known painter, who died in 1712. Benjamin Yeats, Jervis's grandson and William's great-great-grandfather, had in 1773 married Mary Butler of a landed family in County Kildare. Following their marriage, they kept the name Butler. Mary was of the Butler of Neigham (pronounced Nyam) Gowran family, descended from an illegitimate brother of the 8th Earl of Ormond.

At the time of his marriage, William's father, John Yeats, was studying law, but would later pursue art studies at Heatherley School of Fine Art, in London. William's mother, Susan Mary Pollexfen, came from Sligo, from a wealthy merchant family, which owned a milling and shipping business. Soon after William's birth, the family relocated to the Pollexfen home at Merville, Sligo, to stay with her extended family, and the young poet came to think of the area as his childhood and spiritual home. Its landscape became, over time, both literally and symbolically, his "country of the heart".[8] So too did its location by the sea; John Yeats stated that "by marriage with a Pollexfen, we have given a tongue to the sea cliffs".The Butler Yeats family were highly artistic; his brother Jack became an esteemed painter, while his sisters Elizabeth and Susan Mary—known to family and friends as Lollie and Lily—became involved in the Arts and Crafts movement.

Yeats was raised a member of the Protestant Ascendancy, which was at the time undergoing a crisis of identity. While his family was broadly supportive of the changes Ireland was experiencing, the nationalist revival of the late 19th century directly disadvantaged his heritage and informed his outlook for the remainder of his life. In 1997, his biographer R. F. Foster observed that Napoleon's dictum that to

understand the man you have to know what was happening in the world when he was twenty "is manifestly true of W.B.Y." Yeats's childhood and young adulthood were shadowed by the power-shift away from the minority Protestant Ascendancy. The 1880s saw the rise of Charles Stewart Parnell and the home rule movement; the 1890s saw the momentum of nationalism, while the Catholics became prominent around the turn of the century. These developments had a profound effect on his poetry, and his subsequent explorations of Irish identity had a significant influence on the creation of his country's biography.

In 1867, the family moved to England to aid their father, John, to further his career as an artist. At first, the Yeats children were educated at home. Their mother entertained them with stories and Irish folktales. John provided an erratic education in geography and chemistry and took William on natural history explorations of the nearby Slough countryside. On 26 January 1877, the young poet entered the Godolphin school, which he attended for four years. He did not distinguish himself academically, and an early school report describes his performance as "only fair. Perhaps better in Latin than in any other subject. Very poor in spelling". Though he had difficulty with mathematics and languages (possibly because he was tone deaf), he was fascinated by biology and zoology. In 1879 the family moved to Bedford Park taking a two-year lease on 8 Woodstock Road. For financial reasons, the family returned to Dublin toward the end of 1880, living at first in the suburbs of Harold's Cross and later Howth. In October 1881, Yeats resumed his education at Dublin's Erasmus Smith High School. His father's studio was nearby and William spent a great deal of time there, where he met many of the city's artists and writers. During this period he started writing poetry, and, in 1885, the Dublin University Review published Yeats's first poems, as well as an essay entitled "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson". Between 1884 and 1886, William attended the Metropolitan School of Art—now the National College of Art and Design—in Thomas Street. In March 1888 the family moved to 3 Blenheim Road in Bedford Park. The rent on the house was £50 a year.

He began writing his first works when he was seventeen; these included a poem—heavily influenced by Percy Bysshe Shelley—that describes a magician who set up a throne in central Asia. Other pieces from this period include a draft of a play about a bishop, a monk, and a woman accused of paganism by local shepherds, as well as love-poems and narrative lyrics on German knights. The early works were both conventional and, according to the critic Charles Johnston, "utterly unIrish", seeming to come out of a "vast murmurous gloom of dreams". Although Yeats's early works drew heavily on Shelley, Edmund Spenser, and on the diction and colouring of pre-Raphaelite verse, he soon turned to Irish mythology and folklore and the writings of William Blake. In later life, Yeats paid tribute to Blake by describing him as one of



the "great artificers of God who uttered great truths to a little clan". In 1891, Yeats published *John Sherman* and "Dhoya", one a novella, the other a story. The influence of Oscar Wilde is evident in Yeats's theory of aesthetics, especially in his stage plays, and runs like a motif through his early works. The theory of masks, developed by Wilde in his polemic *The Decay of Lying* can clearly be seen in Yeats's play *The Player Queen*, while the more sensual characterisation of *Salomé*, in Wilde's play of the same name, provides the template for the changes Yeats made in his later plays, especially in *On Baile's Strand* (1904), *Deirdre* (1907), and his dance play *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (1934).

### **Young poet**

1900 portrait by Yeats's father, John Butler Yeats

The family returned to London in 1887. In March 1890 Yeats joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and with Ernest Rhys co-founded the Rhymers' Club, a group of London-based poets who met regularly in a Fleet Street tavern to recite their verse. Yeats later sought to mythologize the collective, calling it the "Tragic Generation" in his autobiography, and published two anthologies of the Rhymers' work, the first one in 1892 and the second one in 1894. He collaborated with Edwin Ellis on the first complete edition of William Blake's works, in the process rediscovering a forgotten poem, "Vala, or, the Four Zoas".

Yeats had a lifelong interest in mysticism, spiritualism, occultism and astrology. He read extensively on the subjects throughout his life, became a member of the paranormal research organisation "The Ghost Club" (in 1911) and was especially influenced by the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. As early as 1892, he wrote: "If I had not made magic my constant study I could not have written a single word of my Blake book, nor would The Countess Kathleen ever have come to exist. The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write." His mystical interests—also inspired by a study of Hinduism, under the Theosophist Mohini Chatterjee, and the occult—formed much of the basis of his late poetry. Some critics disparaged this aspect of Yeats's work.

His first significant poem was "The Island of Statues", a fantasy work that took Edmund Spenser and Shelley for its poetic models. The piece was serialized in the *Dublin University Review*. Yeats wished to include it in his first collection, but it was deemed too long, and in fact, was never republished in his lifetime. Quinx Books published the poem in complete form for the first time in 2014. His first solo publication was the pamphlet *Mosada: A Dramatic Poem* (1886), which comprised a print run of 100 copies paid for by his father. This was followed by the collection *The*

Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems (1889), which arranged a series of verse that dated as far back as the mid-1880s. The long title poem contains, in the words of his biographer R. F. Foster, "obscure Gaelic names, striking repetitions [and] an unremitting rhythm subtly varied as the poem proceeded through its three sections"

We rode in sorrow, with strong hounds three,  
Bran, Sceolan, and Lomair,  
On a morning misty and mild and fair.  
The mist-drops hung on the fragrant trees,  
And in the blossoms hung the bees.  
We rode in sadness above Lough Lean,  
For our best were dead on Gavra's green.

"The Wanderings of Oisín" is based on the lyrics of the Fenian Cycle of Irish mythology and displays the influence of both Sir Samuel Ferguson and the Pre-Raphaelite poets. The poem took two years to complete and was one of the few works from this period that he did not disown in his maturity. Oisín introduces what was to become one of his most important themes: the appeal of the life of contemplation over the appeal of the life of action. Following the work, Yeats never again attempted another long poem. His other early poems, which are meditations on the themes of love or mystical and esoteric subjects, include *Poems* (1895), *The Secret Rose* (1897), and *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899). The covers of these volumes were illustrated by Yeats's friend Althea Gyles.

During 1885, Yeats was involved in the formation of the Dublin Hermetic Order. The society held its first meeting on 16 June, with Yeats acting as its chairman. The same year, the Dublin Theosophical lodge was opened in conjunction with Brahmin Mohini Chatterjee, who travelled from the Theosophical Society in London to lecture. Yeats attended his first séance the following year. He later became heavily involved with the Theosophy and with hermeticism, particularly with the eclectic Rosicrucianism of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. During séances held from 1912, a spirit calling itself "Leo Africanus" apparently claimed it was Yeats's Daemon or anti-self, inspiring some of the speculations in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*. He was admitted into the Golden Dawn in March 1890 and took the magical motto *Daemon est Deus inversus*—translated as 'Devil is God inverted'.<sup>[b]</sup> He was an active recruiter for the sect's Isis-Urania Temple, and brought in his uncle George Pollexfen, Maud Gonne, and Florence Farr. Although he reserved a distaste for abstract and dogmatic religions

founded around personality cults, he was attracted to the type of people he met at the Golden Dawn. He was involved in the Order's power struggles, both with Farr and Macgregor Mathers, and was involved when Mathers sent Aleister Crowley to repossess Golden Dawn paraphernalia during the "Battle of Blythe Road". After the Golden Dawn ceased and splintered into various offshoots, Yeats remained with the Stella Matutina until 1921.

## **Maud Gonne**

### **Main article: Maud Gonne**

Maud Gonne (c. 1900)

In 1889, Yeats met Maud Gonne, a 23-year-old English heiress and ardent Irish Nationalist.[c] She was eighteen months younger than Yeats and later claimed she met the poet as a "paint-stained art student."Gonne admired "The Island of Statues" and sought out his acquaintance. Yeats began an obsessive infatuation, and she had a significant and lasting effect on his poetry and his life thereafter.In later years he admitted, "it seems to me that she [Gonne] brought into my life those days—for as yet I saw only what lay upon the surface—the middle of the tint, a sound as of a Burmese gong, an over-powering tumult that had yet many pleasant secondary notes." Yeats's love was unrequited, in part due to his reluctance to participate in her nationalist activism.

In 1891 he visited Gonne in Ireland and proposed marriage, but was rejected. He later admitted that from that point "the troubling of my life began".Yeats proposed to Gonne three more times: in 1899, 1900 and 1901. She refused each proposal, and in 1903, to his dismay, married the Irish nationalist Major John MacBride. His only other love affair during this period was with Olivia Shakespear, whom he first met in 1894, and parted from in 1897.

Yeats derided MacBride in letters and in poetry. He was horrified by Gonne's marriage, at losing his muse to another man; in addition, her conversion to Catholicism before marriage offended him; Yeats was Protestant/agnostic. He worried his muse would come under the influence of the priests and do their bidding.

Gonne's marriage to MacBride was a disaster. This pleased Yeats, as Gonne began to visit him in London. After the birth of her son, Seán MacBride, in 1904, Gonne and MacBride agreed to end the marriage, although they were unable to agree on the child's welfare. Despite the use of intermediaries, a divorce case ensued in Paris in 1905. Gonne made a series of allegations against her husband with Yeats as her main 'second', though he did not attend court or travel to France. A divorce was not granted,

for the only accusation that held up in court was that MacBride had been drunk once during the marriage. A separation was granted, with Gonne having custody of the baby and MacBride having visiting rights.

Charcoal portrait of Yeats by John Singer Sargent (1908)

Yeats's friendship with Gonne ended, yet, in Paris in 1908, they finally consummated their relationship. "The long years of fidelity rewarded at last" was how another of his lovers described the event. Yeats was less sentimental and later remarked that "the tragedy of sexual intercourse is the perpetual virginity of the soul." The relationship did not develop into a new phase after their night together, and soon afterwards Gonne wrote to the poet indicating that despite the physical consummation, they could not continue as they had been: "I have prayed so hard to have all earthly desire taken from my love for you and dearest, loving you as I do, I have prayed and I am praying still that the bodily desire for me may be taken from you too." By January 1909, Gonne was sending Yeats letters praising the advantage given to artists who abstain from sex. Nearly twenty years later, Yeats recalled the night with Gonne in his poem "A Man Young and Old"

My arms are like the twisted thorn  
And yet there beauty lay;  
The first of all the tribe lay there  
And did such pleasure take;  
She who had brought great Hector down  
And put all Troy to wreck.

In 1896, Yeats was introduced to Lady Gregory by their mutual friend Edward Martyn. Gregory encouraged Yeats's nationalism and convinced him to continue focusing on writing drama. Although he was influenced by French Symbolism, Yeats concentrated on an identifiably Irish content and this inclination was reinforced by his involvement with a new generation of younger and emerging Irish authors. Together with Lady Gregory, Martyn, and other writers including J. M. Synge, Seán O'Casey, and Padraic Colum, Yeats was one of those responsible for the establishment of the "Irish Literary Revival" movement. Apart from these creative writers, much of the impetus for the Revival came from the work of scholarly translators who were aiding in the discovery of both the ancient sagas and Ossianic poetry and the more recent folk song tradition in Irish. One of the most significant of these was Douglas Hyde, later the first President of Ireland, whose *Love Songs of Connacht* was widely admired.

## Abbey Theatre

### Main article: Abbey Theatre

Yeats photographed in 1908 by Alvin Langdon Coburn

In 1899, Yeats, Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn and George Moore began the Irish Literary Theatre to present Irish plays.[50] The ideals of the Abbey were derived from the avant-garde French theatre, which sought to express the "ascendancy of the playwright rather than the actor-manager à l'anglais." The group's manifesto, which Yeats wrote, declared, "We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted & imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory ... & that freedom to experiment which is not found in the theatres of England, & without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed."

The collective survived for about two years but was not successful. Working with two Irish brothers with theatrical experience, William and Frank Fay, Yeats's unpaid yet independently wealthy secretary Annie Horniman, and the leading West End actress Florence Farr, the group established the Irish National Theatre Society. Along with Synge, they acquired property in Dublin and on 27 December 1904 opened the Abbey Theatre. Yeats's play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and Lady Gregory's *Spreading the News* were featured on the opening night. Yeats remained involved with the Abbey until his death, both as a member of the board and a prolific playwright. In 1902, he helped set up the Dun Emer Press to publish work by writers associated with the Revival. This became the Cuala Press in 1904, and inspired by the Arts and Crafts Movement, sought to "find work for Irish hands in the making of beautiful things." [54] From then until its closure in 1946, the press—which was run by the poet's sisters—produced over 70 titles; 48 of them books by Yeats himself.

Yeats met the American poet Ezra Pound in 1909. Pound had travelled to London at least partly to meet the older man, whom he considered "the only poet worthy of serious study." [55] From that year until 1916, the two men wintered in the Stone Cottage at Ashdown Forest, with Pound nominally acting as Yeats's secretary. The relationship got off to a rocky start when Pound arranged for the publication in the magazine *Poetry* of some of Yeats's verse with Pound's own unauthorised alterations. These changes reflected Pound's distaste for Victorian prosody. A more indirect influence was the scholarship on Japanese Noh plays that Pound had obtained from Ernest Fenollosa's widow, which provided Yeats with a model for the aristocratic drama he intended to write. The first of his plays modelled on Noh was *At the Hawk's Well*, the first draft of which he dictated to Pound in January 1916.

The emergence of a nationalist revolutionary movement from the ranks of the mostly Roman Catholic lower-middle and working class made Yeats reassess some of his attitudes. In the refrain of "Easter, 1916" ("All changed, changed utterly / A terrible beauty is born"), Yeats faces his own failure to recognise the merits of the leaders of the Easter Rising, due to his attitude towards their ordinary backgrounds and lives.

Yeats was close to Lady Gregory and her home place of Coole Park, Co, Galway. He would often visit and stay there as it was a central meeting place for people who supported the resurgence of Irish literature and cultural traditions. His poem, "The Wild Swans at Coole" was written there, between 1916 and 1917.

He wrote prefaces for two books of Irish mythological tales, compiled by Augusta, Lady Gregory: *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902), and *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904). In the preface of the latter, he wrote: "One must not expect in these stories the epic lineaments, the many incidents, woven into one great event of, let us say the War for the Brown Bull of Cuailgne or that of the last gathering at Muirthemne."

## **Politics**

Yeats was an Irish Nationalist, who sought a kind of traditional lifestyle articulated through poems such as 'The Fisherman'. However, as his life progressed, he sheltered much of his revolutionary spirit and distanced himself from the intense political landscape until 1922, when he was appointed Senator for the Irish Free State.

In the earlier part of his life, Yeats was a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood.[61] Due to the escalating tension of the political scene, Yeats distanced himself from the core political activism in the midst of the Easter Rising, even holding back his poetry inspired by the events until 1920.

In the 1930s Yeats was fascinated with the authoritarian, anti-democratic, nationalist movements of Europe, and he composed several marching songs for the Blueshirts, although they were never used. He was a fierce opponent of individualism and political liberalism and saw the fascist movements as a triumph of public order and the needs of the national collective over petty individualism. On the other hand, he was also an elitist who abhorred the idea of mob-rule, and saw democracy as a threat to good governance and public order. After the Blueshirt movement began to falter in Ireland, he distanced himself somewhat from his previous views, but maintained a preference for authoritarian and nationalist leadership. D. P. Moran called him a minor poet and "crypto-Protestant conman."

## Marriage to Georgie Hyde Lees

Walter de la Mare, Bertha Georgie Yeats (née Hyde-Lees), William Butler Yeats, unknown woman, summer 1930; photo by Lady Ottoline Morrell

By 1916, Yeats was 51 years old and determined to marry and produce an heir. His rival John MacBride had been executed for his role in the 1916 Easter Rising, so Yeats hoped that his widow might remarry. His final proposal to Maud Gonne took place in mid-1916. Gonne's history of revolutionary political activism, as well as a series of personal catastrophes in the previous few years of her life—including chloroform addiction and her troubled marriage to MacBride—made her a potentially unsuitable wife; biographer R. F. Foster has observed that Yeats's last offer was motivated more by a sense of duty than by a genuine desire to marry her.

Yeats proposed in an indifferent manner, with conditions attached, and he both expected and hoped she would turn him down. According to Foster, "when he duly asked Maud to marry him and was duly refused, his thoughts shifted with surprising speed to her daughter." Iseult Gonne was Maud's second child with Lucien Millevoye, and at the time was twenty-one years old. She had lived a sad life to this point; conceived as an attempt to reincarnate her short-lived brother, for the first few years of her life she was presented as her mother's adopted niece. When Maud told her that she was going to marry, Iseult cried and told her mother that she hated MacBride. When Gonne took action to divorce MacBride in 1905, the court heard allegations that he had sexually assaulted Iseult, then eleven. At fifteen, she proposed to Yeats. In 1917, he proposed to Iseult but was rejected.

That September, Yeats proposed to 25-year-old Georgie Hyde-Lees (1892–1968), known as George, whom he had met through Olivia Shakespear. Despite warnings from her friends—"George ... you can't. He must be dead"—Hyde-Lees accepted, and the two were married on 20 October. Their marriage was a success, in spite of the age difference, and in spite of Yeats's feelings of remorse and regret during their honeymoon. The couple went on to have two children, Anne and Michael. Although in later years he had romantic relationships with other women, Georgie herself wrote to her husband "When you are dead, people will talk about your love affairs, but I shall say nothing, for I will remember how proud you were."

During the first years of marriage, they experimented with automatic writing; she contacted a variety of spirits and guides they called "Instructors" while in a trance. The spirits communicated a complex and esoteric system of philosophy and history, which the couple developed into an exposition using geometrical shapes: phases, cones, and gyres. Yeats devoted much time to preparing this material for publication

as *A Vision* (1925). In 1924, he wrote to his publisher T. Werner Laurie, admitting: "I dare say I delude myself in thinking this book my book of books".

### ***Nobel Prize***

In December 1923, Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, "for his always inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation".[71] He was aware of the symbolic value of an Irish winner so soon after Ireland had gained independence, and sought to highlight the fact at each available opportunity. His reply to many of the letters of congratulations sent to him contained the words: "I consider that this honour has come to me less as an individual than as a representative of Irish literature, it is part of Europe's welcome to the Free State."

Yeats used the occasion of his acceptance lecture at the Royal Academy of Sweden to present himself as a standard-bearer of Irish nationalism and Irish cultural independence. As he remarked, "The theatres of Dublin were empty buildings hired by the English travelling companies, and we wanted Irish plays and Irish players. When we thought of these plays we thought of everything that was romantic and poetical because the nationalism we had called up—the nationalism every generation had called up in moments of discouragement—was romantic and poetical." The prize led to a significant increase in the sales of his books, as his publishers Macmillan sought to capitalise on the publicity. For the first time he had money, and he was able to repay not only his own debts but those of his father.

### **Old age and death**

By early 1925, Yeats's health had stabilised, and he had completed most of the writing for *A Vision* (dated 1925, it actually appeared in January 1926, when he almost immediately started rewriting it for a second version). He had been appointed to the first Irish Senate in 1922, and was re-appointed for a second term in 1925. Early in his tenure, a debate on divorce arose, and Yeats viewed the issue as primarily a confrontation between the emerging Roman Catholic ethos and the Protestant minority. When the Roman Catholic Church weighed in with a blanket refusal to consider their anti position, The Irish Times countered that a measure to outlaw divorce would alienate Protestants and "crystallise" the partition of Ireland.

In response, Yeats delivered a series of speeches that attacked the "quixotically impressive" ambitions of the government and clergy, likening their campaign tactics to those of "medieval Spain." [78] "Marriage is not to us a Sacrament, but, upon the other hand, the love of a man and woman, and the inseparable physical desire, are sacred. This conviction has come to us through ancient philosophy and modern



literature, and it seems to us a most sacrilegious thing to persuade two people who hate each other... to live together, and it is to us no remedy to permit them to part if neither can re-marry." The resulting debate has been described as one of Yeats's "supreme public moments", and began his ideological move away from pluralism towards religious confrontation.

His language became more forceful; the Jesuit Father Peter Finlay was described by Yeats as a man of "monstrous discourtesy", and he lamented that "It is one of the glories of the Church in which I was born that we have put our Bishops in their place in discussions requiring legislation". During his time in the Senate, Yeats further warned his colleagues: "If you show that this country, southern Ireland, is going to be governed by Roman Catholic ideas and by Catholic ideas alone, you will never get the North... You will put a wedge in the midst of this nation". He memorably said of his fellow Irish Protestants, "we are no petty people".

In 1924, he chaired a coinage committee charged with selecting a set of designs for the first currency of the Irish Free State. Aware of the symbolic power latent in the imagery of a young state's currency, he sought a form that was "elegant, racy of the soil, and utterly unpolitical". When the house finally decided on the artwork of Percy Metcalfe, Yeats was pleased, though he regretted that compromise had led to "lost muscular tension" in the finally depicted images. He retired from the Senate in 1928 because of ill health.

Towards the end of his life—and especially after the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and Great Depression, which led some to question whether democracy could cope with deep economic difficulty—Yeats seems to have returned to his aristocratic sympathies. During the aftermath of the First World War, he became sceptical about the efficacy of democratic government, and anticipated political reconstruction in Europe through totalitarian rule. His later association with Pound drew him towards Benito Mussolini, for whom he expressed admiration on a number of occasions. He wrote three "marching songs"—never used—for the Irish General Eoin O'Duffy's Blueshirts.

Chantry House, Steyning. A plaque on the wall reads "William Butler Yeats 1865–1939 wrote many of his later poems in this house".

At the age of 69 he was 'rejuvenated' by the Steinach operation which was performed on 6 April 1934 by Norman Haire. For the last five years of his life Yeats found a new vigour evident from both his poetry and his intimate relations with younger women. During this time, Yeats was involved in a number of romantic affairs with, among others, the poet and actress Margot Ruddock, and the novelist, journalist and sexual radical Ethel Mannin. As in his earlier life, Yeats found erotic adventure

conducive to his creative energy, and, despite age and ill-health, he remained a prolific writer. In a letter of 1935, Yeats noted: "I find my present weakness made worse by the strange second puberty the operation has given me, the ferment that has come upon my imagination. If I write poetry it will be unlike anything I have done". In 1936, he undertook editorship of the Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892–1935.

He died at the Hôtel Idéal Séjour, in Menton, France, on 28 January 1939, aged 73. He was buried after a discreet and private funeral at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin. Attempts had been made at Roquebrune to dissuade the family from proceeding with the removal of the remains to Ireland due to the uncertainty of their identity. His body had earlier been exhumed and transferred to the ossuary.[87] Yeats and George had often discussed his death, and his express wish was that he be buried quickly in France with a minimum of fuss. According to George, "His actual words were 'If I die, bury me up there [at Roquebrune] and then in a year's time when the newspapers have forgotten me, dig me up and plant me in Sligo'." In September 1948, Yeats's body was moved to the churchyard of St Columba's Church, Drumcliff, County Sligo, on the Irish Naval Service corvette LÉ Macha. The person in charge of this operation for the Irish Government was Seán MacBride, son of Maud Gonne MacBride, and then Minister of External Affairs. His epitaph is taken from the last lines of "Under Ben Bulbin", one of his final poems:

Cast a cold Eye

On Life, on Death.

Horseman, pass by!

French ambassador Stanislas Ostroróg was involved in returning the remains of the poet from France to Ireland in 1948; in a letter to the European director of the Foreign Ministry in Paris, "Ostrorog tells how Yeats's son Michael sought official help in locating the poet's remains. Neither Michael Yeats nor Sean MacBride, the Irish foreign minister who organised the ceremony, wanted to know the details of how the remains were collected, Ostrorog notes. He repeatedly urges caution and discretion and says the Irish ambassador in Paris should not be informed." Yeats's body was exhumed in 1946 and the remains were moved to an ossuary and mixed with other remains. The French Foreign Ministry authorized Ostrorog to secretly cover the cost of repatriation from his slush fund. Authorities were worried about the fact that the much-loved poet's remains were thrown into a communal grave, causing embarrassment for both Ireland and France. Per a letter from Ostroróg to his superiors, "Mr Rebouillat, (a) forensic doctor in Roquebrune would be able to reconstitute a skeleton presenting all the characteristics of the deceased."

## Style

Yeats is considered one of the key twentieth-century English-language poets. He was a Symbolist poet, using allusive imagery and symbolic structures throughout his career. He chose words and assembled them so that, in addition to a particular meaning, they suggest abstract thoughts that may seem more significant and resonant. His use of symbols is usually something physical that is both itself and a suggestion of other, perhaps immaterial, timeless qualities.

Unlike other modernists who experimented with free verse, Yeats was a master of the traditional forms. The impact of modernism on his work can be seen in the increasing abandonment of the more conventionally poetic diction of his early work in favour of the more austere language and more direct approach to his themes that increasingly characterises the poetry and plays of his middle period, comprising the volumes *In the Seven Woods*, *Responsibilities* and *The Green Helmet*. His later poetry and plays are written in a more personal vein, and the works written in the last twenty years of his life include mention of his son and daughter, as well as meditations on the experience of growing old. In his poem, "The Circus Animals' Desertion", he describes the inspiration for these late works:

Now that my ladder's gone  
I must lie down where all the ladders start  
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

During 1929, he stayed at Thoor Ballylee near Gort in County Galway (where Yeats had his summer home since 1919) for the last time. Much of the remainder of his life was lived outside Ireland, although he did lease Riversdale house in the Dublin suburb of Rathfarnham in 1932. He wrote prolifically through his final years, and published poetry, plays, and prose. In 1938, he attended the Abbey for the final time to see the premiere of his play *Purgatory*. His *Autobiographies of William Butler Yeats* was published that same year. In 1913, Yeats wrote the preface for the English translation of Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* (Song Offering) for which Tagore received the Nobel Prize in literature.

"A Coat" on a wall in Leiden

While Yeats's early poetry drew heavily on Irish myth and folklore, his later work was engaged with more contemporary issues, and his style underwent a dramatic transformation. His work can be divided into three general periods. The early poems are lushly pre-Raphaelite in tone, self-consciously ornate, and, at times, according to

unsympathetic critics, stilted. Yeats began by writing epic poems such as *The Isle of Statues* and *The Wanderings of Oisín*. His other early poems are lyrics on the themes of love or mystical and esoteric subjects. Yeats's middle period saw him abandon the pre-Raphaelite character of his early work and attempt to turn himself into a Landor-style social ironist.

Critics who admire his middle work might characterize it as supple and muscular in its rhythms and sometimes harshly modernist, while others find these poems barren and weak in imaginative power. Yeats's later work found new imaginative inspiration in the mystical system he began to work out for himself under the influence of spiritualism. In many ways, this poetry is a return to the vision of his earlier work. The opposition between the worldly-minded man of the sword and the spiritually minded man of God, the theme of *The Wanderings of Oisín*, is reproduced in *A Dialogue Between Self and Soul*.

Some critics claim that Yeats spanned the transition from the nineteenth century into twentieth-century modernism in poetry much as Pablo Picasso did in painting while others question whether late Yeats has much in common with modernists of the Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot variety.

Modernists read the well-known poem "The Second Coming" as a dirge for the decline of European civilisation, but it also expresses Yeats's apocalyptic mystical theories and is shaped by the 1890s. His most important collections of poetry started with *The Green Helmet* (1910) and *Responsibilities* (1914). In imagery, Yeats's poetry became sparer and more powerful as he grew older. *The Tower* (1928), *The Winding Stair* (1933), and *New Poems* (1938) contained some of the most potent images in twentieth-century poetry.

Yeats's mystical inclinations, informed by Hinduism, theosophical beliefs and the occult, provided much of the basis of his late poetry,[108] which some critics have judged as lacking in intellectual credibility. The metaphysics of Yeats's late works must be read in relation to his system of esoteric fundamentals in *A Vision* (1925).[109]

## **Legacy**

Yeats is commemorated in Sligo town by a statue, created in 1989 by sculptor Rowan Gillespie. On the 50th anniversary of the poet's death, it was erected outside the Ulster Bank, at the corner of Stephen Street and Markievicz Road. Yeats had remarked on receiving his Nobel Prize that the Royal Palace in Stockholm "resembled the Ulster Bank in Sligo". Across the river is the Yeats Memorial Building, home to the Sligo

Yeats Society.[110] Standing Figure: Knife Edge by Henry Moore is displayed in the W. B. Yeats Memorial Garden at St Stephen's Green in Dublin.[111]

### The Second Coming

"The Second Coming" is a poem written by Irish poet W. B. Yeats in 1919, first printed in *The Dial* in November 1920, and afterwards included in his 1921 collection of verses *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*. The poem uses Christian imagery regarding the Apocalypse and Second Coming to allegorically describe the atmosphere of post-war Europe.[1] It is considered a major work of modernist poetry and has been reprinted in several collections, including *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*.

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## 2.3 POEM

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Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.  
Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it

Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

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## 2.4 ANALYSIS

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### Historical context

The poem was written in 1919 in the aftermath of the First World War[3] and the beginning of the Irish War of Independence that followed the Easter Rising, at a time before the British Government decided to send in the Black and Tans to Ireland. Yeats used the phrase "the second birth" instead of "the Second Coming" in his first drafts.[4]

### Influence

Phrases and lines from the poem are used in many works, in a variety of media, such as literature, motion pictures, television and music. Examples of works whose titles draw from "The Second Coming" include: Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958); Joan Didion's essay collection *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968); Robert B. Parker's novel *The Widening Gyre* (1983); the 1996 non-fiction book *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* by Robert Bork; the song "Slouching Towards Bethlehem" (which quotes or paraphrases almost all of the poem)[5] by Joni Mitchell from her 1991 album *Night Ride Home*; by Lou Reed in his preamble to the song "Sweet Jane" on the 1978 album *Live: Take No Prisoners*; the episode "Revelations" (9 November 1994) of the science fiction television series *Babylon 5*;<sup>[citation needed]</sup> *The Roots* LP *Things Fall Apart*,<sup>[citation needed]</sup> released in 1999; Harry Turtledove's novel *American Empire: The Center Cannot Hold*; the 2003 game *Slouching Towards Bedlam*; the *Star Trek* eBook collection *Mere Anarchy* (2006–07); Elyn Saks' autobiography *The Center Cannot Hold* (2007); *The Sopranos* episode "The Second Coming" (2007);<sup>[citation needed]</sup> the Altan album *The Widening Gyre* (2015); the Ben Frost LP *The Centre Cannot Hold* (2017); *When the Center Held*, a 2018 memoir by Donald Rumsfeld of the Gerald Ford presidency;<sup>[citation needed]</sup> and the Sleater-Kinney LP *The Center Won't Hold*, released in 2019, 100 years after Yeats wrote the poem. Stephen King's novel *The*

Stand references the poem numerous times, with one character explicitly quoting lines from it.[citation needed]

A 2016 analysis by research company Factiva showed that lines from the poem were quoted more often in the first seven months of 2016 than in any of the preceding 30 years.[6] In the context of increased terrorist violence (particularly in France), and political turmoil in the Western world after the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America shortly thereafter, commentators repeatedly invoked its lines: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." [7]

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## 2.5 LET US SUM UP

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Yeats believed that history operates in cycles, and so images of the apocalypse arising out of the "Spiritus Mundi" may actually be memories of a previous apocalypse surging back up to the surface of the speaker's mind. Perhaps this is "The Second Coming": a flashback to memories of an apocalypse, forgotten by the self, but remembered by the our soul.

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## 2.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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1. Do you think that Yeats's "The Second Coming" will remain popular throughout the twenty-first century, and does the poem offer special insight for today's readers?

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2. Explain these lines from "The Second Coming": "The falcon cannot hear the falconer."

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3. Explain these lines from "The Second Coming" of W.B Yeats: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity."

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4. What are important lines from the poem "The Second Coming"?

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5. "The falcon cannot hear the falconer" (Explanation).

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6. Who are the falcon and the falconer?

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7. Identify the reason the the falcon cannot hear the falconer. Explain how this metaphor helps to explain what is happening in modern society.

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8. Comment on the themes of Yeats's "The Second Coming."

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9. What is the significance of the gyre in poem "The Second Coming"?

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10. What is the "vast image" he sees in "The Second Coming"?

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11. What is the main theme of William Butler Yeats' poem "The Second Coming"?

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12. Is "The Second Coming" a magnificent statement about the contrary forces at work in history and about the conflict between the modern world and ancient world?

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13. Why does William Butler Yeats end the poem "The Second Coming" in a question?

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14. What imagery is present in the poem "The Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats?

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15. State the claim of William Butler Yeats about his own poem, "The Second Coming."

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16. Write the themes of the poem "the second coming" in detail.

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17. What vision of future is suggested in the second half of "The Second Coming"?

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## **UNIT 3 : WILFRED OWEN: “STRANGE MEETING”**

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### **Structure**

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 About Wilfred Owen
- 3.3 Poem
- 3.4 Let us Sum up
- 3.5 Check Your Progress

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### **3.0 OBJECTIVE**

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After reading the poem you will find out the greatest contributions to modern English poetry came through the works that described World War I, in great part because of WWI's significance on human history. Poetry written by soldiers is one of the best ways to approach literature on the subject, and it will be the focus of this essay to introduce two war poets, one Englishman and one Irishman, who conveyed the sense of being a soldier in the Great War and, in turn, were transformed by this event. Edward Thomas and Francis Ledwidge were two such poets whose pieces drew upon elements of nature to communicate a soldier's isolation and his acceptance, even embrace, of imminent death

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### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

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"Strange Meeting" is one of Wilfred Owen's most famous, and most enigmatic, poems. It was published posthumously in 1919 in Edith Sitwell's anthology *Wheels: an Anthology of Verse* and a year later in Siegfried Sassoon's 1920 collection of Owen's poems. T.S. Eliot referred to "Strange Meeting" as a "technical achievement of great originality" and "one of the most moving pieces of verse inspired by the war." That war, of course, is WWI – the central element in all poems in Owen's relatively small oeuvre. The poet Ted Hughes noted in his writings on "Strange Meeting": "few poets can ever have written with such urgent, defined, practical purpose."

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### **3.2 ABOUT WILFRED OWEN**

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Wilfred Edward Salter Owen, MC (18 March 1893 – 4 November 1918) was an English poet and soldier. He was one of the leading poets of the First World War. His

war poetry on the horrors of trenches and gas warfare was heavily influenced by his mentor Siegfried Sassoon, and stood in stark contrast both to the public perception of war at the time and to the confidently patriotic verse written by earlier war poets such as Rupert Brooke. Among his best-known works – most of which were published posthumously – are "Dulce et Decorum est", "Insensibility", "Anthem for Doomed Youth", "Futility", "Spring Offensive" and "Strange Meeting".

### **Early life**

Owen was born on 18 March 1893 at Plas Wilmot, a house in Weston Lane, near Oswestry in Shropshire. He was the eldest of Thomas and (Harriett) Susan Owen (née Shaw)'s four children; his siblings were Mary Millard, (William) Harold, and Colin Shaw Owen. When Wilfred was born, his parents lived in a comfortable house owned by his grandfather, Edward Shaw.

After Edward's death in January 1897, and the house's sale in March,[1] the family lodged in the back streets of Birkenhead. There Thomas Owen temporarily worked in the town employed by a railway company. Thomas transferred to Shrewsbury in April 1897 where the family lived with Thomas' parents in Canon Street.[2]

Thomas Owen transferred back to Birkenhead, again in 1898 when he became stationmaster at Woodside station.[2] The family lived with him at three successive homes in the Tranmere district,[3] They then moved back to Shrewsbury in 1907.[4] Wilfred Owen was educated at the Birkenhead Institute[5] and at Shrewsbury Technical School (later known as the Wakeman School).

Owen discovered his poetic vocation in about 1904[6] during a holiday spent in Cheshire. He was raised as an Anglican of the evangelical type, and in his youth was a devout believer, in part thanks to his strong relationship with his mother, which lasted throughout his life. His early influences included the Bible and the Romantic poets, particularly John Keats.[7]

Owen's last two years of formal education saw him as a pupil-teacher at the Wyle Cop school in Shrewsbury.[8] In 1911 he passed the matriculation exam for the University of London, but not with the first-class honours needed for a scholarship, which in his family's circumstances was the only way he could have afforded to attend.

In return for free lodging, and some tuition for the entrance exam (this has been questioned[citation needed]) Owen worked as lay assistant to the Vicar of Dunsden near Reading,[9] living in the vicarage from September 1911 to February 1913. During this time he attended classes at University College, Reading (now the University of Reading), in botany and later, at the urging of the head of the English

Department, took free lessons in Old English. His time spent at Dunsden parish led him to disillusionment with the Church, both in its ceremony and its failure to provide aid for those in need.[10][11]

From 1913 he worked as a private tutor teaching English and French at the Berlitz School of Languages in Bordeaux, France, and later with a family. There he met the older French poet Laurent Tailhade, with whom he later corresponded in French.[12] When war broke out, Owen did not rush to enlist – and even considered the French army – but eventually returned to England.[9]

### **War service**

On 21 October 1915, he enlisted in the Artists Rifles Officers' Training Corps. For the next seven months, he trained at Hare Hall Camp in Essex.[11] On 4 June 1916, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant (on probation) in the Manchester Regiment.[13] Initially Owen held his troops in contempt for their loutish behaviour, and in a letter to his mother described his company as "expressionless lumps".[14] However, his imaginative existence was to be changed dramatically by a number of traumatic experiences. He fell into a shell hole and suffered concussion; he was caught in the blast of a trench mortar shell and spent several days unconscious on an embankment lying amongst the remains of one of his fellow officers. Soon afterward, Owen was diagnosed as suffering from neurasthenia or shell shock and sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh for treatment. It was while recuperating at Craiglockhart that he met fellow poet Siegfried Sassoon, an encounter that was to transform Owen's life.

Whilst at Craiglockhart he made friends in Edinburgh's artistic and literary circles, and did some teaching at the Tynecastle High School, in a poor area of the city. In November he was discharged from Craiglockhart, judged fit for light regimental duties. He spent a contented and fruitful winter in Scarborough, North Yorkshire, and in March 1918 was posted to the Northern Command Depot at Ripon.[15] While in Ripon he composed or revised a number of poems, including "Futility" and "Strange Meeting". His 25th birthday was spent quietly at Ripon Cathedral, which is dedicated to his namesake, St. Wilfrid of Hexham.

Owen returned in July 1918, to active service in France, although he might have stayed on home-duty indefinitely. His decision to return was probably the result of Sassoon's being sent back to England, after being shot in the head in an apparent "friendly fire" incident, and put on sick-leave for the remaining duration of the war. Owen saw it as his duty to add his voice to that of Sassoon, that the horrific realities of the war might continue to be told. Sassoon was violently opposed to the idea of Owen

returning to the trenches, threatening to "stab [him] in the leg" if he tried it. Aware of his attitude, Owen did not inform him of his action until he was once again in France.

At the very end of August 1918, Owen returned to the front line – perhaps imitating Sassoon's example. On 1 October 1918 Owen led units of the Second Manchesters to storm a number of enemy strong points near the village of Joncourt. For his courage and leadership in the Joncourt action, he was awarded the Military Cross, an award he had always sought in order to justify himself as a war poet, but the award was not gazetted until 15 February 1919.[16] The citation followed on 30 July 1919:

2nd Lt, Wilfred Edward Salter Owen, 5th Bn. Manch. R., T.F., attd. 2nd Bn. For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty in the attack on the Fonsomme Line on October 1st/2nd, 1918. On the company commander becoming a casualty, he assumed command and showed fine leadership and resisted a heavy counter-attack. He personally manipulated a captured enemy machine gun from an isolated position and inflicted considerable losses on the enemy. Throughout he behaved most gallantly.[17]

## **Death**

Owen's grave, in Ors communal cemetery

Owen was killed in action on 4 November 1918 during the crossing of the Sambre–Oise Canal, exactly one week (almost to the hour) before the signing of the Armistice which ended the war, and was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant the day after his death. His mother received the telegram informing her of his death on Armistice Day, as the church bells in Shrewsbury were ringing out in celebration.[9][18] Owen is buried at Ors Communal Cemetery, Ors, in northern France.[19] The inscription on his gravestone, chosen by his mother Susan, is based on a quote from his poetry: "SHALL LIFE RENEW THESE BODIES? OF A TRUTH ALL DEATH WILL HE ANNUL" W.O..[19][20]

## **Poetry**

Owen is regarded by many as the greatest poet of the First World War,[21] known for his verse about the horrors of trench and gas warfare. He had been writing poetry for some years before the war, himself dating his poetic beginnings to a stay at Broxton by the Hill when he was ten years old.[22] The Romantic poets Keats and Shelley influenced much of his early writing and poetry. His great friend, the poet Siegfried Sassoon, later had a profound effect on his poetic voice, and Owen's most famous poems ("Dulce et Decorum est" and "Anthem for Doomed Youth") show direct results of Sassoon's influence. Manuscript copies of the poems survive, annotated in Sassoon's handwriting. Owen's poetry would eventually be more widely acclaimed



than that of his mentor. While his use of par rhyme with heavy reliance on assonance was innovative, he was not the only poet at the time to use these particular techniques. He was, however, one of the first to experiment with it extensively.

### **Anthem for Doomed Youth**

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.

His poetry itself underwent significant changes in 1917. As a part of his therapy at Craiglockhart, Owen's doctor, Arthur Brock, encouraged Owen to translate his experiences, specifically the experiences he relived in his dreams, into poetry. Sassoon, who was becoming influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis, aided him here, showing Owen through example what poetry could do. Sassoon's use of satire influenced Owen, who tried his hand at writing "in Sassoon's style". Further, the content of Owen's verse was undeniably changed by his work with Sassoon. Sassoon's emphasis on realism and "writing from experience" was contrary to Owen's hitherto romantic-influenced style, as seen in his earlier sonnets. Owen was to take both Sassoon's gritty realism and his own romantic notions and create a poetic synthesis that was both potent and

sympathetic, as summarised by his famous phrase "the pity of war". In this way, Owen's poetry is quite distinctive, and he is, by many, considered a greater poet than Sassoon. Nonetheless, Sassoon contributed to Owen's popularity by his strong promotion of his poetry, both before and after Owen's death, and his editing was instrumental in the making of Owen as a poet.

Owen's poems had the benefit of strong patronage, and it was a combination of Sassoon's influence, support from Edith Sitwell, and the preparation of a new and fuller edition of the poems in 1931 by Edmund Blunden that ensured his popularity, coupled with a revival of interest in his poetry in the 1960s which plucked him out of a relatively exclusive readership into the public eye.[9] Though he had plans for a volume of verse, for which he had written a "Preface", he never saw his own work published apart from those poems he included in *The Hydra*, the magazine he edited at Craiglockhart War Hospital, and "Miners", which was published in *The Nation*.

There were many other influences on Owen's poetry, including his mother. His letters to her provide an insight into Owen's life at the front, and the development of his philosophy regarding the war. Graphic details of the horror Owen witnessed were never spared. Owen's experiences with religion also heavily influenced his poetry, notably in poems such as "Anthem for Doomed Youth", in which the ceremony of a funeral is re-enacted not in a church, but on the battlefield itself, and "At a Calvary near the Ancre", which comments on the Crucifixion of Christ. Owen's experiences in war led him further to challenge his religious beliefs, claiming in his poem "Exposure" that "love of God seems dying".

Only five of Owen's poems were published before his death, one in fragmentary form. His best known poems include "Anthem for Doomed Youth", "Futility", "Dulce Et Decorum Est", "The Parable of the Old Men and the Young" and "Strange Meeting". However, most of them were published posthumously: *Poems* (1920), *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* (1931), *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* (1963), *The Complete Poems and Fragments* (1983); fundamental in this last collection is the poem *Soldier's Dream*, that deals with Owen's conception of war.

Owen's full unexpurgated opus is in the academic two-volume work *The Complete Poems and Fragments* (1994) by Jon Stallworthy. Many of his poems have never been published in popular form.

In 1975 Mrs. Harold Owen, Wilfred's sister-in-law, donated all of the manuscripts, photographs and letters which her late husband had owned to the University of Oxford's English Faculty Library. As well as the personal artifacts, this also includes all of Owen's personal library and an almost complete set of *The Hydra* – the

magazine of Craiglockhart War Hospital. These can be accessed by any member of the public on application in advance to the English Faculty librarian.

The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin holds a large collection of Owen's family correspondence.

An important turning point in Owen scholarship occurred in 1987 when the *New Statesman* published a stinging polemic 'The Truth Untold' by Jonathan Cutbill,[24] the literary executor of Edward Carpenter, which attacked the academic suppression of Owen as a poet of homosexual experience.[25] Amongst the points it made was that the poem "Shadwell Stair", previously alleged to be mysterious, was a straightforward elegy to homosexual soliciting in an area of the London docks once renowned for it.

### Relationship with Sassoon

Owen held Siegfried Sassoon in an esteem not far from hero-worship, remarking to his mother that he was "not worthy to light [Sassoon's] pipe". The relationship clearly had a profound impact on Owen, who wrote in his first letter to Sassoon after leaving Craiglockhart "You have fixed my life – however short". Sassoon wrote that he took "an instinctive liking to him",[26] and recalled their time together "with affection".[27] On the evening of 3 November 1917 they parted, Owen having been discharged from Craiglockhart. He was stationed on home-duty in Scarborough for several months, during which time he associated with members of the artistic circle into which Sassoon had introduced him, which included Robbie Ross and Robert Graves. He also met H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett, and it was during this period he developed the stylistic voice for which he is now recognised. Many of his early poems were penned while stationed at the Clarence Garden Hotel, now the Clifton Hotel in Scarborough's North Bay. A blue tourist plaque on the hotel marks its association with Owen.

Robert Graves[28] and Sacheverell Sitwell[29] (who also personally knew him) stated that Owen was homosexual, and homoeroticism is a central element in much of Owen's poetry.[30][31][32][33] Through Sassoon, Owen was introduced to a sophisticated homosexual literary circle which included Oscar Wilde's friend Robbie Ross, writer and poet Osbert Sitwell, and Scottish writer C. K. Scott Moncrieff, the translator of Marcel Proust. This contact broadened Owen's outlook, and increased his confidence in incorporating homoerotic elements into his work.[34][35] Historians have debated whether Owen had an affair with Scott Moncrieff in May 1918; he had dedicated various works to a "Mr W.O.",[36] but Owen never responded.[37]

Throughout Owen's lifetime and for decades after, homosexual activity between men was a punishable offence in British law, and the account of Owen's sexual development has been somewhat obscured because his brother Harold removed what

he considered discreditable passages in Owen's letters and diaries after the death of their mother.[38] Andrew Motion wrote of Owen's relationship with Sassoon: "On the one hand, Sassoon's wealth, posh connections and aristocratic manner appealed to the snob in Owen: on the other, Sassoon's homosexuality admitted Owen to a style of living and thinking that he found naturally sympathetic." [39] Sassoon, by his own account, was not actively homosexual at this time.[40]

Sassoon and Owen kept in touch through correspondence, and after Sassoon was shot in the head in July 1918 and sent back to England to recover, they met in August and spent what Sassoon described as "the whole of a hot cloudless afternoon together." [41] They never saw each other again. About three weeks later, Owen wrote to bid Sassoon farewell, as he was on the way back to France, and they continued to communicate. After the Armistice, Sassoon waited in vain for word from Owen, only to be told of his death several months later. The loss grieved Sassoon greatly, and he was never "able to accept that disappearance philosophically." [42]

## **Memory**

There are memorials to Owen at Gailly,[43] Ors,[44] Oswestry,[45] Birkenhead (Central Library) and Shrewsbury.[46]

On 11 November 1985, Owen was one of the 16 Great War poets commemorated on a slate stone unveiled in Westminster Abbey's Poet's Corner.[47] The inscription on the stone is taken from Owen's "Preface" to his poems: "My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity." [48] There is also a small museum dedicated to Owen and Sassoon at the Craiglockhart War Hospital, now a Napier University building.

The forester's house in Ors where Owen spent his last night, Maison forestière de l'Ermitage, has been transformed by Turner Prize nominee Simon Patterson into an art installation and permanent memorial to Owen and his poetry, which opened to the public on 1 October 2011.[49]

Susan Owen's letter to Rabindranath Tagore marked, Shrewsbury, 1 August 1920, reads: "I have been trying to find courage to write to you ever since I heard that you were in London – but the desire to tell you something is finding its way into this letter today. The letter may never reach you, for I do not know how to address it, tho' I feel sure your name upon the envelope will be sufficient. It is nearly two years ago, that my dear eldest son went out to the War for the last time and the day he said goodbye to me – we were looking together across the sun-glorified sea – looking towards France, with breaking hearts – when he, my poet son, said those wonderful words of yours – beginning at 'When I go from hence, let this be my parting word' – and when

his pocket book came back to me – I found these words written in his dear writing – with your name beneath.”[50]

### Wilfred Owen Association

To commemorate Wilfred’s life and poetry, The Wilfred Owen Association was formed in 1989.[51][52] Since its formation the Association has established permanent public memorials in Shrewsbury and Oswestry. In addition to readings, talks, visits and performances, it promotes and encourages exhibitions, conferences, awareness and appreciation of Owen's poetry. Peter Owen, Wilfred Owen’s nephew, was President of the Association until his death in July 2018.[53] Dr Rowan Williams (Archbishop of Canterbury 2002–2012), Sir Daniel Day-Lewis and Grey Ruthven, 2nd Earl of Gowrie are Patrons.[54][55] The Association presents a biennial Poetry Award to honour a poet for a sustained body of work that includes memorable war poems; previous recipients include Sir Andrew Motion (Poet Laureate 1999-2009), Dannie Abse, Christopher Logue, Gillian Clarke and Seamus Heaney. Owen Sheers was awarded the prize in September 2018.[56][57][58] In November 2015, actor Jason Isaacs unveiled a tribute to Owen at the former Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh where Owen was treated for shell shock during WWI.[59]

### Depictions in popular culture

#### In literature and films

Stephen MacDonald's play *Not About Heroes* (first performed in 1982) takes as its subject matter the friendship between Owen and Sassoon, and begins with their meeting at Craiglockhart during World War I.[60]

Pat Barker's historical novel *Regeneration* (1991) describes the meeting and relationship between Sassoon and Owen,[61] acknowledging that, from Sassoon's perspective, the meeting had a profoundly significant effect on Owen. Owen's treatment with his own doctor, Arthur Brock, is also touched upon briefly. Owen's death is described in the third book of Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, *The Ghost Road* (1995).[62] In the 1997 film *Regeneration*, Stuart Bunce played Owen.[63]

Owen is the subject of the BBC docudrama *Wilfred Owen: A Remembrance Tale* (2007), in which he is played by Samuel Barnett.[64]

Owen was mentioned as a source of inspiration for one of the correspondents in the epistolary novel, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* (2008), by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows.[65]

In Harry Turtledove's multi-novel Southern Victory Series, the title of the third volume, *Walk in Hell*, is taken from a line in "Mental Cases". This part of the series is set during an alternate history version of World War I which sees Canada invaded and occupied by United States troops. Owen is acknowledged on the title page as the source of the quote.

A film named *The Burying Party* (released August 2018), depicts Owen's final year from Craiglockhart Hospital to the Battle of the Sambre (1918). Matthew Staite stars as Owen and Joyce Branagh as his mother Susan.[66][67][68]

### **In music**

His poetry has been reworked into various formats. For example, Benjamin Britten incorporated eight of Owen's poems into his *War Requiem*, along with words from the Latin Mass for the Dead (*Missa pro Defunctis*). The Requiem was commissioned for the reconsecration of Coventry Cathedral and first performed there on 30 May 1962.[69] Derek Jarman adapted it for the screen in 1988, with the 1963 recording as the soundtrack.[70]

The Ravishing Beauties recorded Owen's poem "Futility" in an April 1982 John Peel session.[71]

Also in 1982, 10,000 Maniacs recorded a song titled "Anthem for Doomed Youth", loosely based on the poem, in Fredonia, New York. The recording appeared on their first EP release *Human Conflict Number Five* and later on the compilation *Hope Chest*. Also appearing on the *Hope Chest* album was the song "The Latin One", a reference to the title of Owen's poem "Dulce et Decorum Est" on which the song is based.

"Strange Meeting" is a poem by Wilfred Owen. It deals with the atrocities of World War I. The poem was written sometime in 1918 and was published in 1919 after Owen's death. The poem is narrated by a soldier who goes to the underworld to escape the hell of the battlefield and there he meets the enemy soldier he killed the day before.

This poem has been described as one of Owen's "most haunting and complex war poems".[1]

Pararhyme or double consonance is a particular feature of the poetry of Wilfred Owen and also occurs throughout "Strange Meeting" – the whole poem is written in pararhyming couplets. For example: "And by his smile I knew that sullen hall, / By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell." The pararhyme here links key words and ideas, without detracting from the meaning and solemnity of the poem, as a full rhyme sometimes does. However, the failure of two similar words to rhyme and the obvious

omission of a full rhyme creates a sense of discomfort and incompleteness. It is a discordant note that matches well to the disturbing mood of the poem.[citation needed]

This poem is the final one of Owen's poems set in the War Requiem of Benjamin Britten. It is sung by the tenor and baritone soloists accompanied by chamber orchestra, joined at the closing line "Let us sleep now..." by the full forces of orchestra, organ, and soprano soloist, mixed chorus and children's chorus, singing Latin texts.

The line, I am the enemy you killed, my friend, appears on the memorial sculpture to Owen erected by Wilfred Owen Association, (sculptors husband-and-wife Paul and Ruth de Monchaux) in the grounds of Shrewsbury Abbey (in whose parish his family settled) to mark his birth centenary in 1993.[2]

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### 3.3 POEM

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#### 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 fears 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,  
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.  
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. . . .”

### **MORE POEMS BY WILFRED OWEN**

Dulce et Decorum Est

Anthem for Doomed Youth

Arms and the Boy

The Last Laugh

Insensibility

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### **3.4 LET US SUM UP**

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The poem is narrated by a soldier who goes to the underworld to escape the hell of the battlefield and there he meets the enemy soldier he killed the day before. This poem has been described as one of Owen's "most haunting and complex war poems"

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### **3.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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1. Wilfred Owen was a soldier in WWI. According to this poem, what do you think his attitude toward war is? How can you tell, based on the text of the poem?

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2. For the first couple of lines we think this poor soldier might have escaped the tortures of battle, but instead he's been sent to hell.

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3. These don't seem like such bad guys, so why are they in hell? What did they do to deserve that eternal punishment?

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4. And speaking of hell, why should their suffering continue beyond the battlefield, and which do you think is worse: the suffering they endured in battle, or the suffering in hell? Can you tell, based on the poem itself?

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5. Do you think speaker number two has forgiven speaker number one for killing him?  
How can you tell?

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6. We don't hear from speaker number one after the first part of the poem. If you had to guess his reaction and response to speaker number two's speech, what do you think he would say?

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7. Do you think there is any hope for the two soldiers in this poem, or for the future soldiers that speaker number two talks about? Why or why not?

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## **UNIT 4 : SIEGFRIED SASSOON, “SUICIDE IN THE TRENCHES”**

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### **Structure**

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 About Siegfried Sassoon
- 4.3 Poem
- 4.4 Analysis
- 4.5 Let us Sum up
- 4.9 Check Your Progress

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### **4.0 OBJECTIVE**

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“Suicide in the Trenches,” by the English poet Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), is one of the many poems Sassoon composed in response to World War I. It reflects his own notable service in that especially bloody conflict. Sassoon was a brave and gallant upper-class officer who eventually opposed the war, but he never lost his admiration for the common soldiers who had to fight it. Sassoon felt contempt for the political leaders and civilian war hawks who, safe in their power and comfort, sent young men off to die in huge battles that seemed futile and pointless.

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### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

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After reading the poem you will find out the greatest contributions to modern English poetry came through the works that described World War I, in great part because of WWI’s significance on human history. Poetry written by soldiers is one of the best ways to approach literature on the subject, and it will be the focus of this essay to introduce two war poets, one Englishman and one Irishman, who conveyed the sense of being a soldier in the Great War and, in turn, were transformed by this event. Edward Thomas and Francis Ledwidge were two such poets whose pieces drew upon elements of nature to communicate a soldier’s isolation and his acceptance, even embrace, of imminent death.

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### **4.2 ABOUT SIEGFRIED SASSOON**

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Siegfried Loraine Sassoon, CBE, MC (8 September 1886 – 1 September 1967) was an English poet, writer, and soldier. Decorated for bravery on the Western Front,[1] he

became one of the leading poets of the First World War. His poetry both described the horrors of the trenches and satirised the patriotic pretensions of those who, in Sassoon's view, were responsible for a jingoism-fuelled war.[2] Sassoon became a focal point for dissent within the armed forces when he made a lone protest against the continuation of the war in his "Soldier's Declaration" of 1917, culminating in his admission to a military psychiatric hospital; this resulted in his forming a friendship with Wilfred Owen, who was greatly influenced by him. Sassoon later won acclaim for his prose work, notably his three-volume fictionalised autobiography, collectively known as the "Sherston trilogy".

### **Early life**

Siegfried Sassoon was born to a Jewish father and an Anglo-Catholic mother, and grew up in the neo-gothic mansion named "Weirleigh" (after its builder, Harrison Weir), in Matfield, Kent.[3] His father, Alfred Ezra Sassoon (1861–1895), son of Sassoon David Sassoon, was a member of the wealthy Baghdadi Jewish Sassoon merchant family. For marrying outside the faith, Alfred was disinherited. Siegfried's mother, Theresa, belonged to the Thornycroft family, sculptors responsible for many of the best-known statues in London—her brother was Sir Hamo Thornycroft. There was no German ancestry in Siegfried's family; his mother named him Siegfried because of her love of Wagner's operas. His middle name, Loraine, was the surname of a clergyman with whom she was friendly.

Siegfried was the second of three sons, the others being Michael and Hamo. When he was four years old his parents separated. During his father's weekly visits to the boys, Theresa locked herself in the drawing-room. In 1895 Alfred Sassoon died of tuberculosis.

Sassoon (front) with his brother Hamo and other students on the morning after a college May Ball at Cambridge University in 1906

Sassoon was educated at the New Beacon School, Sevenoaks, Kent; at Marlborough College, Wiltshire; and at Clare College, Cambridge, where from 1905 to 1907 he read history. He went down from Cambridge without a degree and spent the next few years hunting, playing cricket and writing verse: some he published privately. Since his father had been disinherited from the Sassoon fortune for marrying a non-Jew, Siegfried had only a small private income that allowed him to live modestly without having to earn a living (however, he would later be left a generous legacy by an aunt, Rachel Beer, allowing him to buy the great estate of Heytesbury House in Wiltshire.[4]) His first published success, *The Daffodil Murderer* (1913), was a parody of John Masefield's *The Everlasting Mercy*. Robert Graves, in *Good-Bye to*

All That describes it as a "parody of Masfield which, midway through, had forgotten to be a parody and turned into rather good Masfield."

Sassoon expressed his opinions on the political situation before the onset of the First World War thus—"France was a lady, Russia was a bear, and performing in the county cricket team was much more important than either of them". Sassoon wanted to play for Kent County Cricket Club; the Marchant family were neighbours, and Frank Marchant was captain of the county side between 1890 and 1897. Siegfried often turned out for Bluemantles at the Nevill Ground, Tunbridge Wells, where he sometimes played alongside Arthur Conan Doyle. He had also played cricket for his house at Marlborough College, once taking 7 wickets for 18 runs. Although an enthusiast, Sassoon was not good enough to play for Kent, but he played cricket for Matfield village, and later for the Downside Abbey team, continuing into his seventies.[3][5]

## **War service**

### **The Western Front: Military Cross**

Portrait of Sassoon by Glyn Warren Philpot, 1917 (Fitzwilliam Museum)

Motivated by patriotism, Sassoon joined the British Army just as the threat of a new European war was recognized, and was in service with the Sussex Yeomanry on 4 August 1914, the day the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland declared war on Germany. He broke his arm badly in a riding accident and was put out of action before even leaving England, spending the spring of 1915 convalescing. (Rupert Brooke, whom Sassoon had briefly met, died in April on the way to Gallipoli.) He was commissioned into the 3rd Battalion (Special Reserve), Royal Welch Fusiliers, as a second lieutenant on 29 May 1915.[6] On 1 November his younger brother Hamo was killed in the Gallipoli Campaign,[7] and in the same month Siegfried was sent to the 1st Battalion in France. There he met Robert Graves, and they became close friends. United by their poetic vocation, they often read and discussed each other's work. Though this did not have much perceptible influence on Graves' poetry, his views on what may be called 'gritty realism' profoundly affected Sassoon's concept of what constituted poetry. He soon became horrified by the realities of war, and the tone of his writing changed completely: where his early poems exhibit a Romantic, dilettantish sweetness, his war poetry moves to an increasingly discordant music, intended to convey the ugly truths of the trenches to an audience hitherto lulled by patriotic propaganda. Details such as rotting corpses, mangled limbs, filth, cowardice and suicide are all trademarks of his work at this time, and this philosophy of 'no truth unfitting' had a significant effect on the movement towards Modernist poetry.

Sassoon's periods of duty on the Western Front were marked by exceptionally brave actions, including the single-handed capture of a German trench in the Hindenburg Line. Armed with grenades, he scattered sixty German soldiers:[8]

He went over with bombs in daylight, under covering fire from a couple of rifles, and scared away the occupants. A pointless feat, since instead of signalling for reinforcements, he sat down in the German trench and began reading a book of poems which he had brought with him. When he went back he did not even report. Colonel Stockwell, then in command, raged at him. The attack on Mametz Wood had been delayed for two hours because British patrols were still reported to be out. "British patrols" were Siegfried and his book of poems. "I'd have got you a DSO, if you'd only shown more sense," stormed Stockwell.[9]

Sassoon's bravery was so inspiring that soldiers of his company said that they felt confident only when they were accompanied by him.[10] He often went out on night-raids and bombing patrols and demonstrated ruthless efficiency as a company commander. Deepening depression at the horror and misery the soldiers were forced to endure produced in Sassoon a paradoxically manic courage, and he was nicknamed "Mad Jack" by his men for his near-suicidal exploits. On 27 July 1916 he was awarded the Military Cross; the citation read:

2nd Lt. Siegfried Lorraine [sic] Sassoon, 3rd (attd. 1st) Bn., R. W. Fus. For conspicuous gallantry during a raid on the enemy's trenches. He remained for 1½ hours under rifle and bomb fire collecting and bringing in our wounded. Owing to his courage and determination all the killed and wounded were brought in.[11]

Robert Graves described Sassoon as engaging in suicidal feats of bravery. Sassoon was also later recommended for the Victoria Cross.[12]

### **War opposition and Craiglockhart**

Despite his decorations and reputation, in 1917 Sassoon decided to make a stand against the conduct of the war. One of the reasons for his violent anti-war feeling was the death of his friend David Cuthbert Thomas, who appears as "Dick Tiltwood" in the Sherston trilogy. Sassoon would spend years trying to overcome his grief.

In August 1916, Sassoon arrived at Somerville College, Oxford, which was used as a hospital for convalescing officers, with a case of gastric fever. He wrote: To be lying in a little white-walled room, looking through the window on to a College lawn, was for the first few days very much like a paradise. Graves ended up at Somerville as well. How unlike you to crib my idea of going to the Ladies' College at Oxford, Sassoon wrote to him in 1917.



At the end of a spell of convalescent leave, Sassoon declined to return to duty; instead, encouraged by pacifist friends such as Bertrand Russell and Lady Ottoline Morrell, he sent a letter to his commanding officer entitled *Finished with the War: A Soldier's Declaration*. Forwarded to the press and read out in the House of Commons by a sympathetic member of Parliament, the letter was seen by some as treasonous ("I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority") or at best as condemning the war government's motives ("I believe that the war upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation has now become a war of aggression and conquest"[13]). Rather than court-martial Sassoon, the Under-Secretary of State for War, Ian Macpherson, decided that he was unfit for service and had him sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital near Edinburgh, where he was officially treated for neurasthenia ("shell shock").[12]

For many years it had been thought that, before declining to return to active service, Sassoon had thrown his Military Cross into the River Mersey at Formby beach. According to his description of this incident in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* he did not do this as a symbolic rejection of militaristic values, but simply out of the need to perform some destructive act in catharsis of the black mood which was afflicting him; his account states that one of his pre-war sporting trophies, had he had one to hand, would have served his purpose equally well. In fact, the MC was discovered after the death of Sassoon's only son, George, in the home of Sassoon's ex-wife, which George had inherited. The Cross subsequently became the subject of a dispute among Sassoon's heirs.[14]

At Craiglockhart, Sassoon met Wilfred Owen, a fellow poet who would eventually exceed him in fame. It was thanks to Sassoon that Owen persevered in his ambition to write better poetry. A manuscript copy of Owen's *Anthem for Doomed Youth* containing Sassoon's handwritten amendments survives as testimony to the extent of his influence and is currently on display at London's Imperial War Museum. Sassoon became to Owen "Keats and Christ and Elijah"; surviving documents demonstrate clearly the depth of Owen's love and admiration for him. Both men returned to active service in France, but Owen was killed in 1918, a week before Armistice. Sassoon, despite all this, was promoted to lieutenant, and having spent some time out of danger in Palestine, eventually returned to the Front. On 13 July 1918, Sassoon was almost immediately wounded again—by friendly fire when he was shot in the head by a fellow British soldier who had mistaken him for a German near Arras, France. As a result, he spent the remainder of the war in Britain. By this time he had been promoted to acting captain. He relinquished his commission on health grounds on 12 March 1919, but was allowed to retain the rank of captain.[15]

After the war, Sassoon was instrumental in bringing Owen's work to the attention of a wider audience. Their friendship is the subject of Stephen MacDonald's play, *Not About Heroes*.

Post-war life

Green plaque on the site of Sassoon's former home in Tufton Street, Westminster, London

A handwritten letter to Sassoon from Arthur Quiller-Couch, about the possibility of Quiller-Couch writing for *The Daily Herald*.

### **Editor and novelist**

Having lived for a period at Oxford, where he spent more time visiting literary friends than studying, he dabbled briefly in the politics of the Labour movement, and in 1919 took up a post as literary editor of the socialist *Daily Herald*. He lived at 54 Tufton Street, Westminster from 1919 to 1925; the house is no longer standing, but the location of his former home is marked by a memorial plaque.[16]

During his period at the *Herald*, Sassoon was responsible for employing several eminent names as reviewers, including E. M. Forster and Charlotte Mew, and commissioned original material from "names" like Arnold Bennett and Osbert Sitwell. His artistic interests extended to music. While at Oxford he was introduced to the young William Walton, to whom he became a friend and patron. Walton later dedicated his *Portsmouth Point* overture to Sassoon in recognition of his financial assistance and moral support.

Sassoon later embarked on a lecture tour of the USA, as well as travelling in Europe and throughout Britain. He acquired a car, a gift from the publisher Frankie Schuster, and became renowned among his friends for his lack of driving skill, but this did not prevent him making full use of the mobility it gave him.

Sassoon was a great admirer of the Welsh poet Henry Vaughan. On a visit to Wales in 1923, he paid a pilgrimage to Vaughan's grave at Llansantffraed, Powys, and there wrote one of his best-known peacetime poems, "At the Grave of Henry Vaughan". The deaths within a short space of time of three of his closest friends – Edmund Gosse, Thomas Hardy and Frankie Schuster – came as another serious setback to his personal happiness.

At the same time, Sassoon was preparing to take a new direction. While in America, he had experimented with a novel. In 1928, he branched out into prose, with *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, the anonymously-published first volume of a fictionalised

autobiography, which was almost immediately accepted as a classic, bringing its author new fame as a humorous writer. The book won the 1928 James Tait Black Award for fiction. Sassoon followed it with *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930) and *Sherston's Progress* (1936). In later years, he revisited his youth and early manhood with three volumes of genuine autobiography, which were also widely acclaimed. These were *The Old Century*, *The Weald of Youth* and *Siegfried's Journey*.

### **Personal life**

Siegfried Sassoon's gravestone in Mells churchyard

Blue plaque, 23 Campden Hill Square, London

### **Affairs**

Sassoon, having matured greatly as a result of his military service, continued to seek emotional fulfilment, initially in a succession of love affairs with men, including:

William Park "Gabriel" Atkin, the landscape architectural and figure painter, draftsman and illustrator[17]

Ivor Novello, actor[18]

Glen Byam Shaw, actor and Novello's former lover[19]

Prince Philipp of Hesse, German aristocrat[18]

Beverley Nichols, writer[18]

the Hon. Stephen Tennant, an aristocrat[18]

Only the last of these made a permanent impression, though Shaw remained Sassoon's close friend throughout his life.[19]

### **Marriage**

In September 1931, Sassoon rented Fitz House, Teffont Magna, Wiltshire and began to live there.[20] In December 1933, he married Hester Gatty, who was many years his junior. The marriage led to the birth of a child, something which he had purportedly craved for a long time:

George Sassoon (1936–2006), who was married four times: firstly Stephanie Munro, at Inverness in 1955 (dissolved 1961); secondly Marguerite Dicks in 1961 (dissolved 1974); thirdly Susan Christian-Howard in 1975 (dissolved 1982); and lastly Alison Pulvertaft.

George became a scientist, linguist, and author, and was adored by Siegfried, who wrote several poems addressed to him. However, the marriage broke down after the Second World War, Sassoon apparently unable to find a compromise between the solitude he enjoyed and the companionship he craved.

Separated from his wife in 1945, Sassoon lived in seclusion at Heytesbury in Wiltshire, although he maintained contact with a circle which included E M Forster and J R Ackerley. One of his closest friends was the cricketer, Dennis Silk who later became Warden (headmaster) of Radley College. He also formed a close friendship with Vivien Hancock, then headmistress of Greenways School at Ashton Gifford, where his son George was a pupil. The relationship provoked Hester to make strong accusations against Hancock, who responded with the threat of legal action.[21]

### **Religion**

Towards the end of his life, Sassoon converted to Roman Catholicism. He had hoped that Ronald Knox, a Roman Catholic priest and writer whom he admired, would instruct him in the faith, but Knox was too ill to do so.[22] The priest Sebastian Moore was chosen to instruct him instead, and Sassoon was admitted to the faith at Downside Abbey in Somerset.[23] He also paid regular visits to the nuns at Stanbrook Abbey, and the Abbey press printed commemorative editions of some of his poems. During this time he also became interested in the supernatural, and joined the Ghost Club.[24]

### **Death and awards**

Sassoon was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in the 1951 New Year Honours.[25] He died from stomach cancer on 1 September 1967, one week before his 81st birthday.[26] He is buried at St Andrew's Church, Mells, Somerset, not far from the grave of Father Ronald Knox whom he so admired.[27][28]

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## **4.3 POEM**

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### **Suicide In The Trenches**

By Siegfried Sassoon

I knew a simple soldier boy  
Who grinned at life in empty joy,  
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,

And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,  
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,  
He put a bullet through his brain.  
No one spoke of him again.

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye  
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,  
Sneak home and pray you'll never know  
The hell where youth and laughter go.

#### **Other poems of SASSOON (165)**

Ancient History

A Whispered Tale

Banishment

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## **4.4 ANALYSIS**

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"Suicide in the Trenches" is one of the many poems the English poet Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967) composed in response to World War I, reflecting his own notable service in that especially bloody conflict. Sassoon was a brave and gallant upper-class officer who eventually opposed the war, but he never lost his admiration for the common soldiers who had to fight it. Sassoon felt contempt for the political leaders and civilian war hawks who, safe in their power and comfort, sent young men off to die in huge battles that seemed futile and pointless. It was first published February 23, 1918 in Cambridge Magazine,[1] then in Sassoon's collection: Counter-Attack and Other Poems. The poem is written in iambic tetrameter[2] and consists of twelve lines in three stanzas.[3]

The poem exemplifies the sensibility of war poets in "avoid[ing] sentimentality and self-pity while describing the realities of war".[4] It tells of the suicide of a young man

sent off to war and attacks the "'smug-faced' crowds who greet the returning soldiers".[5] This is one of the poems referenced when Copp states, "It was with poems like these that Sassoon, more than any other trench poet writing in English, brought home to an uninformed public the true reality of the ghastly nature of the war."

**Cultural references**

In 2009, Brian Blessed read the poem within the song "Army of the Damned", part of the album Beneath the Veiled Embrace by the band Pythia.

The English rock star Pete Doherty set this poem to music and performs it sometimes during live performances. He also recited it along with his partner Carl Barât during the 2004 NME Awards with his band The Libertines.

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**4.5 LET US SUM UP**

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The poem exemplifies the sensibility of war poets in "avoid[ing] sentimentality and self-pity while describing the realities of war". It tells of the suicide of a young man sent off to war and attacks the "'smug-faced' crowds who greet the returning soldiers.

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**4.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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1. How does the poet present his ideas of war?

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2. What would be a critical appreciation of "Suicide in the Trenches"?

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3. What is the message of the poem?

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4. What is the main theme of "Suicide in the Trenches" by Siegfried Sassoon?

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5. How is the theme presented/explored in "Suicide in the Trenches" by Siegfried Sassoon?

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