

20th Century War Poetry

1. War poetry an ancient form
 - a. Classical tradition of honoring heroes: Virgil's Aeneid begins "Armo virumque cano" - "Of arms and the man I sing."
 - b. Traditionally war poetry has served as war propaganda
 - i. urging young men into battle - "wars are declared by old men and fought by young men"
 - ii. celebrating the victors and their taking of spoils
 - iii. writing history from the victors' viewpoint
 - c. Owen's "old lie," "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" is the epitome of this tradition, - the entire classical tradition celebrating war which his poetry and poetry since then has called into question

2. WWI the first major world conflict to generate its own body of anti-war poetry.
 - a. "The war to end all wars" was not.
 - b. Technology made new wars more impersonal, more fatal, and more horrifying - new weapons like bombs, hand grenades, and poison gas made death in war seem more random and horrifying
 - c. The war was spread over many theatres, including Europe, North Africa, and Egypt, leading it to seem amorphous, impersonal, enormous
 - d. The term "shell shock" (now Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) was developed to describe the free-floating terror that resulted in some bombing victims
 - e. Political conflicts urged generals to abuse soldiers from certain countries: famous battles (Gallipoli) featured the mass destruction of entire units of non-British soldiers.
 - f. The British government paid some of its soldiers to write poetry about the war (I don't think they got what they expected!)

3. War poetry influenced/was influenced by modernist movements
 - a. Skepticism about tradition and hierarchy
 - b. Celebration of the uniqueness and fluidity of human perception
 - c. Anti-imperialistic ethos just beginning to arise in European countries.
 - d. Women's and other civil-rights movements influence perception of war.

4. War poets begin questioning the use and abuse of human life.
 - a. Woolf pictures Septimus as the shell-shock victim killed not by war but by its psychological aftermath.
 - b. Poets and thinkers reconsider war in the abstract and the futility of hand-to-hand combat.
 - c. But many war poets, especially Brooke, continued to lard their poetry with hymns to the greatness of England -the kind of propaganda we expect to see in war

5. The war poetry to end all war poetry: the poetic aftermath of WWI
 - a. Though it is commonly held that WW2 produced little important literature, all major 20thC wars produced substantial "literatures"
 - b. Possibly the most important "literature" of WW2 was in film, the evolving and popular genre that reached more people than did the poetry of war
 - c. Auden's poems from the Spanish Civil War ("Spain 1937") and "Musee" discuss war in a broader context.
 - d. The Vietnam War in the US produced a new generation of war poetry - popular song.