

Poetry of World War One

Suicide in the Trenches

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.

Glory of Women

Siegfried Sassoon

You love us when we're heroes, home
on leave,
Or wounded in a mentionable place.
You worship decorations; you
believe
That chivalry redeems the war's
disgrace.
You make us shells. You listen with
delight,
By tales of dirt and danger fondly
thrilled.
You crown our distant ardours while
we fight,
And mourn our laurelled memories
when we're killed.
You can't believe that British
troops 'retire'
When hell's last horror breaks
them, and they run,
Trampling the terrible corpses—
blind with blood.

O German mother dreaming by the
fire,

While you are knitting socks to
send your son

His face is trodden deeper in the
mud.

Does it Matter?

Siegfried Sassoon

Does it matter?--losing your legs?...
For people will always be kind,
And you need not show that you mind
When the others come in after hunting
To gobble their muffins and eggs.

Does it matter?--losing your
sight?...
There's such splendid work for the
blind;
And people will always be kind,
As you sit on the terrace remembering
And turning your face to the light.

Do they matter?--those dreams from the
pit?...
You can drink and forget and be glad,
And people won't say that you're mad;
For they'll know you've fought for
your country
And no one will worry a bit.

Survivors

Siegfried Sassoon

No doubt they'll soon get well; the
shock and strain
Have caused their stammering,
disconnected talk.
Of course they're 'longing to go out
again,'—
These boys with old, scared faces,
learning to walk.
They'll soon forget their haunted
nights; their cowed
Subjection to the ghosts of friends
who died,—
Their dreams that drip with murder;
and they'll be proud
Of glorious war that shatter'd all
their pride...
Men who went out to battle, grim and
glad;
Children, with eyes that hate you,
broken and mad.

Fight to a Finish

Siegfried Sassoon

The Dug-Out

Siegfried Sassoon

Why do you lie with your legs
ungainly huddled,
And one arm bent across your
sullen, cold,
Exhausted face? It hurts my heart
to watch you,
Deep-shadow'd from the candle's
guttering gold;
And you wonder why I shake you by
the shoulder;
Drowsy, you mumble and sigh and
turn your head...
You are too young to fall asleep
for ever;
And when you sleep you remind me of
the dead.

In Flanders Fields

John McCrae

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing,
fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset
glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we
lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it
high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies
grow
In Flanders fields.

High Wood

Philip Johnstone

Ladies and Gentlemen, this is High
Wood,
Called by the French, Bois des

The boys came back. Bands played and
flags were flying,
And Yellow-Pressmen thronged the
sunlit street
To cheer the soldiers who'd refrained
from dying,
And hear the music of returning feet.
'Of all the thrills and ardours War
has brought,
This moment is the finest.' (So they
thought.)

Snapping their bayonets on to charge
the mob,
Grim Fusiliers broke ranks with glint
of steel,
At last the boys had found a cushy
job.

. . . .

I heard the Yellow-Pressmen grunt and
squeal;
And with my trusty bombers turned and
went
To clear those Junkers out of
Parliament.

Grass

Carl Sandburg

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and
Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work-

I am the grass; I cover all.

And pile them high at Gettysburg
And pile them high at Ypres and
Verdun.
Shovel them under and let me work.
Two years, ten years, and passengers
ask the conductor:
What place is this?
Where are we now?

I am the grass.
Let me work.

S.I.W.

Wilfred Owen

*I will to the King,
And offer him consolation in his trouble,*

Fourneaux,
 The famous spot which in Nineteen-
 Sixteen,
 July, August and September was the
 scene
 Of long and bitterly contested
 strife,
 By reason of its High commanding
 site.
 Observe the effect of shell-fire in
 the trees
 Standing and fallen; here is wire;
 this trench
 For months inhabited, twelve times
 changed hands;
 (They soon fall in), used later as
 a grave.
 It has been said on good authority
 That in the fighting for this patch
 of wood
 Were killed somewhere above eight
 thousand men,
 Of whom the greater part were
 buried here,
 This mound on which you stand
 being...
Madame, please,
 You are requested kindly not to
 touch
 Or take away the Company's property
 As souvenirs; you'll find we have
 on sale
 A large variety, all guaranteed.
 As I was saying, all is as it was,
 This is an unknown British officer,
 The tunic having lately rotted off.
 Please follow me - this way.....
the path sir, please,
 The ground which was secured at
 great expense
 The company keeps absolutely
 untouched,
 And in that dug-out (genuine) we
 provide
 refreshments at a reasonable rate.
 You are requested not to leave
 about
 Paper, or ginger-beer bottles, or
 orange-peel,
 There are waste-paper baskets at
 the gate.

With An Identity Disc

Wilfred Owen

If ever I dreamed of my dead name
 High in the heart of London,

*For that man there has set his teeth to die,
 And being one that hates obedience,
 Discipline, and orderliness of life,
 I cannot mourn him.*
W. B. Yeats

I. The Prologue
 Patting goodbye, doubtless they told
 the lad
 He'd always show the Hun a brave man's
 face;
 Father would sooner him dead than in
 disgrace,-
 Was proud to see him going, aye, and
 glad.
 Perhaps his mother whimpered how she'd
 fret
 Until he got a nice safe wound to
 nurse.
 Sisters would wish girls too could
 shoot, charge, curse...
 Brothers would send his favourite
 cigarette.
 Each week, month after month, they
 wrote the same,
 Thinking him sheltered in some Y. M.
 Hut,
 Because he said so, writing on his
 butt
 Where once an hour a bullet missed its
 aim.
 And misses teased the hunger of his
 brain.
 His eyes grew old with wincing, and
 his hand
 Reckless with ague. Courage leaked, as
 sand
 From the best sandbags after years of
 rain.
 But never leave, wound, fever, trench-
 foot, shock,
 Untrapped the wretch. And death seemed
 still withheld
 For torture of lying machinally
 shelled,
 At the pleasure of this world's Powers
 who'd run amok.

He'd seen men shoot their hands, on
 night patrol.
 Their people never knew. Yet they were
 vile.
 'Death sooner than dishonour, that's
 the style!'
 So Father said.

II. The Action

One dawn, our wire patrol
 Carried him. This time, Death had not

unsurpassed
By Time for ever, and the Fugitive,
Fame,
There seeking a long sanctuary at
last,

I better that; and recollect with
shame
How once I longed to hide it from
life's heats
Under those holy cypresses, the
same
That shade always the quiet place
of Keats,

Now rather thank I God there is no
risk
Of gravers scoring it with florid
screed,
But let my death be memoried on
this disc.
Wear it, sweet friend. Inscribe no
date nor deed.
But may thy heart-beat kiss it
night and day,
Until the name grow vague and wear
away.

**The Parable of the Old Man and the
Young**

Wilfred Owen

So Abram rose, and clave the wood,
and went,
And took the fire with him, and a
knife.
And as they sojourned both of them
together,
Isaac the first-born spake and
said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and
iron,
But where the lamb, for this burnt-
offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with
belts and straps,
And builded parapets and trenches
there,
And stretched forth the knife to
slay his son.
When lo! an Angel called him out of
heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the
lad,
Neither do anything to him, thy

missed.
We could do nothing but wipe his
bleeding cough.
Could it be accident?-Rifles go off...
Not sniped? No (Later they found the
English ball.)

III. The Poem

It was the reasoned crisis of his soul
Against more days of inescapable
thrall,
Against infrangibly wired and blind
trench wall
Curtained with fire, roofed in with
creeping fire,
Slow grazing fire, that would not burn
him whole
But kept him for death's promises and
scoff,
And life's half-promising, and both
their riling.

IV. The Epilogue

With him they buried the muzzle his
teeth had kissed,
And truthfully wrote the Mother, 'Tim
died smiling.'

Dulce Et Decorum Est

Wilfred Owen

Bent double, like old beggars under
sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we
cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned
our backs
And towards our distant rest began to
trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost
their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went
lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the
hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that
dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!-An ecstasy of
fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in
time;
But someone still was yelling out and

son.
Behold! Caught in a thicket by its
horns,
A Ram. Offer the Ram of Pride
instead.

But the old man would not so, but
slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by
one.

The Refined Man
Rudyard Kipling

I was of delicate mind. I stepped
aside for my needs,
Disdaining the common office. I was
seen from afar
And killed.
How is this matter for mirth? Let
each man be judged
By his deeds.
I have paid my price to live with
myself on the terms
That I willed.

Petite Chanson des Mutilés
Benjamin Péret

Prête-moi ton bras
pour remplacer ma jambe
Les rats me l'ont mangée
à Verdun
à Verdun.

J'ai mangé beaucoup de rats
mais ils ne m'ont pas rendu ma
jambe
c'est pour cela qu'on m'a donné la
croix de guerre
et une jambe de bois
et une jambe de bois.

stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or
lime...
Dim, through the misty panes and thick
green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him
drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless
sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking,
drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too
could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in
his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick
of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the
blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted
lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent
tongues,-
My friend, you would not tell with
such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate
glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

The Veteran
May 1916
Margaret Postgate Cole

We came upon him sitting in the sun
Blinded by war, and left. And past the
fence
There came young soldiers from the
Hand and Flower,
Asking advice of his experience.

And he said this, and that, and told
them tales,
And all the nightmares of each empty
head
Blew into air; then, hearing us
beside,
"Poor chaps, how'd they know what it's
like?" he said.

And we stood there, and watched him as
he sat,
Turning his sockets where they went

away,
Until it came to one of us to ask "And
you're how old?"
"Nineteen, the third of May."

<http://www.bridgeboymusic.com/ad1918/ww1poetry.htm>

contemn -to view or treat somebody with contempt