THE WAR POETS
Introduction

- Thousands of young men volunteered in WW1: most of them regarded the conflict as an ADVENTURE undertaken for NOBLE ENDS.

- After the slaughter on the Somme (summer 1916) the sense of pride and exhilaration was replaced by DOUBT and DISILLUSIONMENT.
Life in the trenches was HELL because of:
• rain and mud
• decaying bodies
• rats
• repeated bombings
• use of poison gas
• ...
War poetry

- Common soldiers improvised verses which were rough, genuine, obscene songs of the trenches but this kind of poetry did not reach the literate people who lived comfortably at home.

- But among the soldiers many were well-educated and knew the classics and English literature.
The WAR POETS

A group of poets managed
• to represent modern warfare in a realistic and unconventional way
• to awaken the conscience of the readers to the horrors of the war

Their poetry is MODERN because its subject matter
• could not be conveyed in the 19° century poetic conventions
• forced them to find new modes of expression
Different attitudes to war

The reaction to the war passed through different stages:

1. The **patriotic enthusiasm** that led many to enlist (Robert Brooke)

2. Then came **anger**, when many realized the lie of war rhetoric (Siegfried Sassoon)
3. **Wilfred Owen** went a step further giving voice to **compassion**: his poetry is a sort of elegy for the young soldiers

4. Other writers had a more **detached unsentimental view** (Rosenberg, Ernest Hemingway)
Robert Brooke (1887-1915)

- He was born into a well-to-do family, went to Cambridge: he was a good student and athlete, became popular especially for his handsome looks.

- He saw little combat during the war since he contracted blood-poisoning and died in April 1915 in the Aegean Sea and was buried on the Greek Island of Skyros.
He wrote 5 WAR SONNETS in 1914 in which

• he advanced the idea that war is clean and cleansing
• he tried to testify to the safeness of war (only the body suffers, death is a reward)
• he uses a traditional form and a sentimental attitude.
The publication of his war sonnets
• coincided with his death
• made him immensely popular
• turned him into a new symbol of the «young romantic hero» who inspired patriotism in the early months of the Great War
Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967)

- Born in a wealthy Jewish family, led the life of a young squire
- He was the most innocent of the War Poets, so his reactions to the realities of the war were bitter and violent and expressed through irony in his poems
• He also protested publicly against the war: in July 1917 he read out in the House of Commons his «Declaration against the war»

• Luckily his friend Robert Graves convinced the review board that Sassoon was suffering from shell shock and he was sent to the military hospital of Craiglockhart where he met and influenced Wilfred Owen.
He wrote 2 collections of poems:

- *The Old Huntsman* (1917)
- *Counter-Attack* (1918)

He denounced the political errors and insincerities for which the soldiers were being sacrificed in various ways:

- in a sober documentary manner
- through anger and satire (*Suicide in the Trenches*)
- through sardonic distancing (*Survivors*)
• He didn’t want to express pity or compassion but the **bitter spontaneity of shocking and realistic detail**

• All through his life he was a resolute pacifist, he got involved in politics (Labour Party) and became a Roman Catholic.
Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

• In 1915 he was working as a teacher of English in France when he visited a hospital for the wounded and decided to return to England and enlist.

• On November 4th 1918 (7 days before the Armistice) he was killed in a German machine-gun attack.
His poems are about
• accurate accounts of gas casualties
• men who have gone mad
• men who are clinically alive although their bodies have been destroyed

He used technical innovations such as «para-rhymes» (ex: loves/lives, seeds/sides, star/stir) and assonance and alliteration extensively.
In the Preface to *Disabled and other Poems* he wrote:

*This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War. Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity. Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.*