

## Poems about places

William Wordsworth (1770-1850): *Upon Westminster Bridge*

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892): *The Splendour Falls On Castle Walls*

Robert Browning (1812-1889): *Home-Thoughts from Abroad*

These three poems are all about places but they are very different in style and tell us as much about the poets who wrote them as they do about the places. William Wordsworth was brought up in what is now Cumbria. His parents both died when he was young and this may have contributed to his rather serious and thoughtful nature. He attended the local grammar school and went up to Cambridge University but was not happy and left without completing his course. Alfred, later Lord Tennyson, grew up in Lincolnshire. He was educated by his father, the local rector, who was an alcoholic and prone to violence as well as suffering from epilepsy. Tennyson also went to Cambridge but left without a degree although he did win the Chancellor's Medal for English verse. Robert Browning's father was a clerk in the Bank of England and owned a large personal library. Browning was allowed to educate himself and began writing at a very early age. He enrolled at London University but dropped out in his second term. Poets do not make good role-models!

All three young men travelled widely. Wordsworth made several visits to Europe and became passionately committed to the ideals of revolution and republicanism. Like other writers, he later became disillusioned with the way the French Revolution turned to terror. While in France, he had an affair with a young woman who bore his child but he left her and returned to England.

He shared a house with his sister Dorothy who contributed a great deal to his writing. She travelled everywhere with him and kept a detailed diary of what they saw. This often gave him ideas for his poems. From 1802, he was happily married to Mary Hutchinson but remained very close to Dorothy.

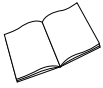


*Williams Wordsworth after his  
return to England*



*Tennyson just before the  
publication of In Memoriam*

Tennyson too travelled abroad with a close friend Arthur Hallam, whom he had met at Cambridge. Hallam died tragically in 1833 and Tennyson began writing a tribute to him which was eventually published in 1850 as *In Memoriam*. In the same year he finally married Emily Sellwood to whom he had been engaged for many years. Lack of money was one possible reason for the delay but he was perhaps also afraid he had inherited his father's epilepsy as well as a family history of depression and instability.



### She Walks in Beauty, Like the Night

'climes' = climates/weather

Replace 'cloudless' and 'starry' with words that mean the same. Do you lose anything?

She walks in beauty, like the night  
Of cloudless climes and starry skies,  
And all that's best of dark and bright  
Meets in her aspect and her eyes,  
Thus mellow'd to that tender light  
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

Does this actually tell you what she looked like?

'aspect' = profile  
'mellow'd' = softened  
'gaudy' = too bright

The answer is no – she depends for her beauty on the perfect light. ———— Would she look the same in broad daylight?

How would you describe her personality? Compare her with the description in Shelley's poem which follows this.

One shade the more, one ray the less  
Had half impair'd the nameless grace  
Which waves in every raven tress  
Or softly lightens o'er her face,  
Where thoughts serenely sweet express  
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

'impair'd' = spoiled  
'nameless' = he cannot describe it  
'raven' = black

And on that cheek and o'er that brow  
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,  
'win' = win people over ———— The smiles that win, the tints that glow ———— 'tints' = colour of her complexion  
But tell of days in goodness spent, ———— A picture of virtue – almost religious in nature  
Why 'below'? ———— A mind at peace with all below,  
What is 'above'? ———— A heart whose love is innocent.

Love for whom? Are we told?

Lord Byron

Although Lord Byron's life and poetry were attacked as immoral, his work was popular both in England and abroad and seemed to achieve the perfect transition from earlier classical elegance to romanticism. He wrote in many and varied styles but neither this nor his chaotic personal life should detract from the seriousness of his commitment to poetry.



- 1 Compare Byron's reaction to this lady with the feelings Shelley described in the next poem. Would you say they have similar temperaments? Look for the similarities and the differences.
- 2 Does the poem create a visual picture? Could you produce a sketch of her from this description? What effect do you think she has had on Byron?



- 1 Write a newspaper report or produce a TV or radio item about the soldiers' send-off as they go to war. Work in groups. How many characters are there who watched them go that you could interview? What would each of them say about the soldiers? Who would see them as heroes? Who would think they shouldn't be going? What will be the tone of your report? What kind of language are you going to use?
- 2 The poet asks what will happen to them. But does he already seem to know? Find words which show his feelings about going to war... is he enthusiastic, angry, fatalistic, etc?
- 3 Look at the shape of the poem and the rhyming scheme. Does this help the poem to make an impact? Look at the repetition of words, eg 'few' and ideas, 'sang' and 'gay', and 'white' and 'dead'. Find more examples.



These are fit young men.  
Why does Owen describe them like this?

Look at the words used to describe the men. How is the picture built up?

Why use direct speech?

What is happening to the man who didn't make it in time?

'misty panes' = glass front of gas mask

Why the change here from past to present tense?

'hanging face' = of a man facing death

'jolt' = movement of the wagon

Who is 'my friend'? Does he mean it?

### Dulce Et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like old 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 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.*

'hags' = old women

Flares were used to light up the sky for an attack. Why haunting?

'Five-Nines' = artillery shells. The barrels were worn out with use so the shells dropped short on their own side.

What would 'ecstasy' usually describe? What were they trying to do?

'lime' = quick-lime; it causes human bodies to disintegrate and disappear

Why is 'drowning' repeated?

Who is 'you too'? How many times does he say 'you'?

Does the poet still hear and see all this? Justify your answer.

What does his choice of words tell us about how he feels?

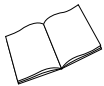
'ardent' = keen, enthusiastic

Wilfred Owen



- 1 This last stanza is all one sentence – Why?  
 ‘*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*’ means it is sweet and noble to die for one’s country. Young soldiers were encouraged to believe this when they joined up. Why does Owen call it a lie? Refer to his own life as well as the poem.
- 2 Imagine you are the soldier who has seen all this. When you went to war you believed the ‘old lie’ but since you have been posted to the front your opinion has changed. Write a letter to the British newspaper *The Times* describing the reality of war and explaining what you now think of the statement *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. You should draw on the experiences in the poem, expressing your reaction in your own words.
- 3 Make a detailed comparison of the two poems by Wilfred Owen. Look at the subject matter/storyline, the mood/atmosphere, the choice of language and the purpose of the poems. Organise your notes into a coursework plan for one of the following titles:
  - i ‘Show how Wilfred Owen’s point of view has changed and developed between these two poems.’
  - ii ‘Compare the setting and atmosphere and the effect of these two poems.’

Rupert Brooke presented a very different view. He was born in 1887 and educated at Rugby School, where his father was a master, and at Cambridge University. He was a popular and successful literary figure. This poem, published in 1915, was in keeping with the picture of glorious sacrifice which was the official version of the war. Poems like this made Rupert Brooke the hero of the public at home in England and his popular reputation survived his early death while on his way to fight in the Dardanelles.



### **The Soldier**

If I should die, think only this of me  
 That there’s some corner of a foreign field  
 That is forever England. There shall be  
 In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;  
 A dust that England bore, shaped, made aware,  
 Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,  
 A body of England’s, breathing English air,  
 Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.  
 And think, this heart, all evil shed away,  
 A pulse in the eternal mind, no less  
 Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;  
 Her sights and sounds; dreams, happy as her day;  
 And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,  
 In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

Rupert Brooke