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THE POETRY OF 1920S

The 1920s was a key decade in poetry: modernism really came to the fore, with a number of major poets adopting an increasingly experimental approach to form, rhyme, imagery, and subject matter. Below, we introduce and discuss some of the best and most notable poems from the 1920s.

EZRA POUND:

- **Ezra Pound** is widely considered one of the most influential poets of the 20th century; his contributions to modernist poetry were enormous. He was an early champion of a number of avant-garde and modernist poets; developed important channels of intellectual and aesthetic exchange between the United States and Europe; and contributed to important literary movements such as Imagism and Vorticism. His life's work, *The Cantos*, remains a signal modernist epic.
- Many critics and scholars regard the poem, "**Hugh Selwyn Mauberley**" as the turning point in Ezra Pound's career. Pound meant this poem to be a strong

statement, because he describes the first stage of his career when his primary concerns were aesthetics, literary traditions, and criticizing post-World War I society. Pound's concern with aestheticism decreased drastically after he moved from London to Paris and then to Italy, where he became more concerned with politics and economics.

- This poem is actually made up of eighteen short poems and grouped into two sections. The first is, in essence, Pound's autobiography from the perspective of his third-person alter ego. It details his struggles to re-emphasize the importance of aesthetics and poetry in society. He pays particular attention to the classical Greek myths to illustrate his point, celebrating their classic beauty and intense passion. He describes America as a "half-savage land" where his art could not flourish. However, when he first arrived in London, he found that Britain was absorbed in commodities.
- Later in section one, Pound goes on to criticize artists and publishers for caring only about sales instead of the craft. He does this by creating a fictional conversation between his alter ego and a bestselling novelist who cares only about the reviews of his work. This encompasses one of the main messages of Pound's poem: mass culture will never be able to produce great art because of corrupt motivations. In the second section of the poem, Pound introduces the title character, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, who is still interchangeable with Pound himself. Pound ends the collection with "Medallion," a farewell poem that celebrates beauty.
- Once again, Pound reminds his reader to celebrate beauty, aesthetics, and poetry because he feels that these values have started to recede from society's collective consciousness.

T. S. ELIOT:

- **T.S. Eliot** was a groundbreaking poet of the 20th-century. Considered to be the single most important and unparalleled poet of the modern era, Eliot attracted widespread attention for his poem, **The Waste Land**. The 1948 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, T.S. Eliot is one of the giants of modern literature, highly distinguished as a poet, literary critic, dramatist, and editor and publisher.

- He is considered as one of the most important modernist poets. The content of his poem as well as his poetic style give elements of the modern movement that was famous during his time.
- *The Waste Land*, a long poem by the American writer T S Eliot, is one of the most famous works of literary modernism. A masterpiece of some 433 lines, incorporating numerous verse forms and taking in the post-war world from squalid encounters in bedsits to chatter in East End pubs it remains one of the high points of the modernist movement and one of the most important and influential poems of the twentieth century.
- It gives a cosmic vision of horror of existence without faith, through innumerable images and allusions comparing the projected objects of the modern for representing the whole. The title *The Waste Land* indicates the spiritual waste land in mankind. This is presented in a number of frustrated sexual images signifying death. Physical conditions of the modern waste land, especially it is referred to the city of London, are the examples of spiritual disease of the modern age. The prescribed solution of 'life in death' denotes the way how the demoralized man could recover his status as a man of virtues.
- Across the poem's five sections – 'The Burial of the Dead', 'A Game of Chess', 'The Fire Sermon', 'Death by Water' and 'What the Thunder Said' – Eliot presents a bleak picture of the landscape of the contemporary world and its history; 'the most important personage', as he put it, is 'the old man with wrinkled dug's' Tiresias, a hermaphroditic character from Greek mythology who is blind, but can see into the future.
- *The Waste Land* offers numerous literary and cultural references from sources as diverse as Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Blake, Conrad, ancient Sanskrit, and First World War trench slang. In addition, the poem contains a variety of musical references: Wagner, music hall, ragtime and nursery rhyme; and these sit alongside the sounds of children sledging, horns and motor cars, pub chatter and the rattle of bones.
- As a modern poem, 'The Waste Land' has bagged its place in the upmost level of its counterparts.

MARIANNE MOORE:

- Published in 1923, just a year after the appearance of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, Marianne Moore's "**Marriage**" is a landmark of High Modernism and one of her most ambitious and important works.
- "Marriage" is a long, complicated collage of statements and quotations regarding the institution of marriage and its problems as well as a critical exploration of gender roles and the relations between men and women.
- This remarkable masterpiece stands apart from the rest of Moore's work for several reasons: it is her longest and one of her most difficult, experimental works; it is perhaps her most openly feminist poem in its critique of marriage and patriarchy; and with its contradictory attitudes, it is also among her most ambivalent and complex.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS:

- One of the most famous poems in the twentieth century American poetry '**The Red Wheelbarrow**' is an Imagist poem. 'The Red Wheelbarrow' is a poem of the Imagist movement. Imagism was a movement in early twentieth century poetry that emphasized concise language and fresh imagery over abstract ideas.
- The poem can be taken to illustrate many of the features of modern American poetry. Though it is deceptively simple, it is actually rich and multiple in meaning. It foregrounds a commonplace situation and image with sheer simplicity and an unusual poem is made out of a single, simple sentence. The poem is composed of one sentence broken up into four stanzas of two lines each.
- The speaker is a farmer, more specifically a poultry farmer, because he is talking about 'chickens' and 'wheelbarrow'. He doesn't seem to be talking/addressing to anyone; this seems to be a typical poetic context of meditation (thinking aloud to oneself). He seems to be in the backyard of his house. Looking at the wheelbarrow kept beside the poultry sheds, and a few chickens seem to be huddling beside the wheelbarrow. The first stanza is meditative; the farmer suddenly becomes thoughtful when he realizes that an ordinary object is practically so important, and probably that he has never realized it.

Yes, so much depends on the wheelbarrow, that is, for the poultry farmer: his very life, his and his family's livelihood, their happiness and success, besides their food, clothes and other basic needs, their education and health care.... and what not. This is the simple meaning of the poem. But generally, and symbolically it means much more.

WALLACE STEVENS:

- *Sunday Morning* is an enigmatic poem by Wallace Stevens, that is part metaphysical, part romantic, and explores the idea '*of the origin and end of eras of human belief*' by first introducing the reader to a woman who on a Sunday morning relaxes in her dressing gown (*peignoir*) instead of presumably going to church.
- The woman is going through a minor crisis or loss of faith - she represents Christianity - and the speaker is there to reassure her that a new approach to the natural world - paganism or humanism - will be enough to sustain her spiritually.
- Wallace Stevens himself wrote: '*This is not essentially a woman's meditation on religion and the meaning of life. It is anybody's meditation...The poem is simply an expression of paganism.*'
- The poem delves into the subject of belief - how humans express their faith and sustain their relationship with the divine - and how symbols and language change over time.

ROBERT FROST:

- Written by Robert Frost, '**Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening**', was published in 1923. It was written to capture the conflict between man and nature and also to highlight the difference between wishes and obligations we face in our lives. However, it has become one of the most popular poems in English literature.
- As the poem is about nature, it has been written from the perspective of an adult, who stops by the woods to enjoy the mesmerizing beauty of nature. The expression of stopping given in the first stanza continues until the traveler decides to restart his journey. The expression of not knowing the woods and then realizing one's duties mark the central point of the poem. However, what

stays in the minds of the readers is the eye-catching and bewitching beauty of woods in the snowy evening.

- The poem comprises the thoughts of an adult, why he stops and why he wants to stay in the lap of nature, forgetting all his worldly affairs. The traveler wants to take a moment to pause in the quiet woods to watch the snow falling. He says he knows whose woods are these, but he is sure the owner of the woods will not notice his presence because he is in the village.
- He is tempted to stay longer, but the pull of obligations and considerable distance force him to leave the woods. As he says that he has to travel a lot, it means he has to perform a lot of duties. Therefore, he puts his wishes aside and starts his journey again. This poem is about the boundaries and limits in which human beings pass their lives, and which do not allow them to get derailed from their respective paths.

T. S. ELIOT:

- Published in 1925, '**The Hollow Men**' reflects the general malaise and sense of limbo that characterized the mid-1920s in Britain for many people: in the US many of the wealthiest may have been enjoying the Jazz Age, but post-war Britain was marked, for Eliot, by a loss of spiritual meaning and direction. '**The Hollow Men**' brilliantly captures this.
- It is most logical to consider **The Hollow Men** (1925) immediately after 'The Waste Land' because it is the most nearly related to 'The Waste Land'. It is, in some ways, a continuation of the earlier poem and, in others, it marks a departure from its predecessor.
- Like 'The Waste Land' it should be regarded as a series of poems rather than as one single poem, most of which is made up out of the lines Ezra Pound deleted from **The Waste Land**.
- The poem certainly bears a strong thematic resemblance to the waste land theme. 'The Hollow Men' is a meditation on the subject of human nature in this world and on the relationship of this world to another, the world of death, or eternity. **The Hollow Men** is also a new poem as regards its music and its final emotional significance.

- The Hollow Men is remarkable for its music. The short lines, the faltering rhythms, the subdued, irregular rhymes help in producing a lamenting music regarding the condition of the Hollow Men. We are not told who they are, where they are or why they are in their present abode. They seem to be in a timeless region.
- There is little hope of redemption for the Hollow Men as the poem ends with a 'whimper'. The word 'whimper' suggests the theme of rebirth. It is the first faint querulous sound which shows that a child is born and is alive. It is a sign of hope and salvation. The hope of salvation is present, although very faintly, for the Hollow Men, but there is little assurance that the hope of salvation will be accepted because the shadow prevents the Hollow Men from attaining the given salvation.

NANCY CUNARD:

- Nancy Clara Cunard was a writer, heiress and political activist. She was born into the British upper class, and devoted much of her life to fighting racism and fascism.
- Although not as famous as Moore, Cunard was another female modernist poet who wrote a long poem in the wake of Eliot's *The Waste Land* – and, in Cunard's case, she seems to have deliberately hinted at to Eliot's *The Waste Land* in order to challenge his despairing and pessimistic view of modernity. '**Parallax**' was, like *The Waste Land*, published in Britain by Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press (in 1925).

LANGSTON HUGHES:

- The finest poet of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes often writes about the lives of African Americans living in America, especially in New York, in the early twentieth century.
- In this poem, '**I, Too**' from 1926, Hughes describes himself as the 'darker brother' and highlights the plight of black Americans. They had to eat separately from everyone else in the kitchen when guests arrived, but they were determined to succeed in the 'Land of the Free'.

- The poem “I, Too” is also known as “I, Too, Sing America,” and was initially titled “Epilogue” when it appeared in *The Weary Blues*, the 1926 volume of Langston Hughes's poetry. It has been anthologized repeatedly and scholars have written about it many times. It is written in free verse and features short lines and simple language.
- Hughes wrote "**I, Too**" from the perspective of an African American man - either a slave, a free man in the Jim Crow South, or even a domestic servant. The lack of a concrete identity or historical context does not mitigate the poem's message; in fact, it confers on it a high degree of universality, for the situation Hughes describes in the poem reflects a common experience for many African Americans during his time.
- The speaker begins by declaring that he too can “sing America,” meaning that he is claiming his right to feel patriotic towards America, even though he is the “darker” brother who cannot sit at the table and must eat in the kitchen. This alludes to the common practice of racial segregation during the early 20th century, when African Americans faced discrimination in nearly every aspect of their lives.

W. B. YEATS:

- **W.B. Yeats** is a prominent poet in modern times for his sense of moral wholeness of humanity and history. He is regarded as the seed of modernism. He is intensely aware of man in history and of the soul in eternity.
- "**Sailing to Byzantium**" is a poem by William Butler Yeats, first published in the 1928 collection *The Tower*. It comprises four stanzas in ottava rima, each made up of eight lines of iambic pentameter.
- It uses a journey to Byzantium (Constantinople) as a metaphor for a spiritual journey. Yeats explores his thoughts and musings on how immortality, art, and the human spirit may converge.
- Through the use of various poetic techniques, Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" describes the metaphorical journey of a man pursuing his own vision of eternal life as well as his conception of paradise.
- ‘**Sailing to Byzantium,**’ is about growing older and feeling out of touch with the new generation superseding you, feeling surplus to requirements, waiting

for death. Yeats's thoughts of death and ageing in this poem are, perhaps, inevitable for a poet in his sixties when he wrote this powerful piece about one's twilight years.

- The first stanza sees Yeats's speaker announcing that the country he's left behind is 'no country for old men' (the phrase has been given a whole new life thanks to Cormac McCarthy's novel, and the film, of that title). Being old, the speaker felt out of place there. Young love, birds singing, and other signs of joy and youth are not the province of the old.
- The second stanza describes old men, such as the speaker himself, as worthless things, like a coat hung upon a stick – just as slight, and just as useless in society's eyes. That is, unless the old can learn to be happy in their twilight years – and to do that, to learn how to relish their old age and wisdom, to make their soul 'sing' again, they need to study the glories of civilization.
- In the third stanza, then, the speaker commands the wise old men, or 'sages', of Byzantium to 'be the singing-masters of my soul' – to teach him how to delight in his old age and be happy in his soul again.
- In the final stanza, Yeats's speaker says that once he has been removed 'out of nature' and is shorn of his desire and 'heart', he will never seek to return to his bodily form, but will instead be like a gold bird made by Grecian goldsmiths, or a bird placed on the 'golden bough' to sing to the people of Byzantium. In other words, Yeats's speaker yearns to leave his body behind and enter some altogether more spiritual, and everlasting, plane.

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