

These presentations will provide some context for the poems we shall be considering. Such context may be biographical (information about the poet), historical (the events that led to the poem), or cultural (visual and musical associations with the poems).

The painting in this slide is by the Russian Suprematist painter Kasimir Malevich. Suprematist art perhaps represented the greatest break with the representational art of the preceding centuries. Modernism taken to its limits. The painting is minimal – two squares on a plain background. The squares are not aligned and the painting gives a sense of unease, fitting for the century.

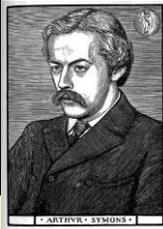
To begin our consideration of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Poetry we shall go through a rapid review of the century by means of its short poems. Short poems (usually defined as having less than the sonnet's 14 lines) are typically easy to understand, and usually characterized by wit rather than weight.



**Venice**

Water and marble and that silentness  
Which is not broken by a wheel or hoof;  
A city like a water-lily, less  
Seen than reflected, palace wall and roof,  
In the unfruitful waters motionless,  
Without one living grass's green reproof;  
A city without joy or weariness,  
Itself beholding, from itself aloof.

Arthur Stieglitz, 1898



Arthur Symons, 1903

We begin with Arthur Symons (1865-1945). He translated the new French poets (Mallarmé, Verlaine) into English, and thus helped move English poetry toward modernism. He was one of a group of lyric poets who met at the Rhymers' Club (in the Cheshire Cheese Pub) – Yeats, Dowson, Johnson, Wilde. Their poetry defined the melancholy and decadence of the *fin de siècle*. Symons wrote the definitive essay on *The Decadent Movement in Literature*. Together with Aubrey Beardsley he contributed to the short-lived magazine *The Savoy*. He had a long friendship with Havelock Ellis, the person who first coined the term “homosexual.” Symons went mad for a while in the early part of the century but survived, and was occasionally seen in public as an aloof old man with impeccable taste. The following is the beginning of a 1940 poem by John Betjeman who saw Symons in the Café Royal on Regent St. :

I saw him in the Café Royal  
 Very old and very grand.  
 Modernistic shone the lamplight  
 There in London's fairyland.

The photograph is by Stieglitz, who ran a gallery in New York that promoted photography and modern art.

The emblem in the woodcut seems to represent an Ophiuchus (serpent-bearer). This similar to the two-serpent staff of the medical caduceus. Both are astrologically related to cures.

**Autumn**

A touch of cold in the Autumn night—  
 I walked abroad,  
 And saw the ruddy moon lean over a hedge  
 Like a red-faced farmer.  
 I did not stop to speak, but nodded,  
 And round about were the wistful stars  
 With white faces like town children.

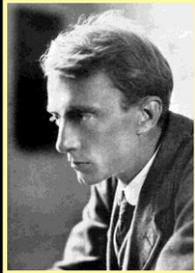
T. E. Hulme, 1908



Read by Andrew de Vermand

Many of the poets of the first part of the 20th century were destined to die in the Great War. T. E. Hulme (1883-1917) was one of these – the photograph shows him in uniform. He wrote only a few poems. They reject the surface sentimentality of late Victorian poetry, aiming instead for intense emotion. The most striking aspect of the poems is their vivid imagery. He is considered by most to be the father of Imagism, a poetic movement that involved Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle (HD), and Amy Lowell.

The vivid images of the moon and the stars allude to the differences between town and country. The poverty of the town children may be the source of the touch of cold.



**Thaw**

Over the land freckled with snow half-thawed  
The speculating rooks at their nests cawed  
And saw from elm-tops, delicate as flower of grass  
What we below could not see, Winter pass.

Edward Thomas, 1910s

Edward Thomas (1878-1917) was a reviewer and essayist in London when he met the American poet Robert Frost. They shared a love of the countryside and long walks. Frost encouraged him to write poetry. His poems were collected and published after his death in the Great War.

**玉階怨**

玉階生白露  
夜久侵羅襪  
卻下水晶簾  
玲瓏望秋月



**The Jewel Stair's Grievance**

The jewelled steps are already quite white with dew,  
It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,  
And I let down the crystal curtain  
And watch the moon through the clear autumn.

Ezra Pound made enormous contributions to 20<sup>th</sup> Century poetry. During the middle and late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europeans had slowly become aware of Chinese poetry. Mahler's *Lied von der Erde* (1909) was based on some early French and German translations. As a basis for his translations, Pound used notes by Ernest Fenolossa, who studied the Chinese poetry with some Japanese professors. Because the poetry is in characters, Japanese scholars can understand the poems although they may not know how they sound. Although Pound is thus twice removed from the actual poems, his translations convey their essence. This poem is by Li Bai (Li Po), an 8<sup>th</sup>-Century Chinese poet. Pound's translation was published in 1915. Chinese recitation is from <https://cup.columbia.edu/extras/sound-files-for-how-to-read-chinese-poetry>

The footnote for this particular poem is almost as subtle and poetic as the poem itself: *Jewel stairs, therefore a palace. Grievance, therefore there is something to complain of. Gauze stockings, therefore a court lady, not a servant who complains. Clear autumn, therefore he has no excuse on account of weather. Also she has come early, for the dew has not merely whitened the stairs, but has soaked her stockings. The poem is especially prized because she utters no direct reproach.*

Pound makes some minor mistakes in the translation. The stairs are made of jade rather than jewels. He omits the idea that the lady withdraws before she lets down the curtain in her room. The final line of the poem describes the curtain as exquisite. This might also apply to the lady or the window through which she watches. Chinese poetry has an incredible depth of meaning.



**The Attack**

At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun  
 In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun,  
 Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud  
 The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one,  
 Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire.  
 The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed  
 With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,  
 Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.  
 Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,  
 They leave their trenches, going over the top,  
 While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,  
 And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,  
 Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!

Siegfried Sassoon, 1918

This poem is one line short of a sonnet. This seems to be on purpose – perhaps as a statement that the topic cannot fit the old forms. The rhyme scheme is irregular – every line rhymes with another but there is no clear sequence. The rhythm is also irregular – it starts in regular iambic pentameter but this is then broken up by anapests ( o o / ) spondees ( / / ) and trochees ( / o ). The poet notes the wristwatches. The British Army issue these to all soldiers in 1917 so that they could synchronize their attack to the “creeping barrages” that the artillery laid down in front of them.

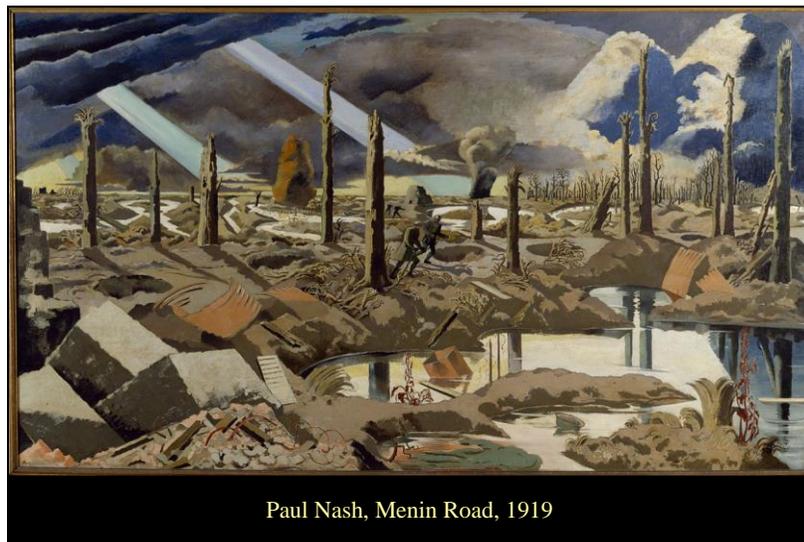



**Epitaphs of the War: Common Form**

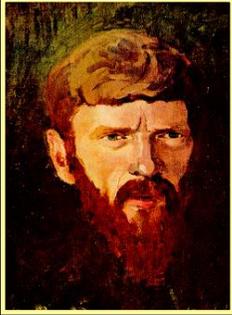
If any question why we died.  
Tell them, because our fathers lied.

Rudyard Kipling, 1918

Kipling (1865-1936) was the great poet of the British Empire. He was awarded the 1907 Nobel Prize in Literature – the first English writer to receive the prize. At the beginning of the Great War he was ardently patriotic. His son was killed in battle in 1915 and Kipling became disillusioned. He wrote a whole series of Epitaphs of the War, this one being the most famous. The poem has two levels – the fathers can represent the leaders of the country who led their people into war, or the sons’ actual fathers (Kipling included) who encouraged them to enlist.



The Great War changed the world forever. British painting quickly and rapidly became modern. This painting represents the landscape in Belgium toward the end of the war. The blasted limbless trees look like the rows and rows of crosses in the cemeteries. Part of the terror is in the strange beauty of the devastation



Jan Juta



**The Mosquito Knows**

The mosquito knows full well, small as he is  
 he's a beast of prey.  
 But after all  
 he only takes his bellyful,  
 he doesn't put my blood in the bank.

D. H. Lawrence, 1929

In the years between the wars, poets tried to come to grips with what went wrong. Socialism was common. This brief poem by D. H. Lawrence, a miner's son, calls out the bankers as well as Bernie Sanders. Unfortunately, the rich are always with us.

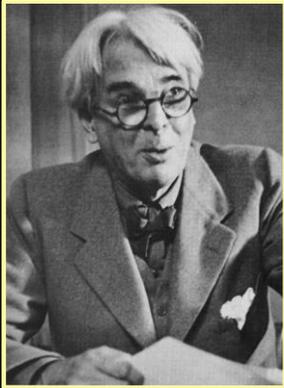
**Sanctuary**

My land is bare of chattering folk;  
 The clouds are low along the ridges,  
 And sweet's the air with curly smoke  
 From all my burning bridges.

Dorothy Parker, 1931



Dorothy Parker was one of the great American wits that gathered for lunch at the Round Table in the Algonquin Hotel in New York. Her witticisms made her the new Oscar Wilde. However, as shown in this poem, the wisecracks floated over an undercurrent of sadness.



**Politics**

How can I, that girl standing there,  
My attention fix  
On Roman or on Russian  
Or on Spanish politics?  
Yet here's a travelled man that knows  
What he talks about,  
And there's a politician  
That has read and thought,  
And maybe what they say is true  
Of war and war's alarms,  
But O that I were young again  
And held her in my arms!

W. B. Yeats, 1938

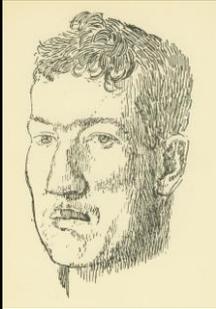
 Michael Caine

Fascism and Communism fought each other politically and sometimes violently in the inter-war years. Yeats himself was a little caught up in the politics. He wrote songs for the Blueshirts – the Irish version of Mussolini's Blackshirts and Hitler's Brownshirts. Yet he came to rue this involvement just before his death in 1939.

**Flying Crooked**

The butterfly, a cabbage-white,  
(His honest idiocy of flight)  
Will never now, it is too late,  
Master the art of flying straight,  
Yet has – who knows so well as I? –  
A just sense of how not to fly:  
He lurches here and there by guess  
And God and hope and hopelessness.  
Even the aerobatic swift  
Has not his flying-crooked gift.

Robert Graves, 1938



Powys Evans



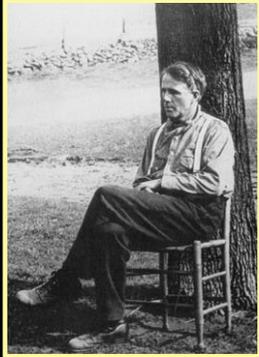


Robert Graves wrote one of the best memoirs of the Great War – *Goodbye to All That*. He is one of the 16 war poets commemorated in Westminster Abbey, but he discarded his war poetry from his *Collected Poems*. He wrote poems throughout his literary career, but is probably more famous for his historical novel *I Claudius* and his compilation of *The Greek Myths*.

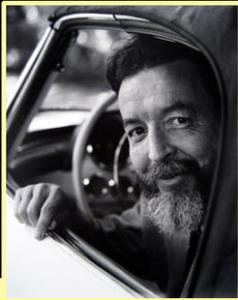
**The Secret Sits**

We dance round in a ring and suppose,  
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

Robert Frost, 1942



Robert Frost was one of the most loved of the American poets. His poems ranged in size from two to several hundred lines. He owned a farm in New Hampshire, and much of his poetry reflects this New England setting. The colloquial language and homespun wisdom of his poems often belie a deeper subversive meaning. However, this brief poem simply says what it means. There are some things that we cannot figure out.



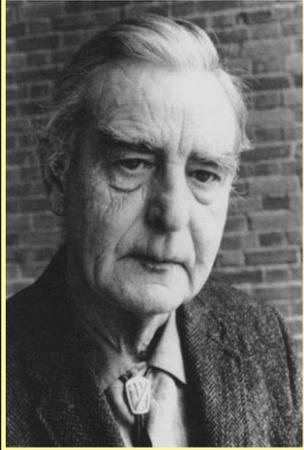
**The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner**

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,  
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.  
Six miles from earth, loosed from the dream of life,  
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.  
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

Randall Jarrell, 1945

During World War II, Randall Jarrell taught navigation in the US Air Force. This poem shows his pity for the flyers that he taught. A ball turret was a spherical gun mounting placed on a bomber to provide protection from enemy fighters. The B24 bomber had a ball turret that could be lowered below the fuselage when the plane was airborne.

After the war Jarrell became a successful poet and critic. His reviews were instrumental in getting recognition for other poets such as Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop. Depression was always close. His death in 1965 was likely a suicide.



**Epigram**

When I shall be without regret  
And shall mortality forget,  
When I shall die who lived for this,  
I shall not miss the things I miss.  
And you who notice where I lie  
Ask not my name. It is not I.

J. V. Cunningham, 1947

Cunningham (1911-1985) studied at Stanford with the famous critic and modernist Yvor Winters. Cunningham wrote small, perfectly worded poems. His collected poems and epigrams amount to 142 pages. Many of the poems harken back to Greek and Roman poets, or to the medieval Christian philosophers. This particular epigram serves well as an epitaph. It works equally well for both atheist and theist.



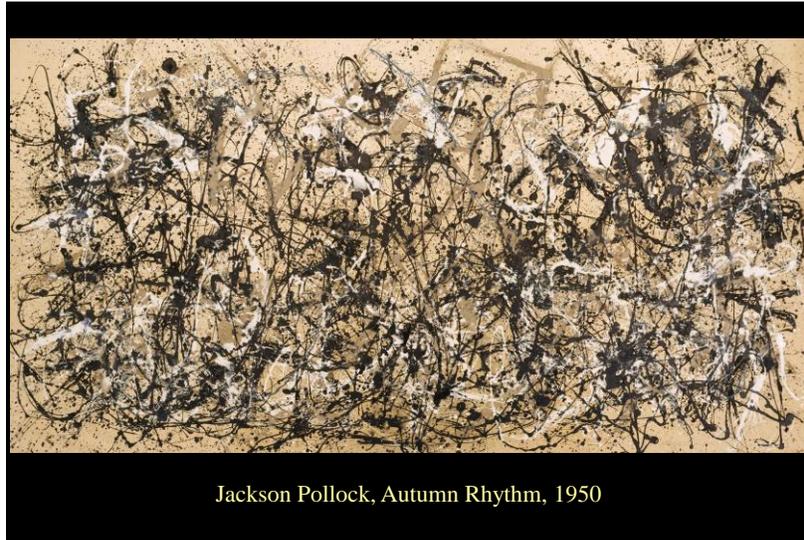
**Dream Deferred**

What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore –  
and then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over –  
like a syrupy sweet?  
Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load  
Or does it just explode?

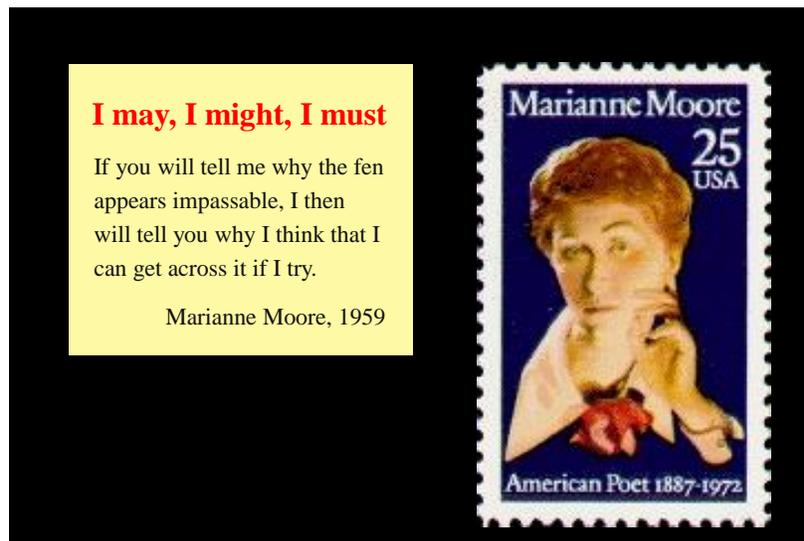
Langston Hughes, 1951



Langston Hughes was the poet of the black experience. He brought to poetry the rhythms of jazz and the dreams of a people that had lived in slavery. *Dream Deferred* was prophetic of the race riots of the 1960s.



The middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was the age of Abstract Expressionism. Painting as free verse.

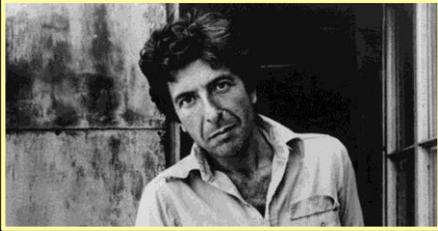


Marianne Moore wrote free verse that was remarkably clear and meaningful. This short poem is very precise in both form and content. The number of syllables per line is exactly eight.

**For Anne**

With Annie gone,  
Whose eyes to compare  
To the summer sun?  
  
Not that I did compare,  
But I do compare  
Now that she's gone.

Leonard Cohen, 1961



Leonard Cohen was a poet before he became famous as a singer and songwriter. This poem is from his collection *The Spice-Box of Earth*. My first book of poetry by a living poet.

**In and Out**

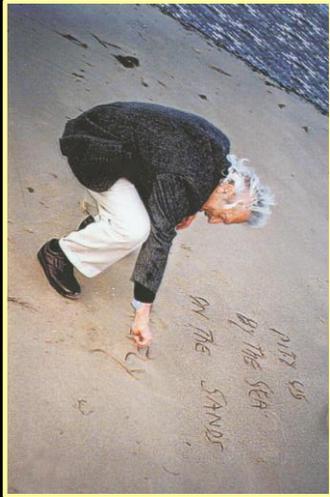
We've covered ground since that awkward day  
When, thoughtlessly, a human mind  
Decided to leave the apes behind,  
Come pretty far, but who dare say  
If far be forward or astray,  
Or what we still might do in the way  
Of patient building, impatient crime,  
Given the sunlight, salt and time.

W. H. Auden, 1966



Georg Platt  
Lynes, 1947

Auden was one of the greatest poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This poem is the epigraph to the second part of his book *About the House*.



Pity us  
By the sea  
On the sands  
So briefly

Samuel Menashe, 1982



Samuel Menashe (1925-2011) was the master of the tiny poem. He served in the US infantry in World War II and studied at the Sorbonne after the war. He was the first recipient of the *Neglected Masters Award* by Poetry Magazine in 2004.

**Valentine**

My heart has made its mind up  
And I'm afraid it's you.  
Whatever you've got lined up,  
My heart has made its mind up  
And if you can't be signed up  
This year, next year will do.  
My heart has made its mind up  
And I'm afraid it's you.

Wendy Cope, 1992




Wendy Cope (1945-) is an English poet. Much of her poetry is comic verse. She is famous for her limericks and triolets.

The triolet derives from medieval French poetry. The rhyme scheme is ABaAabAB – with the lower case letters representing end rhymes and the capitals representing identical lines. The feminine end-rhymes in this particular triolet – mind up/lined up – add to the comedy. The rhythm is usually iambic trimeter.



**Hope**

What's the use  
of something  
as unstable  
and diffuse as hope –  
the almost-twin  
of making-do,  
the isotope  
of going on:  
what isn't in  
the envelope  
just before  
it isn't:  
the always tabled  
righting of the present.

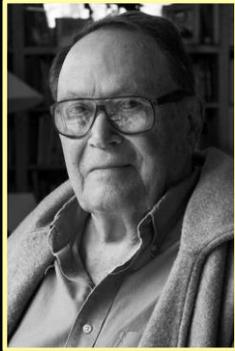
Kay Ryan, 1996

Kay Ryan (1945- ) writes poems that are as meaningful as the lines are brief. She served as the US Poet Laureate from 2008-2010. In 2011 she received a MacArthur “genius grant.”

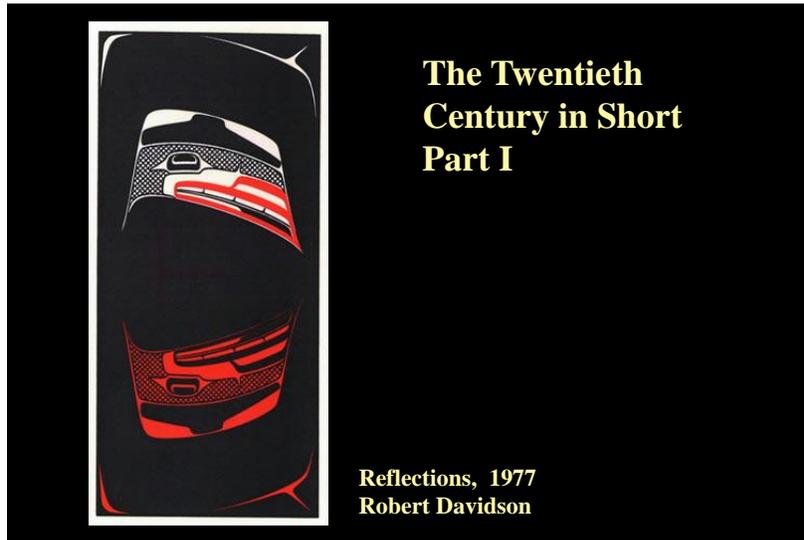
**Once**

The old rock-climber cries out in his sleep,  
Dreaming without enthusiasm  
Of a great cliff immeasurably steep,  
Or of the sort of yawning chasm,  
Now far too deep,  
That once, made safe by rashness, he could leap.

Richard Wilbur, 2000



Richard Wilbur (1921- ) served in the US army World War II and returned to graduate school at Harvard after the war. As well as his poetry he has published numerous translations of plays by Molière and Racine. He is one of the few people able to translate Molière’s verse using the same rhyming-couplet form that it was originally written in.



And so we come to the end of our brief overview of 20<sup>th</sup> Century poetry. This is a lithograph by the Canadian Haida artist Robert Davidson. It serves to remind us that all art has levels of meaning. The direct and the reflected are complementary ways of seeing. The print uses the forms of Haida carving. The image is human – as shown by the eyebrow, the nostril, and the teeth. Poetry often has to fit its meanings to its forms and *vice versa*. Barely visible on the print is the red-on-black link between image and reality.