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VERSES OF VALOR AND DESPAIR: WAR IN THE LANDSCAPE OF MODERN  
POETRY

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**Abstract:**

War has been a persistent theme in modern poetry, capturing the complexities of valor and despair that shape human experiences in conflict. This study examines the representation of war in modern poetry, exploring how poets negotiate themes of heroism, trauma, and resistance within the broader framework of modernism. While early war poetry often glorified battle and sacrifice, modern poets present a more nuanced and fragmented portrayal of warfare, influenced by the horrors of World War I and subsequent global conflicts. Poets like Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and T. S. Eliot employ innovative poetic techniques to depict the psychological scars of combat, challenging traditional narratives of honor and nationalism. This paper investigates how war poetry transitions from romanticized depictions of heroism to raw expressions of suffering and disillusionment, highlighting the shift from structured verse to experimental forms that mirror the chaos of war. By analyzing key works, the study reveals how modern poetry serves both as a site of resistance and a testament to the enduring trauma of war. In doing so, it underscores the role of poetry in shaping collective memory and redefining the meanings of courage and despair.

**Keywords:** War Poetry, Modernism, Trauma, Heroism, Resistance, etc.

**Introduction:**

War has been a recurring theme in poetry, capturing the complexities of valor and despair across different historical epochs. In modern poetry, the representation of war reflects both the heroism and the devastating consequences of armed conflict, often shaping literary landscapes with vivid imagery, personal suffering, and existential reflections. The transition from classical glorifications of war to modernist critiques signifies a profound shift in the literary portrayal of battle. The poetry of war is not merely a record of events but an exploration of the human psyche, navigating themes of patriotism, trauma, and the futility of violence.

The landscape of modern war poetry is deeply influenced by the brutal realities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly the two World Wars. Poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, both soldiers during World War I, redefined the war narrative by rejecting the traditional romanticized view of combat. Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est* condemns the glorification of war, vividly depicting the horrors of gas warfare and the physical suffering of soldiers (Owen 14-28). Sassoon, in works like *The General*, employs irony and direct critique, exposing the incompetence of military leadership and the senseless loss of young lives (Sassoon, 3-8). Their poetry, rooted in firsthand experiences, marks a departure from the heroic tradition of war literature and instead embraces a more cynical and critical perspective.



Beyond the trenches of World War I, the poetry of World War II and later conflicts continues to explore the paradox of valor and despair. W. H. Auden's *September 1, 1939* situates war within a broader socio-political crisis, blending personal disillusionment with a critique of authoritarianism (Auden, 5-12). Similarly, Randall Jarrell's *The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner* encapsulates the dehumanization of soldiers in mechanized warfare, presenting the speaker's death as an impersonal inevitability (Jarrell, 1-5). These modern war poets emphasize the existential weight of conflict, shifting focus from nationalistic pride to individual suffering.

The interplay between valor and despair in modern war poetry highlights the evolving perception of war as both an act of duty and an immense personal and collective tragedy. By analyzing modern war poetry through historical and thematic lenses, this study seeks to illuminate how poets have shaped and redefined the discourse on war, balancing narratives of heroism with the grim reality of destruction. This duality remains a crucial element in understanding the broader implications of war in literary traditions.

### **1. The Evolution of War Poetry in the Modern Era:**

The evolution of war poetry in the modern era reflects the shifting nature of warfare, societal attitudes, and the personal experiences of soldiers and civilians. While early war poetry often glorified heroism and patriotism, the brutality of World War I led poets like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon to depict the horrors of trench warfare, challenging romanticized notions of battle (Fussell, 35). The trend continued in World War II and later conflicts, with poets such as Keith Douglas and Randall Jarrell highlighting the dehumanization and psychological toll of war (Silkin, 210). In the postmodern era, war poetry has expanded beyond battlefield experiences to explore themes of trauma, memory, and political critique, as seen in the works of contemporary poets responding to conflicts in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan (Kendall, 87). The evolution of war poetry, therefore, mirrors the changing realities of war and its impact on the human condition.

#### **1.1. From Romanticism to Modernism - A Literary and Cultural Shift:**

The transition from Romanticism to Modernism marks a profound shift in literary and cultural paradigms, reflecting changes in philosophical thought, artistic expression, and societal structures. Romanticism, flourishing from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, emphasized emotion, nature, and individualism, while Modernism, emerging in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, sought to break with tradition, emphasizing fragmentation, subjectivity, and experimentation. This evolution was influenced by industrialization, scientific advancements, and world events that reshaped human consciousness.

Romanticism, as a movement, reacted against the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the mechanization of the Industrial Revolution. It prioritized intense emotions, the sublime in nature, and the unique experiences of the individual. Writers such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge emphasized personal expression and the spiritual connection with nature. Wordsworth, in his "Preface to Lyrical Ballads," asserts that poetry should be the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth, 98). Similarly, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) critiques the blind pursuit of scientific knowledge and underscores the Romantic ideal of nature's superiority over human ambition.

However, as the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, the optimism and idealism of Romanticism began to wane. The rapid urbanization and technological advancements of the Industrial Revolution, coupled with the horrors of war and existential uncertainty, paved the way for new artistic



explorations. Realism emerged as an intermediary movement, focusing on everyday life and social conditions. Writers such as Gustave Flaubert and Charles Dickens depicted ordinary people and their struggles, setting the stage for Modernist concerns.

Modernism, fully developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, rejected Romantic idealism and embraced a fragmented, often pessimistic view of reality. The devastation of World War I profoundly influenced Modernist literature, leading to a sense of disillusionment and loss of faith in traditional narratives. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) epitomizes this sense of fragmentation, using myth, historical allusions, and multiple voices to depict a fractured world: "April is the cruelest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land" (Eliot 1-2). This sense of alienation and despair is further explored in the works of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, who experimented with stream-of-consciousness narration to capture the complexity of human thought. Modernism also saw a break in formal artistic conventions. Ezra Pound's motto, "Make it new," encapsulated the Modernist urge for innovation (Pound, 3). The use of free verse in poetry, disjointed timelines in fiction, and abstract expression in painting (as seen in the works of Pablo Picasso) all reflect this broader cultural shift.

The journey from Romanticism to Modernism illustrates a fundamental change in artistic and intellectual sensibilities. While Romanticism sought beauty in nature and human emotion, Modernism grappled with the fragmented and chaotic realities of the 20th century. The shift between these movements underscores literature's responsiveness to historical and cultural transformations, demonstrating how artistic expression evolves to reflect the complexities of human experience.

### **1.2. The Role of Modernism in War Poetry:**

War poetry has historically reflected the emotional, psychological, and physical consequences of war. However, with the advent of modernism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, war poetry underwent a significant transformation. Modernist war poets moved away from romanticized and patriotic depictions of war, instead embracing fragmented structures, stark realism, and disillusionment to portray the horrors of combat. The impact of modernism on war poetry is evident in the works of poets such as Wilfred Owen, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, who utilized experimental techniques to capture the brutal and chaotic nature of war.

Modernism as a literary movement arose as a response to the profound changes in society caused by industrialization, scientific advancements, and, most notably, World War I. As Perloff notes, modernist poetry rejected traditional poetic forms and sought to break conventions in both structure and content (Perloff, 15). This shift is evident in the poetry of Wilfred Owen, whose work is characterized by graphic imagery, irregular meter, and irony. His poem *Dulce et Decorum Est* challenges the glorification of war by exposing its gruesome reality. The poem's fragmented rhythm and jarring diction create a visceral experience for the reader, aligning with modernist principles of expressing disarray and trauma.

Similarly, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) captures the existential despair following World War I. Although not explicitly a war poem, it reflects the disillusionment and fragmentation that defined the post-war era. Eliot employs stream-of-consciousness, shifting perspectives, and allusions to various literary traditions to depict the fractured psyche of a war-torn society. According to Hugh Kenner, Eliot's fragmented imagery and intertextual references reflect the chaos and sense of meaninglessness felt by both soldiers and civilians (Kenner, 42).



Another modernist poet, Ezra Pound, utilized imagism—a key modernist technique—to craft war poetry that was precise, concise, and deeply impactful. His poem *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) criticizes the futility of war and the betrayal of soldiers by those in power. Pound's minimalist style and reliance on sharp, unembellished images reject the grandiose and idealistic narratives of war poetry from earlier centuries.

Modernist war poetry also incorporates psychological depth, focusing on the inner turmoil of soldiers rather than glorified battle scenes. This is evident in Siegfried Sassoon's poetry, which employs irony and satire to critique the senselessness of war. His poem *They* contrasts the idealized perception of war promoted by authorities with the harrowing reality faced by soldiers, thus challenging societal myths about heroism and honor.

Modernism played a pivotal role in reshaping war poetry by rejecting traditional forms and embracing experimental techniques. Through fragmented structures, disillusioned themes, and stark realism, modernist war poets conveyed the psychological and physical devastation of war. This transformation not only redefined war poetry but also influenced broader literary movements, shaping the way future generations perceive and interpret war. As critics such as Perloff and Kenner highlight, modernist war poetry remains a powerful testament to the horrors of war and the need for literary innovation in capturing its realities.

## **2. Trauma and the Psychological Landscape of War Poetry:**

War poetry has long served as a medium for expressing the profound psychological impact of conflict on soldiers and civilians alike. From the trenches of World War I to the modern battlegrounds of contemporary warfare, poets have captured the devastation, fear, and existential crises that accompany armed conflict. Trauma, both physical and psychological, is a central theme in war poetry, shaping the way poets depict the horrors of war and its lasting effects on the human psyche.

### **2.1. The Expression of Psychological Trauma in War Poetry:**

The experience of war leaves soldiers and civilians grappling with intense psychological distress, a phenomenon that has been widely documented in literature. Wilfred Owen, one of the most prominent war poets of World War I, conveys this trauma in his poetry, particularly in "Dulce et Decorum Est." Owen's use of vivid imagery and simile underscores the suffering of soldiers: "Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, / Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge" (Owen, 1-2). This depiction of exhausted, broken men contradicts the glorified perception of war, revealing its brutal psychological toll.

Similarly, Siegfried Sassoon's work challenges romanticized notions of heroism. In "Survivors," Sassoon portrays soldiers who are physically present but emotionally shattered: "No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain / Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk" (Sassoon, 1-2). The irony in these lines critiques the ignorance of those who believe war trauma can be easily overcome. Sassoon's poetry often highlights the disconnection between the battlefield and civilian society, exposing the isolation veterans' face upon returning home.

### **2.2. War Poetry and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder:**

The psychological wounds of war, now recognized as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), have been a recurring theme in war poetry. The inability to communicate the horrors of battle often leaves veterans in a state of alienation. Keith Douglas, a World War II poet, encapsulates this struggle in "Vergissmeinnicht," where he describes the eerie juxtaposition of love and death:



"For here the lover and killer are mingled / who had one body and one heart" (Douglas, 17-18). This duality reflects the internal conflict within soldiers, torn between their humanity and the violent realities of war.

Modern war poets continue to explore the effects of trauma, often influenced by conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond. Brian Turner, a former U.S. soldier and poet, illustrates the fragmentation of memory in his collection *Here, Bullet*. In *The Hurt Locker*, Turner uses sparse, disjointed imagery to mimic the psychological fragmentation of war: "Nothing but the hurt left here, / nothing but bullets and pain" (Turner, 1-2). His poetry echoes the disorientation and numbness that characterize PTSD, bridging the experiences of past and present soldiers.

### **2.3. The Role of War Poetry in Healing and Memory:**

War poetry not only serves as a record of trauma but also as a means of processing grief and preserving memory. The works of poets such as Owen, Sassoon, and Turner provide a voice to those who might otherwise be silenced by the overwhelming nature of war trauma. Poetry allows for the articulation of pain and offers a cathartic outlet, both for the poet and the reader. The enduring relevance of war poetry underscores its power in helping societies acknowledge and reflect on the psychological costs of war.

The psychological landscape of war poetry is deeply intertwined with trauma, offering insight into the emotional and mental scars left by conflict. Through vivid imagery, irony, and fragmented narratives, poets convey the haunting realities of war and its impact on the human mind. From the trenches of World War I to contemporary battlefields, war poetry continues to be a vital medium for expressing the psychological consequences of war, ensuring that the voices of those who have experienced its horrors are neither forgotten nor ignored.

### **3. Heroism and Resistance: Reconstructing the War Narrative:**

War narratives have long been shaped by the interplay between heroism and resistance, forming the foundation of collective memory and historical discourse. While traditional war accounts glorify battlefield bravery, contemporary interpretations challenge these representations, bringing to light the complexities of resistance movements, civilian struggles, and the moral ambiguities of war. The reconstruction of war narratives through literature, film, and historical analysis provides a nuanced understanding of heroism beyond the battlefield.

The traditional war narrative often centers on soldiers as the primary figures of heroism. This portrayal is deeply ingrained in historical accounts and literature, from Homer's *Iliad* to modern war films. According to Paul Fussell, "war memoirs and histories frequently emphasize individual gallantry and sacrifice, reinforcing nationalistic pride and military valor" (Fussell 34). However, this approach tends to obscure the broader dimensions of heroism, including the efforts of resistance movements and non-combatant civilians who played crucial roles in shaping the course of war.

Resistance, as a form of heroism, challenges the conventional depiction of war as a series of military engagements. The role of resistance fighters in occupied territories, such as the French Resistance during World War II, underscores the courage required to defy oppression without the conventional means of warfare. Hannah Arendt argues that "resistance movements embody a moral imperative that transcends military strategy, rooted in the defense of human dignity" (Arendt 89). Their struggles, often overshadowed by grand military victories, reflect the resilience of oppressed populations and the power of collective defiance.



Furthermore, civilian narratives highlight the often-overlooked heroism of those who endured wartime atrocities. The experiences of Holocaust survivors, comfort women, and war refugees reveal the silent resistance of enduring extreme hardship. As Primo Levi recounts in *Survival in Auschwitz*, "the ability to retain one's humanity in the face of dehumanization is itself an act of defiance" (Levi, 45). These stories reconstruct war narratives by shifting the focus from soldiers to the everyday individuals whose resilience shaped the historical landscape.

War literature and cinema have played a significant role in reconstructing heroism within war narratives. Films such as *Schindler's List* and novels like *All the Light We Cannot See* illustrate how acts of moral courage—rather than battlefield triumphs—define heroism in wartime contexts. As literary scholar Elaine Scarry asserts, "True heroism often lies in the refusal to perpetuate violence rather than in acts of combat" (Scarry, 67). This broader interpretation challenges glorified depictions of war and fosters a more critical engagement with historical memory.

In conclusion, reconstructing war narratives through the lenses of heroism and resistance allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the human experience in wartime. By moving beyond traditional battlefield valor, historical and literary discourses highlight the significant contributions of resistance fighters, civilians, and those who defy oppression. This reconstructed narrative challenges simplistic glorifications of war, fostering a deeper appreciation for the complexities of heroism in history.

#### **4. War Poetry in the Postmodern Age: A Legacy of Reflection:**

War poetry has long served as a medium through which poets convey the horrors, heroism, and human cost of war. In the postmodern age, war poetry continues this tradition, yet it does so with a heightened sense of skepticism, irony, and reflection on history. Unlike traditional war poetry, which often glorified battle or emphasized patriotic duty, postmodern war poetry questions the narratives of nationalism and the justifications of war. This shift reflects a broader literary movement that critiques absolute truths and embraces fragmented, subjective experiences of reality (Lyotard, 81).

The legacy of war poetry in the postmodern era is deeply influenced by the disillusionment that followed the two World Wars, the Vietnam War, and later conflicts in the Middle-East. Poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon exposed the brutal realities of World War I, setting a precedent for later war poets who rejected romanticized depictions of battle. In contrast, postmodern war poets like Brian Turner and Yusef Komunyakaa employ irony and ambiguity to convey the psychological impact of war on soldiers and civilians alike. Their works do not merely recount events but interrogate the motives behind war and the ways in which history is constructed and remembered (Hutcheon, 54).

A key characteristic of postmodern war poetry is its fragmented structure and reliance on intertextuality. Unlike the structured and formal verse of earlier war poetry, postmodern poets often utilize free verse, shifting perspectives, and experimental language to reflect the chaos and unpredictability of war. For example, Turner's *Here, Bullet* (2005) captures the immediacy of combat through terse, direct language that immerses readers in the battlefield experience. Similarly, Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dau* (1988) explores the Vietnam War through vivid imagery and jazz-influenced rhythms, creating a haunting resonance that challenges official war narratives (Jameson, 23).

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Another defining feature of postmodern war poetry is its engagement with memory and trauma. Postmodern poets frequently blur the boundaries between past and present, individual and collective memory, in order to highlight the lasting psychological scars of war. This approach aligns with Fredric Jameson's concept of the "historical sublime," wherein history is not a fixed narrative but an evolving discourse shaped by multiple perspectives (Jameson 48). For instance, poet Adrienne Rich examines the intersections of gender, power, and war, demonstrating how war affects not only soldiers but also those on the periphery—women, children, and civilians who bear the invisible wounds of conflict.

Furthermore, postmodern war poetry frequently critiques media representations of war. In an era dominated by televised conflicts and digital propaganda, poets challenge the sanitized and sensationalized portrayals of war in mainstream discourse. Carolyn Forché's poetry, for example, employs documentary-style verse to bear witness to war crimes and atrocities, emphasizing the ethical responsibility of writers to counteract misinformation (Hutcheon 79). By doing so, postmodern war poetry not only reflects on the nature of war but also interrogates the role of language and storytelling in shaping public consciousness.

War poetry in the postmodern age carries forward the legacy of reflection and critique. While earlier war poetry sought to document and laments the horrors of battle, postmodern war poetry complicates these narratives by questioning the ideological and historical frameworks that sustain war. Through fragmentation, intertextuality, and engagement with memory and media, contemporary war poets provide a nuanced, often unsettling perspective on warfare that resists simple interpretations. Their work ensures that the voices of those affected by war—soldiers, civilians, and the marginalized—continue to be heard in an increasingly complex and mediated world.

**Conclusion:**

The study of modern war poetry reveals a profound shift in how conflict is represented in literature. Early war poetry often glorified battle, but modern poets emphasize suffering, disillusionment, and the psychological toll of war. This transformation reflects both the changing nature of warfare and evolving perspectives on heroism, trauma, and resistance.

Poets like Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and T. S. Eliot moved away from traditional heroic narratives, instead portraying war as chaotic, brutal, and deeply unsettling. Their innovative poetic techniques capture the fragmentation and psychological scars of battle, challenging conventional notions of nationalism and duty. The transition from structured verse to experimental forms mirrors the disarray of modern warfare, highlighting the alienation and despair experienced by both soldiers and civilians.

Additionally, poets such as W. H. Auden and Randall Jarrell expanded war poetry's scope to critique broader socio-political issues. Their works explore themes like the mechanization of warfare, the dehumanization of soldiers, and the existential crises brought about by mass conflict. This thematic broadening illustrates how war affects both individual lives and collective consciousness, reinforcing poetry's role in resistance and remembrance.

Modern war poetry remains a vital medium for understanding the deep psychological and societal consequences of war. By juxtaposing valor with despair, these poets have reshaped literary traditions and heightened our awareness of war's true costs. Their enduring works serve as poignant reminders of human resilience in the face of destruction.



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