



The Theme of War in English Literature

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Abstract: This article explores the representation of war in English literature during the twentieth century, focusing on the First and Second World Wars. It examines how British writers transformed the theme of war from patriotic heroism into a profound moral and psychological experience. Through the poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, and the prose of Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway (as an influence), Graham Greene, and Evelyn Waugh, the study highlights how war reshaped the modern literary imagination. The analysis demonstrates that English literature of both wars evolved from depicting external events to probing the inner trauma, disillusionment, and ethical dilemmas of the human spirit.

Keywords: English literature, World War I, World War II, realism, trauma, disillusionment, pacifism, memory, moral conflict, modernism.

Introduction: The two World Wars of the twentieth century left an indelible mark on English literature, redefining the moral and aesthetic purpose of art. Unlike earlier centuries that glorified war as heroic adventure, modern writers approached it as a moral catastrophe and an existential crisis. The First World War (1914–1918) shattered the ideals of progress and patriotism, while the Second World War (1939–1945) intensified reflections on human cruelty, faith, and survival.

English writers, poets, and novelists responded not with celebration, but with grief, irony, and introspection. Their works became testimonies of collective suffering and personal loss. War literature thus became not only a record of events but a form of spiritual resistance against dehumanization.

1. The First World War: Disillusionment and the Death of Heroism

World War I produced a generation of poets and writers

whose firsthand experience of the trenches changed the tone and language of English literature forever. The early patriotic enthusiasm of 1914 quickly turned into despair and moral revolt.

Wilfred Owen, perhaps the greatest English war poet, exposed the brutal reality of trench warfare. His poem "Dulce et Decorum Est" (1917) denounces the false ideal that it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country. Owen's imagery — "guttering, choking, drowning" — conveys the horror of chemical warfare and the futility of death. His "Anthem for Doomed Youth" replaces military glory with a requiem of pity, where "the shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells" become symbols of lost humanity.

Siegfried Sassoon, another soldier-poet, brought satire and moral outrage to his verse. In "The General" and "Counter-Attack" (1918), Sassoon criticizes the incompetence of military leadership and the senseless slaughter of soldiers. His style combines simplicity with biting irony: "He's a cheery old card," grumbles the soldier, "when he sends us all up to the line."

Rupert Brooke, by contrast, represents the earlier idealistic phase of the war. His sonnet "The Soldier" (1914) glorifies patriotic sacrifice — "If I should die, think only this of me..." — yet such romanticism soon gave way to the bitter realism of Owen and Sassoon.

Beyond poetry, Robert Graves in *Good-Bye to All That* (1929) and Ford Madox Ford in *Parade's End* (1924–1928) portrayed the disintegration of social values and personal identity in the aftermath of war. These works illustrate that World War I destroyed not only millions of lives but also the moral foundations of modern civilization.

2. The Interwar Period: Trauma, Memory, and Modernism

Between the two wars, English writers sought new forms to express the psychological and philosophical consequences of the conflict. The trauma of World War I became central to the modernist movement.

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) captures postwar England through the fragmented consciousness of its characters. The figure of Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked veteran, embodies the mental scars of the war. His hallucinations and despair reflect the unseen wounds carried by survivors, while Clarissa Dalloway's social world exposes a society haunted by invisible ghosts of loss. Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique translates war trauma into narrative form.

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) also reflects the spiritual devastation of postwar Europe — a civilization reduced to fragments, yearning for renewal. Though

not a war poem in the literal sense, its imagery of desolation and disconnection speaks directly to the moral and emotional aftermath of the First World War.

During the interwar years, writers such as Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*, 1932) and George Orwell (*Homage to Catalonia*, 1938) extended the critique of militarism and authoritarianism, anticipating the ideological conflicts that would culminate in the Second World War.

3. The Second World War: Moral Conflict and the Ethics of Survival

The Second World War revived the theme of human endurance, conscience, and moral ambiguity. Writers no longer portrayed soldiers as heroes but as victims and witnesses of historical chaos. The focus shifted from physical destruction to psychological endurance and ethical choice.

Graham Greene's wartime novels — *The Power and the Glory* (1940) and *The Ministry of Fear* (1943) — depict individuals caught between faith and betrayal, fear and redemption. Greene's "Catholic existentialism" transforms war into a moral battleground where the human soul struggles for grace amidst darkness.

Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) offers a more nostalgic yet tragic reflection on war's impact on faith, love, and memory. The destruction of the aristocratic world parallels the collapse of spiritual order.

George Orwell, in *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), translated the moral lessons of war into political allegory. His experiences in the Spanish Civil War, recorded in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), shaped his anti-totalitarian vision. For Orwell, war revealed not only physical brutality but also the corruption of truth under political ideology.

Keith Douglas, a soldier-poet of World War II, continued the tradition of realism in verse. His poems, such as "Vergissmeinnicht" (1943), combine detachment with compassion, showing how death becomes an ordinary presence in wartime. Douglas's clear, unsentimental voice bridges the gap between Owen's pity and the modern soldier's fatalism.

4. From Heroism to Humanity: The Evolution of Perspective

The comparison between the two wars demonstrates a radical evolution in English literature. World War I produced protest, pity, and disillusionment; World War II deepened this vision into moral inquiry and psychological realism.

While the early war poets sought to expose the horror of physical destruction, later writers expanded the focus to include spiritual and ethical dimensions — guilt, survival, responsibility, and redemption. War ceased to

be a patriotic event and became a metaphor for human frailty and endurance.

By the mid-twentieth century, English literature no longer glorified combat but sought reconciliation through memory and art. The literature of both wars remains a collective act of remembrance — an aesthetic monument to suffering and resilience.

The First and Second World Wars transformed English literature from epic narration to moral introspection. In the works of Owen, Sassoon, Woolf, Greene, Waugh, Orwell, and Douglas, war emerges not merely as a historical crisis but as a mirror of the human condition. These writers replaced the illusion of heroism with the truth of suffering, turning the battlefield into a space for ethical reflection.

Ultimately, the English literature of war teaches that the greatest struggle is not between nations, but within the human soul — between despair and hope, cruelty and compassion, death and the will to live.

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