

The contemporary popularity of rupert brooke's sonnets



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Rupert Brooke's five sonnets, "Peace", "Safety", "The Rich Dead", "The Dead" and "The Soldier", known collectively as "1914", were immensely popular during the First World War, his poems were reprinted, on average, every eight weeks of its duration.

Brooke also received great admiration and respect from his contemporaries both during his time as a pre-war poet and after his death." "The Soldier" was read by Dean Inge from the pulpit of St. Pauls on Easter Sunday 1915, D. H.

Lawrence exclaimed: "he was slain by bright Pheobus' shaft . . . t was a real climax of his pose . . .

O God, O God; it is all too much of a piece: t is like madness. " and Winston Churchill wrote his obituary. Churchill described Brooke's sonnets as "incomparable" and written with "genius". The popularity of Brooke's sonnets was rooted in the patriotism and enthusiasm for war they expressed, he saw war as a "glorious game", and adopted an attitude similar to that expressed by Henry Newbolt in his poem "Vitaii Lampada".

These are the reasons why his poems where chosen by national leaders and propagandists. Brooke's poetry successfully summed up the national mood in the early war years and he acted as a spokesman for popular attitudes and beliefs about the war; he British people were optimistic it would be short-lived and the Allies victorious. The sonnets were also popular as they offered comfort to those that suffered, or could expect, loss of loved ones or faced their own death. His poems glorified war, romanticised death as peaceful and safe and presented dying in battle as heroic and patriotic,

which would bring great inspiration to soldiers and consolation to their families. The first in the series of Brooke's sonnets is "Peace".

The idea presented in this poem is a reversal of the conventional opinion that peace is good and war is bad. In this poem, Brooke suggests that peacetime is a time of decay and war provides opportunities for purification and "rebirth". In the first line the voice of the poem, presumably a soldier, thanks God for making he and his fellow men suitable or "matched" to take part in war, "Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with his Hour". This suggests the war was seen as a thrilling opportunity.

Brooke goes on to explain the thinking behind this excitement and willingness to fight; imagery is used to communicate the notion of war bringing these men a new life. The simile "To turn as swimmers into cleanness eaping" represents the men moving from their old lives into new. The water imagery gives the impression of cleansing, like that of a baptism, which reinforces the view of war as a chance for rebirth and new beginnings. It also suggests that there is a connection between war and religion, this idea of spiritual cleansing can also be found in "The Soldier" "Washed by the rivers, blest by the suns of home." Both images are highly patriotic and optimistic; the belief being that God is on the side of the British people. In stark contrast to the "cleanness" of war, Brooke describes the world during peacetime as "old and cold and weary" and the men that "honour could not move" (being those who were too cowardly to fight) as "half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary".

These comparisons would encourage soldiers to enlist, as war appears the more desirable option and offers escape or “release” from the emptiness of love, of which Brooke wrote from experience, and dreariness of everyday life at home. This idea of war as spiritually cleansing was one of the many common beliefs of the time Brooke picked up on and chose to write about. Siegfried Sassoon also expressed it in his poem “Absolution”; The anguish of the earth absolves our eyes / Till beauty shines in all that we can see. War is our scourge; yet war has made us wise, / And, fighting for our freedom, we are free.

” In the final line of “Peace” Brooke names “Death”, personified, as a soldier’s only enemy. However, this is contradicted in the sonnet “Safety” in which the dead are the voices of the poem and conclude they are safest, this idea is effectively summarised in the ironic phrase “Safe though all safety’s lost”. In “Safety” Brooke seems in love with the idea of dying in war as a hero, as it would bring peace in death. The dead are the speakers in his sonnet and list natural things, “The winds, and morning, tears of men and mirth/ The deep night and birds singing, and clouds flying, / And sleep, and freedom, and the autumnal earth” This is pastoral and, coupled with the picturesque imagery used, makes the prospect of death in battle seem attractive, like a reward for their efforts and loyalty.

The list also suggests that the dead are returned back to nature in some kind of cycle, which is a reassuring thought, as is the guarantee of “a peace unshaken by pain for ever” that is not affected by time or war. Rupert Brooke also expresses his fatalist sentiments in “The Rich Dead” and “The Soldier”.

In “The Rich Dead” death is seen as a release from the weariness of the world
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and the dead are rich as they have been allowed to die for their country, “ But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold. ” The imagery of gold is used to present the idea of death as a reward, this is continued throughout the poem, expressed through the metaphor of a king’s “ royal wage” paid to his most honourable and noble subjects, in this case the soldiers who gave their lives, and also the idea of their death being their “ heritage”. Though Brooke seems to believe death is a good thing, he also outlines that it is not without loss, the dead have lost their future and possible offspring, which is quite a sad thought and presents a more pessimistic attitude than usual “ These..

. gave up the years to be / Of work and joy, and that unhopèd serene, / That men call age; and those who would have been, / Their sons, they gave, their immortality. ” Although his sonnets are religious at times, Brooke never mentions Christian heaven, more of an eternal peace and safety, as in “ Safety”, and a reward after death for loyalty and heroism, which is presented in “ The Rich Dead”. This could have allowed his poetry to be appreciated by a variety of faiths. Brooke’s 1914 sonnets were never personal, in the sense that no particular people were mourned, but always vague. This meant the poems could be read and appreciated by anyone and, as many people were experiencing similar situations and needed the same kind of comfort, they were universally applicable.

This element of his poetry meant that Brooke’s sonnets were distinguishable from the typical propaganda poetry of the time, another of the reasons why they experienced such popularity. The Times Literary Supplement of 11th March 1914 wrote of the war sonnets “ These sonnets are personal... and yet the very blood and youth of England seem to find expression in them.

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They speak not for one heart only, but for all to whom the call has come in the hour of need and found instantly ready. " the fourth sonnet of " 1914", " The Dead" is a prime example of this. " The Dead" is an elegy written to mourn those men who died during the conflict. The poem is hazy in its description and the rhyme scheme is flexible and relaxed, which add to the vagueness. A list in the first stanza gives a general description of the many things the men had done in their lives and the tone is sad and wistful, for example " These had seen movement, and heard music; known / Slumber and waking; loved; gone proudly friended; / Felt the quick stir of wonder; sat alone / Touched flowers and furs and cheeks. " This list could apply to any soldier and the poem could evoke memories in anyone touched by the death of these men.

This would make the poem personal and special to a lot of people, which contributes to its popularity. The first stanza of the poem is written entirely in the past tense, which emphasises the lives of the men are over, a point stressed by the last stark statement " All this is ended. " However the second stanza is written in the present, as if to describe what the men are doing now. This would provide comfort to the reader, as they are told of a beautiful place where the loved one they have lost is at peace and with nature.

The idea of inviolable memories of the dead is included in both " The Dead", in which Brooke writes " He leaves a white / Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance. and in " The Soldier" in which a soldier tells his family, that if he dies, to remember only the good. " The Soldier" is the final poem in Brooke's series of war sonnets and it brings together some of the themes and ideas <https://assignbuster.com/the-contemporary-popularity-of-rupert-brookes-sonnets/>

included throughout 1914". "The Soldier" attempts to capture the sense of optimism, pride, patriotism and nationalism present in England at the start of World War One. The attitude of the British is summarised through the thoughts and feelings of the voice of the poem, an anonymous soldier.

The speaker in this poem has a highly positive attitude to war and a sense of optimism develops throughout. In order to maintain this optimistic perspective on war, Brooke again chooses to omit its more painful aspects, which at the start of the war many civilians were ignorant to. The first line of the poem is "If I should die, think only this of me..."

"The soldier hopefully yet naively assumes he may not die and rather than have his death considered a loss, he wants it to be seen as a victory as it has been for his country. Brooke goes on to further glorify death in conflict "...

That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is forever England. There shall be / In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;" In these lines, the soldier expresses his belief that his remains would enrich any foreign land. He is proud to be born of and shaped by England, personified as a kind of mother figure, who he feels indebted to and happy to die for. However, Brooke's ideas are only fantasies of death, not the reality of war. Unlike true war poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, who experienced war first hand and wrote "Songs of Experience" opposed to the war, Brooke only took part in one day of military action therefore wrote "Songs of Innocence", in favour of it, as he had no real experience to speak of.

By writing his poem in petrarchan sonnet form, usually reserved for serious subject matter such as love or death of a person, Brooke emphasises his love
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for his country. In keeping with the sonnet-style structure, much of the language of the poem is romantic and symbols of love, such as the heart, are repeated several times. "The Soldier" is a pastoral poem; Brooke lists many aspects of England's nature which make him proud to be British, "her flowers to love, her ways to roam..."

"Washed by the rivers, blest by the suns of home." This image of beauty and nature would have invited the reader to feel proud and encourage patriotism, which would have added to the popularity of this sonnet. In conclusion, the immense popularity of the "1914" sonnets at the start of the First World War can be attributed to the way in which Rupert Brooke made his poetry available and applicable to a mass audience. Any British person could read Brooke's sonnets and make it personal to them in some way. His sonnets effectively encapsulated the spirit of the British people and provided them with hope for victory and even manipulated the traditional view of death in conflict, so that too would be regarded as a victory for England. These aspects combined meant the sonnets were a source of great comfort to many people.

The fairly short lengths of the poems, their sonnet structure and the poets use of imagery and flowing rhythm made them easy to read and take in, which allowed them to reach an even greater audience, rather than just the educated. Further into the war however, once people realised, contrary to what they had been told, it was not going to be over by Christmas, the poems lost their power and their popularity waned. The mood reflected in Brooke's early-war sonnets was no longer present; morale was low, due to the lack of progress and introduction of conscription, and the British were far

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less optimistic. Today, society has changed, the public is far more cynical, to regard death as wonderful seems ridiculous, and poetry no longer exercises such influence or obtains such widespread popularity as in 1914.