Rupert Brooke (1887-1915)

Rupert Brooke was born in Warwickshire in 1887. He studied in Cambridge, at King's College, where he started writing poems. His early poetic writings were characterised by the tendency to represent an idyllic view of the English countryside. After a serious nervous breakdown, he travelled to Italy, Germany, North America, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. He was commissioned into the Royal Naval Division shortly after the outbreak of the First World War. Brooke published his first collection of poems in 1912 with the title of *Georgian Poetry, 1911-1912*. This title suggests that he belonged to the group of writers and poets 'Georgian Poets', who rejected the didactic style of Victorian poetry and dealt with humble themes with a melancholic and elegiac tone.
Brooke's most famous poetic work is the sonnet collection entitled *1914 & Other Poems*, published in 1915, the year of his death. This collection of poems, which express an idealistic and enthusiastic praise for war, made him immediately popular.
Brooke died on a hospital ship in Greece in 1915. The obituary which appeared in *The Times* on the day of his death was written by Winston Churchill.

PATRIOTISM AND WAR

One aspect of Brooke's biography needs to be taken into account to understand much of his war poetry. Brooke did not have a long experience of war as he contracted blood poisoning and was then sent to hospital. This fact prevented him from experiencing the most terrible aspects of war and explains much of Brooke's exaltation of and exultation over the experience of war, which he idealised as a purifying experience for people and nations.
Brooke's war poetry lacks the elements of tragedy and loss which characterised the poems by Owen, Rosenberg or Sassoon: the soldier's experience was seen by Brooke as a sacrifice for the nation and war is glorified as a triumph of patriotism and heroism.
Critics have underlined the fact that Brooke's poetry is sometimes too sentimental and superficial; nevertheless, his works represent inestimable historical documents reflecting the exalted mood of Britain during the years immediately before the outbreak of the First World War.

▶ The Rupert Brooke Museum: interior wall (Grantchester, Cambridgeshire).

CHECKPOINT

1. Complete the following sentences.

1 Rupert Brooke was born in ..... and died in ..... .
2 Brooke's early poems focused on the representation of ..... .
3 *He belonged to the group '..... Poets'.*
4 His war poems express a strong '..... for war'.
5 His poems reflect the '..... of Britain immediately after the outbreak of the First World War.

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The Soldier (1915)

WARM UP

1. Focus on one of the men in the picture and answer the following questions.

1 How would you feel if you were him?

2 If you were in his shoes, what would you miss most?

Share your answers with the rest of the class.

The poem you are going to read was written in 1915 and contains the reflections of a young soldier at war.

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed[1];
5 A dust whom England bore[2], shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam[3],
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest[4] by suns of home.
And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
10 A pulse[5] in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

1 concealed: nascosta
2 bore: generò
3 to roam: percorrere
4 blest: benedetto
5 pulse: pulsazione

COMPREHENSION

2. Read the poem and say:

1 who the poet is addressing.

2 what the poet means when he says that the 'dust' is 'concealed' (line 4).

3 what England did to the 'dust'.

4 what image the poet uses to conclude the poem.

ANALYSIS

3. What is the form of this poem? Choose the correct option.

a A ballad. b A sonnet. c An ode.

4. Is there a rhyme scheme?

5. How would you describe the mood of the poem? Which words give you this impression?

6. How does Brooke describe England? Choose the correct option.

a As a person. b As an abstract entity. c As an animal.

7. What is this figure of speech called?

INTERPRETATION

8. Focus on lines 5-7.

1 Who usually performs the actions that Brooke attributes to England in lines 5-7?

2 What does this reveal about Brooke's attitude towards England?

9. Was this poem written before or after Brooke saw active service in the trenches? Why? What makes you think that?

10. What are the elements of 'Englishness' that Brooke reflects on? What picture of English life emerges?