

St Augustine's Centre, Halifax

English for Life in the UK

Episode 32: Literature in the UK: Part 2: Poets and Poetry

September 2020

(Mark) Welcome to the podcast: *English for Life in the UK*. This podcast is for intermediate-level learners of English, and is produced by a group of volunteers from the St Augustine's Centre in Halifax, Yorkshire, where we provide a range of support and advice to those in need, and particularly to asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.

The aim of this podcast is to help anyone wanting to improve their English and, at the same time, to learn more about life in this country. We base this podcast around the official government study guide called: *Life in the United Kingdom*¹, which is used for the basis for the citizenship test, for those of you who, eventually, would like to become British citizens.

Before we start today's episode, we'd like to ask for your help. We've now reached Episode 32 in this podcast and we know we have well over 100 regular listeners and several thousand episodes have been accessed. But we don't know who you are or what you think of the podcast, so we have decided to ask you. We'd love to hear from you: what you think of the podcast, how it could be improved, and what subjects you'd like us to cover, in the future. We have created a short survey which will only take a few minutes to complete. You'll find this on our website :

www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk

that's spelt: s-t-a-u-g-u-s-t-i-n-e-s-c-e-n-t-r-e-h-a-l-i-f-a-x

You'll find the survey near the bottom of the Home page: click on the link that says: "Survey Here".

Alternatively, you can email us at our email address: englishforlifeintheuk@gmail.com

We will be very grateful to hear from you in any of these ways and we will use your comments to help design the next phase of this podcast.

So, let's get on with this week's episode which is a follow-up from the previous episode on "Literature in the UK". This week we are focussing on poets and poetry and the episode is brought to you by Sheena, Christine and myself, Mark.

¹ Life in the United Kingdom: Official Study Guide, TSO

(3 minutes:20 seconds)

(Music)

(Christine) So, this week, again, we're talking about literature in the UK. We covered novels last week, but this week we're going to talk about poetry. So, again, Mark, will you tell us what's mentioned in the *English for Life in the U.K. Guide*?

(M) There is a section in the *Guide* on poetry and it picks out a number of poets over the years. Chaucer, for example, was writing in the Middle Ages² and he is famous for something called *The Canterbury Tales*. And then, Shakespeare, is mentioned, with the sonnets that he wrote. John Milton, in the seventeenth century, who's famous, very famous, poem, called *Paradise Lost*, I remember doing³ at school. Into the eighteenth and nineteenth century, we have William Wordsworth and then John Keats, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, Lord Tennyson and Robert and Elizabeth Browning, are all mentioned. Then the First World War poets are also mentioned: Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, and then into the twentieth century, the poets that are mentioned in the *Guide* are Sir Walter de la Mare, John Masefield, Sir John Betjeman and Ted Hughes. We should perhaps mention that Ted Hughes lived very near to where we are based and where we work, and is very much celebrated as a local celebrity, I suppose you could say, although he's no longer alive.

So, those are the poets that are mentioned in the *Guide* and always difficult to know who to pick and who not to pick, but I know, Christine, you were particularly annoyed that one who wasn't included - so do you want to tell us about that?

(C) I was ... Yes! I was very angry because there is no mention in that *Guide* of Robert Burns or [*in a Scottish accent:-*] *Rabbie Burns* - as we [*the Scots*] call him. He is the most celebrated Scottish poet and who is one of the most well-known, throughout the world. He was ...he's - yeah - a brilliant poet and very famous and very good. Why was he not mentioned? So, I think I know the answer to that as well, which is: because he wrote in the Scots' dialect - so not in standard English.

(6:24) I'm going to read you something in the Scots' dialect to see if you can catch it. I could choose many poems but I'm going to choose the first verse and perhaps the ...er ... another verse towards the end, of "To a Mouse" and what it is, it recounts the tale

² Middle Ages usually considered to run from 400 to the 1400s (i.e. fifth to fifteenth centuries)

³ doing at school = studying at school

when he was a farmer, Robert Burns, when he was ploughing a field and he broke into a mouse's nest and so he addresses the poem to the mouse and he says:

'why - no, look, little thing, don't run away, don't be scared of me - I'm not going to chase after you with my spade'

and then later on - he talks about this poor mouse who's made this little nest in the ground. He built it in the Autumn, to see it through the winter, but now of course it's winter time, when he cut into the mouse's nest and there's nothing left for him to build a new nest with - so: I'll come to that at the end. I'm going to read it now - though just those two verses - in Scots:

Wee, sleekit, cowrin', tim'rous beastie,
 O, what a pannic's in thy breastie!
 Thou need na start awa sae hasty,
 Wi' bickering brattle!
 I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee,
 Wi' murd'ring prattle!

That's at the beginning - and then at the end :

But, Mousie, thou art no thy-lane,
 In proving foresight may be vain;
 The best-laid scheme o' mice an' men
 Gang aft agley,
 An' lea'e as nought but grief an' pain
 For the promis'd joy! ⁴

So, I am sure you will have heard that phrase: "of mice and men" - well, I'm sure some of you will have - very famous John Steinbeck book - but he inspired people across the world.

(M) It's interesting isn't it hearing something ... a poet - a poem, that is not in standard English, so in a sense, we're probably I'm hearing it a bit like some of our listeners hear English poems, in that I don't get all of it, but I hear key words and phrases but more importantly, I hear the flow and the style of it and the sound. Fabulous - thank you for that.

Sheena - tell us your choice of poet and poem.

(9:24)

⁴ taken from Wikipedia where the poem is reproduced in full with "translation" into more standard English : https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/To_a_Mouse

- (S) OK - erm ... well, my choice of poet, especially because he is mentioned in the *Guide* too, is Wilfred Owen. When I was 15, I had to study this for my exams and I think it was the first poetry that really, really, I really understood. And I could really enjoy some of the techniques he used, as well as what the poet is trying to do. So Wilfred Owen, I'm not sure when Robbie Burns actually wrote, I presume it was before ,,
- (C) Well before - in the eighteenth century.
- (S) Right - OK - well, Wilfred Owen was writing at the time of the First World War. He was a young officer and he was in charge of a group of men and he was horrified by what was happening on the battlefields, in the trenches, and what was happening to these young men, many as young as 18, that had never been out of the country before; and here they were, suffering terribly, away from home and because we didn't have photographs or social media, over a hundred years ago, he had to paint pictures in the words that he chose, so I think this is why I found what he wrote very affecting. People, at home, expect the soldiers to look very smart, expect them to be singing and marching, but if I could just read just a few lines from the first stanza of this poem, then we'll see that Wilfred Owen paints quite a different impression with his words. So he says - the poem is called "*Dulce et Decorum Est*"⁵- it was written in 1917: it starts:

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags,
 We cursed through the sludge.

A little later he says:

Men marched asleep,
 Many had lost their boots
 But limped on, blood-shod.

He then continues to describe a gas attack and what happens to one young man who dies and at the end of the poem he then says:

If you could see what I can see or what I saw, you would never tell other children who were desperate for glory - what he called - 'the old lie': "*dulce et decorum est*" and the old lie translates from Horace, from Latin, to mean: 'that it is right and good to die for your Country'. So Wilfred Owen, even as an officer in the army, was saying he didn't think that this war was right and that you shouldn't tell other young people to go and fight, so very anti-war - so many years ago, too.

(12:58)

⁵ This is in Latin - translated means: "It is sweet and fitting" and is part of a quotation that finishes: [to die for one's country]

- (M) That's great, Sheena.
- (C) It's interesting, Sheena - that poem affected me too. At school, I remember. Very powerful.
- (M) It's what you said about it painting a picture - because it does, doesn't it? The images are so strong, in the words, that you end up with images in your head, too. So you can picture some of what he's writing about.
- (S) And feel empathy - you can feel how those soldiers were feeling, I think.
- (C) And outrage at the lie.
- (M) Yes. Yes. OK - I'm going to choose a modern poet - he's called Lemn Sissay. He was born in Wigan, which is not all that far from here - it's in the North of England, for those who don't know it. He was born to an Ethiopian mother - he never knew his father. In fact, he didn't really know his mother, because he was fostered⁶ out as a very young child into a family and it was a family that, in the end, abandoned him and he ended up in a number of children's homes⁷. So he was taken into care and he was in a number of children's homes throughout his teenage years. So he had a very tough upbringing and early life, but he found himself through his poetry, through his writing. And he's written some fabulous stuff, over the years, and he's now widely celebrated as one of our best poets. He was appointed the Official Poet of the 2012 Olympics. He got his doctorate from Huddersfield University, so another local link there. He received an OBE - that's an Order of the British Empire⁸ [error] - which is one of the medals that people can get, in this country. And he became Chancellor - and still is - Chancellor of Manchester University⁹. So, a very celebrated career and wrote many, many poems. I'm just going to give you a very short, but beautiful, one that I found - and this is how it goes:

How do you do it? said night.
 How do you wake and shine?
 I keep it simple, said light,
 One day at a time. ¹⁰

⁶ put into the care of a family, not his own, by the authorities, on a temporary basis; adoption would be a similar arrangement, but intended to be more permanent.

⁷ local authority institutions for the care of children unable to live in a family home

⁸ this is an error he was awarded the MBE which stands for Member of the order of the British Empire

⁹Chancellor of an English University is a high-ranking, but usually non-executive, and sometimes ceremonial role (do not confuse with Chancellor of the Exchequer in government).

¹⁰ You can find this poem on Lemn Sissay's Facebook page and on Twitter

That's it!

- (C) That's lovely
- (M) It is, isn't it? It's lovely - it's a clever, short poem about light and day, but also about the notion of keeping things simple and taking each day as it comes. Really excellent.
- (C) And he's ... if we have the opportunity - if any of you have the opportunity to listen to Lemn Sissay: he's a delightful speaker - a very engaging speaker - and I think you might find him on You Tube, reading poems.
- (M) Yes - there are a number of You Tube performances of his, that you can find and I think he's accessible as well, to people who are learning English. You won't understand it all, but there's quite a lot of the language, I think, that you will find and that you can access.
- (C) And he was I think he experienced racism, himself, as he was growing up and as an adult, he talks very movingly about life, in the north of England, in the twentieth century and in the twenty-first.
- (M) I want to finish this section by mentioning two other modern poets - both of whom have been the Poet Laureate. The Poet Laureate is appointed by the Queen, on the advice of the Prime Minister, and plays an important role in promoting poetry across the country. Between 2009 and 2019 the Poet Laureate was Carol Ann Duffy. She was born in Scotland and she is currently professor of poetry at Manchester Metropolitan University. After she finished as Poet Laureate, she was succeeded by Simon Armitage who is the current Poet Laureate. Simon Armitage actually was born and lives fairly close to where I live. He was born in Marsden, Huddersfield, right on the edge of the moors, the area of open countryside in the Pennine hills of Yorkshire: a very beautiful area. Simon Armitage is a professor of poetry at Leeds University and before that at Oxford University. Now all these poets that we've mentioned - if you are interested in poetry and want to have a go at reading some of it - or listening to it - you can find links to most of them, either on Google, or in many cases, on You Tube. You will find somebody either reading their poetry or in some cases, the person, the poet themselves, the modern ones, actually reading their own poetry.

(Music)

(19:32)

Language Support

- (M) This is the part of the podcast where we choose an aspect of the English language and talk about it in a bit more detail. Sheena - I think you're going to talk to us a little bit about **similes** today. Tell us what a simile is.
- (S) OK - thank you. I think I mentioned it, when I talked about Wilfred Owen, but I would say that we use similes very often, in everyday speech, as well. So, a simile is when we compare things: often - most often - using 'as' or 'like'. So some people might say about me, very unkindly, that I am "as blind as a bat" as I have very poor eyesight. What people wouldn't say about me is that "I sing like an angel". But everyone would understand that we were comparing one thing with another. And we use it all the time: - like "swim like a fish" - everyone then knows that you're a really good swimmer.

So, Wilfred Owen, because at the time he wanted to convey how things looked and felt for the men on the frontline, in the war, he starts off by saying "bent double, like old beggars, under sacks". Now I think people at home would always expect soldiers to be standing upright: they are young, healthy men, looking very smart in their uniforms, but the picture that he paints using his simile 'like old beggars under sacks' would mean that they were like people living on the streets, they are bent over, bent double, carrying their heavy, wet rucksacks on their backs. He also says they were "coughing like hags" and 'a hag' is like a witch, so again, instead of these healthy young men, you get this picture of this old, horrible, coughing, old - well he calls them hags, which is not a very pleasant comparison at all.

- (C) Now, Sheena - you're talking about **similes**, but quite often, people use **metaphors**, as well. Could you possibly explain the difference? Because I remember considering similes and metaphors together.
- (S) Yes - well they sort of come under "figurative language" together, don't they? Language that isn't literal - it is not actual language - it's using ideas and images to describe things. A metaphor doesn't use 'like' or 'as', but there is an implied comparison, so again, you are - words or phrases are applied to something you don't normally apply them to. They are a bit more complicated than similes - so you might say the "snow is a white blanket on the ground" - you know it's not a blanket, but you completely understand that image or that picture of how the snow is lying on the ground. Things like - we use them again in every day speech - I might say, "he or she broke my heart" - but they didn't literally break my heart, but they damaged me, so I'm

feeling hurt and sad. And poets and writers are brilliant at using metaphors, I think, so often, we don't even realise they are using them. Wilfred Owen in this poem: one of the metaphors that I remember, he said is that "the men limped, on" - again, not marching - "blood-shod". So this suggests that they had blood encrusted round their feet - maybe they had lost their boots, and so they had this thick layer - not of leather, but of blood, that they were walking in.

- (C) Yes - because 'shod' means 'wearing shoes'.
- (S) Yes, usually. I think that's a very powerful metaphor in there.
- (M) That's really useful, Sheena, thank you. I'm sure our listeners will find that interesting, and will be able to look out for similes and metaphors in things that they're hearing and reading.

That's it for this week. thank you again, for listening. A reminder that the transcript - the written version - of this episode, will be available on our website in a few days' time, and on that website, you can also find a link to our survey, where we would really like to know your views about the podcast, and what we should be doing in the future. So our website again is :

www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk

and our email address and we'd love to hear from you is :

englishforlifeintheuk@gmail.com

Thank you for listening. Goodbye.

(Music)