

Poems in English: Top 5 [C1]

Una panoramica sulle migliori poesie della letteratura in lingua inglese.

Selecting just five poems from across English literary history is quite a challenge! Nevertheless, here are five that are often taught in British or American schools. These are poems about life's big themes: love, death, solitude and **struggle**. All the poets mentioned had a major cultural impact at the time they were writing, and all five poems below are still read and **quoted** today. The choice has been made with historical perspective, which is why three of the poets are white, male, and English. All the poems are from Britain or the US, even though the profile of people publishing poetry in the language is considerably more varied and people from around the globe have written world-changing poetry in English. There are many omissions: we could have gone all the way back to the Old English epic poem Beowulf, written in the 1st century; **drawn on** the work of Chaucer, who was writing in the late 1300s; or come right **up-to-date** with the poems of American poet laureate Ada Limón, born in 1976. From the love sonnets that mimic the rhythm of a beating heart (Shakespeare's iambic pentameter) to lines that **stirred** the souls of Black rights protesters, here is the work of five poets writing in English who have changed the way we think.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: SONNET 18 (1590S)

Today, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is best known for his plays — he wrote around thirty-seven of them — but he also wrote poems including 154 sonnets, many on the theme of love. The most famous is probably Sonnet 18. It's often interpreted as a romantic love poem addressed to a woman but, in fact, it was certainly written to a man and more likely expressed platonic rather than romantic love. It's one of 126 sonnets that Shakespeare addressed to a mysterious male figure called "the **Fair Youth**" who some scholars believe was the attractive young aristocrat Henry Wriothesley. Sonnet 18 compares the beloved to a beautiful summer's day but concludes that his beauty, as described in the poem, is more perfect and will last longer.

In fact, suggests Shakespeare, his beauty will stay alive for as long as people continue to read about it in the poem. The fourteen-line sonnet form was nothing new but Shakespeare developed a distinctive version with three four-line verses (called '**quatrains**') plus a pair of rhyming lines (a 'rhyming **couplet**') at the end. Shakespeare uses iambic pentameter (lines of ten syllables with alternating unstressed and then stressed syllables), as well as his typical sonnet rhyme scheme of ABAB, whereby in each quatrain the first and third lines rhyme and the second and fourth lines rhyme.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, And often is his gold complexion dimm'd; And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd; But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st; Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade, When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Dovrei paragonarti a un giorno d'estate? Tu sei ben più raggiante e mite: venti furiosi scuotono le tenere gemme di maggio e il corso dell'estate ha vita troppo breve: talvolta troppo cocente splende l'occhio del cielo e spesso il suo volto d'oro si rabbuia e ogni bello talvolta da beltà si stacca, spoglio dal caso o dal mutevol corso di natura. Ma la tua eterna estate non dovrà sfiorire né perdere possesso del bello che tu hai; né morte vantarsi che vaghi nella sua ombra, perché al tempo contrasterai la tua eternità: finché ci sarà un respiro od occhi per vedere questi versi avranno luce e ti daranno vita.

2. WILLIAM WORDSWORTH:I WANDERED LONELY AS A CLOUD (1804)

One of the Romantic poets, William Wordsworth (1770-1850) focused on ideas of beauty and the sublime, that is, the realm of experience beyond rational thought, in his work. This seemed especially urgent as the British Industrial Revolution (1760-1840) was changing people's traditional relationship with nature. Wordsworth lived in the Lake District in northwest England and the dramatic landscapes of the region inspired many of his

poems. In I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud, Wordsworth describes walking alone in the countryside and suddenly seeing a lot of yellow daffodils growing wild (daffodils grow abundantly in England in spring.) At the end of the poem, Wordsworth reflects on the joy of being able to recall a scene from nature, like that of the daffodils, when he is alone. I wandered lonely as a cloud That floats on high o'er vales and hills, When all at once I saw a crowd, A host, of golden daffodils; [...] For oft, when on my couch I lie In vacant or in pensive mood, They flash upon that inward eye Which is the bliss of solitude Vagavo solitario come una nuvola che fluttua in alto sopra valli e colline, quando all'improvviso vidi una folla, un mare, di giunchiglie dorate; [...] poiché spesso, quando mi sdraiò sul mio divano in uno stato d'animo ozioso o pensieroso, esse appaiono davanti a quell'occhio interiore che è la beatitudine della solitudine

3. ELIZABETH BARRETT-BROWNING: SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE,

Nº 43 (1845-46) By the mid-1840s, Elizabeth Barrett (1806-1861) was one of the leading English poets of the time, popular both in Britain and the United States. She had been born into a wealthy family but was politically engaged, writing poems defending the rights of the poor and oppressed. In 1843, she published a poem called The Cry of the Children about the suffering of children forced to work in factories and mines. And in 1848 she published the poem The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point, protesting against slavery in America, even though her own family had made its money using slave labour. Her long poem Aurora Leigh (1857) is now seen as an early feminist text. In 1845, another well-known English poet, Robert Browning, wrote to Barrett after reading her work and the couple married in secret against the wishes of Barrett's family. In 1850, Elizabeth Barrett-Browning was persuaded by Robert to publish a collection of forty-four love poems called Sonnets from the Portuguese, which she had written in 1845-6. These sonnets, like Shakespeare's, use iambic pentameter. Several of them remain well known today, especially Sonnet n° 43, which is a popular choice for wedding celebrations. Here are the first lines. Notice the ABBA rhyme scheme. How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth

and breadth and height My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight For the ends of being and ideal grace. I love thee to the level of every day's Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light. I love thee freely, as men strive for right; I love thee purely, as they turn from praise. I love thee with the passion put to use In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith. I love thee with a love I seemed to lose With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath, Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death.

Come ti amo? Lascia che te ne conti i modi. Ti amo fino alla profondità, la vastità e l'altezza che l'anima mia può raggiungere allorquando persegue, irraggiungibili agli sguardi, i fini del bene e della grazia ideale. Ti amo al livello delle calme necessità quotidiane, alla luce del sole ed al lume della candela. Ti amo liberamente come gli uomini tendono al giusto, ti amo puramente, come essi rifuggono dalle lusinghe. Ti amo con la passione sperimentata nei miei antichi dolori e con la fede della mia fanciullezza. Ti amo d'un amore che mi sembrò smarrire coi miei santi perduti: ti amo col respiro, i sorrisi, le lacrime di tutta la mia vita e, se Dio vorrà, ti amerò ancor meglio quando sarò morta.

4. WILFRED OWEN: DULCE ET DECORUM EST (1917)

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) was one of the First World War poets. His work describes the horrors of life and death for soldiers in the trenches of France during the 1914-18 war. He depicts in graphic detail the suffering caused by the gas attacks and bombs and mud. Owens himself suffered from shell shock and while trying to recover was inspired by another English war poet, Siegfried Sassoon, to write poetry about his own experience in the trenches. Owen completely rejects any idea of patriotism or glorification of war. In his 1917 poem Anthem for Doomed Youth, he writes about young men dying "like cattle", forgotten by their country. In Dulce et Decorum Est, he starts by describing the intense physical suffering of the soldiers in the trenches and ends by condemning as "the old Lie", the patriotic Latin expression of the poem's title that translates: "How sweet and fitting it is to die for one's country." Owen died in action in France aged twenty-five, exactly a week before Armistice Day. Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots, But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind; Drunk with

fatigue; deaf even to the hoots Of gas-shells dropping softly behind [...] If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,— My friend, you would not tell with such high zest To children ardent for some desperate glory, The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori. Uomini marciavano addormentati. Molti avevano perso i loro stivali ma avanzavano con fatica, calzati di sangue. Tutti andavano avanti zoppi; tutti ciechi; ubriachi di fatica; sordi anche ai sibili di granate stanche, distanziate, che cadevano dietro. [...] se tu potessi sentire, ad ogni sobbalzo, il sangue che arriva come un gargarismo dai polmoni rosi dal gas, ripugnante come un cancro, amaro come il bolo di spregevoli, incurabili piaghe su lingue innocenti, – amico mio, tu non diresti con tale profondo entusiasmo ai figli desiderosi di una qualche disperata gloria, la vecchia Bugia: Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.

5. MAYA ANGELOU: STILL I RISE (1978)

Maya Angelou (1928-2014), born in St. Louis, Missouri, had a varied career that included dance, composing, acting, directing and teaching. She is best known, however, for her poetry, autobiography and activism. She worked with Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. during the American civil rights movement of the 1960s. Her most famous work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), is a memoir of her traumatic childhood. Many of her poems address themes of civil rights, especially for women and Black people, and often express a sense of exuberance and optimism. Her poem *Phenomenal Woman* (1978), which has the refrain “I’m a woman/ Phenomenally./ Phenomenal woman,/That’s me...” has a celebratory tone. Here are the first and last lines of Angelou’s poem *Still I Rise*, about the experience of being Black in America. It was often quoted after the election of Barack Obama as US president in 2008. You may write me down in history With your bitter, twisted lies, You may trod me in the very dirt But still, like dust, I’ll rise [...] Leaving behind nights of terror and fear I rise Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear I rise Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream and the hope of the slave. I rise I rise I rise. Puoi svalutarmi nella storia Con le tue amare, contorte bugie, Puoi calpestarmi nella più fonda

sporcizia Ma ancora, come la polvere, mi solleverò [...] Lasciando alle spalle
notti di terrore e paura Io mi sollevo In un nuovo giorno che è
meravigliosamente limpido Io mi sollevo Portando i doni che i miei antenati
hanno dato, Io sono il sogno e la speranza dello schiavo. Io mi sollevo Io mi
sollevo Io mi sollevo

Glossary

- **stressed** = accentato
- **whereby** = per cui, per mezzo del quale
- **Notice** = notare
- **depicts** = rappresentare
- **Anthem** = inno
- **cattle** = bestiame
- **quoted** = citare
- **drawn on** = attingere
- **daffodils** = narcisi gialli
- **politically engaged** = politicamente coinvolta
- **shell shock** = sindrome da stress post-traumatico
- **Doomed** = condannati
- **Fair Youth** = bel giovane
- **couplet** = coppia di versi in rima
- **quatrains** = quartina
- **unstressed** = non accentato
- **Wandered** = vagare
- **trenches** = trincee
- **mud** = fango
- **refrain** = ritornello
- **struggle** = lotta
- **up-to-date** = aggiornare
- **stirred** = agitare
- **Rise** = alzarsi