20 Modernist Poets, Their Poems, and Their Poetry Books

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**Modernist Poets And Poetry - Introduction**

Modernism in English poetry it could be argued began with the publication of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 in the United States of America. This unusual book, decades in the making, announced a freewheeling poet to the western literary world. Poetry would never be the same again.

The book caused an outrage amongst the authorities because it dealt with personal and taboo subjects such as sex, war and the physical body. Many of the poems were in free verse. The flowery, rhyming poems of the Victorians were suddenly out of fashion.

*Leaves of Grass* undoubtedly opened the door for more adventurous American poets to experiment with language and look for fresh forms, leaving behind the more traditional past, dominated mostly by English poets such as Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning, each a pioneer of sorts.

D.H. Lawrence in his Classical Studies of American Literature reviewed Whitman's book later on in his life. He wrote:

*'Whitman,the great poet, has meant so much to me. Whitman, the one man breaking a way ahead. Whitman, the one pioneer. And only Whitman. No English pioneers, no French.'*

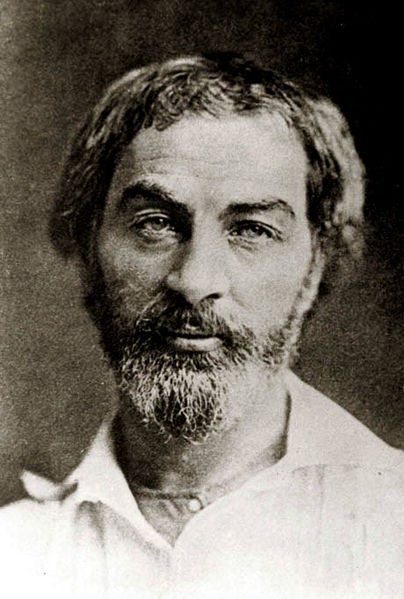
This article is a guide to what I consider to be 20 of the most important and influential modernist poetry books. I shall give the author, title, date of publication, the significant poems and the reasons why I think it deserves to be amongst the top 20.

By doing this I hope you'll be able to learn the names of poets you've not come across before and, in turn, get to know a little about their work, perhaps for the first time.

*Come, said my Soul,*

*Such verses for my Body let us write, (for we are one,)*

— Walt Whitman



*Walt Whitman in 1854/55* | Source

**1. Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman**

**Poet**: Walt Whitman

**Date Published** : June 1855

**Significant Poems**: Song of Myself, I Sing The Body Electric, There Was A Child Went Forth.

Leaves of Grass, with its long and audacious preface written by Whitman, is the single most influential poetry book of the modern era. Whitman's power, originality and inclusiveness changed the way we look at the world and ourselves within it.

His poems are a deep exploration of the emerging American self yet they embrace the universal. Whitman's observations, both mundane and spiritual, reflected the growing strength and willpower of a nation.

*'Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes...*' he wrote.

Here is a man alive to all that's going on around him. No subject is beyond his poetic reach, no feelings neglected. From the taboo to the cutting edge, Whitman forces on with his energised narrative.

*'The known universe has one complete lover and that is the greatest poet...'*

The fresh, loose structures of his poems allowed readers new freedom. There were no obvious rhymes or plodding iambic pentameters, no genteel verse. Instead, Whitman offered straggling sentences of 20 words, driven by deep breaths. These sat alongside prose-like creations, inspired perhaps by certain books from the bible's old testament.

Whitman thought of himself as a cosmos, a phenomenon. His poems can sometimes overwhelm the reader but they never fail to rouse feeling and thought. Alone, he built the new poetic road as he forged ahead.



*A young Robert Frost around 1915.* | Source

**2. North of Boston by Robert Frost**

**Poet** : Robert Frost

**Date Published**: 1914

**Significant Poems**: Mending Wall, The Death of the Hired Man, After Apple Picking,Home Burial, The Wood Pile.

Robert Frost's second collection confirmed him as a poet of some note, not simply an observer of rural goings on. He developed his longer narrative poems, used formidable blank verse and great technical skill to bring what some said 'a new poetic sound to solitude.'

These are the opening lines from Mending Wall:

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,*

*That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it.*

*And spills the upper boulders in the sun;*

*And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.*

He went on to become America's most respected poet, writing some classic poems that you'll find in all the good anthologies,including The Road Not Taken, Birches,Acquainted With The Night.



*Ezra Pound* | Source

**3. Lustra**

**Poet**: Ezra Pound

**Date Published** : 1916/17

**Significant Poems**: In a Station of the Metro, The River Merchant's Wife, A Pact, The Faun.

Although Ezra Pound is considered one of the most important prime movers in what became known as modernism, his poetic output was erratic. The publication of Lustra helped define the Imagist movement, a break away from the sweet and safe verse of the traditionalists. Pound's short concise poems hold to his idea of crisp, clear language carrying intense images drawn from society.

*'The apparition of these faces in the crowd;*

*Petals on a wet, black bough.*'

In A Station of the Metro

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*William Butler Yeats* | Source

**4. The Wild Swans at Coole**

Poet: William Butler Yeats

Date Published: 1919

Significant Poems: The Wild Swans at Coole, An Irish Airman Foresees His Death, Memory, Two Songs of a Fool.

Yeats is best known for his romantic poem 'Lake Isle of Innisfree' but he called that 'full of old mythology,' from 'The Celtic Twilight.' The Wild Swans at Coole broke new ground for the Irish writer and dramatist as he sought to integrate a natural symbolism with lyrical beauty.

You can also sense his growing fears for civilisation and the need for a spiritual renaissance.

Impeccable rhythm and form are a hallmark of his poetry but his themes and handling of history also impress. Known for his esoteric interests Yeats combined philosophy and the natural world to create poems that ignite the imagination and feed the spirit.

*'But now they drift on the still water,*

*Mysterious, beautiful;*

*Among what rushes will they build,*

*By what lake's edge or pool*

*Delight men's eyes when I awake some day*

*To find they have flown away?'*

The Wild Swans at Coole

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*T.S.Eliot* | Source

**5. The Waste Land**

Poet: T.S.Eliot

Date Published: December 1922

Significant Poems: The Waste Land

This long poem by American born but British based poet Eliot was dedicated to Ezra Pound, who championed young writers and their modern innovations of the time. The Waste Land gives a sense of confusion and desolation, many seeing it as a kind of barometer of the cultural and social crises arising after the First World War. It's not an easy read. Eliot uses mythological and literary figures throughout the five parts of the poem and even recommends the reader to study two books before attempting to understand the poem as a whole!

Reading through it is a bit like experiencing a dream or a nightmare. There are visionary elements, biblical and Hindu references, London pub scenes, Italian, French, Latin refrains, German quotes and religious undertones. The free verse lengthens and narrows, twists and turns, like a river. The Waste Land is a journey into the human soul, but be sure to take your study books with you!

*April is the cruellest month,breeding*

*Lilacs out of the dead land,mixing*

*Memory and desire, stirring*

*Dull roots with spring rain.*

The Waste Land

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*Wallace Stevens* | Source

**6. Harmonium**

Poet: Wallace Stevens

Date Published: 1923

Significant Poems: [The Emperor of Ice Cream](https://owlcation.com/humanities/Analysis-of-poem-The-Emperor-of-Ice-Cream-by-Wallace-Stevens), Earthy Anecdote, Anecdote of the Jar, Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.

Philosophical, abstract, difficult, enigmatic - Harmonium proved a challenge for critics and readers alike but there's no doubting that the 72 poems in the book are as impressive a debut as you're likely to find - Stevens was 44 years old when it was published. An insurance lawyer all of his life, he wrote poems on little slips of paper at work after thinking them up on his routine walks. He believed the imagination working through poetry 'gives to life the supreme fiction,' and he sought to replace the gods of religion with poetical images and ideas.

When I read some of his Harmonium poems I'm thrilled with the language and exotic sentences. They journey to places no other poetry even attempts, whether I come back understanding them is a different matter!

*I do not know which to prefer,*

*The beauty of inflections*

*Or the beauty of innuendoes,*

*The blackbird whistling*

*Or just after.*

from Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

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*William Carlos Williams* | Source

**7. Spring And All**

Poet: William Carlos Williams

Date Published: 1923

Significant Poems: The Red Wheelbarrow, At The Ball Game, The Right of Way.

In complete contrast to Wallace Stevens, Williams took real life as his starting point and used local idioms and simple open ended forms to express himself.

'Anything is good material for poetry,' he said, and from seemingly trivial objects created astoundingly memorable poems. Spring And All is light yet profound, local and universal, full of what Ezra Pound called 'volts, jerks,sulks,baulks,outblurts and jump-overs...'.

*The crowd at the ball game*

*is moved uniformly*

*by a spirit of uselessness*

*which delights them -*

*all the exciting detail*

*of the chase*

*and the escape, the error*

*the flash of genius* -

At The Ball Game

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*E.E.Cummings* | Source

**8. Tulips and Chimneys**

Poet: E.E.Cummings

Date Published: 1923

Significant Poems: Puella Mea (My Girl),The Gladdest Thing, All In Green Went My Love Riding.

Poetry that is playful, romantic and unusual in form are the hallmarks of E.E.Cummings. Early on in his career he broke with traditions of rhyme and metre to compose comical, quirky poems that deal with love, family and America. Reading some of his work is tricky because he forces you to rethink meanings and negotiate syntax. Nearly all of his poems require slow reading initially but once grasped reveal familiar themes - expressed with unorthodox punctuation and quaint language.

*you shall above all things be glad and young*

*For if you're young, whatever life you wear*

*it will become you;and if you are glad*

*whatever's living will yourself become.*

you shall above all things be glad and young.

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*Marianne Moore* | Source

**9. Observations**

Poet: Marianne Moore

Published: 1924

Significant Poems: An Octopus, Marriage, Poetry, To A Snail.

Marianne Moore's poems often take unusual form. Long sentences are broken into orderly patterns yet the language is sophisticated, punctuation precise, and the end result is often a magnificent view of the poem, after a long,meandering climb!

Animals feature strongly in her poems, artistically drawn and observed - the chameleon, fish, armadillo for example - and are some of the best you'll come across. Her work is thoughtful, with a peculiar wisdom present.

*I,too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this*

*fiddle.*

*Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in*

*it after all, a place for the genuine.*

Poetry

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*Langston Hughes 1902-67* | Source

**10. The Weary Blues**

Poet: Langston Hughes

Date Published: 1926

Significant Poems: The Weary Blues, Dream Variations, The Negro Speaks of Rivers, Shadows In The Sun.

Langston Hughes drew on jazz, the blues and ordinary speech to reflect the life of 'the low down folks, the so called common element....' meaning the poor black population. His poetry is full of rich rhyme and rhythm but he also used free verse narratives effectively. Some of his more controversial work was disliked by many for years, including blacks, but he is now seen as a poet who gave a voice to an oppressed people. The Weary Blues is a distinctive and powerful book.

*I've known rivers:*

*I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of*

*human blood in human veins.*

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

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*Dylan Thomas* | Source

**11. 18 Poems**

Poet: Dylan Thomas

Date Published: December 1934

Significant Poems: Especially When The October Wind, Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines, The Force That Through The Green Fuse.

Dylan Thomas had written many of his most famous poems before he was twenty years of age, a remarkable achievement. Inspired by William Blake and the romantic poets he was also heavily influenced by the Bible's old testament.

Combining tight metre, complex rhymes and rich texture the themes of time, love, childhood experiences, death and Nature are expressed. Perhaps no other poet in the modern era has created such strong imagery through craft and instinctive diction.

*'The lips of time leech to the fountain head;*

*Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood*

*Shall calm her sores.*

*And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind*

*How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.'*

The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives The Flower

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*W.H.Auden* | Source

**12. Another Time**

Poet: W.H. Auden

Date Published: 1940

Significant Poems: Refugee Blues, Musee des Beaux Arts, Funeral Blues, The Unknown Citizen, September 1, 1939.

Another Time was published during World War II, a time of enormous tension and disruption. Auden had already experienced the horrors of war when observing the civil war in Spain in 1936 and some of his poems in this volume reflect the anxiety and turmoil caused by such actions. Reaction to political change and the human condition are major themes for Auden, allowing him to use his extensive knowledge and great compassion to create formal poems that 'maintain the sacredness of language.'

*'All I have is a voice*

*To undo the folded lie......*

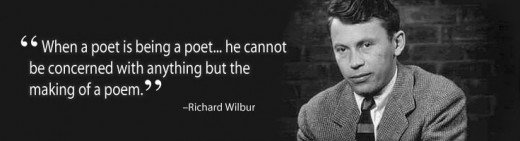
*We must love one another or die.'*

September 1, 1939

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Richard Wilbur



*Richard Wilbur* | Source

**13. The Beautiful Changes**

Poet: Richard Wilbur

Date Published: 1947

Significant Poems: Snow In Alsace, The Beautiful Changes, Potato, Sun and Air, Sunlight Is Imagination.

Published just after World war II had finished this volume reflects Wilbur's optimism in the beauty of things.

'I feel that the universe is full of glorious energy,' he said. His poetry is formal, graceful and understated. Rhyme and steady metre are the bedrock on which his quietly powerful language is built. When I read Richard Wilbur's poems I feel a true craftsman has been at work; he's unspectacular but his standards are so high technically you can forgive his quaintness.

*'The snow came down last night like moths*

*Burned on the moon;it fell till dawn,*

*Covered the town with simple cloths.'*

First Snow in Alsace

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*Allen Ginsberg with Bob Dylan.* | Source

**14. Howl**

Poet: Allen Ginsberg

Date Published: November 1956

Significant Poems: Howl, A Supermarket in California, Sunflower Sutra, America.

'Hold back the edges of your gowns, ladies, we are going through hell.' So wrote none other than William Carlos Williams in the preface to Howl. Ginsberg's radical poetry both shocked and inspired. Howl was impounded for a time under obscenity laws but popular demand soon prevailed and the fresh, exciting material could be read without fear of being arrested.

Howl broke new ground and helped 'widen consciousness',using sharp vernacular language, long rambling lines and spiritualised content to shake up the poetical world. Friends with Jack [Kerouac](https://owlcation.com/humanities/How-To-Understand-Kerouacs-On-The-Road), Ginsberg became known as The Godfather of the Beats.

*'What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I*

*walked down the sidestreets under the trees with a headache self-*

*conscious looking at the full moon.*'

A Supermarket in California

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*John Ashbery* | Source

**15. Some Trees**

Poet: John Ashbery

Date Published: 1956

Significant Poems: Some Trees, The Painter, Grand Abacus.

Deceptive, elusive, ironic and unfathomable, Ashbery's poems trick and tease us with their clever use of casual language and comic effect. Yet his poems are not easy or light. Anything but.

'My poetry is disjunct, but then so is life,' he once said. It's true, some of his poetry is pure expressionist, you just have to enjoy the colours and textures of the words as they flow, or not, then return at a later date to find any meaning! Others 'work' because the narrative is strong and there's a sort of dialogue of souls in action - he experiments with voices and ideas, never quite staying put long enough to pin down.

*'These are amazing: each*

*Joining a neighbor, as though speech*

*Were a still performance.'*

Some Trees

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*Ted Hughes in 1993* | Source

**16. The Hawk in the Rain**

Poet: Ted Hughes

Date Published: 1957

Significant Poems: The Hawk In The Rain, Jaguar, Wind, The Horses,The Thought-Fox, Six Young Men.

Nature and the deep emotional relationship humans have with it are strong themes in the poetry of Hughes. He is a sensitive hunter, relishing the instincts of his quarry yet observing them with powerful perception, like no other poet has in modern times.

'What excites my imagination is the war between vitality and death,' admitted Hughes. This conflict is worked out again and again in much of his best work, gritty and assertive language carried along in some excellent free verse, as well as more formal rhymed pieces. Reading Hughes brings you into contact with primal mythological energies - he gets inside the animal as totem, his gift as an intuitive shaman of words.

*'I climbed through woods in the hour-before-dawn dark.*

*Evil air, a frost-making stillness,*

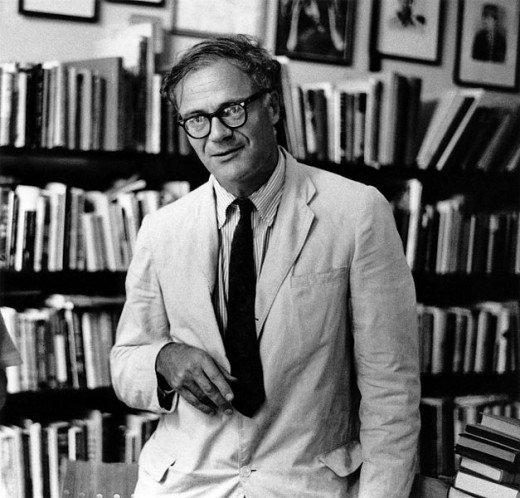
*Not a leaf, not a bird -*

*A world cast in frost. I came out above the wood*

*Where my breath left torturous statues in the iron light.'*

The Horses

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*Robert Lowell* | Source

**17. Life Studies**

Poet: Robert Lowell

Date Published: 1959

Significant Poems: Waking In The Blue, Skunk Hour, Man and Wife, Grandparents.

Robert Lowell with his Life Studies intensified the idea that poetry could be both confessional and tolerable for the reader. The danger was that with such dark forces within him Lowell might implode and overdo things. But, with controlled free verse structures and crisp language he created poems that stick in the memory and resonate within this stress inducing age.

Mental illness, local observation, family and the human condition are the subject themes - Lowell confronts, explores and reveals. Some disliked his confessions, others lapped them up and couldn't get enough. His work influenced both Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton.

*'One dark night,*

*my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull;*

*I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,*

*they lay together, hull to hull,*

*where the graveyard shelves on the town.......*

*My mind's not right.'*

Skunk Hour

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*Sylvia Plath* | Source

**18. Colossus**

Poet: Sylvia Plath

Date Published: October 1960

Significant Poems: The Stones, Suicide Off Egg Rock, Point Shirley, Blue Moles, Mushrooms.

Colossus proved to be the only book that Sylvia Plath would see published in her lifetime and whilst not as intensely confessional as her two later volumes,[Ariel](https://owlcation.com/humanities/Analysis-of-poem-The-Night-Dances-by-Sylvia-Plath) and Winter Trees, it contained enough inventive material to persuade people that here was no ordinary talent.

The natural world features heavily throughout, Plath's energetic language formed into unorthodox lines that create tension and disturbance for the reader. As always there are great internal rhymes and rhythms in the mix, reflecting the poet's own unsettling energy.

*'What I want back is what I was*

*before the bed, before the knife,*

*Before the brooch-pin and the salve*

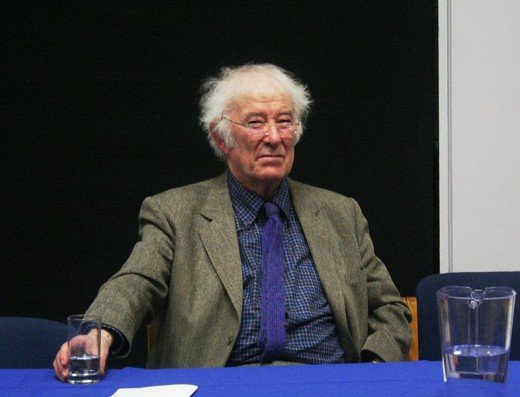
*Fixed me in this parenthesis;*

*Horse fluent in the wind,*

*a place, a time gone out of mind.'*

The Eye-Mote

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*Seamus Heaney in 2009, Dublin, Ireland.* | Source

**19. Death of a Naturalist**

Poet: Seamus Heaney

Date Published: 1966

Significant Poems: Death of a Naturalist, [Digging](https://owlcation.com/academia/How-To-Analyse-A-Poem-For-Exams-Or-Pleasure), Mid-Term Break, Blackberry-Picking.

Seamus Heaney's poetry explores the life and times of his homeland, Ireland, and concentrates on historical and cultural elements. He makes the local connection through family observations and deep reflection on past troubled times. With immaculate structures, precise language and rich syntax, poems such as Digging bring home the fact that with Heaney, simple down to earth order is king. There is no disguise, no chicanery.

Love, mythology, blood ties, death - all are dealt with in a measured, humane and even nostalgic way. Death of a Naturalist brought Seamus Heaney into the lives of many and he went on to become the best loved of English speaking poets before his death in 2013.

*'The cold smell of potatoe mould, the squelch and slap*

*Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge*

*Through living roots awaken in my head.*

*But I've no spade to follow men like them.*

*Between my finger and my thumb*

*The squat pen rests.*

*I'll dig with it.'*

Digging

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*Rita Dove.* | Source

**20. The Yellow House on the Corner**

Poet: Rita Dove

Date Published: !980

Significant Poems: The Yellow House on the Corner, The Bird Frau, Notes From A Tunisian Journal, The Secret Garden, Teach Us To Number Our Days.

Pullitzer prize winner Rita Dove's poetry has 'an awkward loveliness' about it, it strives for musicality. Her subject matter ranges from family, adolescence, sexuality and history in this her first book. Slave narratives reflect her interest in the plight of the oppressed, and the title poem suggests that much can be learned from our domestic lives, the mundane being transformed through a magical use of language.

'A confrontation with poetry should provoke a journey into yourself,' says Rita Dove. Her poetry is sensual, contradictory, rich in symbolism and always exploring.

*'This nutmeg stick of a boy in loose trousers!*

*Little coffee pots in the coals, a mint on the tongue.*

*The camels stand in all their vague beauty -*

*at night they fold up like pale accordions.*

*All the hedges are singing with yellow birds!*

*A boy runs by with lemons in his hands.*

*Food's perfume, breath is nourishment.*

*The stars crumble, salt above eucalyptus fields.'*

Notes from a Tunisian Journal

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