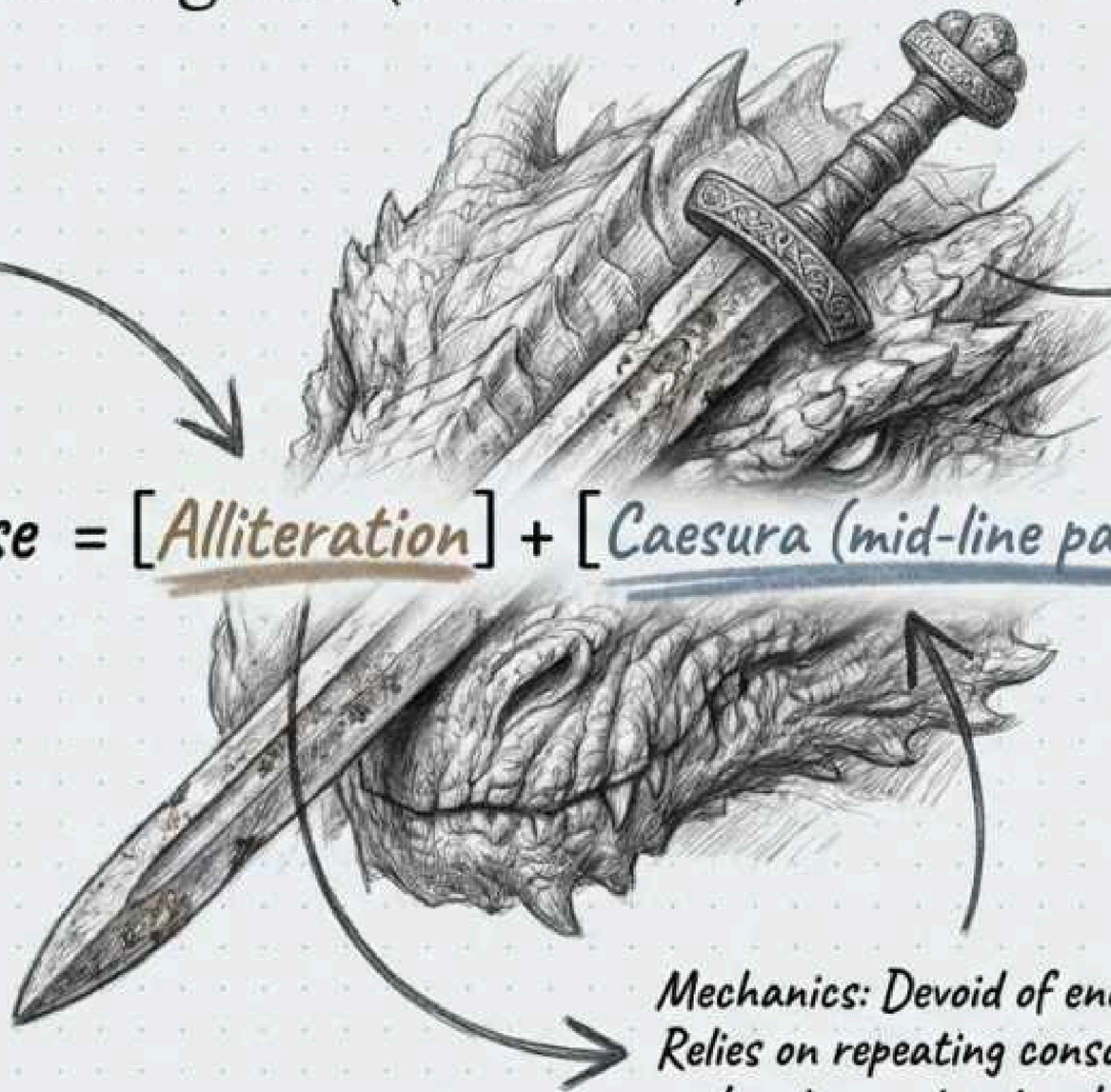
The Origins: Old English (Pre-1100)

Language Roots:
Closer to German than to modern English.



The Masterpiece:
Beowulf — An epic of a hero's battle against monsters and a dragon.

Old English Verse = [Alliteration] + [Caesura (mid-line pause)] – [Rhyme]

Mechanics: Devoid of end-rhyme.
Relies on repeating consonant sounds and a strong structural pause.

Middle English & The French Influence (1066 – Late 14th C.)

¶ 5.2





Old English Foundation + (**French + Italian Rhyme & Metre**) ⇒ **Chaucerian Poetry**

End Rhyme

iambic pentameter

hendecasyllabic influence

*Synthesis of Form & Vernacular

The Catalyst







Norman Conquest (1066) fundamentally transformed the language via French influence.

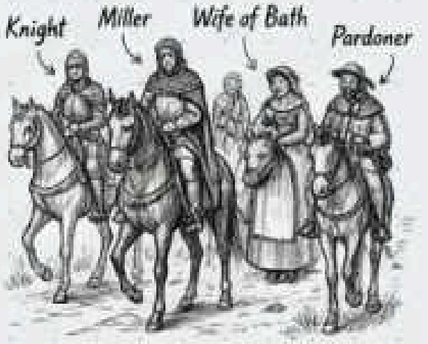
The Key Figure



Geoffrey Chaucer, the "father of English poetry", writing in the late 14th century.

The Masterwork

The Canterbury Tales: A vivid cross-section of medieval society told by diverse pilgrims.



The Renaissance Flowering (16th Century)

¶ 5.3

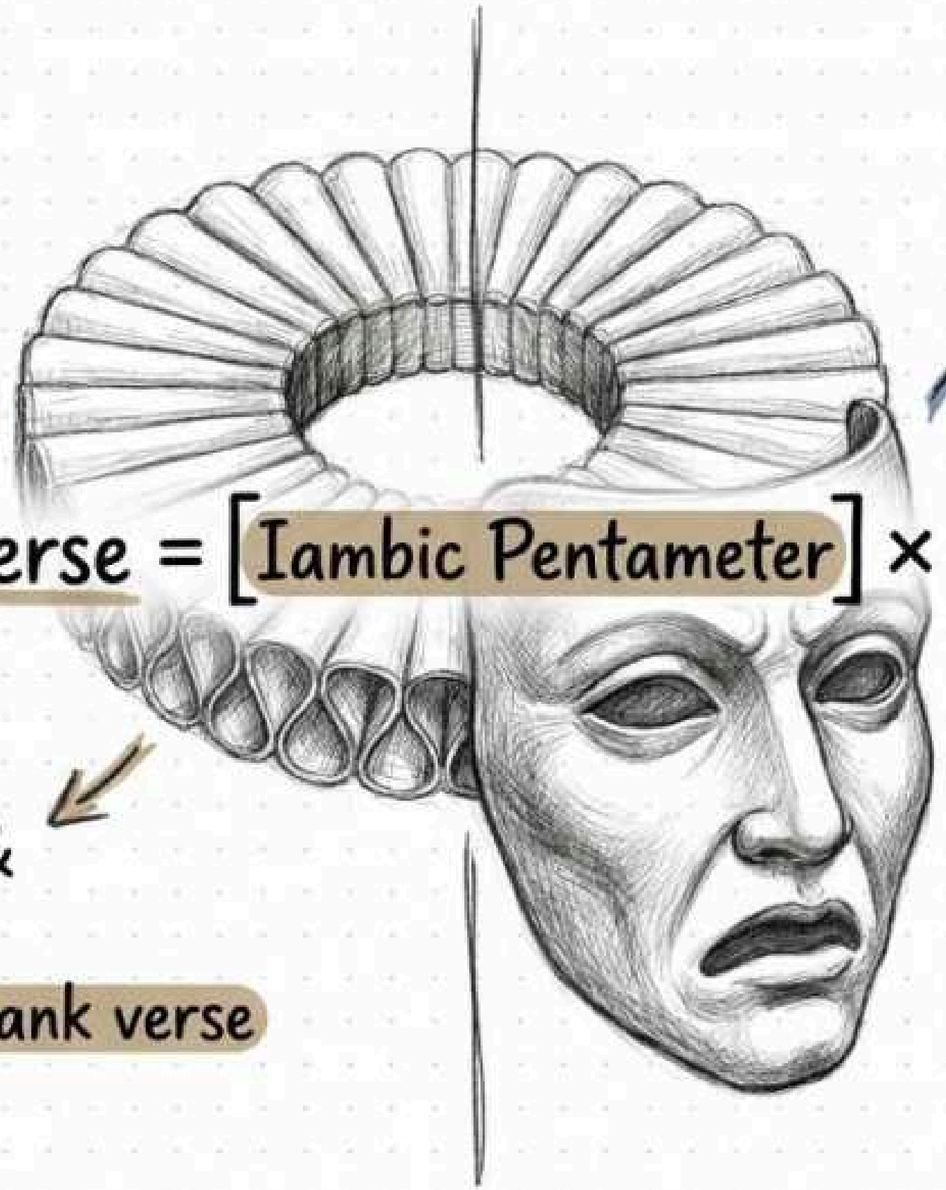
Epic Allegory

- Edmund Spenser: **The Faerie Queene**

Defense & Sonnets

- Sir Philip Sidney: **Sonnets** and formal **defence of poetry**

Blank Verse = [Iambic Pentameter] × O(Rhyme)



The Stage

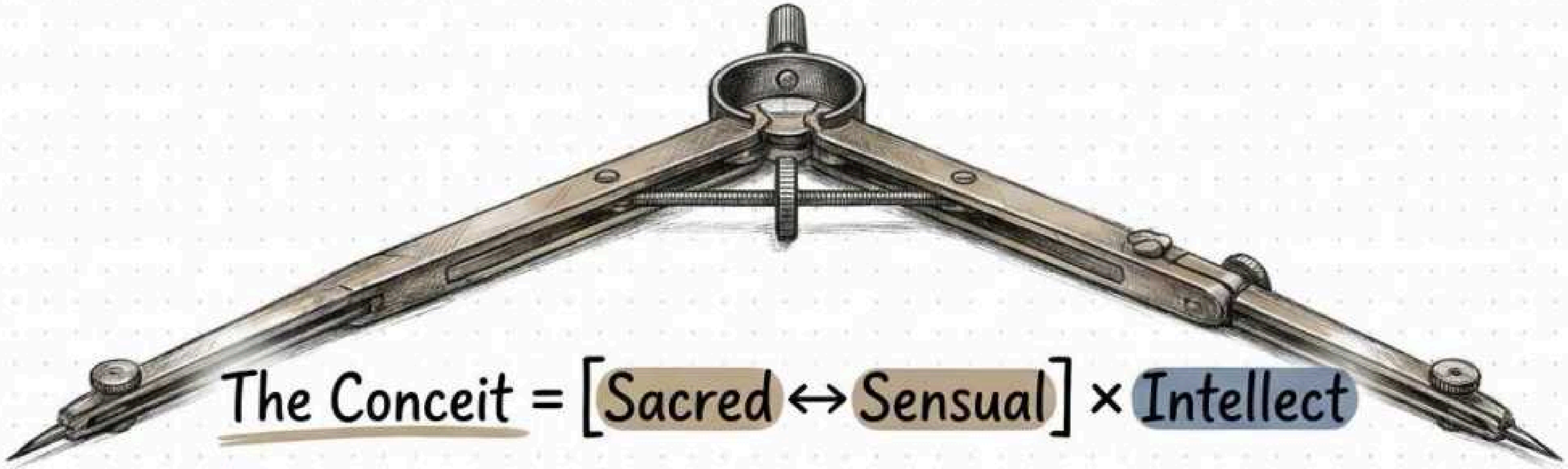
Christopher Marlowe & **William Shakespeare**: Pioneered **unrhymed blank verse** for the theater

The Summit

Shakespeare's **plays and sonnets** remain the **absolute peak** of English poetry

The Metaphysical Poets (Early 17th Century)

¶ 5.4



The Conceit = [Sacred ↔ Sensual] × Intellect

Early 17th Century:

John Donne, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell construct intellectual, witty poems with sudden dialectic shifts.

18th Century:

Given the label pejoratively by Samuel Johnson (who strongly disapproved).

20th Century:

Championed and resurrected by T.S. Eliot.

John Milton & The Epic Vision (1667)

¶ 5.5

Context of Creation

Dictated entirely while blind; Milton previously served in Oliver Cromwell's government.

The Form

Published in 1667, a grand epic written purely in blank verse.



$$\text{Paradise Lost} = \frac{(\text{Adam \& Eve's Fall} + \text{Satan's Rebellion})}{(\text{Justifying the ways of God to men})}$$

The Legacy

A work of enduring grandeur featuring a deeply compelling Satan, fascinating readers ever since.

The Augustan Age (Late 17th & 18th Centuries)

¶ 5.6



Augustan Ideal =
+ *Reason*
+ *Order*
+ *Wit*

Heroic Couplet =
(Iambic Pentameter)$_2$

→ **The Masters**

John Dryden & Alexander Pope (perfectors of the rhyming heroic couplet).

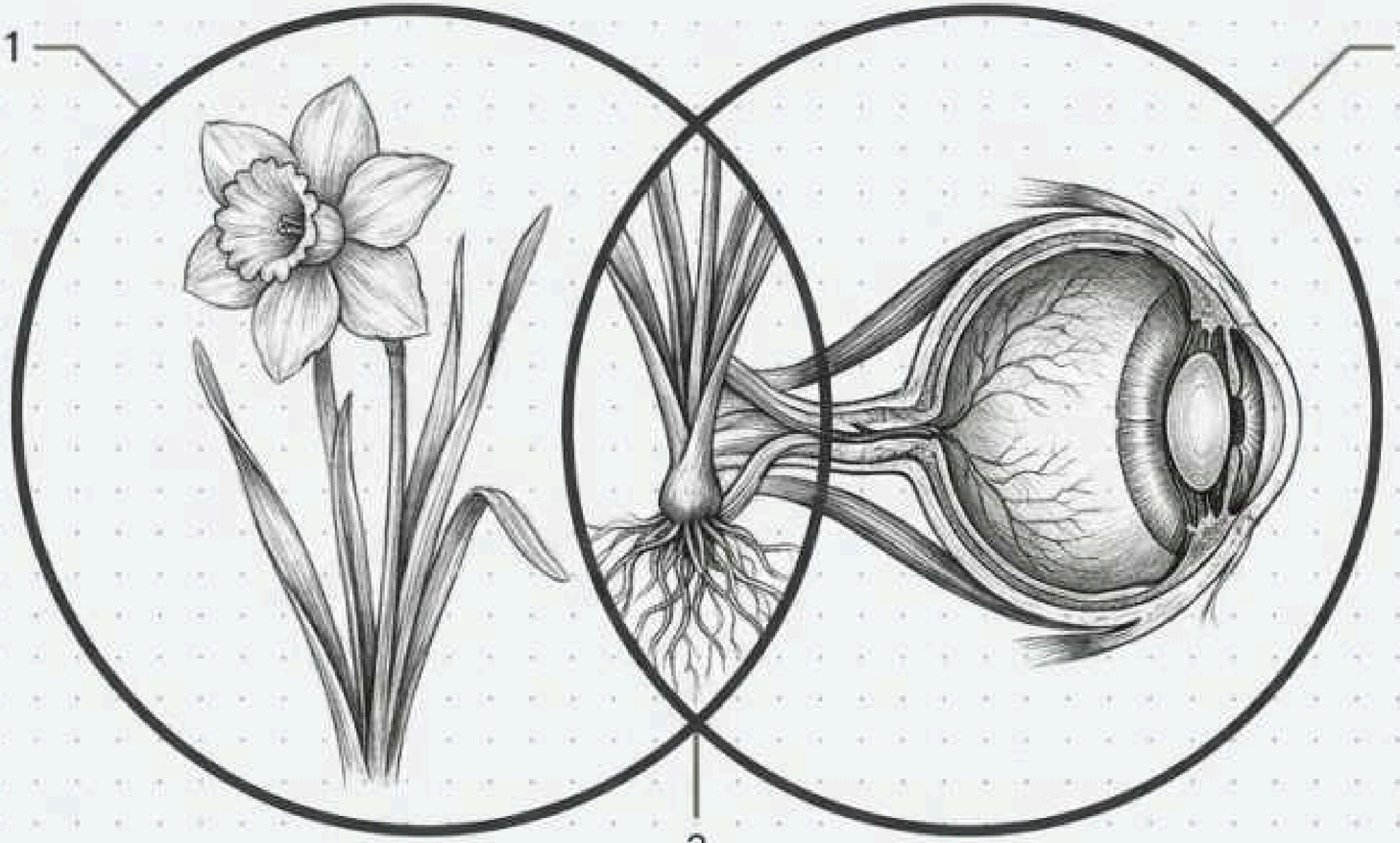
→ **Masterworks (Pope)**

- *The Rape of the Lock* (1712): A mock-epic treating a trivial quarrel over a stolen lock of hair with Homeric grandeur.
- *Essay on Criticism*: Foundational text that contributed many proverbs to the English language.

First Generation Romantics (1798)

Lyrical Ballads (1798) = Real Language$^{\text{Ordinary Life}}$ *× Nature*$^{\text{Emotion}}$

The Catalyst. 1
Publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge, aiming to use the "real language of men."

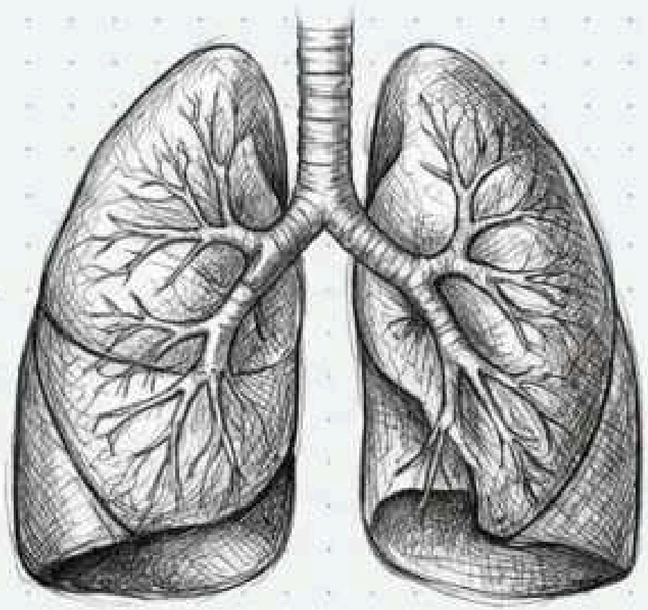


2 **Core Values.**
A premium on imagination, emotion, nature, and the individual.

3
The Precursor
William Blake: *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, synthesizing poetry with intricate copperplate engravings.

Second Generation Romantics

Poets = Unacknowledged Legislators(World)





Lord Byron

Known equally for his satirical epic *Don Juan* and his highly scandalous life.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

A radical idealist asserting the supreme legislative power of poetic art.

John Keats

Died tragically of tuberculosis at age 25 (1821); left behind odes that stand among the finest in the English language.

The Victorians (1837–1901)

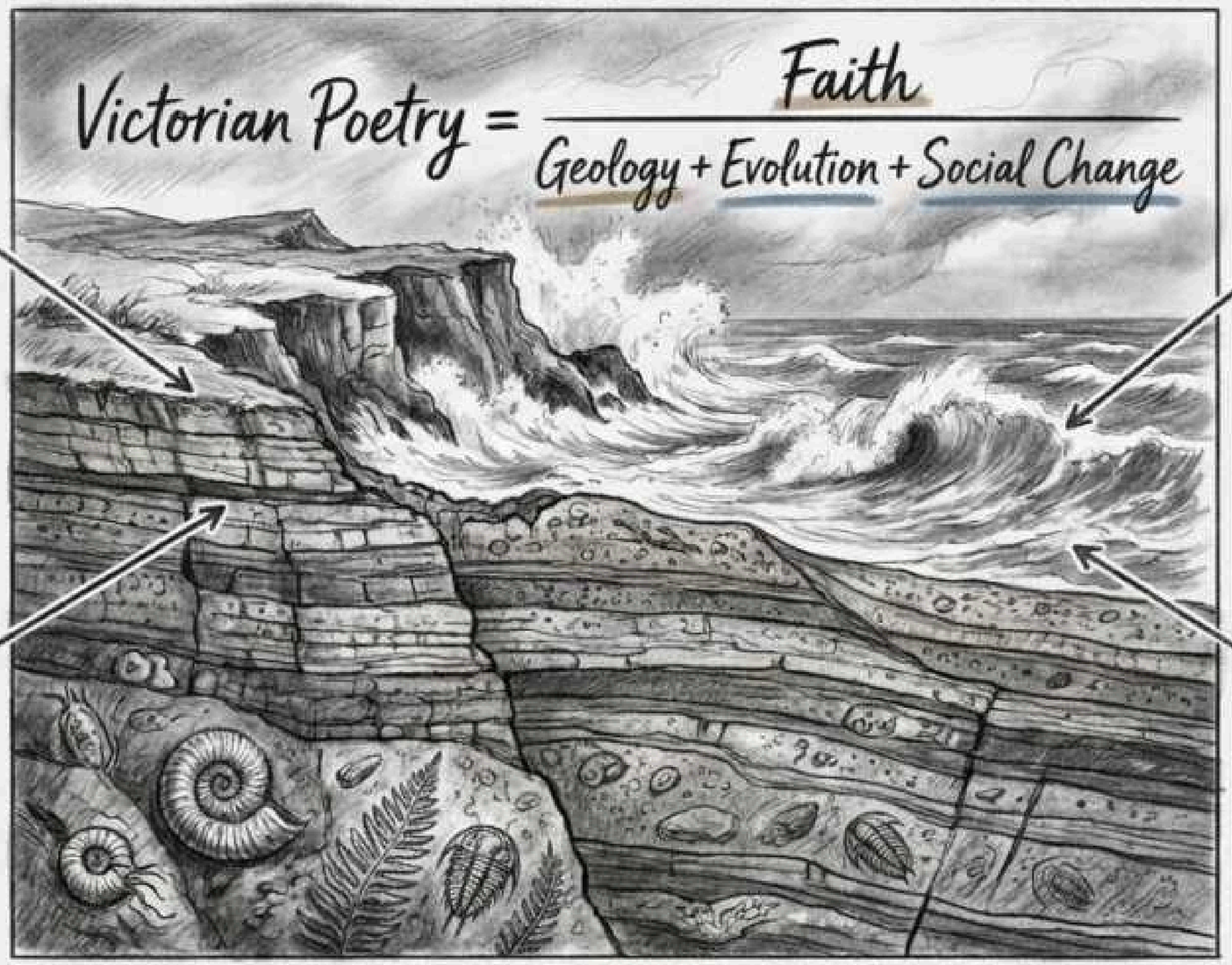
¶ 5.9



Alfred Tennyson:
Poet Laureate.
Wrote *In Memoriam* to channel grief and religious doubt amid scientific discovery.



Robert Browning:
Perfected the dramatic monologue.





Christina Rossetti:
Author of the haunting *Goblin Market*.



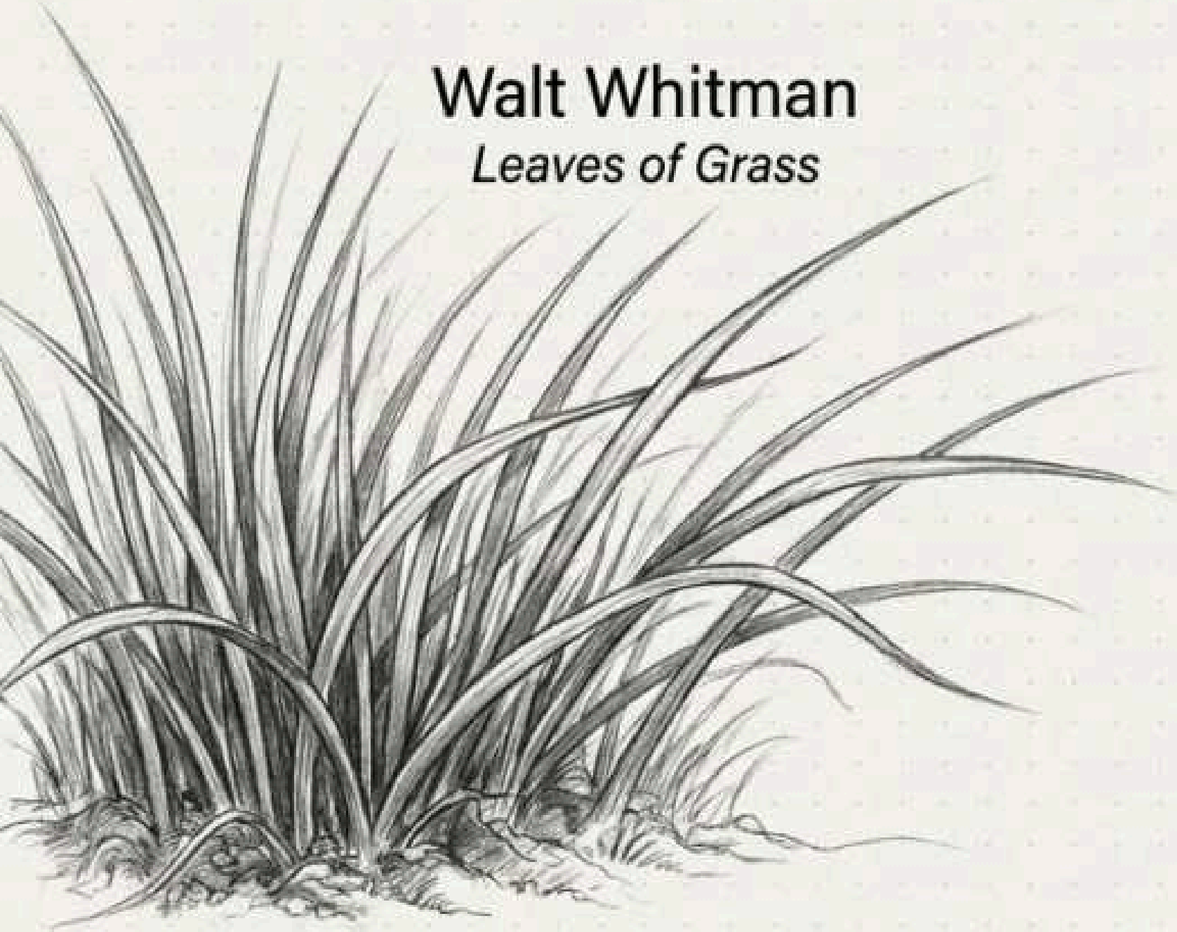
Matthew Arnold:
Wrote *Dover Beach*, charting the "withdrawing sea of faith."

Twin Founders of American Poetry (19th Century)

$$\text{American Poetics} = \sum(\text{Whitman}_{\text{Expansion}}) + \sum(\text{Dickinson}_{\text{Compression}})$$

Walt Whitman

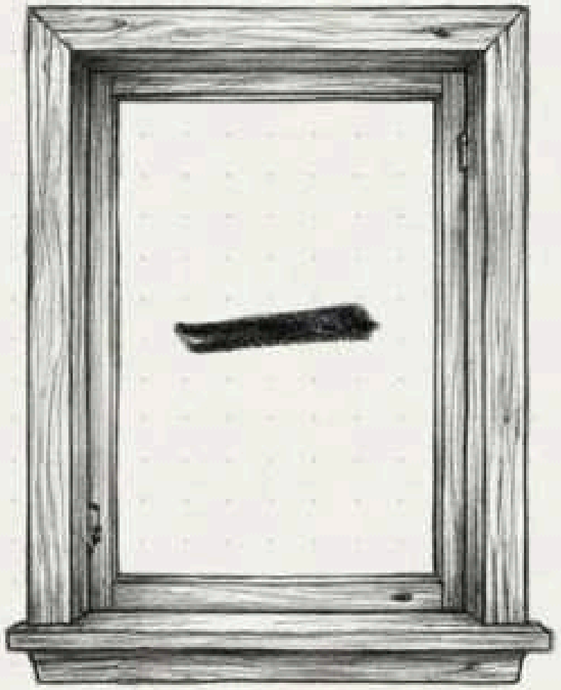
Leaves of Grass



Sprawling free verse celebrating democracy, the physical body, and the expansive self.

Emily Dickinson

Amherst Recluse

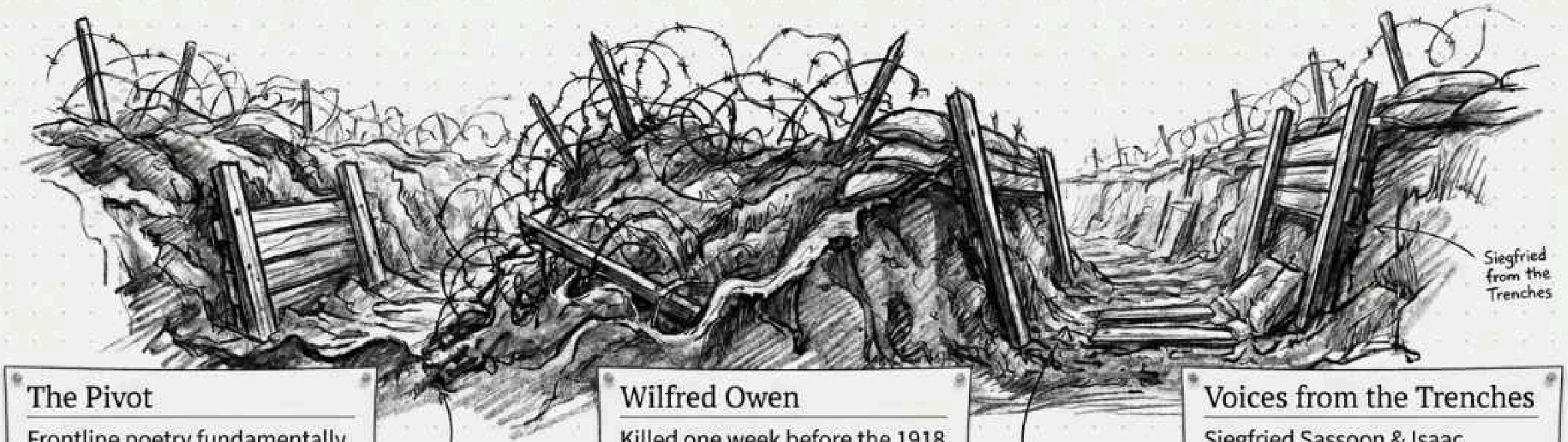


Nearly 1,800 intensely compressed, dash-filled poems; largely unpublished in her lifetime.

The First World War (1914–1918)

¶ 5.11

Reality(Gas Attacks + Waste of Youth) ≠ "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" (The Old Lie)



The Pivot

Frontline poetry fundamentally and permanently altered how war is historically remembered.

Wilfred Owen

Killed one week before the 1918 armistice. His poetry explicitly rejected the romanticization of dying for one's country.

Voices from the Trenches

Siegfried Sassoon & Isaac Rosenberg delivered unflinching accounts of frontline realities.

Modernism (1910–1940)

The Waste Land (1922) = ∫(Myth + Quotation + Voices) → Spiritually Broken World

T.S. Eliot:
Collaged fragments to reflect modern spiritual ruin.



W.B. Yeats:
Transitioned from Irish myth to stark, visionary political poetry.





Ezra Pound:
The mandate to "Make it new." A fundamental rupture with tradition.



William Carlos Williams:
Focused tightly on plain, distinctly American objects.



The Harlem Renaissance (1920s)

¶ 5.13

Black Identity + Resistance = (Jazz Rhythm + Blues Form) × Poetic Voice



The Impact

Brought African American poets to national prominence, deeply exploring Black life, identity, and resistance.

Langston Hughes

Fused poetry with jazz and blues rhythms. Works like "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" connect Black experience to ancient history.

Key Contemporaries

Claude McKay & Countee Cullen further established this vital literary foundation.

Post-1945 Diversification

Contemporary Era = Confessional + Beat + Observation + Global Perspectives

Confessional

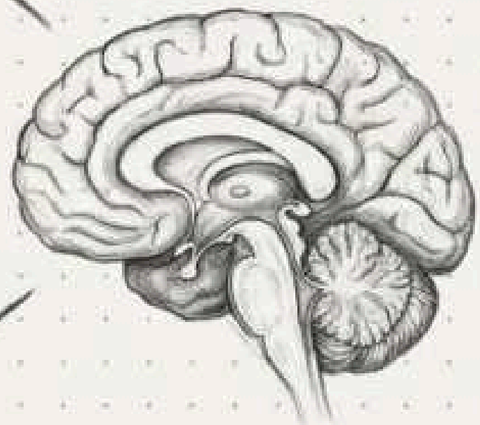
Lowell, Plath, Sexton. Unflinching looks at mental illness and family trauma.



The Beats

Allen Ginsberg (author of the seminal poem "Howl").







Exact Observation

Elizabeth Bishop prized meticulous, exact observation of the external world.



Global/Post-Colonial



Seamus Heaney (Ireland) and Derek Walcott (Caribbean); both Nobel Laureates.

Poetry Today (The Present)

$$\text{Public Power} = (\text{Many Englishes})^{(\text{Hip-Hop} + \text{Social Media} + \text{Spoken Word})}$$



Performance & Venues

- Poetry thrives in live performance, filling venues with spoken word and slam poetry.



Mass Distribution

- Hip-hop brings complex rhyme/rhythm to vast audiences; social media revives short-form poetry.

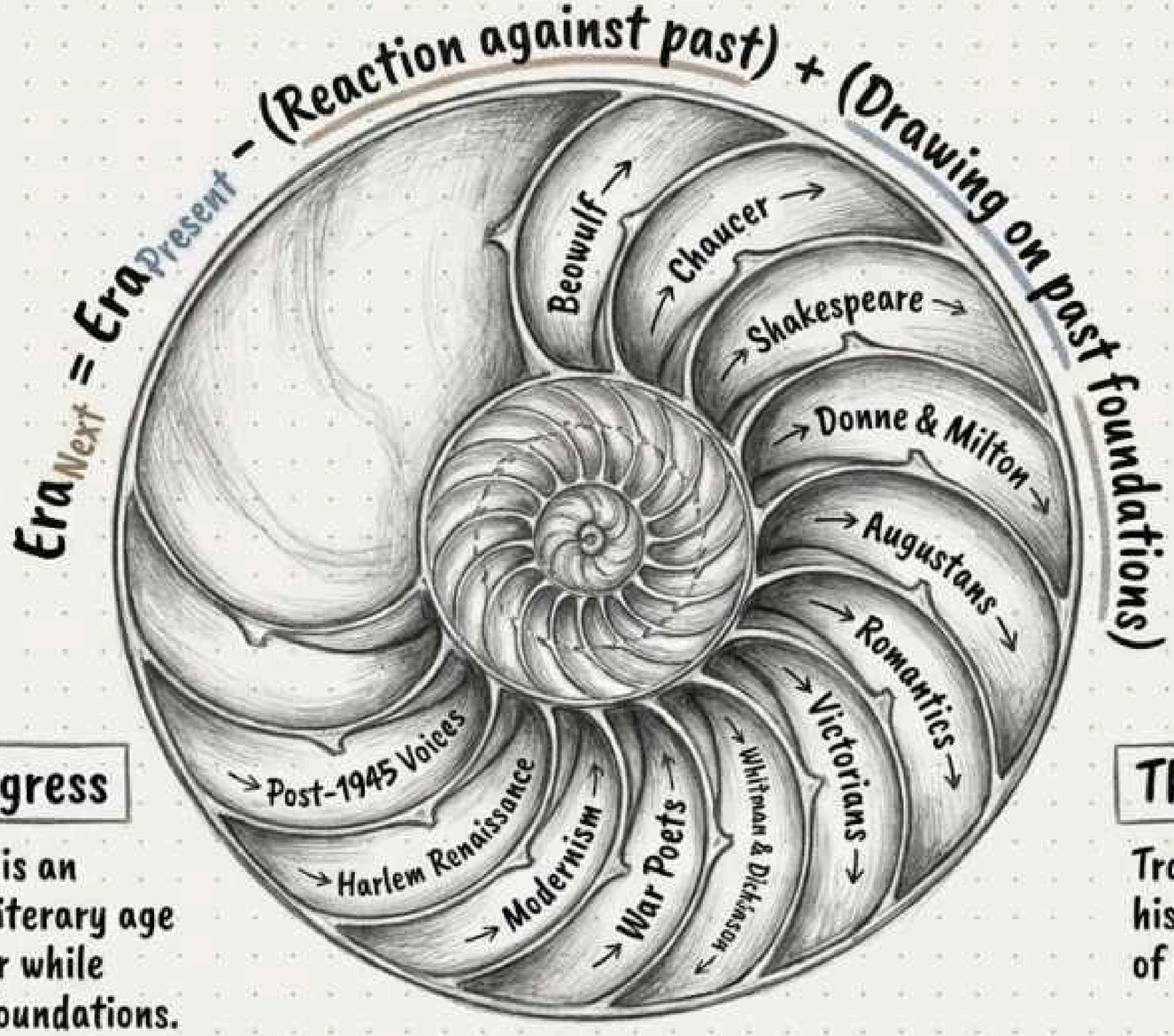


Civic Impact

- Amanda Gorman's 2021 US Presidential Inauguration reading showcased poetry's enduring public power.



Summary: The Continuum of English Poetry



The Mechanism of Progress

The history of English poetry is an ongoing conversation. Every literary age reacts against its predecessor while inherently building upon its foundations.

The Next Step

Transitioning from the study of history to the active practice of writing poems ourselves.