



# The Underworld in Twentieth-Century Poetry: From Pound and Eliot to Heaney and Walcott

*Michael Thurston*

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The hero's descent into the Underworld is not only one of the oldest stories in western literature; it is also one of the most often retold. Why do so many modern poets—British and American, black and white, male and female, from the metropole and from the margins—stage Underworld descents in their works? Through a series of contextualized close readings, this study traces the cultural work performed by modern deployments of the classical narrative. While some poets engage their literary forebears to exorcise anxiety and others use Hell to sharpen their cultural critique, most recent poets, including James Merrill, Derek Walcott, Tony Harrison, and Seamus Heaney, have found the Underworld descent to be a useful framework for addressing the claims of history and politics.

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