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A Century of War in Poetry: 1915-2015

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Introduction

One of my former students, Oretha, is now a soldier in Iraq. A few years ago I was coaching tennis at Englewood High School and was desperate for players. I was told of a young woman who might be interested. Oretha was a tall, imposing African American gal with a deadly serve who was skeptical about fitting in on a preppy, white team. I pursued her, cajoled her, maybe even bullied her, and she became an important part of the team, as well as an eager young woman looking for direction. I often drove her home after a match. Oretha lived with her mother and knew she needed a future different from her surroundings. While a member of the tennis team she lost weight, got in shape, and before graduation signed on with the Navy. Since then she has visited me on several occasions and military officers interviewed me for a reference when she was under review for a higher security clearance. I often think of Oretha now that she is in Iraq. War has become very personal to me.

The unit I have planned will encompass the many faces of war, focusing on the last 100 years. I have been drawn to war poetry for several other reasons as well. I remember when my older brother shipped off to Vietnam; I am married to an ex-marine; and I work in a school that has an active JROTC. Jacksonville is located near Mayport, a busy naval base. For the last few years I have watched soldiers returning from the war being met by their families on the 6 o'clock news. Some of my students are still waiting for a father, sister, or brother to return from overseas. I am waiting for Oretha.

Rationale and Overview

Within the unit we will examine poems that relate to three main themes: the reasons men and women go to war, the pain and death many soldiers face, and the effect of war on men and women. My unit is designed for world literature which is taught in Jacksonville in the sophomore year. In Florida sophomore students take the high-stakes Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test that they are required to pass in order to graduate. A great emphasis is placed on reading skills. For this reason the unit will incorporate reading passages from poetry and prose. Nonfiction material is heavily emphasized in the test, together with two or three different

selections of narratives or poems for students to compare and contrast. The test requires students to answer multiple choice questions and write short and extended responses. Fifty-six percent of our tenth grade students scored on a level one (the lowest reading level) in 2005. Twenty-five percent scored on level two. This means eighty-one percent failed the test. My unit will incorporate a combination of texts for this reason. Our classes are ninety minutes long and the students take four classes each day.

The main focus of my unit will be poetry, with suggested prose selections that can be added. The unit is a natural for making connections with history classes. If you team teach, the unit could easily be combined with a history of war. History not only repeats itself but teachers, including myself, are constantly amazed at how little students know concerning the major wars involving America and how much we have to "repeat" and teach the subject. With the present political situation students can really see the relevance of debate and discussion on the issue of war.

Objective

Robert Frost once was asked, "Is there one basic point to all fine poetry?" He

responded, "The phrase and what do I mean by a phrase? A clutch of words that gives you a clutch at the heart" (Kahn 98). It is this "clutch" that makes poetry so intriguing to me. I hope that while I discuss this war poetry unit with my students they will have the opportunity to read and listen to the selections and explore the phrases that clutch at their heart.

Most English teachers hope to inspire a love of words in their students. It is my hope that this unit will do just that by encouraging students to enjoy reading poetry and see the power behind it. In addition, the issues at the heart of this poetry are surrounding us in the newspaper and television and should inspire lively discussions of their own opinions concerning the current war. Bringing current issues into the discussion will hopefully bring relevance and reality into the discussion of poetry. An added bonus will be the involvement of my male students, who often think poetry is for girls.

Additional Objectives

Student Objectives

To gain an appreciation and understanding that poets reflect the social consciousness of a nation.

To become responsible and well organized.

Teacher Objectives

To familiarize students with tools and techniques of poetry.

To expand their ability to view events through literary works.

To improve their ability to incorporate quoting into their writing.

To strengthen their ability to work in groups and express themselves verbally in polite discussion and debate.

To enable students to read even difficult poems confidently and comfortably.

Strategies and Student Assignments

When we begin this unit I will start off with a KWL technique and then give each child a written explanation of what my expectations are throughout the next three weeks. First, the class will brainstorm the K part of KWL. (KWL stands for what you know (K), what you want to learn (W) and what you learned (L).) Each student will make a list of words related to war. The concrete ideas will come to life fairly easily: tanks, guns, soldiers, battle, bomber planes, fox hole etc. Next, students will pair and share their web of words and assist each other in expanding their list. Then, I will guide the students. We will continue on with a more focused brainstorming that includes the reasons why men and women go to war, the pain and death many soldiers face, and the effect of war on mankind. We will incorporate the emotions of war: fear, courage, pain; and colors that are related to war, such as red perhaps for blood, white for surrender. We will include wars from the last hundred years beginning with World War I and ending with Iraq. This process should not be hurried. It will provide a link to what they know, and students should be encouraged to create a fairly massive web of words. The word association list can be as artistic and bold as the student wants. You could place students in groups and have them transpose their list onto larger poster board, or you could combine several of their lists into a collage of word posters, or create one yourself - while they are working on theirs - that will be placed somewhere in the room. This word wall will be constantly referred to as we delve into the unit and will allow for good dialogue about our topic. It will also probably be added to as the unit progresses. I imagine using this visual at the end of several class periods as a where have we been, what have we seen and not seen review. If you do not collect their personal web have them use it as a cover for their war packet.

This building of student generated and teacher guided discussion of ideas is vital, but it is often rushed by teachers to get to the "meat" of the lesson. I urge you not to rush through this initial lesson. You might ask your students why they think people write poetry about war. They could write their ideas down and you could ask several students to read what they wrote. I will continue with a list of poetic terms I plan to teach them. This will be the W what I plan for them to learn. At the end of the unit we will return to this and discuss what we have learned to complete our KWL.

The following passage is from *The Things They Carried*, by Tim O'Brien. You can make a copy of it or place it on the overhead.

War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead (65).

In their notebooks have students take two of the ideas and free write. This will lead you into an opportunity to give the students an overview of where the unit is going and what you will be asking of them.

Student Assignments

The students will have two individual assignments they will work on and a group assignment throughout the unit. The daily notes and assignments will be placed in their notebook and turned in with their individual project. This part of the notebook will be checked on throughout the lessons. It will also be reviewed during their one on one conferencing time or group conference.

Their first individual assignment will be completed when we have completed studying the teacher directed poems. Each student will locate a poem that relates to one of the poems presented in class. Students will describe in a paper of 250 words how the poet describes his position. (Hint: use one of the three themes and pinpoint words or phrases or lines to support your opinion.) Include a copy of the poem with your paper.

The second individual assignment requires each student to keep a notebook of all their notes and class assignments relating to the unit. The notebook must also include ten of the following tasks. A divider should be used and labeled to separate the class notes and class assignments from the other part. Class time for the following section will be scheduled into the day but students will still need to work outside of class. All students must include numbers 1, 7, and 12.

1. Copy of the 10 poems (to be given to student)
2. Resume'. Create a resume' for any of the poets discussed in this unit.
3. Word search. Words must be about one of the poets discussed and include his/her personal data.
4. Letter to a poet.
5. Letter to a poem's speaker.
6. Attractive array of your favorite lines done in a neat creative style
7. A newspaper article about war with a personal response.
8. Venn diagram comparing/contrasting 2 of the poems
9. A poem of your own concerning the topic
10. A visual relating to one of the poems
11. Four examples of poetic devices from the poems
12. A table of contents
13. Imagery chart using one of the poems
14. Four words with their denotation and their connotation from the poems
15. Write a letter to a soldier
16. Write a letter to a politician expressing your views on the war

Group assignment (three students in each group): Research time in the library will allow students to work on this section together. Keeping in mind the three focuses of the unit, students will find three poems that they feel fit in the three categories; OR students could create one, two or all three of their own categories. Students may want to look for poems about comradeship, coming of age, fear, protest, minorities, etc. The poems must fit their categories and as a group the students must be able to discuss and defend their choices. The group will meet with me to get approval several times throughout the process. The group will present one of their three poems to the class. Throughout the unit I will suggest various poets they may want to research.

Parents will be given a copy of this information along with titles of all the poems. A parent signature will be required. I usually send home a calendar with due dates for major assignments.

Why Men Go To War

"An Irish Airman Foresees his Death" by W. B. Yeats will start off the unit. In addition to the quality of the poem as a poem, embedded within it there is much to offer the student regarding the political climate in Ireland as it was in the period and continues to be today. A line such as "Those that I guard I do not love" requires a lengthy enough explanation, socially and historically, not only to necessitate a long look at participation with the English in World War I from the Irish point of view but also to illuminate current Irish/English political, social, and religious differences.

The poem was written for a patron of Yeats, Lady Gregory, in honor of her son who fought and died in World War I. We will look at the poem itself, free write about whether we think it was what Lady Gregory might have had in mind, and learn background information on Yeats. The poem provides examples of several poetic devices. We will examine rhyme scheme, alliteration, speaker, and tone and theme, among others. Yeats's use of iambic tetrameter will introduce students to this type of rhyme scheme along with the alliteration in "country", "Kiltartan", and "Cross". Could the poet be the speaker? Why or why not? We will answer the question why the Irish Airman goes to war, obeying "A lonely impulse of delight," and this will lead us back to O'Brien's line, "War is thrill." A passage from *The Red Badge of Courage* expresses a similar attitude towards war.

Siegfried Sassoon's "Base Details" and Carl Sandburg's "And They Obey" will examine the political aspect of war and the contrast between those who actually fight and those who command. This will give the students an opportunity to discuss not only the poems but the political ramifications of war. Sassoon's earlier work embraces the nobility of war, and looking at his biography will allow us to examine his changing attitude. After the death of his brother he immersed himself in the war, and was called "Mad Jack" for his heroic, almost suicidal bravery. In 1916 he won the Military Cross for carrying a wounded lance-corporal who was lying close to German lines to safety (Bean). He also became good friends with Wilfred Owen, a poet the students might research.

Sassoon's "Base Details" will be a poem the students should find they relate to because they are so firmly controlled by authority in almost every aspect of their life. Many students love to talk about the older generation as out of touch or uncaring about their plight. We will also have an opportunity to examine the use of pun, alliteration, onomatopoeia, rhyme scheme, tone, irony and dialogue. The title requires close examination. The word base has several meanings. Base could just refer to a military area. Base can also mean vulgar, or, yet again, it can mean something that is foundational. The visual description of the Major is particularly vivid. The students may have to be prodded but they should be able to understand the irony. He is out of shape and his redness could be from drinking or fury. His total lack of concern for the young soldiers and his repugnant self righteous attitude will be clear to the students. The poem contrasts the older, self-indulgent, safe members of the military with the young men they send to war (Perrine & Arp 94). The entire poem is four sentences long but says quite a bit. Part of the strength of the poem is that it is presented as hypothetical. The emphasis on words like "If", "I'd" and "you'd" assists in creating the irony. The war protest element will become part of our discussion too.

The speaker expresses his bitterness through irony. He would actually hate having anything to do with such a man. Most likely the speaker is an officer who is criticizing a system that preserves the "fierce, and bald, and short of breath" but sends young men off to be killed. During World War I "company commanders (captains) and platoon leaders (lieutenants) suffered the highest fatality rates because they had to lead their men 'over

the top' on charges across 'No Man's Land' against withering enemy fire" (Perrine & Arp 97). In contrast some had it relatively easy working on a base far from danger. Showing students a picture of the British uniform with the "red lapel tabs and cap bands" (Perrine & Arp 98) worn by "scarlet Majors" will assist students in understanding the various ways the color can have meaning. This will help when the line "youth stone dead" appears. Most students will view it as the men that have died. Suggest that it could also be the lost youthfulness of the men who return. Look closely also at the word "scrap". The speaker reduces the horrific situation almost to a scuffle between youths. The word "toddle" does the same thing by suggesting second childhood and senility (Perrine & Arp 98). Isolating the first and last lines: "If I were fierce, and bald, and short or breath"/ "I'd toddle home and die in bed," leaves the reader with the 'matter of factness,' the 'coming home from a day at the office' attitude of commanding, i.e., death is the destiny of someone else.

The web site www.teachit.co.uk/ has a great approach to the poem. With very accurate war pictures as a backdrop, the poem appears slowly to the students. After each line or two, questions appear concerning those lines. After answering the questions you click on the last visual line and the next line appears along with questions relating to that section of the poem. Students are then shown the entire poem except for the last line and asked to write the last line themselves. Because of the clear rhyme scheme, students can usually see for themselves that the last word of the poem is bed. The fun is seeing how close their line is to the poet's, which is exposed when you click on the preceding line.

Why Men Go To War

There are several ways to do the next activity. I often switch among these possibilities from one class to another depending on the time of day, size of the class, and how they interact with each other. I will do this poem in one of the following ways.

Sandburg's "And They Obey" is a simple poem. I will provide each student with one line of the poem on various colored strips and they will walk around the room repeating their one line to as many students as possible. Then matching their color to their peers', they will form groups. The groups will then attempt to compose the poem in the correct order. This activity allows for students to have fun and discuss where the poem begins and where it ends.

Another way to approach this poem is to hand a strip of paper with a different line from the poem on it to each child. Some students do not like to read aloud but will often read a line. This exposes students to ideas from the poem without the entire context. When you ask what the poem is about you will get lots of responses from the students. The line "You are workmen and citizens all" might make a student suggest that the poem is about capturing a city. "Knock the walls to pieces" could mean what soldiers do with explosives. The activity forces the students to think about what the poem is expressing. Once you have written their ideas on the board or overhead you place the students in groups and have them arrange the strips into lines of poetry. The activity forces students to examine what would go where. It is like figuring out a puzzle and if you want you can reward the first group that makes the poem complete. Moving around the room, you can have groups read their version to you or give them hints about how accurate their version is or isn't. Finally, you give each student a copy of the complete poem. This allows students to read the poem and talk about how the poet arranged the poem, how close their group was, and why the line, "You are the soldiers and we command you," fits so beautifully in the middle.

Carl Sandburg was rejected by West Point, served in the Spanish American War (1898), never saw combat, and was too old to serve in World War I. (Anon.Sandburg). Two other poems I recommend by him are "Iron" and "Grass." He has been compared to Walt Whitman for his use of everyday language and the listing technique.

Now that the first section is finished, this would be a good time to go back over the poetic elements you have seen in the three poems. Have students rate the effectiveness of the poem to them personally. In a student response log have students explain their ranking. First, they must create a rubric and decide what elements they find necessary to make a poem "good". They could get in groups to create their rubric. Have them attach their rubric to their student response and collect it for a grade or place it in their notebook. Keep in mind that as they move farther into the unit their rubric may change, as well as how they rank each element. Many students want to understand a poem on first reading or firmly believe poetry must rhyme, but hopefully as you move forward they may enjoy other approaches to poetry.

Death and Dying

Death and war are inseparable. The poems I have included in this section begin with Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier". The students will easily make the comparison/ connection to our first poem by Yeats. In addition, this will give me an opportunity to teach a war sonnet.

Students should have an ongoing discussion about whether a person can write about war if they have never been in one. We will continue with this type of writing exercise as we read the poems.

Brooke wrote five war sonnets before his death. Several writers feel he should actually be considered a prewar poet. He saw one day of fighting before he died in April, 1915, from blood poisoning. However, his poems inspired great patriotism and were helpful in the early war effort to England. Churchill used him as a "poster boy" for England and actually wrote his obituary for *The Times*. "The Soldier" was read from the pulpit of St. Paul's on April 23, 1915 (Groves). Students will see how this poem could also fit our first category: why men go to war. Each time we move forward we will go back to discuss his handling of this idea. The blending of the Italian sonnet and Shakespearean sonnet will help students review the sonnet style. This poem is also called Brooke's "epitaph," and we can discuss why.

Since the students have many choices, they may work on their project notebook after we talk about this poem. They may choose to do a Venn-diagram of two poems we have read. This will allow some of the students to work on the internet while I help those who have been absent or need individual assistance.

Yeats' "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" and Brooke's "The Soldier" have several similar features. They have the same sense of tension and the premonition of death. They both have a deep personal drive to go to war, almost a quiet exhilaration. Also, they do not seem to have regret. They both have a rhyme scheme, first person point of view, and nature as a backdrop.

Death and Dying

I will bring in short clips from several war movies. Students will watch each clip and write a response to each one. We will look at *Saving Private Ryan*, *Forest Gump*, and *We Were Soldiers*.

We will view each clip twice. The first viewing will focus on the visual aspect and the second will focus on the sound/music accompanying the scene. Each time, the student will do a quick write. I will show the scene in *Saving Private Ryan* in which families are receiving notice that their son is dead. The *Forest Gump* scene shows Forest in combat and saving a fellow soldier. *We Were Soldiers* has both types of scenes. I will not lead a discussion because I feel the emotion of the topic is enough. If students want to share their feelings here it will be in a casual forum, after which we will move on to the next part of the lesson.

Wallace Stevens's "The Death Of A Soldier" and Randall Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" express the grim reality of death.

I will put the students in groups of three or four and give each group several spring leaves and several fall leaves. The leaves will be a combination of real ones and silk ones. Their job will be to write down ways in which they think a war poet would use leaves. Their job will be to look at the basic symbol first. Next, they will work on simile and metaphor. With glue, scissors, magazines, and markers the students will create and post their best work. I want their work to focus on war. I like to give each group a dictionary and a thesaurus to help them with words. You can move about the room assisting students with all of this. The exercise will help lead us into looking at "The Death Of A Soldier". In addition, a close look at a few lines of Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode To The West Wind" will illustrate the use of autumn leaves and metaphor.

Wallace Stevens wrote this poem for one soldier. Eugene Leerier was a young French painter killed in 1915. His letters were collected as *Lettres d'un soldat* and read by Stevens in 1917(Longenbach).

Reading the entire poem two or three times before talking about it is important in the case of this poem. Have several students read the poem. Listen to male voices and female voices read it. Does the poem say violence is as natural as autumn? The students will see that the poem uses simile and that each stanza is a tercet. Each of the stanzas slowly tells the story of how the death of a soldier is as minor and as natural as a single autumn leaf.

Imagine autumn leaves falling from trees, slowly gliding to the ground. Now, imagine men. Men not ready to die. Imagine men who are too young to die and men who have stopped breathing—"the wind stops"—and are now dead. The religious connection to a "three-days personage" examines how a soldier's death is final, unlike that of Christ. Their death is "absolute" and the world continues ignoring them, "without memorial." The soldiers are not returning but the season of autumn will return. Students should look at the tone of the poem closely. Has the poet created an attitude of callousness or caring? What is the poet's or the speaker's attitude towards war?

Supplementary material for teacher on color and number

In literature color has many symbolic ramifications. Obviously patriotism has a color or colors usually associated with the flag. And for a soldier there are three colors: white for smoke, red for blood, and green for grass; or, for a wounded soldier there is red the wound, white the hospital, and blue robes worn in the hospital (Fussell 126). Colors are interesting to talk about and the students might enjoy attaching symbols to colors.

The number three is worth a bit of discussion as well. During World War I there were three distinctive areas of war. Soldiers count off by threes. Plus, the site has three areas, the front, the support and the reserve. When returning home there was first sleep, then food, and only then a woman (Fussell 125). Poet Charles Sorley states, "the transformation of man into corpse is a three-part action. First man, then, when hit, animal, writhing and thrashing in articulate agony, or making horrible snoring noises; then a 'thing'" (Fussell 126). Naturally a great deal could be said about color and the number three. I found this insight helpful and perhaps you might use this background information before teaching Stevens's "The Death Of A Soldier."

Randall Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" captures a horrific vision and is often anthologized in high school text books. The poem lets students take a close look at alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme, metaphor, and irony. Background on the type of aircraft is helpful. Most text books provide a visual as well as the explanation before the poem along with questions.

Randall Jarrell was a gifted poet and professor of English literature at Kenyon College when World War II broke out. He served in the United States Air Force and saw at first hand the evils of war. Simply stated, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" tells of a soldier's end. The soldier hunched over inside the ball turret of a plane is shot and they callously "washed me out." The poem also tells his entire story through metaphor. He is born, employed by the "State" and dies. The alliteration in "fur froze" recreates an animal like imagery as well as a visual of his fur collared or lined jacket. The implication of birth continues to create a painful image in "woke to black flak," which stresses the rattling k's at the end of the words to sound like gunfire. His life moves from mother into the State into the belly of the plane into nothing (Perrine & Arp 260). The stark image of the hose reflects on the awe of life and horror of his death.

Throughout the unit, students will work on their individual research or with their group. The list of choices provides students with the opportunity to explore their own interest. Our school encourages a classroom of students working at various levels. Differentiated instruction is expected in the classroom. I will be able to spend more time with those who need my assistance and allow those who are stronger in one area to excel. Also, this gives me an opportunity to meet with each group to discuss what direction they plan to take and to offer suggestions. In order to do this, students have to be extremely familiar with the rituals and routines of the classroom. This does not happen overnight but is vital to ensure student productivity. In addition, I will ask each student to bring to the conference their packet to be checked and monitored. This is also an opportunity to assign a grade and assess their individual progress.

The Effects of War on Men and Women

The last section will examine the effects of war on survivors and on the living. Peter Lafarge's "Ballad of Ira Hayes" tells the story of a young Indian man returning from war. Ira Hayes is one of the men in the famous photograph of the raising of the flag on Mount Suribachi, Iwo Jima. His personal saga along with the song will allow the students to put a face and a condition to the ballad. The issue of minorities in war will also be explored.

Information about the story of Ira Hayes is collected at several websites. My favorite one is <http://www.fortunecity.com>. The photograph is another opportunity for students to free write. The ballad is performed by Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash and written by Peter Lafarge. There are photos of Ira Hayes and the other men in the picture along with Ira Hayes' story. Putting a face and a name to a war veteran always does a person good, and many students prefer nonfiction material. James Bradley, the son of one of the men in the famous photograph, along with Ron Powers wrote *Flags of Our Fathers*. The book is a gripping account of the lives of the six men who raised the flag.

Further, the role of photojournalist and journalist can be explored. Because I want my students to be aware of current events, this will also give us an opportunity to chat about the role of the press. The journalists in Iraq provide a good connection to this part of the unit. In 2003, thirteen journalists died from hostile action. In 2004, 23 had been killed. These numbers do not include people who died from car accidents or for health-related reasons (Allbritton 9). Joe Rosenthal took the famous photograph. It has been used on two different postage stamps that can also be seen at this site, along with actual newsreel coverage. Once we have looked at the photo and written about the four men we will read the ballad. I will count the students off by threes, and continue until everyone has a number. The ones will read the ballad, focusing only on the Pima Indian's role; the twos on the white man's role, and the threes on Ira. They will gather details as they read about their character. Reading for a purpose helps students concentrate. When they have finished they will write a one sentence summary (main idea). Next, they will read a nonfiction article about Ira Hayes. This time they will highlight or underline information connected to their focus. When they have finished they will take the information from the ballad and information from the article and write a poem. The poem has to be from their character's perspective. Who killed Ira Hayes? As students write their poem I will play the song. Students can share their poems if they like at the end of class.

As a review of the ballad form we will examine the elements of a ballad. We will listen to the other version of the ballad and complete a graphic organizer that relates to the elements of a ballad. We could also read a few of the student written poems.

Ballads began as an oral tradition. The simple definition of ballad is "a fairly narrative poem written in a songlike stanza form" (Perrine& Arp 317). Robert Penn Warren defines ballad as "a song that tells a story "(552). A ballad has several elements:

1. Tells a story
2. Focuses on action and/or dialogue
3. Traditionally quatrains of alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines
4. Is sung in a modal melody
5. Uses repetition and refrain

The Effects of War on Men and Women

Henry Reed's "Naming of Parts" will allow the students to examine a poem about anticipating war. The use of several voices and the concreteness of the poem will engage JROTC students and allow them to be the experts. Reading the poem with a tone of military command and discussing the parts of the gun will bring this poem alive.

Henry Reed served in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps and Foreign Office during World War II. His poem "Naming of Parts" came from his joking around and imitating his superiors during his experience in basic training. He noticed the rhythmic pattern that their commands took on (Anon.Reed). The poem has two distinct voices, the instructor's and a recruit's. The recruit's mind wanders off during the drill. The break is very distinct (Perrine & Arp Man. 94). Notice, in the first stanza, the break in line four.

Naming of Parts

To-day we have naming of parts. Yesterday,

We had daily cleaning. And to-morrow morning,

We shall have what to do after firing. But to-day,

To-day we have naming of parts. Japonica

Glistens like coral in all of the neighboring gardens,

And to-day we have naming of parts.¹

Reed's five stanza poem's meaning stems from its use of contrast. The punctuation contributes to the emphasis on "to-day" and "yesterday." The recruits will continue cleaning and drilling and waiting for war. War will come and the contrast between the waiting and what one daydreams about illustrates the contrast between the beauties of nature and the dull lives of the soldiers. The poem continues with this symbolic contrast. The gardens appear natural, free, graceful; and the "early bees are assaulting and fumbling with flowers." In contrast, the recruits are living lives of tedious repetition, unnatural and incomplete, just like their guns. The trainees and the gardens continue to represent symbolic opposites, "death versus life, incompleteness versus completeness, the mechanical versus the natural, regimentation versus freedom, awkwardness versus grace, drabness versus beauty" (Perrine & Arp Man. 94). The mechanical routine contrasting with the beauty of nature shows that although both nature and man are outdoors there is no connection. Man will die in war, an unnatural state, while the "Japonica Glistens" and the "bees go[ing] backwards and forwards".

If you have a JROTC program, ask the instructor to have his class act out the poem in a reading and have your film/media class film the performance for your students. This is my goal. I will either have a live performance or a taped one or maybe both. Chances are I will be able to use students from my classes. The parts of a rifle and the steps to breaking one down make the poem very "demonstration" ñlike, yet the juxtaposition of thoughts presents an opportunity to say, "Hey, what is the poem really about? How does the tone shift help the reader?"

Often there are teachers on campus who have spent time in the military and are willing to be guest speakers. I hope to have such a person come and talk about the Vietnam War before I have my students work on the last three poems in the unit.

The Effects of War on Men and Women

Students will read "Ambush," a short story by Tim O'Brien. Before reading the story the students will journal on the following question. If your nine- year- old child asked you if you had ever killed a person during war, what would you say? O'Brien's story takes the reader into this situation and flashbacks to an incident in Vietnam. W.D. Ehrhart's poem "Imagine" would go well with this story.

W.D. Ehrhart's "A Relative Thing" painfully expresses the feelings of many Vietnam veterans on returning from war. Ehrhart served as a Marine and spent thirteen months in Vietnam (Sketch). Students will be able to clearly understand the message and the emotion. The poem is poignant on its own and a great lead into the last two poems written by women. Clarifying several terms will assist in a better understanding of this poem: A known place where the Viet Cong collected to begin an assault (VC staging point); Hue (pronounced Way) City; Army of the Republic of North Vietnam (ARVN); Raids designed to burn down Vietnamese villages usually with a Zippo lighter or flame thrower as the igniter (Zippo raid).

Vietnam poets often use free verse. However, a comparison to "Base Details" can obviously be made. What was their purpose? Does Ehrhart appear too personal? There is more here than meets the eye. Students by now should be able to unlock the subtleties. The image of the "breastless woman" juxtaposed with the "pigeon-breasted fantasies" needs close examination. The juxtaposition of a woman's world as a vision of mother and child and man's world being "pigeon-breasted", full of pride and arrogance, seems to be saying something about gender roles and war. Has this changed? Further, even though men from earlier generations knew war they know nothing of this one. Why? The second to last stanza makes a point of pointing a finger. Also, study the humor, particularly the line "The cookies from the wives of Local 104 did not soften our awareness." The play on the word "soften" keeps the poem from being too preachy. Vietnam was an unpopular war. It was referred to as a conflict for most of the ten years the United States was involved. It has been likened to the Iraq War in the news. Most people support our troops because they do not want to make the mistakes made towards soldiers returning home from Vietnam. Will this attitude continue? The poem's title is similar to "Base Details." Relative has several meanings. It connotes related to by kinship, and having a connection to something else, or about; concerning. Which definition best suits the poem or do they all?

Students could now create a poem in the fashion of Ehrhart's poem often referred to as a stylistic imitation. Have students make two columns on a sheet of paper. They will put Iraq on one half and Vietnam on the other. Working with a partner reading each stanza the students will write a list all of the words and phrases that directly refer to Vietnam. We will then go over their list on the overhead. I will underline the phrases and lines they have selected. Next, the students will think about words to replace the ones we have listed with Iraq in mind. Students will then write a poem using the Iraq visions. They must start with the title because it is so fundamental to the emotion of the poem. Students could change words like "newsmen" to internet and "Hue City" to Basra. While they are creating be sure to let them change the tone if they want.

The discussion of war and patriotism will ultimately lead to students discussing their views on the current

political climate, the possibility of a draft, and the future, especially theirs. Patriotism is an important part of this unit. America has rallied around the troops for the most part. For example, after 9/11 the NCAA required all its member colleges to display an American flag on the sleeve of uniforms. Bumper stickers and ribbons with "Support Our Troops" and "We will never forget" are readily available. Encourage students to find current articles or poems that embrace these issues.

The Effects of War on Men and Women

Ehrhart wrote the Foreword to *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace: Writings of Women in the Vietnam War*. He openly discusses the false idea many people have that war is male and apologizes for this earlier omission on his own part in the Foreword.

The closing two poems are "Dried Corsages" by Dana Shuster and "The Vietnamese Mother" by Huong Tram. Shuster's poem examines a woman going to war and Tram's depicts a mother's pain. Both poems are in free verse and tell a war story.

"Dried Corsages" struck me as a poem the students might like for several reasons. Prom is a memory most of my students will have and can identify with on some level. Also, students think about packing up and moving out. What will they take and where will they go? The poem certainly can move towards or away from war depending on where your students are in life and/or in the unit.

In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell discusses how universal it was for soldiers of all rank to carry with them a talisman, a "lucky coin, button, dried flowers, hair cuttings, New Testaments, pebbles from home, medals of St. Christopher and St. George, childhood dolls and teddy bears, poems or Scripture verses written out or worn in a small bag around the neck like a phylactery" (124). One young man, Robert Graves, was certain his "preservation of his virginity got him safely through the war" (124). With this in mind before reading the poem, have the students write about a possession they hold dear to them. Students could write a poem about it, or a short essay.

Depending on you class size and your energy, half the class could study and present Shuster's poem and the other half work on Huong Tram's poem. This could be handled in several ways. "Dried Corsages" brings up the discussion of females and war. Shuster was a nurse in the Army and went to Vietnam for two tours. During the Vietnam era around 15,000 women served (see in Devanter xviii). The idea of women at war can now be researched by your students or discussed in class. Many women are in Iraq right now and several have been killed.

"The Vietnamese Mother" was written by Huong Tram and translated by Phan Thanh Hao with Lady Borton. Huong Tram is a well known Vietnamese poet. The poem could be beautifully read by three voices or reenacted by your students. The students working with this poem could read "The Power of Words in Wartime" by Robin Tolmach Lakoff. The article includes a list of derogatory names used during war time to dehumanize enemies. The article goes on to discuss the use of collective nouns because they make the enemy faceless. Why does the poem make such a strong connection with the "Oh, Mama" cry?

Additional Suggestions and Insight

Students could arrange the selections in chronological order. We could briefly review the selections and have the students discover similarities and differences in the three styles. For a final assessment students could write an in class essay. Some suggestions to include are "Dulce et Decorum" by Wilfred Owen or "I Have a Rendezvous with Death" by Alan Seeger. This would depend on what poems were presented by the students and how smoothly the unit has flowed. Many songs have been recorded concerning war - George Cohen's "Over There", Joni Mitchell's "The Fiddle and the Drum", and "I Didn't Raise My Boy to be a Soldier" to name a few.

While preparing this unit, I was amazed at how much war poetry I discovered from World War I and how relatively little, in contrast, from World War II. Several reasons for this were pointed out to me. During World War I the elite, especially the British elite, fought along-side their soldiers. Naturally, the well-to-do were educated in the major British lineage of literary prose and poetry. Further, even ordinary men were familiar with the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*. Add to this the enormous debt and obligation they must have felt to excel based on their forefather's contributions (Fussell 37).

By contrast, World War II losses were beyond comprehension. Fifty-five million died. More civilians died than soldiers (Overy). America had just come out of the depression. People wanted to forget. They knew hard times. The world wanted to bury the dead. For many their youth had been full of hunger, their young life was given to the war effort, and now was not a time for remembering but for moving on.

I hope to get the students to understand some of these points, and to have them discover others as they research war poems for their group assignment. Creating curious life-long learners and thinkers is every teacher's goal.

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Perrine, Laurence and Thomas R. Arp. *Literature Structure, Sound, and Sense*. Fourth edition. New York: Harcourt: 1983. A text including anthology of works with a large collection of poem with helpful guiding questions.

Yeats, W.B. "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death". Dec. 2003. <http://www.thebeckoning.com/poetry/yeats/yeats.html>

Reading list for students

Poems covered in the unit:

W.B. Yeats, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death"

Siegfried Sassoon, "Base Details"

Rupert Brooke, "The Soldier"

Wallace Stevens, "The Death Of A Soldier"

Carl Sandburg, "And They Obey"

Randall Jarrell, "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner"

Henry Reed, "Naming of Parts"

Peter LaFarge, "Ballad of Ira Hayes"

W.D. Ehrhart, "A Relative Thing"

Dana Shuster, "Dried Corsages"

Huong Tram, "The Vietnamese Mother"

Selected stories from:

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

"On the Rainy River"

"Ambush"

"Enemies"

"Friends"

School issued Language Arts textbook

List of material for classroom use

An overhead projector

LCD panel and projector

CD player/Tape Player

VCR or DVD player

Art supplies

Access to Internet

Appendix

A Relative Thing

We are the ones you sent to fight a war

you didn't know a thing about.
It didn't take us long to realize
the only land that we controlled
was covered by the bottoms of our boots.
When the newsmen said that naval ships
had shelled a VC staging point,
we saw a breastless woman
and her stillborn child.
We laughed at old men stumbling
in the dust in frenzied terror
to avoid our three-ton trucks.
We fought outnumbered in Hue City
while ARVN soldiers looted bodies
in the safety of the rear.
The cookies from the wives of Local 104
did not soften our awareness.
We have seen the pacified supporters
of the Saigon government
sitting in their jam-packed cardboard towns,
their wasted hands placed limply in their laps,
their empty bellies waiting for the rice
some district chief has sold
for profit to the Viet Cong.
We have been Democracy on Zippo raids,
burning houses to the ground,
driving eager amtracs through new-sown fields.

We are the ones who have to live
with the memory that we were the instruments
of your pigeon-breasted fantasies.

We are inextricable accomplices
in this travesty of dreams:

but we are not alone.

We are the ones you sent to fight a war
you did not know a thing about-

those of us that lived

have tried to tell you what went wrong.

Now you think you do not have to listen.

Just because we will not fit

into the uniforms of photographs

of you at twenty-one

does not mean you can disown us.

We are your sons, America,

and you cannot change that.

When you awake,

we will still be there.²

Endnotes

1. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press from "Collected Poems:Henry Reed" by Reed, Henry edited by Stallworthy, Jon (1991).

2. Reprinted with permission of the author from *Beautiful Wreckage: New and Selected Poems*.

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