



## **Dulce et Decorum Est: Common Core and The Poetry of War**

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### **Introduction**

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For centuries, the poppy flower has held an association with restoration, sleep, and death: the plant was sacred to both Demeter—in ancient Greece, the flowering weed was used to revitalize the soil—and Hypnos—its seeds were used as both anesthetic and medicine. Red poppies grow in abundance in Asia and Europe including in the County of Flanders in southern Belgium. It was here, in the fields of Flanders, when the flower became the indelible symbol of World War I.

The Second Battle of Ypres started on April 21, 1915 and raged for over a month. Within thirty-five days, over 105,000 men were killed, wounded, or missing. <sup>1</sup> Throughout the battle, Lieutenant Colonel John McRae, a field surgeon with the Canadian artillery, treated the injured from both sides. He would later write: "Seventeen days of Hades! At the end of the first day if anyone had told us we had to spend seventeen days there, we would have folded our hands and said it could not have been done." <sup>2</sup> Included in the list of dead was Alexis Helmer, a close friend and former student of McRae. Helmer fell on May 2, 1915, twelve days into the conflict.

The following day, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, McRae allowed himself a few moments to grieve. He sat in the back of an ambulance and began to write, staring out at the makeshift cemetery that had blossomed behind the field hospital. <sup>3</sup> Wild blooms of the blood-red flower adorned the new graveyard. In fifteen short lines, using a tight metrical pattern and paired rhyme scheme, McRae used poetry to grapple with the death of his friend, perhaps in an attempt to memorialize or give meaning to his loss. For almost 100 years, this composition—"In Flanders Fields"—has stood as one of the finest pieces of modern war poetry.

Unfortunately, most contemporary students finish their education with little background in poetry and almost no ability to analyze the genre. Many teachers assume that it is the students who do not like to study poetry and leave it out of their curriculum. Surprisingly, a 2006-2007 educational report found that "older pupils, particularly the more able, enjoyed the intellectual demands poems made and their ability to inspire frequent rereading." <sup>4</sup> In other words, our students want poetry in the classroom; we are the ones keeping it out.

With little exception, most of my seniors have had limited experience with poetry throughout their education. Some had an introduction in primary school, reading rhymed verse by writers like Dr. Seuss and writing short poems about family members. By middle and high school, they have analyzed very little poetry: maybe an

occasional verse sprinkled in as an afterthought—a sestina here, a haiku there—with the literary focus always on the novel, play, or short story.

I'm guilty of this emphasis as well. In conversations with my colleagues, there is a sentiment that poetry is too hard, too confusing. It barely shows up on most standardized exams, so my fellow English teachers and I find teaching short stories to be more manageable. Perhaps some high school teachers shy away from poetry because of the overwhelming fear that this—this sonnet, this verse—is just beyond us, that this will be the day that we are proved a fraud. What if we don't get the metaphor or cannot identify the meter? If we do not get it, how can we teach it to our students? We are so used to being subject matter experts and we are pulled in so many different directions with our standards: teaching students the different genres; balancing fiction and non-fiction; pushing students to write and revise; practicing grammar and mechanics. Poetry is something that can easily fall through the cracks. Many teachers eschew poetry because of a misperceived benefit-cost ratio of teaching poetry: the amount of time it takes to adequately read, discuss, interpret, and analyze a 20-line poem is generally equal to reading, discussing, and analyzing a 1000-word short story. Ergo, in our minds, the study of prose gets us more bang for our buck.

Let us flip this final argument. When you are craving chocolate, you have many options, but for this analogy pretend you only have three: a chocolate chip cookie, a candy bar from the vending machine, or a truffle from an artisan chocolatier. All three will satisfy the craving, but the truffle will provide a richer chocolate experience. Poetry is like a truffle and using poetry—concise, densely packed texts—will provide a more satisfying experience in teaching language and voice in a way that cannot be matched by a prose-only approach to the classroom.

In its oldest form, poetry is oral, full of pattern, repetition, rhythm, music, sound, and beat. It is "the most kinesthetic of all literature, it's physical and full-bodied which activates [one's] heart and soul and sometimes bypasses the traps of our minds and the outcome is that poetry moves us." <sup>5</sup> It can help educate young children who may not understand all the words or meaning, but they will feel the rhythm, get curious about what the sounds mean, and perhaps want to create their own patterns or feel more comfortable in guessing the next word on the page because of the rhymes. Poetry can also educate older children who are learning English as a second language, and mainstream students who are learning about a major event in world history.

Poetry has been an important part of every civilization and dates back to the earliest of human history. Poetry as an art form is believed to predate the written word. "In many ancient cultures, the poem was used as a way to maintain oral history and transport it across long distances." <sup>6</sup> Most of the surviving ancient texts include the poetry of prayer as well as passion. Because of its use of grammatical and rhythmic patterns, poetry helped people remember and pass down their stories, laws, and history.

This unit is being written for 10<sup>th</sup> grade World Literature, though it could be adapted for any level of English. Much of my research looks at the importance of fiction and poetry in an educational system that is pivoting away from those subjects in favor of expository reading and writing. This unit is concurrent to a World History unit of study on World War I.

## Background

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Independence High School is a large, public high school in California serving almost 3100 students. Our students come from many ethnicities and backgrounds: 39.5% of our students are Asian, 32.7% are Hispanic, and 19.3% are Filipino; the Caucasian population is officially considered statistically insignificant at just 4% of the total school population. 43% of our students qualify nationally for the Free/Reduced Lunch Program and a total of 51.8% of our students are categorized as socio-economically disadvantaged. Additionally, 45.4% of our students are targeted English Language Learners and 8.4% of the student population is categorized as having a disability.

To meet the diverse needs and demands of our students, we have three California Partnership Academies. I teach sophomore English in a Teaching Academy, offering opportunities to at-risk students who are interested in pursuing a career in teaching or education. In the sophomore year, my students teach a total of six hours at local elementary schools. In addition to meeting national standards and preparing students for a state graduation exam, part of my curriculum includes preparing students to speak in front of large groups, to research standards and objectives for their elementary classrooms, and to design and implement their own lesson plans. With public speaking standards, interpreting text, and understanding elements of literature, poetry is a way to teach many parts of my curriculum and meet the Common Core.

## Rationale: Why Read, Study, and Teach Poetry in the Age of Common Core?

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Geoffrey Harpham, director of the National Humanities Center, posited "[t]he scholarly study of documents and artifacts produced by human beings in the past enables us to see the world from different points of view so that we may better understand ourselves." <sup>7</sup> It's been a century since World War I, and many present-day high school students feel that distance, feel that the history is too dusty and too far removed from their own lives. But it is important to read the personal words that memorialize that period. We are not so far removed from total war nor from sending our citizens to fight for our ideals.

"If you want to fight your way through a thorny sentence, look no further than Shakespeare. If you are having trouble figuring out what equipment is necessary for the task you are about to perform, look no further than *The Iliad*, where Achilles has a similar problem." <sup>8</sup> The Common Core State Standards, introduced in 2011, have been adopted by 45 states. These standards include specific indicators for reading and analyzing literature, abbreviated as RL. Our classrooms must be places that encourage teachers and students to focus on the craft and structure of complex pieces of texts, looking not just at plot but also theme (RL.9-10.2) and demanding students use textual evidence to support their thoughtful analyses (RL.9-10.1). These steps are satisfied through both an introduction and extended analysis of the succinct literature of poetry.

Because of its nature, poetry encourages both literacy—the building block of an educated and capable populace—and global citizenry. The Common Core is built on the concept of range and complexity in reading with teachers building on texts that get progressively more complex as students advance through each grade level (RL. 9-10.10). Further, students should be analyzing a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature

(RL.9-10.6). When building a poetry unit—especially a unit that focuses on World War I or any event that played out on a world stage—it is easy to include poems from various cultures and time periods. Our national standards in English-Language Arts recognize that students at the secondary level need to be reading texts selected from a broad range of cultures and periods. This includes "narrative poems, lyrical poems, free verse poems, sonnets, odes, ballads, and epics." <sup>9</sup> Poems written during the war have become the permanent "verbal artifacts" of World War I, to appropriate a phrase of W.H. Auden. <sup>10</sup> It is as important to study these artifacts, as it is to know the causes and consequences of a world at total war.

The Common Core encourages teachers to build cross-curricular units. The History/Social Studies Standards, a subset of the English-Language Arts Standards, are abbreviated RH for Reading History. Students must be able to examine key ideas and details and, just like in literature, they must be able to cite specific textual evidence (RH.9-10.1) and determine central ideas (RH.9-10.2). The difference is that, in history, student-historians should be reading primary and secondary sources in order to compare and contrast the treatment of the same topic over several primary and secondary sources (RH.9-10.9). Many of the poems from World War I are first-hand narratives and are found in the diaries and journals of the poet-soldiers, creating first-hand documentation and personal insights. "Children need to be told personal stories about historical events such as the First World War because these are often too big for them to comprehend... stories are able to get through to people in a way that history books are unable to." <sup>11</sup> In this sense, the poetry and history textbooks complement each other, each giving something the other cannot.

In 1938, just months before the start of a second World War, Winston Churchill defended the absolute need for a country to have an investment in the arts. "The arts are essential to any complete national life. The State owes it to itself to sustain and encourage them....Ill fares the race which fails to salute the arts with the reverence and delight which are their due." <sup>12</sup> The livelihood of many in the arts, not to mention every elective program in every school, is threatened whenever the economy takes a downturn. Likewise, when standards change—such as the switch to Common Core—some politicians and administrators can overreact in an attempt to appease their constituents. In my own district and across my state, senior English is being eliminated and replaced with a course called Expository Reading and Writing. ERWC focuses on non-fiction modules such as "The Rhetoric of the Op-Ed Page: Ethos, Pathos, and Logos" and "Good Food/Bad Food." Fiction has been replaced by magazines, poetry supplanted by newspaper articles. This is the result of erroneous beliefs that senior English courses that focus on non-fiction will better meet the Common Core and improve test scores. Contemporary British writer and activist Jeanette Winterson counters this dangerous path:

When people say that poetry is a luxury or an option, or for the educated middle classes, or that it shouldn't be read in school because it is irrelevant, or any of the strange and stupid things that are said about poetry and its place in our lives, I suspect that the people doing the saying have had things pretty easy. A tough life needs a tough language—and that is what poetry is. That is what literature offers—a language powerful enough to say how it is. It isn't a hiding place. It is a finding place. <sup>13</sup>

In 2013 the American Academy of Arts and Sciences commissioned a report: *The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences for a Vibrant, Competitive, and Secure Nation*. Their findings indicate that there has been a troubling shift in the pendulum of education away from the liberal arts towards science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Since 2011, Common Core State Standards have been suggesting more non-fiction texts be taught and that, by Grade 12, students should spend only 30% of their day on fiction

and 70% of their reading should be informational texts. <sup>14</sup> In an overreaction, this means *Fast Food Nation* has replaced *Faustus* in some districts. But the adoption of the Common Core does not mean that 70% of the reading in 12th grade English classes should be informational, but that nonfiction should make up 70% of all the reading 12th graders should do throughout their school day, across all their subjects. The final report stated three overarching goals:

1. to educate Americans in the knowledge, skills, and understanding [students] will need to thrive in a twenty-first-century democracy;
2. to foster a society that is innovative, competitive, and strong; and
3. to equip a nation for leadership in an interconnected world.

The report warns "these goals cannot be achieved by science alone." <sup>15</sup> In the 88-page document, the Commission details how the humanities and social sciences are key in maintaining national excellence in education. If the goal of the country is to have educated citizens, then citizens must have a background in the humanities. A sustained, structured, and scaffolded poetry unit teaches the highest levels in Bloom's Taxonomy—analysis, synthesis, and evaluation—which are essential in shaping citizens who can think critically and independently. These findings echo the United Kingdom's Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) report *Poetry in Schools: a Survey of Practice, 2006/07* where primary and secondary schools were evaluated to see if and how poetry was taught. Their findings were that a lot of the poetry being taught was considered "relatively lightweight" and pupils had "a limited experience of classic poems and poems from other traditions and cultures." <sup>16</sup> Their findings also showed that students enjoyed poetry when their teachers were using active approaches. Additionally, Ofsted found that it was necessary in broadening the range of poems studied:

Poetry matters because it is a central example of the use human beings make of words to explore and understand. Like other forms of writing we value, it lends shape and meaning to our experiences and helps us move confidently in the world we know and to step beyond it. [Therefore,] poetry should be at the heart of work in English because of the quality of language...that it offers to us. <sup>17</sup>

## Teaching Strategies

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Visually identifying a poem is a relatively easy task: students recognize a jagged right edge, a traditional use of rhyme, a metrical pattern. They can see the shape and abbreviated length. Verbalizing a definition of poetry is another matter entirely for students and teachers, as well as scholars and poets. Isaac Newton defined poetry as "ingenious nonsense." Carl Sandburg called it "an echo asking a shadow to dance." Samuel Taylor Coleridge said that "poetry [is] the best words in their best order." Diction and syntax are two of the goals in teaching voice: to consider not just words, but their order across the page. As in the case of that chocolate truffle, using the vehicle of poetry to teach language and style can be more satisfying than using prose, but it requires time, patience, and courage. As such, it should be the focus in our classrooms rather than the afterthought.

## Why Read and Study the Poetry of World War I?

This year—2014—is the start of the one-hundred-year anniversary of the outbreak of World War I. This war is a critical moment in history: the first time the entire modern world entered into conflict. As soldiers on both sides hunkered down for what would prove to be a lengthy and costly war—in both human and practical measures—poetry started pouring back home in letters and telegrams. In just four years, more than 2200 men and women in just Britain and Ireland had poems published, creating a diverse range of voices and attitudes towards the war. <sup>18</sup> Much of this verse was printed in newspapers and, later, individual collections and anthologies; some of it is being rediscovered as we approach the centenary. As British journalist Jasper Copping noted, "The works of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Rupert Brooke beautifully describe the pity and loss of the conflict raging around them and are still appreciated for their historical and literary significance." <sup>19</sup> These poems provide voices from a generation that started off optimistic and enthusiastic about the battle ahead of them. Many believed that the conflict, which started in July 1914, would be over by that Christmas. These poets were young and hopeful, educated and shaped by what they had learned in school, by attitudes towards war that had been handed down for generations. This idealism and misinformation was reinforced by popular music and yellow journalism. By war's end, their bodies, minds, and voices were broken and exhausted, attitudes changed sharply by four years of hell, horror, and hopelessness.

It is important to remember that the poetry produced during World War I is not all doom and gloom. Most contemporary poetry units, especially a unit for World War I, allows for an incorporation of the music and song from the era. Music played an important part in the trenches as it does today with soldiers fighting wars in the deserts and jungles. "Music can transcend national, age and gender boundaries. It's a shared experience that helps cohesion and team bonding. It uplifts people and takes them away from the moment they are in." <sup>20</sup> Songs were a way to propagandize World War I and the war effort. Songs were written in the trenches and on the home front as a way of keeping up morale. Remember, "[i]n 1914, there was virtually no cinema; there was no radio at all, and there certainly was no television...amusement was to be found in language formally arranged, either in books and periodicals, or at the theater and music hall." <sup>21</sup>

Songs to incorporate in the unit include Jack Judge's 1911 hit "It's a Long Way to Tipperary," one of the first hits of World War I. This song instantly brought a sense of "camaraderie and [chased] away fear as the 1st Battalion of one of the British Army's Irish regiments headed for the Western Front." <sup>22</sup> Ivor Novello and Lena Gilbert Ford's 1914 composition "Keep the Home Fires Burning" encouraged those who were not fighting to "Let no tears add to their hardships/As the soldiers pass along,/And although your heart is breaking/Make it sing this cheery song." <sup>23</sup> Paul Rubens's 1914 song "Your King and Country Want You" has the great line "Oh, we don't want to lose you but we think you ought to go" which humorously pushed men towards recruiting stations and the front line. <sup>24</sup> While post-modern eyes have learned a distrust towards war and are cynical towards manipulative propaganda, we can see that these songs played on the sentiments of both the men being encouraged to enlist and the women who assisted in the emotional manipulation of their brothers, sons, boyfriends, and husbands.

Perhaps the most famous of these early war songs is George and Felix Powell's 1915 standard "Pack Up Your Troubles": "Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag,/And smile, smile, smile,/While you've a lucifer to light your fag,/Smile, boys, that's the style./What's the use of worrying?/It never was worth while." <sup>25</sup> It is now considered a "viral hit of World War I" for its jaunty, simple nature and rousing, stirring message. <sup>26</sup> The song was originally dismissed as nonsense by George Powell and stuffed in a drawer, but it was brought out and polished up when "New York publishers Francis Day and Hunter...were giving a prize of 100 guineas for a

marching song for the troops." <sup>27</sup> Even today, popular music quickly saturates a populace and country, reaching into all corners and forming a great medium for conveying messages.

Recognizing this capability, governments often used it as an effective means for inspiring fervor, pride, patriotism, and action in the citizens in order to gain manpower, homeland support, and funds. Composers and publishers readily cooperated and adopted these new musical motifs with which to earn money from a large population rallied by war and eager to respond to the sentiments by purchasing the pro-war music. <sup>28</sup>

"Pack Up Your Troubles," an upbeat song written in 1/2 time and G major, mimicked the cheerful optimism of soldiers marching off to war with heads held high, whistling jaunty tunes. <sup>29</sup> Music scholars note that the G major means that the song was quick to learn, simple to play on the home piano or the accordion in the trenches, and, most importantly, easy to sing along to. <sup>30</sup> It speaks of the universal life of a soldier: the kit bag, or soldier's duffle, translates universally to those who have to march off to battle packed with just the essentials. As conductor, singer, and scholar Gareth Malone notes: "It hoodwinks you, this song. You think it's going to be a simple music hall song, then we go into a slightly rousing and emotional section, and I think that's key to this. This is why it grabs people. People are in need of a song like this during very difficult times."

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### **Why Were So Many World War I Soldiers Poets?**

With the passage of the United Kingdom's 1870 Education Act, the 1876 Royal Commission on the Factory Acts, and a lengthier process in the United States (starting with Massachusetts by 1852 and ending with Mississippi in 1917), most western countries had a compulsory education system starting at the age of five and extending through the age of sixteen in place by the end of the World War I. <sup>32</sup> For England especially, this meant that the soldiers were an educated, literate generation: "For the first time in history virtually all the soldiers who took part were able to read and write. And many of them, perhaps feeling sentimental, perhaps being shaken and appalled by what they had experienced, wrote poetry." <sup>33</sup> These men had read, analyzed, memorized, and written poetry throughout their school years, so they were emulating these past masters and their school-day lessons.

Many soldiers wrote in diaries and letters texts that were rich in allusions to the classical literature of their formative years. General Sir Ian Hamilton wrote in his diary, after an unwanted postponement in the Gallipoli expedition, "Postponed! The word is like a knell," evoking a line from "Ode to a Nightingale" by John Keats: "Forlorn! The very word is like a bell." <sup>34</sup> Captain Oliver Lyttelton, 1st Viscount Chandos, wrote "Well, that [attack] dawdled away. Ovid and his mistress would not have addressed the gods that day: '*O lente, lente currite nocte equi* [Run softly, softly, horses of the night].'" <sup>35</sup> Granted it would be expected that officers like General Hamilton and Captain Lyttelton would have been highly educated, but even the lowest level of soldiers, like a Private Stephen Graham who would not have had access to a Cambridge education, were able to reference such works as *Richard III* in letters: "'[It] recalled the mood of Clarence's dream [from *Richard III*, 1.4] when he was pacing on the hatches of the ship at night.'" <sup>36</sup>

[The soldiers of World War I] belonged to a...poetic generation, whose inherited tradition and technique were utterly at variance with the material which they suddenly found themselves trying to handle. So that whether they wrote in the overly-simplified lyric vein now commonly associated with Georgian poetry, or in the prosaic, academic model that was equally popular with pre-1914

poets, they were quite unable to adjust themselves, as many critics have pointed out, to the grim realities of modern war. What men...were experiencing and feeling, after the holocaust of the Somme if not before, could no longer be given poetic expression by writers whose sensibilities had been conditioned in Edwardian days or earlier, and whose poetic conventions were out-worn even before the war started. <sup>37</sup>

The Georgian tradition is a term given to lyrical poetry from the first part of the twentieth century, written during the early part of the reign of George V, England's king from 1910 until 1935. The Georgians came from the conservative climate of the first decade of the twentieth century: "In general, the conservatism that prevailed in the first decade of the twentieth century resulted in patriotic and nationalistic issues often being addressed in the poetry of the period." <sup>38</sup> When first applied, the Georgian tradition was supposed to mean romantic and new, a promise that a long period of stagnation in British poetry was coming to an end. <sup>39</sup> After a half-decade of war and profound loss, the term became a pejorative, synonymous with "old-fashioned" mostly because Edward Marsh, the editor of the five volumes of *Georgian Poetry* that were published between 1912 and 1922, resisted releasing anything that was unsavory, uncomfortable, or unpleasant despite the fact that the horrors of total war had irrevocably changed the face of history and the arts. <sup>40</sup>

### **Suggested Poets and Poetry**

Borrowing my structure from I.M. Parsons' 1965 anthology *Men Who March Away* and John Sadler and Rosie Serdiville's 2013 collection *Tommy Rot: WWI Poetry They Didn't Let You Read*, this unit incorporates six movements in this poetic history: Visions of Glory or Expectation, The Bitter Truth or Resignation, No More Jokes, The Pity of War or Mud, The Wounded and The Dead, and Aftermath. However, perhaps the best way for students to study the poetry of World War I is to allow them to stumble upon the poetry on their own. This means having collections of war poetry in our classrooms and creating links to online sites, and then "[giving] students a reason for exploring these [poems]." <sup>41</sup>

#### *Visions of Glory or Expectation*

Like the music and songs of 1914, the poetry from the earliest part of World War I was optimistic, pro-war verse. There was a "mood of optimistic exhilaration with which so many writers, young and old, greeted the outbreak of war. This was a period of euphoria, when it was still possible to believe that war was a tolerably chivalrous affair, offering welcome opportunities for heroism and self-sacrifice." <sup>42</sup> The poetry that emerged from the beginning of the war emulated the styles and rules of traditional poetry and traditional rhetoric.

For this first movement in war poetry, Alfred, Lord Tennyson's 1854 poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade" works well as a starting point in studying rhyme, meter, assonance, and alliteration. It would also be a classic example of a poem that the poet-soldiers themselves would have studied and embraced. Additional poetry from this part of the war would include Eric Blair's "Arise Young Men of England," Owen Seaman's "Pro Patria," Jessie Pope's "The Call," and Rupert Brooke, one of the original founders of the anthology *Georgian Poetry*, "The Soldier." These poems evoke that heady sunniness of this war being a good thing, a necessary endeavor. This would also be a good place to include the music and songs mentioned previously in this curriculum unit.

#### *The Bitter Truth or Resignation*

Moving from the ideal of war to its bitter reality, the next phase in the poetry of World War I is a shift in understanding that the front is actually "'the hell where youth and laughter go.'" <sup>43</sup> These boys—just past



college-aged students—were now men on the frontlines and their poems were reports on the experience of war. Poems for this period would include John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" and "The Silent Ones" by Ivor Gurney.

However, people always find humor in the unlikeliest of places. Despite the serious nature of war, the ugliness of the trenches, and the privations of the home front, there is much wit to be found throughout World War I. Since a unit on the poetry of war can become bleak, it would be best to sprinkle some sarcasm and wit throughout the unit. Mark Sheridan's 1914 song "Belgium Put the Kibosh on the Kaiser" explores some of the ridiculousness the Allied soldiers and citizens found in war:

A silly German sausage Dreamt Napoleon he'd be,  
Then he went and broke his promise,  
It was made in Germany.

In addition to verses from silly songs, there are lots of less academic works created on the battlefield. The day-to-day tedium of the trenches, the frequent horror of war, and the natural human response to unrelenting awfulness can make for gallows humor. These poems may not have as much of the literary merit and genius of Owens, Sassoon, or Brooke, but there is the human element as well as an historical importance. Naval sub-lieutenant A.P. Herbert wrote a popular poem about one of the least-liked officers, General Sir Cameron Deane Shute of the British Army.

For shit may be shot at odd corners and paper supplied there to suit,  
but a shit would be shot without mourners if somebody shot that shit Shute. —A.P. Herbert,  
"The General," circa 1916

Obviously, be careful as you hunt for poems of this lighter fare, but there is a humanity in the humor and the profane that high school students will recognize. "These men are actually having a good laugh. What they write is raw and unedited. Mostly the men were private soldiers rather than officers, but they [too] were not uneducated...Their works are moving...because they are funny. They don't seem to lose heart. It is all about keeping cheerful and trying to look on the bright side." <sup>44</sup> Another poem from this time parodied a famous song "Little Grey Home in the West" with the lines: "There's a shallow wet trench near the Houplines/'Tis the wettest there has ever been/There are bullets that fly/There are shells in the sky/And it smells like a German 'has been.'" <sup>45</sup> This piece of fluff was found in a letter from British Second Lieutenant Gamble dated on November 20, 1915. The balance of the letter continues to describe the wretched living conditions: "The water in the front line was everywhere a foot or more deep; it was intensely cold; the hail came across with such force, that it seemed to be mixed with bullets, and I'm sure many men must have thought they were shot by hail-stones." <sup>46</sup>

Another poem, "I Want to Tell You Now Sir," shows a funny side of the Battle of Ypres, a balance to John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields": "I want to tell you now sir/Before it's all forgot/That we were up at Wipers/And found it very hot." <sup>47</sup> This verse can set up a classroom conversation about rhyme and meter, the tedium of trench life, and the typical-British refusal to pronounce words in anything but a strictly British fashion, and the humanity of the soldiers who found a way to laugh in the worst of all conditions.

### *No More Jokes*

The third phase of war poetry is the anti-war verses. I.M. Parsons describes this phase in *World War I Poetry* as "poems of protest." <sup>48</sup> The tone has shifted firmly away from the high-spirited, pro-war joy where battle was

where a boy became a man and into dark, snarling, critical anger that seeks to mock the experience around them. The dominating tone for these poems, as expected, is bitter and satirical reflecting the exhaustion and disappointment of the soldiers. A poem that starts with "God, how I hate you," encapsulates the cynicism of a world that has been at war far longer than anticipated with still no end in sight. Poems to include in this portion of the unit would include "The General" by Siegfried Sassoon, Charlotte Mary Mew's "June, 1915," and Charles Hamilton Sorley's "To Germany."

### *The Pity of War or Mud*

Not necessarily poems written by soldiers, this movement in war poetry comes from those who "had the heart and wit" to understand the bigger picture of total war. <sup>49</sup> Some of these poems are written after the war that allowed for a temporal distance to create a perspective on the consequences. Other poems were written during the war from the soldiers still on frontlines, still in trenches and dugouts. I.M. Parsons found the mood of many of these poems to be "meditative and reflective, rather than assertive or denunciatory." <sup>50</sup>

Poems to include in this section of the unit include Wilfred Owen's "Insensibility," "Parable of the Old Man and the Young," "Anthem for Doomed Youth," and "Dulce et Decorum Est." If Jessie Pope's "The Call" was taught during that first movement (Visions of Glory), it would be interesting for students to know that Wilfred Owen dedicated an early draft of "Dulce et Decorum Est" to Jessie Pope herself. <sup>51</sup> There is also Evelyn Underhill's "Non-Combatants," Edward Thomas's "Rain," and Ivor Gurney's "Strange Hells" to cover in this middle part of the unit.

### *The Casualties: The Wounded and The Dead*

"World War I had a profound human cost, both on servicemen and civilians. Conservative estimates put war casualties at 12 million dead and 20 million severely wounded, though in reality both figures should probably be much higher." <sup>52</sup> Factor in the additional, emotional toll on the parents who lost sons, children who lost fathers, wives who lost husbands, and all who lost friends, cousins, and siblings—not to mention, as Erich Maria Remarque phrased it, "a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by the war"—and the human cost was astronomical and felt for decades. <sup>53</sup>

Poems to include in this part of the unit include Wilfred Owen "Disabled"; Siegfried Sassoon's "Suicide in the Trenches," "Does It Matter," and "Survivors"; and May Herschel-Clarke, "Nothing to Report," "For Valour," and "The Mother." May-Herschel-Clark's "The Mother" was written two years after Rupert Brooke's 1915 sonnet "The Soldier," and should be understood as a direct response to his stirring, pro-war rhetoric.

### *Aftermath*

The absolute devastation of a world that went to war had aftershocks felt throughout the rest of the twentieth century. Never before had the world seen such devastation caused by modern warfare. There was a solemn vow to let this war be "the war to end all wars," a goal that was unmet within two decades. Poems to include in this portion of the unit include Sara Teasdale's "There Will Come Soft Rains" (1920), A.E. Housman's "Here Dead We Lie" (1936). More contemporary poems can also be included such as Edwin Brock's Viet Nam era "Five Ways to Kill a Man" (1972) which has a stanza on World War I.

## **Close Reading and Annotating Texts**

Annotation is the process of adding notes, explanations, or comments directly on a text, diagram, or image. It

is a learned process that requires a traditional method of teaching: namely direct instruction, close and careful modeling, and guided practice before students should be expected to demonstrate independent mastery.

Annotation requires multiple readings of the same text, going over the piece once to get an initial, emotional reaction and a lay of the land, then a second time to unlock the vocabulary, a third layer for more intellectual responses. In some ways it mimics Bloom's Taxonomy: read once for knowledge, twice to approach comprehension, and many more times to get to analysis. While annotation is a major tool for understanding prose passages, it works very well for poetry, perhaps more so because the shorter, denser text of a poem makes the reading and multiple re-readings vastly more appealing and approachable. Students are more likely to read and re-read a 100-word poem than a 2000-word short story.

The strategy of annotating text pushes students to make personal connections on their own, an important part of the Common Core State Standards as well as higher-level thinking. It is more than just reading; it is interacting with text. Since it is not an innate part of reading, where too often students read to complete the assignment and check something off their personal to-do lists, annotation must be explicitly taught and reinforced throughout the unit and the year.

### **Using Interactive Notebooks**

An Interactive Notebook is a paper-and-pen strategy that encourages both organization and close reading. Spiral-bound notebooks are used to teach students how to organize and interact with text. When opened and spread out, an interactive notebook has a left-hand side (the backside of the previous page) and a right-hand side. Teacher handouts, classroom notes, vocabulary words are glued down on the right-hand side while student activities—including doodles, responses, journal activities—are maintained on the left-hand. More information on creating and maintaining Interactive Notebooks can be found by visiting the Teacher's Curriculum Institute.

### **SOAPSTone Technique**

SOAPSTone is a College Board strategy. It is a mnemonic acronym for a series of elements that students should examine as they begin to analyze literature, namely Speaker, Occasion, Audience, Purpose, Subject, and Tone. <sup>54</sup> This technique gives students a "conscious plan" to approach any piece of text regardless of length or style. <sup>55</sup> Students must go beyond the surface level of any piece of writing by teaching students to consider the speaker (not the writer, but who is telling the story?), occasion (why was this written?), audience (to whom is the piece intended? Who is supposed to read it?), purpose (what is the reason for the writing of this text?), subject (what is this piece about?), and tone (what is the attitude of the writer?) as elements that will ground the piece. It provides clarity and focuses the student to seek textual evidence before interpreting the piece. More information about this strategy is readily available through the College Board.

## **Classroom Activities**

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### **Activity #1: What Is a Poem?/Can a Sentence Be a Poem? (2 days)**

Teaching Goals: Students will be able to define and apply elements of voice such as diction, detail, imagery, figurative language, and syntax

Start with a discussion of descriptive sentence writing, reminding them of elements of voice: diction, imagery, detail, figurative language, and tone. Then, distribute photographs or paintings from World War I (Google Images has a great repository of both mediums), one image per student. Have each student write a descriptive sentence to describe the image in twenty words or fewer. It might be advisable to have extra pictures so that students can exchange the image they are given for one they like better.

Next, distribute war poetry anthologies or teacher-created poetry readers around the classroom and encourage students to browse through them to find poems that they really like. Have students copy a poem or an excerpt from the poem onto unlined paper exactly as it looks in the book, mindful of line breaks, stanza breaks, indentations, and punctuation. Post the finished product on a wall in the classroom. Be aware of students who are re-writing the poem into paragraph form or as a sentence string as they may not have had much experience with what poetry looks like.

On the second day, discuss the elements of a poem: what is a poem? Look at sentence-length poems such as "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams (1923) or "Epitaphs of War" by Rudyard Kipling (a collection of short verses published in 1922) and discuss whether these qualify as poems, why or why not. Now would be a very good time to discuss whether or not a poem has to rhyme.

Return to the sentences created by the students that used some of the images of war and have them reformat the sentence into a poem. While students might want to revise their use of poetic devices such as imagery or detail, they should not alter the length of the poem's one-sentence, twenty-word limit. Add these finished products to the classroom wall of war poetry. With permission, you might also want to have students write their one sentence poem, in poetic form, with colored chalk on school sidewalks.

## **Activity #2: Annotating Poetry**

Teaching Goals: Students will be able to define the subject, occasion, audience, purpose, speaker, and tone of a poem (SOAPStone technique). Students will also interpret meaning in poetry and support an interpretation of a poem with evidence from the text

It is important to model the process of annotation as you move further into the poetry unit. For this assignment, find an example of an annotated poem—the teacher can create the example, it can come from a former student's work, or it can be found online using Google images or Google Books. Begin by explaining that annotation is a way of having a conversation with the text and its author. Students should be encouraged to ask questions, pay compliments, argue a point, or seek clarification.

Next, project the image of the annotated poem to the front of the classroom using an overhead, LCD projector, or interactive whiteboard. Lead students through a discussion of what the model-writer marked up, creating a rubric of annotation to help students differentiate between taking notes that are "incomplete or too random."<sup>56</sup> Some teachers have found great success in providing an annotation key for their students: using an asterisk (\*) for passages that demonstrate a fresh way of saying something; a question mark (?) to indicate something that does not make sense; a hashtag (#) for the bigger theme or picture. Leave this rubric and the annotation key on the board or make a poster-sized version of it for students to refer to throughout the year.

Finally, distribute a short war poem to the class—"The Soldier" by Rupert Brooke (1915) would work very well for this assignment. Have them glue the poem onto the right-hand side of their interactive notebook. Next, read the poem out loud once as the teacher, then invite several student volunteers to read the poem a second, third, and even fourth time. Students should use a highlighter or a colorful pen to mark up the poem,

referring to the rubric for thoughtful suggestions of what to annotate. On the left-hand page, have students begin a SOAPStone analysis (who is the Speaker, what is the Occasion, who is the intended Audience, what is the Subject, and what is the Tone), filling in as much as they can individually and with citable evidence before moving to a Think-Pair-Share model. Students should also create below-the-surface discussion questions that could lead to a journal activity or writing assignment.

### **Activity #3: The Vocabulary of Poetry**

Teaching Goal: Students will be able to define and apply poetic devices including alliteration, assonance, consonance, metaphor, onomatopoeia, repetition (including anaphora and epiphora), rhyme scheme (including end rhyme, slant rhyme, and internal rhyme), simile, and theme.

Before the lesson begins, find examples of World War I poems that you enjoy. Look for poems that have strong examples of alliteration, assonance, consonance, metaphor, onomatopoeia, repetition, rhyme scheme, simile, and theme.

Print the poems, one per page with a label of the single element that the poem exemplifies. For example, tag Jessie Pope's "The Call" with the vocabulary word "repetition" and a working definition. Slip the page into a sheet protector to safeguard the pages for today's lesson and to be able to re-use for the next class period and next year.

Have the class sit in pairs or triads, one poem per group. If you printed 14 poems, you will have groups of 2-3 students. Have students copy the vocabulary word into their notebooks, then a phrase from the poem that demonstrates the concept along with a citation of the poem. End class with a discussion of their new vocabulary words or by transferring the information to poster paper around the room.

### **Activity #4: Writing Poetry**

The great irony of most secondary school poetry units is "pupils spend a significant amount of time studying poetry written by others, but most of them write no poetry of their own." <sup>57</sup> This is true for most of the things we study in fiction—we read short stories, plays, and novels, but we don't assign students to write an original story, play, or novel. However, poetry is another matter entirely: imagine receiving a class set of poems to grade rather than a class set of essays.

Writing poetry might be perceived as a luxury with a "crowded examination timetable," but it is thoughtful reflection. <sup>58</sup> Writing poetry is expressive: "much of it is easily based on models and patterns, and the process can be quick and painless and even fun. Let's face it: writing poems is not like writing essays." <sup>59</sup> Poetry helped the soldier make sense of the war and can help our students make connections as well.

Throughout the unit, have students write: something as small as a haiku (5-7-5 syllables) can be an exit ticket for that day's class. This daily or weekly activity will focus students on summarization skills and reinforce the need to look for main ideas.

Longer emulation activities will help students focus on not only the voice of the poet, but their own voice as an emerging student-writer. A model poem such as Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (1917) can be the starting point for writing a poem like "Six Ways of Looking at a Soldier" or "Nine Ways of Writing about the War."

## Resources

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### Materials for Classroom Use

#### I. Visions of Glory or Expectations

Eric Blair, "Arise Young Men of England," 1914.

([https://seandodson.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/ericblair\\_edited.jpg](https://seandodson.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/ericblair_edited.jpg))

Owen Seaman, "Pro Patria," 1914. (<http://www.bartleby.com/266/15.html>),

Jessie Pope, "The Call," 1914. (<http://allpoetry.com/poem/8605781-The-Call-by-Jessie-Pope>)

Rupert Brooke, "The Soldier," 1915. (<http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/soldier>)

Jack Judge, "It's a Long Way to Tipperary," 1911.

(<http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/itsalongwaytotipperary.htm>)

Ivor Novello and Lena Gilbert Ford, "Keep the Home Fires Burning," 1914.

(<http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/keepthehomefiresburning.htm>)

Paul Rubens, "Your King and Country Want You," 1914.

(<http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/yourkingandcountrywantyou.htm>)

George and Felix Powell, "Pack Up Your Troubles," 1915.

(<http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/packupyourtroubles.htm>)

#### II. The Bitter Truth or Resignation

John McCrae, "In Flanders Fields," 1915.

(<http://www.greatwar.co.uk/poems/john-mccrae-in-flanders-fields.htm>)

Ivor Gurney, "The Silent One," 1917.

(<http://www.worldwarone.it/2014/01/the-poets-and-world-war-silent-one-by.html>)

Mark Sheridan, "Belgium Put the Kibash on the Kaiser," 1915.

(<http://www.ww1photos.com/KiboshOnKaiserVideo.html>)

A.P. Herbert, "The General," circa 1916.

(<https://www.facebook.com/WW1ayrshiresharvest/posts/575061632531410>)

#### III. No More Jokes

Charlotte Mary Mew, "June, 1915," 1915. (<http://allpoetry.com/June-1915>)

Charles Hamilton Sorley, "To Germany," 1915. (<http://www.poemhunter.com/charles-hamilton-sorley/>)

Arthur Graeme West, "God, How I Hate You!" 1916.

(<http://allpoetry.com/God!-How-I-Hate-You!>)

Siegfried Sassoon, "The General," 1918. (<http://www.bartleby.com/136/12.html>)

#### **IV. The Pity of War or Mud**

Evelyn Underhill, "Non-Combatants," 1917. (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/0/24961283>)

Edward Thomas, "Rain," 1916. (<http://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/poems/rain/>)

Charles Hamilton Sorley, "When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead," 1915.  
(<http://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/poems/when-you-see-millions-of-the-mouthless-dead/>)

Wilfred Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est," 1917. (<http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/owen1.html>)

#### **V. The Wounded and the Dead**

Wilfred Owen, "Disabled," 1917. (<http://allpoetry.com/Disabled>)

Siegfried Sassoon, "Does It Matter," 1918. (<http://www.bartleby.com/136/14.html>)

May Herschel-Clarke, "The Mother," 1917.  
(<http://allpoetry.com/poem/8600857-The-Mother-by-May-Herschel-Clarke>)

#### **VI. Aftermath**

Rudyard Kipling, "Epitaphs of War," 1922.

(<http://www.bartleby.com/364/202.html>)

Sara Teasdale, "There Will Come Soft Rains," 1920.  
(<http://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/poems/there-will-come-soft-rains/>)

A.E. Housman, "Here Dead We Lie," 1936. (<http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/housman.html>)

Edwin Brock, "Five Ways to Kill a Man," 1972. ([http://worlds-poetry.com/edwin\\_brock/five\\_ways\\_to\\_kill\\_a\\_man](http://worlds-poetry.com/edwin_brock/five_ways_to_kill_a_man))

## **Appendix**

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English-Language Arts Common Core State Standards

Craft and Structure (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1): Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

*Craft and Structure (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2):* Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

*Craft and Structure (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.6):* Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

*Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.10):* By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

History/Social Sciences Common Core State Standards

*Key Ideas and Details (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1):* Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

*Key Ideas and Details (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2):* Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

*Integration of Knowledge and Ideas (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9):* Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

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