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Poetry from the Trenches of World War I

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Grade Level:

9 – 12

Objectives:

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to

- Analyze World War I poetry in order to gain insight into the soldiers' point of view of the battlefield
- Construct a poem from the point of view of a soldier using historical evidence from various primary and secondary sources

Guiding Question:

What insight can primary sources, like poetry, provide on the soldiers' point of view of the World War I battlefield?

Connections to Common Core:

CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RH.11–12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RH.11–12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RH.11–12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines *faction* in *Federalist* No. 10).

CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RH.11–12.5 Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

CCSS.ELA–Literacy.RH.11–12.6 Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

Connections to C3 Framework:

D2.His.4.9–12 Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

D2.His.11–9–12 Critique the usefulness of historical sources for a specific historical inquiry based on their maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.

D4.6.9–12 Use disciplinary and interdisciplinary lenses to understand the characteristics and causes of local, regional, and global problems; instances of such problems in multiple context, and challenges and opportunities faced by those trying to address these problems over time and place.

Documents Used:

Audio Recording:

Enrico Caruso, "Over There," audio recording

<http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/6728>

Poetry:

Eva Dobell, "Pluck"

<https://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/wwlit/education/tutorials/intro/women>

Eva Dobell was a British nurse during World War I who was known to write poems about some of her patients.

Wilfred Owen, "Dulce et Decorum"; "Anthem for a Doomed Youth"

<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/wwlit/collections/item/3303>

<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/wwlit/collections/item/3290?CISOBOX=1&REC=2>

Wilfred Owen, composed most of his poems between August 1917 to September 1918, was killed at the age of 25 only one week before the Armistice.

Siegfried Sassoon, "How to Die"; "Does It Matter"

<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/wwlit/collections/document/9855/9705>

<https://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/wwlit/education/tutorials/intro/sassoon/does.html>

Siegfried Sassoon was a decorated British war hero who spoke out against the war after being repeatedly wounded in battle.

Edward Thomas, "Rain"

<https://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/wwlit/education/tutorials/intro/thomas/rain.html>

Edward Thomas enlisted in the British Army in 1915 and was killed in action in France in 1917.

Images in the PowerPoint file:

William James Aylward:

American Troops Supply Train, 1918

http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_445411

His Bunkie, 1918

http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_445408

On the Trail of the Hun – St. Mihiel Drive, 1918

http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_445410

Troops Waiting to Advance at Hattonchâtel – St. Mihiel Drive, 1918

http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1384429

George Matthews Harding:

American Infantry, Advancing with Tanks, September 12, 1918

http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_448021

Boche Plane Falling in No Man's Land of Verdun Offensive, October 1918

http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_448020

Exploded Boche Dump at Cierges, 1918

http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_448027

First Aid Station with American Wounded, 1918

http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_448015

Road to La Charmel, 1918

http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_448014

Rounding up Boche Prisoners, 1918

http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_448013

Verdun Offensive, 1918

http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_448004

Morgan Wallace, *Out from Battle*, 1918

http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_448043

Ernest Clifford Piexotto, *The Flying Field, Issoudun*, August 1918.

http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_445349

Addison N. Scurlock, *Soldier in World War I uniform with hat: photoprint*

http://collections.si.edu/search/results.htm?q=record_ID:siris_arc_227945

Lesson Description:

Overview: Poetry was a popular means of expressing opinions during World War I. This lesson uses poems as primary sources that provide insight into the soldier's point of view of the battlefield. Students will use the information they learn about World War I to write their own poems from a soldier's perspective.

Time: One 90 minute class or two 45 minute class periods

Materials:

- Computer for World War I PowerPoint and audio
- Poem handouts
- Poem Rubric handout

Lesson Preparation:

- Before class the teacher needs to download World War I Images PowerPoint and Enrico Caruso's recording of "Over There" so that it is playing as students enter the room.

- The teacher needs to assign students into groups of four and determine the roles each student will perform. Each student will need a copy of the poem their group is assigned along with a poem rubric handout.

Procedure:

- As students enter the classroom a PowerPoint, which is attached to this lesson, will display images of World War I soldiers. Along with the images, the students will hear an Enrico Caruso recording of "Over There."
- The images and music will be used to start a discussion on soldiers' perspectives on the war. Suggested questions:
 - How do these images make you feel?
 - How do these images contrast with the upbeat music?
 - How would American soldiers view these images/music?
- Teacher should select an image and ask students, based on this image, what can you learn about life as a soldier?
- The teacher will read aloud Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est." The teacher will stop periodically to model interpreting the text and asking the students questions. A copy of the poem along with notes is provided in handout 1.
- Students will be placed in groups of four and assigned one of the following roles:
 - **Clarifier:** clarifies confusing words or phrases in the poem
 - **Connector:** connects the poem to previous knowledge
 - **Questioner:** poses questions about the poem
 - **Summarizer:** summarizes key ideas in the poem
- Each group will be given a poem to discuss. After all the students have finished reading, the students will perform their role in the discussion.
 - The **clarifier** begins by explaining any words or phrases that the students have trouble understanding. The teacher might choose to delete the definitions on the handout if the students have access to a computer or dictionary.
 - The **connector** highlights parts of the poem that relates to the information previously covered in class.
 - Then the **questioner** asks questions about the poem that the other group members answer.
 - Finally, the **summarizer** writes a paragraph that explains the meaning of the poem.

- The groups will take turns sharing their findings with the class. The teacher will ask questions to the class. Suggested questions:
 - What are some benefits to using poems to study World War I?
 - What are some limitations in using poems to study World War I?
 - What are some common themes found in the poems?
 - “Pluck” was written by a World War I nurse. How is her poem similar and different from that of a soldier’s?
- The teacher will then ask the students to find evidence in the poems that provides insight into the lives of a soldier during World War I.

Assessment Materials:

- Students will write a poem about World War I from the perspective of a soldier. The students will incorporate information that they learned about World War I from the poems they analyzed as well as knowledge gained in previous lessons. The students will be judged based on a poem rubric.

Methods for Extension:

- Students could compare World War I poems with other poems or documents written by soldiers during different time periods. Students could look for common themes as well as learn about issues that were unique to each war.
- Students start by creating a collage of World War I pictures, including descriptions of what is going on in each picture. Students use the pictures to write a reflection on the effects of war.

Adaptations:

- Instead of a poem, the teacher might choose to assign the students to write a letter or postcard from the point of view of World War I soldier.
- For more advanced students, the teacher might have students research the life of World War I soldier and have the student prepare a report.

Bibliography

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“Dulce et Decorum Est”

By Wilfred Owen

1 Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.

5 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! -- An ecstasy of fumbling,
10 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

15 In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
20 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, --
25 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

“Dulce et Decorum Est” – the title is a Latin saying, “It is sweet and right.” The phrase was often repeated at the start of the war. The full quote is at the end of the poem and translates to “it is sweet and right to die for your country.”

Flares– To flame up with a bright, sudden light.

Distant Rest– safety of the camp.

Hoots– The noise made by the shells rushing through the air.

Five-Nines– 5.9 caliber explosive shells

Gas! Poison gas. Gas fills the lungs with fluid and has the same effects as when a person is drowning.

Helmets– the early name for gas masks

Panes– glass in the eye piece of the gas masks

Plunges– To throw violently.

Smothering– to suffocate.

Pace– To walk.

Gargling– To force air quickly from the mouth, referring to the sounds in the throat of the choking man.

Obscene– offensive.

Cud – normally the regurgitated grass that cows chew. Here a similar looking material was coming out of the soldier's mouth.

Incurable– incapable of being altered.

Zest– intense. Ardent– intensely devoted.

Handout 2

"How to Die"

By Siegfried Sassoon

- 1 Dark clouds are smoldering into red
While down the craters morning burns.
The dying soldier shifts his head
To watch the glory that returns;
- 5 He lifts his fingers toward the skies
Where holy brightness breaks in flame;
Radiance reflected in his eyes,
And on his lips a whispered name.
- You'd think, to hear some people talk
- 10 That lads go West with sobs and curses,
And sullen faces white as chalk,
Hankering for wreaths and tombs and hearses.
But they've been taught the way to do it
Like Christian soldiers; not with haste
- 15 And shuddering groans; but passing through it
With due regard for decent taste.

Smoldering- To show signs of repressed anger or hatred.

Craters- A bowl-shaped depression in a surface made by an explosion.

Radiance- warm, cheerful brightness.

Sullen- gloomy, showing bad humor.

Hankering- To have a strong, often restless desire.

Shuddering- To shiver convulsively, as from fear.

Decent- morally upright, respectable.

"Anthem for a Doomed Youth"

By Wilfred Owen

- 1 What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
--Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
- 5 No mockeries for them from prayers or bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,--
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?

- 10 Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of silent minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Patter- To move with quick, light, soft steps.

Orisons- a prayer.

Mockeries- an act of ridicule.

Demented- mentally ill, insane.

Bugles- a brass wind instrument.

Shires- a county in Great Britain.

Pallor- extreme or unnatural paleness.

Pall- a coffin.

Handout 4

“Rain”

By Edward Thomas

- 1 Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain
On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me
Remembering again that I shall die
And neither hear the rain nor give it thanks
- 5 For washing me cleaner than I have been
Since I was born into this solitude.
Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon:
But here I pray that none whom once I loved
Is dying to-night or lying still awake
- 10 Solitary, listening to the rain,
Either in pain or thus in sympathy
Helpless among the living and the dead,
Like a cold water among broken reeds,
Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff,
- 15 Like me who have no love which this wild rain
Has not dissolved except the love of death,
If love it be for what is perfect and
Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint.

Bleak- gloomy and somber.

Solitude- a lonely place.

Myriads- a large number.

Dissolved- to cause to disappear or vanish.

Tempest- a violent windstorm.

“Does it Matter?”

Siegfried Sassoon

- 1 Does it matter?—losing your legs?...
For people will always be kind,
And you need not show that you mind
When the others come in after hunting
5 To gobble their muffins and eggs.

- Does it matter?—losing your sight?..
There's such splendid work for the blind;
And people will always be kind,
As you sit on the terrace remembering
10 And turning your face to the light.

- Do they matter?—those dreams from the pit?..
You can drink and forget and be glad,
And people won't say that you're mad;
For they'll know you've fought for your country
15 And no one will worry a bit.

Gobble— to eat quickly.

Splendid— very good.

Terrace— a porch.

“Pluck”

Eva Dobell

1 Crippled for life at seventeen,
His great eyes seem to question why:
With both legs smashed it might have been
Better in that grim trench to die
5 Than drag maimed years out helplessly.

A child – so wasted and so white,
He told a lie to get his way,
To march, a man with men, and fight
While other boys are still at play.
10 A gallant lie your heart will say.

So broke with pain, he shrinks in dread
To see the 'dresser' drawing near;
And winds the clothes about his head
That none may see his heart-sick fear.
15 His shaking, strangled sobs you hear.

But when the dreaded moment's there
He'll face us all, a soldier yet,
Watch his bared wounds with unmoved air,
(Though tell-tale lashes still are wet),
20 And smoke his woodbine cigarette.

Crippled- a person who is disabled.

Maimed- to injure.

Gallant- brave and high-spirited.

Shrinks- to draw back.

Woodbine- honeysuckle.

Poetry Rubric

	Beginning 1	Developing 2	Accomplished 3	Exemplary 4	Score
Word Choice	General or ordinary words. Includes inappropriate words or limited use of vocabulary.	Attempts to use descriptive words to create images. Does not experiment with new or different words.	Attempts to use descriptive words to create images. Tries to use words for specificity. Experiments with new and different words with some success.	Precise, original, fresh words. Creates vivid images.	
Organization	Sequencing is not evident.	Sequencing is evident, but is illogical.	Sequencing is logical. The poetry form has been followed with more errors than it should.	Uses a logical, effective organizational strategy and follows format of each poem exactly. Poem uses form to interpret idea creatively and effectively.	
Main Idea	Information has little or nothing to do with the topic.	Information does not relate to the main topic. No details or examples are given.	Information does not relate to the main topic. It includes supporting details/examples.	Information clearly relates to the main topic. It includes supporting details/examples.	
Evidence	There are several factual errors and/or the examples are not fully explained.	Most facts presented in the poem are accurate (70%) and fully explained.	Almost all details/examples are accurate and fully explained.	All details and/or examples presented in the poem are accurate and fully explained.	
Sources	No sources are listed for evidence.	Some sources are not in the desired format.	All sources are documented correctly but some are unreliable.	All sources are reliable and accurately documented.	

Spelling	Contains frequent and numerous errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation that interferes with the reader's understanding.	Contain many errors in spelling, grammar, and/or punctuation that may interfere with the reader's understanding.	Contains some errors that do not interfere with the reader's understanding.	Contains no spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors.	
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