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POETRY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR



*At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.*

Laurence Binyon: *For the Fallen*



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Introduction

There is no doubt that the Great War was one of the most devastating conflicts in human history, yet we return again and again to the literature created by those who took part in it. Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* and *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, Graves' *Goodbye To All That*, Remarque's *Im Westen Nichts Neues* continue to fascinate - and appal - every new generation. War films covering every conflict are immensely popular - as a scrutiny of the shelves in any video store will confirm. The poets of World War I have occupied a permanent niche in the curriculum of every English department in the land. Are we so bloodthirsty? Or do we convince ourselves that we are strengthening ourselves with the knowledge of Man's past mistakes?

As far as the poems are concerned I think we do have to ask ourselves one question: Do we read Owen and Sassoon, Brooke and Binyon for their poetry - or for their history? Jennifer Breen in her introduction to *Wilfred Owen, Selected Poetry and Prose**, comments: "In the case of Owen, critics have marginalized his work by pushing it into the cul-de-sac known as 'war poetry'". She makes the point that literary critics like Leavis, although claiming the opposite, have tried to dissociate poetry from experience forgetting that poetry has little significance if it is not written in response to experience. This, of course, is a point of view which could stimulate endless hours of debate. But the main thrust of her argument is clear to see.

Much of the good poetry of the period - and there is a great range of very fine writing - is inherently difficult. At times it may seem to be artlessly simple. Owen's *Futility* and Rosenberg's *Break of Day in the Trenches* are both simple enough until you get to the poetry. At that point it is simply poetry, poetry which moves, elevates, and transmutes the ordinary experience - but language which cannot be further reduced to a matter of history. At this point the poet rises above the experience and something new is created. All of these poems, then, will present young readers with problems. As with all poetry, the awareness dawns as the poems are considered from as many different points of view as possible and, above all, read as many times as possible.

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* Jennifer Breen (Editor) *Wilfred Owen, Selected Poetry and Prose*, Routledge 1988 reprinted 1992. ISBN 0-415 00733 X

A useful and interesting book for the library is "Forgotten Voices of The Great War" (a new history of WW1 in the words of the men and women who were there) by Max Arthur.

The Siegfried Sassoon poems, *A Working Party* and *Counter-Attack* appear by Permission of George Sassoon.

Wilfred Owen

(1893-1918)

The Sentry

We'd found an old Boche dug-out, and he knew,
And gave us hell, for shell on frantic shell
Hammered on top, but never quite burst through.
Rain, guttering down in waterfalls of slime,
5 Kept slush waist-high and rising hour by hour,
And choked the steps too thick with clay to climb.
What murk of air remained stank old, and sour
With fumes of whizz-bangs, and the smell of men
Who'd lived there years, and left their curse in the den,
10 If not their corpses. . .

There we herded from the blast

Of whizz-bangs, but one found our door at last, -
Buffeting eyes and breath, snuffing the candles,
And thud! flump! thud! down the steep steps came thumping
And splashing in the flood, deluging muck -
15 The sentry's body; then, his rifle, handles
Of old Boche bombs, and mud in ruck on ruck.
We dredged him up, for killed, until he whined
"O sir, my eyes - I'm blind - I'm blind, I'm blind!"
Coaxing, I held a flame against his lids
20 And said if he could see the least blurred light
He was not blind; in time he'd get all right.
"I can't," he sobbed. Eyeballs, huge-bulged like squids',
Watch my dreams still; but I forgot him there
In posting Next for duty, and sending a scout
25 To beg a stretcher somewhere, and flound'ring about
To other posts under the shrieking air.

* * *

Those other wretches, how they bled and spewed,
And one who would have drowned himself for good, -
I try not to remember these things now.
30 Let dread hark back for one word only: how
Half listening to that sentry's moans and jumps,
And the wild chattering of his broken teeth,
Renewed most horribly whenever crumps
Pummelled the roof and slogged the air beneath -
35 Through the dense din, I say, we heard him shout
"I see your lights!" But ours had long died out.

Wilfred Owen with his platoon had advanced and moved into a deserted German dug-out. The Germans knew they were there and shelled it. The dug-out was waterlogged. The steps into it were caked with clay and difficult to climb. It stank of past habitation - of the men who had previously occupied it and the fumes left behind by shells.

Owen and his men sheltered as best they could from the bombardment. Eventually a shell exploded at the entrance to their dug-out. The force of the explosion blew out their candles, put pressure on their eyes and took away their breath. The sentry Owen had posted on the steps was thrown back into the dug-out. They thought he was dead but when they picked him up they found that he was still alive but blinded by the blast.

Owen had to put him out of his mind for the moment and get on with his duty - posting a new sentry, sending a messenger off to try to get a stretcher and trying to get to the other positions nearby which were under his command.

Line 1	<i>Boche</i>	German (abusive French slang)
Line 11	<i>whizz-bangs</i>	a light artillery shell of very high velocity. You heard its “whizz” of air before you heard the report from the gun - hence, first the whizz and then the bang.
Line 12	<i>snuffing</i>	putting out
Line 21	<i>like squids'</i>	bulging like the eyeballs of a squid - a creature like an octopus
Line 24	<i>scout</i>	messenger

Notes on the poem

1. There is a powerful realism in the poem. For most of the poem Owen is reporting exactly what happened and bringing it to life for the reader by his vivid, descriptive language.
2. Onomatopoeia is used very effectively throughout this poem. Note particularly line 13 - "thud! flump! thud!"
3. The details of the scene are accurately recorded - the wet, the smells, the debris of trench warfare.
4. There is a powerful dramatic quality in parts of the poem. Look particularly at the dramatic description of the sentry falling down the steps into the dug-out.
5. The final line of the poem is deliberately ambiguous. The sentry moans "I see your lights!" Does the sentry really see the flame they are holding against his eyes or does he imagine it? The final six words are rich in ambiguity. On one level Owen is saying that the flame has died out. On a deeper level he is saying that the flame of life in them had long since died out. This ambiguity allows us to see the sentry's blindness and the absence of light in the dug-out as symbolic of the blindness of the war-lords and the civilian population to the tragedy taking place in the trenches.
6. The events in this poem are reported in the letter to Owen's mother, Susan Owen, dated 16th January 1917 printed for you on a separate page.

QUESTIONS

1. Write about the way Owen uses SOUND in this poem to make his narrative vivid and dramatic.
2. Write about the way Owen accumulates DETAIL in this poem to create a feeling of realism.
3. Owen was at first undecided about how to title this poem - he considered *The Blinded* and *The Sentry*. Which title would you prefer and why?
4. Think about the word "den" in line 9. What does this word suggest?
5. Imagine that the sentry in the poem later dies. Write the letter that Wilfred Owen, as his officer, might have written to the man's parents.
6. Choose ten words or very short phrases (no more than three words in each) from the poem. Blend them together with words of your own to create your own poem about life in the trenches.
7. Write as much as you can about the last line of the poem.

OWEN'S PREFACE

Some time during the middle of 1918 Owen started to think about the publication of a collection of his poems. He got as far as making a provisional selection of the poems he wanted to include. He considered "Disabled and Other Poems" as a possible title. He also scribbled down a draft version of a preface for his poems. This unfinished outline has become one of the most famous literary statements in English literature. It is given below in full.

PREFACE

This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.

Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War.

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.

My subject is War, and the pity of War.

The Poetry is in the pity.

Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.

(If I thought the letter of this book would last, I might have used proper names; but if the spirit of it survives - survives Prussia - my ambition and those names will have achieved themselves fresher fields than Flanders)

Owen is saying that in his poetry he does not intend to glorify war. When he says that he is "not concerned with Poetry" he means that he is not using poetry as something pretty and superficial to amuse an idle moment. He is writing for the men he has fought with. He is writing for the men he has seen mutilated. He is writing to stop the war.

1. What do you think Owen means when he says "The Poetry is in the pity"?
2. A preface is a sort of introduction to a book. Imagine that you have edited an anthology of war poems. Write a preface for your selection of poems.

John McCrae
(1872-1918)

In Flanders Fields

5 In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

10 Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
15 In Flanders fields.



This poem, which first appeared anonymously in *Punch* magazine 6th December 1915, was one of the most popular poems of the war. Its simple, eloquently sentimental lines made an immediate appeal to those at home who had loved ones in Flanders. Its author, John McCrae, was a Canadian doctor who first served as a gunner in Europe and then became a military medical officer. He died, not of gunshot wounds but of pneumonia, in 1918.

The poppy, with its intense blood-red colour, grew profusely in Flanders - but no more profusely than the vivid blue cornflower. Its colour, however, symbolic of blood, ensured that it became the symbol of death in battle. Paper poppies, symbols of remembrance, are still sold by the British Legion on November 11th.

QUESTIONS

1. In your own words write about the scene which McCrae describes in the first five lines of this poem.
2. What is there, do *you* think, about the language of this poem - the way it is written - which made it so popular - a popularity which it continues to enjoy seventy years after it was written?
3. This poem seems to be in two parts. The first nine lines make us think with regret of the soldiers who gave their lives. Lines 10 to 15 seem to have a different purpose. What effect do you think the last six lines of the poem create? In what way are these lines different in tone from the first nine lines.