

Poetry Generation: Verse in World War I

More than any other conflict, the First World War is associated with poetry, particularly the powerful, anti-war works by Wilfred Owen and Sassoon. This activity explores their influence on contemporary images of war by asking pupils to generate their own WWI verse through group work and comparing their work with less well-known soldiers' verse.

The activity is designed to develop literacy, communication and critical thinking skills through word-play, discussion and debate.

Set the Scene

The poetry that we often associate with World War I is that of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. With its vivid descriptions of mud, wire and slaughter on a horrific scale, their poetry powerfully expresses the despair and futility of war.

Owen, Sassoon and Brookes were well educated officers and their eloquent prose resonates with contemporary European views on violence and conflict. While this has made both authors very popular, not all verse written by soldiers expresses the same anti-war sentiment.

Much poetry and verse written on the front line was much more irreverent. It often focused on everyday concerns, like where the next rum ration was coming from, or expressed disillusionment with the army. For example, *Hanging on the Old Barbed Wire* described inequality, greed and corruption in the army's ranks.

Sometime verse was written simply to amuse. Soldiers often parodied popular wartime songs, such as *Keep the Home Fires Burning*, replacing the original lyrics with bawdy ones. For example, *It's a Long Way to Tipperary* became *That's the Wrong Way to Tickle Mary*, and *When This Bloody War is Over* was sung to the tune of *What A Friend We Have in Jesus*.

Lyrics were often darkly humorous, fatalistic and full of bravado. For example, *The Bold Aviator* (also known as *The Dying Airman*) was sung in many First World War pilots' messes and reflected the extremely high risks that aviators took. Some pilots joined operational squadrons with less than 15 hours' solo flying experience, and their life expectancy could be as short as a few weeks. There were many versions of this song, and its longevity was such that it was sung by members of the RAF in the following war. It could be sung to many tunes, including *My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean* and *The Church's One Foundation*.

Second and Third Level

Tasks

1. Ask the pupils to imagine they are a soldier in World War I. Where they are? What are they doing? Think of the colours in the image they conjure up in their minds. Now imagine the sounds and maybe the smells. Are there any actions taking place in your image – is someone sitting, standing, writing, walking? Is the person in the image happy or sad?

2. Ask each pupil to write down four key words under the headings:
 - Place
 - Sense
 - Action
 - Feeling
3. Ask the students to swap their key words with another student. This is so that each student is not overly attached to the material they are going to be asked to generate.
4. Ask the pupils to write two short sentences based on the key words they now have. Each sentence should consist of no more than 10 words and should focus on one of the headings, but it does not necessarily have to include a key word. These lines do not need to rhyme. They should represent an image each student has of World War I.
5. Ask the students to swap their sentences with another member of the class.
6. Ask them to read the sentences out loud, one after another without stopping.
7. If similar images occur in the different lines, ask the group if they would like to re-arrange themselves (and the order of the lines) and read them again to group these images together.
8. Share the different types of verse provided in this pack or choose other examples. Discuss with the class the images they have generated through their lines. How do these compare with other types of poetry and verse from World War I?

Curriculum Experiences & Outcomes

Second

I can show my understanding of what I listen to or watch by responding to literal, inferential, evaluative and other types of questions, and by asking different kinds of questions of my own. **LIT 2-07a**

Core Skills

- Thinking
- Communication
- Literacy
- Working with others

Third

I can show my understanding of what I listen to or watch by commenting, with evidence, on the content and form of short and extended texts. **LIT 3-07a**

Approaches & Methods

- Creative learning

Materials & Resources

The Bold Aviator

- anon

A poor aviator lay dying
At the end of a bright summer's day.
His comrades had gathered about him
To carry his fragments away.

The airplane was piled on his wishbone.
His Hotchkiss was wrapped round his head.
He wore a spark-plug on each elbow.
'Twas plain he would shortly be dead.

He spit out a valve and a gasket
And stirred in the sump where he lay,
And then to his wondering comrades
These brave parting words he did say.

'Take the magneto out of my stomach
And the butterfly valve off my neck.
Extract from my liver the crankshaft.
There are lots of good parts in this wreck.

'Take the manifold out of my larynx
And the cylinders out of my brain,
Take the piston rods out of my kidneys
And assemble the engine again.

'Pull the longeron out of my backbone,
The turnbuckle out of my ear (my ear).
From the small of my back take the rudder -
There's all of your aeroplane here.

'I'll be riding a cloud in the morning
With no rotary before me to cuss (to cuss).
Take the lead from your feet and get busy,
Here's another lad needing the bus!

'Take the bullet from out of my shoulder,
Take the shrapnel out of my brain,
And the pom-pom from out of my liver,
And patch up the turret again.

'I'll be riding a cloud in the morning,
No more this gun turret to cuss,
So please patch me up in my shroud,
For I'll not be needing this bus.'

So hold all your glasses steady
And let's drink a toast to the sky.
For here's to the dead already,
And here's to the next man to die.

When this bloody war is over

-anon

When this bloody war is over
Oh, how happy I will be;
When I get my civvy clothes on
No more soldiering for me.
No more church parades on Sunday,
No more putting in for leave.
I will kiss the Sergeant Major.
How he'll miss me; how he'll grieve.

No more standing to attention
Or begging for a weekend pass.
You can tell the Sergeant Major
To stuff his passes up his ass.
No more NCOs to curse us.
I will beat my own tattoo.
No more s*****g in slit trenches,
No more f*****g army stew.

The Spirit

- Padre Woodbine Willie

When there ain't no gal to kiss you,
And the postman seems to miss you,
And the fags have skipped an issue,
Carry on.

When ye've got an empty belly,
And the bulley's rotten smelly,
And you're shivering like a jelly,
Carry on.

When the Boche has done your chum in,
And the sergeant's done the rum in,
And there ain't no rations comin',
Carry on.

When the world is red and reeking,
And the shrapnel shells are shrieking,
And your blood is slowly leaking,
Carry on.

When the broken battered trenches
Are like the bloody butchers' benches,
And the air is thick with stenches,
Carry on.

Carry on,
Though your pals are pale and wan,
And the hope of life is gone,
Carry on.
For to do more than you can,
Is to be a British man,
Not a rotten 'also ran,'
Carry on..