

War Poetry

Wilfred Owen

Introduction to Wilfred Owen

Few would challenge the claim that Wilfred Owen is the greatest writer of war poetry in the English language. He wrote out of his intense personal experience as a soldier and wrote with unrivalled power of the physical, moral and psychological trauma of the First World War. All of his great war poems on which his reputation rests were written in a mere fifteen months.

From the age of nineteen Wilfred Owen wanted to become a poet and immersed himself in poetry, being especially impressed by Keats and Shelley.

He was working in France, close to the Pyrenees, as a private tutor when the First World War broke out. At this time he was remote from the war and felt completely disconnected from it too. Even when he visited the local hospital with a doctor friend and examined, at close quarters, the nature of the wounds of soldiers who were arriving from the Western Front, the war still appeared to him as someone else's story.

Eventually he began to feel guilty of his inactivity as he read copies of *The Daily Mail* which his mother sent him from England. He returned to England, and volunteered to fight on 21 October 1915. He trained in England for over a year and enjoyed the impression he made on people as he walked about in public wearing his soldier's uniform.

He was sent to France on the last day of 1916, and within days was enduring the horrors of the front line.

Wilfred Edward Salter Owen, 1893 - 1918

Born Oswestry, Shropshire. Educated at Birkenhead Institute and Shrewsbury Technical College.



From the age of nineteen Owen wanted to be a poet and immersed himself in poetry, being especially impressed by Keats and Shelley. He wrote almost no poetry of importance until he saw action in France in 1917.

He was deeply attached to his mother to whom most of his 664 letters are addressed. (She saved every one.) He was a committed Christian and became lay assistant to the vicar of Dunsden near Reading 1911-1913 – teaching Bible classes and leading prayer meetings – as well as visiting parishioners and helping in other ways.

From 1913 to 1915 he worked as a language tutor in France.

He felt pressured by the propaganda to become a soldier and volunteered on 21st October 1915. He spent the last day of 1916 in a tent in France joining the Second Manchesters. He was full of boyish high spirits at being a soldier.

Within a week he had been transported to the front line in a cattle wagon and was "sleeping" 70 or 80 yards from a heavy gun which fired every minute or so. He was soon wading miles along trenches two feet deep in water. Within a few days he was experiencing gas attacks and was horrified by the stench of the rotting dead; his sentry was blinded, his company then slept out in deep snow and intense frost till the end of January. That month was a profound shock for him: he now understood the meaning of war. "The people of England needn't hope. They must agitate," he wrote home. (See his poems **The Sentry** and **Exposure**.)

He escaped bullets until the last week of the war, but he saw a good deal of front-line action: he was blown up, concussed and suffered shell-shock. At Craiglockhart, the psychiatric hospital in Edinburgh, he met Siegfried Sassoon who inspired him to develop his war poetry.

He was sent back to the trenches in September, 1918 and in October won the Military Cross by seizing a German machine-gun and using it to kill a number of Germans.

On 4th November he was shot and killed near the village of Ors. The news of his death reached his parents home as the Armistice bells were ringing on 11 November.

Wilfred Owen's First Encounter with the Reality of War

On 30th of December 1916 Wilfred Owen, having completed his military training, sailed for France.

No knowledge, imagination or training fully prepared Owen for the shock and suffering of front line experience. Within twelve days of arriving in France the easy-going chatter of his letters turned to a cry of anguish. By the 9th of January, 1917 he had joined the 2nd Manchesters on the Somme – at Bertrancourt near Amien. Here he took command of number 3 platoon, "A" Company.

He wrote home to his mother, "I can see no excuse for deceiving you about these last four days. I have suffered seventh hell. – I have not been at the front. – I have been in front of it. – I held an advanced post, that is, a "dug-out" in the middle of No Man's Land. We had a march of three miles over shelled road, then nearly three along a flooded trench. After that we came to where the trenches had been blown flat out and had to go over the top. It was of course dark, too dark, and the ground was not mud, not sloppy mud, but an octopus of sucking clay, three, four, and five feet deep, relieved only by craters full of water . . ."

The above is a brief extract from ***Out in the Dark***. Owen's letter goes on to tell the story of how one of his sentries was blinded, an experience which is the basis of his poem *The Sentry*. There is much more about Wilfred Owen in ***Out in the Dark***, and more still in ***Minds at War***. See main index for more information about these books.

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Extract from Wilfred Owen's letter © Oxford University Press 1967.



LITERARY ANALYSIS - POETRY

Dulce et Decorum Est

Background information

- Owen is writing about his experiences of WW1
- This poem is set in 'no-mans land' 1916
- Owen is telling his readers that war is not to be seen as a noble act but a tragedy because of the waste of human life
- Disturbing imagery used throughout
- Themes: War, tragedy and death

DULCE ET DECORUM EST

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.
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,
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.
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,
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,
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent¹⁴ for some desperate glory,
The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est
Pro patria mori.
8 October 1917 - March, 1918

POETIC DEVICES

Complete the following table, identifying poetic devices. For each technique, quote an example. Remember to copy quotation exactly. Use inverted commas.

Technique	Example
1 st person	
2 nd person	
1 st person plural	
Assonance	
Alliteration	
Repetition	
Personification	

Simile	
Imagery	
Present tense	
Past Tense	
Continuous Tense	

STRUCTURE

How is the poem structured?

Explain what happens in each verse? How is it different from the other verses?

Verse	What happens? Compare it to other verses
1	

2	
3	

PUNCTUATION

Find examples of the following punctuation in the poem. Explain effect.

Punctuation	Quotation	Effect
Dash		
Comma		

Colon		
Semi-colon		
Exclamation mark		
Ellipsis		
Paired commas		

CREATIVE TASK

Storyboard the main events / most powerful parts of the poem.

Draw 6 – 8 boxes and illustrate part of the poem.

Write the corresponding quotation.

Be creative: can the quotation go inside or around the image. Can the quotation be in particular font style / colour? Can you make key words stand out?

Disabled

He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,
And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,
Legless, sewn short at elbow. Through the park
Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,
Voices of play and pleasure after day,
Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him.

About this time Town used to swing so gay
When glow-lamps budded in the light-blue trees
And girls glanced lovelier as the air grew dim,
-- In the old times, before he threw away his knees.
Now he will never feel again how slim
Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands,
All of them touch him like some queer disease.

There was an artist silly for his face,
For it was younger than his youth, last year.
Now he is old; his back will never brace;
He's lost his colour very far from here,
Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,
And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race,
And leap of purple spurted from his thigh.
One time he liked a bloodsmear down his leg,
After the matches carried shoulder-high.
It was after football, when he'd drunk a peg,
He thought he'd better join. He wonders why . . .
Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts.

That's why; and maybe, too, to please his Meg,
Aye, that was it, to please the giddy jilts,
He asked to join. He didn't have to beg;
Smiling they wrote his lie; aged nineteen years.
Germans he scarcely thought of; and no fears
Of Fear came yet. He thought of jewelled hilts
For daggers in plaid socks; of smart salutes;
And care of arms; and leave; and pay arrears;
Esprit de corps; and hints for young recruits.
And soon, he was drafted out with drums and cheers.

Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal.
Only a solemn man who brought him fruits
Thanked him; and then inquired about his soul.
Now, he will spend a few sick years in Institutes,
And do what things the rules consider wise,

And take whatever pity they may dole.
To-night he noticed how the women's eyes
Passed from him to the strong men that were whole.
How cold and late it is! Why don't they come
And put him into bed? Why don't they come?

'Ghastly suit of grey'

What can you say about this quote from Disabled?

Think:

- Language techniques?
- Word choice?
- Connotations?

You will write a response for ONE of the following prompts.

- How does Owen present the reality of war in his poem 'Disabled?'
- OR
- How is the poem 'Disabled' presented as an anti-war poem?

It is recommended to complete the following tasks to prepare for writing.

Task 1

Choose 4 quotes from the poem that you think might be helpful when answering one of these questions.

Task 2

Write each quote on a separate piece of paper. Stick the quotes to a piece of sugar paper. Around the quote, write down reasons why you have chosen it. You might consider:

- What language technique it is e.g. simile, metaphor, alliteration, strong adjective/verb etc

Essay Plan

Paragraph 1

- What is the poem about?
- What themes does it explore?
- What was Owen trying to show?

Paragraph 2 onwards

- Choose a quote, and comment on what it's about. Define it e.g. this is a simile, this is an adjective
- Explain how that quote tells us something about the poem **BE SPECIFIC**
- What is the effect on the reader?

Conclusion

- You should never include anything new in your conclusion. It should just **sum up your main points** and tell the reader how you have answered the question.

For example:

Owen uses a variety of techniques to show his reader the futility of war. By describing the gas attack in such a vivid way along with using harrowing adjectives to describe the fate of the men, the reader understands why Owen believed fighting for your country was not an honour, it was a lie.

Anthem for Doomed Youth

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.

No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor 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?

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 patient minds,

And each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds.

Exposure

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced cast winds that knife us...

Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent...

Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient...

Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,

But nothing happens.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,

Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.

Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,

Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.

What are we doing here?

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow...

We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.

Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army

Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey,

But nothing happens.

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.

Less deathly than the air that shudders black with snow,

With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew;

We watch them wandering up and down the wind's nonchalance,

But nothing happens.






Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces---
We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed,
Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,
Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses,
---Is it that we are dying?




Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed
With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;
For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;
Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed,---
We turn back to our dying.



Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn;
Nor ever suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit.
For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;
Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were born,
For love of God seems dying.

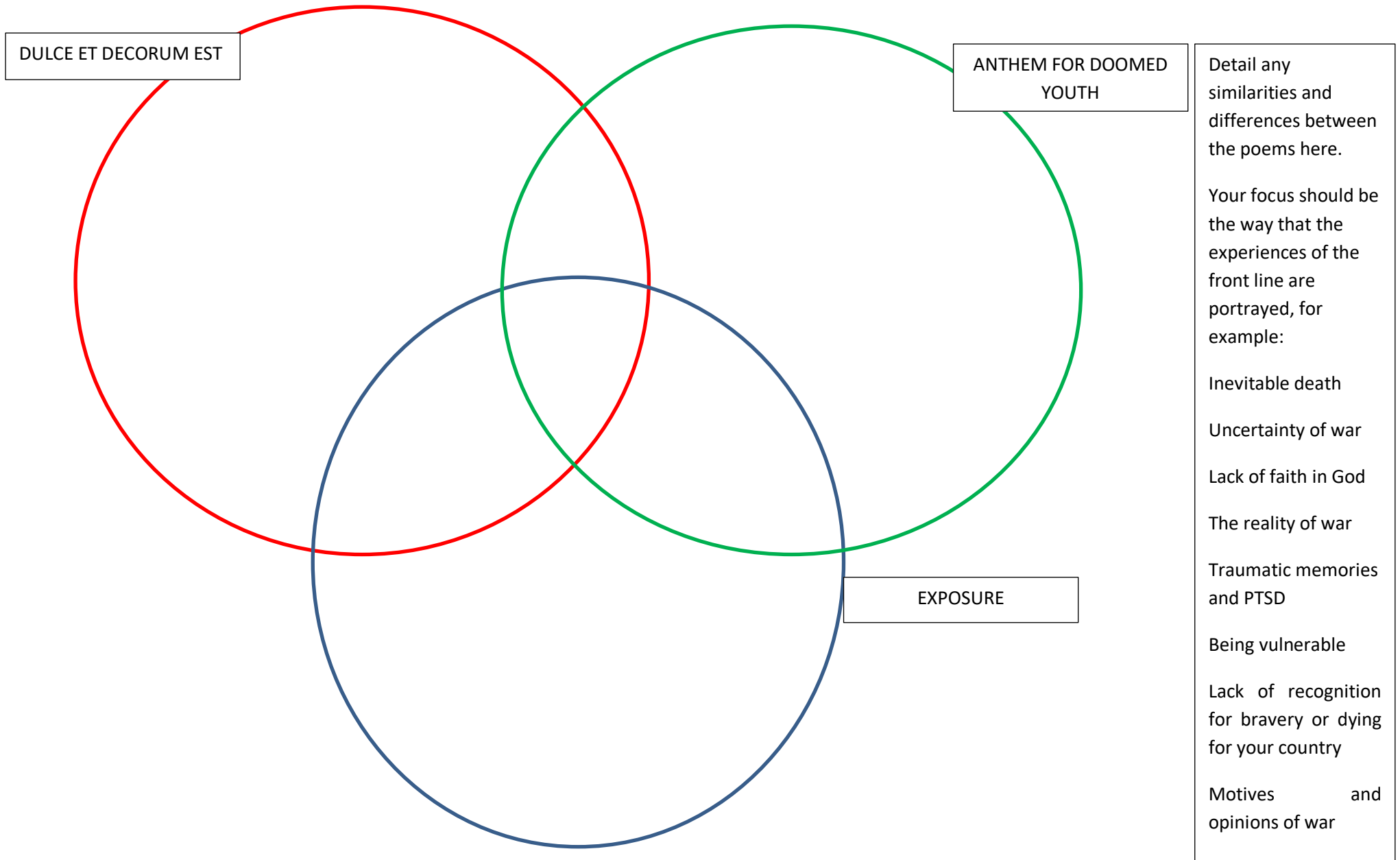
Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and us,
Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp.
The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp,
Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,
But nothing happens.

How Does Owen **bring alive** the experience of soldiers on the **front line** in his poetry?

Poetic device	Definition	Effect	Example
Alliteration 	Repetition of initial consonant sounds in a group or words close together	Emphasises words and ideas, makes descriptions more vivid. Unites words and concepts together.	<i>'only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle' (Anthem)</i> <i>'watch the white eyes writhing in his face,' (Dulce)</i>
Onomatopoeia 	The use of words which imitate sound	Emphasises words and ideas, makes descriptions more vivid.	<i>"when miners roared past in lorries"</i> <i>"I was trying to complete a sentence in my head but it kept Stuttering"</i>
Repetition 	The purposeful re-use of words and phrases.	Reinforces words and ideas, makes them memorable and leaves a lasting impression. Makes poem more contained.	<i>'But nothing happens.'</i>
Rhyme 	The use of words with matching sounds. Can be internal or at ends of lines.	Makes it memorable. Drives forward the rhythm. Unifies the poem and adds structure.	<i>"O what is that light I see flashing so clear Over the distance brightly, brightly? Only the sun on their weapons, dear, As they step lightly"</i>
Rhythm 	The pace or beat of the poem - can vary from line to line	Chosen to achieve a particular effect, e.g. to mirror pattern of natural speech or the pace of walking. May be fast, lively, slow, regular, irregular, awkward, tense, brisk, flowing, smooth	<i>"I hate that drum's discordant sound, Parading round, and round, and round:"</i> <i>"I remembered from my Sunday School book: olive trees, a deep jade pool, men resting in clusters after a long journey"</i>

<p>Imagery</p> 	<p>Words that appeal to the senses</p>	<p>Creates vivid mental pictures and evokes ideas, feelings and atmosphere by appealing to the senses (sight, smell, taste, touch, and sound).</p>	<p><i>'...flights of bullets streak the silence.'</i> (Exposure) <i>'As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.'</i> (Dulce)</p>
<p>Simile</p> <p>'like' 'as'</p>	<p>A comparison between two unlike things using <i>like</i> or <i>as</i>.</p>	<p>Enhances descriptions, expands reader's understanding of what poet is trying to convey, clarifies meanings.</p>	<p><i>'and flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...'</i> (Dulce) <i>'His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;'</i> (Dulce)</p>
<p>Metaphor</p> <p>'is'</p>	<p>A comparison saying something <i>is</i> something else</p>	<p>Can uncover new and intriguing qualities of the original thing that we may not normally notice or even consider important. Helps us to realize a new and different meaning. Makes it more interesting to read.</p>	<p><i>'All their eyes are ice'</i> (Exposure)</p>
<p>Personification</p> 	<p>Giving human qualities or characteristics to animals or inanimate objects</p>	<p>Makes the objects and their actions easier to visualize for a reader. Makes the poem more interesting and achieves a much more vivid image.</p>	<p><i>'the white eyes writhing in his face.'</i> (Dulce) <i>'the monstrous anger of the guns.'</i> (Anthem for Doomed Youth) <i>'pale fakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces-'</i> (Exposure)</p>
<p>Symbolism</p> 	<p>A word, phrase or image which stands for something.</p>	<p>Enables the writer to convey images directly to the mind of the reader - it serves almost like an emotional short-cut.</p>	<p><i>'Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses,'</i> (Exposure) <i>'no prayers nor bells;'</i> (Anthem)</p>

<p>Rhetorical question</p>	<p>A question which does not expect an answer.</p>	<p>Plants a question in the reader’s mind and then guides them towards the answer they want them to reach. Makes a deeper impression upon the reader than a direct statement would.</p>	<p><i>‘What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?’ (Anthem for Doomed Youth)</i></p> <p><i>‘What are we doing here?’ (Exposure)</i></p>
<p>Emotive language</p> 	<p>Words and phrases that cause an emotional response in the reader</p>	<p>Plays on the reader’s feelings, gets them to think or feel in a certain way according to poet’s intentions.</p>	<p><i>‘If you could hear, at every jolt,’ (Dulce)</i></p>
<p>Enjambment</p> 	<p>A line ending in which the syntax, rhythm and thought are continued into the next line.</p>	<p>Draws the reader from line to line and verse to verse and makes poetry flow quicker by making it less blocky. Makes end rhymes more subtle. Can indicate excitement, anger or panic.</p>	<p><i>‘Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.’ (Anthem)</i></p>
<p>Caesura</p> <p>(/‘,!:?)</p>	<p>A natural pause or break in a line of poetry indicated by punctuation</p>	<p>Stops rhythm becoming predictable. Mirrors natural speech. Lots of pauses slows the pace of the poem. May make you pause abruptly, drawing attention to that idea.</p>	<p><i>‘Gas! GAS! Quick boys! – an ecstasy of fumbling,’ (Dulce)</i></p>



G12 HL Summer Pack 2021-2022 – Part 1

<p>Point – How is Owen bringing alive the experiences of soldiers on the front line? This could be a particular theme of the front line or war.</p>	<p>Evidence- 'this is shown by....' 'The quotation (INSERT QUOTATION) demonstrates this....' 'Owen writes....'</p>	<p>Analysis-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key word analysis or technique used • What the writer is trying to highlight or emphasise about war (context) • How this affects this reader or what the writer is trying to get the reader to consider/think about 	<p>Link- How is this similar or different to one of the other poems? 'in a similar way....' 'In contrast to this poem.....' 'Similarly....' 'Owen highlights this theme in a different way in *** poem by....' 'Owen presents this idea in another poem...'</p>

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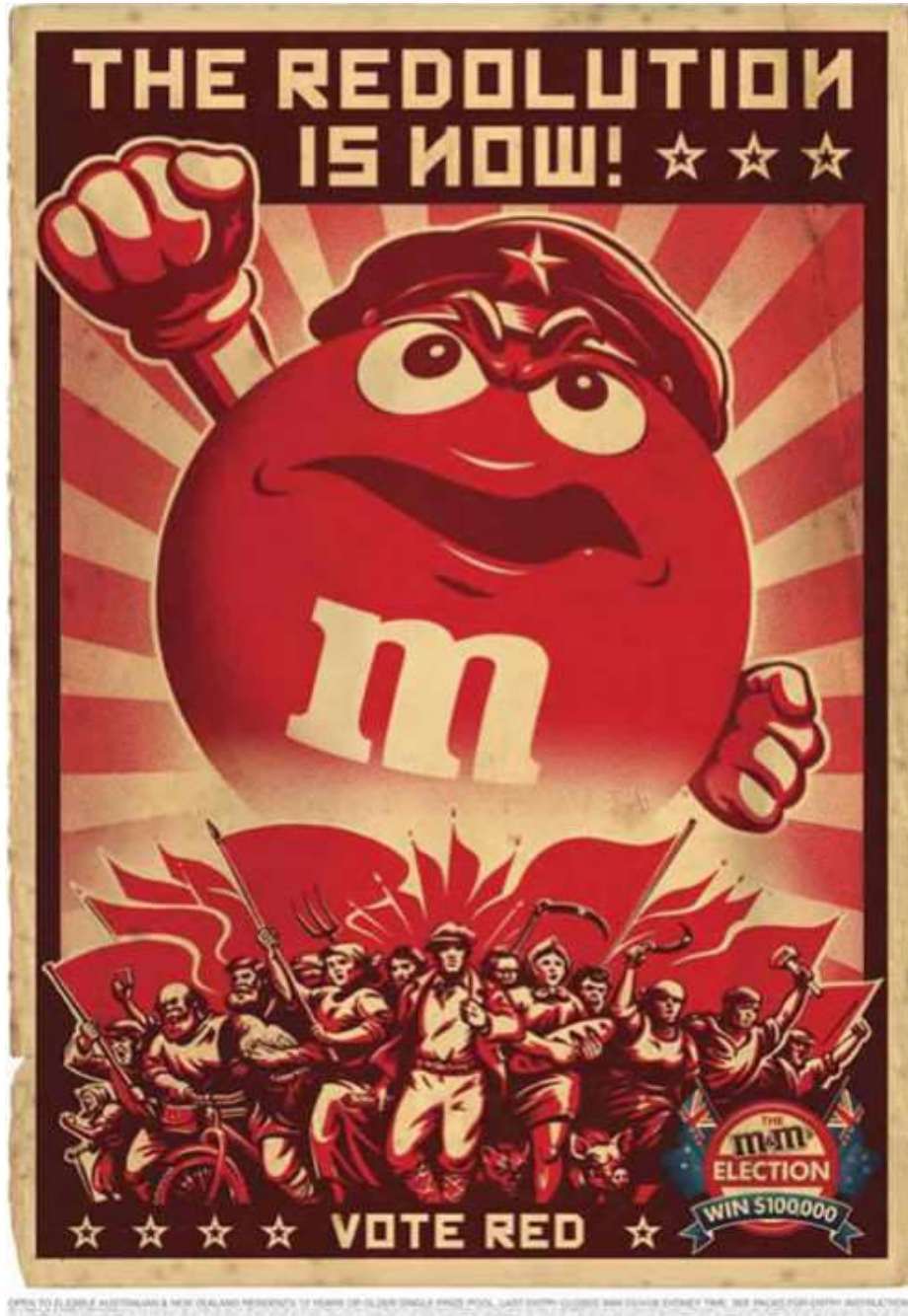
The language of war

These are key concepts when studying the language of war. What do these concepts mean? Which passage from the right column illustrates each concept from the left column?

The language of war

Key concept	Example from the text
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dysphemism ____ 2. Epithet ____ 3. Hyperbole ____ 4. Euphemism ____ 5. Bias ____ 6. glittering generality ____ 7. expression ____ 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The silver linings they find in the darkest clouds 2. “The votes prove our determination to defend our forces, to prevent aggression and to work firmly and steadily for peace and security in the area” 3. to strengthen his hand in dealing with Communist aggression 4. “whup the hell out of them” 5. As a close neighbour and comrade-in-arms of Cambodia, the D.R.V.N. Government people remotely condemn the American imperialists and the henchmen’s repeated violations of the 1954 Geneva Agreements 6. American imperialists 7. And with each escalation, the world comes closer to the brink of cosmic disaster

Write a short textual analysis (300-400 words) of **EACH** of the following visual texts. Use the terms above as appropriate.



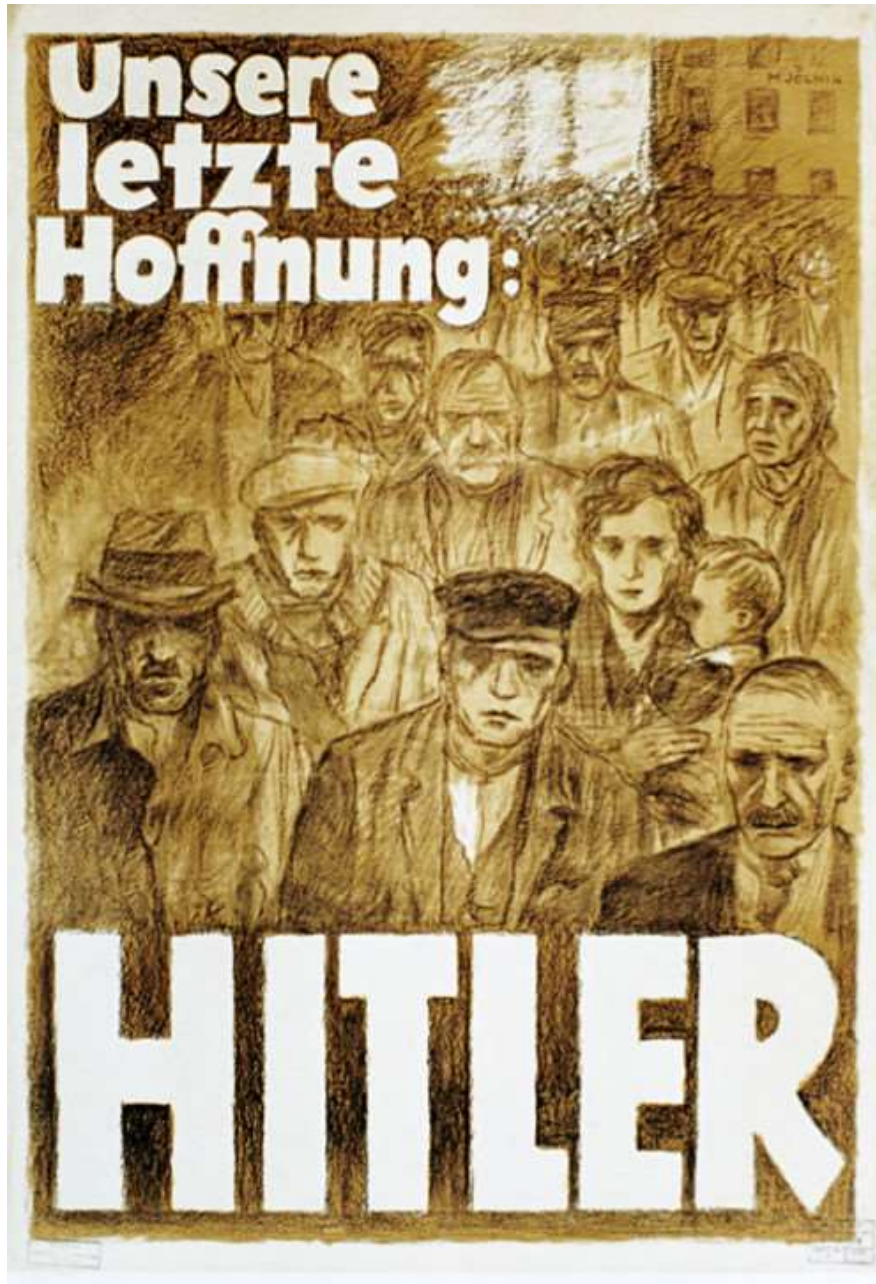
WILLIAM ORPEN: ENGLAND, 1917

Orpen studied at the Slade School in London alongside the likes of Augustus John and Wyndham Lewis. He produced some of his best work while at the school and became known for his portraits. A friend of Orpen then arranged for him to paint the pictures of senior military officials, such as Lord Derby and Churchill. In 1917, he was recruited by the government's head of War Propaganda to the Western front to paint images of war-torn France. It was there that Orpen painted his most famous piece, "Dead Germans in a Trench."



DIMITRI MOOR: RUSSIA, 1917–1921

Dimitri Moor (or Dmitry Stakhievich Orlov) changed the face of graphic design in Soviet Russia back in 1918. His work dominated both the Bolshevik Era (1917–1921) and the New Economic Policy (1921–1927). The main theme of Moor's work is the stark contrast between the oppressive evil and the heroic allies. A lot of pressure was put on Russian workers to rise up against imperialism.



This poster by Mjolinir, titled "Our Last Hope: Hitler" was used in the presidential elections of 1932, when Germany was suffering through its great depression. Nazi propagandists targeted the German people who were unemployed and living on the breadline, and they suggested Hitler as their way out, their savior.



PHILLIP ZEC: ENGLAND, 1930

Phillip Zec was probably best known for his depictions of Nazis as snakes and vultures. At the time, Nazis were usually drawn as bumbling clowns or buffoons. But Zec brought out the more sinister side of the German regime in his drawings. Hitler reportedly hated Zec so much that he added him to his black list and ordered his arrest following the invasion of Britain. He blamed Zec's Jewish ancestry for his extreme ideas.



NORMAN ROCKWELL: US, 1939

Norman Rockwell is probably one of the best known of the propaganda movement. He admitted that he was just a propaganda stooge for the Saturday Evening Post. The newspaper paid many artists and illustrators to whitewash American news with patriotism and propaganda for around 50 years.

Rockwell's famous Rosie the Riveter poster is shown below, representing the American women who worked in the munitions and war supplies factories during World War II. This was a call to arms for the women of America to become strong capable females and support the war effort.

PABLO PICASSO: SPAIN, 1937

Picasso painted Guernica in response to the bombing of the town by Germany and Italy, which were following orders from Spanish Nationalist forces, on 26 April 1937. It must be said that it was commissioned to Picasso long before the bombing of the town and was supposed to be a classic painting first; after the bombings, Picasso changed his drawing to respond to the recent bombing. The giant mural shows the tragedy of war, using innocent civilians as the focal point. It became a huge symbol of anti-war, and upon completion it was exhibited worldwide to spread the message. The piece also educated other countries about the horror of the Spanish Civil War, which till then most people had never heard of.



ELECTION COMMUNICATION - LONDON
EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS JUNE 4th



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NICK GRIFFIN is not an artist, he is the chairman of the British National Party (BNP). Just as most other national parties across the globe, BNP is a good example of propaganda techniques being used to produce an emotional rather than rational response to the information presented. BNP has used them to build their hate-filled ranks for years. BNP is extremely good at speaking to people in plain, emotional language and affecting those who experience personal problems and want to find someone who can be blamed for these problems.

Adapted from: <https://www.smashingmagazine.com/2010/06/100-years-of-propaganda-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly/>