Teaching the Poetry of the First World War at Key Stage 4

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If fine poetry is the skilful crafting of powerful feelings in response to experience, much of the poetry of the Great War qualifies. A further argument for its inclusion in the English curriculum is that the First World War has an important place in our cultural heritage. However, these two propositions have an uneasy relationship which confronts the classroom teacher of English with difficulties and obligations.

Facing the difficulties

The difficulties in approaching these texts in the classroom, particularly the work of the combatant poets, stem from the confusion and controversy about the relationship between the poetry and the war that exists in wider society. On the one hand we have the inheritance of the 1930s and the 1960s, which prompts us to use the poetry to demonstrate the horror and the futility of the war—and of war in general—and the incompetence and disregard for the ordinary soldier with which the First World War was waged. On the other hand, we have the military historians, who, fighting a rear-guard action about the legitimacy of the war and the competence of its conduct, insist that ‘the war poets’ (i.e. the combatant poets of the canon) were atypical and unrepresentative of the fighting men. Both standpoints are simplifications which fail to do justice, one to the war’s combatants and leaders, the other to its poets.

We have only to consider some of the myths that underpinned popular British support for the war in 1914—war as adventure or chivalric crusade, as a male rite of passage; war as the purifier of national decadence, as a stiffener of national morale or as the obligation of a superior civilisation—to realise the divide between the thinking of that
society and our own. Heroic, crusading and romantic visions of war did not outlast the Great War. It is not surprising that the verse that espoused those myths has not on the whole survived. Most of the ‘canon’ demands that we recognise the human cost of war and strip it of glamour, and much of it castigates those who fail to do so.

Nevertheless, to categorise this body of work as ‘anti-war’ is a simplification. While we no longer see war as a ‘good’, we nevertheless—as the war poets certainly did—recognise the irony that its extreme circumstances bring out not only the evil in human beings but also the highest good: courage, leadership, initiative, loyalty, comradeship, selflessness and compassion. The aftermath poetry of survivors such as Blunden, Sassoon and Gurney reveals that, haunted as they were by their experiences, they retained a longing for those ‘lost intensities of hope and fear’. When/Will kindness have such power again?’ asks Blunden in ‘The Watchers’. Furthermore, all these poets chose to serve and many of them made fine soldiers. The political challenge posed by their poetry is much more complex than an ‘anti-war’ label allows.

Poets such as Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Charles Sorley were very consciously addressing a public steeped in nationalism, Germanophobia, racial supremacism and religious-patriotic notions of heroic sacrifice, a public which (these poets believed) was too little aware of the hideous consequences of modern industrial warfare. Satire is essential to the moral health of a nation and Sassoon, in particular, proved a fine satirist. Taken as a whole, the body of combatant war poetry questioned prevailing attitudes towards nationhood and patriotism, race, class, masculinity and gender, religion and the glamour of war; the complexity of these challenges demands a close reading of the poetry. Posing fundamental questions, these poems very rarely provide direct answers, irony and ambiguity being, as the much-maligned Paul Fussell pointed out in The Great War and Modern Memory, their dominant modes of expression.

Fortunately, we can leave it to history teachers to explore with our students the causes of the First World War (still a controversial issue, as the spate of new books on the subject demonstrates). There are myths about the war, however, that we can prevent our students from acquiring. Sassoon’s ‘The General’ reveals the anger of the poet after the action at Arras on 23 April 1917 in which so many of his companions fell, while ‘Base Details’ displays the combatant’s resentment of the staff officer; but it would be absurd to suggest to students that either generals or staff officers were consistently incompetent, safe from the action and
indifferent to its outcomes. Satires about the staff are characteristic of combatant writing in most wars (First World War examples include those by A.P. Herbert and Julian Grenfell), but very little of the poetry of the First World War is critical of the war’s military conduct. Fussell’s chapter ‘Adversary Proceedings’ remains an excellent survey of the application, and limitations, of ‘gross dichotomy’ or ‘the adversary habit’ in First World War writing, and particularly that of Sassoon.4

Nor should we allow the persistence of the myth that war poetry followed a simple trajectory from idealism to disillusionment. Dominic Hibberd and John Onions provide a more nuanced account: ‘As the war went on, the chorus of “what everybody is saying” began to break down into individual voices, as the more talented poets worked out what they wanted to say and how to say it.’5

On the other hand, we have also to combat the myths promulgated by several military historians. First, there is ‘the junior officer myth’, the view that because many of the combatant poets were privileged young men who served as volunteer junior officers, their war experience did not reflect that of the vast majority of the infantry, while their own limited life-experience made them unduly squeamish about the actualities of war. We need only consider the biographies of Owen, Ivor Gurney and Isaac Rosenberg (the last named two of whom served in the ranks) to realise that this is a distortion. Furthermore, to be a regimental junior officer was to share in the experience of the front-line infantry, even if there were privileges of rank; it placed these young men in a position to observe at close hand the trials of the PBI.

The second military myth that we need to dispose of is ‘the sensitivity myth’. Ian Beckett, for example, insists that ‘it should certainly not be accepted that a handful of sensitive, intellectual or otherwise like-minded wartime officers...were in any way representative of their armies as a whole’, and refers scathingly to ‘those of literary sensitivities’.6 The argument about the atypicality of these young men loses its force if we substitute the concept of ‘sensibility’ for ‘sensitivity’. In one important respect, we do not want our poets to be ‘representative’: their value resides in their peculiar sensibility, their creative imaginations and their mastery of language, all of which contributed to their capacity to witness.

Finally, military historians argue that the poetry consistently portrays the infantryman as victim rather than agent, suffering under the onslaught of mutilating modern weaponry. Unfortunately, this is an accurate picture of much front-line experience, in which hand-to-hand combat was the
exception rather than the rule and the majority of wounds and fatalities were caused by artillery. However, Dan Todman’s assertions that Owen ‘discussed the experience of war in terms of suffering and victimhood’ and that he ‘ignores the moral ambiguities of fighting and killing’ are a completely inaccurate representation of Owen, who boldly explored the ‘seared conscience’ and ambivalent emotions of the soldier as killer, notably in ‘Insensibility’, ‘Strange Meeting’, ‘Spring Offensive’ and ‘Apologia Pro Poemate Meo’.7

Readers may be beginning to ask if any of this is the business of the English teacher. I would argue that we do the poetry, as well as the heritage, a disservice if we allow these myths to enter our students’ belief systems or thrive there. An anecdote: I recently came across an otherwise thoughtful poem about the war, written by a sixteen year-old student, which ended with the line, ‘Shot by his own best friend’. When I enquired about the meaning of the line she told me that it could either mean that his friend was on the firing squad or that his friend shot him during an attack because he retreated. When I suggested that the first was highly unlikely and that the second would have resulted in a court-martial for murder, she insisted that her English teacher had told her that such events were ubiquitous. I appreciate that not all that is learned in the classroom is what has been taught, but the incident nevertheless demonstrates the embeddedness of the horror/futility myths of the war. (It also prompted me to question the value of requiring students to write their own poems about the war, but that is another debate.)

Meeting the obligations

I have suggested that we have obligations to the literary texts and to the heritage; we have, also, of course, obligations to our students. One of these is to prepare them for their GCSE English Literature examinations. I want to look now at how the GCSE Literature specifications of the various boards, for assessment from 2015, support or hinder us as we bring the poetry of the First World War into the classroom.

The specifications

Three of the examination boards, AQA, Edexcel and WJEC, require candidates to study one thematic ‘cluster’ of fifteen poems by both contemporary poets and poets from ‘the literary heritage’. In the AQA anthology teachers can choose a ‘Conflict’ cluster, while the Edexcel anthology contains one entitled ‘Clashes and Collisions’; WJEC also has a
‘Conflict’ grouping but the board specifies the particular cluster(s) to be studied in each year of entry and the ‘Conflict’ group of poems is not available for 2015. The AQA cluster includes Owen’s ‘Futility’ and Margaret Postgate Cole’s ‘The Falling Leaves’, as well as e e cummings’s 1926 poem ‘next to of course god america i’ and three contemporary or near-contemporary poems that take the First World War as their subject, Ted Hughes’s ‘Bayonet Charge’, Owen Sheers’s ‘Mametz Wood’ and Jane Weir’s ‘Poppies’. In the Edexcel cluster only seven poems are specifically concerned with war, and only one (Owen’s ‘Exposure’) is about the First World War. In the WJEC selection the eleven poems specifically focusing on war include seven concerned with the First World War: two by Sassoon (‘The Hero’ and ‘Base Details’), two by Owen (‘The Send-Off’ and ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’), Wilfrid Gibson’s ‘The Conscript’, Rupert Brooke’s ‘The Soldier’ and the near-contemporary poem ‘MCMXIV’ by Philip Larkin. The WJEC (controlled assessment) task not only involves comparison between poems, as do the tasks set in the AQA and Edexcel examinations, but requires candidates to link the poems with the Shakespeare text they have been studying. All three boards also assess students’ responses to a previously unseen poem, prescribing a preparatory list of 15 poems each by a separate poet from amongst whom the ‘unseen poem’ will be selected. AQA include Owen in their list, Edexcel Sassoon, whereas the WJEC list is of poems by contemporary poets.

OCR is the only board not to take a thematic approach. Their controlled assessment requires students to have studied a selection of 8 poems by one of six prescribed poets from the literary heritage, amongst whom Owen figures. The Owen selection is: ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’, ‘Conscious’, ‘Disabled’, ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, ‘Exposure’, ‘Futility’, ‘Inspection’ and ‘Mental Cases’.

It is important to note the objectives covered by these assessments: while the presence of, and the weightings given to, AO1 and AO2 vary (in somewhat arbitrary ways) between the four boards, in none of the assessments does AO4 figure; contrastingly, AO3 is consistently present and generally given considerable weighting.

Tackling the texts

The absence of the requirement for examination candidates to demonstrate their understanding of social, cultural and historical context allows teachers to ensure that the poetry speaks for itself and to provide contextual information only when students ask for it or when it becomes essential to the understanding of a text. Given both the familiarity that
students have with the subject and the extent to which they will have absorbed the prevailing myths, it is better to allow them to bring their existing knowledge to bear on a text and then to adjust their perceptions where necessary—particularly by referring them to the text itself.

The biggest hurdle that these specifications impose is the thematic focus. This, combined with the requirement that students link and compare texts, can be reductive and distorting. In this respect the OCR specification, allowing the teaching of at least eight poems by Owen—between which comparisons can be fruitful and illuminating—is more rewarding.

The other tendency—demonstrated in the AQA and WJEC selections—is to the inclusion of contemporary or near-contemporary poems about the war. There are three reasons why this approach is to be regretted. First, it seems a pity to choose such poems rather than the ‘originals’; why Hughes’s ‘Bayonet Charge’, for example, rather than Owen’s ‘Spring Offensive’ or Read’s ‘The Happy Warrior’? Secondly, many of these poems (such as Larkin’s ‘MCMXIV’, Vernon Scannell’s ‘The Great War’ or Hughes’s ‘Six Young Men’) are more about the poets themselves and the world they grew up in—and its view of the war—than about the war itself. Thirdly, the choice of the First World War as a subject by a contemporary writer often leads to inauthenticity, sentimentality, manipulativeness and/or the perpetuation of the myths. Jane Weir’s ‘Poppies’ (in the AQA anthology) demonstrates some of these attributes. However, Owen Sheers’s poem ‘Mametz Wood’ (AQA again) seems to justify its inclusion, concerned as it is with the poet’s response to what he actually witnesses in the present.

AQA’s inclusion of Margaret Postgate Cole’s ‘The Falling Leaves’ raises another issue: all first-hand experiences of the war are important and we should not concentrate exclusively on combat experience, important though it is. Our students should hear, for example, the voices of nurses, conscientious objectors and the bereaved and, certainly, the voices of women as well as of men. Whatever we offer our students should, however, be fine poetry; it is, perhaps, unsurprising that the Home Front produced rather less of this.

Even amongst the work of the respected combatant poets of the canon, however, there are poems which are strident or manipulative and need careful handling to foster something more than a simplistic understanding of the war. In this respect, such poems as ‘Base Details’, ‘Dulce et
Decorum Est’ and ‘The Soldier’ (all WJEC choices) pose us extra difficulties in the classroom.

**Teaching ‘Exposure’**

I want to finish by outlining a possible classroom approach to Owen’s ‘Exposure’. Students can be provided with some ‘contextualising’ documents: Owen’s letter of Sunday 4 February 1917 describing the incident on 23 January from which the poem arose; the 2nd Manchesters’ war diary entry for this tour of duty (which indicates that one man from Owen’s platoon died of exposure); and an account of exposure/hypothermia and its symptoms. After a first reading of the poem, the students can be invited to reflect on what they find illuminating and helpful in the other materials. Thereafter, the poem itself can be the focus of attention, students (perhaps initially in pairs) investigating its form, structure and language in order to uncover its (ambiguous) meanings and to make personal responses. The following are questions I might use to structure their study of the poem:

I. What images of the weather are we being given here? To what is it being compared? Why?

II. List the words and phrases that describe sounds. What is their effect?

III. List the words and phrases that describe touch. What is their effect?

IV. Write down some of the lines of the poem where the sounds of the words are striking. In each case work out what Owen is doing with sound and what effect it has. e.g. Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous, where the alliteration and consonance using s make us able to hear the silence and whispering, and experience the anxiety they bring. (Why is the silence worrying?) (Try lines 1, 8,12,16, 18, 19, 21, 24, 26, 36 or 39)

V. Find examples of repetition in the poem and in each case try to work out its effect. e.g. in ranks on shivering ranks of grey where the repetition suggests the apparent endlessness of this cold dawn and gives force to the adjective inserted between the repeated words. (Try line 29 or the last lines of each stanza.)

VI. Does this poem rhyme? (A one-word answer is not sufficient!) What effects do Owen’s line-endings achieve?
VII. What words and comments in this poem are ambiguous? Work out their possible meanings. (Try the title, lines 3 and 30 and the whole of verse 7)

VIII. What contrasts are there in verse 5 and why are they there?

IX. What is happening in verse 6?—and what effect does it have on the soldiers? How do Owen’s words emphasise this effect?

X. In verse 7 Owen seems to come to some sort of conclusion? What is it?

XI. What is the effect of the final verse of the poem?

XII. Whose voice are we hearing in this poem? Think about the use of ‘we’ and ‘our’ throughout the poem (except for ‘their’ twice in the last verse.) What effect does it have?

XIII. What do you find striking about Owen’s representation of war in this poem?

Ultimately, the study of a First World War poem should have similar aims to the study of any other poem, to uncover meanings and explore how they are conveyed. The additional task with a poem of the First World War is to help students to bypass their preconceptions in order to achieve that understanding. In doing this, we fulfil our obligations to the text, our students—and to the heritage.

References


2. Fussell has been criticised, not entirely unjustly, for historical inaccuracies, for his reinforcement of popular myths about the war and for his implication that the war’s permanent importance lay in its literary and imaginative impact.


8. In OCR’s Unit Four, students are similarly examined on a selection of 8 poems by one of six prescribed contemporary poets, with the alternative of being tested on their response to a previously unseen poem by one poet from a list of fifteen, but these are all contemporary poets.

9. The GCSE English Literature assessment objectives are as follows:
   AO1: respond to texts critically and imaginatively; select and evaluate relevant textual detail to illustrate and support interpretations;
   AO2: explain how language, structure and form contribute to writers’ presentation of ideas, themes and settings
   AO3: make comparisons and explain links between texts, evaluating writers’ different ways of expressing meaning and achieving effects;
   AO4: relate texts to their social, cultural and historical contexts; explain how texts have been influential and significant to self, and other readers in different contexts and at different times.

10. This poem is prescribed by both OCR and Edexcel and can form ‘unseen’ preparation for the AQA specification. It can also be linked fruitfully with ‘Futility’, which is an AQA prescribed poem.