Exposure
Wilfred Owen

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1st Edition
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Context

World War One

It is now almost a century since the outbreak of World War One, which lasted from 1914 until 1918. In the first years of the twentieth-century, rivalries between European powers had grown. Britain and France, who had already amassed worldwide empires in the nineteenth century, felt threatened by the rise of Germany. A new nation, founded in 1860, the Germans were very keen to “catch-up” in the empire-building stakes, and had built a navy to rival Britain’s. The insecurity between these rival powers led to a complicated system of alliances, in which countries promised to back each other in the event of a war. It was these alliances that allowed the murder of an Austrian prince, Franz Ferdinand, in Sarajevo in 1914 to erupt into a war that involved almost all of Europe - and European colonies from across the world.

Europe in summer 1914.
Even as more and more countries declared war on each other over the summer of 1914, most people thought that the war would be ‘over by Christmas,’ as most wars in the past had been fairly short. Governments across Europe issued propaganda promising young men glory if they signed up to fight.

However, new technologies of the twentieth century (such as machine guns, improved artillery bombs and, from 1916, tanks), meant that this war was very different than nineteenth-century wars. Because attacking meant running headlong into the enemy’s guns, it was easier to defend, and both sides dug trenches. There were lines of trenches along the Western Front from Belgium right down to Switzerland, and both sides dug in. The war became a stalemate that lasted for four years.
Life in the Trenches

The front line trench was a line dug into the ground. It was shored up with wood and sandbags, and it was where the infantry soldiers lived. Behind it were several kilometres of ‘supply trenches’ through which armies provided the men with food and weapons.

Between the two front lines of trenches lay ‘no man’s land.’ This was several hundred metres of land that neither side controlled. It was a wasteland full of barbed wire, mud, and, after attacks, dead bodies.

No man’s land at Passchendaele, 1917
Every so often, generals would order thousands of men to go ‘over the top’ into no man’s land to try and capture the enemy’s trenches. These attacks were very dangerous, and in the Somme offensive of 1916, 16,000 British soldiers died in one day during an attack.

Life in the trenches differed depending on where you were, but for almost all ordinary soldiers the conditions in the ‘front line’ trenches were horrifying. Some of the struggles the men had to face included:

- Cold, wind, rain and mud - men in the trenches were exposed to the elements.
- Disease and illness.
- Rats, lice and infestation.
- Lack of sleep - sleep was snatched whenever possible, but men were often given tasks to do throughout the night. If you fell asleep on sentry duty (keeping watch for any attacks from the enemy) you were executed by firing squad.
- Sniper fire and artillery fire from the enemy - you never knew if you were going to be hit. Up to 1/3 of casualties in the war died in the trench from sniper or artillery fire.
- The constant sound of gunfire.
- The terrible smell of latrines and the carcasses in ‘no man’s land.’
- Boredom and uncertainty - men did not know when an attack into ‘no man’s land’ would be ordered, and so were constantly waiting for something to happen.
- The regular deaths of friends and fellow soldiers.
- Shell shock and psychological problems.
Want to know more about World War One and trench life?

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/launch_vt_trench_life.shtml - This site allows you to take a ‘virtual tour’ of a trench.

http://www.firstworldwar.com/features/trenchlife.htm - This site goes into detail about the realities of trench life, including disease, sniper bullets, rats and daily routines.

Wilfred Owen

Wilfred Owen was born in 1893, so was 21 when the war broke out. At the time, he was living in southern France (away from the war) and working as a language tutor. As a young man, he read poetry regularly (particularly the poetry of John Keats), and dreamed of being a poet himself. Owen was also a committed Christian, and regularly read the Bible.
By 1915, Wilfred Owen enlisted in the British army, having seen the propaganda posters. He felt a tension between his loyalty to his country and his Christian beliefs, but decided to join up. He was deployed to France in December 1916 as a junior officer, but although he was initially excited, he soon became very disillusioned with the war. His company of soldiers were forced to sleep outside in the front line trenches throughout a freezing January. His letters to his mother reveal how harrowing his experiences were.

In 1917, Owen was hit by a German mortar but survived, landing on top of the body of a fellow soldier. Shortly afterwards, he was trapped in an old German dugout for days. After these events, Owen was diagnosed with ‘shell shock’ (see http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/shellshock_01.shtml) and was taken away from the front to a psychiatric hospital in Craiglockhart, Scotland. Here, he met an older poet and soldier, Siegfried Sassoon, and the men became friends. Sassoon encouraged him to write, and many of Owen’s poems are likely to have been written in the psychiatric hospital.

Owen was troubled; although he hated the war, he still felt that it was his duty to fight for his country, and thus could not fully support the pacifists. In April 1918, he decided to return to the trenches. He wrote to his brother "I know I shall be killed. But it's the only place I can make my protest from." He was declared fit for service in August 1918 and returned to France and the front line.

In the last few months of his life, Owen seems to have become emotionally deadened to the war, and in October 1918 he was awarded the Military Cross for using a machine gun to kill a large number of Germans (before 1918, it seems he made little effort to kill people). His behaviour became daring and reckless, suggesting he was actively courting death.
Owen was shot dead less than one week before the end of the war, on 7 November 1918, whilst attempting to instruct his men to cross a canal to capture a German line. His parents heard the news of his death on the 11th November 1918, the very day the war ended. His poems were first published in 1920.

Want to know more about Wilfred Owen?

http://www.wilfredowen.org.uk/home/ - The website of the Wilfred Owen Association has abundant resources on Owen, his life and his poetry. There is also a brief analysis of ‘Exposure’ at on the site at http://www.wilfredowen.org.uk/poetry/exposure

http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/owena.htm - This site has a biography of Owen and recounts his psychological journey as a soldier in World War One.
Pre-Reading Task

Look up the word ‘exposure’ at http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/exposure. What are the different meanings of this word? What does it suggest the poem might be about?

Exposure

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knive us...
Weary 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

“Our brains ache” is an adaptation of John Keats’ (a famous Romantic poet of the early 19th century) opening line of “Ode to a Nightingale” - “Our hearts ache.” Owen loved John Keats’ poetry.

Salient - a military position that juts out into the line of the enemy. Salients were dangerous places to be.

Incessantly - constantly, without stopping.

Poignant - touching, meaningful. Melancholy - sad.
Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of gray,
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.

To-night, His 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.

Wilfred Owen (exact date of composition unknown).

Initial Response

What do you think this poem is about?

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What emotions are present in the poem?

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S.M.I.L.E. Analysis

Remember, to analyse a poem we need to look at:

- Structure
- Meaning
- Imagery (similes, metaphors, personification)
- Language
- Effect on the reader
“Meaning” is a good place to start when thinking about a poem, as here you can discuss the principal theme(s) of the poem and why you think the poet has written it.

**Meaning - Key points:**

- In this poem, Owen is writing about his experiences in the trenches. The poem focuses on the everyday battle against the weather, for example the ‘air that shudders black with snow.’

- He also focuses on the boredom, confusion and meaninglessness of everyday existence, repeating the phrase ‘but nothing happens’ and constantly questioning ‘what are we doing here?’ He feels he is losing his faith, observing that even ‘love of God seems dying’ and noting that it is ‘His’ (i.e. God’s) ‘frost’ that will ‘fasten on this mud and us.’

- He feels that even though he is alive, the war has essentially already killed the men who fight, noting that ‘slowly our ghosts drag home.’

- Even when the men go home on leave, he cannot feel the ‘home fires burning’ as in the popular song of the time. Instead, the ‘home fires’ are ‘sunk’ and Owen and his men have to ‘turn back to our dying.’

- The title ‘exposure’ has various meanings:
  
  - Exposure to the cold of the freezing winter.
  
  - Exposure to death and violence.
  
  - The poem ‘exposes’ the truth about the fighting conditions for the men in the trenches - which was quite a different reality than the picture given by the propaganda.
**Exploration - Meaning**

Why do you think Owen focuses on the battles against the weather and boredom in this poem, rather than on the fighting itself?

The word ‘dying’ appears throughout the poem. Is there a sense in which Owen is talking about something other than physical death?
Structure refers to the way a poem is set out and organised. Here, you write about things like rhyme scheme, length, repetition and the flow of ideas throughout the poem.

**Structure - Key Points**

- Owen uses **half-rhyme** throughout the poem e.g.

  Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that **knive 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.

  ‘Knive us’ and ‘nervous’ are half-rhymes, as as ‘silent’ and ‘salient.’ This pattern (A B B A C) of half-rhymes continues throughout the poem.

- The stanzas follow a regular structure, although there is no fixed number of syllables per line.

- The fifth line of each stanza is always shorter. Here, the phrase ‘**but nothing happens**’ is repeated, whilst other final lines also contain the word ‘**dying.**’

- The stanzas recount everyday experiences of trench life - e.g. the first stanza is about sentry watch at night, the middle stanzas are about weather and waiting, towards the end Owen writes about the brief periods of home leave, and the final stanza recounts a ‘burying party’ in which the men bury dead soliders.

- In the first stanza, **ellipses** (…) are used at the end of each line.
Exploration - Structure

Why do you think Owen uses half-rhyme within this poem? What is the effect of these half-rhymes?

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Why are the fifth lines of each stanza shorter? Could this ‘short line’ represent something?

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What is the effect of repetition in the poem?

In the first stanza, what could the ellipses (...) at the end of each line represent? How do they help to create a mood of boredom and confusion?

Imagery

This is where you look at techniques such as similes, metaphors and personification. What pictures has the poet tried to create in your head?
• Owen repeatedly uses **personification** as a technique for describing the weather. The weather is compared to a fighting force:
  
  - **‘merciless iced east winds that knive us’** - here, the wind is stabbing him.
  - **‘dawn massing in the east her melancholy army’** - here, dawn is compared to a general who is getting her soldiers (of wind, rain, snow etc) together to fight the men in the trenches.
  - **‘the wind’s nonchalance’**
  - **‘pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces’** - here, the snow is ‘creeping up’ on them.
  - **‘the air that shudders black with snow’** - here, the air is ‘shuddering’ and shaking.
  - **‘watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire / Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.’** - (NB this is a simile as it uses ‘like’ but is also personification, as Owen compares the gusts of wind on the wire to the screams of dying men trapped on it).

• A key **metaphor** of this poem is **‘slowly our ghosts drag home’** - here, the metaphor of ghosts highlights the fact that Owen feels he and his men are already dead.
Why do you think that Owen uses personification to describe the weather? What kind of person is the weather personified as?

Why is ‘Dawn’ a woman? How does the depiction of her as a general fit in, for example, with our ideas about ‘Mother Nature’ protecting us?

What does the word ‘nonchalance’ tell us about the wind and weather?
How does the metaphor ‘slowly our ghosts drag home’ fit in with the idea that Owen has lost his religious faith due to the war?

What is the effect of Owen comparing the wind on the barbed wire with the screams of dying men? What mood does this create?

Language

This is where you comment on the language the poet uses. What choices has he/she made, and why?
• This is one of Owen’s bleakest depictions of war, and he uses language throughout to create a sense of horror e.g.:

  • ‘Our brains ache’
  • ‘Twitching agonies’
  • ‘War lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy’
  • ‘The air that shudders black with snow’
  • ‘Cringing’
  • ‘Shivering ranks of grey’
  • ‘Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp’
  • ‘Their eyes are ice’

• Alliteration is used on a few occasions within the poem:
  • ‘Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces’
  • ‘Sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause and renew’

• He also uses sibilance (a special type of alliteration in which the ‘s’ sound is repeated - this creates an effect of coldness and cruelty):
  • ‘Merciless iced east winds’
  • ‘Suddenly successive bullets streak the silence’

How does Owen use language to create a sense of horror in the poem? Pick out any key words that you find disturbing, and analyse their effect in detail.
What is the effect of the alliteration and assonance used to describe the snow? What does it make the snow sound like?

**Effect on the reader**

How did you feel after reading this poem?
Did you think that this poem was effective in conveying the horrors of trench life in World War I? Why / why not?

Want to know more?

There are quite a lot of resources about ‘Exposure’ online, so look at these if you’re still confused:

http://clashesandcollisions.blogspot.co.uk/2011/06/exposure-wilfred-owen.html - this is a blog set up by a teacher who is doing the same poems as us. The blog notes contain some helpful ideas and interpretations of ‘Exposure.’

http://www.freewebs.com/vazzas_notes/Exposure.htm - this site explains some of the more difficult words in the poem.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1XH6tn9WJo - video of a teacher analysing some of Owen’s emotions in the poem. Please ignore the references to OCR as the information is still relevant to us. NB - he says the line ‘our hearts ache,’ but the actual line of the poem is ‘our brains ache.’

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQ_vhH3kJ3I - this video gives some of the background to ‘Exposure’ by reading some of Owen’s letters to his mother from the war.
Sample Exam Question Part A

3. a) “Explore how the writer presents the horrors of war in “Exposure”’

Use examples of the language from the poem to support your answer. (15 marks).

NB - In the exam, you would have about 30 minutes to complete this question.

Write an answer to this question and email it to me.

Comparison

You could compare this poem to various other poems in the collection. Poems such as ‘The Drum’ and ‘Conscientious Objector’ criticise war and violence, and so could be useful ‘pairs’ with ‘Exposure,’ which offers an insider perspective as to what the everyday experience of war is actually like.
Alternatively, you could compare the experience of World War I with that of more modern war and violence by comparing ‘Exposure’ with ‘Belfast Confetti’ or ‘Invasion.’

Sample Exam Question - Part B

Answer EITHER 3(b)i OR 3(b)ii

3 b) (i) Compare how the writers of “Exposure” and “Conscientious Objector” present their views about war.

3 b) (ii) Compare how the writers of “Exposure” and one other poem of your choice from the Clashes and Collisions collection present their views about conflict in any setting. (15 marks)

Use examples from the language of both poems to support your answer.

NB - In the exam, you would have about 30 minutes to complete this question.

Write an answer to this question and email it to me.