

Wilfred Owen: Investigating *The Letter*

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Investigating *The Letter*

- ❖ *The Letter* is Owen's way of showing what life was like for the average British Tommy or private soldier on the front. Make a list of the ordinary day to day things he mentions in the poem.
 - Make a list of the relationships which emerge through the poem.
 - How does Owen use these simple but deeply human aspects to show the pity of war?
- ❖ Owen was an officer, whilst the private soldiers he commanded were known as 'men'. How does this poem help us to get a sense of Owen's understanding of his troops?
- ❖ What does this poem tell us about the living conditions of the men even when 'in the rest'?

Investigating language and tone in *The Letter*

- ❖ Owen's choice of words for the voice of the soldier is all important in this poem. Contrast the bracketed conversations spoken on the Western front with the words of the letter home.
 - How do these two different voices add to the power of the poem?
 - How does the colloquial language add to the pity of the poem?
- ❖ Make a list of the terms of endearment the man uses in the letter.
 - Make a list of the oaths, curses or name callings he uses.

Investigating structure and versification in *The Letter*

- ❖ Owen's use of rhyme and rhythm, his versification, is unusual in this poem. Print off a copy of the poem from <http://texts.crossref-it.info> and use highlighter pens to show the rhyme schemes.
- ❖ On your copy of *The Letter* identify which lines are short and which are long.
 - Look at what you have identified and see if you can draw any conclusions as to why Owen chose to write in this way.

Investigating imagery and symbolism in *The Letter*

- ❖ Owen uses the indirect image of a cow in this poem, foreshadowing the slaughter of the soldier. In *Anthem for Doomed Youth* and *The Dead-Beat* he also uses the metaphor of animals going to be butchered. Look up the quotations in each of the poems mentioned and try to memorise them (for the exam).
 - How effective are they as metaphors? Compare them with each other.

Investigating themes in *The Letter*

- ❖ Owen makes poetry out the horror of war. The poet W.B. Yeats dismissively summed up Owen's style as 'all blood, dirt and sucked sugar stick'. How far would you agree with this statement regarding *The Letter*?