

Wilfred Owen, Selected Poems:

(a) *The Letter*

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☞ refers to links on www.crossref-it.info

- ❖ **Lesson focus:** To explore how Owen uses the structural features of the poem to present different views of the experience of life at the front.
- ❖ **Opening exercise:** Empathy task - Imagine you were a soldier fighting at the front in WWI. About which topics would you write home to your family?
 - The daily horrors of war?
 - Would you try to put on a brave face?
 - Explain censorship and the difficulty of communicating realistic accounts to family.

☞ (*The Letter* > Synopsis and commentary > Letters home)

 - Read the 'edited' version of *The Letter* (see **Student worksheet a)i**) and pick out those details and reassurances which the soldier writes to his wife.
 - How realistic a picture do you think this is of life at the front?
 - Speculate what might have happened at the end of the letter (signified by the dash).
- ❖ **Textual examination:** Using **Student worksheet a)i** compare the full version of the poem with the 'edited' version.
 - Establish the events of the 'true' story compared to what is written in the soldier's letter.
 - What do the sections of dialogue in brackets add to the 'story' of the poem?
(*The Letter* > Synopsis and commentary)
 - Highlight all the punctuation marks and annotate what jobs they do eg:
 - Separate the truth and lies/dialogue and writing (parentheses)
 - Create speed (caesura) and tension (exclamation marks, dash)
 - Create a realistic voice for the soldier (apostrophes for omission)
 - Create a conversational tone (question marks), etc.
 - Circle all the proper nouns (names) and pronouns. Why is there this repetition?
 - Personal, relationships, realistic, etc.
 - Highlight all the rhyming words and consider the effect these words and their associations have on the tone of the poem eg: fret, fear/near, you/to, lad/bad
 - Is there a warning contained in these words?
☞ (*The Letter* > Language, tone, and structure)
- ❖ **Discussion ideas:** Discuss the following questions in groups, making notes, and then feed back to the rest of the class.
 - What do you think Owen is suggesting by organising and presenting his poem in this way?
 - What features do you find most effective in communicating Owen's messages about war?
 - Why?
 - To what extent can this poem be seen as a reaction against censorship?
 - How realistic a picture of life at the front does the reader get from the 'unedited' version?
- ❖ **Recreative task:** Use some of the techniques identified in the poem (punctuation, repetition, coded rhyme words, etc) to write a letter to a friend or parent about a day at school or an evening out. Try to include both the 'edited' version and the reality.
- ❖ **Critical task:** 'Owen's focus is not so much the pain and horror of war, as the lies which try to mask these horrors.' To what extent do you agree?
 - This question should fuel some debate. A logical second poem to consider would be *Dulce et Decorum Est*, but several others could be suitable.

☞ (An overview of the themes in the poetry of Wilfred Owen > War)
- ❖ **Extension task:** Look back at some other Owen poems and identify structural features which are used to communicate Owen's messages about war.