

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

First World War Poetry

Read one or more of the following poems about the First World War and answer the questions that appear at the end of each poem.

After the Speeches About the Empire, by Ted Plantos

A Working Party, by Siegfried Sassoon

Creed, by Dick Diespecker

Our Dug-Out, by Edgar W. McInnis

The Reaper, by Bill Caddick

To the Dead Soldiers, by Emile Verhaeren

In Flanders Fields, by John McCrae



AFTER THE SPEECHES ABOUT THE EMPIRE

Ted Plantos

I remember the Union-Jack-waving crowds
Before our train pulled out, and the quiet later
That choked their gaiety – how they went black
And motionless white when the last photograph was taken

I volunteered with twenty-one others
August of '14 it was, and we were handsome then
In our red tunics, trousers as blue
As the ocean we ached to cross
And white helmets marching to the railway station

Sam Hughes couldn't have hoped for more
They were joining up right across Canada
In Vancouver we burned the Kaiser in effigy,
Soaked him in kerosene and applauded the flames

The crowds cheered us in our new uniforms
When we marched ahead of automobiles,
Horses and buggies and the local fire brigade
Loaded down with flags

One of the officers told me
The war would last only three months,
And I'd likely not see any action

After the speeches about the Empire
Soaked up our hearts and were over,
The band played "God Be With You Till We Meet Again"

And the crowded platform
Went motionless quiet
When the train with us out the windows pulled away

Source: Colombo, John Robert, and Michael Richardson, *We Stand on Guard: Poems and Songs of Canadians in Battle*, Toronto: Colombo & Company, 1998.




OVER THE TOP
An Interactive Story

http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/overtop/index_e.html

Questions

- 1) What patriotic images are evoked in this poem?
- 2) Who were “Sam Huges” and the “Kaiser”?
- 3) Why do you think “the crowded platform went motionless quiet” when the train pulled away?



A WORKING PARTY

Siegfried Sassoon

Three hours ago he blundered up the trench,
Sliding and poising, groping with his boots;
Sometimes he tripped and lurched against the walls
With hands that pawed the sodden bags of chalk.
He couldn't see the man who walked in front;
Only he heard the drum and rattle of feet
Stepping along barred trench boards, often splashing
Wretchedly where the sludge was ankle-deep.

Voices would grunt "Keep to your right—make way!"
When squeezing past some men from the front-line:
White faces peered, puffing a point of red;
Candles and braziers glinted through the chinks
And curtain-flaps of dug-outs; then the gloom
Swallowed his sense of sight; he stooped and swore
Because a sagging wire had caught his neck.

A flare went up; the shining whiteness spread
And flickered upward, showing nimble rats
And mounds of glimmering sand-bags, bleached with rain;
Then the slow silver moment died in dark.
The wind came posting by with chilly gusts
And buffeting at corners, piping thin.
And dreary through the crannies; rifle-shots
Wood split and crack and sing along the night,
And shells came calmly through the drizzling air
To burst with hollow bang below the hill.

Three hours ago he stumbled up the trench;
Now he will never walk that road again:
He must be carried back, a jolting lump
Beyond all need of tenderness and care.

He was a young man with a meagre wife
And two small children in a Midland town;
He showed their photographs to all his mates,
And they considered him a decent chap
Who did his work and hadn't much to say,
And always laughed at other people's jokes
Because he hadn't any of his own.



OVER THE TOP
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That night when he was busy at his job
Of piling bags along the parapet,
He thought how slow time went, stamping his feet
And blowing on his fingers, pinched with cold.
He thought of getting back by half-past twelve,
And tot of rum to send him warm to sleep
In draughty dug-out frowsty with the fumes
Of coke, and full of snoring weary men.

He pushed another bag along the top,
Craning his body outward; then a flare
Gave one white glimpse of No Man's Land and wire;
And as he dropped his head the instant split
His startled life with lead, and all went out.

Source: Sassoon, Siegfried, *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*, London: Faber & Faber, 1985.

Questions

- 1) How does Siegfried Sassoon convey the dreariness and dangers of life in the trenches?
- 2) What do the words "parapet", "dug-outs" and "No Man's Land" mean?
- 3) What do you think happens to the main character at the end of the poem?



CREED

Dick Diespecker

If they should ask you,
Why do you fight?
Tell them, For Freedom. For the right
To live in peace; to worship God;
To build a cottage, turn a sod
That is my own; to trust my friends;
To know that when the work day ends,
A wife and children wait to greet
Me with a smile. I fight to meet
The future unashamed; to read
What books I will; to choose the creed
I wish; face politicians unafraid,
And criticize, if need be, laws they've made.
These are the web of life; for these I lend
My strength; these are the rights that I defend.

Source: Colombo, John Robert, and Michael Richardson, *We Stand on Guard: Poems and Songs of Canadians in Battle*, Toronto: Colombo & Company, 1998.

Questions

- 1) For whom did Dick Diespecker write this poem and why do you think he felt obliged to write this?
- 2) What are the reasons the poet gives for going off to war?
- 3) Can you think of any other reasons why ordinary men and women would volunteer to serve in time of war?
- 4) Is there such a thing as a "Just War"?



OUR DUG-OUT

Edgar W. McInnis

When the lines are in a muddle – as they very often are –
When the break's a mile away from you, or maybe twice as far,
When you have to sort the trouble out, and fix it on the run,
It's fine to know that you can go, when everything is done,

To a cosy little dug-out (and the subject of this ode)
Just a comfy little bivvy on the – Road,
A sheltered, sandbagged doorway with the flap flung open wide,
And a pal to grin a greeting when you step inside.

When the weather's simply damnable – cold sleet and driving rain –
When the poles snap off like matches and the lines are down again,
And you rip your freezing fingers as you work the stubborn wire,
It's great to get back home again, and dry off by the fire.

In a cheery little dug-out (and you know the kind I mean)
With a red-hot stove a-roaring, and a floor that's none too clean,
A pipe that's filled and waiting and a book that will not wait,
And a cup of steaming coffee if you come back late.

It may look a little crowded, and the roof's a trifle low,
But it's water-tight – or nearly – and it wasn't built for show,
And when Woolly Bears are crumping and the shrapnel sprays around,
You feel a whole lot safer if you're underneath the ground

In a rat-proof, rain-proof dug-out (and it's splinter-proof as well)
Where we got the stuff to build it is a thing I mustn't tell,
But we've made it strong and solid, and we're cosy, rain or shine,
In our happy little dug-out on the firing line.

Source: Colombo, John Robert, and Michael Richardson, *We Stand on Guard: Poems and Songs of Canadians in Battle*, Toronto: Colombo & Company, 1998.




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Questions

- 1) What images does Edgar McInnis evoke to give his underground dug-out all of the qualities of a home away from home?
- 2) Find the meaning of the words “bivvy”, “Woolly Bears” and “shrapnel”.
- 3) Why is the poet unable or unwilling to tell you where he got the materials to build his dug-out?
- 4) What is the value of a dug-out?



THE REAPER

Bill Caddick

So now it's done
Once more the shining field
Has gone to feed the reaper's blade
All silent now
The stubble it lies still
With blood-red poppies overlaid

"Where are my sons?" the mother cries
"Justly barely grown, yet gone away."
"Away, away," the reaper sighs
"Cut down like corn on an autumn day"

And so once more
The Seed of life is sown
And in the loving earth is laid

But it's never done
Once more the young men all
Must go to feed the reaper's blade.

Source: Chielens, Piet, *We Died in Hell – They Called it Passchendaele*, Maldegem, Van Hoestenbergh, 1992.

Questions

- 1) What is the "reaper" and why does it carry a blade?
- 2) What is it that is harvested "like corn on an autumn day"?
- 3) What other analogies or comparisons could you use to describe war?



TO THE DEAD SOLDIERS

Emile Verhaeren

No more shall you see mountains, woods, earth,
Handsome eyes of my soldiers, just twenty years old,
Who fell last spring
When light was at its softest.

We dared not remember the golden fields
That dawn covered with iridescent glory;
Only the sadness of war was in our thoughts
When, behind the hamlets, came news of your death

Since your departure, at the angle of the mirror,
Your image attracted both heart and eyes;
No one sat on the rickety stool
Where each night, by the fireplace, you took your place.

Alas! Where are your young, strong and wild bodies?
Where are your arms, your hands and the superb gestures
You made with the big scythes in the fields?
Alas, the immense night has descended upon you.

Your mothers have wept in their closed thatched cottages,
Your lovers have spoken their sorrow to the villagers,
Every day you have been mentioned, sadly,
But, one evening in June, talk turned to something else.

Source: Chielens, Piet, *We Died in Hell – They Called it Passchendaele*, Maldegem, Van Hoestenbergh, 1992.

Questions

- 1) How does the loss of a loved one in wartime affect the surviving family?
- 2) What image does the poet evoke to describe the soldier's death?
- 3) What is the meaning of the last line of the poem? What does this say to notions of bravery, glory and sacrifice?



IN FLANDERS FIELDS

John McCrae

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

Source: Veterans Affairs, *Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae, 1872-1918: Soldier-Poet-Doctor / Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae, 1872-1918 : Soldat-poète-médecin*, Ottawa: Veterans Affairs, 1988.

Questions

- 1) Why do you think John McCrae's *In Flanders Fields* is so often used in Remembrance Day ceremonies?
- 2) Where is "Flanders" and what happened there?
- 3) What is the symbolism of the "torch"?

