

First World War Poetry Revision Sheets

'Recruiting'

E. A. Mackintosh – Served as a soldier during the war – was wounded at the Somme and killed in 1917.

This is a very bitter poem, heavily sarcastic and aiming an attack at all the people back home who send young men off to war with stories of glory and the country's need but who then sit back to enjoy their safety – glad they aren't going.

The poem isn't anti-war as the second half suggests that young men might gain something from the experience – if they face it honestly. His attack is against the 'fat old men' and the 'harlots'. Written in the first person we get the feeling that the poet is expressing a personal feeling/experience.

Look at how the poet engages with his audience in the first line by quoting from the recruiting poster on a train.

'Lads' – the first word suggests youth and a certain innocence. Unlike his image of who set up the recruiting campaign – the 'fat civilians' – the adjective emphasises how unhealthy and objectionable they are – the noun civilians underlines the fact they won't be involved in the fighting.

In the second stanza the poet quote what the fat civilians say wishing they 'Could go and fight the Hun' (Hun = Germans) knowing they will never be in danger of doing anything of the sort as they 'thank God they are over forty one (too old).

The poet also attacks the shallow girls who often in World War I poetry are seen as the reasons why men went off to die – to please them. The girls are said to have 'feathers' – either because they are entertainers in bars in costumes or perhaps it's a reference to the white feathers young women used to give men who hadn't joined up as a sign of the men's cowardice. The songs are 'vulgar songs' meaning they have little real emotion – they are shallow and crude.

After stanza three the poet speaks of what the recruiting poster should say if it were honest – the real picture of 'shivering in the morning dew' and killing people 'like yourselves' – a frequent theme that the German soldiers were just like them – ordinary men. Mackintosh implies the journalists like the war and casualties as it gives them something to write about and the line 'Help to keep them nice and safe' is really bitter aimed at those who would send young men to die to protect their own comfort but who would do nothing about it themselves. The expression 'wicked German foe' shows the clichéd way the propagandists portrayed the enemy as evil. The last line to stanza 6 "Lads you're wanted – out you go" ends with a dismissive phrase after the dash to show how eagerly the civilians get rid of the soldiers – out of sight, out of mind.

From line 25 to the end, Mackintosh changes tone to suggest there might be something good to gain from fighting in that the individual will share the comradeship of all the other young men and their experience of life.

"Better twenty honest years
Than their dull three score and ten."

This implies it is better to die after 20 years if it is for a good reason rather than live a boring pointless life for seventy years.

35 'Lads you're wanted. Come and learn
To live and die with honest men.

Line 35 echoes the first line but rather than dismissing the men with 'go' it encourages them to be part of something with 'Come'. This word is given extra emphasis as it comes straight after a caesura. The alliteration of 'learn to live' causes the reader to slow down over those words and gives them a heroic sense.

The final stanza pulls no punches and offers a more realistic slogan than the one found in the recruiting posters – "Take your risk of life and death

Underneath the open sky.
Live clean or go out quick –
Lads, you're wanted, Come and die."

Although not enticing, as it includes dying, it offers a sense of excitement in the first line, an unfenced existence in the second with 'open sky' and the harsh alliteration in line three offers the idea that you either live and feel good about yourself or at least you die quickly.

The poem has a very strong rhythm, quite simple using seven beat lines with rhymes on lines 2 and 4 in each stanza. This is ballad style and the poet probably adapts it to mimic/mock the style of the 'vulgar songs' and 'comic songs' used to encourage the men to enlist.

'Joining the Colours' – Katherine Tynan Hinkson

This describes the young men who have already enlisted, going off to join with their regiment ready to go off to war. The 'Colours' are the flags, emblems of the different regiments.

It includes a mix of emotions which contrast sharply. The young men "golden boys" are elated and excited but this is contrasted by the other observations of them which seem less enthusiastic. "The drab street stares to see them row on row." Although written from the third person, the subtitle 'West Kent's, Dublin, August 1914' may indicate that the poet observed this event as she was an Irish writer.

Whereas in 'Recruiting' the poet gives his perspective of civilians, this seems to be a civilian's perspective on young men joining up. As a consequence the poem starts.

'There they go marching all in step so gay.' The last word indicates the happiness of the young men and the next line shows best the mix of contrasting emotions.

'Smooth – cheeked and golden, food for shells and guns.'

The first part emphasises their youth and innocence – the adjective 'golden' used twice in the poem to describe the young men – perhaps to underline their glowing pride or their value. The second part of the stanza shows them to be nothing more than cannon fodder – bound to die. Their innocence is further emphasised by the use of the simile 'as to a wedding day' – they think war will be a laugh like a wedding – and also by the reference to 'mothers' sons.'

The contrast is maintained in stanza two as the street staring at them (personification) is seen as 'drab' and they are going 'into the dark' but they themselves are 'singing like the lark' (simile).

Look at how alliteration is used in Stanza 3 to emphasise the contrast between – the boys and their fate. Also, look at how the big send off is emphasised through noise.

The last stanza is very powerful. The excitement of the moment is captured in the opening two exclamations. 'High heart! High courage! Immediately after those, however, we get a picture of the girls back home that is very different from the picture given by Mackintosh in 'Recruiting.' Instead of being shallow harlots, these are the girls who have lost their hearts to young men soon to die.

'The poor girls they kissed
Run with them: they shall kiss no more, alas.'

The enjambment between the two lines reinforces the idea of the girls running alongside the marching boys and then the caesura after them brings us to a sharp halt and makes us realise they will never be kissed again. The line finished with another exclamation but not a positive one. In line 15 the poet repeats the word 'mist' to give the impression of the young men being lost forever and they go into the mist "Singing they pass" – still happy, still unaware.

'The Send-Off' by Wilfred Owen deals with a similar situation but once again offers a different perspective. Although he fought in the war, Owen chooses to write this from the perspective of a third person observer.

The title 'send-off' is quite ironic as the poem describes anything but such an occasion. A send off is supposed to be a time of jubilation, noise, celebration but this is a very quiet subdued affair as if it has happened too often before and as if everyone knew what the consequences were.

The poem is constructed with a three line stanza followed by a two line stanza. The rhyme scheme spreads across the two stanzas indicating they are linked. The first three lines seem to give the story/create the image whereas the second two hint at the underlying meaning.

Like the soldiers in 'Joining the Colours' they are singing as they march but they get on the train with faces 'grimly gay.' The alliteration of the oxymoron underlines the ambivalent emotions being felt. The soldiers wear flowers but not in a happy way, more like for a funeral 'As men's are, dead' (simile).

Look at the first eight lines and pick out all the words that make the setting seem dull, unimpressive – not right for a 'send off.'

Identify all the words and phrases – such as the simile 'like wrongs hushed up' that indicate the leaving was quite a secretive, almost embarrassed incident.

The poem becomes quite personal with the line 'They were not ours.'

This underlines the lack of connection between the people who lived in the area of the railway siding and the soldiers. So many men had been sent off like this, it meant little and they knew nothing of where they came from or where they went to.

Lines 14 and 15 are difficult.

'Nor there if they yet mock what women meant.
Who gave them flowers?'

The lines are difficult to pronounce because of all the 'm' sounds and difficult to unravel. If the flowers were given in sympathy for men soon to die, then the poet suggests we don't know if they are dead yet. If they were given as signs of would-be heroes, perhaps he means that many of the men will already have died in a far from heroic way.

Look at the last two stanzas and see how the words show that the homecoming of the 'few' will be just as low key as their send off.

Why does he repeat the word 'few' in line 18? What's the impact?

The last line 'Up half-known roads' sums up the whole feeling of the poem, of thousands of anonymous men being transported somewhere unknown for a pointless death.

The two Siegfried Sassoon poems included are contrasting in form as one is written from the 1st person whereas the other is written in the 3rd person. However, both deal with the topic of how the dreadful conditions and occurrences of the war destroyed men mentally as well as physically.

Sassoon was a serving soldier, highly respected, who survived the war. He was a good friend of Wilfred Owen.

In 'Lamentations' (which means – expression of sadness) the narrative voice (1st person) describes coming across a man who is distraught at the loss of his brother. The harsh final two lines

'In my belief

Such men have lost all patriotic feeling' does not condemn the man for breaking down but expresses how it is to be expected that, understandably in those circumstances, men feel more for their family than for their country.

The man isn't given a name – it could be anyone. Why would he be in the guard room? (line 1). The narrator is almost embarrassed at the sight he comes across in the 'blind darkness' when he 'blundered on.' The sergeant looks at the man 'With puzzled patient face.' They don't know how to deal with such raw expressions of grief.

Pick out all the powerful verbs that are used to bring over the sounds made by the man.

Look at the line:-

"And, all because his brother had gone west."

The narrator seems to be implying that it is no big deal – 'all because' and he uses the euphemism 'gone west' for dying. The soldiers had to treat death casually as it was a constant in their lives but it did not mean they weren't touched by it. Sometimes they were pushed over the edge by it or an incident in the war and those watching could only pity them and be glad it wasn't them.

Look at lines 8 and 9 – 'While he was kneeling
Half naked on the floor.'

They emphasise how normally fit, strong, proud young men might be destroyed by the war. The poem underlines the effect of war on the 'ordinary man.'

The second Sassoon poem 'The Hero' deals with a similar theme but is even more bitter in the way it describes the military authority. The basic story line describes an officer carrying the news of her son's death to a mother. The main difference is that the lies given to her make her believe he died a hero whilst the army officer held the man in contempt for being a coward. Once again it is seen how little civilians really knew about the war.

The reader is drawn into the poem in the first line because of the conversation we are overhearing. We feel sympathy for the woman who has no name; she is called 'the Mother' as she could have been any of thousands of mothers given the same news. She appreciates the letter about Jack's death 'The Colonel writes so nicely' and we can hear her voice as it 'quavered to a choke'. Look at lines 11 and 12 and see how the poet uses powerful vocabulary to evoke sympathy for her.

We feel very differently about the army representative bringing the news. Ironically described as 'the Brother Officer' he is shown as being cold-hearted and indifferent to the woman he sees as a 'poor old dear' to tell lies to and to Jack who he saw as a 'cold footed useless swine.' Jack is an ordinary name used to detail what the effect of war is on an ordinary man. In stanza 3 we are drawn into a picture of what took place. It is made believable by the name given to part of the trench 'Wicked Corner' – this was typical of how soldiers used to name their area and hints at how dangerous it was and why Jack 'panicked.' The graphic description of how he was 'Blown to small bits' makes it more horrific. It seems that Jack, like many soldiers, had tried to get a small injury (a 'cushy') to get sent home but hadn't been successful.

Who cared? No one:-

"Except that lonely woman with white hair."

The power in the last line comes through the adjective 'lonely' and the alliteration of the 'w' sounds which elongate the line adding to the sadness.

Unlike Sassoon's title 'The Hero' which is heavily ironic, Winifred M Letts's poem is called The Deserter describing exactly what the soldier was. The major irony in the poem comes in the repeated line – 'An English bullet in his heart' which shows how they dealt with people who were seen as cowards and which continues to explore the theme of how war affects ordinary men.

Once again the subject of the poem is anonymous – he represents all the 300 plus men who were dealt with in this way and the opening words reflect his anonymity.

"There was a man." These opening words also have a fairy story/nursery rhyme feel about them as does the eight beat rhythm. This is probably to reflect the innocence of these ordinary young men who couldn't deal with the horrors they were thrown into. The repeated rhyming couplets such as lines 4 and 5 also help to support this idea.

The poem is written in the first person as if we are hearing a story and the audience is forced to consider the issues by the use of rhetorical questions – 'But who can judge him, you or I?' And by using the exclamation on line 15 'But oh!'

Look at how he is described between lines 7 and 14. How does the writer encourage us to feel sympathy? His fate is made to seem particularly unfeeling by the references to 'They' – this makes it seem impersonal and by the description of the greyness of the dawn. He is seen to be isolated 'He stood there in a place apart.'

Identify the IRONY the poet talks about in line 26. After this line the poem has a very heavy link with Sassoon's 'The Hero.' Once again we are made aware of what the people back home don't know about the war and how the ordinary man is affected by it.

The affect of the war on ordinary men is also seen in Ivor Gurney's poem The Target. Similar to 'The Deserter', the voice of the poem (it is written in the 1st person) engages in conversation with the audience. Another similarity is its simplicity – this seems to be done to give us the impression we are spoken to by a simple, ordinary man. The poem highlights the way that war brutalises men into killing when in other circumstances they would not be violent people. In his simple way the soldier explains his action and his feeling of guilt. He has no hatred for the other man as:- 'Perhaps he was the only son ...' The reason behind all this senseless violence is made clear in his last line:-

'This is a bloody mess indeed.'

The poet makes us believe this is the thought process of quite a simple man by the way it is broken up with frequent use of caesuras mid line (such as lines 2 and 7). Also the language of the speaker is simple as he uses colloquial expressions like 'a-happening' and 'durst.' The conversation is maintained at the beginning of stanza 4 when he says:- 'Well.'

Beneath the theme of a man brutalised by war is the deeper explanation of God's role. In a time when religious belief was more important to people than it is today, the voice questions why God doesn't do anything.

'Yet God keeps still, and does not say
A word of guidance any way.'

A simple, ordinary man needed something to believe in to help him through the horrors of war but he starts to question all the things that he has been taught. Stanza 4 speaks of the possibility of talking to the man he killed in the after-life – continuing his Christian beliefs especially as he hopes to 'ask his pardon.'

In stanza 2 he even considers that his death might be beneficial to his mother as at least she wouldn't be worried anymore. The first line of the last stanza:-

'All's tangle. Here's my job.' Emphasises how the ordinary man felt about the war and how trapped he was in the middle of something he couldn't control.

Gurney's other poem The Bohemians also deals with the effect of war upon men but is a little more difficult to understand as the structure is quite complex. The Bohemians of the title are people who do not wish to conform to what society believes to be 'normal' – they deliberately break rules, look down on the people who follow the rules, and live a very self centred existence. The irony is, though, that regardless of not wishing to conform, they get dragged into the war like everybody else and are affected by the war – just like everybody else.

The first sentence is 16 lines long and seeks to describe the men, what they didn't do, what they did do, and how they differed from the others. After that first, extra long sentence only one line remains –

'In Artois or Picardy they lie – free of useless fashions.'

Throughout their lives they have tried to avoid the fashions and expectations of society – to be different. Now they are free of those fashions but just like thousands of other men, they are dead.

The poetic voice seems to be against these people as the poem starts 'Certain people' and in line 10 it refers to 'What little soul they had.'

We can see they didn't conform as they refused to look neat and tidy (lines 1 – 3) and only just escaped execution for not following the rules. We are told they preferred to spend their time playing cards (Bridge) than to talk about military matters and that they couldn't believe the army would sound 'Lights Out' (the call to go to bed) in the middle of their game. They 'died off one by one, or became officers' the latter is ironic as they had never even wanted to be soldiers but the very fact they may have survived made them fit to be officers.

The fact that the first sentence is 16 lines long is one of the reasons why this poem is difficult to grasp at first. The poet may be doing this to reflect the way the Bohemians also don't like to conform. However, behind the first 9 lines of the poem is quite a rigid rhyme structure – reflecting upon how they, unwittingly conformed in the end and how the army didn't care if they didn't totally conform as they still had to use them. The only 'winner' was war.

Six of the poems deal especially with loss and the effect that it has on the lives of the survivors. Five of these are written by women the sixth is In Flanders Fields by John McCrae.

The title refers to an area of Belgium where some of the worst fighting took place and also uses the word 'fields'. This has connotations of burial/death as that was where many men fell but also of new life as things will grow again and he particularly refers to the famous poppies – a symbol we have come to accept as representative of those who fall in war.

Stanza one underlines the mix of death and life when it says how

'the poppies blow
Between the crosses row on row'

The repetition of 'row' emphasises just how many have died whilst the poppies remind us of life. Similarly, although the guns are making a lot of noise, 'The larks still bravely singing, fly.' Nature continues to proclaim life just as man continues to try to destroy it.

McCrae writes the poem as if one of the dead is speaking to the audience. In line 3 he says the crosses mark our place.' Stanza 2 starts with the short statement

'We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived.'

The caesura after the word 'Dead' really has a powerful impact upon the audience and the next part of the line explains how cheaply life is held – one moment you have it, the next you don't. Stanza 2 concludes by explaining all the things they have lost through their sacrifice in order to give more impact to stanza 3.

Stanza 3 is a call to the survivors to make something from their sacrifice - to ensure it was not pointless. Hence the rallying cry 'Take up our quarrel' and

'To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.'

The audience is called upon to continue the work of the dead and the poet uses Biblical style language

'If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep.'

to give more seriousness to the call. It also seems that there is almost a lying underneath – that the fallen soldiers will not lie in peace if their work is not carried on.

Look up details about John McCrae and identify what makes him different from the other 5 writers of poems dealing with loss.

The other five poems which deal especially with loss are 'The Falling Leaves', 'The Seed Merchant's Son', 'Spring In War-Time', 'Perhaps' and 'Reported Missing.'

Like McCrae's poem they all make use of references to Nature to explore the idea of loss and also to look at how the natural world progresses through its seasons even though mankind is destroying itself though war and Nature constantly offers the reminder that there will be new life.

'The Falling Leaves' is subtitled 'November 1915' – Autumn at the time of the worst destruction of life on the Somme. The poet uses the analogy of autumn, when nature 'dies' and leaves drop from the trees to reflect upon so many men 'dropping' in the war.

The voice speaks to the audience as if in conversation describing an experience from that day.

When she saw the 'brown' leaves dropping – the colour is reminiscent of the soldiers' uniforms. It's a 'still' afternoon – no reason for the leaves to drop – just like there is no reason for the men to drop.

Explore how the alliteration of line 4 creates an effect.

'But thickly, silently,
They fell, like snowflakes wiping out the noon.'

So many are dropping it's like a snowstorm (simile) and blocks out the light. This natural occurrence makes her think of the 'gallant multitude' – the adjective shows her pride in the men and their nobility. The word 'multitude' implies how many died. They lie 'withering' like the leaves.

'Slain by no wind of age or pestilence,
But in their beauty strewed
Like snowflakes falling on the Flemish clay.'

These powerful last lines emphasises the fact there is no reason behind the deaths of these men. They are cut down in their prime, as hinted at by the word 'beauty' and there is no purpose as they are killed randomly 'strewed.' The last line gives an excellent contrast between their purity (white snowflakes) and the dirt of the ground which is described as 'clay.' So many die it's like a blizzard and the word 'Flemish' reminds us they die away from their own country.

Find out what the term ANALOGY means.

The other four poems are more specific in their grief – not talking about the loss of many but specific ones. This is especially the case in Perhaps by Vera Brittain as this poem is dedicated to her fiancé, Roland Leighton, who died around the time described in 'Falling Leaves.'

Why is it called 'Perhaps'? Why is the title followed by a dash? Why do four of the stanzas start with the word 'Perhaps'?

Look at how the stanzas are structured – the first two lines offer a positive, natural picture of something that might be beautiful whereas the last two lines refer to the loss of her loved one 'You' and have a negative feel. The voice of the poem speaks directly to the dead person's spirit and this ambivalent feeling of hoping that one day she will stop grieving but a resignation that this will never be the case.

The stanzas are uniform in their rhyme scheme – perhaps this is meant to reflect another theme of the poem – the way that Nature continues through the seasons – life goes on even though a life, is lost. Very strong images of all the seasons are given. 'Sunny hours of Spring', 'Summer woods will shimmer bright', 'autumn harvest fields a rich delight.' Perhaps the most poignant (look that word up) is used in the last but one stanza. She mentions the 'passing of the dying year' and listening to 'Christmas songs.' This is a particularly family orientated time and the New Year emphasises time passing and so this time would add to the sense of loss.

What does the voice feel about her life in stanza 1?

What are the connotations with 'crimson rose', stanza 3?

Why does she use a capital for 'You'?

How do the last two lines answer all the questions raised by the poem?

Edith Nesbit writes in a similar way in Spring In War-Time as the voice of the poem speaks directly to a lost loved one and explores all the things that will not be the same again. The title emphasises the contrasts as Spring is traditionally a time of new life whereas War-Time is a time of loss of life. The major theme of the poem explores how life will continue as it has always done but it won't be the same for her because of her loss.

The poem is a lot to do with love lost, future destroyed and must have struck a chord for many young women whose loves didn't return from the war. Similar to 'Perhaps' the first two lines of each stanza provide a positive natural image from Spring time, but the second two have a negative feel. Also the rhyme scheme is the same, offering the idea that the changing of the seasons, time progressing it eternal – not to be altered, but mankind's existence is constantly changing.

Look at the metaphor used in the first line. The white blossom of the blackthorn is referred to as 'snow' emphasising its colour but perhaps also the coldness that has descended. The alliteration of the 'l' sounds in the second line lengthens the line to underline the sadness. The repetition of the word 'where' and the use of powerful verbs 'used to go' 'shall not go again' remind us of what has been lost. How do the images of stanza 2 underline the ideas of Nature continuing whilst she suffers from loss?

The third stanza is really powerful as it refers especially to love and families = she has lost her love and they will never build a family. In line one every bird 'sings of its nest, warmed by its breast.' The internal rhyme on the words 'nest' and 'breast' throw focus on the idea of a home/family and also on love/emotion. Line 4 says "We had heart to sing last spring" starting with a personal pronoun which emphasises the fact that they were together, the internal rhyme bringing over the happiness they felt a year ago. The following line:-

'But we never built our nest' emphasises the home building they hadn't time to complete. The finality of the word 'never' shows just how she feels.

Look at the natural images used in the last stanza. Why red roses? Why use the elliptic dots at the end of line 2, what's the effect? Why mention daisies? What phrase links death with daisies? His grave is seen as an unpleasant place by referring to the 'clay.'

In her poem 'Reported Missing', Anna Gordon Kearns, touches on similar ideas but from a slightly different perspective. Unlike Nesbit and Brittain, she doesn't know that her loved one is dead, but that he is 'Reported Missing.' This is perhaps even worse as she cannot grieve, she cannot find

closure. Instead she fills her poem with the conviction that he isn't dead but underneath there is a feeling that this is an empty, unreasonable hope. Unlike Brittain and Nisbet who were writing about lovers, there is the suggestion that Kearn writes about a son as she refers to his 'little room' and draws a picture of what small boys are doing in the fields perhaps being reminders of how he used to play when he was young.

The voice of this sonnet speaks directly to the lost soldier 'My though shall never be that you are dead.' The first word makes it very personal and the word 'never' shows how determined she is. Her memories of him are of a person full of life (see lines 2 and 3) and she is very critical of those who try to prepare her for loss. Her critical expression is made clear by the alliteration:-

'Scornful I hear the flat things they have said
And all their pitiful platitudes of pain.'

The repetition in line 7 shows her determination to think they are wrong 'I laugh! I laugh!' The reason she is so confident is given in the powerful line 8 -

'This heart would never beat if you were dead' indicating the strength of the bond between mother and son. As with the previous two poems, life is described in continuation – lilac growing, boys playing but she isn't worried and this Shakespearean sonnet ends with a rhyming couplet that sums up her emotions:-

'Of these familiar things I have no dread'
'Being so very sure you are not dead'

'The Seed-Merchant's Son' maintains this motif of life continuing. We can see that in the title itself as it refers to a man who sells life – SEEDS. The irony is, as we will discover, he has encountered the loss of life as his son has been killed in the war. The voice of the poem is in conversation with the reader describing how he/she has encountered the Seed Merchant.

The poet has chosen to write in rhyming couplets of eight beat lines. This gives the poem a very simplistic feel and links to the picture we get of the Seed-Merchant's son. He is described as young, naïve and innocent and so this nursery rhyme style is entirely appropriate.

The first stanza emphasises the closeness between father and son and the sense of loss:-

'His dear, his loved, his only one.' This pattern of three underlines the significance of the boy, especially the word 'only.'

Look at stanzas 2, 3, 4, 5 and pick out the details that show the boy as being young and full of life. In stanza 6 the first line starts with a short statement:- 'Died in the war....' The elliptic dots give the reader a chance to digest the dreadful detail and the line that follows emphasises the paradox that someone so young and full of life meets death so early. 'Must have looked at death with a child's surprise.'

Stanzas 7, 8, 9 create sympathy for the Seed-Merchant. It's as if the narrator has seen him and is telling us about what he saw. Life goes on as he 'goes on his way' and he's been seen 'on his land today.' Line 15 is particularly poignant

'Old to have fathered so young a son' – implying he will not have a chance to be a father again. The use of the rhetorical question in stanza 9 engages the audience and makes us feel the sadness.

In stanzas 10, 11 we get a picture of a man so struck with grief that he is motionless – seemingly without life:-

'As if naught human were standing there.' But around him the birds are flying, ignoring him as, for them, life does go on. This is emphasised by the enjambment between stanzas 10 and 11. This is a small, positive sign and we are given a chance to consider it by the elliptic dots between stanzas 11 and 12.

We are brought back into the poem by the vocative 'Oh' to express some confusion at the Seed-Merchant's behaviour. He stands looking at the earth, seed in hand and murmurs 'Thank God, thank God!!' Perhaps he has realised that the loss of his son is not the end of everything, life does continue and nature shows us that out of death comes life. He, of all, should know that but he had to cope with personal grief before it became clear.

The final two poems are both written by Wilfred Owen. These are 'Spring Offensive' and 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young.' The first one, Spring Offensive is a major poem in the selection and should be looked at closely.

This poem is the only one in the selection which deals directly with action in the war. Owen was fully involved at the front and no doubt could relate the graphic details from personal experience. The poem splits into two parts and reveals the contrasting experience of war. The first part is relaxed, sleepy when the soldiers are able to soak up the beauty of nature. The second part is brutal, terrifying and nature seems pitted against them.

The first stanza gives an atmosphere of relaxation underpinned with nervous anticipation. Perhaps the soldiers were exhausted after a long march as they take anything to lean upon and 'Carelessly slept.' Many of them, though, look into the far distance. 'Knowing their feet had come to the end of the world.' This line indicates that they are aware of the battle to follow and the fact they may die.

This knowledge may account for how much natural detail they take in – knowing they may not see it again. The images are soothing:- 'Marvelling they stood, and watched the long grass swirled. By the May breeze, murmurous with wasp and midge'

The alliteration of the 'm' sounds helps to replicate the insects' humming. Even so, beneath this there is a feeling of what is to come –

'For though the summer oozed into their veins
Like the injected drug for their bones' pains,
Sharp on their souls hung the imminent line of grass
Fearfully flashed the sky's mysterious glass.'

The simile works well to show how the atmosphere soothes them but the other two lines indicate the anticipation. Perhaps the 'Fearfully flashed' represents the shells fired far off, indicating the battle about to start.

Look at stanza 3 – how does Owen bring over the relaxed state of the men? Look at where he uses personification. What does this show about nature?

The call to battle is described as 'the little word.'

'No alarms of bugles, no high flags, no clamorous haste –'

None of the things expected at the start of a battle – the repetition of 'no' emphasises it didn't happen in the way people expected. It started just with a look up from the eyes of the soldiers as they: "faced the sun, like a friend with whom their love is done" – a realisation that they won't see the sun again.

Stanzas 5 and 6 are full of violent action which describes how most of the men are destroyed. The men 'raced together' and line three starts with the word 'Exposed.' The caesura after the word underlines the fact that they didn't stand a chance. Owen was highly critical of commanding officers in the war. Soon, nature seems against them 'the whole sky burned with fury against them' and the ground is covered with craters to catch their blood and deep chasms to fall into.

The impact of the attack is seen in the description of the men who 'Leapt to swift unseen bullets' and the battle is so furious, it seems that hell has broken into this world the 'fury of hell's upsurge.' So swift was men's fate: 'Some say God caught them even before they fell.'

The last stanza is very difficult but deals with those who survived this dreadful battle. Owen describes them as men who have entered hell and defeated the devils.

'The few who rushed in the body to enter hell,
And there out-fiending all its fiends and flames.'

They managed to crawl 'slowly back' but the poem ends with a question 'Why speak they not of comrades that went under?' The implication is that having survived such horrors, few wanted to discuss it. Perhaps they wanted to keep the horrors locked away, perhaps they felt guilty about surviving.

In 'The Parable of The Old Men and The Young' Owen takes directly from the Biblical story in Genesis when God tests Abraham by demanding that he sacrifice his son Isaac. Before it can happen, God stops Abraham but he has shown his faith and loyalty.

To give the story credibility, Owen uses Biblical wording such as 'clave the wood' (cut the wood) 'they sojourned' (they rested). Just like in the Bible, Isaac asks the question 'Behold the preparations, fire and iron,

But where the lamb for this burnt offering?'

Saying that they've got all the materials for a sacrifice to God but no ritual lamb (little did he know!).

This is where Owen moves the poem to World War One.

'Then Abram bound the youth with belt and straps,
And builded parapets and trenches there.'

The youth that was Isaac is now a word for all the young men in Britain. The straps that held Isaac to the sacrifice table now become the belts and buckles of uniforms.

Just like in the Bible, an Angel appears to stop Abram just in time. The Angel points out a ram that is caught up in nearby bushes – God has provided an alternative.

"Offer the Ram of Pride instead" – In Owen's version the sacrifice should be the sacrifice of pride – one of the reasons he sees for war. Unlike the Bible, the sacrifice of the youth goes ahead. There is a gap and his changed ending.

"But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one."

This is a bitter attack on the stupid old men Owen saw as being in control of the war. The politicians and generals who experienced none of the horror but who still sent thousands of men to needless deaths for ridiculous reasons. The last line is particularly powerful as it emphasises how many died – 'half the seed of Europe' ('seed' indicates they are the young) and how it went on and on – 'one by one.'