

## “Do Now” Work

How does Owen present his ideas in 'Exposure'?

*Be able to identify techniques and explore the effect on the reader.*

**Task:**

Look at the image from the trenches in WWI.

How might you describe the conditions?



In Silence Please

**BOURNVILLE**  
SCHOOL

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World War One began in July 1914 and at first it was predicted that it would end swiftly, and soldiers thought they would be home for Christmas. However, as both sides dug trenches across France and Belgium, the opposing armies became locked in a stalemate that neither side could break. By the winter of 1917 both sides had sustained massive losses and extreme cold weather made the misery even worse. It was said to be the coldest winter in living memory. The soldiers suffered from hypothermia and frostbite and many developed trench foot, a crippling disease caused by feet being wet and cold and confined in boots for days on end.

Owen and his fellow soldiers were forced to lie outside in freezing conditions for two days. He wrote: "We were marooned in a frozen desert. There was not a sign of life on the horizon and a thousand signs of death... The marvel is we did not all die of cold."

It was against this background that Owen wrote *Exposure*.

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Owen and a number of other poets of the time used their writing to inform people back in Britain about the horrors of the war and in particular about life on the front line. The picture they painted contradicted the scenes of glory portrayed in the British press. *Exposure* is a particularly hard-hitting example of this.

Owen had joined the army in 1915 but was hospitalised in May 1917 suffering from 'shell shock' (today known as PTSD – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). In hospital Owen met the already established war poet Siegfried Sassoon who, recognising the younger man's talent, encouraged him to continue writing. Owen eventually returned to the war but was tragically killed just days before the war ended; he was just 26. He is now regarded as one of Britain's greatest war poets.

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**Key Words**

- 'flares' – flare guns were used in the First World War to send signals and identify positions
- 'sentries' – soldiers set to keep guard
- 'nonchalance' – disinterest or indifference
- 'burying-party' – Owen uses this phrase to refer to the group of soldiers who come along to collect and bury those who have not survived the night.

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

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  
Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey,  
But nothing happens.

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.  
Less deadly 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;  
Now 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.

Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and us,  
Shrivelling many hands, and 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.

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**Comprehension Questions**

1. Where is this poem set?
2. Who is speaking in the poem?
3. What threatens to 'knife' the men?
4. Which men 'whisper'?
5. Which phrase is repeated at the end of the first, third, fourth and final stanzas?
6. What is more dangerous to the men – bullets or the weather?
7. What feels for the men's faces?
8. How do they feel about God?
9. What effect does the frost have on them?
10. Who comes with picks and shovels?

**Deeper Thinking Questions**

1. How do you interpret the title of this poem?
2. How do you feel about the soldiers in 'Exposure'?
3. How would you justify the business of war when it puts individual lives in danger?
4. Is this poem relevant today?



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Compare the ways poets present the experience of soldiers in 'Exposure' and in one other poem from Power and Conflict.

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|           | Bayonet Charge   | Exposure   | Comparison |
|-----------|--|--|------------|
| Context   |  |  |            |
| Structure | “_____ lugged a rifle”   | “_____ brains ache”                                      |            |
| Patterns  | “Bullets _____ the belly out of the air”                                   | “_____ successive flights of bullets streak the silence” |            |
| Language  | “_____ he awoke and was running”   | “But _____ happens”                                      |            |
| Imagery   | “The _____ tear... sweating like molten iron from the centre of his chest” | “For love of _____ seems dying.”                         |            |
| Theme     | “King, honour... etcetera dropped like _____”                              | “What are we _____ here?” “Is it that we are _____?”     |            |

## 'Exposure' Owen

### Context:

Owen was a soldier in the trenches in WWI. He wrote this poem in 1917. He wrote about the horrors of war. He suffered from shell shock, and he died a few days before the war ended. During the war, Owen lost his faith in God.

### Themes:

Effects of conflict  
Power of nature  
Experience of soldiers  
Reality of conflict

**S** 'Our brains ache' - The **inclusive pronoun** 'our' suggests this is a shared experience. The **present tense** implies the suffering is continuous.

**P** 'But nothing happens.' is **repeated**. This emphasises the tension and boredom felt by the soldiers.

**L** 'the merciless iced east winds that knife us' - nature is **personified**. It seems powerful, unforgiving and like the enemy. The **adjective** 'merciless' and the **verb** 'knife' seem threatening and malicious.

**I** 'All their eyes are ice' - **metaphor** - hints the men are either dead, or they can no longer feel emotion.

**T** 'What are we doing here?'  
'- is it that we are dying?'

Owen uses **rhetorical questions** to highlight the futility of war. He suggests that the soldiers are there to die.

