

An Introduction to Teaching Wilfred Owen

Wilfred Owen has always been one of my favourite writers to teach, because his poetry is like a stripped nerve - alive, electric, painful, and full of power. Getting students to engage with this material can be the key to converting your classroom's most fervent poetry cynic into an advocate for the pen as mightier than the sword! It is worth bearing in mind, however, that both world wars are starting to lose their immediacy for students. Having grandparents who fought even in the Second World War already puts me in a minority in my staff room, so those in the generation below must feel the distance even more keenly. To that end, watching recitations by actors via YouTube and stressing the incredible human interest of a body of work created within fifteen hair-raising months offers one ticket to success. These are not just the poems of another faceless "dead guy" from years ago - these are the very real products of war and of humanity stretched to its absolute limit.

Whilst Owen's language speaks for itself, this poetry is dynamic and requires, in my opinion, bringing to life by fleshing out historical detail. Authentic propaganda, British Pathé footage of shell-shocked soldiers, snapshots of the trenches, handwritten letters, diary entries - it all combines to create the image of Owen as a relatable, fallible human in a situation of utter global horror. And how did he react to his hellish surroundings? Quite simply, by writing. In my experience, Owen's compulsion to return to our basic form of communication and put pen to paper is something our fast-paced, social media generation find very humbling. I like to ask them what the alternative would be today - would we tweet from the trenches? One of my students suggested Instagram would be polarised between figures of authority manipulating #gridgoals by showing valiant propaganda, and real soldiers depicting intermittently censored pictures of the horrors of war.

To that end, my resources rely heavily on visual stimuli. The outline of lessons via PowerPoint take as their background the very real scenes of suffering, hardship and sometimes even moments of unexpected humour. I foreground Owen's writing by first explaining what he was reacting against, showing jingoism to be at variance with reality. Free writing is a great starter in a module on Owen's poetry as it allows the students to put themselves in the boots of the soldiers. Working to a timer also recreates a sense of urgency, of scribbling down thoughts and feelings like wildfire in between the call of duty. Using a backing track of conflict from YouTube and dimming the lights ever so slightly creates an immersive experience - harness that imagination! The facsimile documents made available by the University of Oxford, therefore, are something I can't wait to use. Seeing work edited and scribbled on by the man himself will bring the words to life in a way no printed edition, however beautiful, would be able to manage.

"Dulce et Decorum est" and "Anthem for Doomed Youth" are my go-to poems. It is easy, once the groundwork has been laid, to slip in language analysis in a way that carries real meaning for students. Why has Owen chosen the oxymoron of "doomed youth"; what point is he trying to make? What is the effect of that verb "flung" in the ever-powerful "behind the wagon we flung him in"? Why not used "placed"? Why use present participles in the tricolon "he plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning"? What is Owen trying to say about watching somebody die?

The old teaching adage of "a technique must always be followed by the effect it creates" is often something I find I do not have to reiterate in essays resulting from this module. Students love finding the devices Owen uses as it feels like decoding someone's most private thoughts and emotions. Indeed, it seems second nature to attribute an effect when the poetry is so emotionally charged.

Owen's poetry makes the job of an English teacher easy. This is why people write, and this is why language is powerful!

A selection of sample teaching materials to accompany this essay [1] is also available.

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[1] <http://writersinspire.org/content/teaching-materials-lucy-freeland>