AFTER THE LESSON

But Nothing Happens

Miss Pargeter's Classroom

EXPOSURE

Wilfred Owen

A free companion to the novel.

For the reader who wants more, and the teacher who has an hour.

THIRTY-TWO PRESS

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Free to download, copy and photocopy for classroom use.

WHAT THIS IS

The novel you have just finished does not explain itself. That is deliberate, and it is the same in every book in this series.

This is where the explaining happens.

Nothing in here is required. The novel is complete without it and you have lost nothing by not having read it first. But a poem sits at the centre of that book, and some of what the book is doing is only visible once you know the poem — so here is the poem, taught properly, with the history it came out of and the method for writing about it.

There are two readers in mind and the pack is built for both.

- THE READER who finished the novel, wondered what was true, and would like the poem opened up. Start at THE POEM and read to WHAT WAS TRUE.
- THE TEACHER with a class and an hour, whatever the number on the register. Start at THE HOUR. Everything in it is ready to use and you are welcome to photocopy any of it.

Nothing here requires the novel. The poem section stands entirely on its own and can be taught to a class that has never heard of the book.

How the pack is built, for anyone who wants to know before they start

① The poem.

② The poem opened up — context, structure, language, and the one thing it is doing.

③ The seven steps, on one page.

④ A model paragraph, and the shape of a full answer.

⑤ An exam question bank.

⑥ The hour — a complete lesson, ready to teach.

⑦ What was true — the record the novel was built on.

⑧ Questions for a reading group, which ask rather than tell.

THE POEM

Exposure

Wilfred Owen, written in the winter of 1917–18

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knive 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;
Nor 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 their shaking grasp,
Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,
But nothing happens.

Owen died on 4 November 1918 and the poem is long out of copyright, so it is printed in full in this pack and at the back of the novel, free of charge and free of permission. Where a poem in this series is still in copyright, it is not reproduced — a short notice stands in the same place instead and sends you to find it. Every book in The Lessons is built to survive a refusal.

THE POEM OPENED UP

The one thing it is doing

Four of the eight stanzas end with the same four words: BUT NOTHING HAPPENS.

The words never change. Their meaning changes completely.

The first time, it is almost a relief — the attack everyone is braced for has not come. By the fourth time, men have frozen to death in the intervening forty lines, and a burying party is at work. The same four words now mean something closer to: AND DYING OF COLD DOES NOT COUNT AS SOMETHING HAPPENING.

Nothing in the line has moved. Everything round it has. If a pupil takes one idea out of this poem, it should be that one, and it is worth saying out loud that the reason the refrain changes meaning is not in the words — which are identical — but in the forty lines in between, in which men have died.

Context, and only what bears on the poem

Three facts. There are a great many more and almost none of them will earn a mark.

- OWEN WAS AN OFFICER. He was not writing about soldiers; he was writing about men he was responsible for, and watching that responsibility fail to be enough. That is why the poem says WE and OUR and never THEY.
- HE WAS WRITING AGAINST THE NEWSPAPERS, in which things happened. The war as reported was a sequence of events. The war as lived, for most men most of the time, was waiting in bad weather. The poem is an argument with the official version.
- HE WAS KILLED ON 4 NOVEMBER 1918, one week before the Armistice. The telegram reached his mother as the church bells were ringing. This is the only biographical fact that changes how the last stanza reads, which is why it is the only one included.

Structure

- EIGHT STANZAS, FIVE LINES EACH. Regular, relentless, and going nowhere — the shape enacts the content.
- THE SHORT FIFTH LINE. Every stanza builds for four lines and is then cut off before it can arrive anywhere. Draw it in the air with your hand: a rising line, stopped flat.
- THE REFRAIN CLOSES HALF THE STANZAAS AND NOT THE OTHERS. The ones it does not close end on a question — WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE? — or on something worse. The pattern is not quite regular, which is more unsettling than regularity would be.

Language

- PARARHYME. Owen rhymes KNIVE US against NERVOUS, SILENT against SALIENT. The rhyme arrives at the place a rhyme should be and does not

close. Make a class say both words aloud, twice, and listen for the gap. Nothing in this poem is allowed to resolve, including the sounds.

- PERSONIFICATION OF THE WEATHER. The winds KNIVE; dawn MASSES IN HER MELANCHOLY ARMY and ATTACKS. The enemy in this poem is never German. It is the air.
- THE BROKEN WORD. KNIVE is not a word. Owen spelled the other four hundred correctly, so this one is a decision, and a reader stops on it. A sixteen-year-old once called it THE LANGUAGE GETTING FROSTBITE, which is better than anything in the mark scheme.
- THE COLOUR. There is almost none. Grey, pale, black, and one astonishing intrusion of warmth in the sixth stanza — sunk fires, crusted dark-red jewels, blossom, a blackbird — which turns out to be a hallucination, and is taken away.

THE SEVEN STEPS

One cycle is a paragraph. A full answer is four cycles. The order is fixed.

Each step has one job and one thing that must not go in it. The second column is the teaching; the first is only the name.

① **POINT —** answer the question that is on the paper.
NOT: *the question you would rather have been asked.*

② **EVIDENCE —** the poet's words, inside a sentence of your own.
NOT: *the technique. Evidence is the words. Nothing else lives here.*

③ **EXPLAIN —** what those words are doing.
NOT: *what they say, again, more slowly.*

④ **WRITER'S INTENTION —** why the writer chose to do it that way.
NOT: *his life story. Two facts beat a paragraph of dates.*

⑤ **LANGUAGE —** name it, then say what it does.
NOT: *naming it and stopping. If the structure is doing the work, say so and say how.*

⑥ **READER —** what it does to the person reading it. Which is you, sat there, now.
NOT: *skipping it. It is the cheapest mark on the paper and everybody leaves it.*

⑦ **LINK —** back to the question, in the question's own words.
NOT: *trusting the examiner to work it out. They have read four hundred since Tuesday.*

THE ONE THAT MATTERS IS STEP TWO.

Almost every weak paragraph in English Literature is a paragraph where the technique has been named at Evidence instead of at Language. By the time the writer reaches step five there is nothing left to say, so they say it again. Fix step two and four of the other six steps improve without being taught.

And one line worth saying out loud

The seven steps are not a recipe for thinking. They are a container for thinking you have already done. A child with nothing to say about the poem will produce seven immaculate empty sentences, and the method will have worked perfectly and achieved nothing.

A MODEL PARAGRAPH

How does Owen present suffering in 'Exposure'?

POINT Owen presents suffering not as an event but as a condition that is never allowed to resolve.

EVIDENCE The refrain "But nothing happens" closes four of the eight stanzas, unchanged every time.

EXPLAIN The words do not alter and their meaning does. The first time it is almost a relief — no attack has come. The fourth time, men have died of cold in between, and the same four words now mean that dying of cold does not count as something happening.

WRITER'S INTENTION Owen was an officer, so he was not describing soldiers but writing about men he was responsible for and watching that responsibility fail to be enough. He is also writing against the newspaper account of the war, in which things happen.

LANGUAGE Pararhyme — "knive us" against "nervous" — a rhyme that arrives at the place a rhyme should be and does not close. He does it the whole way through, so nothing in the poem is permitted to resolve, including the sounds.

READER The reader keeps waiting for the poem to deliver an event, exactly as the men keep waiting, and is refused one four times — so the poem does to its reader a small version of what the winter is doing to the men.

LINK The suffering Owen presents is therefore the suffering of nothing happening, and he builds the refrain, the pararhyme and the short fifth line so that the reader experiences the waiting rather than being told about it.

The shape of a full answer

Four cycles, and the four Points must move rather than restate each other.

① Suffering as a condition that never resolves. (The refrain.)

② The weather, not the enemy, as the agent of it. (Personification.)

③ Suffering reaching past the body into what a man can still believe. (Stanzas five and six — the sunk fires, the closed doors, love of God seeming to die.)

④ Suffering unrecorded, and therefore continuing. (The burying party, and the last refrain.)

Twenty-eight sentences in forty-five minutes is about eleven minutes a paragraph. That is why the method is drilled until it is automatic rather than taught as an idea.

EXAM QUESTION BANK

Written in the style of the paper. The first three are the likeliest; the last three are harder and better.

① How does Owen present suffering in ‘Exposure’?

② How does Owen use nature to present the experience of war in ‘Exposure’?

③ How does Owen present the effects of conflict on the mind in ‘Exposure’?

④ How does Owen present waiting in ‘Exposure’?

⑤ ‘The real enemy in “Exposure” is not the German army.’ How far do you agree?

⑥ How does Owen present the relationship between the soldiers and those at home in ‘Exposure’?

Comparison questions

① Compare how poets present the effects of conflict in ‘Exposure’ and in one other poem.

② Compare how poets present powerlessness in ‘Exposure’ and in one other poem.

The three strongest partners, and why

- STORM ON THE ISLAND — Heaney. Both poems are about bracing. The difference is the one worth writing about: Heaney’s islanders are braced for something, and Owen’s men are braced for nothing, because there is nothing to brace for.
- REMAINS — Armitage. Both are about what will not finish happening. Owen’s men are stuck in a present that will not move; Armitage’s speaker is stuck in a past that will not stay put.
- THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE — Tennyson. The sharpest contrast in the anthology. Tennyson gives war a shape, a direction and six hundred heroes. Owen gives it weather.

THE HOUR

A complete lesson. Sixty minutes, any class size, no preparation beyond printing this page and the revision sheet.

Do Now · RRR · five minutes

Retrieve, Review, Revise. On the board before they come in, covered until they are seated. Five questions, five minutes, no talking, answers taken off the room in one pass.

① Name the poet and the year he died.

② What is pararhyme?

③ Which exam paper does the anthology sit in?

④ Name one other poem in the cluster about the First World War.

⑤ What is the difference between a simile and a metaphor?

Question five is in there because eleven people get it wrong every July.

Read it · four minutes

Read the poem aloud yourself, straight through, no stopping, first time. Do not let them read it. Forty lines read badly by a sixteen-year-old are forty lines that never fully recover.

Then wait. A room that goes quiet after a poem has had the poem happen to it. A room that goes straight to its pencil case has not.

The hinge question · five minutes

Mini-whiteboards. Thirty seconds. All boards up together so nobody hides behind anybody else's answer. Do not explain the question — a hinge question explained is a quiz, and you have thrown away the only instrument you had.

> *Owen writes that the winds "knive" the men, and that dawn is "massing in her melancholy army". What is he doing?*
>
> A — describing the weather accurately.
> B — personification, making nature the real enemy of the poem.
> C — showing that the German army attacks at dawn.
> D — suggesting the men are imagining things, because they are exhausted.

WHAT TO DO WITH WHAT COMES BACK:

- Over 80 per cent on B — take one explanation and move on.
- Between 50 and 80 — pair them deliberately, one right with one wrong, two minutes to argue, then poll again. Do not give the answer in between.
- Under 50 — stop. Reteach personification from a different poem, never this one, and do not start the writing task whatever the clock says.

D IS THE CLEVER WRONG ANSWER and it will come from your strongest readers. It relocates the cause — it takes the killing out of the world and puts it inside the men's heads. It is a more sophisticated mistake than it looks and it is worth two minutes.

Model it · twelve minutes

One paragraph on the screen, all seven steps labelled. Read at pace. Stop at each label and ask what the sentence is DOING — not what it says. Anybody can say what a sentence says.

Then delete the Writer's Intention sentence in front of them and read the paragraph again without it. Ask what has gone. Somebody will say THE REASON, and that is the most useful sentence anybody will say in the room that day.

Write it · twenty minutes

Silent, in books, one full cycle, on a piece of evidence that is NOT in the model. Put four quotations on the board and rule out the one you modelled — it forces about a third of the room into a choice they would not otherwise have made, which is the entire point.

Circulate. Do not stand behind anybody. Read upside down, on the move, and intervene from the side, crouched, for no longer than forty seconds. Live-mark two out loud at normal volume — three strengths and one action step each — so that the twelve children nearest hear a piece of whole-class teaching disguised as a private conversation.

Visualise one paragraph at the end. Not the best one. The second best, from somebody who needs a win.

Plenary · at the door

One sentence each on the way out. The question:

> *Why is "but nothing happens" the worst line in the poem?*

You will get: because it is repeated. Because nothing has changed. Because it is the fourth time and men have died since the first. Because no rescue is coming. Because it sounds calm, which is worse.

And once every few years, from somebody at the back: BECAUSE NOTHING HAPPENING IS THE THING THAT HAPPENS.

WHAT WAS TRUE

For readers of the novel. None of this is needed to teach the poem.

The series rule is that the history is real and the people are not. Here is the line between them for this book.

The battalion

The 2/6th Battalion, North Staffordshire Regiment was a real second-line Territorial unit of the 59th (2nd North Midland) Division. It was really in the line at Bullecourt in February and March 1918, holding a sector of the forward zone with low trench strength and young reinforcement drafts.

21 March 1918

At 4.40 in the morning, along a front of some fifty miles, the German Army opened the bombardment that began Operation Michael. The 176th and 178th Brigades were in the forward zone. By nightfall the division had effectively ceased to exist as a fighting formation. Fewer than a hundred men of the two brigades answered the roll afterwards. Two battalion commanding officers were killed.

The weather in the first fortnight of that March had been unusually mild.

The wall

Tunstall's memorial was raised in 1928 and carried no names at all — for eighty-one years, a monument with nothing on it but a sentiment. The names were not added until 2009, when walls were built either side of the entrance to the Memorial Gardens: sixteen plaques, more than six hundred men of that town, the First World War and the Second run together because there was no sense in two walls. They are listed alphabetically, by surname, with their regiment. There was a consultation about adding dates. Somebody argued for them and lost, on grounds of cost and space.

The plaque

The bronze memorial plaque sent to the next of kin of every British serviceman who died is real, and it carried no rank — a private and a colonel received the identical object. Something over a million were issued. It is the single most decent decision anybody made about any of it, and nobody has ever thanked them for it.

And what is not true

Thomas Yarnall, Sergeant Instone, Meir, Coppice, Stonier, Hollins, the padre, Jenny Pargeter, Bevan, Adeyemi, Priya, Whitfield and everybody else in the book are invented. So is the school. The letters are invented. The pay book is invented.

The cold is not invented.

QUESTIONS FOR A READING GROUP

These ask. They do not tell. There are no answers at the back.

① Yarnall decides not to write the true thing to his mother because there is nothing she could do with it. Is that kindness, or is it something else wearing kindness's coat?

② Pargeter teaches this poem for eleven years without once saying why. She calls it professional restraint. By the end, she can no longer make that argument hold. What changed — the facts, or her?

③ The novel ends with her thinking a sentence she does not say aloud. Would the book be better or worse if she said it?

④ Nothing happens to Kayleigh Marsden. She moves house. Why is she in the book?

⑤ Instone answers for a dead man at a roll call because nobody else can. Who did that answer belong to?

⑥ Bevan is the only person in the novel who says a true thing out loud, in front of everybody, and he is sixteen. Is that the point?

⑦ The last thing Yarnall writes to his mother is a promise to tell her the rest of it when he gets home. What does the epilogue do to that sentence?

⑧ What does the title mean on the first page, and what does it mean on the last?

WHERE NEXT

Every book in The Lessons has a pack like this one, free at the same address.

thirtytwopress.co.uk/lessons

If you have come to the poem first and the novel second, that is the right way round as far as we are concerned. Every poem was once a real day.