

Words that Burn
Poetry Academic Reading Booklet
Year 9

London

War Photographer

Dulce

The Manhunt

All extracts taken from websites below

The British Library

The Guardian

The British Council

BBC



Extracts from

Looking at the manuscript of William Blake's 'London'

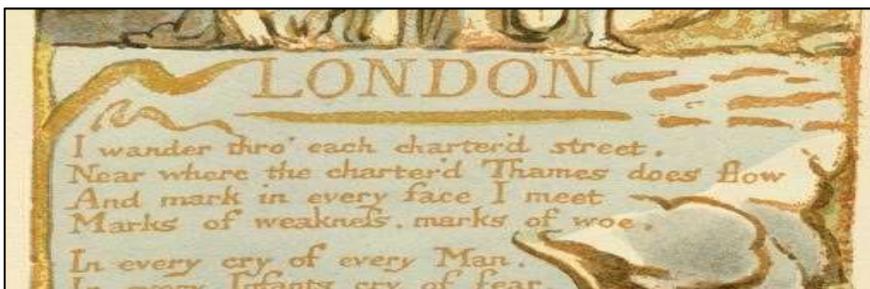
<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/looking-at-the-manuscript-of-william-blakes-london>

One of the major political events of William Blake's lifetime was the French Revolution. For Blake, it was a moment of radical hope turned to violent disillusion. He was initially a supporter. In the summer of 1792 he wore a 'bonnet rouge' to show his solidarity with the revolutionaries abroad. The 'bonnet rouge' was a pointed red cap that had its roots in classical antiquity. For the ancient Romans, the cap symbolised freedom from tyranny. It was first seen publicly in France in 1790 and it became an icon of the Revolution and continued to be a sign of revolutionary support throughout the Reign of Terror. When Blake walked round London with the cap on his head, he left no-one in doubt as to his revolutionary sympathies.

In that same summer of 1792 Blake wrote his first version of the poem 'London', which he included in *The Songs of Experience*. In this early draft, Blake described the streets of London as 'dirty'. 'Dirty' was quite an accurate description as the late 18th-century London streets that he knew so well were piled with filth of all kinds. It also suggests the fallen state of contemporary society.

Blake saw a world in turmoil: blood running down palace walls, prostitutes suffering from sexually-transmitted diseases, children forced to become chimney sweeps and innocent babies born to mothers who couldn't look after them. 'Dirty' describes this state of moral and physical degeneration but it doesn't have the political weight of the later term: 'charter'd'. Chartering was an 18th-century process of corporate ownership, effectively transferring public land to private hands. Blake's readers would quickly have recognised the political implications of the word. Supporters of chartering claimed that it gave people rights over the land. Those against claimed that it took rights away from the many in order to give them to the few. The English-born, American writer and revolutionary, Tom Paine, declared: 'Every chartered town is an aristocratical monopoly in itself.' He felt strongly that chartering was anti-democratic and unnatural.

The poem gives some indication of how this redemption might come about. We are constantly reminded of the need to listen. The verb 'hear' appears three times in emphatic positions. The rhymes are heavy and repetition is frequent, creating echoes in the middle as well as at the end of lines. Blake's London is a noisy place. The sounds of the city reverberate throughout, ranging from the chimney sweep's 'cry', to the harlot's 'curse' and the soldier's 'sigh'. The voice that sings this song is not that of a child but that of the bard, who, we are told in the 'Introduction' to *Experience*, 'present, past and future sees'. By opening our ears and our eyes, Blake suggests we may also open our minds. Here, as always, lies the key to his vision of redemption.



Extracts from

Source:

An Introduction to the Romantics

<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-romantics>

Today the word 'romantic' evokes images of love and sentimentality, but the term 'Romanticism' has a much wider meaning. It covers a range of developments in art, literature, music and philosophy, spanning the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The 'Romantics' would not have used the term themselves: the label was applied retrospectively, from around the middle of the 19th century.

In 1762 Jean-Jacques Rousseau declared in *The Social Contract*: 'Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.' During the Romantic period major transitions took place in society, as dissatisfied intellectuals and artists challenged the Establishment. In England, the Romantic poets were at the very heart of this movement. They were inspired by a desire for liberty, and they denounced the exploitation of the poor. There was an emphasis on the importance of the individual; a conviction that people should follow ideals rather than imposed conventions and rules. The Romantics renounced the rationalism and order associated with the preceding Enlightenment era, stressing the importance of expressing authentic personal feelings. They had a real sense of responsibility to their fellow men: they felt it was their duty to use their poetry to inform and inspire others, and to change society.

The Romantics were inspired by the environment, and encouraged people to venture into new territories – both literally and metaphorically. In their writings they made the world seem a place with infinite, unlimited potential. A key idea in Romantic poetry is the concept of the sublime. This term conveys the feelings people experience when they see awesome landscapes, or find themselves in extreme situations which elicit both fear and admiration. For example, Shelley described his reaction to stunning, overwhelming scenery in the poem 'Mont Blanc' (1816).

Extracts from

Source:

Dulce

The Life of Wilfred Owen

<https://www.bl.uk/people/wilfred-owen>

Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) is widely regarded as one of Britain's greatest war poets. Writing from the perspective of his intense personal experience of the front line, his poems, including 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' and 'Dulce et Decorum Est', bring to life the physical and mental trauma of combat. Owen's aim was to tell the truth about what he called 'the pity of War'. Born into a middle-class family in 1893 near Oswestry, Shropshire, Owen was the eldest of three. His father, Tom Owen, was a railway clerk and his mother, Susan, was from a fervently religious family.

In 1915, Owen enlisted in the army and in December 1916 was sent to France, joining the 2nd Manchester Regiment on the Somme. Within two weeks of his arrival he was commanding a platoon on the front line. In the midst of heavy gunfire, he waded for miles through trenches two feet deep in water with the constant threat of gas attacks. The brutal reality of war had a profound effect on him, as he recounted in letters to his mother. His poems 'The Sentry' and 'Exposure' record specific ordeals of this time.



In April, after being blown into the air by a shell, Owen spent several days sheltering in a hole near the corpse of a fellow officer, and was shortly after diagnosed with shell shock. In June 1917 he was sent to Craiglockhart War

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Source:

Hospital, near Edinburgh, where he spent four months under the care of the renowned doctor, Captain Arthur Brock. Here Owen wrote many poems and became editor of the Hospital magazine, *Hydra*. He also met fellow poet Siegfried Sassoon who gave him crucial support and encouragement in a literary friendship which transformed Owen's life.

In September 1918, Owen returned to the front during the final stages of the war. He fought a fierce battle and was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery. He was killed, at the age of 25, while leading his men across the Sambre and Oise Canal near Ors, on 4 November – just one week before the Armistice was declared. Virtually unknown as a poet in his lifetime, most of Owen's poems were published after his death. Aware that his work could do nothing to help his own generation, he succeeded in warning the next, his poetic legacy having a major impact on attitudes to war.



Extracts from

Source:

The Manhunt Armitage

Simon Armitage on the poetry of World War One

<https://www.radiotimes.com/news/2014-11-08/simon-armitage-on-the-poetry-of-world-war-one/>

The first world war poets Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and Rupert Brooke were the bloggers of their day, says Simon Armitage. They revealed a different war to the one being reported through mainstream sources – a war, as we know now, of unimaginable slaughter and suffering. ‘What is astonishing about those poems is they run counter to every expectation,’ says Armitage. ‘They are blasphemous, they are treacherous, they are radical and they are unpatriotic. They are everything that you wouldn’t expect for the time and that is what makes them so extraordinary.’



Armitage, the Yorkshire-born poet, playwright, author and songwriter, says his own knowledge of the war is shaped ‘and probably skewed’ by those poets. ‘They were like the social networkers of their day. Their poems were undercutting all the official formal news sources. What you got in *The Times* was quite different from what you were hearing from Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon.’ And, of course, the imprint they left was huge. So, Armitage admits a slight trepidation in offering his own poetic commentary on the war, using as his inspiration the stories of people whose lives were either ended or profoundly changed by it.

One was Edith Appleton, a nurse who worked on the Western Front and whose diaries helped inform the scripts of the BBC1 drama *The Crimson Field* broadcast earlier this year. Appleton, who lived to be 80, addressed the diary entries to her mother and was unsparing in the detail she shared. But she juxtaposes those brutally illustrative accounts of men with minds and bodies obliterated by battle, with descriptions of off-duty swims on the Normandy coast close to where she was stationed. It was that paradox Armitage has sought to represent in his poem *Sea Sketch* (reproduced below), one of seven he’s written for the Culture Show special.

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Source:

'What really interested me was not just the journal entries, but the drawings that were in and amongst them — all these really charming sketches of Étretat where she used to go to swim on her days off. It seemed to me that she was trying to find repose and even bliss only a few miles away from where she was witnessing and dealing with all this terror. That just seemed to me to be an untold story.'

Other subjects include a Lincolnshire mother who lost five of her eight sons to the war and a navigator shot down and taken prisoner, but who tunnelled his way out to freedom. Armitage's enduring concern has been to honour the memory of those whose life stories he is exhuming. 'I am really pleased with them. There was a lot of pressure to put them together quite quickly and I think it provoked or produced something in me that I wasn't quite expecting. I think there is a sincerity to the work; they are poems that wear their heart on their sleeve.'

Extracts from

War Photographer Carol Ann Duffy

Wearing a poppy was a pledge of peace and now it serves to sanitise war

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/03/wearing-poppy-pledge-peace-sanitise-war-remembrance>

When the poppy was first adopted as the symbol of remembrance, it was shortly after the end of the first world war when almost every family in the land still felt the raw grief of the time. The poppy represented mourning and regret, and served as a pledge that war must never happen again. Arguably this original meaning became subverted. By the 1930s, those alarmed at the militarism that had become associated with the Cenotaph rituals started wearing white poppies to reinforce the peace pledge. By 1939, the world was at war again. Another generation signed up, though this time reluctantly, knowing they had to defeat an unprecedented evil, unleashed by the unresolved issues of the first world war that was spreading across Europe. When remembrance customs continued after 1945, they were little changed – except that on the war memorials up and down the country, a new list of names had been added.

Over the decades, as the memory of both wars began to fade, the poppy began to take on a subtle new meaning. To many people it had become a patriotic duty to wear one, a symbol of pride in the sacrifices of the armed services. Indeed, all those who had ever worn a military uniform had become ‘heroes’, and the dead were described euphemistically as ‘having fallen’.



In an utterly unintended way the remembrance customs now serve to sanitise war and even to make the military option a respectable political option. Judged from the perspective of those first wearers of the poppy – that the red

Extracts from

flower should be a declaration of hope that wars should never happen again – the poppy has been a sad failure. What an irony it will be if at 11 o'clock on Remembrance Sunday, British troops on war exercises find themselves wearing poppies and listening to The Last Post as they face Russian troops across eastern Europe.

Today, millions still wear the poppy every autumn, but millions choose not to. It has become a cause of social division as each year the debate is rehearsed as to what the poppy really symbolises, and under what circumstances it is appropriate to display it. The debate this year about whether the England and Scotland football teams should wear poppy armbands illustrates how passionately the arguments are felt and how increasingly polarised views have become.

Don McCullin and Giles Duley in conversation

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/feb/03/don-mccullin-giles-duley-photography-retrospective-tate-interview>

When are about to die, Sir Don McCullin observes, 'they often look up', searching for 'one last chance that maybe somebody can save [them].' Condemned prisoners glance skyward in Goya's paintings, he notes, as did some of the doomed souls he encountered on his assignments, such as in the killing fields of Lebanon in 1976. In the pictures from Beirut that appear in a new exhibition of Sir Don's work at Tate Britain in London, a woman wails for her murdered family. Gunmen crouch in a ruined ballroom.

Sir Don couldn't hide, and neither can his viewers. Looking at him, his subjects seem also to be gazing through and beyond his black-and-white images. What, he asks, could he say to that starving boy? His work is an accusation – against the perpetrators of the cruelty he intimately chronicled, against his audience and against himself.

In 1970 his camera took a bullet for him as he zigzagged through a Cambodian paddy field; a week later he was wounded by a mortar, crawling away to evade the Khmer Rouge. ('Did I do this?' he asks in momentary wonderment.) In 1972 he spent four days in a Ugandan prison, where every morning Idi Amin's lorries would take corpses to the Nile to feed to the crocodiles: 'I thought I'd had it.' Charles Glass, a foreign correspondent and friend, says Sir Don 'will endure any amount of discomfort and suffering to get a picture.' He complained, Mr Glass says, only when pettifogging officials barred the path to his destination. Some wounds didn't heal. Feeling 'more elated and more blessed' for surviving, he sensed he was becoming a war junkie. 'Every two or three years,' he recalls, 'I'd have a kind of breakdown.' Now, at 83, stories tumble out of him, like the one about a man with a blown-off face he took to hospital in Salvador in 1982, whose 'eyes were screaming'. Or about the company of marines he saw 'chewed up' in Hue. 'I think about it every bloody day,' he says. 'My head is overcrowded with memory.'

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He blames politicians: '90% of the things I went and photographed was because they bollocksed up.' That goes equally for the struggling English towns that he documented between foreign jobs. His close-up portrait of a homeless Irishman in London's East End, wild hair framing a haunted visage, is as wrenching in its way as his battlefields. Cities are 'where the real truth is,' he reckons. Even his glowering English landscapes seem suffused with threat. For him, the Roman ruins he photographed in North Africa are imbued with the hardship of the slaves who built them.

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