

B2/C1 Teenagers Critical Thinking Skills World War I Poetry

Aim: To develop critical thinking skills through reading and comparing two WW1 poems

Length of lesson: 90 mins

Level/age: B2/C1 16-18 years

Language: Vocab – *slaughtered, crouched, clenched, thrust, rouse, fatuous, toil, vigil, futility*

Materials: Vocab and Poems worksheet

Preparation: Photocopy enough vocab and poetry worksheets per student

Procedure:

Warmer: Put sts in pairs. Tell them to brainstorm all the words they associate with WW1. (eg *trenches, soldiers, guns*, etc)

Allow 5 mins and then board some of their words. Which word came up most?

1. Explain they are going to read two well-known war poems, one by a British poet and one by an Italian poet, written at different times in the First World War.
2. Pre-teach some of the vocab using vocab worksheet.
3. Give out poetry worksheet. Sts do Q1 individually. T monitors and helps with any comprehension problems. Whole class discussion of sts' reactions.
4. Put sts in pairs to discuss questions 2-5. Insist on sts supporting their answers with a rationale where possible.
5. Whole class discussion of answers.
6. Sts individually write a paragraph discussing which poem they prefer and why. Or they write a short poem as if they were a young soldier based on the example poem given. If there is no time for this in the lesson, set it as homework.

Vocab worksheet answers:

1. d)
2. e)
3. i)
4. h)
5. g)

6. b)
7. j)
8. a)
9. c)
10. f)

Contributed by Christine Mo, Italy
May 2020

B2/C1 Teenagers Critical Thinking Skills World War 1 Poetry Worksheet

1. Read the two poems about the First World War and write your first reaction to each below.

The Vigil

An entire night long
Crouched close
To a companion
Slaughtered
Mouth
Clenched
Up at the full moon
With the coldness
Of his hands
Penetrating
My silence
I have written
Letters full of love.
I have never held on
So
Hard to life

Giuseppe Ungaretti 1915
(See original Italian at the end)



FUTILITY

Move him into the sun—
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds—
Woke once the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

Wilfrid Owen, 1918

Vigil

- sadness
- economic use of words to create effect
- horror of death

Futility

- waste of a young life
- soft and gentle language in first stanza
- anti-war

2. Which poem do you think was written by the British poet and why?

(What makes you think the other poem was written by an Italian poet?)

- Accept, within reason, the answers your learners give as long as they have a rationale for them.
- The second one is more likely to be by the British poet, as the soldier was killed in France.

3. They were written in 1915 and 1918. Is there anything in either poem that helps you identify which one was written at the beginning and which one at the end of the war?

- Again, accept, within reason, the answers your learners give as long as they have a rationale for them.
- *Futility* is about the pointlessness of war, the sorrow at the waste of young people's lives and basically asks *What is the point?* So it is more likely to have been written towards the end of the war when, soldiers were tired and could no longer see the need for senseless killing. The soldier in the *Vigil* has not (yet) given up hope

4. In what way do the references to the sun and moon influence your feeling towards either of the poems.

- The moon is cold and the language is cold, concise and hard in places, eg *crouched, clenched, coldness, slaughtered*, whereas the sun is warm, and the first stanza is gentle and even tender the way the writer talks about his friend. The sun gives birth to nature, and usually makes us feel happy, yet this man has died and to what purpose? The moon and the coldness seem fitting for a death, whereas the sun and its warmth does not.

5. Which one makes you feel more optimistic? Why?

- *Vigil*, although quite cold and brutal, gives hope through the comrade's tenacity for life.
- *Futility*, although showing more feeling for the dead soldier in comparison with the cold reality of *Vigil*, questions the point of this and other deaths, the waste of life, of soldiers from different countries killing each other and has more of a sense of hopelessness about it.

General class discussion and feedback on students' answers.

Write a paragraph saying which poem you prefer and why, supporting your reasons with some of your answers given above or from the class discussion.

Alternative task or homework:

Now read the short poem below. Imagine you are a boy soldier, or even a friend of Thomas's and write your own short poem about your experience.

Boy of War

No one should see the things we've seen
Here in the trenches, my mates and me
Being a hero, is not all it seems
When you're in a war, and you're just nineteen
(Thomas M Caswell - World War I Soldier)

M.J. Chalkley

Veglia

Un'intera nottata
buttato vicino
a un compagno
massacrato
con la sua bocca
digrignata
volta al plenilunio,
con la congestione
delle sue mani
penetrata
nel mio silenzio
ho scritto
lettere piene d'amore.
Non sono mai stato
tanto
attaccato alla vita.

Giuseppe Ungaretti, 1915

B2/C1 Teenagers Critical Thinking Skills World War I Poetry

Vocabulary Worksheet

Match the words on the left to the most appropriate definition on the right.

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| 1. clay* | a) killed brutally or violently |
| 2. clenched | b) only half the seeds have been planted |
| 3. crouched | c) work hard |
| 4. fatuous | d) thick, heavy earth that is soft when wet,
and hard when dry or baked |
| 5. futility | e) pressed tightly together |
| 6. half-sown | f) a period of staying awake to be with
someone who is ill, or has died |
| 7. rouse | g) pointlessness |
| 8. slaughtered | h) foolish, no purpose |
| 9. to toil | i) bend your knees and lower yourself so
that you are close to the ground |
| 10. vigil | j) to waken someone |

* A biblical reference to God making man from clay.

B2/C1 Teenagers Critical Thinking Skills World War 1 Poetry Worksheet

1. Read the two poems about the First World War and write your first reaction to each below.

The Vigil

An entire night long
Crouched close
To a companion
Slaughtered
Mouth
Clenched
Up at the full moon
With the coldness
Of his hands
Penetrating
My silence
I have written
Letters full of love.
I have never held on
So
Hard to life



FUTILITY

Move him into the sun—
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds—
Woke once the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

Vigil

-
-
-

Futility

-
-
-

Class feedback and discussion.

2. Which poem do you think was written by the British poet and why?
(What makes you think the other poem was written by an Italian poet?)
3. They were written in 1915 and 1918. Is there anything in either poem that helps you identify which one was written at the beginning and which one at the end of the war?
4. In what way do the references to the moon and the sun in these two poems influence your feeling towards either of the poems ?
5. Does one of the poems make you feel more optimistic than the other?
Why? / Why not?

Be prepared to discuss your answers with the class.

6. Write a paragraph saying which poem you prefer and why. Support your reasons with some of your answers given above or from the class discussion.

Or:

Read the short poem below.

Boy of War

No one should see the things we've seen
Here in the trenches, my mates and me
Being a hero, is not all it seems
When you're in a war, and you're just nineteen
(Thomas M Caswell - World War I Soldier)

M.J. Chalkley

Imagine you are a young soldier, or even a friend of Thomas's, and write your own short poem about your experience.

Follow-up: Next lesson look at the way language is used in the poems, the imagery, 'clay growing tall' when it is an inanimate object, etc.