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**GREAT WAR, FLAWED PEACE,  
AND THE LASTING LEGACY  
OF WORLD WAR I**

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THE UNITED STATES  
WORLD WAR ONE  
CENTENNIAL COMMISSION

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# HOW THEY WRITE ABOUT THE FIGHT: AMERICAN SOLDIER-POETS SINCE WORLD WAR I

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**GUIDING QUESTION:** How is poetry and those soldiers who wrote it changed by the events of World War I?

## AUTHOR

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## WHY?

I have always been fascinated with the cultural legacy of World War I as the first truly modern war. For me, the poetry of that era perfectly speaks to the search for normalcy in the face of chaos. Soldiers themselves wrote some of the most compelling poetry of the era, perhaps because poetry lends itself so beautifully to emotional expression when clear explanation is not possible. Therefore, I thought it would be fascinating to explore the soldier-poet phenomenon and trace its legacy from World War I through subsequent American conflicts.

## OVERVIEW

Using poems from several American wars, students will examine how poetry provides a language to express the conflicting emotions surrounding war. Poetry is especially valuable for those, like combat soldiers, who have the need to describe experiences and emotions that can never be fully described to others. Students will learn more about both the personal experience of war and the challenges of the men and women who are called to serve in wartime.

## OBJECTIVES

At the conclusion of this activity, students will be able to

- > Describe some of the first-hand experiences of American soldiers in war;
- > Identify the elements and structure of poetic verse; and
- > Evaluate the role of artistic expression during traumatic moments in a person's life.

## STANDARDS CONNECTIONS

### CONNECTIONS TO COMMON CORE

- > CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- > CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.D Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.
- > CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

## DOCUMENTS USED

### PRIMARY SOURCES

Alan Seeger, "I Have a Rendezvous with Death," 1915

Randall Jarrell, "Losses," 1942

Basil T. Paquet, "It Is Monsoon Season at Last," 1972  
From the Collection *Winning Hearts and Minds*  
<https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/it-monsoon-last>

Brian Turner, "Eulogy," 2005  
From the collection *Here, Bullet*  
<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5126583>

## MATERIALS

- > War Poems Collection
- > Poetry Analysis Sheet
- > Computers with internet access for additional research

## ACTIVITY PREPARATION

- > Divide the class into groups of four students each.
- > Print one copy of the War Poems Collection for each group of students.

## PROCEDURE

### ACTIVITY ONE: WAR POETRY (30 MINUTES)

- > Distribute one War Poems Collection to each group of four students and one Poetry Analysis Sheet for each student.
- > Direct students to select one of the four poems and read it twice. For the first reading, they should experience the poem. On the second reading, they should mark or highlight words or phrases that stand out to them. Direct students to answer the questions in section one of the Poetry Analysis Sheet.
  - » Discuss with the students the nature of poetry and the power of emotional language to inform our understanding of how people might be feeling during stressful times.
  - » Encourage students to carefully consider the poetic devices and how they are used.
  - » **Teacher Tip:** Abbreviate the list of poetic devices on the Poetry Analysis Sheet or allow students to work together if time is limited.
  - » Encourage students to avoid overly simplistic answers and to support their answers with the specific language of the poem.
- > Explain that students now need to set these poems in historical context. Direct students to research the lives and wartime experiences of the soldier-poets whose work they read as well as the larger context of the conflict in which the soldier-poet fought.
  - » Encourage students to complete section two of the Poetry Analysis Sheet with specific historical details that demonstrate careful research of the conflict as it was happening at the time the poem was written.
  - » Remind students that as students of history we have the benefit of hindsight, so events that seem clear to us might have been very unclear to people living through them.
  - » Assist students as needed in finding reputable internet sources for research.

## ASSESSMENT

- > Allow students to share their poems with the other students in their working groups in chronological order to create a sense of historical context and to emphasize the ordinary soldier's experience as one of the legacies of World War I in subsequent American conflicts. After each student has read their poem aloud, students will consider and respond to the questions in section three of the Poetry Analysis Sheet.
  - » Encourage students to collaborate as much as possible during this section. Better group discussion will lead to more thorough responses to the questions.
  - » Emphasize the importance of the similarities and differences between the soldiers in relation to the wars in which they fought. How are the experiences of World War I soldiers reflected in the experiences of soldiers in later conflicts?
  - » Discuss with students how the changing historical context of the conflicts associated with each poem might affect poetic expression and thus their own responses to these questions.
- > The completed Poetry Analysis Sheet can be submitted for grading at teacher discretion.

## METHODS FOR EXTENSION

- > Students can be invited to create poetry related to stressful events in their lives. Students can be invited to share the poem if they feel comfortable doing so.
- > Students may be encouraged to research other poems from the authors in the War Poems Collection.

## WAR POEMS COLLECTION

ALAN SEEGER, "I HAVE A RENDEZVOUS WITH DEATH," 1915

### I Have a Rendezvous with Death (1915)

by Alan Seeger

I have a rendezvous with Death  
At some disputed barricade,  
When Spring comes back with rustling shade  
And apple-blossoms fill the air—  
I have a rendezvous with Death  
When Spring brings back blue days and fair.

It may be he shall take my hand  
And lead me into his dark land  
And close my eyes and quench my breath—  
It may be I shall pass him still.

I have a rendezvous with Death  
On some scarred slope of battered hill,  
When Spring comes round again this year  
And the first meadow-flowers appear.

God knows 'twere better to be deep  
Pillowed in silk and scented down,  
Where love throbs out in blissful sleep,  
Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath,  
Where hushed awakenings are dear...

But I've a rendezvous with Death  
At midnight in some flaming town,  
When Spring trips north again this year,  
And I to my pledged word am true,  
I shall not fail that rendezvous.

## WAR POEMS COLLECTION

RANDALL JARRELL, "LOSSES," 1942

### Losses (1942)

by Randall Jarrell

It was not dying: everybody died.  
It was not dying: we had died before  
In the routine crashes— and our fields  
Called up the papers, wrote home to our folks,  
And the rates rose, all because of us.  
We died on the wrong page of the almanac,  
Scattered on mountains fifty miles away;  
Diving on haystacks, fighting with a friend,  
We blazed up on the lines we never saw.  
We died like aunts or pets or foreigners.  
(When we left high school nothing else had died  
For us to figure we had died like.)

In our new planes, with our new crews, we bombed  
The ranges by the desert or the shore,  
Fired at towed targets, waited for our scores—  
And turned into replacements and worked up  
One morning, over England, operational.

It wasn't different: but if we died  
It was not an accident but a mistake  
(But an easy one for anyone to make.)  
We read our mail and counted up our missions—  
In bombers named for girls, we burned  
The cities we had learned about in school—  
Till our lives wore out; our bodies lay among  
The people we had killed and never seen.  
When we lasted long enough they gave us medals;  
When we died they said, "Our casualties were low."

The said, "Here are the maps"; we burned the cities.

It was not dying —no, not ever dying;  
But the night I died I dreamed that I was dead,  
And the cities said to me: "Why are you dying?  
We are satisfied, if you are; but why did I die?"

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## WAR POEMS COLLECTION

BASIL T. PAQUET, "IT IS MONSOON SEASON AT LAST," 1972

### It Is Monsoon Season at Last (1972)

by Basil T. Paquet

The black peak at Xuan Loc  
pulls a red apron of light  
up from the east.  
105s and 155s are walking shells  
toward us from Bear Cat  
down some trail  
washing a trail in fire.  
An eagle flight snakes west toward Lai Khe,  
a demonstration of lights  
flashing green and red across a sky still black above.  
Our boots rattle off the boardwalk  
Cha-Chat-Cha-Chat  
the sound spills across the helipad  
out towards the forest  
out towards the dawn;  
it chases devil dusters  
out to the jungle.

The boardwalk bends  
with our ungainly walk  
litter handles creak  
with the heavy weight of the dead,  
the dull whoosh and thud of B-40s  
sounds south along the berm  
the quick flat answer of 16s follows.

Gunships are going up  
sucking devil dusters into the air.  
We can see them through the morgue door  
against the red froth clouds  
hanging over Xuan Loc.  
We lift the boy into a death bag.  
We lift the boy into the racks.  
We are building a bunker of dead.  
We are stacking the dead for protection.

This dead boy is on my hands  
My thighs are wet with the vomit of death  
His blood is on my mouth  
My mouth My mouth tastes his blood.

The gunships are firing over the Dong Nai  
throwing fire into the river  
clouds are coming in from the sea  
I can smell the rain, see it  
over Xuan Loc, over me  
it is monsoon at last.

## WAR POEMS COLLECTION

BRIAN TURNER, "EULOGY," 2005

### Eulogy (2005)

by Brian Turner

It happens on a Monday, at 11:20 A.M.,  
as tower guards eat sandwiches  
and seagulls drift by on the Tigris River.  
Prisoners tilt their heads to the west  
though burlap sacks and duct tape blind them.  
The sound reverberates down concertina coils  
the way piano wire thrums when given slack.  
And it happens like this, on a blue day of sun,  
when Private Miller pulls the trigger  
to take brass and fire into his mouth:  
the sound lifts the birds up off the water,  
a mongoose pauses under the orange trees,  
and nothing can stop it now, no matter what  
blur of motion surrounds him, no matter what voices  
crackle over the radio in static confusion,  
because if only for this moment the earth is stilled,  
and Private Miller has found what low hush there is  
down in the eucalyptus shade, there by the river.

PFC B. Miller

(1980-March 22, 2004)

# POETRY ANALYSIS SHEET

## SECTION ONE: POETRY ANALYSIS

Carefully read the poem through once. On the second read, make note of words and phrases that stand out to you. Then consider the following questions:

Look at the title. What do you think it means? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

How does the poet use poetic devices to convey meaning or intent? Consider this especially in terms of:

Simile or Metaphor (comparison, often with an abstract): \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Personification (giving human qualities to nonhuman things): \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Tone (the emotion of the speaker as he talks): \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Point of view (who is the speaker?): \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Imagery (creating pictures with words): \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Alliteration (frequent repetition of the same letter): \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Meter (a noticeable pattern of rhyme or repetition): \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

# POETRY ANALYSIS SHEET

## SECTION TWO: RESEARCH

Now it is time to find out more. Use the internet or classroom resources for assistance in answering the following questions:

What year was this poem written? \_\_\_\_\_

What was the author's experience as a soldier in war? (Hint: search for your poet and his or her experiences in war.)

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Given the year that the poem was written, what were some of the other major events of the larger conflict in which your soldier-poet was participating? (Hint: look for battles, offensives, political changes that might affect the conflict, etc.)

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How do you think the poet's own experiences and the larger events of the war might affect the way he or she wrote about the war in the poem? Refer to specific examples of poetic devices that you have identified from the poem in your response.

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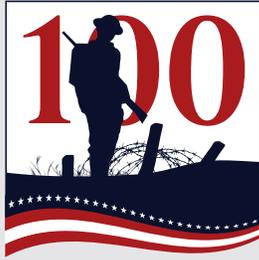
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