



# EXPOSURE

## KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER

**Context** – *Exposure* was written by Wilfred Owen in 1917.

**Wilfred Owen** – Wilfred Edward Salter Owen (1893-1918) was a British poet and soldier. He was one of the predominant World War I poets, detailing the horrors of trench warfare in a similar style to his mentor: Siegfried Sassoon. His poetry brought a sense of realism to public perceptions of war, in stark contrast to the earlier works of poets such as Rupert Brooke at the time. Owen was killed one week before the end of the war.



**World War I** – World War I, also known as the 'Great War', was a global war originating in Europe that took place from July 1914 to November 1918. It involved all of the world's major powers, opposing the Allies (including Russia, France, UK, and USA) against the Alliance (Germany, Austro-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire) Over 9 millions armed forces and 7 million civilians were killed in the war.



**Trench Warfare** – The use of trench warfare significantly influenced the high death toll. Attacks involved going across No Man's Land (in the middle) where attackers were open to machine gun fire, mines, and shells. Even if successful, casualties were huge. Life in the trenches were awful, with diseases like trench foot rife. Men would often spend weeks at a time on the front line, where they would need to sleep, eat, and defecate in close proximity in the trenches.



**Exposure to the Weather** – The majority of the fighting took place in Europe, where the soldiers faced extremities in temperature and weather over the years. Rain would quickly accumulate in the trenches (sometimes to waist height) whilst in the winter months soldiers would often be battered by snow, hail, and sub-zero temperatures. The winter of 1916-17 was so cold that many lost fingers and toes to frostbite. Trenches offered little to no protection. Even clothes and blankets froze solid.



### Language/Structural Devices

**Personification/Pathetic Fallacy** – Owen persistently personifies the weather to create the impression that the weather is as much of danger to the soldiers as the enemy itself. The weather is constantly referred to as an enemy, for example through suggesting it 'knives' the men, gathers a 'melancholy army' against them, and uses 'stealth' to attack them. The use of pathetic fallacy (e.g. the 'mad gusts') even add emotions and malice to the forces of nature.

**Sibilance/Alliteration/Assonance** – These language techniques are used to echo/mimic the sounds (or in some cases silence) that the men are exposed to. For example, repetitive use of the 'w' and 's' sounds are representative of the whistling of the wind around them, and even the muffled whispering of the men. Furthermore, awkward 'o' sounds emphasise words, and represents the difficulty the men have in taking their minds off the cold misery that they face.

**Quote:** "Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knive us"

**Quote:** "Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed"

**Similes/Metaphors** – Similes and metaphors are used to figuratively describe the physical and psychological pain that the men are enduring. For example, the dawn of a new day is compared to a 'melancholy army' being amassed – a new day signals a repeat of the cycle of misery and despair.

**Varied Verbs** – Owen uses some interesting and original verbs to present the discomfort of movement and actions by the exposed soldiers. For example, the frost makes their hands 'shrivel' and their foreheads 'pucker', whilst they are 'shaking.' These are young men in their prime and yet the description of their actions makes them resemble the old and infirm.

**Quote:** "Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army."

**Quote:** "We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed"

**Form/Structure** – The poem is conventional in the sense that each stanza is five lines long, with eight stanzas in total. Half-rhyme is used throughout to create a A-B-B-A-C rhyme scheme. The fifth line adds a little more to what would normally be expected – this could be seen as representative of the war dragging on for longer than anyone thought.

**Versification** – Each of the eight stanzas ends with a short half line. At the end of the first, third, fourth, and eighth lines the refrain 'but nothing happens' is added. This hammers home the message that despite all of the pain and suffering being described, little changes. The last lines, when read alone one after the other, tell their own melancholy story.

**Quote:** "Shrivelling many hands, and puckering foreheads crisp/The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp."

**Quote:** "What are we doing here? Is it that we are dying?"

**Themes** – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

**Suffering** – In order to get across his message across, it was essential that Owen presented the barbaric, appalling nature of war in a realistic manner and tone. In this poem, Owen portrays the quieter moments of war, the painful periods in between the battle and bloodshed. Here, physical pain and psychological trauma can both be taken in more fully, and are described vividly and frankly.




**The Futility of War** – In contrast to many poems at the time that glorified war and fighting for one's country, Owen's poems typically depict war in a harsh light, in order to demonstrate how horrific and futile it is. 'Exposure', in this sense, is no different. His bleak and shockingly realistic portrayal of the soldier's experiences (in this case caused by both the opposition and the forces of nature) forms a stark contrast to general public opinions at the time.



**Line-by-Line Analysis** – Remember that this is an extract from the poem, not the whole poem.

STANZA	LINE	POEM	ANALYSIS
1	1	Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knive us . . .	The reader is delivered to the bleak French landscape, and the use of personification (winds...knive) brings the conditions to life. This is a hostile environment; even nature is against them. Alliteration w/s sounds mimic whispers. 'We' is used to demonstrate that the narrator is among the soldiers. The soldiers fear the silence.
	2	Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent . . .	
	3	Low drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient . . .	
	4	Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,	
	5	But nothing happens.	
2	6	Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,	Pathetic fallacy is used to attribute anger to the wind – again making the place seem inhospitable. The simile used over the top two lines creates connotations of pain. Even though the action of the war is in the distance, it is still at the forefront of their minds. The soldiers question what they are doing – the reason for fighting is long lost.
	7	Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.	
	8	Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,	
	9	Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.	
3	10	What are we doing here?	Dawn is typically associated with freshness, happiness, but here it brings 'poignant misery'; they are trapped in an endless cycle of war. Dawn itself is then personified as an enemy, and a metaphor is used to describe an attack by a 'melancholy army.' The repeated last line shows the anxiety of waiting for death – 'nothing happens.'
	11	The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow . . .	
	12	We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.	
	13	Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army	
	14	Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey,	
4	15	But nothing happens.	Sibilance (repeating 's' sound) is used at the beginning of the stanza to add emphasis to the sounds being described. More personification is used – even the snowflakes seem to be conscious in deciding who to attack/ where they will fall. The wind is personified in its apathy in the face of the untold suffering and hardship.
	16	Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.	
	17	Less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow,	
	18	With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew,	
	19	We watch them wandering up and down the wind's nonchalance,	
5	20	But nothing happens.	The icy flakes are compared to assassins that stalk out the soldiers. Varied verb in 'cringed' creates a vivid image of the soldiers weakly covering from the weather. The juxtaposition of the 'blossoms' and 'sun-dozed' dream enhances the extremity of the misery of the lines before. The last line answers the question at the end of stanza 2.
	21	Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces—	
	22	We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed,	
	23	Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,	
	24	Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses.	
6	25	—Is it that we are dying?	Assonance of the awkward 'o' sound opening the stanza is representative of the effort that it takes to think of anywhere but their ghastly present environment. Use of the word 'ghost' creates the sense that these men are already dead – effective when considering later in the stanza: the men have been forgotten already.
	26	Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed	
	27	With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;	
	28	For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;	
	29	Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed,—	
7	30	We turn back to our dying.	The speaker questions the existence of warming stimuli, as it has been so long since they have experienced such comforts. The spring that will follow the current winter makes them feel afraid, as they fear that they will not be alive to see it. Due to the agony of their predicament, God's love of the men is itself questioned.
	31	Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn;	
	32	Now ever suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit.	
	33	For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;	
	34	Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were born,	
8	35	For love of God seems dying.	The last stanza is perhaps the most haunting. The effects of frost are described using varied verbs and adjectives (shrivelling, crisp). The soldiers (half frozen themselves) attempt to bury those killed from exposure. Metaphor – eyes are physically frozen/ numb to the horror of what they are doing. Last line shows nothing is being achieved.
	36	Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and us,	
	37	Shrivelling many hands, and puckering foreheads crisp.	
	38	The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp,	
	39	Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,	
8	40	But nothing happens.	

### Poems for Comparison

	Poems for Comparison	Thoughts of the Poet
Remains	<i>Exposure</i> can be contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of <u>Suffering</u> and the <u>Horrors of War</u> .	<p>Dear Mother, Immediately after I sent my last letter, more than a fortnight ago, we were rushed up into the Line. Our A Company led the Attack, and of course lost a certain number of men. I had some extraordinary escapes from shells &amp; bullets...I think the worst incident was one wet night when we lay up against a railway embankment. A big shell lit on the top of the bank, just 2 yards from my head. Before I awoke, I was blown in the air right away from the bank! My brother officer of B Coy., 2/Lt. Gaukroger lay opposite in a similar hole. But he was covered with earth, and no relief will ever relieve him, nor will his Rest be a 9 days' Rest. I think that the terribly long time we stayed unrelieved was unavoidable; yet it makes us feel bitterly towards those in England who might relieve us, and will not. WEO</p> 
Charge of the Light Brigade	<i>Exposure</i> can be compared with this poem in relation to the theme of <u>suffering</u> and can be contrasted with this poem in their approach to the <u>futility of war</u> .	