www.horshamposters.com

Remembrance:
War Poetry

Preparation: read background sheet on remembrance

Across the country people remember the First World War in a range of different ways. In today's Britain a 2 minute silence is held at 11 o'clock on the 11th of November and ceremonies are held at War memorials across the country.

The Horsham War Memorial is today one of the most obvious representations of Horsham's memories of the war. The memorial was proposed only a few weeks after the armistice was called in 1918. Then followed a long debate over how to represent those who died in the war. The Memorial was finally built in 1921. Since then the memorial has been moved and added to and is still a focus for Remembrance Day activities.

But what about the memories of those who experienced the war? One former soldier Edmund Blunden wrote poetry. Edmund studied locally at Christ's Hospital school and had a long career as a poet, teacher and editor. He served on the Front Line of World War One continuously between 1916 and 1918. His poetry was continuously influenced by his memories of the war. Find out more about Edmund on his family's website at www.edmundblunden.org.

Over the page you will find copies of two of Edmund's poems that focus on his memories of the war. The first was written after the war but was came from a clear memory of an event as it happened. The second was written many years after the war and talks about how his memories of the war come back to him.

Read through the poems. It will also help to hear them read aloud. In fact you can hear recordings of the poet and his family reading the poems aloud on the website www.edmundblunden.org . Then complete the Exercises.
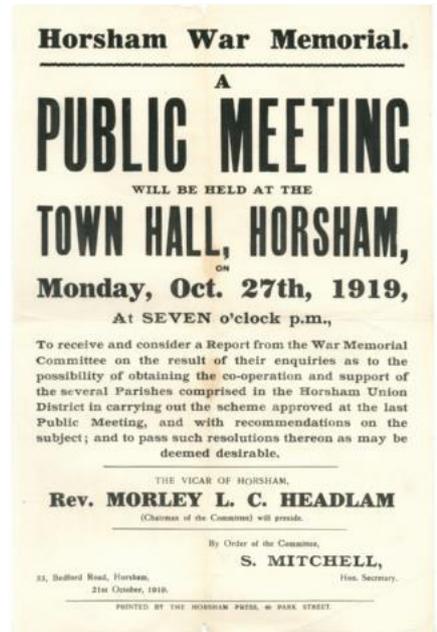
Poster: 1998.1292 © Horsham District Council's Horsham Museum & Art Gallery

> **Learning Objective**
> Analyse and compare two example of conflict poetry that deal with memories of the war.

WWI

Poem 1

Edmund Blunden's 'Concert Party: Busseboom' was published in November 1928. But Edmund explains that he composed the poem at the moment the events described in it happened and wrote it up later. Busseboom was the location of their trench on the Western Front in France. The poem recounts a concert party the soldiers attended one evening behind the Front Line and the battle they were shocked to witness as they left.

Concert Party: Busseboom

The stage was set, the house was packed,
The famous troop began;
Our laughter thundered, act by act;
Time light as sunbeams ran.

Dance sprang and spun and neared and fled,
Jest chirped at gayest pitch,
Rhythm dazzled, action sped
Most comically rich.

With generals and lame privates both
Such charms worked wonders, till
The show was over lagging loth
We faced the sunset chill;
And standing on the sandy way,
With the cracked church peering past,
We heard another matinee,
We heard the maniac blast

Of barrage south by Saint Eloi,
And the red lights flaming there
Called madness: Come, my bonny boy,
And dance to the latest air.

To this new concert, white we stood;
Cold certainty held our breath;
While men in tunnels below Larch Wood
Were kicking men to death.

WWI

Poem 2

Edmund Blunden's 'Can You Remember?' was written in January 1936 and published in the book, Elegy in 1937, almost twenty years after the end of the war. In it the poet asks himself if he can remember the war and describes how it feels as the memories return. Living with the memories of war was clearly difficult for Blunden as it was for many others.

Can You Remember?

Yes, I still remember
The whole thing in a way;
Edge and exactitude
Depend on the day.

Of all that prodigious scene
There seems scanty loss,
Though mists mainly float and screen
Canal, spire and fosse;

Though commonly I fail to name
That once obvious Hill,
And where we went and whence we came
To be killed, or kill.
Those mists are spiritual
And luminous-obscure,
Evolved of countless circumstance
Of which I am sure;

Of which, at the instance
Of sound, smell, change and stir,
New-old shapes for ever
Intensely recur.

And some are sparkling, laughing, singing,
Young, heroic, mild;
And some incurable, twisted,
Shrieking, dumb, defiled.

WWI

Concert Party: Busseboom

Read through the poem. Take a moment to listen to Edmund Blunden give his own review of the poem and read it out loud at www.edmundblunden.org (it is featured in the War Poetry section under 'Behind the Front').

Exercise 1: Language of Performance

Blunden uses the theme of performance in the language and imagery throughout this poem - e.g. 'stage' and 'action'.

- In pairs go through your copy of the poem and highlight the words and phrases in the poem that are connected with a performance.
- As a class review the answers together.

Exercise 2: Turning Point

The poem has a clear turning point between the fun of the party and the return to the horror of war.

- In pairs identify and underline the line(s) that you think mark that turning point.
- Why do you think it is the turning point?
  Consider:
  Are there any key words at the turning point that suggest change?
  Does the tone of the poem change before and after the turning point?
  Do you feel differently about the poem before and after the turning point?
- Discuss your answers with the class.

Exercise 3: Contrasting language

The differences in the poem before and after the turning point are often *contrasting* – have opposite meanings and impressions. This contrast is clear in the language Blunden uses to create images and feelings in the poem.

In your pair give an example of this contrast – one has been done or you over the page. You will need a blank sheet of A4.

1. Find an example of language that creates a positive image/feeling. Write the phrase/line in the centre of the top half of your sheet. Taking the phrase bit by bit describe how the language is used to create this positive image/feeling.
2. Then find an example of language that creates a negative image/feeling. Write the phrase/line in the centre of the bottom half of your sheet. Taking the phrase bit by bit describe how the language is used to create this negative image/feeling.

WWI

A jest implies a joke, having a laugh

This phrase extends the personification of 'jest' by describing the sound 'jest 'made. It says that jest was chirping its happiest sound. In this context 'gayest' means happiest, most joyful.

Jest chirped at gayest pitch

Use of the literary technique **personification**. 'Jest chirped' implies that 'jest' is a bird that can make noise, 'chirp'. Chirped as a word itself has positive/bright connotations and hints of nature.

This describes the performance of a different kind that the soldiers now saw.

The use of literary technique – a metaphor. The battle they were seeing in the tunnels was a performance of a kind itself but its 'new' nature was completely opposite to the joyful concert described at the start of the poem.

To this new concert, white we stood

Cold colour. Has connotations of shock, cold, and death.

The phrase had an overall feeling of such shock and horror before their eyes that the soldiers could only stand and watch.

WWI

Can you remember?

Read through the poem. Take a moment to listen to Claire Blunden read it out loud at www.edmundblunden.org (it is featured in the War Poetry section under 'The Survivor's Ghosts').

Exercise 1: Explanation

The language used in this poem is much harder to understand than Concert Party.

The teacher will divide up the poem into sections.

- Working in pairs discuss the section of the poem you have been given. Try and write a brief overview of what your section is trying to say in the sheet provided. The first stanza has been done for you.
- When you are finished present your results to the class.
- Take notes on the other sections from what the other groups say.

By the end you should have a better understanding of the meaning of the poem.

Exercise 2: Clarity

In this poem Blunden describes his memories as confused and difficult to grasp sometimes and clear and crisp at other times.

- In pairs go through your copy of the poem and highlight the words in the poem that suggest things are unclear.
- As a class review the answers together.

Exercise 3: Contrast and juxtaposition

Blunden has contrasting views of the war. Good memories coming back to him alongside the bad. His contrasting feelings are echoed in the language he uses.

One of the key language techniques he uses to create the impression of contrasting feelings is juxtaposition. This is when you place words or phrases that have completely opposite meaning right next to each other. For example the use of 'luminous-obscure'. Luminous suggest something glowing, light, bright and warm. 'Obscure' suggests something hard to see, difficult to understand.

- In your pair find and highlight another example of juxtaposition in the poem.

The final stanza shows how the memories and ghosts of his past come back to him and how he has contrasting views of them. He throws image after image at you as his memories come back to him.

- In your pair identify and describe the impressions of the positive and negative words used.

WWI

Poem Section	Explanation
1 (the first stanza)	The first lines are a response directly to the question of the title. The narrator is the poet. He says he does still remember everything but the phrase 'in a way' suggests he doesn't remember it clearly. We know from the context that what he is remembering is his experiences in the war. The last two lines clarify the 'in a way'. He describes how the definition ('edge') and accuracy ('exactitude') of the memories is not always constant.

WWI

Looking at the poems together

Consider the overall **format and rhythm** of each poem. Look at the word cloud below.

Flows

Clear

Confused

Jumpy

Staccato

Simple

Steady
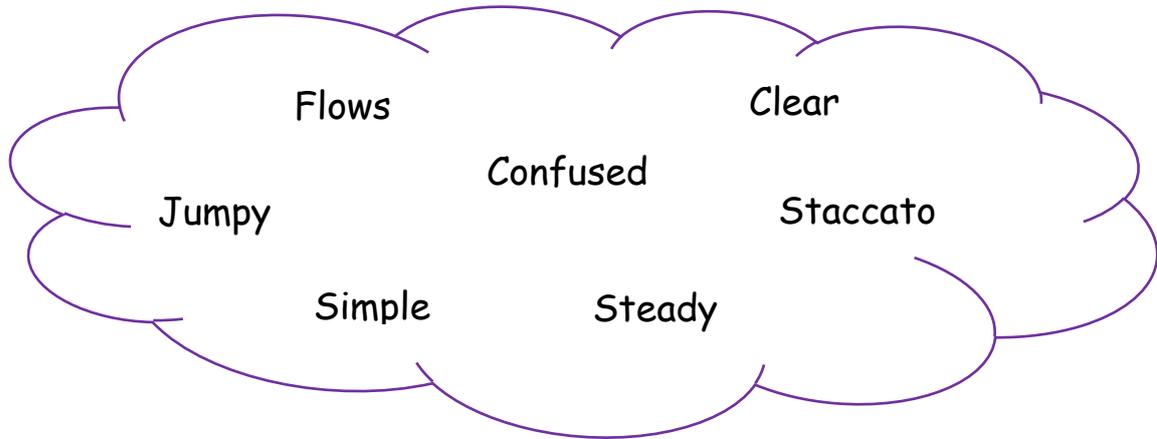
Which words apply to:

- the Concert Party: Busseboom

- Can you remember?

What do these different formats suggest about how the poet remembers the event(s)?

Practice Exam Question

Compare how Blunden's memories of the war are presented in poems 'Concert Party: Busseboom' and 'Can you remember?'

Remember to pick specific examples from the poems and remember to consider:

- Context,
- form and structure,
- language and imagery,
- themes and ideas.

WWI