

WORLD WAR I POETRY FROM THE HOME FRONT

This resource explores the poem 'The Wind on the Downs', written by Marian Allen in May 1917, and looks at how we remember people who are gone. Allen wrote the poem a few days after she heard the tragic news that her fiancé, Arthur Tylston Greg, had been killed in an air battle over France. He was 22 years old.

The poem began life as two unnamed sonnets in Allen's collection called *The Wind on the Downs*. As they appeared one after the other, later anthologists have conflated them into one poem and adopted the title of the collection. Confusingly Allen wrote another poem titled 'The Wind on the Downs' but these two unnamed sonnets have become better known under that title.

The context of the First World War

The experience of soldiers in war is vividly documented by poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, who describe their experience in the trenches, and whose poetry is widely recognised. However millions of people were left behind and lost sons, brothers, boyfriends and husbands.

The experience of those back home is less well-known: Allen's poem provides a bittersweet insight into their experience. Relatives and friends would suffer long periods where they feared the worst for their loved ones, dreading that each letter would bear bad news from the front line.

Above: Arthur Tylston Greg. Right: Marian Allen.
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Stills from Linda Hughes' animation of 'The Wind on the Downs'



Reading the poem

TONE AND MOOD

Read the poem first and ask your students to think about the tone and mood of the poem. The poem is remembering someone who has died, but is the tone of the poem sad or depressed? What words would they use to describe it? How does it fit with the content of the poem? Does it change at all through the poem?

If you are able, watch Linda Hughes' animation, then ask them to think why she might have chosen that particular style of animation for the poem. Do they think the film captures the mood of the poem, or does it add anything, or change the way they encounter the poem?

www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bfLMt3VoqM

www.vimeo.com/107023488

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

The language in the poem is often naïve and very literal, but there are a couple of highly figurative moments: a reference to 'new kingdoms' and most notably the 'golden wings' in the final few lines. Ask your class to consider what they think these lines refer to.

Do they think the speaker can really see these wings, or are they a metaphor for a constant state of mind? What do they think these wings represent? Is it Arthur Greg's soul; his adventurous spirit; the plane he was flying

when he died; a representation for him keeping watch over her; her own memories? Greg was a pilot for the Royal Flying Corps (what is now the Royal Air Force), which uses wings as part of its insignia. Perhaps these influenced Allen's use of image?

How do these two figurative images of Greg in death inform how we imagine he was in his life?

A metaphor such as the wings and the new kingdoms doesn't need to mean one thing – it can contain all these ideas at once. Allen uses vivid metaphors, but leaves the meaning tantalisingly vague; the reader's own thoughts help create the meaning too.



Badge of the Royal Flying Corps (now the Royal Air Force)

Memorialisation

ELEGY

Writing a poem about someone you have lost is an act of memorialisation. Memorialisation tries to make the person live on in some way and writing poetry about someone has often been used to do this. As Shakespeare says at the end of Sonnet 18:

*So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

Poetry that memorialises is called an elegy. It's poetry of loss or mourning typically written after someone has died.

It is interesting to compare Allen's poem to 'The Soldier' by Rupert Brooke, written in 1914. In 'The Soldier' Brooke seems to create his own memorial even before his own death. Like Allen, he imagines some kind of eternal life, and like Allen, this is not explicitly a religious afterlife. As with 'The Wind on the Downs', memory plays an important role in resurrecting the dead soldier, and particularly memories of ordinary activities.

In 'The Soldier' the poet is memorialising himself. Ask your class how this is different to memorialising someone else. The speaker is still alive – how does this affect the tone, in comparison to Allen's poem?

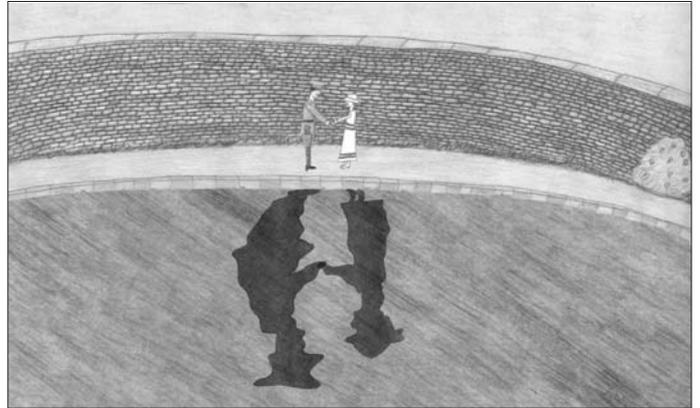
PSYCHOANALYSIS

The speakers in Allen and Brooke's poems share many impulses. Does this suggest something about the psychology of memorialisation and thinking about death in poetry?

You may wish to consider the critical response from psychoanalyst Gerry Byrne, below:

One has to bear in mind that a single poem is often one observation by the poet on life or an aspect of life and affords us insight into the life and mind of the poet, but a limited one.

This poem was written soon after Arthur Greg's death; it is suggestive of the early reaction of denial that one often sees following sudden and traumatic losses. Freud quoted the phrase 'del mortuis, nil



Still from Linda Hughes' animation of 'The Wind on the Downs'

nisi bene', 'of the dead, speak naught but good', in his paper Reflections on War and Death, 1918. He stated that this was preferable to the truth of the complexity of the relationship with the person who has died. Allen depicts her fiancé in a somewhat idealized light, and again, one has a sense of a proud heroic figure, almost a photograph, but with little of the real person visible.

Look at Allen's poem again. Do your class agree with Byrne that the poem hints at Allen's denial regarding Greg's death? Do they think that she only portrays him in a good light or do they find any insights into disagreements or problems they might have had?

Byrne continues in his analysis of the poem and makes an interesting, more personal point about the language:

The line 'sluggish moving, still canal' I find I experience as the most honest in the whole poem. It can be taken to represent death, and death is more present in this section as they walk in life along the path and absent later when he is, in fact, dead. She imagines him above ground walking or flying forever, which feels like a denial of his sinking in another part of her mind into that slow, sluggish canal of death.

What do your students think of this reading? Do they agree? Does the canal represent death; does it represent Allen's unconscious mind; or do they think it represents something else? Can they find clues in the language to support their arguments?

Comparing texts

Ask your class to look at Wilfred Owen's 'Strange Meeting' and think about how it differs from Brooke and Allen's poems.

At first glance we can see that both Allen and Brooke's poems are sonnets (Allen's is two sonnets), laid out regularly on the page. We soon discover that they have regular rhyme schemes as well; Owen's poem is a stark contrast to this.

Ask your students to look at just the first three lines of Owen's poem:

*It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.*

He uses iambic pentameter the same as Allen and Brooke, but how does the content and form of his poem signal a difference from Allen and Brooke's elegies? Try comparing the first three lines of all the poems and seeing what you find.

Move through the rest of Owen's poem. Neither Allen nor Brooke mentions the realities of war and death, or explores the morality of war. Is there room for Owen and Sassoon's sentiments in a poem of memorialisation? Discuss how the purpose of a poem affects how it is expressed. Which of the three poems does the class think is most successful in conveying its meaning? And what about the poem makes it more successful?

Writing a response

Recap the ideas of memorialisation that you talked about earlier and explain to the class that they are going to write their own elegy.

This could be about someone they have researched from the First World War; someone they know; a famous figure either alive or dead. A neat twist could be to write one based on the soldier character in Wilfred Owen's 'Strange Meeting'. The poem can be a sonnet like Allen and Brooke's poems, but it doesn't have to be.

WRITING PROMPTS

Students should look back at Allen's poem and think about the qualities of the subject of their poem. They may wish to use Allen's structure of 'I like to think of you...' to bring in the qualities of the person that they think should be remembered.

'The Wind on the Downs' also describes activities that Arthur Greg and Marian Allen would do together. What activities do your students wish to include? Does the tone with which they talk about these need to change depending on their relationship with the person they are remembering?

Finally, remind your students of the symbolic golden wings. Ask them to choose a symbol that represents something about the soldier or about their imagined relationship to the person who has gone. This can be something from Owen's poem, or from their imagination. Ask them to think about how they present it; do they see it in the air like Allen, or in a dream, or – like Owen – do they see the whole poem as a vision?

SHARE YOUR POEMS

Once your students have written down their ideas, encourage them to spend some time editing the lines as they shape them into a poem. Once they have a working draft share some of the responses and compare them to Wilfred Owen's poem. What details can the rest of the class recognise from 'Strange Meeting'?

THE WIND ON THE DOWNS

I like to think of you as brown and tall,
As strong and living as you used to be,
In khaki tunic, Sam Brown belt and all,
And standing there and laughing down at me.
Because they tell me, dear, that you are dead,
Because I can no longer see your face,
You have not died, it is not true, instead
You seek adventure some other place.
That you are round about me, I believe;
I hear you laughing as you used to do,
Yet loving all the things I think of you;
And knowing you are happy, should I grieve?
You follow and are watchful where I go;
How should you leave me, having loved me so?

We walked along the towpath, you and I,
Beside the sluggish-moving, still canal;
It seemed impossible that you should die;
I think of you the same and always shall.
We thought of many things and spoke of few,
And life lay all uncertainly before,
And now I walk alone and think of you,
And wonder what new kingdoms you explore.
Over the railway line, across the grass,
While up above the golden wings are spread,
Flying, ever flying overhead,
Here still I see your khaki figure pass,
And when I leave meadow, almost wait,
That you should open first the wooden gate.

MARIAN ALLEN

Khaki: a light brown colour, the colour of army uniforms
Sam Brown belt: a belt with a strap that goes over the
shoulder, used as part of some military uniforms
Towpath: a track or path that runs alongside a canal

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THE SOLDIER

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

RUPERT BROOKE

STRANGE MEETING

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
"Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn."

Continues overleaf

“None,” said that other, “save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery;
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.

“I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now. . . .”

WILFRED OWEN