

KEY STAGE	AGE
EYFS	3-5
KS1	5-7
KS2	7-11
KS3	11-14 ✓
KS4	14-16 ✓
KS5	16-18

AT A GLANCE

- WAR POETRY
- NATURE
- RHYTHM
- DRAMA
- COMPARING TEXTS

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POETRYCLASS: FRESH IDEAS FOR POETRY LEARNING FROM THE POETRY SOCIETY

WAR HORSE AND WWI POETRY

A RESOURCE CREATED COLLABORATIVELY BY **NT LEARNING & THE POETRY SOCIETY**

This resource is designed to support you and your students in using the National Theatre's production of *War Horse* as a way into poetry of the First World War.

Anthologising *War Horse*

An anthology is a collection of poems by different authors, usually with a shared theme or purpose. Students could devise their own anthologies to act as a companion to *War Horse* or could be offered poems to help them discuss the narrative of the play or to broaden their understanding of certain aspects of it.

Michael Morpurgo, the author of the novel that inspired the play, cites poetry as one of his influences:

"As a schoolboy I read the great poets of the First World War – Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, Edward Thomas, Thomas Hardy. I learned of 'the men who marched away', of 'the millions of the mouthless dead', understood 'the pity of war'. I read Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. I saw the film. I went to see Joan Littlewood's *Oh! What a Lovely War*. Britten's great War Requiem, the pictures of Paul Nash and Stanley Spencer left an indelible impression on me."



Poetry was used as both propaganda and documentary during WWI; as a source of information as well as an outlet for personal feelings and stories. The date that a poem was written can be a useful guide to tracing the progress of the war, moving from initial optimism, through propaganda and bleak nihilism to reflection on the impact: the trajectory of the *War Horse* plot also loosely follows this arc.

Starting points

Look at the list of scene titles used in the production (page 2). The students are going to create their own anthology based on some of the themes in *War Horse*. You could assign students a single scene title, group the scene titles into themes, or get them to create their anthology using the full list. If they are using themes, you could give them some starting points such as:

- Rural life
- Recruitment/training
- Going to war: initial optimism
- The battlefield and trenches: realising the reality
- Thinking about home
- Comradeship
- Meeting heavy artillery – tanks, machine guns, barbed wire
- Men and animals
- The home front – receiving letters and bad news from the trenches
- Recognising shared human experience of enemy soldiers
- Homecoming and the after-effects
- Sons and mothers/fathers

Ask students to use the library or online resources, such as the [Poetry Archive](#) and the [Poetry Foundation](#), to identify poems for their anthology. You can then create a class anthology using all their choices. For each submitted poem ask the students to explain why it should be included, what they like about the poem, and how it fits their themes. Suggest students think about the order in which they arrange the poems they choose, so that their anthology follows a journey.

Examples for themes

For lower ability groups you might want to give them a selection of poems where they can highlight the different themes or work through ones you have identified together. Here are some examples:

Recruitment

'The Call' by Jessie Pope

Initial optimism

'Men Who March Away' by Thomas Hardy

Realising the reality of battle

'Dulce et Decorum est' by Wilfred Owen

Thinking about home

'Song (Only the Wanderer)' by Ivor Gurney

Meeting heavy artillery

'Bombardment' by Richard Aldington

The home front – receiving news

'The Wind on the Downs' by Marian Allen

Shared experience with enemy

'This is no case of petty right or wrong'
by Edward Thomas

After-effects of war

'1916 seen from 1921' by Edmund Blunden

As well as searching for poems with matching themes, suggest students look out for particular images they recognise from *War Horse*, e.g. birds, fields or barbed wire; or poems that convey the emotions explored in *War Horse*, e.g. fear, or a sense of betrayal.

War Horse: scene titles

ACT 1

Scene 1	Devon
Scene 2	Auction Scene
Scene 3	Ted and Rose's Farm
Scene 4	Trust Scene
Scene 5	Growing Up Scene
Scene 6	Muybridge Scene
Scene 7	Chickens Scene
Scene 8	Stables Scene
Scene 9	Learning to Plough Scene
Scene 10	Ploughing Scene
Scene 11	Mustering/Sequestering Scene
Scene 12	Military Stables Scene
Scene 13	The Fight Scene
Scene 14	Boat/Channel Crossing Scene
Scene 15	First Calais Scene
Scene 16	First Charge
Scene 17	Christmas Scene
Scene 18	Second Charge

ACT 2

Scene 19	Second Calais Scene
Scene 20	First Paulette Scene
Scene 21	Crater Scene
Scene 22	Second Paulette Scene
Scene 23	Triptych Scene
Scene 24	Over the Top Scene
Scene 25	Gun Team Scene
Scene 26	Mud/Hell Scene
Scene 27	British Advance Scene
Scene 28	Behind New German lines
Scene 29	Joey's Night
Scene 30	No Man's Land
Scene 31	Clearing Station Scene
Scene 32	Ted and Rose's Farm

Horses in a First World War poem

In this activity students will look closely at the Edward Thomas poem 'As the Team's Head-Brass', written in 1916, almost exactly the middle of the war, which connects closely to *War Horse*. This poem is included below; the original manuscript of the poem can be seen on the [Oxford University First World War Digital Poetry Archive](#).

The poem is written in iambic pentameter – if your students are unfamiliar with this or if you want to remind them, ask them to clap out the rhythm of an iambic line. You can use Shakespeare's "My horse, my horse, my kingdom for a horse" as a simple example. Ask the students what the rhythm reminds them of. They might suggest heartbeats or horses galloping.

Show the students the first stanza of the poem up to "Once more". Ask them to consider what is happening in the poem. The poem is a narrative one with characters, a setting and a plot.

- Can the students identify where the ploughman, lovers and narrator are in each line?
- What is happening in the field?
- How do these connect to students' experiences of the story of *War Horse*?

You might want to show them pictures of horses ploughing and work through some of the vocabulary with them. What is "the turn" in the first line, and how does this connect to the idea of a 'turning point' in somebody's life? Ask students to look out for 'turning points' in the poem.

Next look at the second stanza.

- What does the short line at the end of the first stanza do to the reader?
- What is different about the second stanza?
- Discuss the fallen tree, how it forms an obstacle, breaking up the regular lines.
- What is the significance of the tree?

The poem is set in a very rural environment with an everyday activity taking place.

- What impact does the conversation in the second stanza have on that setting?

- What do you think the poet was trying to achieve?
- Why is a ploughed field a powerful image in relation to the First World War?

Think, finally, about the end of the poem.

- How are we left feeling?
- What impact does the repeated activity of the plough going up and down have?
- What do the falling clods of earth call to mind?
- Discuss the symbolism of swords and ploughshares as symbols of war and peace.
- How might these horses be similar/different to Joey and Topthorn in *War Horse*?
- What does it mean to be part of a team?
- How might being part of a team connect to the idea of fighting for your country?
- Can the students draw any further comparisons between the poem and *War Horse*?
- What key moments of the play/novel does it remind them of?

Edward Thomas wrote 'As the Team's Head-Brass' just before he set out to fight in the First World War. He was killed in action at the Battle of Arras less than a year later, on Easter Monday 1917. The poem is set in a peaceful field in England and says little directly about war.

Discuss why a story can sometimes be more poignant by leaving details to the imagination.

- How does *War Horse* help to fill in the gaps and let you imagine what might be happening 'off-stage' beyond the edges of the poem?
- Does that knowledge change your experience of the poem?

You might want to do some further comparison and analysis using Rupert Brooke's 'The Soldier' which is very patriotic and has lots of pastoral imagery for comparison. Alternatively, AE Housman's 'Oh, stay at home, my lad, and plough' may provide some useful context as it was written before the war (1896). We know Edward Thomas read the Rupert Brooke poem, and may have read the AE Housman. Do your students think he had these in mind when he wrote 'As the Team's Head-Brass'? Both poems are provided below.

AS THE TEAM'S HEAD-BRASS

As the team's head-brass flashed out on the turn
The lovers disappeared into the wood.
I sat among the boughs of the fallen elm
That strewed the angle of the fallow, and
Watched the plough narrowing a yellow square
Of charlock. Every time the horses turned
Instead of treading me down, the ploughman leaned
Upon the handles to say or ask a word,
About the weather, next about the war.
Scraping the share he faced towards the wood,
And screwed along the furrow till the brass flashed
Once more.

The blizzard felled the elm whose crest
I sat in, by a woodpecker's round hole,
The ploughman said. 'When will they take it away?'
'When the war's over.' So the talk began –
One minute and an interval of ten,
A minute more and the same interval.
'Have you been out?' 'No.' 'And don't want to, perhaps?'
'If I could only come back again, I should.
I could spare an arm, I shouldn't want to lose
A leg. If I should lose my head, why, so,
I should want nothing more... Have many gone
From here?' 'Yes.' 'Many lost?' 'Yes, a good few.
Only two teams work on the farm this year.
One of my mates is dead. The second day
In France they killed him. It was back in March,
The very night of the blizzard, too. Now if
He had stayed here we should have moved the tree.'
'And I should not have sat here. Everything
Would have been different. For it would have been
Another world.' 'Ay, and a better, though
If we could see all all might seem good.' Then
The lovers came out of the wood again:
The horses started and for the last time
I watched the clods crumble and topple over
After the ploughshare and the stumbling team.

EDWARD THOMAS

THE SOLDIER

If I should die, think only this of me;
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever 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

OH STAY AT HOME, MY LAD, AND PLOUGH

Oh stay at home, my lad, and plough
The land and not the sea,
And leave the soldiers at their drill,
And all about the idle hill
Shepherd your sheep with me.

Oh stay with company and mirth
And daylight and the air;
Too full already is the grave
Of fellows that were good and brave
And died because they were.

AE HOUSMAN
