

| 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
- LONGER POEMS
- STRUCTURE
- SIMILE AND METAPHOR
- IMAGERY

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**POETRYCLASS: FRESH IDEAS FOR POETRY LEARNING FROM THE POETRY SOCIETY**  
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# POETRY OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

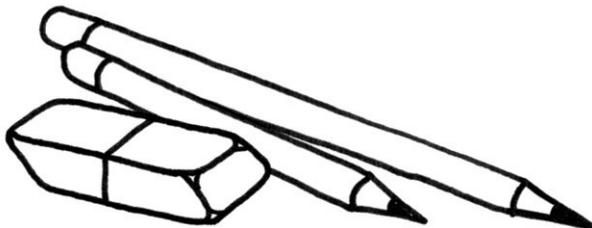
BY RICHARD STILLMAN

## Overview

This resource will introduce pupils to an often-neglected yet very important group of poets: those who chronicled the Second World War. In particular, it will study one of the poems of a young poet, Timothy Corsellis. Working through this resource they will learn how these poets continued the unflinching depiction of the brutality of war so notable in the work of WWI poets and yet also wrote in new forms about the often very different reality of life both home and abroad during WWII.

## War Poetry

Some of the world's finest writing has been about war, from Homer's epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, to Shakespeare's rousing patriotic speeches in *Henry V*, to the graphic horror conveyed by Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum est'. One of the earliest heroes in the fledgling English language is Beowulf, a dragon-slaying warrior king.



The nature of warfare changes just as societies change and the experience of warfare, whilst always harrowing, can differ over time in many ways. The twentieth century saw some of the most terrible human tragedies in war: the Holocaust, the Gulags, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and genocides such as that which occurred in Rwanda. There have, however, been many other conflicts where lives are touched more indirectly, such as the evacuees of the Second World War who waited with foster families in the countryside until the air raids on the major cities stopped and they could return home.

In our restless world we see an increasing proportion of civilians involved in conflicts. What poetry will come out of, for example, Aleppo in Syria, which is currently at the centre of that country's bloody civil war?

## Second World War Poetry

There are many excellent Second World War poets whose fame has never burned as brightly as that of Owen and Sassoon and others of their generation. Perhaps this is because some of the poetry of WWII can seem less intense, as more of the fighting was at a distance compared to the trench warfare of WWI. Poems such as 'How to Kill' by Keith Douglas and 'Naming of Parts' by Henry Reed do not have the immediacy of some of the earlier poetry but their exploration of detachment in warfare is just as chilling. As well as Douglas, Reed and Corsellis, other poets that are well worth discovering are Alun Lewis, Sidney Keyes and Vernon Scannell.

## Timothy Corsellis

After attending Winchester College, an independent school for boys, Corsellis worked in the office of the Town Clerk of Wandsworth, London before joining the RAF in 1940. Once a conscientious objector, Corsellis felt again the moral difficulties of frontline engagement in war when assigned to Bomber Command and sought his discharge. He then worked as an ARP (Air Raid Precautions)

worker before becoming a pilot in the Air Transport Auxiliary, which led to his untimely death in a plane crash in 1941, at just twenty years old. The poetry he left promised a great talent, and Corsellis joins that tragic pantheon of war poets whose brilliant promise was cut off before its true fruition.



Timothy Corsellis at Winchester College, 1938. With permission of the Warden and Scholars of Winchester College

The poem we will study and use as a basis for our creative writing was written during his time as an ARP Officer, and explores his reaction to the aftermath of a devastating air raid during the Blitz.

## Writing Poetry in Sections

We are going to look at how poetry written in different sections can produce very powerful effects by generating contrasting tones and feelings. To do this we are going to analyse Timothy Corsellis' poem 'Dawn after the raid', and use it as a model to create our own poem.

Begin by reading the poem as a whole (it is reproduced in full at the end of this resource), then use the steps below to work through the poem section by section, to help students create their own poem in contrasting parts.

The notes can help your class analyse Corsellis' poem. You may wish to discuss these with the class or allow students to work through the poem on their own.

## Section I

As a whisper in the darkness  
 As the hushing of the wind  
 As the rising of a salmon  
 When the water rims with ripples  
     Life moved laboriously over death.  
 As the programme seller in the audience  
 Blind to the passion on the stage  
 As the swimmer in a surging sea  
 As the Britisher in a foreign country  
     Life busied itself with death.

## Notes

*The poem starts with a series of similes capturing movement. We presume this is the falling of the bomb but are drawn up short when we noticed that Corsellis is actually describing 'life', which has been personified. The second half of this stanza continues the list of similes; this time they capture a sense of indifference. Again, it is 'life' that is being referred to, and again 'life' is closely linked to its antithesis 'death'.*

## TASK 1

Think about an abstract concept such as life or time or fate, anything you wish, and then describe it as if it were something physical, preferably something that has dynamic movement. This changing of the abstract into the concrete is a special kind of personification called prosopopoeia. Shakespeare used it all the time: 'Mischief, thou art afoot/ Take though what course thou wilt' (Antony in *Julius Caesar* Act 3, Scene 2). Now think of a list of similes that can help capture the qualities of your abstract idea but which also conveys the movement.

This will give your poem a theme that will contrast well with the more physical description and emotional reflection that comes later.

## Simile

A simile is a phrase that describes something as being like something else e.g. life is like a swimmer in a surging sea.

## Section II

The blue overalls and metal helmets  
The lorries, one time used for coal,  
The worried warden and the rescue worker  
Hovered and hurried among the ruins.

### Notes

*The poem continues with very specific details. These ground a particular experience. The use of colour and metal details create a sensory picture. The mention of the lorry's former use highlights the difference between the peaceful past and the present crisis. Note how only in the final line do we have the main verbs, and the writer uses alliteration to capture the frantic motion.*

## TASK 2

Section II of 'Dawn after the raid' concentrates on the aftermath of the event. Decide for yourself what the event in your poem will be – it might be an historical occasion, a sudden move, or the end of some sort of relationship. The 'I' speaker will not be the person most directly affected by the event – you will bring this person in later.

Use three lines of description that are packed with nouns. Use details of clothing, transport and so on, like Corsellis does, to really give a vivid picture. Only use verbs in the last line, and try to make these capture movement or tension, giving an idea of what has happened.

## Section III

Under this pile of fallen masonry  
Under those spillikins of beams  
Where number thirty two lies shattered  
There may be a body  
Dig  
For there may be a body.

### Notes

*Note the repetition of 'under' at the beginning of two consecutive lines – this is anaphora (where a word or phrase is repeated at the beginning of a line or clause) and is particularly good for emphasis. 'Spillikins' is a children's game where you have to catch sticks before they fall. They do resemble fallen masonry but to use these as a metaphor here is slightly macabre and reminds us of the everyday domesticity that has been shattered by the bomb. The house number makes the house specific; somebody lived here. Finally, there is an imperative, 'dig', that stresses the urgency of the situation. This is undermined though by the word 'body'; we realise no-one could have survived this.*

## TASK 3

Your next section will deal with the details of the event. Try using a simile or metaphor to link your event to something far removed from it. This will make the description all the more striking and memorable. After this, you need to use an imperative verb, like 'dig', as if someone close to the event was barking out an order or perhaps crying out some desperate response. Don't worry about rhyme or rhythm. As you can see, Corsellis' poem uses neither and yet its fragmented, broken phrases seem a more authentically realistic response than anything more artificially patterned might create.



Bombed-out family cross the road with their belongings, 1941. Photograph from the Ministry of Information © The National Archives

## Section IV

Distorted corpse once breathed slum air  
Lived in the grey dust where it died;  
Is it for this that bending we strived  
And fought in other's blood and other's sorrow  
To reach these wretched mangled remains?  
Is it for this that we ached in the darkness  
Not knowing that nearby  
Another house had fallen  
To the blast of that same bomb.

### Notes

*This section has a more powerfully emotional, reflective tone. With unsparing graphic detail ('distorted corpse', 'mangled remains') Corsellis meditates on the horror and futility of war. His use of rhetorical questions provokes feelings of despair. Corsellis creates emphasis on particular phrases through repetition ('other's blood and other's sorrow') and through plosive alliteration, 'the blast of the same bomb'.*

### TASK 4

Now your poem, after establishing the scene, must reflect on the significance of what has happened. You should choose a serious event so that you can have something meaningful to say. Make sure you use emotive detail to bring the issue unsparingly to the fore. You can use repetition, anaphora or alliteration to make your thoughts come across with more impact. Finally, use rhetorical questions to provoke the reader into considering what their reaction would be.

## Section V

Sweat fell, we were not the strong and young  
They were out training, preparing,  
We are the best of those remaining  
We are the mellow and the hardened  
And though our backs are hard of bending  
Under aloofness our souls bend rending  
The sorrow out of the bereaved father's breast  
Tearing it out and holding it in our own hands  
Adopting it to our own bodies  
Caring for the children we had never seen.

### Notes

*This stanza is perhaps the most moving, admitting, as it does, his feelings of inadequacy in the face of the human cost of war. We have a series of present participles ('bending', 'rending') that seem to suggest these actions are not just in the moment but also are ongoing, a terrible indictment of war's continuing toll. These also provide the only rhyme in the poem creating an urgency and intensity. He writes 'under aloofness' suggesting that they are trying to be dispassionate, putting on a brave face, to cope with the reality of the 'bereaved father's breast'. Clearly, with 'sorrow' and 'caring', his human response cannot remain cold under these circumstances.*

### TASK 5

Your poem now needs to take that next emotional step and go from the personal response to the imagined connection with someone who has been affected by your event. The human connection between you, a person who is responding, and the victim should convey compassion and be the emotional heart of your poem. Don't hold back on the sympathy – your previous use of abstraction and your use of concrete details has set this within a framework that will cope with what might otherwise seem too emotional.

## Section VI

Sometimes we pray to be hardened and callous  
But God turns a deaf ear  
And we know hate and sorrow,  
Intimately  
And we do not mind dying tomorrow.

### Notes

*This final section is an important conclusion to the poem and differs in some ways to much of the poetry of WWI because it offers a sense of hope. He wants to be indifferent to the fate of others in order to cope with the ordeal but the fact that he isn't indifferent at least demonstrates the power of humanity to inspire us all. The knowledge of hatred and sorrow is also knowledge of compassion and that is a consolation of sorts. His continuing to help victims of the war places him above the seeming callousness of life depicted in the first stanza.*

## TASK 6

Your final section should, like Corsellis' poem, provide some extension to the strong feelings explored so far. It can take the poem in a different direction, perhaps almost the opposite direction. It serves to provide a calmer, more reflective tone to the intensity of the poem and can either sum up or contrast with what has gone before. The use of the plural pronoun 'we' can be effective in suggesting a shared human experience.

## Conclusion

Modeling – taking the themes, form or structure of another poem – can be a very inspiring way of creating new writing. This isn't plagiarism, which means the intentional copying of another's work in order to pass it off as your own. This is creating a dialogue between your work and that of other poets. Traditionally, many poets would write in the style of their illustrious predecessors to build their technique and their range. It can also help you understand how a poem works and how the poet's techniques affect the reader.

For more information about Timothy Corsellis and the poetry prize in his name, please visit [www.youngpoetsnetwork.org.uk](http://www.youngpoetsnetwork.org.uk).

## Bibliography

Goethals, Helen *The Unassuming Sky: the life and poetry of Timothy Corsellis*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012

## Selected War Literature Reading List

Homer *The Iliad*  
Seamus Heaney (translation) *Beowulf*  
William Shakespeare *Henry V*  
William Makepeace Thackeray *Vanity Fair*  
Erich Maria Remarque *All Quiet on the Western Front*  
The poems of Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg (WWI)  
Rebecca West *Return of the Soldier*  
Joseph Heller *Catch 22*  
Ernest Hemingway *For Whom the Bell Tolls*  
The poetry of Keith Douglas, Henry Reed and Timothy Corsellis (WWII)  
George Orwell *Homage to Catalonia*

## Useful Resources:

Imperial War Museum website  
<http://www.iwm.org.uk/learning/resources/second-world-war-learning-resources>

## ***DAWN AFTER THE RAID***

*I*

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As the hushing of the wind  
As the rising of a salmon  
When the water rims with ripples  
    Life moved laboriously over death.  
As the programme seller in the audience  
Blind to the passion on the stage  
As the swimmer in a surging sea  
As the Britisher in a foreign country  
    Life busied itself with death.

*II*

The blue overalls and metal helmets  
The lorries, one time used for coal,  
The worried warden and the rescue worker  
Hovered and hurried among the ruins.

*III*

Under this pile of fallen masonry  
Under those spillikins of beams  
Where number thirty two lies shattered  
There may be a body  
Dig  
For there may be a body.

*IV*

Distorted corpse once breathed slum air  
Lived in the grey dust where it died;  
Is it for this that bending we strived  
And fought in other's blood and other's sorrow  
To reach these wretched mangled remains?  
Is it for this that we ached in the darkness  
Not knowing that nearby  
Another house had fallen  
To the blast of that same bomb.

*V*

Sweat fell, we were not the strong and young  
They were out training, preparing,  
We are the best of those remaining  
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And though our backs are hard of bending  
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But God turns a deaf ear  
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**TIMOTHY CORSELLIS**