

Poetryclass Fresh ideas for learning from The Poetry Society

The Big Push

by John Glenday

KS3

KS4

Topics at a glance

- War poetry
- Art
- History
- Juxtaposition

Introduction

The Battle of the Somme took place from July until November 1916 and was one of the largest and bloodiest offensives of the First World War. Despite meticulous planning, including troops being ordered to march no faster than 2mph and a week-long artillery barrage of 1.5 million shells, the British and French troops experienced great difficulties in advancing against entrenched positions, under heavy artillery and machine gun fire. By the end of the first day there had been nearly 20,000 British soldiers killed, and over 38,000 injured.



The Eve of the Battle of the Somme

Getting started

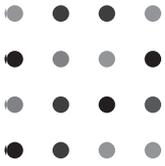
This resource is based on my poem 'The Big Push', which was inspired by the painting 'The Eve of the Battle of the Somme' by Sir Herbert James Gunn; and on the film-poem of 'The Big Push', produced by animator Xin Li.

Herbert James Gunn fought in the Artists' Rifles during the First World War – and two of his brothers were killed in the conflict. He had visited northern France before the War to paint landscapes, so he was familiar with its beauty, which was now the setting for a human tragedy.

Discussing the painting

To begin with, show your class the painting (bit.ly/gunnthebigpush) but don't reveal the title just yet! This is in many ways a remarkable painting, though on first glance it seems very simple.

Left: image from the animated film-poem, 'The Big Push', produced by The Poetry Society and Mosaic Films (available to view at bit.ly/thebigpush2016).



Before you engage in any discussion or context setting – before you’ve even revealed the title – ask pupils to examine the painting carefully. What title would they give it? Encourage them to be adventurous – to search the detail for clues as to the subject matter. Who are the people? When is it set?

Many may choose titles based on obvious foreground activity – *The Swimmers; Bathing by Trees; A Summer Camp*.

Go round the class and ask students to name their title and explain why they chose it and how it is appropriate. Now reveal the true title, ‘The Eve of the Battle of the Somme’. What is your students’ first response? Reveal to your class that this was painted in the middle of a conflict, with a massive attack just about to begin. More information about the conflict can be found from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (bit.ly/sommehistory)

Now your students know the context, discuss the clues to this that might be in the painting: the background of army tents in the trees; the red cross; the hint of uniforms. How many noticed the date in the bottom right hand corner? How does the title alter the perception of the bather lying down in the red trunks?



Image from the animated film-poem, ‘The Big Push’, produced by The Poetry Society and Mosaic Films (available to view at bit.ly/thebigpush2016).

The Big Push

Read your class ‘The Big Push’ (reprinted on page 6) but don’t give them a copy of it yet.

Ask them to jot down any words or phrases that catch their attention. They can note down as many as they like, but ideally about 15-20 words. It’s worth reading the poem two or three times to allow the class plenty of opportunity to gather words which attract their interest. Put these to one side, we will come back to them later.

Discussing the poem

Now hand out copies of the poem and discuss it in more detail.

Discussion points

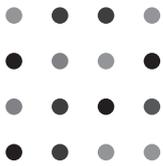
- Who might be speaking in the poem?
- What elements of the poem make it sound like it could be a monologue?
- What elements of everyday speech can your students identify in the poem?
- What effect do these have on the reader?
- Do your students feel the poem reflects the tone of the painting?

Juxtaposition

The poem contains much juxtaposition. Ask your students to read through the poem and to highlight parts which show:

- The brutality of war
- Humour and irony
- Natural beauty
- Colloquial language
- Reflective language

Why do they think the poem contains these disparate elements? How might this link the poem back to the painting?



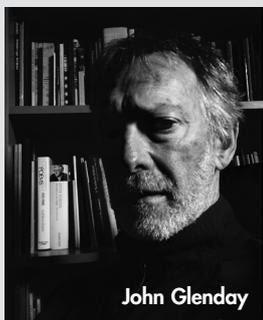
Historical context

Now ask the class to talk about the historical detail described in the poem. Almost all of these details come from first-hand accounts of the war included in the book *Forgotten Voices of the Somme* (Ebury Press, 2009). This book is a record of the conflict, seen through the eyes of soldiers who fought there.

Either read out some extracts from *Forgotten Voices of the Somme* (if you have a copy), or play a selection of sound recordings of interviews with soldiers who fought at the Somme; available online from Imperial War Museums (bit.ly/sommeaudio).

My thoughts on 'The Big Push'

The poem is in effect a monologue, spoken by one of those young swimmers.



To me, the poem falls into three sections. In the first, we have the stark reality of war, its inhumane detail and terrifying deadliness. In the second, the swim is remembered, and how it lifted the swimmer above the horrors of war, just for

a moment. The skylark links the second section with the third, where the young soldier moves into a reflection on what might lie beyond war, and beyond life. He remembers how quickly the flowers grew back over the trenchworks earlier in the war, (this was ironically because exploding shells threw up rich soil to the surface) and ponders how the dead might also return, transformed, and at peace.

The swimmer who voices the poem is acutely aware of the paradoxes of war – the silence after the deafening noise of the week-long artillery barrage; the lone soldier singing a sadly ironic song; the terror and the bravery of the assault; the misery and the dark trench humour.

Ask your class to jot down another 15-20 words or phrases that catch their attention. Ask your class to add these words to those they wrote down earlier. These will be the starting point for a poem.

Response poems

Your class will use the words and phrases collected the first reading of the poem, and from the historical voices, to create their own poem.

To give their poem a focus, ask your students to write a poem of their own which details a journey. The 'real' story of 'The Big Push' is about a journey after all: a journey across water from life to whatever lies beyond it; a journey from innocence to tragedy; from peace to war.

Give your students the title: 'A Peculiar Journey'. The poems could be about a real journey, an imagined journey, or a metaphorical one like in 'The Big Push'. Ask them to select ten words from their list to include in their poem.

The poems don't have to be war poems, but ask your students to include:

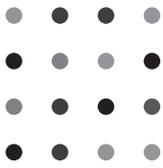
- At least one colloquial phrase
- At least one word or phrase that gives the poem historical context

Sharing and responses

After the exercise, ask the class to share their poems.

Discuss which words attracted the students' attention – were they mostly nouns, verbs, adjectives or something else? Were any single words especially popular? Why would this be? And how many used the five senses? Does this sort of word make a greater impression on us than abstract words, and if so, why?

Further discussion could explore the topic of journeys. Why are so many novels about journeys; and why are so many films 'road movies'?



The film-poem

Since it was written, 'The Big Push' has been turned into an animated film-poem (available at bit.ly/thebigpush2016).

Without providing any further information show your class the film and discuss their initial impressions. How does the film relate the poem back to the painting? Is it successful in doing so?

The film was animated by Chinese-Australian artist Xin Li who used a painstaking paint-on-glass technique. Each frame of the film was hand painted onto a pane of glass, photographed, and then repainted to make the next frame, and so on. There are no special effects or digital technology used to alter the images. It can take hours just to produce a few seconds of footage.

Does your students feel this technique suits the tone of the poem and the painting? What moments from the visuals in particular are effective, which are less so?

Play your students the film again. This time ask them to close their eyes and listen only to the reading of the poem and the soundscape. What extra emphasis does the reading bring to the poem? Does it alter how they understand the poem in any way?

Ask your students to go back to their poems and look at what instructions they might give a reader and an animator. What type of images would they be after, and in what medium would they want the film animated? How would they direct a reader to read the poem? Which parts would they want to emphasise?

Ask your students in pairs to discuss their thoughts, explaining how and why they arrived at their decisions.

Extension ideas

Extend these ideas further by asking students to produce a mood-board for their film, collecting images which give a feel for what their animation would look like and linking each image to a specific section of their poem. These could be presented to the class in a three-minute 'pitch' for their film.

Alternatively students could create a storyboard, breaking their poem into lines or sections and creating a still image for each section to show what a finished film would look like.

About the author

John Glenday was born in Broughty Ferry, near Dundee. His first collection, *The Apple Ghost* (Peterloo Poets, 1989) won a Scottish Arts Council Book Award and his second, *Undark* (Peterloo Poets, 1995), was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation. *Grain* (Picador, 2009) was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation and shortlisted for both the Griffin International Poetry Prize and the Ted Hughes Award. His most recent collection, *The Golden Mean* (Picador, 2015), won the 2015 Roehampton Poetry Prize.

Some notes on 'The Big Push'

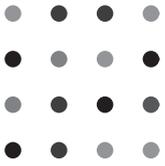
'*When You Come to the End of a Perfect Day*': The opening lines from a popular song at the time.

The Boche: a (derisive) term for the Germans widely used during the First World War.

Minnenwerfer: Literally a 'mine-launcher', was the German name for a mortar cannon.

Montaubon: A village in the Somme, seized by the British on the first day of the conflict; one of the few successes of the day.

'*Like an unbodied joy*': a quote from Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem 'To a Skylark'.



The Big Push

By John Glenday

after Sir Herbert James Gunn 'The Eve of the Battle of the Somme'

Would you believe it, there's a bloke out there singing
'When You Come to the End of a Perfect Day'.
His audience, a sixty-pounder crew, stand round bleeding
from the ears. The Boche are all but finished, apparently –

I heard they're packing old clock parts into trench mortars
now, for want of iron scrap. Some wag quips that next time he's
sentry and hears the plop of a *minnenwerfer* tumbling over,
he'll not blow the alarm, he'll shout: 'Time, gentlemen, please...'

We laugh and for one heartbeat forget to be afraid. Bravery
and cowardice are just two workings of the same fear
moving us in different ways. The 8th East Surreys
have been given footballs to kick and follow at Zero Hour;

it's to persuade them from the trenches lest their nerve fail
as they advance on Montaubon. I've watched men
hitch up their collars and trudge forward as if shrapnel
and lead were no worse than a shower of winter rain.

This afternoon a few of us went swimming in the mill dam
behind Camp. Just for a while to have no weight, to go drifting
clear of thought and world, was utter bliss. A skylark climbed
high over the torn fields on its impossible thread of song:

"like an unbodied joy." I don't know why, but it reminded
me of the day we took over from the French along the Somme;
it was so tranquil, so picturesque, the German trenchworks crowded
with swathes of tiny, brilliant flowers none of us could name.

I believe if the dead come back at all they'll come back green
to grow from the broken earth and drink the gathered water
and all the things they suffered will mean no more to them
than the setting-in of the ordinary dark, or a change of weather.

'The Big Push' was first commissioned by The Poetry Society and The Fleming Collection.