

Historica Canada Education Portal

First World War Poetry Analysis

Overview

The lesson allows students to gain a better understanding of the trenches and the effects of chlorine gas on the soldiers through the use of poetry through an analysis of the poem "Dulce et Decorum est" by Wilfred Owen.

Aims

The aim of the lesson is to show how horrific war was for the soldiers that fought in the First World War. It also shows the horrors of the gas attack as witnessed by a soldier, Owen, who served in the war. The poem brings a different dimension to the study of the war beyond reading about it in a textbook.

Background

Students should have an understanding of the trench system in the First World War, including the problems faced by soldiers in the trenches (i.e. muddy trenches, lack of sleep, constant shelling, and the fact that the men had to stay down in the trenches). This lesson fits well after introducing the Battle of Ypres to the students so they have an

understanding of the use of chlorine gas and its effects on the soldiers who inhaled it.

Activities

Time Allowance: 60-70 minutes

Procedures:

1. Students are given background information on Owen and a copy of the poem.
2. The teacher, or a student, can read the background information to the class.
3. The teacher introduces the poem reminding students of some of the themes previously covered - trenches, gas attacks.
4. The teacher defines the Latin phrases to the students so that they understand that Owen is not glorifying war, but rather talking about the horrors of war.
5. The teacher, or a student, then reads the poem to the class.
6. Upon completion, the teacher points out certain phrases (i.e. “men marched asleep”, “drunk with fatigue” etc.) from the poem and asks the students what they think Owen is referring to.
7. Students are then asked to mark on the paper with the poem every five lines - writing “5” after the first five lines, “10” after the first ten lines etc.

8. Students are then broken up into small groups of 3-4 students depending on the class size.
9. Each group is then given a series of five lines to interpret to the class. Group 1 will be given lines 1-5. Group 2 will be given lines 6-10, etc.
10. Each group selects a representative to write down their interpretation on the blackboard, and the students gain a full understanding of the poem by the end of class.
11. The lesson can also be extended to explore certain poetic devices (similes, metaphors, alliteration, oxymoron, assonance, etc.)

Evaluation:

The students are given a section or sections of the poem on their unit test and asked to interpret them.

Required Materials:

Copy of the poem and background information. Blackboard and chalk.

Resources

The students need a copy of the poem "Dulce and Decorum Est". The poem is [attached](#) but can also be easily found on several websites. It can also be helpful to provide brief background information about Wilfred Owen.