CAPITOLO

7

The Pity of War: the Poets of 1914–1918

"They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old: / Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn." — Laurence Binyon, "For the Fallen" (The Times, 21 September 1914)

OBIETTIVI

1. I can describe Britain's war of 1914–1918 — the Western Front, gas, Gallipoli and the Somme, the home front, conscription and remembrance.
2. I can define war poetry and outline the lives and work of Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg.
3. I can analyse form, imagery and tone in "The Soldier", "Dulce et Decorum Est" and "Break of Day in the Trenches", and recognise pararhyme.
4. I can explain connotation, euphemism and the devices of propaganda, and form and punctuate compound adjectives.
5. I can describe and interpret an image and write an analysis of a visual source.
6. I can compare Owen with Ungaretti, and Owen's "old Lie" with Horace and Tyrtaeus.

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In September 1914 a poem in *The Times* promised that the young men who were dying in France would "grow not old". Four years later a twenty-five-year-old officer, writing in a hospital and then in the trenches, called the oldest consolation of war "the old Lie". Between those two poems lies the most destructive war Britain had ever fought, and a change in the way poetry speaks about death that has lasted to the present day.

This chapter follows Britain through the First World War, from the declaration of war in August 1914 to the Armistice of November 1918 and the first ceremonies of remembrance. You will read three soldier-poets — Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg — and study how words can glorify, soften or expose a fact: connotation, euphemism, propaganda and the compound adjectives poets invented to describe what they saw. In the Connections section you will meet Italy's war and Ungaretti, the chemistry of the gas that drifted into the trenches, and the line of Horace that Owen turned against itself — together with its Greek ancestor in Tyrtaeus, whom you met in Greek 3.

7.1 History and Society: Britain at War, 1914–1918

On 28 June 1914 the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was shot in Sarajevo. Within five weeks the great powers of Europe, bound by alliances, were at war: Germany and Austria-Hungary on one side; Russia, France and Britain — the **Entente** (*Intesa*) — on the other. Britain entered the war on **4 August 1914**, after German armies invaded neutral Belgium on their way to France; Britain had guaranteed Belgian neutrality by the Treaty of London of 1839. The Ottoman Empire joined Germany at the end of 1914, and Italy, at first neutral, entered the war against Austria-Hungary on 24 May 1915 (see Connections). Many people expected a short war. It lasted more than four years. Figura 7.1 places the events and the poems of this chapter on one time scale.

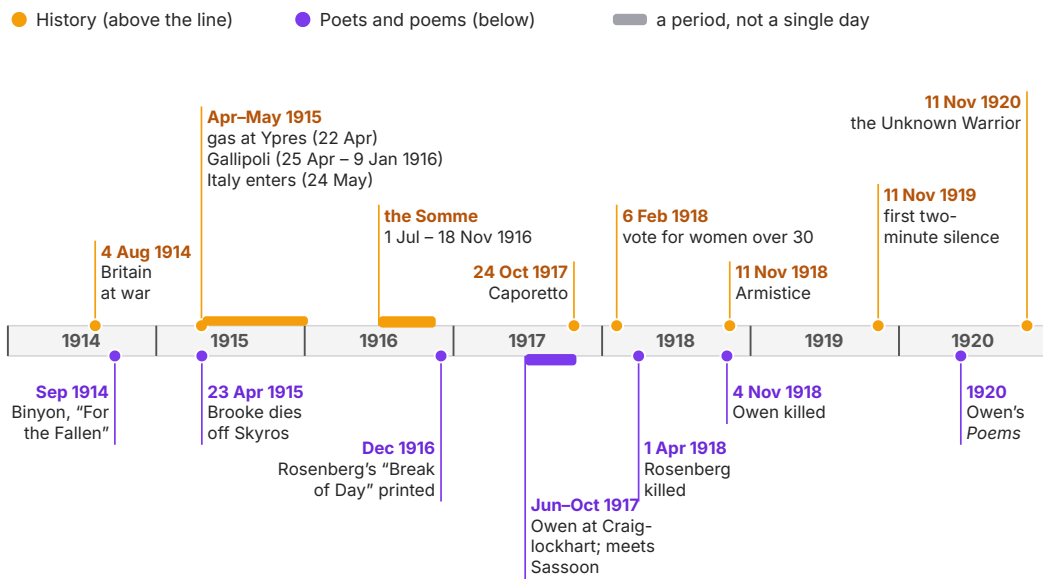


Figura 7.1 Britain's war and its poets, 1914–1920 (proportional time scale; a period is drawn as a bar: Gallipoli, the Somme, Owen at Craiglockhart). The Armistice of 11 November 1918 ended the fighting on the Western Front; Italy's armistice with Austria-Hungary had come into force on 4 November.

7.1.1 The Western Front

In the first weeks the war was one of movement. The German advance was stopped on the river Marne, east of Paris, in September 1914; both armies then tried to outflank each other towards the sea, and by the end of the year a continuous line of **trench warfare** (*guerra di trincea*) ran for some 700 kilometres from the Belgian coast to the Swiss border (Figura 7.2). A trench system was a network: a front-line trench, a support trench and a reserve trench, joined by communication trenches, protected by sandbags and barbed wire. Between the opposing front lines lay **no man's land** (*terra di nessuno*), a strip of mud and craters that could be a few hundred metres wide or much less. To attack, soldiers climbed out of their trench and went "over the top" into machine-gun fire and artillery shells. Machine guns and heavy guns gave a great advantage to the defender, and for three years neither side could break through.

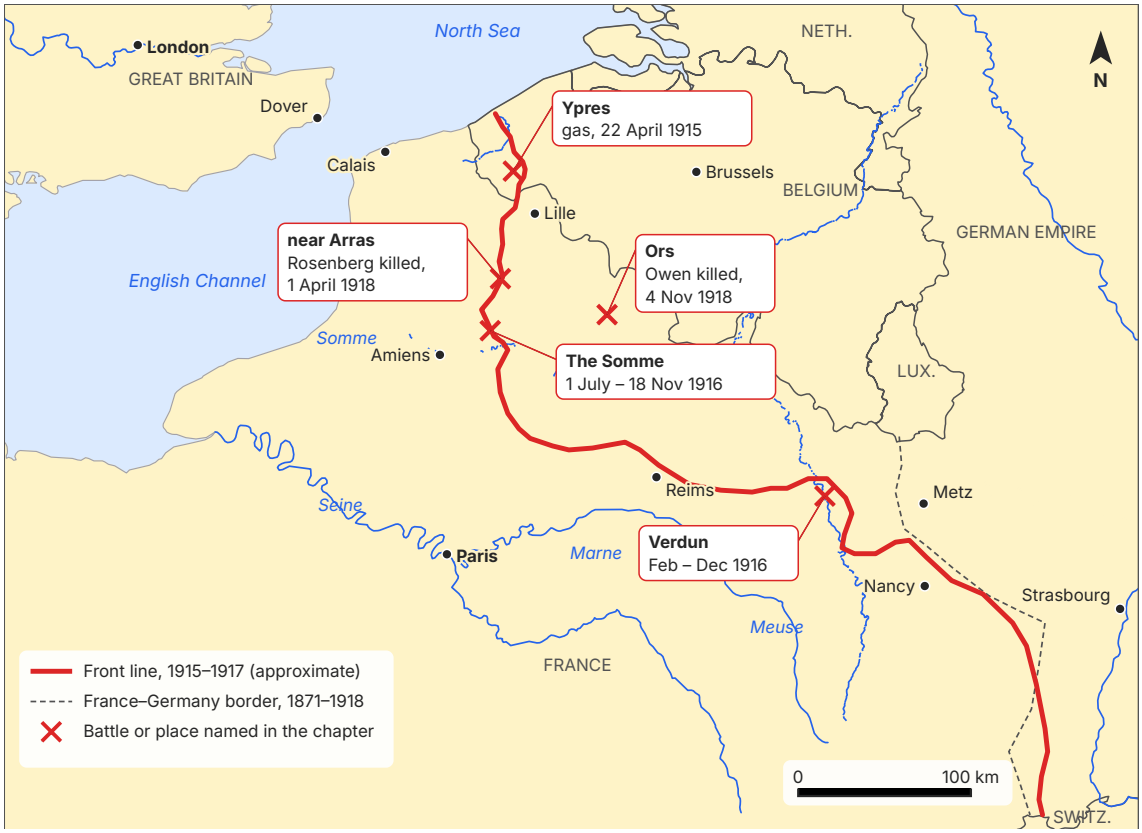


Figura 7.2 The Western Front, 1915–1917 (approximate front line), with the places named in this chapter. Ors, where Owen was killed in November 1918, lay behind the German lines until the Allied advance of autumn 1918.

Life in the line was a routine of boredom and fear: sentry duty, repairing trenches at night, rats, lice, mud and, in winter, frostbite and "trench foot". Units rotated between the front line, the support lines and rest behind the lines, which is why Owen's soldiers in "Dulce et Decorum Est" are marching "towards our distant rest".

7.1.2 New weapons

Industry changed war. On **22 April 1915**, near Ypres in Belgium, the German army released chlorine gas from thousands of cylinders and let the wind carry it towards French and Algerian troops: it was the first large-scale gas attack of the war. Britain used gas in its turn at Loos in September 1915, and both sides later used phosgene and, from July 1917, mustard gas, which burned the skin. Gas masks became part of every soldier's equipment. Tanks were used for the first time by the British army on 15 September 1916, during the Battle of the Somme, and aircraft, first used to observe the enemy lines, soon fought each other in the sky.

7.1.3 Gallipoli and the Somme

In 1915 the Allies tried to break the deadlock elsewhere. Their plan was to force the Dardanelles, the narrow strait between Europe and Asia, take Constantinople and knock the Ottoman Empire out of the war. British, French, Australian and New Zealand troops (the ANZACs) landed on the Gallipoli peninsula on **25 April 1915**, a few kilometres across the strait from the site of ancient Troy (Figura 7.5). They never advanced far beyond the beaches, and were evacuated by January 1916.

The great British offensive of 1916 was the **Battle of the Somme**, in northern France, from **1 July to 18 November 1916**. After a week of bombardment, the infantry attacked in daylight across no man's land. According to the Imperial War Museums, by the end of the first day 57,470 British soldiers had become **casualties** (*perdite*) — killed, wounded or missing — and 19,240 of them had been killed: the heaviest losses the British army has ever suffered in a single day. The battle went on for four and a half months and moved the front only a few kilometres. Further south, the French army was fighting the even longer Battle of Verdun (February–December 1916).

7.1.4 The home front

Britain began the war with a small professional army. In August 1914 Lord Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War, called for volunteers, and posters, newspapers, speeches and songs urged young men to enlist. Some towns formed "Pals" battalions, in which friends and workmates served together — and often died together. In January 1916 the Military Service Act introduced **conscription** (*coscrizione obbligatoria*), first for single men and then, from May 1916, for married men too; a small number of conscientious objectors refused to fight on grounds of conscience.

The war reached into every home, and the civilian side of the war came to be called the **home front** (*fronte interno*). The Defence of the Realm Act (August 1914) gave the government wide powers, including censorship of the press and of soldiers' letters. In September 1914 a secret War Propaganda Bureau invited well-known writers — among them Thomas Hardy, Arthur Conan Doyle and H. G. Wells — to put their pens at the service of the war. Women replaced men in factories, offices and transport; hundreds of thousands worked in munitions factories, and many served as nurses near the front. In February 1918 the Representation of the People Act gave the vote to all men over 21 and to women over 30 who met a property qualification (chapter 9 looks at the act in detail): the war had changed what Parliament thought women could be trusted with.

7.1.5 "Shell shock"

Doctors soon saw soldiers who had no visible wound but could not stop shaking, could not speak or walk, or relived the battle in nightmares. Soldiers called it **shell shock** (*shock da bom-*

bardamento), and the psychologist Charles Myers used the term in an article in *The Lancet* in February 1915. At first many thought the cause was physical — the blast of exploding shells — and some officers saw only cowardice; slowly doctors understood that the mind itself had been wounded. Officers were treated in special hospitals such as **Craiglockhart War Hospital**, near Edinburgh, where Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon met in 1917.

7.1.6 Armistice and remembrance

The United States entered the war in April 1917; Russia, after its revolutions, made peace with Germany in March 1918. A last German offensive in the spring of 1918 was stopped, and from August the Allied armies advanced steadily. The **Armistice** (*armistizio*), signed in a railway carriage near Compiègne, came into force at 11 a.m. on **11 November 1918**. The dead of the British Empire were counted in hundreds of thousands; almost every town and village in Britain lost men.

Remembrance (*commemorazione*) became a public ritual. On 11 November 1919 the first **two-minute silence** was kept across the country; in 1920 the stone Cenotaph ("empty tomb") was unveiled in Whitehall, and an unidentified soldier — the Unknown Warrior — was buried in Westminster Abbey on 11 November. Every community raised a memorial carved with its names, and the language of those memorials — "the fallen", "the Glorious Dead", "they gave their lives" — is the starting point of this chapter's Language section.

> **ERRORE FREQUENTE**
>
> ✗ «Rupert Brooke morì in combattimento a Gallipoli.» → ✓ Brooke morì il 23 aprile 1915 di una **setticemia**, su una nave ospedale francese ancorata al largo di Sciro, **due giorni prima** dello sbarco a Gallipoli: non combatté mai in quella campagna.
>
> ✗ «La guerra finì per tutti l'11 novembre 1918.» → ✓ L'11 novembre è l'armistizio sul fronte occidentale; per l'Italia la guerra con l'Austria-Ungheria era finita il **4 novembre** (armistizio di Villa Giusti). La pace con la Germania fu firmata a Versailles soltanto il 28 giugno 1919.

7.2 Literature: Poets in Uniform

Soldiers have always sung about war, and poets have always praised the dead: you have read Homer and Tyrtaeus in Greek and Horace in Latin. What was new in 1914–1918 was the number of soldiers who wrote. Britain's armies were made of citizens — clerks, teachers, students, workers — and thousands of them wrote verse in the trenches, in hospital or on leave. Newspapers printed poems every day. In English, **war poetry** (*poesia di guerra*) is the name for poetry about the experience of war, above all the poetry of the First World War written by men who served in it.

Many of these poets had grown up on the poetry of the years before the war: the five anthologies of *Georgian Poetry* (1912–1922), edited by Edward Marsh, collected quiet, musical poems about the English countryside, friendship and love, in regular metre and rhyme. The war tested that language. Critics often describe two phases — the idealism of 1914–1915 and the angry realism of 1916–1918 — and the scheme is useful if you remember that it is a simplification: some poets wrote patriotic verse until the end, and some saw the horror from the start.

7.2.1 Rupert Brooke (1887–1915)

Rupert Brooke was born in 1887 at Rugby, where his father taught at the famous public school, and studied classics at King's College, Cambridge. Handsome, gifted and admired, he was one of the Georgian poets; in 1913–1914 he travelled to North America and the South Seas. When war came he joined the Royal Naval Division, saw brief action at Antwerp in October 1914, and wrote five sonnets called "1914", which were printed in the little magazine *New Numbers* at the start of 1915. On Easter Sunday, 4 April 1915, the Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, W. R. Inge, read the fifth sonnet, "The Soldier", in his sermon, and it became famous almost overnight.

In February 1915 Brooke sailed with his division for the Dardanelles. He fell ill on the voyage and died of blood poisoning on **23 April 1915**, on a French hospital ship anchored off the Greek island of Skyros, where his friends buried him in an olive grove. His collection *1914 and Other Poems* appeared a few weeks later and sold in huge numbers. For a nation at war, the young poet who had died on the way to Troy became a symbol of noble sacrifice; for the soldier-poets who came after him, he became the voice of an innocence they no longer had.

7.2.2 Wilfred Owen (1893–1918)

Wilfred Owen was born at Oswestry, in Shropshire, on 18 March 1893, into a family of modest means. He could not afford university; he worked as assistant to a country vicar and then taught English in Bordeaux. He enlisted in October 1915, became an officer in the Manchester Regiment and reached the front in January 1917, in one of the coldest winters of the war. In the spring, after months of fighting, he was blown into the air by a shell and spent days among the remains of a fellow officer; he was sent home with shell shock.

At Craiglockhart (June–October 1917) his doctor, Arthur Brock, encouraged him to work and to write; Owen edited the hospital magazine, *The Hydra*. There, in August 1917, he met **Siegfried Sassoon**, already a decorated officer and a published poet, who had publicly protested against the continuation of the war. Sassoon read Owen's drafts, suggested changes and told him to write about what he had seen. In a few months Owen wrote or drafted most of the poems for which he is remembered, among them "Dulce et Decorum Est" and "Anthem for Doomed Youth", whose first line asks: "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?"

Owen returned to the front in the late summer of 1918, and in October he won the Military Cross. On **4 November 1918** he was killed while leading his men across the Sambre–Oise canal near Ors, one week before the Armistice; the telegram reached his parents on 11 November, Ar-

mistice Day. Only a handful of his poems had been printed in his lifetime. His *Poems*, edited by Sassoon, appeared in 1920 with a preface found among his papers:

> This book is not about heroes. English Poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. [...]
> The subject of it is War, and the pity of War.
> The Poetry is in the pity.
>
> Wilfred Owen, Preface to *Poems* (1920). The draft in Owen's hand reads "My subject is War"; the 1920 edition prints "The subject of it is War".

Owen's line is often harsh, but his ear was very fine. In poems such as "Strange Meeting", a dialogue in an underworld between a soldier and the enemy he has killed, he ends his lines not with full rhymes but with **pararhyme** (*pararima*): two words with the same consonants and a different stressed vowel, such as *escaped / scooped* or *killed / cold* (Figura 7.3). Pararhyme is a special kind of the half-rhyme you met in English 4 (chapter 13), like Dickinson's slant rhyme (chapter 5): the ear expects a rhyme and receives a sound that is close but "wrong" — an echo of a world out of tune.

Same consonants, different stressed vowel

lines	first word		second word	shared consonant frame	vowels
1–2	escaped	→	scooped	s·c·p·d	a / oo
3–4	groined	→	groaned	gr·n·d	oi / oa
14–15	years	→	yours	y·r·s	ea / ou
18–19	hair	→	hour	h·r	ai / ou
25–26	spoiled	→	spilled	sp·l·d	oi / i
29–30	mystery	→	mastery	m·st·r	y / a
33–34	chariot-wheels	→	wells	w·l·s	ee / e
39–40	friend	→	frowned	fr·n·d	ie / ow
41–42	killed	→	cold	k·l·d	i / o

Violet: the consonant frame the two words share. Amber: the stressed vowel (as spelt), which changes.

Figura 7.3 Pararhyme in Owen's "Strange Meeting": nine of the poem's pairs, with the line numbers of the 1920 text. Later editions, based on Owen's manuscripts, print one more line after line 9, so their numbering differs.

7.2.3 Isaac Rosenberg (1890–1918)

Isaac Rosenberg came from a very different world. He was born in Bristol in 1890 to a poor Jewish family from the Russian Empire and grew up in Whitechapel, in the East End of London. He left school at fourteen to work for an engraver, studied painting at the Slade School of Fine

Art thanks to private patrons, and printed his poems at his own expense. He enlisted in 1915, served first in a battalion of short soldiers (the "Bantams") and went to France in 1916 as a private, not an officer: he is the great poet of the ordinary ranks. He wrote in pencil, on scraps of paper, between fatigues. On **1 April 1918** he was killed near Arras. His *Poems* were collected only in 1922.

7.2.4 Other voices

Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967) wrote short, bitter satires in which generals, journalists and comfortable civilians are set beside the dying; in July 1917 his "Soldier's Declaration" against the prolongation of the war was read in the House of Commons, and he was sent to Craiglockhart instead of being court-martialled. His poems and his memoirs are still protected by copyright, so this book summarises them. **Edward Thomas** wrote quiet poems of the English countryside in which the war is felt at a distance; he was killed at Arras in April 1917. Women wrote too, from the patriotic verse of Jessie Pope — to whom an early draft of "Dulce et Decorum Est" was addressed — to Vera Brittain's memoir of her work as a nurse and of the deaths of her fiancé, her brother and her friends, *Testament of Youth* (1933, mentioned only: not public domain). The most quoted poem of remembrance, however, came from a civilian: Laurence Binyon's "For the Fallen", printed in *The Times* on 21 September 1914, from which this chapter's epigraph is taken.

DA RICORDARE

Three soldier-poets. Brooke: "1914" sonnets (1915), died 23 April 1915 off Skyros. **Owen**: Craiglockhart 1917, killed 4 November 1918, *Poems* 1920; pararhyme. **Rosenberg**: a private, painter and poet of the East End, killed 1 April 1918, *Poems* 1922.

ERRORE FREQUENTE

✗ «"Dulce et Decorum Est" fu pubblicata durante la guerra.» → ✓ Fu scritta nel 1917–18 e pubblicata **dopo la morte** di Owen, nel 1920.

✗ «La pararima è una rima sbagliata.» → ✓ È una scelta: stesse consonanti, vocale accentata diversa (*killed / cold*). Owen la usa per un effetto di dissonanza, non per incapacità di rimare.

7.3 Texts: Three Soldiers, Three Voices

Three complete poems, written within two years of one another: a sonnet composed before its author had seen a trench, a poem drafted in a hospital by an officer who had seen too much, and a poem in free verse written in a trench at dawn by a private. All three are about a soldier's death; they could hardly be more different.

7.3.1 T1 · Rupert Brooke, “The Soldier” (1914)

Context. The last of the five “1914” sonnets, written at the end of 1914, when Brooke was in training in England. The speaker is a soldier who imagines his own death abroad and tells the reader how to think of it.

Tabella 7.1 T1 — Rupert Brooke, “The Soldier”, complete. Text of *1914 and Other Poems* (London, 1915), Project Gutenberg eBook #33902, checked against the scan of the 1915 edition on Wikisource; indentation as there.

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,	5
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	10
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.	

Glosses. *corner*: small piece of land · *dust*: here, the body after death (as in the burial service: “dust to dust”) · *bore*: gave birth to (past of *bear*) · *made aware*: gave consciousness to · *blest*: blessed · *shed away*: thrown off · *the eternal mind*: God · *learnt of*: learnt from.

Analysis

Form. “The Soldier” is a sonnet with two faces. The octave rhymes like two English quatrains (*abab cdcd*); the sestet keeps the Italian pattern (*efg efg*). The volta (English 3, chapter 9) falls exactly at line 9: “If I should die” becomes “And think”, and the body of the octave becomes the heart and the spirit of the sestet. The metre is a smooth iambic pentameter, with almost no harsh sounds.

Language. The words *England* and *English* occur six times in fourteen lines. England is personified as a mother who "bore, shaped, made aware" her son and gave him flowers, roads, rivers and sun; his death simply gives back what he received. The poem never mentions an enemy, a weapon or a wound: the "foreign field" becomes English by being enriched with English "dust", and death is turned into a gift and a homecoming. Its vocabulary is that of the memorial: *blest*, *eternal*, *peace*, *heaven*.

Themes. Patriotism as love of a landscape and a way of life; death as sacrifice and as peace. Read in 1915, after Brooke's own death, the poem sounded like a prophecy fulfilled. Read after Owen, it can sound like the "old Lie" itself — though it is a lie only if we forget that it was written before the Somme, by a man who believed every word.

1. Who is speaking, to whom, and in what situation?
2. Find the three things England gave the speaker in lines 5–8. What do they have in common?
3. Underline the verbs of the sestet. Are they about action or about feeling and giving?
4. Why does Brooke say "dust", not "body", in line 4? Think of a funeral service.
5. The poem never shows fighting. Is this a strength or a weakness of the poem? Give a reason.

7.3.2 T2 · Wilfred Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est" (1917–1918)

Context. Owen drafted the poem at Craiglockhart in October 1917 and revised it in 1918; an early draft was addressed to Jessie Pope, whose patriotic verse encouraged boys to enlist. It was published after his death, in the 1920 *Poems*. A unit is marching back from the front line when it is caught in a gas attack.

Tabella 7.2 T2 — Wilfred Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est", complete. Text of *Poems* (London, 1920), checked on the scan of the 1920 edition on Wikimedia Commons and on Project Gutenberg eBook #1034; spacing before punctuation modernised. Line 23 reads "Bitten" in the 1920 scan (the Gutenberg and Wikisource transcriptions print "Bitter"); later editions, based on Owen's manuscripts, print a longer line 23.

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,	
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,	
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,	
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.	
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,	5
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame, all blind;	
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots	
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.	

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling	
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,	10
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling	
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—	
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,	
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.	
In all my dreams before my helpless sight	15
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.	
If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace	
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,	
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,	
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin,	20
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood	
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs	
Bitten as the cud	
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—	
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest	25
To children ardent for some desperate glory,	
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*	
Pro patria mori.	

Glosses. *hags*: ugly old women · *sludge*: thick mud · *flares*: lights fired into the sky to show the ground at night · *trudge*: walk slowly and heavily · *blood-shod*: with "shoes" of blood · *hoots*: the noise of the shells as they fall · *helmets*: here, gas masks · *lime*: quicklime, which burns the skin · *panes*: the glass eyepieces of the mask · *guttering*: flickering, like a candle about to go out · *jolt*: sudden shake · *cud*: food that cows chew again · *zest*: enthusiasm · *ardent*: eager. Latin: "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country" (Horace, see Connections).

Analysis

Structure. The poem moves in four steps: the exhausted march (lines 1–8), the gas attack (9–14), the dream that never ends (15–16) and the address to "my friend" (17–28). The first two stanzas together make up fourteen lines, like a sonnet, but the rhymes run on beyond them: *sight / drowning* in lines 15–16 echoes *light / drowning* in lines 13–14, so the nightmare refuses to stay in the past. The tense changes in the same place: everything before is in the past (*we cursed, was yelling, I saw*); from line 16 Owen writes "He **plunges** at me" — the present of trauma.

Language. The soldiers are not heroes but "old beggars" and "hags": young men turned old. The similes come from disease and from the farm ("the cud / Of vile, incurable sores"), and the sounds are as ugly as the sight: *sludge, trudge, gargling, froth-corrupted*. The gas scene uses short exclamations and a capital "GAS!", then the slow image of a man "drowning" "As under a green sea". In the last stanza a single conditional sentence (*If… you too could pace… If you could hear… you would not tell…*) traps the reader in the scene.

Themes. The title and the last lines quote Horace, and the poem answers him: dying for one's country is not "sweet" but agony. The real target is not the dead man but the civilians — "My friend" is ironic — who repeat the old phrase to children "ardent for some desperate glory".

1. Find all the words in lines 1–8 that make the soldiers seem old, ill or animal-like.
2. What happens between "Gas! GAS!" and "I saw him drowning"? Tell it in three plain sentences.
3. Why is the shortest stanza (lines 15–16) set apart? What has changed in the tense of the verbs?
4. Who is "My friend"? Is the phrase friendly? Explain the irony.
5. Translate the Latin of lines 27–28 and explain why Owen calls it "the old Lie".
6. Choose one simile and say what it adds to the scene.

ESEMPIO SVOLTO

From a quotation to a PEE paragraph. Question: *How does Owen make the reader feel the horror of the gas attack?*

1. **Point.** Owen turns the gas attack into an image of drowning, so that the reader watches a death that cannot be stopped.
2. **Evidence.** "Dim through the misty panes and thick green light, / As under a green sea, I saw him drowning."
3. **Explanation.** The speaker sees through the glass of his own mask, so the reader sees through it too: the light is "dim", "misty", "thick". The simile "As under a green sea" is almost beautiful, and the slow rhythm of the line is the opposite of the panic above it. The word *drowning* then returns at the end of line 16, in the present tense, and the scene becomes a nightmare that repeats "In all my dreams".

Tip. Quote briefly, name the device (*simile, repetition, tense change*) and always say what it does to the reader. Use the present tense to write about the poem (chapter 1).

7.3.3 T3 · Isaac Rosenberg, "Break of Day in the Trenches" (1916)

Context. Written in France in 1916 and printed in the Chicago magazine *Poetry* in December 1916. At dawn, on the parapet of a British trench, a private picks a poppy and is touched by a rat.

Tabella 7.3 T3 — Isaac Rosenberg, "Break of Day in the Trenches", complete. Text of *Poems by Isaac Rosenberg*, ed. G. Bottomley (London, 1922), Project Gutenberg eBook #66889, checked against the scan of the 1922 edition on Wikisource.

The darkness crumbles away—	
It is the same old druid Time as ever.	
Only a live thing leaps my hand—	
A queer sardonic rat—	
As I pull the parapet's poppy	5
To stick behind my ear.	
Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew	
Your cosmopolitan sympathies	
(And God knows what antipathies).	
Now you have touched this English hand	10

You will do the same to a German—	
Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure	
To cross the sleeping green between.	
It seems you inwardly grin as you pass	
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes	15
Less chanced than you for life,	
Bonds to the whims of murder,	
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,	
The torn fields of France.	
What do you see in our eyes	20
At the shrieking iron and flame	
Hurled through still heavens?	
What quaver—what heart aghast?	
Poppies whose roots are in man's veins	
Drop, and are ever dropping;	25
But mine in my ear is safe,	
Just a little white with the dust.	

Glosses. *druid*: a priest of the ancient Celts (who were said to offer human sacrifices) · *leaps*: jumps over · *queer*: strange · *sardonic*: mocking · *parapet*: the top of the front wall of the trench · *droll*: funny · *cosmopolitan*: at home everywhere · *antipathies*: dislikes · *the sleeping green between*: no man's land · *haughty*: proud · *less chanced … for life*: with less chance of living · *bonds*: slaves · *whims*: sudden wishes · *quaver*: trembling · *aghast*: filled with horror.

Analysis

Form. The poem is in free verse (chapter 5), with lines of uneven length, a few loose rhymes (*sympathies / antipathies*) and the tone of a man thinking aloud. There is no rhetoric of glory and no rhetoric of protest: the voice is ironic, quiet and exact.

Language. Everything is seen through the rat, which crosses no man's land freely and touches English and German hands alike: its "cosmopolitan sympathies" mock the war's frontiers. The soldiers, "Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes", are "Less chanced than you for life": they have less chance of living than the rat. The poppy — whose roots "are in man's veins" because it grows from the blood of the dead — "Drop, and are ever dropping", like the soldiers; the

one behind the speaker's ear is "safe" only for now, "Just a little white with the dust", the dust of death of T1 turned literal.

Themes. The absurdity of enmity, the fragility of life, the indifference of nature ("the same old druid Time"). Rosenberg was a painter, and the poem is built of precise visual details: his poppy is at once a real flower on a parapet and the blood of the dead (see the Approfondimento on the remembrance poppy).

1. Where is the speaker and what time is it? Which words tell you?
2. Why would "they" shoot the rat? Explain the joke in lines 7–9.
3. In lines 14–19, who has the better chance of life, the rat or the soldiers? Why is this ironic?
4. Find two images of sound and violence in lines 20–23.
5. What does the poppy behind the speaker's ear stand for in the last three lines?

7.4 Language: Connotation, Euphemism and Compound Adjectives

Brooke, Owen and the posters on the walls of 1914 described the same war with very different words. This section gives you the tools to describe those differences precisely — and to notice them in today's news, advertising and politics.

7.4.1 Denotation and connotation

The **denotation** (*denotazione*) of a word is what it refers to: the dictionary meaning. Its **connotation** (*connotazione*) is the set of feelings, judgements and associations it carries. *Died*, *fell*, *gave his life* and *was slaughtered* can all denote the same event; their connotations are very different (Figura 7.4). A word with strong connotations is often called **loaded** (*connotato, carico*): *hero*, *sacrifice*, *glory* and *the fallen* are loaded with honour; *cattle*, *butchery* and *slaughter* are loaded with horror.

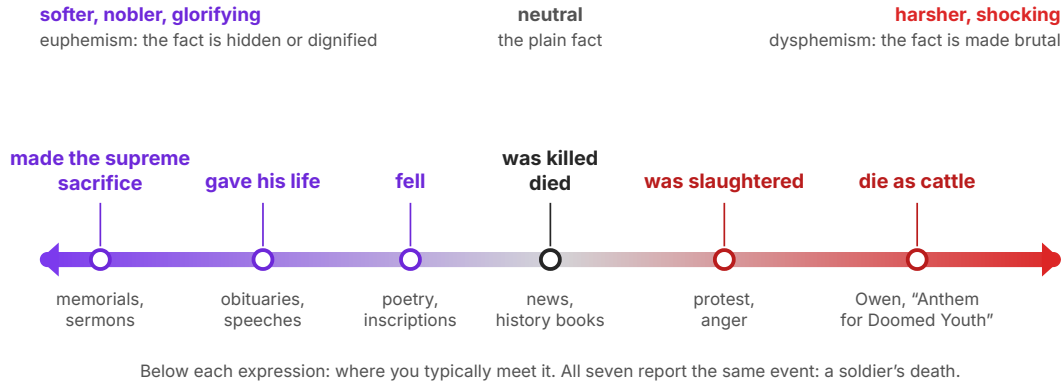


Figura 7.4 A connotation scale: seven ways of reporting a soldier's death (the two neutral ones share the centre), from the most dignified to the most brutal.

7.4.2 Euphemism

A **euphemism** (*eufemismo*) is a mild or indirect expression used instead of one that is painful, embarrassing or unpleasant. Its opposite, a deliberately harsh expression, is sometimes called a **dysphemism** (*disfemismo*). Every war produces both. On memorials the dead are "the fallen" or "the Glorious Dead" (the words carved on the Cenotaph); in obituaries a man "gave his life" or "made the supreme sacrifice". Soldiers had their own euphemisms, often grimly comic: a man who was killed had "gone west". Later wars have added their own official euphemisms — *collateral damage* (civilian deaths), a phrase from the second half of the twentieth century, not from 1914–1918.

A euphemism is not always a lie. It can express respect or spare the feelings of the bereaved, which is why it belongs on a gravestone. It becomes dangerous when it hides a fact that people need to know. Owen's method is to take the euphemism away: in "Dulce et Decorum Est" nobody "falls"; a man drowns in his own lungs.

7.4.3 The language of persuasion

Propaganda (*propaganda*) is information, often one-sided or misleading, spread in an organised way to make people think or act in a particular way. The recruitment posters of 1914–1915 used a small set of devices that advertising still uses today.

Tabella 7.4 The language of persuasion: devices of the recruitment posters (the slogans with a date are real; the other examples are invented)

Device	How it works	Example
Direct address	*you*, often in capitals; the reader is singled out	*Your Country Needs You* (1914)
Imperative	an order or an urgent request	*Enlist today. Don't wait to be asked.*
Guilt	the reader imagines being judged in the future	*Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?* (1915)
Pride and flattery	the reader is told he is brave, strong, needed	*Only the best men will answer.*
The group	*we, our, your pals*: everyone else is going	*Your friends are already in France. Are you?*
Loaded words	abstract nouns with strong positive connotations	*honour, duty, glory, freedom, King and Country*
A short slogan	easy to remember, easy to repeat	*Women of Britain say — "Go!"* (1915)

GRAMMAR IN ITALIANO

Connotazione ed eufemismo. La **denotazione** è il significato di base (morire); la **connotazione** è il valore emotivo che la parola aggiunge («cadere», «immolarsi», «essere massacrati»). L'**eufemismo** attenua («è scomparso», «ci ha lasciati»); l'italiano dei monumenti ai caduti usa gli stessi strumenti dell'inglese: «caduti», «gloriosi», «immolati per la patria».

Aggettivi composti. L'inglese forma molti aggettivi unendo due parole con un trattino davanti al nome: *a war-torn country* = «un paese dilaniato dalla guerra». L'italiano, di solito, usa un participio con un complemento o una relativa: *a shell-shocked soldier* = «un soldato traumatizzato dai bombardamenti». Attenzione ai numeri: *a two-minute silence* (nome al **singolare**) = «un silenzio di due minuti».

7.4.4 Compound adjectives

You learnt the basic compound adjectives in English 2 (chapter 9): *well-known*, *a ten-minute walk*. Poets and journalists use the same patterns to pack an image into one word: Owen's soldiers are *knock-kneed* and *blood-shod*, and the dying man's lungs are *froth-corrupted*. Tabella 7.5 shows the main patterns at B2+.

Tabella 7.5 Compound adjectives: patterns, examples and stress (the stressed syllable in capitals)

Pattern	Examples	Usual stress
noun + past participle	*war-torn, shell-shocked, sun-baked, froth-corrupted*	on the first part: *WAR-torn*
adjective / adverb + past participle	*well-known, short-lived, ill-equipped*	on the second part: *well-KNOWN*
noun + present participle	*heart-breaking, life-saving, record-breaking*	on the first part: *HEART-breaking*
adjective + noun + *-ed*	*long-haired, broad-shouldered, cold-blooded*	on the second part: *long-HAIRED*
number + noun (singular!)	*a two-minute silence, a four-year war, a 25-year-old poet*	on the noun: *two-MINute*
noun + adjective	*blood-red, sea-green, battle-weary*	varies: *blood-RED*, *BATtle-weary*

Hyphens. Use the hyphen when the compound comes **before** a noun: *a well-known poet*, *a war-torn town*. After a verb, most British style guides leave it out when the meaning is clear: *The poet is well known.* Adverbs ending in *-ly* take no hyphen at all: *a badly wounded officer*, *a newly dug trench*. **Stress.** The stress patterns in the table are tendencies, not laws; before a stressed noun the stress of a compound often moves forward (*a WELL-known POET*). Check a pronouncing dictionary when in doubt.

ERRORE FREQUENTE

✗ *a two-minutes silence* · ✗ *a four-years war* → ✓ *a two-**minute** silence*, *a four-**year** war*: nell'aggettivo composto il nome resta al singolare (ma: *the silence lasted two minutes*).

✗ *a badly-wounded soldier* → ✓ *a badly wounded soldier*: niente trattino dopo un avverbio in *-ly*.

✗ *Owen was 25-years-old.* → ✓ *Owen was 25 years old* / *a 25-year-old officer*.

7.5 Skills: Remembering

7.5.1 Vocabulary: war and memory

Tabella 7.6 War and memory: key words

Word	Meaning	Example
trench (n.)	a long, deep ditch dug to protect soldiers	*They spent four days in the front-line trench.*
front line (n.)	the place where two armies face each other	*Owen returned to the front line in 1918.*
shell (n.)	an explosive fired from a big gun	*The shells fell all night.*
gas mask (n.)	a mask that filters poisoned air	*They fumbled with their gas masks.*
casualty (n.)	a person killed, wounded or missing in war or in an accident	*The casualties of the first day were enormous.*
wounded (adj. / n.)	injured by a weapon; *the wounded* = wounded people	*The wounded were carried to the rear.*
enlist (v.)	join the armed forces voluntarily	*He enlisted in October 1915.*
conscript (n. / v.)	a person made to join the army by law; to make someone join	*From 1916 single men were conscripted.*
memorial (n.)	a monument that keeps alive the memory of the dead	*The names are carved on the town memorial.*
remembrance (n.)	the act of remembering the dead, especially in a ceremony	*Remembrance Sunday is in November.*

Word formation: military expressions in everyday English

Several expressions that you will hear in offices, sports reports and newspapers come from war, and some were made popular by the trenches of 1914–1918. Their origins are not always as simple as people think: when a story is uncertain, say “it is popularly said to come from…”.

Tabella 7.7 Military expressions in everyday English

Expression	In 1914–1918	Today
over the top	out of the trench and into an attack	exaggerated, excessive: *The decorations were a bit over the top.*
in the trenches	in the front line	doing the hard, practical work: *teachers in the trenches*
no man's land	the ground between the opposing trenches (the phrase is medieval: it first named waste land outside London's walls)	an uncertain area between two positions: *a legal no man's land*
front line	the line nearest the enemy (a much older military term)	the people who deal directly with a problem: *front-line health workers*
shell shock / *shell-shocked*	the psychological trauma of bombardment (term of 1915)	stunned by a sudden shock: *Fans left the stadium shell-shocked.*

APPROFONDIMENTO

Why a red poppy? Poppies grow quickly on disturbed ground, and in 1915 they flowered over the graves and shell holes of Flanders. The Canadian doctor John McCrae wrote "In Flanders Fields" after the death of a friend near Ypres; the poem appeared in the magazine *Punch* in December 1915. The American teacher Moina Michael and the Frenchwoman Anna Guérin then made the poppy a symbol of remembrance and a way of raising money for veterans; in Britain the first poppies were sold for 11 November 1921. Rosenberg's poppy (T3), picked from a parapet in 1916, belongs to the same landscape — but in his poem it is not yet a symbol of the official memory.

7.5.2 Listening: at the memorial

Before you listen. Is there a war memorial in your town or village? Where is it, and what is written on it? **Listen (books closed).** In November, Callum spends a long weekend in Turin. He and Giulia take a bus up into the hills, to a small town with a war memorial in its square — a memorial like thousands of others in Italy.

Tabella 7.8 Listening script — At the memorial

Speaker	Line
Giulia	Here it is. My grandfather's family came from this town. Look — forty-three names, for a place with a few hundred people.
Callum	And some of them are the same surname. Two, three… four Ferreros.
Giulia	Brothers, or cousins. That's what gets me every time. A whole family on one stone.
Callum	It's the same at home. There's a village near my uni with a stone cross and twelve names, and two of them are brothers. They were killed on the same day at the Somme.
Giulia	Why are you wearing a paper flower, by the way? I meant to ask you at the station.
Callum	It's a poppy. In Britain everyone wears one in early November, for Remembrance Sunday. You give a coin and the money goes to veterans and their families.
Giulia	Why a poppy?
Callum	Because of a poem, believe it or not — "In Flanders Fields". Poppies grew all over the battlefields. And at eleven o'clock on the eleventh of November we keep two minutes' silence. Even in shops, sometimes.
Giulia	We don't have poppies. Here the date is the fourth of November, when the war ended for Italy. There's usually a small ceremony: the mayor, a band, a wreath of laurel.
Callum	Can you translate the inscription for me? I can only get "caduti".
Giulia	It says, more or less, "To her sons who fell for their country, the town remembers." "Caduti" is exactly your "the fallen".
Callum	Funny, isn't it? Nobody writes "killed" on a memorial. In any language.
Giulia	Prof.ssa Rossi would say that's a euphemism. We're doing Owen this week — "the old Lie".
Callum	But I don't think a memorial is a lie. It isn't telling you that dying was sweet. It's just… keeping the names.
Giulia	Maybe that's the difference. The poster says "go". The memorial says "we remember". And the poem says "look".
Callum	You should put that in your essay.
Giulia	I might. Come on — if we miss the four o'clock bus, the next one's at seven.

After listening. The comprehension tasks are in the exercises (Towards the Exam). Then, in pairs: how is Giulia's last remark a summary of this chapter?

7.5.3 Speaking: describing and interpreting an image

In the colloquio and in many B2 tests you may be given an image — a photograph, a poster, a painting — and asked to describe it and say what it means. A good answer moves in three steps: **describe** (what you can see, from the general to the details), **interpret** (what it suggests, how it tries to affect the viewer) and **connect** (its context and your own response).

Tabella 7.9 Useful language — describing and interpreting an image

Step	Useful language
Describing the whole	*It's a poster / a black-and-white photograph showing… · In the foreground / background… · In the centre / at the top…*
Focusing on details	*What strikes me first is… · If you look closely, you can see… · The text at the bottom reads…*
Interpreting	*It seems to suggest that… · The artist wants us to feel… · This could be a symbol of… · The colours / the gaze create…*
Speculating about the context	*It was probably made to… · It must have been aimed at… · Judging by the clothes, it dates from…*
Giving your response	*Personally, I find it… · What I find disturbing / effective is… · Compared with Owen's poem, …*

Task 1 (2 minutes). Describe and interpret this poster for a partner who cannot see it. *A recruitment poster of 1914, based on a magazine cover drawn by Alfred Leete for* London Opinion *(5 September 1914): against a plain background, the head and shoulders of Lord Kitchener, with a large moustache and an officer's cap. He looks straight at the viewer and points his index finger out of the picture. Above him, in capitals, "BRITONS"; below him, "WANTS YOU", and in smaller letters "Join Your Country's Army! God Save the King".* Use the three steps and at least two devices from Tabella 7.4.

Task 2 (pairs, 4 minutes). Student A describes a war memorial or a monument he or she knows; student B describes a modern public-information campaign (road safety, health, the environment). Then compare: how does each one use connotation to affect the viewer? **Colloquio link:** the poster → history (propaganda in the First World War and under the dictatorships of the 1920s–30s, chapter 10).

7.5.4 Writing: analysing a visual source

A *visual-source analysis* is a short essay that treats an image as a historical document: what it shows, who made it, for whom, how it works and what it tells us about its time. Read the model, written by Sam for a first-year history module that students of English take in Manchester.

Tabella 7.10 Model text — a visual-source analysis (Sam Taylor, 232 words without the bold labels)

Identification. "Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?" is a British recruitment poster designed by Savile Lumley and published by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee in 1915, when the army still depended on volunteers.
Description. The scene is a comfortable living room after the war. A man sits in an armchair; his small daughter, on his knee, is holding a history book and asks him the question printed below. On the carpet, his son is playing with toy soldiers. The father does not answer: he stares out of the picture with an uneasy expression.
Interpretation. The poster works through guilt, not through glory. It moves the viewer into the future and makes him imagine the shame of a man who stayed at home while others fought. The capital "YOU" addresses each reader directly, and the children, a symbol of the next generation, turn the war into a story that will be told and judged. Even the toy soldiers suggest that war is a game boys grow into.
Context and evaluation. The poster was effective because it did not need to show the war at all: no trench, no enemy, no wound. That silence is exactly what Owen attacked two years later. As a source, it does not tell us what the war was like; it tells us how the government hoped civilians would think about it in 1915 — and which feelings it was willing to exploit.

Structure. Four paragraphs: identification (who, when, for whom), description (from the whole to the details), interpretation (devices and their effect), context and evaluation (what the source can and cannot tell a historian). Description is in the present simple; the context is in the past.

Checklist. ✓ author, date and purpose in the first sentence · ✓ description before interpretation · ✓ at least three devices named and explained · ✓ a judgement on the source's value as evidence · ✓ neutral, precise vocabulary; no "I think" in every sentence · ✓ 220–260 words.

Task. Write an analysis (220–260 words) of the poster described here: *"Women of Britain say — 'Go!'", Parliamentary Recruiting Committee, 1915. Inside a house, two women and a young boy stand at an open window and look out at a column of soldiers with rifles marching past. Below the picture, in large letters, the slogan.*

LEARNING TO LEARN

Analysing images and posters for the colloquio. The colloquio often starts from a material: a photograph, a poster, a painting. Before you speak, take thirty seconds and answer five questions on a piece of paper:

1. **Who** made it? (an artist, a government, a newspaper — or unknown)
2. **What** does it show? (the whole, then three details)
3. **For whom**? (the audience: young men, mothers, voters, buyers)
4. **How** does it work? (words, colours, gaze, devices of persuasion)
5. **Why**? (its purpose and its historical context)

Transfer. The same five questions work for the images you study in Italian (a Futurist manifesto, the typography of a D'Annunzio speech), in history of art (a monument to the dead of 1915–1918 in your town) and in Latin and Greek: the Ara Pacis or the coins of Augustus are images made to persuade too. **Colloquio link:** Leete's poster → history (mass mobilisation) → Italian (the language of interventism, Connections) → Latin (Horace's Roman Odes and Augustan propaganda, Latin 4).

7.6 Connections: Italy's War, Chlorine and "the Old Lie"

7.6.1 Italy at war: Ungaretti and the Carso

Italy did not enter the war in 1914. In the spring of 1915 the country was divided between neutralists and *interventisti*; by the secret Pact of London (26 April 1915) the government promised to join the Entente in exchange for Trento, Trieste and other territories, and on **24 May 1915** Italy went to war against Austria-Hungary. Writers were among the loudest voices: on 5 May 1915, at Quarto near Genoa, Gabriele D'Annunzio gave a famous speech for war at the unveiling of the monument to Garibaldi's Thousand. Then came eleven battles on the river Isonzo and the stony plateau of the Carso, the defeat of **Caporetto** (24 October 1917) and the retreat to the Piave, and finally the offensive of Vittorio Veneto and the armistice of Villa Giusti, in force on **4 November 1918**.

Giuseppe Ungaretti, born in Alexandria in Egypt in 1888, volunteered and fought as a private on the Carso. In December 1916 a friend, Ettore Serra, had eighty copies of his first collection, *Il porto sepolto*, printed in Udine. The poems are very short, often only a few words per line, and each one is dated with the place and the day on which it was written, like a diary from the trench. In "Veglia" ("Cima Quattro, 23 dicembre 1915") the speaker spends a whole night lying beside a comrade who has been killed, and writes letters full of love; the poem ends by saying that he has never felt so "attaccato alla vita". Ungaretti's poems are still protected by copyright, so they are summarised here.

Put Ungaretti beside Owen and the differences are as instructive as the similarities. Both write from beside a dead comrade, and both refuse the heroic language of the posters. Owen fills his lines with images, sounds and an accusing argument addressed to the civilians; Ungaretti strips his language almost to silence, and the reaction to death is not anger but a desperate love of life. Ernest Hemingway, who was wounded on the Piave in July 1918 while serving as a Red Cross volunteer, later told the story of the retreat from Caporetto through an American officer in the Italian army in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929; summarised only — not public domain): the hero deserts and escapes to Switzerland, having lost faith in words like "glory" and "sacrifice".

COLLEGAMENTI

Chemistry: why chlorine filled the trenches. Chlorine (Cl_2) is a yellow-green gas with a sharp smell. A mole of chlorine has a mass of about 71 g; a mole of air (mostly nitrogen and oxygen) about 29 g. At the same temperature and pressure, equal volumes of gases contain the same number of molecules, so chlorine is about 2.5 times denser than air: released from cylinders on the ground, it flowed with the wind across no man's land and sank into trenches, dugouts and shell holes — exactly where soldiers sheltered. In contact with the water in the eyes, the throat and the lungs, chlorine reacts to form hydrochloric acid and hypochlorous acid, which destroy the tissues; fluid fills the lungs, and the victim can die by suffocation — the "drowning" of "Dulce et Decorum Est" (Owen does not say which gas).

The German chemist **Fritz Haber** directed the first chlorine attack at Ypres; in 1919 he received the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for 1918 for the synthesis of ammonia from nitrogen and hydrogen, the reaction that still produces the fertilisers that feed much of the world. The use of chemical weapons in war was banned by the Geneva Protocol of 1925. The same element, in tiny controlled doses, is used today to make drinking water safe.

COLLEGAMENTI

Psychology and medicine: from "shell shock" to trauma. In 1914–1918 doctors had no clear name for the condition of soldiers who trembled, lost their speech or relived the battle at night. Today psychiatry speaks of *post-traumatic stress disorder* (PTSD), recognised as a diagnosis in 1980. The two terms do not mean exactly the same thing, and we should be careful not to diagnose the dead. But Owen's line "In all my dreams before my helpless sight / He plunges at me" describes with precision what is now called an intrusive memory — and at Craiglockhart his doctor's cure was not rest but work: writing, walking, teaching, editing the hospital magazine.

7.6.2 Classico: "the old Lie" and the islands of Achilles

The line that Owen calls "the old Lie" comes from the second of Horace's "Roman Odes" (Odes III.2), which you read in Latin 4. Horace is praising the young Roman who learns hardship in the army; Owen quotes the line as the motto of the men who send others to die.

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori:
mors et fugacem persequitur virum.

Horace, *Odes* III.2.13–14

"Sweet and fitting it is to die for one's country: death pursues even the man who runs away" (translation by the editors). The thought is much older than Horace. In the seventh century BC the Spartan poet Tyrtaeus — you read his elegies in Greek 3 (chapter 8) — opened one of his war elegies with the same idea; the lines survive because the Athenian orator Lycurgus quoted them in a speech.

τεθνάμεναι γὰρ καλὸν ἐνὶ προμάχοισι πεσόντα
ἄνδρ᾽ ἀγαθὸν περὶ ᾗ πατρίδι μαρνάμενον.

Tyrtaeus, fr. 10 West, ll. 1–2, quoted by Lycurgus, *Against Leocrates* 107

"For it is a fine thing for a brave man to die, fallen among the front-line fighters, fighting for his own country" (translation by the editors). Notice the difference: Tyrtaeus says *kalón*, "fine, noble"; Horace adds *dulce*, "sweet" — the very word Owen cannot forgive. And there is an irony that a classico student can enjoy: Horace himself, in *Odes* II.7.9–10, admits that at the battle of Philippi he ran away, "relicta non bene parmula" — "leaving my little shield behind, not very gloriously" — the same gesture of Archilochus that you compared with Tyrtaeus in Greek 3. Owen's use of Horace is documented in the poem itself; the line from Tyrtaeus is a comparison by the editors.

Rupert Brooke's last voyage took him through the landscape of the *Iliad* (Figura 7.5). Brooke had studied classics, and in a letter of February 1915, printed in Edward Marsh's memoir of 1918, he wondered whether the Turks would "meet us on the plains of Troy" and whether the sea would be "polyphloisbic and wine-dark and unvintageable" — three Homeric epithets of the sea (πολύφλοισβος, "loud-roaring"; οἶνοψ, "wine-dark"; ἀτρύγετος, usually "barren", which Brooke jokingly translates as "unvintageable"). He died and was buried on Skyros, the island where, in the myth, Thetis hid the young Achilles among the daughters of King Lycomedes, and where, according to Plutarch (*Theseus* 35–36), whom you read this year in Greek, Theseus died and was buried before Cimon brought his bones back to Athens. Marsh did not miss the coincidence: he called Skyros "the island where Theseus was buried, and whence the young Achilles and the young Pyrrhus were called to Troy".



Figura 7.5 The northern Aegean in 1915: Brooke's route in spring 1915, from Lemnos by way of Egypt (off the map) to Skyros (schematic), the Gallipoli landings and the site of Troy across the Dardanelles.

COLLEGAMENTI

Classics: three war poets, three verdicts. Tyrtaeus (7th century BC): death in the front line is *kalón*, the duty of the citizen of Sparta. Horace (23 BC): death for one's country is *dulce et decorum*, but the poet confesses elsewhere that he threw his shield away. Owen (1917–1918): the phrase is "the old Lie". **Colloquio link:** "Dulce et Decorum Est" → Latin (Horace, Odes III.2 and II.7) → Greek (Tyrtaeus and Archilochus) → Italian (Ungaretti's "Veglia") → history (propaganda and conscription).

SINTESI

- Britain declared war on Germany on **4 August 1914**, after the invasion of neutral Belgium; by the end of 1914 a line of trenches some 700 km long ran from the Belgian coast to Switzerland (the **Western Front**).
- Industrial war: machine guns and artillery favoured the defender; **chlorine gas** was first used on a large scale near Ypres on 22 April 1915; tanks appeared at the Somme in September 1916.
- Gallipoli (April 1915 – January 1916) failed; on the first day of the **Somme** (1 July 1916) the British army suffered 57,470 casualties, 19,240 of them killed (Imperial War Museums).
- On the home front: volunteers and recruitment posters, **conscription** from 1916, censorship, women in factories and nursing, the vote for women over 30 with a property qualification (1918), and "**shell shock**".
- The **Armistice** came into force on 11 November 1918 (for Italy the war with Austria-Hungary ended on 4 November); remembrance followed: the two-minute silence (1919), the Cenotaph and the Unknown Warrior (1920), the poppy (1921).
- **War poetry**: poems by the soldiers themselves; the shift from the idealism of 1914–15 to the realism of 1916–18 is a useful simplification.
- **Brooke**, "The Soldier" (T1): a hybrid sonnet in which death abroad is a gift returned to a motherly England; Brooke died of blood poisoning off Skyros on 23 April 1915.
- **Owen**, "Dulce et Decorum Est" (T2): a gas attack and its nightmare, addressed to civilians who repeat "the old Lie"; written 1917–18, published 1920; Owen was killed on 4 November 1918. **Pararhyme**: same consonants, different vowel (*killed / cold*).
- **Rosenberg**, "Break of Day in the Trenches" (T3): a private's ironic free verse; the rat crosses no man's land freely, the poppy grows from the blood of the dead.
- **Denotation** and **connotation**; **euphemism** (*the fallen, gave his life*) and its opposite; the devices of **propaganda** (direct address, imperative, guilt, pride, the group, loaded words, slogans).
- Compound adjectives: noun / adjective / number + participle or noun (*war-torn, well-known, a two-minute silence*); hyphen before a noun, none after *-ly*; the noun stays singular.
- Connections: Italy's war (24 May 1915 – 4 November 1918) and Ungaretti's *Il porto sepolto* (1916); the chemistry of chlorine and Haber; Horace's *dulce et decorum est*, Tyrtaeus' *kalón*, and Brooke's grave on Skyros, the island of Achilles and Theseus.

ESERCIZI

History and Literature

1. ● Britain entered the war on 4 August 1914 because…
   - **A.** Austria-Hungary had declared war on Serbia
   - **B.** Germany had invaded neutral Belgium
   - **C.** the Ottoman Empire had closed the Dardanelles
   - **D.** Italy had left its alliance with Germany

2. ● Rupert Brooke died…
   - **A.** in the first attack at Gallipoli
   - **B.** in a gas attack near Ypres
   - **C.** in a London hospital after the Somme
   - **D.** of blood poisoning on a hospital ship off Skyros

3. ● The first large-scale chlorine attack of the war took place…
   - **A.** on the Somme in July 1916
   - **B.** at Gallipoli in April 1915
   - **C.** near Ypres in April 1915
   - **D.** at Caporetto in October 1917

4. ● True or false? Correct the false statements. a The Battle of the Somme lasted one day. b Conscription was introduced in Britain in 1916. c Owen met Sassoon at Craiglockhart in 1917. d "Dulce et Decorum Est" was printed in a newspaper in 1917. e Rosenberg served as an officer. f The first two-minute silence was kept in 1919.

5. ● Match each poem with its author and with the year in which it was first printed. Poems: "For the Fallen" · "The Soldier" · "Break of Day in the Trenches" · "Dulce et Decorum Est". Authors: Binyon · Brooke · Owen · Rosenberg. Years: 1914 · 1915 · 1916 · 1920.

6. ● Complete the timeline with one event for each date. a 4 August 1914 · b 22 April 1915 · c 25 April 1915 · d 1 July 1916 · e 24 October 1917 · f 11 November 1918.

7. ●● Explain each term in one or two sentences and give an example from this chapter: a war poetry · b pararhyme · c trench warfare · d shell shock.

8. ●●● Short answer (50–80 words). Critics often describe two phases in the poetry of 1914–1918. What are they, and why is the scheme a simplification?

Text Analysis

9. ● In T1, the “richer dust” (line 4) is…

   A. the speaker’s body after death

   B. the soil of the foreign field

   C. the dust of the battlefield

   D. the ashes of the enemy dead

10. ●● T1. Write out the rhyme scheme of “The Soldier”. Where is the volta, and how does the subject change after it? Why can we call the form a hybrid?

11. ● T2. Answer briefly. a Where are the soldiers going in lines 1–8, and in what condition? b What warns them of the gas? c What happens to the man who is too slow? d Where does the speaker see him again? e Whom does “you” address in the last stanza?

12. ●● T2. Find in the text: a two similes in lines 1–2; b an example of alliteration in line 19; c a word that imitates a sound in lines 7–8; d two compound adjectives; e the line where the tense changes from past to present.

13. ●● T3. Answer. a What is the “sleeping green between” (line 13)? b Why is the rat “cosmopolitan”? c Explain “Less chanced than you for life” (line 16). d Why is the poppy behind the speaker’s ear “safe”, and for how long?

14. ●●● T1 and T2. Compare the two poems in about 80 words: how does each one show a soldier’s death, and what does each ask the reader to do (“think only this of me” / “If… you too could pace…”)?

15. ●●● Write a PEE paragraph (100–120 words) on T3: *How does Rosenberg use the rat to question the war?*

16. ●●● Colloquio link (60–80 words). Start from T2 and link it to one other subject: Latin (Horace, Odes III.2), Greek (Tyrtaeus), Italian (Ungaretti) or history (propaganda and conscription).

Language

17. ● Which expression has the most positive, glorifying connotation?

   A. he was killed

   B. he died

   C. he gave his life

   D. he was slaughtered

18. ● Which phrase is correct?

    A. a two-minutes silence

    B. a badly-wounded officer

    C. a four-years war

    D. a 25-year-old poet

19. ● Put the three words of each group in order, from the most positive to the most negative connotation. a thin · slim · skinny · b stubborn · determined · firm · c crowd · mob · gathering · d hero · soldier · mercenary · e elderly · old · decrepit.

20. ●● What does each euphemism mean, plainly? Where would you hear it, and why is it used? a *He passed away last year.* b *the fallen* c *He's gone west.* (soldiers' slang, 1914–1918) d *collateral damage* e *She's between jobs.*

21. ●● This is an invented recruitment poster of 1915. Find five devices of persuasion and quote the words: "MEN OF BRISTOL! Your pals are already at the front. Will YOU let them fight alone? Our King, our homes, our honour call you. Enlist TODAY — and be proud for the rest of your life."

22. ●● Make a compound adjective. a a silence that lasts two minutes → a … silence · b a town torn apart by war → a … town · c a soldier shocked by shells → a … soldier · d an officer who is 25 years old → a … officer · e a battle that lasted four months → a … battle · f a girl with long hair → a … girl · g a poem that breaks your heart → a … poem · h a medicine that saves lives → a … medicine.

23. ●● Find and correct the mistake in each sentence (✗). a The trench was newly-dug. b It was a four years war. c Owen is a well known poet. d They took a ten-minutes break. e The poem is heart breaking. f He was a five-feet-tall soldier.

24. ●● Translate into English. a «Il silenzio di due minuti fu osservato per la prima volta nel 1919.» b «Sul monumento non c'è scritto "uccisi", ma "caduti": è un eufemismo.» c «Owen, un ufficiale di venticinque anni, fu ucciso una settimana prima dell'armistizio.»

25. ●●● Read this neutral report: *"Yesterday three hundred soldiers of the regiment attacked the enemy trench. One hundred and twenty were killed or wounded. The trench was not taken."* Rewrite it twice (40–50 words each): a as a patriotic newspaper of 1915 might have written it; b as Owen might have written it in a letter to his mother. Then underline the words whose connotation you changed.

Vocabulary

26. ● Complete with words from Tabella 7.6. In 1914 thousands of young men rushed to ___ (1). In 1916 single men were ___ (2) by law. At the Somme the British ___ (3) of the first day were the worst in the army's history. A ___ (4) exploded in the ___ (5) and the soldiers put on their ___ (6) masks. The ___ (7) were carried to the rear. Today the names are carved on the town ___ (8), and every November there is a service of ___ (9).

27. ●● Complete with *over the top · in the trenches · no man's land · front-line · shell-shocked*. a The wedding was lovely, but the fireworks were a bit ___. b After the result was announced, the team looked completely ___. c ___ staff in hospitals were the first to see the new virus. d The two companies are negotiating, and the project is in a kind of ___ until they agree. e The minister talks about schools, but it is the teachers ___ who know what works.

28. ●● Match the verbs with the nouns to make collocations, then use three of them in sentences about this chapter. Verbs: *enlist in · suffer · lay · keep · carve · launch*. Nouns: *a wreath · heavy casualties · the army · names on a memorial · an offensive · a two-minute silence*.

Writing and Speaking

29. ●●● Writing. Do the task at the end of the Skills section: an analysis of the poster "Women of Britain say — 'Go!'" (220–260 words). Use the four-part structure of the model and the checklist.

30. ●● Speaking. Describe and interpret Leete's Kitchener poster (Skills, Task 1) in about two minutes: describe, interpret, connect. Then say in one sentence how Owen would have answered it.

Towards the Exam

31. ●● Listening (on the printed script, books closed while it is read). Answer. a How many names are on the memorial? b What do the repeated surnames suggest? c Why is Callum wearing a poppy, and where does the money go? d Which date does the town remember, and why? e Which English expression translates "caduti"? f How does Giulia sum up the difference between a poster, a memorial and a poem? g If they miss the four o'clock bus, when is the next one?

32. ●● Open cloze. Write ONE word in each gap. Laurence Binyon was not a soldier. (1) ___ the war began, he was working at the British Museum, and he wrote "For the Fallen" (2) ___ the first weeks of the war, (3) ___ the British army had already suffered heavy losses in France. The poem was printed in *The Times* (4) ___ 21 September 1914. Its fourth stanza is now read aloud at ceremonies all (5) ___ the world, and many people know it by heart (6) ___ having read the rest of the poem. Binyon, (7) ___ was too old to fight, later worked as a volunteer in a hospital for French soldiers. He lived (8) ___ 1943.

33. ●● Key-word transformations. Complete the second sentence so that it means the same as the first, using the word in capitals. Use two to five words, including the word given. a The war lasted four years. FOUR — It was ___ war. b People say that the sonnet made Brooke famous overnight. SAID — The sonnet ___ Brooke famous overnight. c Owen did not publish many poems while he was alive. ONLY — Owen published ___ poems in his lifetime. d Although the poster did not show the war, it was very effective. DESPITE — The poster was very effective ___ the war. e It was the first time he had seen a gas attack. NEVER — He ___ a gas attack before.

34. ●●● Colloquio prompt. Material: *"They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old: / Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn."* (Laurence Binyon, "For the Fallen", 1914) and, beside it, a description: *a monument in an Italian piazza — a bronze soldier holding a flag, and below him a stone with the words "Ai caduti" and a long list of names.* a Describe the material and say what both pieces want us to feel. b Compare them with Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est": are they examples of "the old Lie"? c Link the material to one other subject. Speak for about three minutes.

PER APPROFONDIRE

- [NOR] S. Greenblatt (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. F: the section of poems and prose from the First World War, with Brooke, Owen and Rosenberg.
- [SAN] A. Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*: the pages on the poetry of the First World War.
- [ABR] M. H. Abrams, G. G. Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*: the entries "connotation and denotation" and "rhyme" (for half-rhyme and pararhyme).
- [SWA] M. Swan, *Practical English Usage*: the entries on word formation and on hyphens in compound adjectives.

Glossario del capitolo

Armistice
armistizio — an agreement to stop fighting, which comes before a peace treaty; on the Western Front, 11 November 1918.

Casualty
perdita, vittima — a soldier killed, wounded, captured or missing; also a victim of an accident.

Connotation
connotazione — the feelings and associations a word carries beyond its basic meaning (*fell* vs *was killed*).

Conscription
coscrizione obbligatoria, leva — compulsory military service; in Britain from 1916.

Denotation
denotazione — the basic, literal meaning of a word, what it refers to.

Dysphemism
disfemismo — a deliberately harsh or offensive expression used instead of a neutral one; the opposite of a euphemism.

Enlist
arruolarsi — to join the armed forces voluntarily.

Entente
Intesa — the alliance of France, Russia and Britain (later joined by Italy) against Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Euphemism
eufemismo — a mild or indirect expression used instead of a painful or unpleasant one (*the fallen*).

Front line
prima linea — the position nearest to the enemy; today also the people who deal directly with a problem.

Home front
fronte interno — the civilian population of a country at war, and its work and life during the war.

No man's land
terra di nessuno — the ground between two opposing lines of trenches.

Pararhyme
pararima — a half-rhyme in which the consonants are the same and the stressed vowel changes (*killed / cold*); typical of Owen.

Propaganda
propaganda — information, often one-sided or misleading, spread in an organised way to influence what people think and do.

Remembrance
commemorazione, ricordo — the act of remembering the dead, especially in a public ceremony.

Shell shock
shock da bombardamento — the psychological trauma of soldiers exposed to bombardment, so named in 1914–1918.

Trench warfare
guerra di trincea — fighting from lines of trenches that face each other, typical of the Western Front in 1914–1918.

War poetry
poesia di guerra — poetry about the experience of war, especially by the soldier-poets of 1914–1918.

Soluzioni

1. B — Britain had guaranteed Belgian neutrality (Treaty of London, 1839); the German armies crossed Belgium on their way to France.

2. D — he died on 23 April 1915, two days before the Gallipoli landings, on a French hospital ship off Skyros.

3. C — 22 April 1915, near Ypres, against French and Algerian troops.

4. a F — it lasted from 1 July to 18 November 1916. b T (Military Service Act, January 1916). c T (August 1917). d F — it was published after Owen's death, in *Poems* (1920). e F — he was a private. f T (11 November 1919).

5. "For the Fallen" — Binyon — 1914 (*The Times*) · "The Soldier" — Brooke — 1915 (*New Numbers* and *1914 and Other Poems*) · "Break of Day in the Trenches" — Rosenberg — 1916 (*Poetry*, Chicago) · "Dulce et Decorum Est" — Owen — 1920.

6. a Britain declares war on Germany. b First large-scale chlorine attack, near Ypres. c Allied landings at Gallipoli. d First day of the Battle of the Somme. e Caporetto (Austro-German breakthrough on the Italian front). f The Armistice on the Western Front.

7. Model answers. a *War poetry*: poetry about the experience of war, above all that written by soldiers of 1914–1918 (Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est"). b *Para-rhyme*: two words with the same consonants and a different stressed vowel (*escaped / scooped* in "Strange Meeting"). c *Trench warfare*: fighting from continuous lines of trenches facing each other across no man's land, as on the Western Front from late 1914. d *Shell shock*: the soldiers' name, used in *The Lancet* in 1915, for the psychological trauma of bombardment; Owen was treated for it at Craiglockhart.

8. Traccia: the first phase (1914–15) is idealistic and patriotic — death as noble sacrifice, traditional forms (Brooke, "The Soldier"); the second (1916–18) is realistic and angry — the physical horror, protest against the civilians and the leaders (Owen, Sassoon). It is a simplification because the change was not the same for everyone: patriotic verse went on being written until 1918, some poets (Rosenberg) were neither idealistic nor angry, and the poets' views depended on their experience, not only on the date.

9. A — the speaker's body, made of English "dust", which will make the foreign earth "richer".

10. *abab cdcd efg efg*. The volta comes at line 9 ("And think"): the octave is about the body and the earth, the sestet about the heart and the spirit, which give back to God what England gave. The octave rhymes like an English (Shakespearean) sonnet, with alternate rhymes in two quatrains; the sestet keeps the Italian pattern *efg efg* — so the sonnet mixes the two traditions.

11. a Away from the front line, towards their "distant rest"; exhausted, lame, some without boots, half asleep, "deaf" and "blind". b A shout: "Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!" (the gas-shells themselves fall "softly"). c He cannot fit his mask in time and is poisoned: he stumbles, "drowning", then he is thrown into a wagon, where he lies dying, coughing up blood. d In his dreams, every night ("In all my dreams"). e A civilian "friend" who tells children that dying for one's country is glorious — in an early draft, the writer Jessie Pope.

12. a "like old beggars under sacks", "coughing like hags". b "white eyes writhing" (*w-*). c *hoots*. d *Knock-kneed*, *blood-shod*, *froth-corrupted* (also *gas-shells*, a compound noun). e Line 16: "He plunges at me" (present simple).

13. a No man's land, the grass between the British and German trenches, "sleeping" because it is quiet at dawn. b Because it is at home on both sides: it touches English and German hands alike and does not care about frontiers. c The strong young sol-

diers have less chance of surviving than the rat: the war has turned the natural order upside down. d Because it is behind his ear, not on the ground with the poppies that "Drop, and are ever dropping" — but it is only "a little white with the dust", and the dust suggests death: it is safe only for now, as he is.

14. Model: Brooke imagines his own death but never shows it: there is no wound, only "dust" that makes a foreign field "for ever England", and the reader is asked to "think only this" — a consoling thought of gift, peace and heaven. Owen shows another man's death in close-up — the drowning, the "white eyes", the gargling blood — and asks the reader to imagine walking behind the wagon. Brooke offers consolation; Owen refuses it and demands that the reader see.

15. Model: Rosenberg uses the rat to show how absurd the war is. The rat crosses "the sleeping green between" the armies and touches "this English hand" and "a German" one without distinction; the speaker jokes that "they would shoot you if they knew / Your cosmopolitan sympathies". The irony is clear: an animal is free to be everyone's friend, while men are forced to be enemies. The rat also "inwardly grin[s]" at the "haughty athletes / Less chanced than you for life": the strongest young men of Europe have less chance of surviving than a rat. Through a small, almost comic detail, Rosenberg exposes the waste of the war without any rhetoric.

16. Traccia (one possibility): Owen's title quotes Horace, Odes III.2.13, in which death for one's country is "sweet and fitting"; the idea goes back to Tyrtaeus (fr. 10 W), for whom it is "fine" (*kalón*) to die in the front line. Owen calls it "the old Lie" because he has seen what such a death is really like. Horace himself, in Odes II.7, admits he ran from Philippi: even the classical tradition is less heroic than the slogan.

17. C.

18. D. (A a two-minute silence; B a badly wounded officer; C a four-year war.)

19. a slim (+) · thin (neutral) · skinny (–). b determined (+) · firm (neutral or +) · stubborn (–). c gathering (neutral / +) · crowd (neutral) · mob (–). d hero (+) · soldier (neutral) · mercenary (–). e elderly (polite) · old (neutral) · decrepit (–). Accept reasoned variations in the middle position.

20. a He died — polite, used to spare the feelings of the family. b the soldiers killed in war — on memorials and in ceremonies, to honour them. c He was killed — soldiers' slang, grim humour to make death bearable. d civilians killed or property destroyed by a military attack — official language of later wars, which hides the human cost. e She is unemployed — polite, to avoid an embarrassing word.

21. Direct address: "MEN OF BRISTOL!", "Will YOU". The group: "Your pals are already at the front". Guilt: "Will YOU let them fight alone?". Loaded words: "Our King, our homes, our honour". Imperative: "Enlist TODAY". Pride / flattery: "be proud for the rest of your life". (Any five.)

22. a a two-minute silence · b a war-torn town · c a shell-shocked soldier · d a 25-year-old officer · e a four-month battle · f a long-haired girl · g a heartbreaking poem · h a life-saving medicine.

23. a newly dug (no hyphen after a *-ly* adverb) · b a four-year war · c a well-known poet (hyphen before the noun) · d a ten-minute break · e heart-breaking (or *heartbreaking*) · f a five-foot-tall soldier (or *a soldier five feet tall*).

24. a The two-minute silence was kept (observed) for the first time in 1919. b The memorial does not say "killed" but "fallen": it is a euphemism. c Owen, a twenty-five-year-old officer, was killed a week before the Armistice.

25. Models. a *Yesterday our gallant lads stormed the enemy trench with magnificent courage. Many of our heroes gave their lives for King and Country, and their sacrifice will never be forgotten. The struggle continues, and every man at home must now do his duty.* b *Yesterday we were ordered over the top against a trench the guns had not even touched. We lost a hundred and twenty men in a few minutes, cut down on the wire. We took nothing. The newspapers will call it a gallant attack.* Changed words: *gallant, stormed, heroes, gave their lives, sacrifice* (a); *ordered, cut down, took nothing* (b).

26. 1 enlist · 2 conscripted · 3 casualties · 4 shell · 5 trench · 6 gas · 7 wounded · 8 memorial · 9 remembrance.

27. a over the top · b shell-shocked · c Front-line · d no man's land · e in the trenches.

28. enlist in the army · suffer heavy casualties · lay a wreath · keep a two-minute silence · carve names on a memorial · launch an offensive. Example: *The British army launched an offensive on the Somme on 1 July 1916 and suffered heavy casualties on the first day.*

29. Assess with the checklist. Expected content: identification (Parliamentary Recruiting Committee, 1915, aimed at women and through them at men who had not enlisted); description (the two women and the boy inside, the soldiers marching past outside; the slogan below); interpretation (the women are shown as giving their consent and their sacrifice; the men who have not gone are put under moral pressure by their own families; the contrast between home and the road to war; the short imperative slogan); evaluation (a source about the government's strategy and its idea of women's role, not about women's real feelings; Brittain's memoir or the death lists would give a different picture).

30. Model (speaking): *It's a recruitment poster from 1914, based on a magazine cover by Alfred Leete. In the centre there's the head of Lord Kitchener, the war minister, with his huge moustache and his cap. What strikes me first is the finger: he points straight out of the picture, at me, and his eyes follow me wherever I stand. The text works the same way: "BRITONS … WANTS YOU". It uses direct address and an implied order, and it relies on Kitchener's fame — no explanation, no image of war. It must have been aimed at young men who were still hesitating. Personally I find it powerful but disturbing, because it turns a personal decision into a duty to a single man.* Owen would have answered with the gas attack: the poster shows a finger; he shows the man who obeyed it.

31. a Forty-three. b That brothers or cousins from the same family died: whole families were hit. c For Remembrance Sunday; the money goes to veterans and their families. d The fourth of November, when the war ended for Italy. e "The fallen". f The poster says "go", the memorial says "we remember", the poem says "look". g At seven.

32. 1 When (As) · 2 in (during) · 3 when (as) · 4 on · 5 over · 6 without · 7 who · 8 until (till).

33. a a four-year · b is said to have made · c only a few (only a handful of) · d despite not showing · e had never seen.

34. Model (traccia): a Binyon's lines promise that the dead will stay young for ever: they escape old age, and the living have a duty to remember them. The Italian monument does the same in stone: the bronze soldier with a flag is an ideal, not a real man, and the word "caduti" is a dignified euphemism; the list of names makes the loss personal. Both want us to feel grief, gratitude and pride. b They are not exactly "the old Lie": they do not say that dying is "sweet", and they are written for the bereaved, not to recruit. But they share its language — youth, honour, "the fallen" — and leave out what Owen shows: the agony of the death itself. c History: the monuments to the dead built in almost every Italian town after 1918, and the two-minute silence in Britain (1919); or Greek: Pericles' funeral oration and the Athenians' public burial of the war dead; or Italian: Ungaretti's "Veglia", where a single dead comrade replaces the list of names.