

3

POETRY

It may seem that war is an unlikely subject for poetry but poets have been writing about human conflict and wars since at least the time of the ancient Greeks. Often this poetry glorifies war and those who take part, making soldiers people to envy and worth aspiring to be.

The First World War marked something of a turning point and the young war poets that emerged from it, overcome in many cases by the immensity of the suffering, wrote about the less glamorous elements. Like inglorious death, like pain and grief, and futility.

This collection of poetry deals with a variety of conflicts, including our own one here on this island. It also dares to consider the place of children and women, so often overlooked in war poetry, and invites students to consider war from a more human perspective.

On completion of this module students can be expected to have a deeper understanding of the life and death experience of conflict, the pain, suffering and futility, as well as the heroism. They should also be able to articulate a more nuanced understanding of the poetry that emerges from conflict, and perhaps to think in new ways about the conflict on this island.

This learning module will fit with Key Stage 3 History, Local and Global Citizenship and English.

## FUTILITY Wilfred Owen

Move him into the sun—  
Gently its touch awoke him once,  
At home, whispering of fields half-sown.  
Always it woke him, even in France,  
Until this morning and this snow.  
If anything might rouse him now  
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds—  
Woke once the clays of a cold star.  
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides  
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?  
Was it for this the clay grew tall?  
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil  
To break earth's sleep at all?

Published as No 153 in 'Complete Poems and Fragments', 1983

Wilfred Owen is writing this poem about his friend who has died. He is saying to "Move him into the sun" hoping that the sun might wake him up here like it did at home.

- What do you think Wilfred Owen's feelings are in this poem?
- What are Wilfred Owen's thoughts about war in this poem?
- There are three questions in the second stanza. What are they? How would you answer these three questions?



## PRAYER TO THE LIVING TO FORGIVE THEM FOR BEING ALIVE Charlotte Delbo

You who are passing by  
well dressed in all your muscles  
clothing which suits you well or badly or just about  
you who are passing by  
full of tumultuous life within your arteries  
glued to your skeleton  
as you walk with a sprightly step athletic awkward  
laughing sullenly, you are all so handsome  
so commonplace  
so commonplacely like everyone else  
so handsome in your commonplaceness  
diverse  
with this excess of life which keeps you  
from feeling your bust following your leg  
your hand raised to your hat  
your hand upon your heart  
your kneecap rolling softly in your knee  
how can we forgive you for being alive...

I beg you  
do something  
learn a dance step  
something to justify your existence  
something that gives you the right  
to be dressed in your skin in your body hair  
learn to walk and to laugh  
because it would be too senseless  
after all for so many to have died  
while you live doing nothing with your life.

Published in 'Auschwitz and After', Yale University Press, 1997

Charlotte Delbo was a survivor of the women's camp in Auschwitz, a Nazi death camp.

- Charlotte Delbo addresses her poem to a "You". How does she describe the "You"? and what does she beg the "You" to do?
- What are the images of the everyday in this poem?
- How do you think the everyday feels to a person who has survived a Death Camp?

## LETTER COMPOSED DURING A LULL IN THE FIGHTING Kevin Powers

I tell her I love her like not killing  
or ten minutes of sleep  
beneath the low rooftop wall  
on which my rifle rests.

I tell her in a letter that will stink,  
when she opens it,  
of bolt oil and burned powder  
and the things it says.

I tell her how Pvt. Bartle says, offhand,  
that war is just us  
making little pieces of metal  
pass through each other.

Published in 'Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting', Little Brown and Company, 2014

Kevin Powers is a contemporary American Poet who served with the American Army in Iraq. The poet is writing to a woman, a woman he loves. He says that little moments, like "not killing" or "ten minutes of sleep" are precious moments, and he loves his girlfriend as much as he loves those moments.

- What are the feelings in this poem?
- Do you think the poet-soldier in this poem is tired? Why?
- Why do you think that Private Bartle, in the last stanza, is making light comments about the atrocity of war?





## AN IRISH AIRMAN FORESEES HIS DEATH WB Yeats

I know that I shall meet my fate  
Somewhere among the clouds above;  
Those that I fight I do not hate  
Those that I guard I do not love;  
My country is Kiltartan Cross,  
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,  
No likely end could bring them loss  
Or leave them happier than before.  
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,  
Nor public man, nor cheering crowds,  
A lonely impulse of delight  
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;  
I balanced all, brought all to mind,  
The years to come seemed waste of breath,  
A waste of breath the years behind  
In balance with this life, this death.

Published in 'The Wild Swans at Coole', MacMillan, 1919

WB Yeats was an Irish poet who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923. In this poem he imagines an Irish Airman foreseeing his death. The poem was written in 1918, and imagines an Irish airman fighting with the allied forces in World War I. This poem was written before the partition of Ireland in 1922.

- The Airman says that he fights people he doesn't hate, and guards people he doesn't love. Why would a person do that?
- Who do you think makes decisions?
- Who are the people the Airman doesn't hate?
- Who are the people the Airman doesn't love?
- Who does the Airman love?

Note the images of the "above" and the "below" in this poem, and note also the references to the future and the past in the poem. These things seem a balance in the poem, but a balance that doesn't bring meaning. The Airman seems to be considering the worth of a life "The years to come seemed waste of breath". What do you think the Airman thinks of war?

## ALTERNATE NAMES FOR BLACK BOYS Danez Smith

1. smoke above the burning bush
2. archnemesis of summer night
3. first son of soil
4. coal awaiting spark & wind
5. guilty until proven dead
6. oil heavy starlight
7. monster until proven ghost
8. gone
9. phoenix who forgets to un-ash
10. going, going, gone
11. gods of shovels & black veils
12. what once passed for kindling
13. fireworks at dawn
14. brilliant, shadow hued coral
15. (I thought to leave this blank  
but who am I to name us nothing?)
16. prayer who learned to bite & sprint
17. a mother's joy & clutched breath

Originally published at Poetry Foundation, Poetry Magazine, 2014

Danez Smith is a contemporary African-American poet. Danez is non-binary — this means a person who prefers that the pronoun “they” is used rather than “she” or “he”.

This poem is a list of seventeen things “Black Boys” are named, going between horrible names (like number 7) and poetic names (see 3 and 14).

- What are the images of fire in the poem? (include coal, smoke, etc.)
- Which line in this poem that strikes you the most? Why?
- Who do you think gives the negative names in this poem? i.e. Line 10: “going, going, gone” - this is a line from an auctioneer.
- What do you think the author is saying about the lives of Black people in the poem?





## THE NORTHERN IRELAND QUESTION Desmond Egan

Two wee girls  
were playing tig near a car  
How many counties would you say  
are worth their scattered fingers.

Published in 'Collected Poems', National Poetry Foundation, 1983

There are six counties in Northern Ireland, and 26 counties in the Republic of Ireland. Some want a reunited 32 county Ireland. Some want the six counties of Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. This poem, written by Desmond Egan, is about two girls playing "Tag" (or, "tig" as it is in the poem) near a car. They are about to be blown up by a bomb that is in the car, a bomb that some would justify because of their political opinions about "The Northern Ireland Question".

- This poem is tiny and asks a terrible question. Now that you understand more about the poem, how do you think the poet would answer the question?
- If you let your eyes lose focus, the poem might look like the shape of a car. What do you think about the shape of the poem on the page?
- How do you think the parents of the girls would read this poem?
- How do you think those who planted the bomb would read this poem?

## ON BEING ASKED TO WRITE A POEM AGAINST THE WAR IN VIETNAM Hayden Carruth

Well I have and in fact  
more than one and I'll  
tell you this too

I wrote one against  
Algeria that nightmare  
and another against

Korea and another  
against the one  
I was in

and I don't remember  
how many against  
the three

when I was a boy  
Abyssinia Spain and  
Harlan County

and not one  
breath was restored  
to one

shattered throat  
mans womans or childs  
not one not

one  
but death went on and on  
never looking aside

except now and then  
with a furtive half-smile  
to make sure I was noticing.

Published in 'Toward the Distant Islands', Copper Canyon Press, 2006

This poem is really a poem about how useless poetry is against War or Death. The poet lists many wars — little and large.

- List the wars mentioned in the poem, and do some research about all the wars mentioned in the poem. What years did these wars take place? How many people died in each of these wars mentioned?
- The poet has left out almost all punctuation. The poet has left out the apostrophes in "mans womans or childs" and "not one not / one". Try reading this poem out in different ways — dramatically, in monotone — and see what happens when you try different tones of your voice.
- The character of Death appears in the last two stanzas, and Death seems to be busy, almost happy, but also a bit evil. What do you think of the character of Death? Why would it have a "furtive half-smile"? What does death think of the poet, and of Poetry?

ALL THERE IS TO KNOW ABOUT ADOLPH EICHMANN  
Leonard Cohen

EYES:.....	Medium
HAIR:.....	Medium
WEIGHT:.....	Medium
HEIGHT:.....	Medium
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES.....	None
NUMBER OF FINGERS:.....	Ten
NUMBER OF TOES:.....	Ten
INTELLIGENCE.....	Medium

What did you expect?

Talons?

Oversize incisors?

Green saliva?

Madness?

Published in 'Selected Poems, 1956-1968', Bantam Books, 1971

Leonard Cohen is most well known as a singer, but he came to attention first as a poet in the 1960s. He is Jewish, and in this poem he is describing the body of Adolph Eichmann.

- Do some research on Adolph Eichmann. Who was he? Make a list of eight pieces of information about his life.
- Why might some people want Adolph Eichmann to have talons, or incisors, or green saliva or madness?
- Leonard Cohen portrays Adolph Eichmann as a person who looks completely normal. What point do you think he is making about the "Appearance of Evil" in this poem?

PRISON Mahmoud Darwish

The address of my house has changed,  
And the time when I eat,  
Changed too the amount of my tobacco,  
The colour of my clothes, my face, the look of me.  
Even the moon, so dear to me here,  
Has become larger, more beautiful,  
And the smell of the earth: Perfume,  
And the taste of nature: Sugar.  
It is as though I am on the roof of my old house  
And a new star  
Has riveted itself upon my eye.

Mahmoud Darwish was a beloved Palestinian poet who was regarded as the Palestinian national poet. He wrote a lot about exile — about being far from your home because of war or conflict.

- If you didn't know the title of this poem by Mahmoud Darwish, what would you think the poem is about? What feelings would you have about it?
- When you realise that this poem is about describing the inside of a prison, and the poet is trying to see it merely as a change of address, what do you think about the poet's purpose in writing the poem.
- To whom do you think this poem is written?
- Look up the dictionary definition and etymology of the word "defiance". Where — if anywhere — do you see defiance in this poem?
- What do you think this poem says about "home"?

NOT YET Pádraig Ó Tuama

'You're too young  
to know about The Troubles,'  
the peaceman said.

And the youngman said:

fathershotdead  
motherfellapart  
brotherfellintohimself  
otherbrothersenttolivewithothers  
andmeismotheredeverything  
iwasfarmedaround  
andnowyears later  
wehavefoundourselvesbackbeneath  
asharedandtroubledceiling.

Not yet.

No-one's too young  
to know about The Troubles.

Published in 'Sorry for your Troubles', Canterbury Press, 2013

Pádraig Ó Tuama is an Irish poet. This poem recounts a conversation between a "peaceman" and a "youngman", where the paceman thinks the young man is too young to know about the Troubles. The "Troubles" is a word used to describe the years between 1968 and 1998 in Ireland, where 3600 people were murdered. Troubles comes from the Irish word Triblóidí meaning "bereavements".

- How do you think the peaceman felt when he realised he was talking to a person whose father had been shot and killed?
- What is the effect of the way the youngman's words are tumbled together on the page with no spaces?
- What is the challenge of the poem?

**WEEPING WOMAN** Denise Levertov

She is weeping for her lost right arm  
She cannot write the alphabet any more  
on the kindergarten blackboard.

She is weeping for her lost right arm.  
She cannot hold her baby and caress it at the same time  
ever again.

She is weeping for her lost right arm.  
The stump aches, and her side.

She is weeping for her lost right arm.  
The left alone cannot use a rifle  
to help shoot down the attacking plane.

In the wide skies over the Delta  
her right hand that is not there  
writes indelibly,  
                'Cruel America,  
when you mutilate our land and bodies,  
it is your own soul you destroy,  
not ours.'

Published in 'The Freeing of the Dust', New Directions, 1975

Denise Levertov was a celebrated American poet who was born in 1923 and was raised in England. Her father was a Hasidic Jew who converted to Christianity and became an Anglican minister. In the 1960s she was active in the American anti-war movement.

- This extraordinary poem plays with perspective. Read up until the line "The stump aches" and ask the feelings of the class about the subject of the poem. How do you feel about her? Is she a victim? Who is the aggressor?
- After you read the rest of the poem, how do you feel about her? Is she still a victim? Why not? If you were to understand that she was retaliating, would it make her more or less of a victim?
- Denise Levertov was an American poet who wrote a lot about politics and war. Does it make a difference to you that this poem was written by an American? Why?



## LAST POST Carol Ann Duffy

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.  
If poetry could tell it backwards, true, begin  
that moment shrapnel scythed you to the stinking mud ...  
but you get up, amazed, watch bled bad blood  
run upwards from the slime into its wounds;  
see lines and lines of British boys rewind  
back to their trenches, kiss the photographs from home -  
mothers, sweethearts, sisters, younger brothers  
not entering the story now  
to die and die and die.  
Dulce - No - Decorum - No - Pro patria mori.  
You walk away.  
You walk away; drop your gun (fixed bayonet)  
like all your mates do too -  
Harry, Tommy, Wilfred, Edward, Bert -  
and light a cigarette.  
There's coffee in the square,  
warm French bread  
and all those thousands dead  
are shaking dried mud from their hair  
and queuing up for home. Freshly alive,  
a lad plays Tipperary to the crowd, released  
from History; the glistening, healthy horses fit for heroes, kings.  
You lean against a wall,  
your several million lives still possible  
and crammed with love, work, children, talent, English beer, good food.  
You see the poet tuck away his pocket-book and smile.  
If poetry could truly tell it backwards,  
then it would.

Commissioned by the BBC



Carol Ann Duffy is the poet laureate of Britain. This poem is best understood as a "backwards poem". Try reading the lines of the poem in reverse order. i.e. start with "if poetry could truly tell it backwards,/ then it would. / You lean against a wall / your several million lives still possible / ... " etc.

Notice the shape of this poem. It is centred on the page, rather than using the margin on one side or the other. It gives it a hazy, wavy shape, like a dream; or like a scene in a film where you're taken years back into the life of the person on the screen.

- This poem imagines that everybody has several million lives. What are the ways that war limits all the possibilities of our lives?
- Think of someone in the contemporary world who — you think — wastes their life. How would you write their life backwards?
- Think of someone in the contemporary world who — you think — has their life taken from them by warmongering decision-makers. How would you write their life backwards?

NOTES

NOTES

This learning module will fit with Key Stage 3 History, Local and Global Citizenship and English with Media Education.

CROSS CURRICULAR SKILLS		
KEY ELEMENT		THINKING SKILLS & PERSONAL CAPABILITIES
Personal Understanding		a. Managing Information
Mutual Understanding		b. Thinking, Problem Solving, Decision Making
Moral Character		c. Being Creative
Cultural Understanding		d. Working with Others
Citizenship		e. Self-Management
Media Awareness		

## FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

Students might consider writing their own poetry of conflict. To do this they could choose one of the poems in this short collection, or another they are familiar with, and follow it as a Mentor Text. They could then use the poem as a template by which they could write their own poem, following the development and themes of the mentor text.

Students could be encouraged to write sentence lists about what an evil person looks like (linking to Leonard Cohen's poem).  
Or sentence lists about what people who've been discriminated against have been called (linking to Danez Smith's poem).

Upon completion of these writing prompts it may be then appropriate to explore the linked poem, and see how another writer has compiled this list. Taking the artistry of the poets, they could then return to their own sentence list and let it be shaped by the poetics of each poet.



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An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha  
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