

War Poetry—Discussion Questions on Selected Poems

I. Wilfred Owen, “Dulce et Decorum Est”

1. Who is the speaker in this poem? What is the setting? Who is the listener?
2. What is the speaker’s attitude toward war, and what in the poem reveals this attitude?
3. List some imagery in this poem (words that conjure up the senses—taste, touch, smell, sight, hearing). What effect does the imagery have in this poem? What kind of picture is painted?
4. Identify metaphors and/or similes in this poem. What effect does this figurative language have on the poem?
5. Identify examples of alliteration .
6. What is the rhyme scheme?
7. Identify ironies in the poem.

II. Amy Lowell, “Patterns,” p. 839

1. Who is the speaker in this poem? How can you tell?
2. What details suggest the setting of the poem? What is the situation?
3. Identify examples of rhyme and repetition in this poem. How does the rhyme and repetition affect the poem?
4. What kinds of patterns are illustrated in this poem?
5. What is the contrast between what IS and what the speaker WISHES were?

III. Henry Reed, “Naming of Parts,” p. 1228

1. There may be two speakers in this poem, or one speaker repeating the words of another and adding his own thoughts. Identify the two voices in the poem.
2. What is significant in the contrast between the description of nature and the description of a gun?
3. How and why is jargon (the special language of a group or profession) used in this poem? How and when does the term “parts” become ambiguous and sexually suggestive?
4. Identify examples of repetition in the poem. How does this repetition affect the mood and tone of the poem?
5. What do you think the writer may be trying to communicate with the contrasts in voices, with the contrasts between symbols of life (sex, regeneration) and symbols of death?

IV. Bruce Weigl, “Song of Napalm”

(online at: <http://www.contemporarypoetry.com/dialect/biographies/weigl.html>

and at

<http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/memorialday/particulars.shtml>)

1. Who is the speaker in this poem and who is the listener?
2. Describe the setting.
3. What in the initial setting causes the speaker to think of another time and place—and what is that other time and place?
4. Where in the poem do we get the first hint that there is some kind of barrier in understanding between the speaker and the listener (audience)?
5. What is that barrier, and is it overcome at the end of the poem?
6. What does the speaker try to do to forget his horrific memories?
7. What does the speaker realize by the end of the poem?

V. Jim Northrup, “The Duke,” “Shrinking Away,” “Night Walk,” “Danang Dirge,” “Ogichidag,” “wahbegan,” “time wounds all heels”

Some of these poems can be found online at <http://www.jimnorthrup.org/>. You can hear Northrup read some of his poems at:

<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/vietnam/slideshow/index.html>.

1. Although these poems do not rhyme, they are unified by other poetic devices we have discussed. Identify some of those poetic devices in at least a couple of the poems.
2. Analyze the word choice in the poems. How would you characterize the language—Formal? Informal? Conversational?

How does the level of diction affect the poems?
3. The speakers in all of these poem seem similar, so similar as to perhaps be the same speaker. What do the poems reveal about the speaker? What characteristics of the speaker can you ascertain from the poems?
4. What examples of dark humor can you find in the poems?
What purpose does that humor seem to serve?
5. Identify examples of irony in these poems.
6. What does the speaker’s attitude toward authority seem to be in these poems?