Anthem for Doomed Youth

Workshop activities based around ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ by Wilfred Owen

Learning objectives

- Develop and use vocabulary for discussing complex literary texts.
- Understand the role of the drafting process.
- Improve confidence in close analysis of language and connotation.
- Introduce the sonnet form and explore different sonnet styles.

Skills

- Close and critical analysis of texts.
- Drafting and improving written work.
- Collaborating to enable textual analysis and improved drafting.

Knowledge

- Students acquire specialist vocabulary for the description of poetic techniques.
- Students learn about the sonnet form and examples of the sonnet form.
- Students gain a close understanding of the poem ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’.

Resources

Different versions of the ‘Anthem for Doomed’ Youth by Wilfred Owen.

Session outline

1. Starter activities to activate students’ thinking and knowledge about the First World War, its poets and their key concerns.
2. Main activities on ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’: exploring language and connotation through contrasting and comparing drafts of the poem.
3. Further activity on the sonnet form to develop student confidence in independent analysis of literary texts.
4. Further activity on the role and impact of drafting in the writing process.
Starter activities

Part one
Objectives
- Assess students’ prior knowledge of World War I and its literature.
- Introduce key concepts useful to reading, understanding and analysing Owen’s work.

Task
Ask students some key questions to brainstorm around, e.g.
- What do you know about the First World War?
- What do you know about the literature and poetry generated by the First World War?

Collect ideas from students. Some key points to draw out might include:
- Trench Warfare – what was it and what impact did it have on the soldiers and the way the war was fought?
- the vast numbers of soldiers killed
- the impact on society – the ‘lost generation’ and the way that politics, culture, class, etc. changed as a result of the war
- names of first world war poets, the ideas they expressed, famous poems.

The level of students’ prior knowledge will influence the level of questions in subsequent activities.

Part Two
Objectives
- Establish key concerns of poets of World War I.
- Start discussing literary texts with appropriate vocabulary.

Poems used: ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ by Wilfred Owen and ‘Now God Be Thanked Who Has Matched Us With His Hour’ by Rupert Brooke.

Task
Distribute copies of the poems (perhaps giving one of the poems to each group of 2/3 students). Students read their poem independently and discuss the poem in their group.

Possible questions to direct discussion:
1. What impression of war do you gain from the poem?
2. What do you think the poet’s view of war may be?
3. What form or structures is the poet using to express his ideas?
4. Which phrases or images do you find particularly meaningful or memorable?
Compare answers as a class, drawing out contrasting viewpoints in the poems. List key vocabulary used in the discussion on the board (e.g. sonnet, metaphor, rhyme). Ask students for other useful vocabulary to use when discussing poetry and add this to the list, with other terminology you wish to introduce.

Main Activities

Objectives
- Use literary terminology in discussion.
- Explore the impact of the drafting process.
- Examine closely the effect of language choice on associations and meaning.
- Establish the form and structure of the sonnet.

Poem used: ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ by Wilfred Owen.

Tasks

Reading and analysing the poem
Begin by briefly discussing the title of the poem. What is an anthem? What associations and ideas does the title inspire in your mind?

Read the poem, perhaps initially as a class and then giving students time to reread the poem independently. As they become familiar with the poem students could consider questions such as:
1. What do you think the poem is about?
2. What is Owen contrasting in the poem?
3. What does the poem seem to be suggesting about war and the experience of dying on the battlefield?
4. What do you notice about the form or structure of the poem?
5. Which phrases do you find particularly interesting?
6. What questions would you like to ask about the poem?

Discuss responses to these questions as a class to ensure common understanding of key concerns and devices in the poem, i.e. the contrast between death on the battlefield and death at home in peacetime.

Establish the structure of the sonnet form and its typical characteristics.

Close study of language through exploring the drafting process
In groups of 2-3, students are given four earlier drafts of ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’. Students read the drafts and in their groups complete the following tasks:
- Which order do you think the poems were written in and why? Put the poems in their order of composition, noting down the reasons for your decisions at each stage.
Identify and highlight words and phrases which have changed.

Which version do you like best and why?

Come back together as a class to discuss students’ responses to the tasks and establish the correct order of composition.

Introduce next activity – close analysis of word changes and effects – by looking back at the title. Why do students think Owen changed from “Dead Youth” to “Doomed Youth”? What different associations and impact are there with ‘dead’ and ‘doomed’?

Each group of students is then given key lines or phrases in the poem to analyse closely. They should track the changes to their line/phrases through the different drafts, noting down the associations of the different word choices and their effect on meaning. They should also suggest a rationale for Owen’s changes and eventual choice of words.

For example, one group could look at line 2 and the changes from “solemn anger” to “monotony” to “iron anger” to “monstrous anger” in describing the guns.

Feedback: each group focuses on one word or phrase and presents their ideas about the implications for different word choices.

**Plenary**

Students reflect on what they have learned and discovered, prompted by questions such as:

- What have you learnt from these activities?
- What tools did you use to analyse the poem?
- What have you been made to think about which you may not have considered previously?
- What or who might have influenced Owen in the changes he made to the poem?

**For further thought – the role of the ‘critical friend’**

How much influence did Sassoon have on Owen’s poem ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’? Use copies of manuscript versions of the poem with Sassoon’s amendments and annotations as evidence/material for discussion.

Students could consider/discuss questions such as:

- Is it important to know who has influenced the production of a literary text and how they have influenced it?
- When does editing and/or advice become co-authorship?
- Does it matter if a work of literature is the product of more than one person? Does there need to be one identified author behind a text? Why/Why not?
Or – Yeats on the War Poets

WB Yeats described Owen’s poetry as “all blood, dirt & sucked sugar stick” and refused to put Owen’s poems (or those of any of the poets of the First World War) in his edition of The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935.

What do you think about this judgement of Owen’s poetry? Do you think Yeats was right, and why/why not?

Suggested homework activity

Using either ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ or ‘Now God Be Thanked’:

Pick out five phrases or images, and for each one write down:
- what associations, ideas, pictures or meanings they put in your head
- why you think the poet chose to use those particular words.

Further Activities

Investigating Sonnets

Objectives
- Gain confidence in independent analysis of poetry.
- Compare and contrast sonnets from different literary periods.

Task

Bring a range of sonnets for students to explore. Students annotate one of the sonnets in a small group, and then present their annotated poem to the rest of the class and share their ideas about the poem.

The class could be given some generic questions/tasks to direct their discussion, e.g.
- What do you think this sonnet is about?
- Who is the poet writing the sonnet to or for?
- What does the sonnet form contribute to the poem? / Why do you think the poet has chosen to use the sonnet form?
- Which phrases or images do you find particularly memorable? What ideas or associations do they create in your mind?
- What questions do you have about the poem?

Or, the class could focus on one sonnet, with different groups being allocated a particular focus for annotation/discussion, e.g. structural devices, or the effects of similes and metaphors.
Depending on available time, expertise and resources, students could go on to more creative activities such as making a collage to represent their sonnet, or making a film of their sonnet (using windows movie maker or a similar programme).

**Some suggested sonnets**

- **Thomas Wyatt**  ‘Farewell, love, and all thy laws forever’
- **Michael Drayton**  ‘Since there’s no help, come, let us kiss and part’
- **John Donne**  ‘Death be not proud’ [links well with ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’]
- **John Keats**  ‘When I have fears’
- **Christina Rossetti**  ‘Remember’
- **Gerald Manley Hopkins**  ‘The Windhover’
- **Laurence Binyon**  ‘Gifts of Silence’
- **Rupert Brooke**  ‘The Soldier’ – reads very well in conjunction with U A Fanthorpe’s poem ‘Knowing about Sonnets’

And of course Shakespeare also wrote some sonnets…
Creative writing and the drafting process

Objective
Investigate and reflect on the impact of the drafting process in students’ own writing.

Task
Set students a creative writing task, e.g.
- Write a descriptive piece from the point of view of a soldier in the trenches.
- Write a sonnet about a favourite place or ...?
- It is 1917. Write a letter to *The Times* arguing either for or against Britain's involvement in the war.
- Produce a response in the form of your choice to one of the poems you have encountered in this unit of work.

After giving students a specified length of time to work on this, organise students into pairs or threes. Students read each other’s work and make suggestions for improvements, focusing on language choice and the impact of specific words or phrases.

Students then re-write their piece in the light of the comments from their peers.

Depending on the time available this process could be repeated so students write a third draft.

Follow up task / homework
Write a commentary on your creative piece, detailing the choices and changes you have made in your work and why. Consider points such as:
- What did you choose to write about and why? What did you want to communicate to your reader?
- How easy or difficult did you find it to write your first draft? Why?
- What suggestions did your editor make? Did you act on those suggestions? Why/Why not?
- What other changes did you make to your work, and why?
- Did you enjoy discussing your work? What impact and effect did your discussions have on your final piece?
- How do you think you could improve your piece further?