

**Topic** First World War Poetry: *Exposure* by Wilfred Owen

**Level:** C2

**Time:** 2 hours

### Aims

- To develop students' ability to read and discuss poetry.
- To give practice of identifying language features in poetry.
- To develop vocabulary associated with war and extreme survival conditions.

### Introduction

This lesson is based around the poem *Exposure* by the First World War poet Wilfred Owen. *Exposure* vividly depicts the experience of the soldiers on the front line of the trenches in the freezing winter of 1917. It provides students with practice in analysing poetry: identifying language features, finding examples in the text and discussing their responses to the poem. It also provides contextual and biographical information about the First World War and Wilfred Owen, including subject specific and historical vocabulary.

An audio recording of the poem, read by Kenneth Branagh, can be accessed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zDnzb06Kfc> (or search for 'Wilfred Owen Kenneth Branagh Exposure' on YouTube). Excellent and comprehensive information on Wilfred Owen including biographical information, virtual tours and poetry critiques, can be found on the *Wilfred Owen Association* website: <http://www.wilfredowen.org.uk>. A concise analysis of *Exposure* is available at <http://www.wilfredowen.org.uk/poetry/exposure>.

You can find a list of literary terms and their definitions at <http://justuscgcseenglish.blogspot.co.uk/p/glossary-of-lit-terms.html>. Alternatively, search 'literary terms glossary GCSE'.

Line and verse numbers will be referred to as follows: (l.1) = line 1, (v.1) = verse 1.

### Preparation

- Find an audio of *Exposure* (if you don't have access to the internet in your classroom then you can read it out loud yourself).
- Photocopy one copy of the student worksheet per student.
- Photocopy **Extract A** (l.6-20 of the poem) for half the class and **Extract B** (l.21-35) for the other half for use in **Task 3 – Jigsaw reading activity**.
- Make sure that dictionaries are available for reference.
- Read and listen to the poem through at least once (p.14 of the lesson plan) before you teach it.
- For **Extension – Keep the home fires burning**, search: 'Ivor Novello Keep The Home Fires Burning' on YouTube.

### Tip for teaching poetry

Don't worry about not being able to provide 'correct' or 'concrete' answers, as would normally be expected in the language classroom. As a general rule, keep asking questions to find out what the students think, and encourage them to find examples in the text; this way you can affirm their contribution, rather than tell them whether they are 'correct'. Use the suggested answers provided in the teacher's notes for extra support. Also, don't be afraid to be open with the students if you're not sure what any given line means; this could lead to a fruitful collaborative learning experience.

### Procedure

#### Warmer – Introducing the poem (10 mins)

This activity is intended to provide historical context to the poem and to activate schema associated with war. It will also provide a structured introduction to the first verse of the poem.

- Open the **PowerPoint** and **show slides one to three**. Elicit what students can see. Use the captions below the pictures for context and answers.
- **Show slide four**. Show students the title of the poem and elicit the meaning of the word and its possible connotations. You could do this as a mind map on the board. If appropriate, you could extend the discussion by asking students to think of a time when they felt exposed.

*Connotations of the title, 'Exposure': it implies the state of being unprotected, uncovered or revealed. This could be physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually. The soldiers in the poem are exposed to the severity of the elements and to attacks from the enemy. The extreme danger of the situation also exposes them to mental and emotional strain.*

- Tell students that they are going to read and listen to the beginning of a poem called *Exposure*. Play the audio of the first verse (or read it out loud yourself).
- Put students into pairs to discuss the questions. Keep the images up on the PowerPoint to facilitate discussion. Encourage students to look at the text to get ideas.
- **Show slide five** of the PowerPoint and elicit answers as a whole class.

*Suggested answers:*

1. *The poem is written from the perspective of soldiers, collectively ("our brains ache").*
2. *They are positioned on the front line of the fighting between the Germans and the Allies at Serre, France, also known as "No Man's Land". Around them "nothing happens" (l.5) apart from the physical sensations they experience as they wait ("wearied we keep awake" l.2).*
3. *Emotions range from physical discomfort ("the merciless iced east winds" l.1), exhaustion ("wearied" l.2), confusion ("low drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient" l.3), to the more explicit feelings articulated by the sentries, who are "worried by silence", "curious" and "nervous" (l.4). The description is heavily sensual, though there is little movement aside from the distant flares and the relentless wind. This creates a sense of tension and anticipation.*

#### Task 1 – The life and work of Wilfred Owen (15 mins)

This task – which can be completed fairly quickly – aims to provide background information in preparation for the analysis of the poem. It briefly explores the life of Wilfred Owen and the characteristics of his poetry.

- **Show slide six** of the PowerPoint. Show the picture of Wilfred Owen and ask students either to discuss the questions in pairs or elicit information about him as a whole class. Encourage students to speculate before revealing the answers.

Answers:

1. Owen would have been 22-23 years old at the time of the photograph.
2. Owen was an officer (2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant) in the British army.
3. The photo was taken in 1916.

- Tell students that they will read a short biography of Wilfred Owen. Ask them to work in pairs to answer the questions.
- Refer students to the glossary for definitions of some subject specific vocabulary.

Answers:

1. Owen was 25 years old when he died.
2. In the summer of 1917, after meeting and being influenced by the poet Siegfried Sassoon (paragraphs 1-2).
3. Owen experienced shell shock after active service at Serre and St. Quentin in January-April 1917 and as a result, returned to Britain for treatment. Whilst receiving treatment, Owen met Siegfried Sassoon, who “provided him with guidance, and encouragement to bring his war experiences into his poetry” (para.2).
4. Owen was awarded the Military Cross in October 1918 “in recognition of his courage and leadership” (para.3).
5. The ‘Pity of War’ refers to the anguish and anger at the suffering experienced by the soldiers and the violence and waste of human life. It also implies that the tragedy of war, and humans’ desire for it, is doomed to be re-enacted repeatedly in the future.
6. Rhyming patterns (para.1), bleak realism, energy, indignation, compassion, technical skill (para.4).

## Task 2 – Analysing the first verse of the poem (10 mins)

This task is intended to give students supported practice in identifying language features and discussing possible responses to the poem. It aims to prepare students for **Task 3 – Jigsaw reading activity** where they will analyse the poem themselves.

- Show **slide five** of the PowerPoint.
- Tell students to look again at the first verse of the poem. If appropriate, you can play the audio of the first verse again.
- Explain that the language Owen uses to describe the experience of the soldiers was chosen for a reason. Each word and phrase conveys a particular meaning, for a particular purpose, to evoke a response in the reader.
- Explain that if we look closely at the language chosen, we can see patterns in the use of verbs, adjectives and repeated sounds (rhyming words). We can notice how Owen uses the senses, recurring themes and images to describe the scene. All of these techniques or language features help paint a vivid picture in the reader’s head.
- Tell students that you are going to look more closely at verse 1 to identify some language features.

- Ask students to work in pairs to match the language feature and quotation/example from the poem to its effect on the reader.
- Draw attention to the glossary provided.
- Elicit answers as a whole class, paying particular attention to the questions associated with each language feature (see column one of the table).

Answers:

1.e, 2.c, 3.a, 4.b

### Task 3 – Jigsaw reading activity (20 mins)

This task aims to give students free practice in analysing, interpreting and discussing sections of the poem.

- Tell students that they are going to have a go at reading and analysing a section of the poem themselves.
- Put students into pairs. Now divide the pairs into two equal groups. Give one group **Extract A** (l.6-20 of the poem) and the other group **Extract B** (l.21-35).
- Ask students to work in pairs to discuss their section of the poem. Ask them to fill in the blank table, giving examples of language features and making notes on the effect they have on the reader.
- Encourage students to look at examples from **Task 3 – Analysing the poem** to help them, and to use the glossary below their poem extract or a dictionary to look up any new words.
- Circulate amongst the groups, providing additional support and giving examples where needed (see *suggested answers*).

*Suggested answers:* see **Extract A – Suggested answers** and **Extract B – Suggested Answers**.

#### Tip

It may be helpful to explain to students that there is no single correct response to the poem or to the language used. The important thing is for students to discuss their different responses, and to use quotations or examples from the poem to explain their feelings or opinions.

Although a variety of responses should be encouraged, if a student articulates an opinion that conflicts with the general consensus, the following procedure could be helpful in separating unusual ideas from misinterpretations. Ask them a) why they think this, and b) to support their assertion with an example from the text. It is possible that the student has hit on an interesting and challenging idea (see *example 1*), which could lead to a stimulating discussion. Encouraging students to explain their responses to the poem can help to identify any obvious misinterpretations (see *example 2*).

*Example 1: A student voices the opinion that “the soldiers want to die”.*

*This more subtle interpretation initially seems to contradict the vivid descriptions of the soldiers’ fear and anxiety. However, it can be argued that there is a sense that the ‘real hell’ of the situation lies in the waiting (as seen in the repetition of “But nothing happens”). By contrast, in verse 5 the narrator describes an imagined, idealised rural scene. The dreamlike quality of this passage (“So we drowse, sun-dozed” l.23) and his question, “Is it that we are dying?”, suggests death as a desirable relief from their present torture.*

*Example 2: A student asserts that the soldiers are feeling “happy and relaxed” in verse 1.*

*Try to challenge their interpretation by eliciting examples of ‘negative’ words in the text (“worried”, “weary”, “nervous” etc.).*

## Extract A – Suggested answers

Language feature	Example / Quotation	What effect does it have on the reader? How does it make you feel?
<b>Use of the senses</b> What can you see, feel and hear? What colours are used?	<b>Sight</b> “Dawn massing” (l.13) “shivering ranks of gray” (l.14) “the air that shudders black with snow” (l.17) “flakes that flock” (l.18)	The colour palette is monochrome: blacks, whites and greys. The effect is bleak and hopeless. The scene moves from an ominous grey dawn, through to swirling snow. The air is “black with snow” – an image which <i>subverts</i> (turns upside down) conventional ideas of snow as being ‘pure’. The effect is unsettling and sinister.
	<b>Hearing</b> “incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles” (l.8) “flights of bullets streak the silence” (l.16)	The rumble of distant gunfire increases the tension; although it is now “far off”, the reader has the impression of it drawing ever closer. The “silence” is interrupted by the harsher sound of machine gun fire, increasing the sense of danger.
	<b>Touch/feeling</b> “mad gusts tugging” (l.6) “twitching agonies” (l.7) “rain soaks” (l.12) “shivering ranks” (l.14)	The reader is encouraged to feel and empathise with the suffering of the soldiers as they are exposed to extreme weather conditions: the cold, wind and rain. The pain of it is almost unbearable (“agonies”). Reader reactions could range from distress, to distaste, to anger etc.
<b>Verbs</b> Are there any new, unusual or interesting verbs?	“war <b>lasts</b> , rain <b>soaks</b> , clouds <b>sag</b> stormy” (l.12) “the air that <b>shudders</b> with snow” (l.17) “flakes that <b>flock</b> , <b>pause</b> and <b>renew</b> ” (l.18)	This punchy combination of three present tense verbs give a sense of immediacy. The verb “shudders” gives human characteristics to the snow, which mirrors the fear of the soldiers. Another grouping of three verbs highlights the relentlessness of the snow, and by implication the relentlessness of war. Groupings of three add emphasis (literary term: <i>rule of three</i> ).
<b>Adjectives</b> Are there any new, unusual or interesting adjectives?	“ <b>mad</b> gusts” (l.6), “ <b>twitching</b> agonies” (l.7) “Dawn massing...her <b>melancholy</b> army / Attacks one more in ranks on <b>shivering</b> ranks of gray” (l.13-4)	The choice of adjectives gives the wind human characteristics. The effect is to create a vivid image which unsettles the reader. The dawn is also given human characteristics (literary term: <i>personification</i> ), and rain is represented as a “melancholy army” in “shivering ranks” - mirroring the mood and physical sensations of the soldiers. Note: Owen repeatedly uses verbs which act as adjectives. This gives the descriptions a particularly <i>physical</i> quality, increasing reader’s feelings of horror at the situation.

<p><b>References to death</b></p> <p><i>What language is used to convey the idea of death?</i></p> <p><i>Are there any images that stand out?</i></p>	<p>“Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army / Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of gray” (l.13-4)</p> <p>“Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence. (l.16)</p> <p>Less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow” (l.16-7)</p>	<p>A fairly complex metaphor. Rain is figured as the attacking army; an image that is layered over the physical experience of the soldiers whom the rain is drenching. The “shivering ranks” also suggest a ghostly army, implying that death is never far away.</p> <p>Similarly, the snow is no “less deadly” than the bullets that “streak” overhead. They mingle in the mind of the narrator, suggesting that death could come at the hands of man or of nature, as the soldiers are “exposed” to both.</p>
<p><b>Any other features</b></p> <p><i>Is there anything else that you find interesting or striking, e.g. use of rhyme or repetition? Do you notice any other themes e.g. nature, religion in the poem?</i></p>	<p>Rhyming and half-rhyming end lines:</p> <p>“brambles” and “rumbles” (v.2)</p> <p>“stormy” and “army” (v.3)</p> <p>“snow” and “renew” (v.4)</p> <p>“wire” and “war” (v.2)</p> <p>“<b>sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence</b>” (l.16)</p> <p>“But nothing happens”</p> <p>The theme of <b>nature</b> (brambles, rain, snow, wind and the freezing cold).</p>	<p>This creates a rhythm and regularity to the sound of the poem (try reading or listening to it out loud to get the full effect). It also has the effect of contrasting words, e.g. “rumbles” (the heavy, ominous sound of war) is paired with “brambles” (a natural, rural image), suggesting that the soldiers themselves are displaced in this violent environment.</p> <p>The repetition of the ‘s’ sound (literary term: <i>sibilance</i>) imitates the noise of the bullets whooshing overhead, making the description more vivid.</p> <p>The repetition of this line highlights the frustration of the soldiers and how each hour of their torture blends into the next. It is also ironic, as it is far from the truth.</p> <p>Here, in No Man’s Land, nature is hostile and just as likely to kill you as the opposing army.</p>
<p><b>Summary:</b></p> <p><i>The soldiers are exposed to harsh natural conditions whilst on the front line of the trenches. Around them are the sights and the sounds of war, whilst they themselves wait to be called into action.</i></p>		

**Extract B – Suggested answers**

Language feature	Example / Quotation	What effect does it have on the reader? How does it make you feel?
<p><b>Use of the senses</b></p> <p>What can you see, feel and hear?</p> <p>What colours are used?</p>	<p><b>Sight</b></p> <p>“grassier ditches”, “blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses” (l.23-4)</p> <p>“sunk fires glozed / With crusted dark red jewels” (l.26-7)</p>	<p>The description shifts to a beautiful rural setting, where the vivid colours (greens, pinks, whites) contrast sharply with the monochromes of the first four verses.</p> <p>A poignant image: the fires at home are fading, suggesting that the soldiers have been away too long and have been forgotten.</p>
	<p><b>Hearing</b></p> <p>“blossoms trickling” and “blackbird fusses” (l.24)</p> <p>“crickets jingle” and “mice rejoice” (l.28)</p>	<p>The gentle, nostalgically described sounds of the countryside provide a stark contrast to the deafening noise of war. These are the sounds of small creatures, only barely perceptible. The effect is to dramatically change the tone, signalling the soundscape of a new setting.</p>
	<p><b>Touch/feeling</b></p> <p>“pale flakes...come feeling for our faces” (l.21)</p> <p>“we drowse, sun-dozed” (l.23)</p>	<p>Contrasting with earlier descriptions, here the snow exhibits ‘gentler’ characteristics, suggesting that the soldiers are slowly slipping out of consciousness and into a dreamlike state, where “snow-dazed” becomes “sun-dozed”. The effect of this vivid, sensual description is worrying and sinister rather than comforting.</p>
<p><b>Verbs</b></p> <p><i>Are there any new, unusual or interesting verbs?</i></p>	<p>“We <b>cringe</b> in holes...and <b>stare</b>” (l.22) and “our ghosts <b>drag</b> home” (l.26)</p> <p>“<b>glimpsing</b> the sunk fires” (l.26)</p>	<p>The soldiers are dehumanized, cringing in holes and staring in fear like hunted animals. At the imagined homecoming, they are not men but “ghosts” – a shadow of their former selves. These descriptions are distressing and emphasize the trauma that they have experienced. That their ghosts “drag” home also suggests extreme exhaustion, to the point of death.</p> <p>This poignant verb choice implies that the soldiers are now outsiders in their own country, peering through windows but not allowed in.</p>

<p><b>Adjectives</b></p> <p><i>Are there any new, unusual or interesting adjectives?</i></p>	<p>“fires glozed with <b>crusted</b> red jewels” (l.27)</p> <p>“<b>kind</b> fires burn” (l.31) and “God’s <b>invincible</b> love” (l.33)</p>	<p>This implies the passing of time. There is a sinister undertone; the choice of the verb “crusted” also suggests a scabbing wound.</p> <p>In verse 7, the fire is given positive human characteristics, voicing the idea that somewhere, far from the horror of the trenches, a better and kinder homecoming exists, where God’s “invincible” love awaits. This experience, however, is not for them (l.35). The reader might feel sad, distressed, shocked, regretful etc. at this description.</p>
<p><b>References to death</b></p> <p><i>What language is used to convey the idea of death?</i></p> <p><i>Are there any images that stand out?</i></p>	<p>Death permeates extract B:</p> <p>“Is it that we are <b>dying</b>?” (l.25)</p> <p>“We turn back to our <b>dying</b>” (l.30)</p> <p>“For love of God seems <b>dying</b>” (l.35)</p> <p>“Shutters and doors all closed” (l.29)</p> <p>“For God’s invincible spring our love is made afraid” (l.33)</p>	<p>The reader, like the narrator, is unsure if he is sleeping or dying. The effect is distressing and disorientating. The trajectory is clear: it will inevitably end in physical death (see the implied rhyming of “lie” with “die” in l.34).</p> <p>The closed doors and shutters of the house symbolically represent the end of a life.</p> <p>There is also an implied spiritual death, when the narrator doubts the love and protection of God (l.33).</p>
<p><b>Any other features</b></p> <p><i>Is there anything else that you find interesting or striking, e.g. use of rhyme or repetition? Do you notice any other themes e.g. nature, religion in the poem?</i></p>	<p>Rhyming and half-rhyming end lines:</p> <p>“dazed” and “dozed” (v.5)</p> <p>“glozed” and “closed” (v.6)</p> <p>“burn” and “born” (v.7)</p> <p>“Pale flakes with lingering stealth come <b>feeling</b> for our faces” (l.21)</p> <p>The theme of <b>religion</b></p>	<p>This creates a rhythm and regularity to the sound of the poem. It also speeds up or slows down the pace (the speed) of the poem, e.g. the rhyming of “dazed” with “dozed” – with their long vowel sounds - slows the pace of the line, mirroring the ‘slowing down’ associated with falling asleep.</p> <p>The repetition of the ‘f’ sound (literary term: <i>alliteration</i>) creates a sinister effect, imitating the soft sound of the snowflakes.</p> <p>See ‘References to death’ and ‘Adjectives’. Part of the narrator’s response to his experiences in the trenches is to conclude that God has abandoned them.</p>
<p><b>Summary:</b></p> <p><i>As the snow intensifies, the narrator experiences a vision of his previous life, described as an idealized rural scene. He then imagines the “ghosts” of the soldiers returning home to a very different scene: dying fires and houses infested with mice and crickets. Rather than a glorious homecoming, the narrator is greeted by closed doors and shutters, abandoned by people and by God (“For love of God seems dying” (l.35).</i></p>		

#### **Task 4 – Sharing ideas (25 mins)**

- Ask students to join up with another pair looking at the same section of the poem. Encourage them to share their ideas as a group and to discuss examples of the language features they found particularly effective.
- Now ask students to join up with another pair looking at a different section of the poem. Encourage each pair to take it in turns to describe what is happening in their extract. Ask them to share at least one example of a language feature from each section and say what effect it has on the reader.
- Encourage students to discuss the similarities and differences between the language used in extracts A and B.
- Invite students to share and discuss their ideas as a whole class. You could do this by drawing a mind map on the board or on flipchart paper.

#### **Task 5 – The end of the poem (20 mins)**

This activity aims to consolidate all the ideas from **Task 2 – Analysing the first verse of the poem**, **Task 3 – Jigsaw reading activity** and **Task 4 – Sharing ideas** by discussing how the poem ends.

- Show **slide seven** of the PowerPoint.
- Tell students that they are going to read and listen to the end of a poem. Play the audio of the last verse (or read it out loud yourself).
- Put students in (different) pairs and ask them to discuss the questions.
- Elicit answers as a whole class.

#### *Suggested answers*

1. *The narrator is arguably referring to God, as demonstrated by the capital letter of the pronoun “His”. It also follows on thematically from verse 7, which meditates on the love of God (or lack of). The effect of this is to attribute the frost (l.36) and by implication the entire meteorological onslaught to God, figuring him as ‘torturer’ rather than protector.*

2. *The soldiers are both dying and burying the dead. The frost is “fastening” on the soldiers’ “shrivelling hands” and “puckering foreheads”. The burying party step over the “half-known” faces of corpses, carrying their “picks and shovels”, half frozen themselves. The line “All their eyes are ice” (l.39) is ambiguous, as it could refer to the dead or the living (numbed by the horrors they have experienced). It emphasises the idea that those who are still living are the waking dead, trapped in a literal and metaphorical No Man’s Land.*

3. *The poem ends cyclically, with the repetition of the phrase: “But nothing happens” mirroring the opening verse. Encourage a variety of responses to the ending and prompt students to give reasons for their opinions.*

#### **Cooler – Reflect (10 mins)**

- Ask learners to read and reflect on the questions.

*Students can do this individually or in groups, or a combination of the two. Responses can be spoken or written.*

#### **Extension – Keep the home fires burning (10 mins)**

*The image in verse 6 of “sunken fires”, and the idea of a disappointing homecoming, is a reference to Ivor Novello's song, ‘Keep The Home Fires Burning’ (“Keep the home fires burning....though your lads are far away they dream of home”), written in 1914.*

- Play the song (search ‘Ivor Novello Keep The Home Fires Burning’ on YouTube) and ask students to discuss the differences between the mood of the song and the mood of the poem.

**Extension / Homework – Reflect (25 mins)**

- Ask students to read the other section of the poem and make notes on the language features. Then encourage them to read or listen to the poem all the way through.
- Encourage students to write down any new words they have learned and to write sentences using them.

## Extract A

6 Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire.  
7 Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.  
8 Northward incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,  
9 Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.  
10 What are we doing here?

11 The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow...  
12 We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.  
13 Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army  
14 Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of gray,  
15 But nothing happens.

16 Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.  
17 Less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow,  
18 With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause and renew,  
19 We watch them wandering up and down the wind's nonchalance,  
20 But nothing happens.

### Glossary

incessantly	<i>continual, never stopping</i>
gunnery	<i>the operation of large military guns</i>
poignant	<i>distressing or painful to the feelings</i>
melancholy	<i>characterised by, causing or expressing sadness, dejection etc.</i>
successive	<i>following immediately one after the other</i>
nonchalance	<i>behaving in a way that is casually unconcerned or indifferent</i>

## Extract B

21 Pale flakes with lingering stealth come feeling for our faces -  
22 We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed,  
23 Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,  
24 Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses.  
25           Is it that we are dying?

26 Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires glozed  
27 With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;  
28 For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;  
29 Shutters and doors all closed: on us the doors are closed -  
30           We turn back to our dying.

31 Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn;  
32 Now ever suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit.  
33 For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;  
34 Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were born,  
35           For love of God seems dying.

### Glossary

lingering	<i>to continue to exist for longer than expected</i>
stealth	<i>doing something in a quiet or secret way</i>
cringe	<i>to move back and/or away from somebody because you are afraid</i>
glozed	<i>to minimise or explain away (archaic word)</i>
invincible	<i>too strong to be defeated or changed</i>
loath	<i>can't bear / can't stand</i>
shutters	<i>a pair of wooden or metal covers that can be closed over the outside of a window</i>

**Exposure***I.*

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east  
winds that knife us...

Wearied we keep awake because the night is  
silent...

Low drooping flares confuse our memory of the  
salient...

Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious,  
nervous,

But nothing happens.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on  
the wire.

Like twitching agonies of men among its  
brambles.

Northward incessantly, the flickering gunnery  
rumbles,

Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.

What are we doing here?

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow...

We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and  
clouds sag stormy.

Dawn massing in the east her melancholy  
army

Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks  
of gray,

But nothing happens.

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the  
silence.

Less deadly than the air that shudders black  
with snow,

With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause  
and renew,

We watch them wandering up and down the  
wind's nonchalance,

But nothing happens.

*II.*

Pale flakes with lingering stealth come feeling  
for our faces -

We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams,  
and stare, snow-dazed,

Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-  
dozed,

Littered with blossoms trickling where the  
blackbird fusses.

Is it that we are dying?

Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the  
sunk fires glozed

With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle  
there;

For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house  
is theirs;

Shutters and doors all closed: on us the doors  
are closed -

We turn back to our dying.

Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires  
burn;

Now ever suns smile true on child, or field, or  
fruit.

For God's invincible spring our love is made  
afraid;

Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore  
were born,

For love of God seems dying.

To-night, His frost will fasten on this mud and  
us,

Shrivelling many hands and puckering  
foreheads crisp.

The burying-party, picks and shovels in their  
shaking grasp,

Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are  
ice,

But nothing happens.