IVOR GURNEY

This was written for teachers who might wish to study two poems from the First World War and get their pupils to compare them critically.

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I only recently came across Ivor Gurney through Dr Kate Kennedy, an English lecturer at Cambridge who quite by chance rented our Charretterie with her family. She is currently bringing out a new biography of this poet and musician.

At school, we never encountered him in the classroom; Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg, and many others, yes, but

we were just too early for Jon Silkin's "Out of Battle - The Poetry of the Great War" (1972).

Here is one of his best known poems, to compare with Wilfred Owen's "Futility"

To His Love by Ivor Gurney

He's gone, and all our plans
Are useless indeed.
We'll walk no more on Cotswolds
Where the sheep feed
Quietly and take no heed.

His body that was so quick
Is not as you
Knew it, on Severn River
Under the blue
Driving our small boat through.

You would not know him now…
But still he died
Nobly, so cover him over
With violets of pride
Purple from Severn side.

Cover him, cover him soon!
And with thick-set
Masses of memoried flowers-
Hide that red wet
Thing I must somehow forget.

Futility
by Wilfred Owen

Move him into the sun—
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown.
Always it awoke 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?

Both poems are responses to deaths of soldiers in the trenches of the 1914-18 war. Ivor Gurney's poem is less well known than "Futility", which has often been anthologised.

Before starting, you might need to tell pupils that "Cotswolds" refers to a particularly beautiful part of English countryside in Gloucestershire to the north and west of Oxford. This is where Gurney grew up and the

Gloucestershire countryside remained very much a focus for many of his poems and his music. He wrote many songs in spite of suffering from depression, and later, madness, which led to his being locked up from 1922 until his death in 1937. The Severn is a large river running through Gloucester. "Quick" means rapid, but here has more of the old Biblical sense of "alive" ("the quick and the dead").

There is an urgency about both poems. Readers in both are given orders to respond to these deaths, by covering the body with "violets of pride Purple from Severn side" and in the second poem by moving "him into the sun". Worth noting at this stage, perhaps, is that in the first poem, this is an imaginative act, since the body is literally "gone", whereas in the second, we are faced with a real body.

Both poems use irony. Gurney's poem asks the reader to cover the body (imaginatively with "memoried" flowers), in an attempt to hide it so he can try to forget "that red, wet Thing…" The irony, of course, is that the poem in itself is an important act of memory. While trying to find some comfort in the traditional elements of nature, in the end, nature has the effect of reminding the poet too much. He would almost prefer to forget. Nevertheless, there is comfort also that his friend died "Nobly" and this word's position (just like "Purple") gives it further strength. In the second poem, there is bitter irony, first, in hoping that the sun might warm the cold body and generate life again. Secondly, there is an even greater irony, in wondering at the end whether there is

any point to life at all. The word "fatuous" is particularly strong , meaning stupid or idiotic.

Both poems use sounds in interesting ways. Get pupils to read them out loud and see if they can spot the assonance and alliterations, as well as the rhymes, that make the first work so melodic. By contrast, Owen's poem uses near-rhymes as well as full rhymes, creating a slightly dislocating effect. The unevenness of the length of the lines in the first poem also creates a jagged effect.

Both poems use striking images, one of flowers (violets are hard to spot and stay quite hidden, and here their colour of "purple", a traditional sign of nobility, seems a little paradoxical and ambiguous). The "red, wet Thing.." referring to the soldier's wound, creates a feeling of horror by its very lack of precision, as if the poet cannot bring himself to think about what has happened to him. The "sun" in the second poem is developed fully as an idea, with the link to the soldier's previous life as a farmer creating further irony. Questions raise the tension, until the final outburst at the end comes like a cry of despair.

The title "To His Love" in the first poem, reveals a more personal approach perhaps, and it actually refers to a shared life: "our small boat". Willy Harvey, Gurney's best friend, turned out not to have been killed, but taken prisoner, though at the time, Gurney did not know this. We note the "I" in the last line. "Futility", in contrast, is more impersonal, though the emotion is perhaps just as

intense. The soldier is left unspecified and the second stanza develops a more general critique of war, which is so wasteful of life.

While the first poem's tone is more reminiscent of past happiness in England, the second poem ends with a powerful denunciation - almost a cry of pain and incomprehension. There is nothing "noble" here. The words "kind old sun" hover between a sense of something positive - after all, this soldier was a farmer who depended on the sun to bring "seeds" to life - and deep sarcasm or cynicism.

Sometimes Thomas Hardy's "Drummer Hodge" is set for comparison with "Futility". It is about the death of a drummer boy in the Boer War, roughly 15 years earlier. Hardy wrote the pôem six weeks after the start of the Second Boer War in 1899, after seeing a report about the death of a drummer from Dorset, which is where Hardy grew up.

Here is the poem for reference (and comparison, if you wish).

DRUMMER HODGE
I
They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest
Uncoffined - just as found:
His landmark is a kopje-crest
That breaks the veldt around;
And foreign constellations west
Each night above his mound.

II
Young Hodge the Drummer never knew -
Fresh from his Wessex home -
The meaning of the broad Karoo,
The Bush, the dusty loam,
And why uprose to nightly view
Strange stars amid the gloam.
III
Yet portion of that unknown plain
Will Hodge forever be;
His homely Northern breast and brain
Grow to some Southern tree,
And strange-eyed constellations reign
His stars eternally.

Some glossing is necessary for 'kopje' and 'veldt' (hill and plain in Boer Dutch). This poem is set in South Africa during a vicious colonial war, which pitted the British Army against the Dutch settlers of the adjoining Transvaal state. They had refused to accept British expansion, as Britain was drawn into a struggle to take over the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, which had been colonised earlier by the Dutch Boers. As you might imagine, the gold and the rich mines of South Africa, lay near the surface of this war, which invented (a British invention!!) the "concentration camp", where Boer soldiers and suspects were held.

Questions for pupils could concentrate on the difference in attitudes between this poem compared to the two poems we started with. Who are "they"? How does the

landscape play a part? How does the poet view Drummer Hodge? Is there anything ambiguous about the points the poem is making?

What about the form of this poem and the way in which it has been written?
What are the points, if any, of comparison and contrast?

Quite the most extraordinary of his poems, I think, is “The Silent One”. As a private soldier rather than an officer, Gurney’s reactions are all the more interesting as he views the proceedings from the other side of the ‘tracks’, so to speak. The “silent one” is of course dead, but he was “faithful to his stripes”, in other words he was an officer, doubtless leading the charge.

The Silent One – Ivor Gurney

‘The Silent One’

Who died on the wires, and hung there, one of two–
Who for his hours of life had chattered through
Infinite lovely chatter of Bucks accent:
Yet faced unbroken wires; stepped over, and went
A noble fool, faithful to his stripes– and ended.
But I weak, hungry, and willing only for the chance
Of line– to fight in the line, lay down under unbroken
Wires, and saw the flashes and kept unshaken,
Till the politest voice– a finicking accent, said:
‘Do you think you might crawl through there: there’s a hole.’
Darkness shot at: I smiled, as politely replied–
‘I’m afraid not, Sir.’ There was no hole no way to be seen,
Nothing but chance of death, after tearing of clothes.
Kept flat, and watched the darkness, hearing bullets whizzing–
And thought of music– and swore deep heart’s deep oaths
(Polite to God) and retreated and came on again,
Again retreated– and a second time faced the screen.

What is extraordinary here is the unrhetorical way that Gurney reports this terrible moment – refusing to obey orders carried enormous risks, including the risk of being shot on the spot. Here, there is irony in contrasting the live officer’s “finicking accent” with the Buckingham speech of the man Gurney evidently knew, who was now dead because he had faced “unbroken wires”. The whole point here is the massive idiocy in requiring men to attack, when the wires haven’t been cut properly, as should have been the case. Gurney is not showing cowardice, for he is ready and willing to “fight in the line”, but not to commit suicide by trying to cross the unbroken “screen”. Notice how the regularity of the

rhymes breaks down to irregularity as the situation descends into chaos.

Another extraordinary aspect of the poem is the way the persona or Gurney, for it feels incredibly ‘real’, maintains his humanity. Even his oaths are “Polite to God”. There is an underlying recognition of humour, even, as he responds to the “politest voice” and can even smile. His refusal comes as a shock – this is not what we have come to expect from the brave Owens, Sassoons, Graves of more conventional poetry – even when protesting about the horrors of war. Here we have the gentle, intimate but stark account of how the absurdity of war, in all its horror, feels from an inside point of view. This is what ordinary private soldiers were exposed to.

Here is one more poem which is representative of his responses to the war. In many ways he found comradeship and a purpose to his life during his time in the war. Depression set in after the war, in spite of his love of music and composition.

Bach and the Sentry

BY IVOR GURNEY

Watching the dark my spirit rose in flood
   On that most dearest Prelude of my delight.
The low-lying mist lifted its hood,
   The October stars showed nobly in clear night.

When I return, and to real music-making,
   And play that Prelude, how will it happen then?
Shall I feel as I felt, a sentry hardly waking,
   With a dull sense of No Man's Land again?