



The Sentry – Wilfred Owen

On the following page is an 'immersed' version of 'The Sentry', where the text of the poem has been 'immersed' into other words so that it reads like prose.

This could be used to introduce the poem as a narrative, which helps to overcome the sense that it might be difficult.

It can also be used as a revision activity. Students try to spot the original poem, perhaps by highlighting certain parts and, if they are using a word processor, deleting the rest. This can be turned into a competition: who got (a) the most words from the original and (b) the fewest words that weren't part of the original? Award a point for each (a) word and take one off for each (b) word.

The Sentry

We'd been lucky. In the chaos of the attack, we found ourselves in an old Boche dug-out, and hunkered down while we caught our breath. The Sergeant was grim. He knew this was only a temporary respite and we would have to move on. Jack was posted as sentry as we pondered our next move below in the grim half-light.

The enemy gave us hell for a while. Shell on frantic shell fell all around us and even hammered on top of the dug-out, but never quite burst through. Rain was still bucketing down, guttering down in torrents and creating waterfalls of slime which kept the brown slush waist high. We knew that it was rising hour by hour...

Caked mud choked up the wooden steps. They were too thick with clay to climb: when we left we would be scrambling up as best we could. What murk the air was too! – the air that remained, that is. It stank of old uniforms and it was sour with the fumes of whizz-bangs and the smell of men who'd lived there for years and years, it seemed. They had left their curse in that dreadful den, if not their corpses...

There in that human hell-hole we herded ourselves and sheltered from the blast of the whizz-bangs, but one found our door at last. The explosion knocked us back, buffeting our eyes and taking our breath away and snuffing out the candles we had found.

And then there was a thud! flump! thud! Something came crashing down the steep steps. Something came thumping down and splashing in the flood, deluging muck all over us. It was the sentry's body! Then came his rifle and what looked like the handles of old Boche bombs, and after that, mud in ruck on ruck.

We dredged him up from the slime, giving him up for killed, until we heard his voice crying out, high-pitched. "Oh sir!" he whined, "Oh sir, my eyes — I'm blind — I'm blind, I'm blind!"

He needed coaxing to calm down enough for us to help him. I held a flame against his eye-lids and said if he could see the least bit of blurred light it would show that he was not blind. In time he'd get his sight back, all right, I said.

"I can't," he sobbed. His eyeballs were huge. They bulged like squids. If you could watch my dreams, you'd see him still. But we had other things to do and I forgot him there for the moment. I was immersed in other duties: posting the next men for duty, and sending a scout off to beg a stretcher from somewhere, and floundering about to other posts under my command. Under the cover of smoke and dust I scrambled along, ignoring the shrieking of shells and the foul air.

I recall so many of those scenes. The other wretches and how they bled and spewed, and one who would have drowned himself for good. I try not to remember these things now. Let those dread things stay back in the dreadful past. But my mind will hark back. For one word only. Well, one word stands out from that awful cry, only one.

I remember how it was. I was half-listening to that sentry's moans and seeing his jumps, and noticing the wild chattering of his broken teeth. All these movements and sounds were renewed most horribly whenever crumps of shells pummelled the roof and slogged the air in our dug-out beneath. Through the dense din, I say, we heard him shout, "I see your lights!" But he could not. Ours had long since died out.