Letters from France is a dramatization of selected letters & poetry of Wilfred Owen.

Poetry Dramatized Includes:

- The Next War.
- Dulce Et Decorum Est.
- Anthem For Doomed Youth.
- Strange Meeting.
- Futility.
- The Sentry.
- Sonnet Written At Teignmouth, On A Pilgrimage To Keats's House.

+ Excerpts of other poetry by Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon & Jessie Pope.

The letters we have dramatised were sent to his mother Susan. This selection explores the intellectual, poetic & emotional impact of WW1 upon Wilfred & his response to this great tragedy.

‘I know I shall be killed. But it’s the only place I can make my protest from.’

Essay/Discussion Question:

By his own words, Wilfred Owen was a protest poet. What was he protesting?

In your answer or discussion please quote from at least one of the above-mentioned poems & from the letter & book-preface reproduced below (continues on pg 2):

1. Letter to Susan Owen:

*Advanced Horse Transport Depot*

*4 February 1917*

‘I have no mind to describe all the horrors of this last Tour. But it was almost worse than the first, because in this place my Platoon had no Dug-Outs, but had to lie in the
snow under the deadly wind. By day it was impossible to stand up or even to crawl about because we were behind only a little up ridge screening us from the Bosches’ periscope.

We had 5 Tommy cookers between the Platoon, but they did not suffice to melt the ice in the water-cans. So we suffered cruelly from thirst.

The marvel is that we did not all die of cold. As a matter of fact, only one of my party actually froze to death before he got back, but I am not able to tell how many ended in hospital. I had no real casualties from shelling, though for 10 minutes every hour whizz-bangs fell a few yards short of us. Showers of soil rained on us, but no fragments of shell could find us.

My feet ached until they could ache no more, and so they temporarily died. I was kept warm by the ardour of life within me. I forgot hunger in the hunger for Life. The intensity of your Love reached me and kept me living. I thought of you and Mary without break all the time. I cannot say I felt any fear. We were all half crazed by the buffeting of the High Explosives. I think the most unpleasant reflection that weighed on me was the impossibility of getting back any wounded, a total impossibility. All day impossible, and frightfully difficult by night.

We were marooned on a frozen desert. There is not a sign of life on the horizon and a thousand signs of death. Not a blade of grass, not an insect; once or twice a day the shadow of a big hawk scenting carrion.

I suppose I can endure cold, and fatigue, and the face to face death, as well as another; but extra for me there is the universal pervasion of Ugliness. Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul language, even from one’s own mouth (for all are devil ridden). Everything is unnatural, broken, blasted; the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodes sit outside the dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them the most glorious. But to sit with them all day, all night … and a week later to come back and find them still sitting there in motionless groups THAT is what saps the ‘soldierly spirit.’

2. Preface to a book of poetry Owen had hoped to publish in 1919:

‘This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.

Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War.

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.

My subject is War, and the pity of War.

The Poetry is in the pity.

Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true poets must be truthful.’
The Next War

War's a joke for me and you,
While we know such dreams are true.
- Siegfried Sassoon

Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death,-
Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland,-
Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.
We've sniffed the green thick odour of his breath,-
Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't writhe.
He's spat at us with bullets and he's coughed Shrapnel. We chorussed when he sang aloft,
We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.

Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!
We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.
No soldier's paid to kick against His powers.
We laughed, -knowing that better men would come,
And greater wars: when each proud fighter brags
He wars on Death, for lives; not men, for flags

- Where is: ‘Out there...’?
- ‘Out there...’ what is the soldiers’ attitude to death?
- Does this sonnet suggest that soldiers are not afraid to die?
- Why do the soldiers take this attitude to death?
- What do you think the last two lines of the sonnet mean?

Essay/Discussion Question

Wilfred wrote this sonnet whilst recovering from ‘The Nerves’ at Craiglockhart war hospital in Scotland:

**Letter to Susan Owen 1917:‘The Doctor suddenly was moved to forbid me to go into action. He is nervous about my nerves, and sent me down yesterday—labelled Neurasthenia. I'm being sent to Craiglockhart hospital in Scotland.’**

Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred’s great friend & mentor, described Craiglockhart War Hospital as ‘Dottyville’.

What are all these quotes - ‘The nerves, neurasthenia & Dottyville’ - referring to? (In your essay/discussion reflect upon the impact of war on returned servicemen & women. Discuss PTSD. What is it & what was it called during WW1?)
Dulce Et Decorum Est.

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned out backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame, all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! - An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.-
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin,
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,-
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Again written whilst recovering at Craiglockhart War Hospital: Dulce et decorum est is arguably Wilfred’s most famous poem. It is a modernistic description of the ordinary man, the ordinary soldier, at war. It is a vivid departure from the romantic descriptions, found in the paintings, prose & poetry of the time, which showed war as a grand & glorious adventure. This poem strips war back to its fundamental despair & ugliness:

‘...And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin,
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gurgling from the froth-corrupted lungs
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,...’

In a letter to his mother he introduces the poem. The letter translates the Latin quote from Horace (Odes), that Wilfred uses to such a devastating effect.

**Letter to Susan Owen October, 1917:** ‘Here is a gas poem done yesterday. The famous Latin tag means, of course, it is sweet and meet to die for one’s country. Sweet! and decorous!’

‘...My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.’

Essay/Discussion (in two parts):
- **Part 1:** In your own words describe what the Latin means. In the world today how prevalent is this sentiment?
- **Part 2:** What is Wilfred’s meaning by the use of this quote in the poem?
**Wilfred** wrote: *Dulce*, in part as a response to the following poem that had been published in the Daily Mail in 1916:

Who’s for the game, the biggest that’s played,
The red crashing game of a fight?
Who’ll grip and tackle the job unafraid?
And who thinks he’d rather sit tight?
Who knows it won’t be a picnic – not much-
Yet eagerly shoulders a gun?
Who would much rather come back with a crutch
Than lie-low and be out of the fun?
Come along, lads –
But you’ll come on all right –
For there’s only one course to pursue,
Your country is up to her neck in a fight,
And she’s looking and calling for you.

Jessie Pope.

This poem by Jessie pope suggests that war is a game. She likens it to Rugby with words such as ‘*grip*’ and ‘*tackle*’. She infers that only cowards would avoid volunteering - ‘*lie-low*’ – & concludes that real men would rather:

‘...*come back with a crutch*

*Than lie-low and be out of the fun*...’

Ask any soldier if it *is* ‘fun’ to lose a body-part in war & see what they say!

This poem is a perfect example of jingoism & propaganda dressed up as patriotism; as in the quote from Horace (23 BC): ‘*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.*’ – It is a wonderful thing to die for one’s country.

**Essay/Discussion Question:**

Compare & contrast Wilfred Owens’ concept of war, as illustrated by: *Dulce et decorum est*, with Jessie Pope’s concept of war; as illustrated by: *Whose for the game.*
Anthem for Doomed Youth

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
    — Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
    Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
    Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
    And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
    Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
    The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
    And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Wilfred wrote Anthem to Dead Youth in Craiglockhart War Hospital (notice the different title). He wrote it at the same time he met a man destined to become one of the great influences of his life: Siegfried Sassoon.

22 August 1917 - Wilfred to his cousin Leslie Gunston.

My dear Leslie,
    At last I have an event worth a letter. I have beknown myself to Siegfried Sassoon. Went in to him last night (my second call). The first visit was one morning last week. The sun blazed into his room making his purple dressing suit of a brilliance – almost matching my sonnet! He is very tall and stately, with a fine firm chisel'd (how's that?) head, ordinary short brown hair. The general expression of his face is one of boredom. . . . the last thing he said was “Sweat your guts out writing poetry!” . . . He himself is 30! Looks under 25! – yours, Wilfred.

Siegfried suggested Wilfred change the title of the poem from: Anthem to Dead Youth to Anthem for Doomed Youth. Wilfred eagerly complied. Siegfried also made hand-written revisions throughout the poem – (see reproduction on next page).

Wilfred’s immense respect for Siegfried as a poet & his intensely felt friendship toward this dashing Lieutenant, assured an enormous impact on the style & content of Wilfred’s poetry. Siegfried was also able to fill Wilfred with the confidence he needed to continue writing. He offered praise, insightful criticism, honesty & most importantly, the following command:

‘Sweat your guts out writing poetry!’
Anthem for doomed Youth in Wilfred’s handwriting with revisions by Siegfried Sassoon.

Essay/Discussion in two parts:

1. Do you think that the influence of the people you respect; such as your friends & family, is important to your success & achievements in life?

2. Is honest criticism as valuable as praise?
Strange Meeting

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
“Strange friend,” I said, “here is no cause to mourn.”
“None,” said the other, “save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery;
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint.
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.

I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now...."

Strange Meeting was written in 1918 & published after Owen’s death. The story is not original - (a person suffers a dream-like descent into the underworld & is confronted by the dead therein.) This tale is found throughout art, music & literature: Dante’s Inferno; the legend of Orpheus; Christ’s Descent into Hell (Bosch) & even today in TV & film (ALIEN, Apocalypse Now). Though the story is not original the experience described in Strange Meeting was intensely original & personal to Wilfred – he had killed men & he had been buried alive:

January 1917

‘Mother, I can see no excuse for deceiving you about these last 4 days. I have suffered seventh hell.
I have not been at the front.
I have been in front of it.
I held an advanced post, a ‘dug-out' in the middle of No Man's Land.
To reach it we had to go over the top. It was of course too dark, and the ground was NOT sloppy mud, but an octopus of sucking clay, 3, 4, and 5 feet deep. Men have been known to drown. High explosives were dropping all around and machine guns spluttered every few minutes.
Three quarters dead we reached the dug-out and relieved the wretches therein. My dug-out held 25 men tight packed. Water filled it to a depth of 1 or 2 feet, leaving say 4 feet of air.
One entrance had been blown in & blocked.
So far, the other remained.
The Germans knew we were staying there and decided we shouldn't.
Those fifty hours were the agony of my happy life.
I nearly broke down and let myself drown in the water that was now slowly rising over my knees.

In the Platoon on my left the sentries over the dug-out were blown to nothing....I kept my own sentries half-way down the stairs. In spite of this one lad was blown down the stairs and, I'm afraid, blinded.'
He wrote The Sentry about this experience:

The Sentry

We’d found an old Boche dug-out, and he knew,
And gave us hell, for shell on frantic shell
Hammered on top, but never quite burst through.
Rain, guttering down in waterfalls of slime
Kept slush waist high, that rising hour by hour,
Choked up the steps too thick with clay to climb.
What murk of air remained stank old, and sour
With fumes of whizz-bangs, and the smell of men
Who’d lived there years, and left their curse in the den,
If not their corpses. . . .

There we herded from the blast
Of whizz-bangs, but one found our door at last.
Buffeting eyes and breath, snuffing the candles.
And thud! flump! thud! down the steep steps came thumping
And splashing in the flood, deluging muck —
The sentry’s body; then his rifle, handles
Of old Boche bombs, and mud in ruck on ruck.
We dredged him up, for killed, until he whined
"O sir, my eyes — I'm blind — I'm blind, I'm blind!"
Coaxing, I held a flame against his lids
And said if he could see the least blurred light
He was not blind; in time he’d get all right.
"I can't," he sobbed. Eyeballs, huge-bulged like squids
Watch my dreams still; but I forgot him there
In posting next for duty, and sending a scout
To beg a stretcher somewhere, and floundering about
To other posts under the shrieking air.
Those other wretches, how they bled and spewed,
And one who would have drowned himself for good, —
I try not to remember these things now.
Let dread hark back for one word only: how
Half-listening to that sentry’s moans and jumps,
And the wild chattering of his broken teeth,
Renewed most horribly whenever crumps
Pummelled the roof and slogged the air beneath —
Through the dense din, I say, we heard him shout
"I see your lights!" But ours had long died out.
‘25th April 1917
One wet night when we lay up against a railway embankment; a big shell lit on top of the bank, just 2 yards from my head. Before I awoke, I was blown in the air right away from the bank! I passed most of the following days in a railway cutting, in a hole just big enough to lie in, and covered with corrugated iron. My brother officer, 2/lt. Gaukroger, or Cock Robin as we called him, lay opposite in a similar hole, but no relief will ever relieve him, nor will his Rest be a 9 days-rest.

You know it was not the Bosche that worked me up, nor the explosives, but it was living so long by poor old Cock Robin, who lay nearby, but in various places around and about, if you understand. I hope you don’t!’

The death of his dear friend ‘Cock Robin’ had a deep emotional impact on Wilfred & he was hospitalised for ‘the nerves’ at Craiglockhart War Hospital. As he recovered he was able to give voice to his experiences through a number of the poems he is most remembered for, such as Anthem for Doomed Youth & Dulce et Decorum Est.

Written May 1918 the poem **Futility** was born of the trenches. Wilfred went to war to bear witness. To speak for the ordinary man, the everyday soldier. Futility is amongst Wilfred’s final poems & it is the sum of all he witnessed, felt & experienced in WW1:

‘My Poetry is not about heroes. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War. Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity. The Poetry is in the pity:’

**Futility**

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?
On acting in the presentation – Eliane Morel

It's a privilege to be performing the poems and letters of Wilfred Owen. I have loved Owen’s work since I studied his poems in year 11 at Dickson College. The course was : Voices of War (under the tutelage of a fabulous lady we called Dr Wise) and what struck me then, and still strikes me now, is the immediacy, urgency, and clarity of his message, carried within the beauty and power of his poetic language.

Researching Owen’s life meant reading about his early years. Due to his father’s long working hours and his mother’s ill health, Wilfred sometimes assumed the role of head of the family. This led him to act in a somewhat autocratic manner toward his younger siblings and, according to his brother Harold, a little superior.

In Wilfred’s early years, the family moved between class strata: starting fairly middle class but forced, through circumstance, into lower class districts. Susan, his mother,
seemed perturbed at this association with the lower classes and appears to have tried to separate the family by actively avoiding contact, even when living in these districts.

Wilfred was not immune to these sentiments: on the outbreak of war, Wilfred posted a letter home from France where he was teaching languages. In it he expresses his regret at the impending loss of Englishmen far less than that of “the French, Belgian, or even Russian or German armies: because the former are all Tommy Atkins, poor fellows, while the continental armies are inclusive of the finest brains and temperaments of the land.”

By the end of the war he regrets the loss of all soldiers. He has found commonality: “…you could not be surrounded by a better band of comrades”. The war seems to have helped Wilfred grow into a more caring and compassionate man. The war has humanised him.

In his younger days Wilfred was concerned above all with poetry. His greatest aim in life was to be a romantic poet like his heroes Keats and Shelley. The war seems to slowly strip his poetry of ego. Poems are no longer a romantic way to express his inner self; nor are they just an attempt to achieve technical perfection: now the poems are intent on communicating the full truth of war. Nothing is too horrific to describe or write. Truth is paramount and the “…poetry is in the pity”.

Near the end Wilfred wrote: "I know I shall be killed. But it is the only place I can make my protest from....” and “…I came out here in order to help these boys. By leading them, as well as an officer can, and by watching their sufferings, that I may speak for them as well as a pleader can.” At his death on the 4th November 1918, Wilfred had become so much more than a poet.

**On playing Susan Owen**

When we approached this play as a solo show, Scott (the writer & director) and I chose Wilfred’s mother, Susan Owen, as the person to embody the poetry and letters of Wilfred Owen. This seems obvious due to their intense and honest relationship. Wilfred shared everything in his letters home to Susan; he did not flinch from the most horrific detail of the war, he did not lessen his writing to spare her motherly feelings and he did not hide any of his innermost feelings. She was his confessor, his touchstone, his tell-all:
“Mother, I can see no excuse for deceiving you about these last 4 days. I have suffered seventh hell. I have not been at the front. I have been in front of it...Those fifty hours were the agony of my happy life. I nearly broke down and let myself drown in the water that was now slowly rising over my knees.”

‘Dearest Mother, Here is a gas poem, done yesterday. Dulce et decorum est Pro Patria Mori; The famous Latin tag means, of course, it is sweet and meet to die for one's country. Sweet! And decorous!’

We imagined Susan on an anniversary of Wilfred’s death, the 4th November, set in any year, perhaps every year since. She is lost in reverie looking back over Wilfred’s letters, photos and poems - living through memory what she has so viciously lost.

My initial instinct was to play Susan with a stiff upper lip, a little uptight, but Scott suggested we make Susan a bit cheeky and theatrical, with a penchant for music-hall vaudeville. Odds on she wasn’t like this in real life! This technique gives me the licence to inhabit Wilfred’s voice, and the voices and characters found within his poetry. In the play I feel that Susan is possessed by the poetry and letters: a slight touch of Miss Havisham perhaps.

**On performing the poems**

My approach has been to allow the rhythm and structure of the words to support the character/s within each poem. These characters don’t care about poetic beauty; they want to tell their story. They want the world to hear their truth:

And thud! flump! thud! down the steep steps came thumping
And splashing in the flood, deluging muck —
The sentry’s body; then his rifle, handles
Of old Boche bombs, and mud in ruck on ruck.
We dredged him up, for killed, until he whined
"O sir, my eyes — I'm blind — I'm blind, I'm blind!"

As our starting point, we looked at the readings of war poems by British actors for England’s Channel 4’s Remembering World War 1: Remembrance Day Weekend: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLiC_qpE7y0520gi6Zh8fCqkRfaUTbTeHB](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLiC_qpE7y0520gi6Zh8fCqkRfaUTbTeHB)

I particularly liked the readings by Sean Bean and Christopher Eccleston who spoke as if they were characters who had been in the war and witnessed everything. The urgent need to share their truths comes through very strongly.
In The Next War, The Sentry and Dulce et Decorum Est, we discovered, amongst others, the voice of a battle-hardened, war-weary cockney soldier who, without sentimentality, describes what is happening to him and his mates; the horrors they are sharing and the terror that they witness. He reeks of the gallows humour needed to survive this hell; needed to stay sane regardless of the injuries and losses of his mates. He can see no reason for these atrocities.

In The Next War, the bravado of the character is clear from the beginning. He boasts that soldiers are not just tolerant of Death (also a character in this grim play) but also mates with Death. They laugh with him “...old chum...” They “…league with him...” Death is a comrade on the battlefield. The last two lines of the poem strangely seem to contradict this bravado. As an actor, reading the lines I suddenly realised that this is the point where the character reveals the truth: that the soldiers’ bravado lies in the knowledge that they are expendable. Each soldier in the trench knows they are fighting for their lives and that of their comrades. They are not fighting for glory, flag or country. They are simply fighting for each other.

In The Sentry, our war-weary soldier (Owen) is numbed from his experience in the dug-out; the incessant shelling, the deluge of rain, slime and mud, the fumes of shells and the stench of men:

We’d found an old Boche dug-out, and he knew,
And gave us hell, for shell on frantic shell
Hammered on top, but never quite burst through.
Rain, guttering down in waterfalls of slime
Kept slush waist high, that rising hour by hour,
Choked up the steps too thick with clay to climb.
What murk of air remained stank old, and sour
With fumes of whizz-bangs, and the smell of men
Who’d lived there years, and left their curse in the den,
If not their corpses. . . ."

The mention of the Sentry’s body seems every-day and ordinary:

And thud! flump! thud! down the steep steps came thumping
And splashing in the flood, deluging muck —
The sentry's body; then his rifle, handles
Of old Boche bombs, and mud in ruck on ruck.
We dredged him up, for killed, until he whined
"O sir, my eyes — I'm blind — I'm blind, I'm blind!"

The use of the word “whined” suggests no rejoicing of his being alive, rather a faint annoyance at his sound. Yet the sentry’s plea: "O sir, my eyes — I'm blind — I'm blind, I'm blind!" jolt both us (the reader) and the soldier back to caring and compassion; back from numbness to humanity once more. Owen is fighting against the dulling of the human spirit and the numbing of emotions to war and its horrors. Both the reader and the soldiers must resist the temptation to let go of pity and compassion. This is Owen’s “...protest...”. Perhaps coming together most suitably in the following poem:

Futility
Move him into the sun—
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
Always it woke 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?

Dulce et Decorum Est shares with us (the readers) a vivid and horrific experience of war. The poem invites us onto the battlefield. As an actor I approached the poem as a mini-play. In Act 1 a war-weary soldier describes the utter exhaustion of soldiers walking back from the front line. In Act 2 an incoming shell, most likely containing thick, yellow, mustard gas, is heard through its distinctive whistle; “Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—“. The men frantically fit their gas masks, but one man doesn’t quite cover his
face in time. In Act 3 the war-weary soldier (and us) witness the man “Drowning”.
Drowning in the air:
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime.—
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In Act 4 the war-weary soldier invites us into his dreams, or perhaps his waking visions:
“If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—

In the last ACT - the epilogue - Owen sums up what this experience has meant. Here is his protest: he sums it up for his “friend” – us, the readers:

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Owen’s protest seems to be that: War is not glorious! But his protest is in fact stronger. To say that it glorious to die for your country - is to: Lie! An “old Lie” – a lie as old as war itself.

As always Wilfred was heavily influenced by Sassoon and made special mention of Siegfried’s poem Testament in a letter home to Susan:

‘And now I go among cattle to be a cattle driver. I am now fairly and reasonably tired & must go to my tent, without saying the things which you will better understand unsaid. “O my heart, Be still: You have cried your cry, you played your part.”
Did I ever send you this poem by Siegfried?
“For the last time I say - War is not glorious; 
Tho' lads march out superb & die victorious - 
You say we crush the Beast; I say we fight 
Because men lost the landmarks in the night, 
And met in gloom to grapple, stab & kill.”

This last line obviously influencing Strange Meeting.

Anthem for Doomed Youth and Futility are poems that seem to flow naturally from the voice of Wilfred’s mother, Susan.

Anthem for Doomed Youth contrasts the small and comfortable rituals of mourning the dead – the prayers, bells, choirs, coffins – with the horrors of war, that perversely mock these rituals by replacing them.

...No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells; 
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, –
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells; ...

The last line provides a home for the poem. An emotional hearth:

... And each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds.

The scene is perhaps a mother sitting in a darkened room grieving the loss of a child. The idea of this setting gave me licence to explore complex and contradictory emotions. When Susan says lines such as: ‘what passing bells for these who die as cattle?’ she is simultaneously mourning her son’s death and the death of “our boys” (the young men of England). She is also bitter at the waste, angry at the futility and dull with a numbness; an inability to fully feel or fully express her emotions.

When performed by Susan the poem Futility becomes both her expression of loss and Wilfred’s expression of loss. We (the readers) share this loss; we share with Wilfred the loss of his men, his comrades, his mates, his dear friends. Listening to Susan recite we (the audience) share in her loss of Wilfred and ache at the futility of war, just as she does.

—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil 
To break earth’s sleep at all?

This last plea breaks all our hearts yet it is not sentimental or trite. It is a powerful protest against war.
Strange Meeting

Scott and I had a long and interesting discussion about Strange Meeting: I felt sure that this poem was in Owen’s voice – it was him, as poet, talking to another poet. Scott thought the voice in this poem was that of - Everyman – any and every soldier who had/would encounter their reflection on the other side. I now think we are both correct. It has helped me as an actor to approach Strange Meeting with these ideas in mind. Wilfred/Everyman descends into the underworld (perhaps in a dream). He happens across figures in the dark. One springs up and they talk. This dark figure’s words reveal him to be the same: Wilfred/Everyman’s reflection. They shared the same passions, the same needs:

Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

He too went “After the wildest beauty in the world” (perhaps the writing of poetry). He too fought bravely, cared for his comrades, and killed enemy soldiers.

He is in fact the enemy that Wilfred killed. This ‘Strange Meeting’ offers Wilfred the chance to forgive and in turn be forgiven. He finally recognises that all are the same. All are men with the passions of men. And now they can rest:

“Let us sleep now. . .”