

## The soldier's prayer

Literacy/Drama

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To create drama and poetry from the battle scenes in *War Horse*
- To imagine the feelings of soldiers going into battle
- To understand the use of language to express feelings.

### SKILLS TARGETED

- Speaking and listening
- Characterisation
- Creative writing/poetry
- Group co-operation.

### RESOURCES

- Text from Shakespeare's *Henry V*
- Text from Major Nicholls' speech in *War Horse*

### SUGGESTED TIME SCALE

- One session for steps 1-5
- Additional sessions to develop step 5

#### Step 1

Set up a sensory experience of being in the trenches with your class. This could be creating a soundscape of a battle, or playing some battle scene sound effects (you could use sounds from the *War Horse* soundtrack). You could show some images from the battlefields or read some accounts of life in the trenches

#### Step 2

Ask the class to sit in a circle facing outwards, eyes closed, so they are not distracted by anyone else: they are going to work alone to create a soldier's private thoughts.

Everyone should imagine they are a soldier the night before a battle, and they are thinking of their own private thoughts/prayers – first in their heads, then aloud to themselves

#### Step 2

Let everyone murmur their thoughts aloud for a while in the circle – they should imagine they are alone, and pay no attention to anything else that is being said

#### Step 3

Now ask everyone to think of one important word, phrase or sentence that sums up what they are thinking, and to say that aloud – all at once

#### Step 4

Now assemble all the words and sentences into an interesting order to create a poem – either together as a class, or in small groups of about six children

#### Step 5

Now add actions and/or music to the poem/s to create a performance. You could record them to make a radio piece, or they could be written down and illustrated.

### SUCCESS CRITERIA

- Children will understand the thoughts and feelings of soldiers on the night of battle
- They will be able to express those thoughts as a prayer or stream of consciousness
- They will use their spoken words collaboratively to create poems.



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### ADDITIONAL SUGGESTION

You could introduce another literary depiction of a battle here by using a speech from Shakespeare's *Henry V* (see below). This speech describes the night before the Battle of Agincourt, as Henry wanders in disguise among his troops, watching them prepare for the unequal battle with the far more powerful French army. He then prays to the God of battles to help his soldiers.

### Step 1

You might wish to show your class some scenes from the films of *Henry V* (there are versions by Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh), or from other Shakespeare plays and stories

### Step 2

Read the speech to the children as they are sitting in the circle, before they start their own prayers. Explain what is happening and help them to understand the atmosphere of the scene – how quiet it is and how tense and anxious the soldiers are

### Step 3

End with Henry's prayer:

*Oh God of battles, steel my soldiers' hearts  
Possess them not with fear*

Ask the class to repeat this with you three times.

### Step 4

Now begin the devising sequence as above (steps 2-4).



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AN EDITED VERSION OF THE NIGHT BEFORE AGINCOURT IN HENRY V

There are two halves to this speech. The first half is about how frightened all the troops are. If you want to focus on the experience of ordinary soldiers going into battle, you could use this piece on its own as a stimulus.

Now creeping murmur and the poring dark  
Fills the wide vessel of the universe.  
From camp to camp  
The hum of either army stilly sounds,

(it's night time)

(you can hear the two army camps on opposite sides of the battlefield)

Fire answers fire,  
Steed threatens steed, in high and boastful neighs  
Piercing the night's dull ear, and from the tents  
The armourers,

(knights are being put into their armour)

With busy hammers closing rivets up,  
Give dreadful note of preparation:  
The country cocks do crow, the clocks do toll,  
And the third hour of drowsy morning name.  
The poor condemned English,  
Like sacrifices, by their watchful fires  
Sit patiently and inly ruminate  
The morning's danger.

(the hammering warns it's nearly time)

(it's 3am)

(the English are imagining the battle)

The second half of the speech is about King Henry boosting his troops morale and getting them ready for battle. You could use this if you would like to focus on the officers or generals trying to get the soldiers ready to fight. Compare it with the Major's speech in *War Horse* as he prepares to rally his troops

O now, behold  
The royal captain of this ruin'd band

(ie King Henry with his weak and rag-tag army)

Walking from watch to watch, from tent to tent,  
Forth he goes and visits all his host.  
Bids them good morrow with a modest smile  
And calls them brothers, friends and countrymen.  
Upon his royal face there is no note  
How dread an army hath enrounded him;

(from sentry to sentry)  
(he visits his whole army)  
(says good morning)

(he doesn't show fear even though he's surrounded)

So every wretch plucks comfort from his looks:  
A largess universal like the sun  
A little touch of Harry in the night.

(he helps them feel brave)  
(he makes them feel comforted)  
(Harry is Henry's nickname)

