Why Do We Wear Poppies?



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Lesson Objective

To understand some of the historical context behind the poetry of World War 1

Success Criteria

- To relate two facts about the creation of the poem ‘In Flanders’ Fields’
- To explain some of the language features that are effective in ‘In Flanders’ Fields’
- To explain why Moina Michaels might have found this poem so touching

Flowers in the Trenches

What do flowers normally make you think of? Consider a rose or a carnation. What does this flower make you think of? Why? What are the connotations of this flower?



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What You Already Know

Think about when we use poppies.

Discuss with a partner:

- Who sells them?
- Why?
- Do you know of a famous poem about poppies in the battlefields during the war?





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The Beginnings of the Poppy as a Symbol of Remembrance

- On Sunday 2nd May, 1915 Lieutenant Alexis Helmer of the 2nd Battery, 1st Brigade Canadian Field Artillery, was killed by a direct hit from an 8 inch German shell. He was a great friend of John McCrae (Doctor and Poet). His body parts were gathered in sandbags and laid in an army blanket.

- He was buried the same evening at the new burial ground created for French and Canadian casualties at Essex Farm British Military Cemetery. Because there was no chaplain, his friend Major John McCrae conducted a simple service. He recited, from memory, passages from the Church of England's 'Order of Burial of the Dead'.



John McCrae and the Poppy

- Major John McCrae wrote the first draft of a poem commemorating the war dead on the same evening as Helmer's death. Some fellow soldiers said that he was seen writing the poem sitting on the rear step of an ambulance while looking at his friend's grave. Bright red poppies were said to be springing up amongst the graves in the cemetery.



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In Flanders' Fields

The poem that resulted from that evening's work was 'In Flanders' Fields'. It was accepted for publication in 'Punch' magazine and was published on 8th December, 1915. **Here is the poem.**

In Flanders' fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders' fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders' fields.



- **What do you think of it?**
- **What is effective about it?**
- **What language features has McCrae used?**

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Moina Michael and the Poppy

What has that poem got to do with the poppy we see everywhere on Remembrance Day you may ask? How did it go from being included as one line of a poem to becoming an international symbol of remembrance?

9th November, 1918 – Moina Michael sits in the office of the YMCA Overseas War Secretaries Headquarters in New York. On her break she flips through the pages of the 'Ladies Home Journal' and finds a reprint of the 'In Flanders' Field' poem. She vows then to always remember the troops and writes her own poem in reply on the back of an envelope.

She decides to wear a poppy to remember the men and goes out to buy as many silk poppies as she can from a local department store. She sells and gives them away to the delegates of a war conference taking place in the building. They tell the rest of the delegates about the idea.

Plenary

Now – tell a partner about the symbol of the poppy:

- How does it work to remind us about the sacrifice of soldiers in war?
- Where did the idea come from to use the poppy as a symbol of remembrance?
- Name one of the key people involved in the early history of the Remembrance Poppy. What did that person do to make the poppy the symbol it is today?




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