

ART ACROSS THE CURRICULUM | ENGLISH

WRITING ABOUT WAR

INSPIRED BY PABLO PICASSO'S *WEeping WOMAN*, 1937

LEVELS 9–10

OVERVIEW

In this resource students will analyse *Weeping woman*, 1937, and develop an understanding of its historical context in the time of the Spanish Civil War. They will explore responses to war from different perspectives and for different audiences in a range of text types. Taking inspiration from Picasso's works, students will experiment with style, tone and sensory language to write creative pieces in each text type.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Discuss the nature and effects of war
- Analyse and interpret *Weeping woman*, 1937, and discuss how Pablo Picasso has used visual elements to convey the human consequences of war
- Analyse the techniques used in a range of text types to create atmosphere and meaning
- Compare and contrast the features of different text types
- Apply figurative language to the writing of text types for different audiences
- Experiment with style, tone and sensory language to write specific text types

LINKS TO THE VICTORIAN ENGLISH CURRICULUM

Year 9

- Understand that authors innovate with text structures and language for specific purposes and effects (VCELA429).
- Analyse and explain the use of symbols, icons and myth in still and moving images and how these augment meaning (VCELA431).
- Investigate how evaluation can be expressed directly and indirectly using devices, including allusion, evocative vocabulary and metaphor (VCELA428).
- Use comprehension strategies to interpret and analyse texts, comparing and evaluating representations of an event, issue, situation or character in different texts (VCELY443).
- Create imaginative, informative and persuasive texts that present a point of view and advance or illustrate arguments, including texts that integrate visual, print and/or audio features (VCELY449).

Year 10

- Understand that people's evaluations of texts are influenced by their value systems, the context and the purpose, and the mode of communication (VCELA457).
- Evaluate the impact on audiences of different choices in the representation of still and moving images (VCELA459).
- Create literary texts with a sustained 'voice', selecting and adapting appropriate text structures, literary devices, language, auditory and visual structures, and features for a specific purpose and intended audience (VCELT477).

ABOUT THE WORK

1. PABLO PICASSO'S *WEeping WOMAN*, 1937



Pablo Picasso

Weeping woman, 1937

oil on canvas

55.2 × 46.2 cm

National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne

Purchased by donors of The
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Weeping woman is one in a series of works created by Pablo Picasso in September and October 1937, in the wake of the painting of *Guernica*, 1937 (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid). One of Picasso's largest and best known works, *Guernica* is an impassioned response to the massacre of undefended civilians in the town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. It has become an iconic image of protest against the atrocities of war.

Weeping Woman is a portrait of unbound grief. Silver tears stream down her mauve stained cheeks. Her brows are knitted, dark lines piercing her lurid green skin like nails. Her eyes are unfocused, blinded by loss. She holds a white handkerchief that rises in sharp peaks before a looming shadow cast against the close, grey walls of the airless space. Her black tongue protrudes from parted pink lips, suggesting an anguished wail. Modelled on Picasso's lover and collaborator Dora Maar, the weeping woman's tortured eyes and broken visage represent the distraught mother in *Guernica* who has lost her child, the pain of Spain divided in civil war, bereavement, suffering and loss.

1.1 THE ARTIST

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) is among the most celebrated and influential artists of the twentieth century. Hugely prolific, Picasso created an estimated 50,000 works across a variety of media in a career that spanned eight decades. His reputation, both in his professional and his personal life, made him a celebrity – an artist superstar in his own lifetime.

Throughout his extensive career, Picasso moved freely between different styles and mediums, avidly transforming his inspiration and experience into his own unique visual language. With fellow artist Georges Braque he devised Analytical Cubism, a style that divided objects into flat shapes and lines, and showed objects from multiple perspectives simultaneously. This was a radical break from traditional modes of representation and paved the way for artists to go beyond the figurative to explore abstract forms.

1.2 CULTURAL CONTEXT: THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

In 1937, Spain was embroiled in a civil war between Republican (socialist) factions and Nationalist forces, headed by General Francisco Franco. The Spanish town of Guernica was the ancient capital of the Basque region, which had strongly resisted Nationalist forces. Guernica lay well behind the front lines of the conflict and its civilian population was unprepared and undefended. Intended to send a forceful message to the Republicans, a three-hour-long aerial bombing raid was undertaken by Franco's allies on Monday 26 April 1937. Fighter planes followed the bombers, gunning down fleeing civilians. Fires burned in Guernica for three days, seventy percent of the city was destroyed and one third of the population was injured or killed.

1.3 PICASSO'S *GUERNICA*, 1937

When Guernica was attacked, Picasso had been commissioned by the Spanish Republican government to create a mural for the Spanish Pavilion of the 1937 Paris International Exposition. He was sickened by the reports of the attack and the graphic images that accompanied newsreel footage and newspaper accounts. He abandoned his initial ideas for the mural, instead choosing to express his horror at the massacre in a painting frenzy that culminated in *Guernica* a 3.5-metre tall and 7.8-metre wide mural-size canvas painted in a palette of grey, black and white.

Guernica's motifs include a rampaging bull; a horse, contorted with panic, trampling a soldier who lies broken on the ground; and women fleeing blindly in the chaos, one cradling a small, lifeless body. After the completion of *Guernica*, Picasso continued to develop the theme of the grieving woman, no longer referring to just the Spanish Civil War, but to the broader idea of human suffering.

Pablo Picasso
Spanish 1881–1973,
worked in France 1904–73
Guernica 1937
oil on canvas
349.0 × 776.0 cm
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte
Reina Sofía, Madrid
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Photo: Photographic Archives
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte
Reina Sofía, Madrid



WARM UP



IN SCHOOL

2. DISCUSSION: PERSPECTIVES ON WAR

Discuss the meaning, purpose, effects and ethics of war in pairs or in small groups. Use the information provided about Picasso's paintings *Weeping woman* and *Guernica*, and the cultural context in which they were created to inform your discussions.

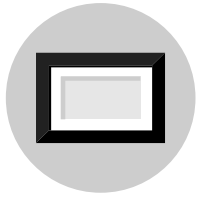
1. Make a list of all the words that come to mind when you think of war.
2. Compare and contrast the following quotations. What do they each reveal about different attitudes to war?

'War is what happens when language fails', Margaret Atwood, 1993, *The Robber Bride*¹

'Battle is the most magnificent competition in which a human being can indulge. It brings out all that is best; it removes all that is base. All men are afraid in battle. The coward is the one who lets his fear overcome his sense of duty. Duty is the essence of manhood.', American General George S. Patton Jr, 1943, to the officers of the 45th Infantry Division before the Invasion of Sicily²

3. Choose one of the following questions to discuss:
 - What wars are occurring in the world today? What are they about?
 - What are the consequences of war? How might it affect civilians and soldiers?
 - Imagine you were explaining the concept of war to an alien who had never heard of it before. How would you describe it?
 - What might future wars be fought over?
4. Report back to other groups on your discussion. What did you consider? What challenges did you have when addressing your question?
5. What ideas did other groups have which you didn't think about? How do their considerations change your responses?

ACTIVITY



IN THE GALLERY

3. AN ARTIST'S PERSPECTIVE: CREATING MEANING IN *WEEPING WOMAN*

In this activity students will analyse the painting and discuss how the artist has used visual elements to comment on the human consequences of war.

Study *Weeping woman* intensely for a few minutes. Looking closely can reveal details that contribute to meaning.

3.1 LOOKING FOR CLUES IN *WEEPING WOMAN*

Reading an artwork is just like reading a piece of creative writing except that instead of words an artist uses colour, line, tone, shape, repetition, exaggeration, viewpoint and composition to create a meaning or mood.

QUESTION	SUGGESTED ANSWER
Describe the emotion the woman is experiencing using one word. What makes you say that? What choices has the artist made to evoke this emotion?	The frenetic, swirling brushstrokes that depict the woman's hair, the open mouth that may be emitting a scream and the tears falling from tilted eyes suggest the devastating power of human grief.
Symbolism is present when a word, phrase, item or image is used to represent a more complex idea. What might the colour green symbolise in the work?	The sharp, sickly green may suggest an 'inner' sickness.
Describe the predominant green in the painting. Why might the artist have contrasted this acidic green with the vivid mauve on the lips and cheeks?	The contrast creates a tension that reflects the woman's anxiety.
Looking at the woman's face, what details do you notice? Where has the artist used exaggeration to create and intensify meaning?	The distorted facial features may suggest the psychological and physical damage to innocent victims of war. The large scale of the face dominates the picture surface, drawing attention to the woman's distress and confusion.
The artist has merged two views of the face, a frontal and a profile perspective. What might this symbolise?	The combined profile and frontal views of the face are characteristic of Picasso's Cubist period. In this instance they resemble ill-fitting jigsaw pieces and emphasise the confusion and insecurity experienced during war.
What idea might be suggested by the small, cramped room in which the woman is positioned?	The confined space implies the claustrophobic experience of being trapped in a war-torn environment with no hope of escape.

Note: Student's responses may differ from the suggested answers. Varied and creative interpretations of the artwork are encouraged.

3.2 USING LITERARY DEVICES TO DESCRIBE *WEEPING WOMAN*

- Suggest some adjectives to describe the lines of the woman's hair, such as 'forceful' and 'swirling'. How might they contribute to meaning in the painting?
- Choose a feature of the woman's face, such as the larger eye, and describe it using a simile.
- Describe the tears running down the woman's face using a metaphor; for example, 'crystal rivers corroding her face'.
- Create an interesting collective noun to describe the assortment of shapes in the painting. This can be anything you like: be creative.

LITERARY DEVICES

Similes are phrases that use comparison words such as 'like' or 'as' to compare two things with similar characteristics. By creating links between concepts that may not be immediately obvious, they help the reader to better imagine the scene being described. For example, 'the moon glowed like a shiny silver button' paints a more vivid picture than 'the moon was glowing'.

A metaphor compares things that have characteristics in common. The writer makes a direct statement that describes one thing as if it is another, inviting us to apply our imagination in a more powerful manner; for example, 'the world is your oyster'.

A collective noun names a group of things; for example, 'a gaggle of geese' or 'a school of fish'.

3.3 PICASSO'S WORLD

Through *Weeping woman*, Pablo Picasso expresses his outrage at the massacre of hundreds of undefended civilians in the Basque town of Guernica by German pilots during the Spanish Civil War.

What do you think was Picasso's purpose in making the painting? Who do you think was his intended audience?

Is this painting still relevant today? Why or why not?

ACTIVITY

4. AN ART CRITIC'S PERSPECTIVE



IN SCHOOL

Pablo Ruiz Picasso
Weeping Woman Paris.
26 October 1937
oil on canvas
60.0 × 49.0 cm
Zervos IX, 73
Tate Gallery, London
Photograph: Lee Miller Archives
1985
© Succession Picasso/
Copyright Agency 2020.



1. Pablo Picasso painted other versions of the *Weeping Woman* including *Weeping woman*, 1937 (Tate, London). Study the work carefully. How is it similar or different from the NGV's *Weeping woman*?
2. Art critics describe, analyse, interpret and make critical judgements about artworks or art exhibitions. They aim to make them accessible to a general audience and expand debate about art. Read art critic Jonathan Jones's description and interpretation of the painting: www.theguardian.com/culture/2000/may/13/art3
 - Find examples of where and how the article provides context about the work and the artist.
 - How has the writer used language to include the reader in his writing?
 - Which powerful adjectives has the writer used to describe the painting vividly?
 - Where has the writer used simile effectively to describe aspects of the image?
 - What is the meaning of 'excoriated face' in the context of the piece of writing?
 - Explain what Jones is suggesting in the sentence, 'This painting takes such associations and chews them to pulp'.
 - What evidence does the writer give to persuade the reader that the painting is optimistic in tone?

ACTIVITY



IN SCHOOL

5. A POET'S PERSPECTIVE: THE EFFECTS OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR ON PABLO NERUDA

For this activity, you will need access to 'I'm explaining a few things' (1947), by Pablo Neruda.

The effects of the Spanish Civil War were so disastrous that many writers turned to poetry, using the lyrical nature of this form as a channel to express both the sorrow and the beauty of their war-torn country. Poetry can help to reveal the contrasts between life before and after war, and its emotional toll on ordinary citizens. Nobel Prize-winning poet Pablo Neruda drew on his personal experience to write his poem *I'm explaining a few things*, 1947, which describes Spain before and after the start of the Spanish Civil War.

Read *I'm explaining a few things* and analyse the poem in more detail using the following questions. Feel free to annotate it or highlight key words or phrases.

- What is your first impression of the poem? Consider how it makes you feel.
- Pablo Neruda has given an impression of life in the suburbs of Madrid before the Spanish Civil War. What specific vocabulary has he used to do this?
- The poet has made use of different line lengths. How do you think this contributes to the meaning of the poem?
- How does the poet convey the smells and colours of the local market in his suburb before the war?
- What word would you use to describe the tone of the poem? Provide at least one example from the poem that reveals this tone.
Tone is the attitude of a writer towards their subject; it can be conveyed through their choice of words or viewpoint. The tone could be serious, melancholy, cynical, humorous, formal or informal.
- Where does the mood of the poem shift and why?
- What message is the poet conveying in the final verse of the poem?
- What specific vocabulary and poetic techniques has he used to convey this message?
- What was the poet's purpose in writing the poem? Who might be the intended audience for the poem?

You could also analyse *In Guernica* by American poet, playwright and novelist Norman Rosten (1913–95) in conjunction with this activity. Incorporate analysis of the poet's use of repetition, metaphor, simile, imagery and allusion.

ACTIVITY



IN SCHOOL

6. A FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT OF WAR: CREATING ATMOSPHERE AND MEANING WITH SENSORY LANGUAGE, STYLE AND TONE

For this activity, you will need access to *Homage to Catalonia* (1938).

Firsthand accounts written by those who have taken part in armed conflicts can also help us to understand the nature of war. George Orwell (1903–50) was a British journalist and author who wrote the books *Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984* (1949), two of the most famous novels of the twentieth century. A socialist, Orwell travelled to Spain in 1936 to fight for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. He documented his experience in a memoir, *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), which communicates the human dimension of life on the battlefield using sensory language.

1. Read the extract from chapter twelve of *Homage to Catalonia* from: *'I had been about ten days at the front when it happened' to 'But all the while the pain in my arm was diabolical, making me swear and then try not to swear, because every time I breathed too hard the blood bubbled out of my mouth'*.⁴
2. Answer the following questions to explore how Orwell has used style, tone and sensory language to convey his own experiences of war:
 - Which words and phrases relate to the writer's sensory experience of war? Consider the sights, taste, touch, sounds and feelings the writer describes.
 - Why might Orwell have chosen these words and phrases?
 - What type of text is this? In your response, consider the style and tone of the text.
 - How does the author use style and tone to communicate his message? *Style describes the way an author uses words. It may include a selection of words, figurative language or the arrangement of sentences that combine to create mood, imagery and meaning in a text.*
 - Why has the author included other people's voices?
 - Where has the author used strong contrasts to convey the conflicting emotions commonly experienced in war?
 - How effective do you think this account is in depicting the impact of war on soldiers? Explain your answer.

PROJECT



IN SCHOOL

7. CREATIVELY RESPONDING TO WAR

Choose one or more of the creative projects below. Utilise your knowledge of the different text types practised in the activities to communicate different perspectives on war.

7.1 A POETIC RESPONSE TO THE HORROR OF THE GUERNICA BOMBING

Write a poem using one of the following ideas. Consider how you want your reader to feel about war. Choose language which will most effectively communicate your message and include poetic techniques, such as alliteration to engage your reader or imagery to paint a vivid picture in their mind.

- Reflect on the bombing of Guernica taking inspiration from one of Picasso's works.
- Before and after images are often used to capture the changes that war has on a country. Write your own simple poem based on the theme 'Before and after the war'. The poem should contain two verses, with no more than six lines in each verse.
- Choose a style of poetry that suits your theme or invent your own style.

7.2 A LETTER HOME FROM THE BATTLEFIELDS OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

Imagine you are a soldier fighting for your beliefs during the Spanish Civil War. Write a letter home to your family describing your experience as if it were 'firsthand'. You may wish to use sensory language, as George Orwell did, to convey a sense of immediacy and the harsh realities of war.

7.3 AN ART CRITIC'S RESPONSE

Write two paragraphs in the same style as Jonathan Jones describing the NGV's *Weeping woman*. Begin your first paragraph with his words, 'Let your eyes wander ...'.

7.4 REFLECTION

Consider the following questions relating to your learning in this resource as a class.

- Reflect on the different text types you have been studying: artworks, art criticism, creative writing and poetry. How are they similar and different?
- What have you learnt about war that you hadn't considered before?
- In what ways might art and literature enhance your understanding of war?
- What ethical issues in relation to war have been raised by the activities?

NOTES

1. Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride*, 1993, Virago, London, 1994, p. 39.
2. Peter G Tsouras, *The Greenhill Dictionary of Military Quotations*, Greenhill Books, London, 2020, p. 30.
3. Jonathan Jones, 'Weeping woman, Pablo Picasso (1937)', *The Guardian*, www.theguardian.com/culture/2000/may/13/art, accessed 20 July 2020.
4. George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, 1938, Harcourt, Inc. (Harvest book), Orlando, 1980, p. 187.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Paul Preston, 'Guernica', *History Extra*, www.historyextra.com/period/second-world-war/guernica/, accessed 20 July 2020.

Patrick McCaughey, 'A witness to Guernica: Picasso's *Weeping woman*', Art Journal of the National Gallery of Victoria, no. 27, www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/a-witness-to-guernica-picassos-weeping-woman/, accessed 20 July 2020.

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