

The Trenches

The trench experience on the Western Front was one of the most sustained onslaughts on the human sensorium: it thrust man's fragile body between the ooze of primordial slime on the one hand and the terrors of shellfire on the other. By November 1914, deadlocked armies on the Western Front encountered each other in a series of zigzagging trenches which soon developed into vast subterranean worlds. There were trenches at Gallipoli and the Italian front, but it is the pockmarked narrow stretch weaving for 475 miles from the North Sea to the Swiss border that has come to form the emblematic terrain of First World War memory. 'In those miles of country', Harold Macmillan wrote on May 13, 1916, 'lurk (like moles and rats, it seems) thousands, even hundreds of thousands of men, planning against each other perpetually some new device of death'. Archival images bear poignant testimony to daily life within the trenches: from their construction, carried out here by the Indian Labour Corps, to a forlorn-looking soldier sitting hemmed in by sandbags, to a British soldier washing himself in a shell-crater, or a group of soldiers having their hair cut.

Trench life and the senses Mud, shells, barbed wire, rain, rats, lice, trench-foot: these iconic images of the First World War have been etched on our consciousness through a handful of soldier-poets but there exist a wide variety of material – notebooks, diaries, journals, memoirs, sketches, interviews, trench songs, memorabilia, and thousands of photographs – which, read together, open up the sensuous world of the trenches. In the diary of J. Bennet, housed in the IWM, the phrase 'Dull cold day' is obsessively repeated, voicing the commonest complaint of trench-life, while Lewis gunner Jack Dillon recalled years later how 'the mud there [at Passchendaele] wasn't liquid, it wasn't porridge, it was a curious kind of sucking kind of mud ... a real monster that sucked at you'. Rain and artillery fire joined forces to turn the trenches into cesspools where the men floundered and even drowned; or, killed by shell-fire, their bodies dissolved into the slime. 'A nightmare of earth and mud' recalled infantryman and French novelist Henri Barbusse, while German officer Erich Maria Remarque wrote in his celebrated novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929): 'Our hands are earth, our bodies mud and our eyes puddles of rain'. In the dark, subterranean trenches, men navigated their way not through the safe distance of their gaze, but through the immediacy of their bodies: 'creep', 'burrow', 'crawl' and 'worm' are recurring verbs in trench narratives, as the familiar visual universe was supplanted by a strange tactile geography. Touch became the ground of testimony and trauma: after three weeks on the Somme, Wilfred Owen wrote to his mother, 'I have not seen any dead. I have done worse. In the dank air I have perceived it, and in the darkness felt'. Amidst the deafening roar of a bombardment, sound was often registered as touch: 'I felt that if I lifted a finger I should touch a solid ceiling of sound' wrote A. McKee as he tried to describe the bombardment at Vimy Ridge.

Name:

Senses and Trenches

Part I

Imagine that you were a European soldier fighting in the trenches during World War I. Use your senses to explain what it was like in the trenches.

I see....

I hear.....

I smell.....

I taste.....

I touch (tactile)....

I feel (emotional)....

Part II

On the back of the sheet write a 50-word poem that describes the experience of a soldier fighting in the trenches in WWI. Concrete details and vocabulary you learned from the video, along with senses you listed in part I should make up the bulk of your poem. Be prepared to share your work with class.
