



Writing about war: multiple perspectives

WORK OF ART 1: *Weeping woman*
Pablo Picasso, 1937



Pablo PICASSO

Spanish 1881–1973,
worked in France 1904–73

Weeping woman 1937

oil on canvas

55.2 x 46.2 cm

National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne

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Benefactor, 1986

In this project, we are going to learn about the nature and effects of war as communicated by artists, poets and writers. You will:

- explore how poetry evokes images of life on the battlefield during World War I and the Spanish Civil War
- discover the exciting new forms of art and literature that sprung to life in the early 20th century
- investigate the characteristics of war reporting, including the impact of bias, and the potential of the arts to promote peace.

At the end of the project, you will have the opportunity to apply your skills to a creative piece, which could be anything from a monologue, poem or article to a short story or letter to a politician.

1 Introduction to the nature of war

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this section, you will:

- gain an understanding of the nature of war
- create a poster examining some of the many aspects of war
- investigate and write about a photograph showing war.

In order to understand the nature of war, and how war impacts people and society, it is important to understand that people experience war differently. Almost everything we know about war comes from ‘representations’ made by others. These representations include personal stories, paintings, photographs, posters, letters and diaries. There are many types of images and texts that present the reality of what happens in war—these visual and written texts convey ideas, values and experiences to an audience.

By analysing and discussing visual and written texts, we can gain exposure to multiple perspectives on war and its effects on ordinary people. Pablo Picasso’s painting *Weeping woman* was inspired by the experience of the Spanish Civil War. It communicates themes of bereavement, suffering and loss. Later in this project, you will use it as inspiration for your own creative work, but first let’s think in more depth about the theme of war by analysing another visual perspective.

ACTIVITY 1.1 Close reading

In 1917, during World War I, Frank Hurley was hired as an official photographer and cinematographer by the Australian War Records Section (AWRS). He is known to have taken great personal risks in order to obtain his photographs.



Answer the following questions about the photograph *No title (Supporting troops of the 1st Australian division walking on a duckboard track)*, 1917.

a What do you notice first in the photograph?

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b What strong contrasts do you see in the photograph?

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c Why might the artist have chosen to show a reflection? What could it symbolise?

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d What aspects of war do you think the artist is communicating?

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e How has he communicated these aspects visually?

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f Try to summarise the mood of the photograph in just one word.

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g Based on your observations, how would you describe the artist's view of war?

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h List some descriptive words and phrases to describe aspects of the photograph that stand out to you (for example, dissolving, inky reflections, ghostly pool).

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i Imagine the photograph was published in a newspaper in 1917. Write a caption for the image.

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ACTIVITY 1.2 A letter home

Imagine that you are a soldier witnessing the scene in Frank Hurley's photograph. Consider what you might see, smell and hear. Write one paragraph of a letter or postcard to your family at home describing the mood and conditions shown in the photograph.

Use words and phrases to create a vivid, atmospheric picture that will help your family to visualise your ‘war experiences’.

Propaganda

Propaganda is the term given to official government communications that aim to influence public opinion. This could be in the form of posters, leaflets or TV ads. The information presented in propaganda may reflect certain truths, but its message is constructed for a specific agenda usually kept hidden from the audience. It is carefully worded to present a message selected by the authorities. The content is designed for political effect rather than to be an accurate reflection of reality.

ACTIVITY 1.3 War propaganda

In what ways is Frank Hurley’s photograph different from a war propaganda poster?



Homework: aspects of war

Using a digital tool such as Prezi, create a poster that explores some of the aspects of war. Brainstorm ideas by answering the questions: what, why, who, when and where. The poster should communicate your feelings about war, and include the following:

- your own definition of war
- visual material that illustrates aspects of war—consider its effects on ordinary people and its impact and demands upon soldiers.

Rounding up

The effects of war go far beyond the physical and even beyond the psychological. War impacts entire populations in numerous ways as well as affecting the experiences and personal identities of individuals. Photography and painting are just two creative fields in which artists produce work that can evoke strong emotions about war and its devastating effects.



2 Close reading and creative thinking

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this section, you will:

- understand how a work of art can be influenced by its historical and cultural context
- investigate the ways in which Picasso used specific visual clues to communicate emotion
- learn how to express an idea in a short written piece.

Works of art can reveal information about an artist's social, cultural and historical context, as well as their ideas and feelings at the time the work was made. Art can also act as a bold political statement that reflects a changing society or time. By studying *Weeping woman* as if you were a detective in search of clues, you can uncover multiple details that reflect Picasso's world.

During the course of this section, you will produce some interesting vocabulary—make a note of any useful words or phrases below. You can refer to these notes when you come to write your own creative piece.

It's worth reading 'The tragedy of Guernica', an article by George Steer. He reported the massacre by German pilots of more than 1000 civilians in the Basque town of Guernica, during the Spanish Civil War. Outrage at this atrocity inspired Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* and *Weeping woman*.

ACTIVITY 2.1 Looking for clues in *Weeping woman*

Study *Weeping woman* (page viii) closely for a few minutes and examine the details.

a Write one emotive word that best describes the feelings expressed by the woman in the painting.

b What specific art elements, such as line, shape, colour and composition, has Picasso used to create the emotion you identified in your chosen word?

ACTIVITY 2.2 Picasso's world

In this activity, you are going to use your visual analysis skills to consider the meaning of *Weeping woman* and the historical and social context in which it was painted. Viewers of works of art form different interpretations influenced by their own personality and experience.

a Describe the green in the painting.

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b What could this colour **symbolise**?

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c Create a **simile** to describe the larger eye.

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d In which direction is the larger eye looking? Why do you think it is looking in this direction?

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e List three examples where the artist has used exaggeration to create and intensify meaning.

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f The artist has merged two views of the face, a frontal and a profile perspective. What might this symbolise?

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g What could the 'T' shapes around the eyebrows signify?

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h Create an interesting **collective noun** to describe the assortment of shapes in the painting. This can be anything you like—be creative!

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Symbolism relates to a word, phrase, item or image that represents a more complex idea.

A **simile** compares two things that have similar characteristics, even though they may not be immediately obvious. Similes often include words that create comparisons, including 'like' and 'as', for example, 'the green grass was like an emerald'.

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

i Why do you think the artist chose to contrast the vivid, acidic green with the soft pinks?

j How does the dark shadow behind the woman's face add to the meaning of the work?

k What idea is suggested by the small, cramped room in which the woman is positioned?

l Which aspects of the painting may suggest Picasso's own troubled personal life?

m What specific element of the painting makes it a political anti-war statement?

n What was Picasso's purpose in making the painting?

o Who was the intended audience for the painting?

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

q Consider the following statement about portraits, made by Picasso in 1932: *'The artist loses himself in a futile effort if he wants to be realistic. The work can be beautiful even if it doesn't have a conventional likeness'*. How does *Weeping woman* differ from a portrait of a particular person?

r In what ways could *Weeping woman* be considered ‘beautiful’?

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Opposites attract

Artists and writers often use two directly opposing ideas in order to emphasise the difference between them. This technique is called **contrast**. Sometimes, extreme contrasts are not between exact *opposites*, but between two starkly different things that we wouldn’t normally see as having anything in common. The clashing of two incongruous (normally unrelated) objects, situations, words or ideas is called **juxtaposition**. This technique is used by composers of texts to create a dislocating, shocking effect that dramatically highlights a particular theme or idea.

Contrast is the deliberate positioning of two opposite images or elements together to emphasise their differences.

Juxtaposition is the clashing of two normally unrelated objects, situations, words or ideas in order to achieve a desired effect or convey a particular idea or theme.

ACTIVITY 2.3 Identifying contrast

Think about the following elements of the painting:

- shading
- colour
- line
- shape
- size
- symbolism.

Now, identify three instances where opposites exist in any of the elements listed above. Consider the ways in which these opposites might contribute to the painting’s meaning.

Use the table below to record your responses. An example has been completed for you.

| Element | Opposites | Meaning |
|----------------|-----------------------|--|
| <i>shading</i> | <i>light and dark</i> | <i>may emphasise the intensity of feeling that the weeping woman is experiencing</i> |
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