

Writing about war: multiple perspectives

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

Objectives

The focus of this project is to investigate the nature and effects of war through studying and analysing written and visual texts with an emphasis on:

- the use of poetry inspired by World War I and the Spanish Civil War to communicate emotions and convey experiences and atmosphere
- understanding and identifying the features of Modernism in art and literature
- investigating the characteristics of war reporting, including the impact of bias, and the potential of the arts to promote peace.

CREATIVE OUTCOMES

Along with the 'Communicating war: analytical essay' creative task suggested for assessment, the skills acquired through this project can be applied to the following creative outcomes:

- Create a monologue: a heroine of war
- Create poetry: a collage of headlines
- Stream-of-consciousness poetry: responding to war today
- Explore *Guernica*
- Write a response: the art of war
- Short story: the mysterious disappearance of the *Weeping woman*
- Descriptive writing: peaceful places
- Political activism: a letter to a politician.

The activities are outlined in the 'Inspire me!' section at the end of the project.

Teaching plans: a summary

- 1 Introduction to the nature of war
- 2 Close reading and creative thinking
- 3 The Spanish Civil War: responding through poetry
- 4 World War I: responding through poetry
- 5 Modernism in literature and art
- 6 Communicating ideas about war
- 7 In search of peace

Artist and work of art

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) is among the most celebrated and influential artists of the 20th century, famous in his own lifetime as much for his charismatic personality as for his unconstrained creativity, tireless originality and innovation in art.

Prolific in his output, Picasso created an estimated 50 000 works of art 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.

Weeping woman is one in a series of works created by Picasso in September and October 1937, in the wake of the painting of *Guernica*, an impassioned response to the massacre of undefended civilians in the town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. *Guernica*, one of Picasso's largest and best known works, has become an iconic image of protest against the atrocities of war. Drawn from the figure of the anguished mother holding her dead child in *Guernica*, *Weeping woman* also explores the universal themes of grief and loss.

The artist

Pablo Picasso was born in Malaga, Spain, on 25 October 1881, the first of four children. He showed an early aptitude for art and received formal training in drawing and painting from his father—an artist, teacher and curator—from the age of seven. By 1894, aged 13, Picasso was already exhibiting and selling his oil paintings. After some persuasion from his father, the School of Fine Arts in Barcelona allowed Picasso to take the exam for advanced entrance. The exam, normally completed in a month, was finished by Picasso in just a week. Impressed, officials invited him to enrol.

At the prompting of his father and uncle in 1897, Picasso, aged 16, enrolled in Madrid's Royal Academy of San Fernando, Spain's foremost art academy. The school's rigid focus on traditional subjects and techniques did not interest Picasso, who took instead to wandering the city to sketch the people he encountered on its streets.

After 1901, Picasso gravitated to Paris, the centre of bohemian life in Europe and the crucible for invention in art and culture, settling there in 1904. Initially, his life in Paris was touched by privation and an identification with society's underclasses and the dispossessed. His paintings at this time were characterised by the use of austere, blue tones and doleful subjects. This became known as his Blue Period. Gradually, blues were replaced by brighter, warmer hues and themes—this was referred to as the Rose Period.

Picasso readily assimilated emerging styles and ideas into his work and sought to create new forms. With fellow artist Georges Braque, Picasso devised analytical Cubism—the division of objects into flat shapes and lines—breaking down traditional ideas of form and space,

and synthetic Cubism, which used collage, simplified shapes, brighter colours and textures. Cubism was a radical break from traditional modes of representation, a truly modern art movement that paved the way for artists to go beyond the figurative and to explore abstract forms.

In the years between World Wars I and II, Picasso moved in the circle of the Surrealists, who reacted to the horror of war by giving reign to the unconscious, the chance encounter, coincidence and dreams. Although he never fully embraced Surrealism, Picasso was influenced by the idea that his art could be a reflection of his subconscious and an expression of his reaction to the events around him.

Throughout his extensive career, Picasso continued to move freely between styles and mediums, avidly transforming his inspiration and experience into his own unique visual language.

Lovers, wives and muses

Over the course of his life Picasso married twice, had four children by three women and had numerous lovers, partners and muses, many of whom left their mark in his work. Eva Gouel was the model for many of Picasso's Cubist portraits, while Picasso's 1918 marriage to Russian ballet dancer Olga Khokhlova marked a return to an earthy classicism in his work, influenced by the art of ancient Rome and Pompeii.

In 1927, Picasso met Marie-Thérèse Walter, who became his next model and muse. Their relationship was kept secret from Olga until Marie-Thérèse fell pregnant with daughter Maya, who was born in 1935. Marie-Thérèse was displaced in turn by Dora Maar, a painter and photographer, who became Picasso's partner and collaborator for 10 years from 1936. Dora Maar worked alongside Picasso as he painted *Guernica*, photographing its evolution and even painting some minor details of the work.

In 1961, Jacqueline Roque became Picasso's second wife. They met at the Madoura pottery in the French village of Vallauris, where Picasso created his ceramic works. Together from 1953 until his death in 1973, Jacqueline was Picasso's most painted subject.

The work of art

... women are suffering machines.

Pablo Picasso

The *Weeping woman* series created by Picasso in September and October 1937 continued the exploration of the tragedy depicted in *Guernica*.

Weeping woman is a portrait of grief unbound. Silver tears stream from a crescent boat eye down mauve-stained cheeks. The woman's brows are knitted—black nails piercing her acid green skin. A white handkerchief 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 in an anguished wail.

Modelled on his lover and collaborator Dora Maar—dark and intense—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.

At the time *Weeping woman* was painted, Picasso was balancing his complex relationships with the women in his life—Olga, Marie-Thérèse and Dora Maar. The latter two were said

to have met accidentally in Picasso's studio while he was painting *Guernica*. When asked by the women to choose between them, Picasso was purported to have told them to fight it out among themselves, sparking a wrestling match that Picasso described as one of his 'choicest memories'.

Weeping woman also reflects the emotional turmoil wrought by Picasso himself on those around him.

Cultural context

In 1937, Spain was embroiled in a civil war between Republican (socialist) factions and Nationalist forces, headed by General Francisco Franco. Both sides looked for assistance from abroad to secure a quick victory. Germany and Italy sent troops, tanks and planes to aid the Nationalists, while the Republicans received equipment and supplies from the Soviet Union and support from the Mexican government.

When news arrived of the attack on the Spanish town of Guernica, Picasso, living in Paris, was engaged on a commission for the Spanish Republican government to create a mural for the Spanish Pavilion of the 1937 Paris International Exposition. Guernica lay well behind the front lines of the Civil War, its civilian population unprepared and undefended. Designed to test the capabilities of the German air force, the three-hour-long aerial bombing raid undertaken at the behest of Franco resulted in the devastation of the Basque town and the loss of hundreds of lives. Fighter planes followed the bombers, gunning down fleeing civilians. Fires burned in Guernica for three days, 70 per cent of the city was destroyed and one third of the population was injured or killed. Picasso was sickened by the reports of the attack and the graphic images that accompanied newsreel footage and newspaper accounts. He expressed 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.

Guernica went on display at the Paris International Exposition accompanied by graphic films, photographs and newsreels demonstrating the brutality of Nationalist forces in Spain. The public, expecting a celebration of modern technology, was forced instead to confront the atrocities being inflicted on the Spanish people.

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.

Picasso would not allow his mural to return to Spain until the country embraced democratic institutions and public liberties. *Guernica* was returned on the centenary of Picasso's birth, 25 October 1981, and is now housed in the Reina Sofía—Spain's national museum of modern art.

The *Weeping woman* was the centre of its own controversy in 1986 when it was stolen from the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) by a group calling itself the Australian Cultural Terrorists. The group, who demanded an increase in arts funding and the establishment of an annual art prize, returned the painting after a fortnight—wrapped in brown paper and unharmed—to a locker at Spencer Street (now Southern Cross) train station. The perpetrators were never found.

Suggested linked texts

The following texts are excellent for study in Years 9 and 10. The topics and themes would link neatly with the work of art in this project.

Year 9		
<i>The Diary of Anne Frank</i>	Anne Frank	Published in more than 60 different languages, Anne Frank's record of the two years she and her family spent hiding in a Dutch attic has become a classic of literature about World War II. The story engages us, not only because of its portrait of human courage and resilience, but also because it is a story about teenage romance. Even under these appalling conditions, brought about by war and persecution, teenagers will still be teenagers.
<i>Friedrich</i>	Hans Peter Richter	This is another story about Jewish experiences during World War II. Narrated by Friedrich's friend, the story focuses on how Friedrich is eventually forced into hiding after Hitler's rise to power. Although it explores the atrocities perpetrated on the Jewish people, it is also an uplifting story about love and friendship.
A selection of poems	Thich Nhat Hanh	Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–) is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, who is a teacher, author, poet and peace activist. His beautiful, uplifting poems are about peace, hope and the human spirit, and they would be a wonderful contrast to the poems and images about the horrors of war. His poems can be found on the internet, and some have accompanying images. Titles include 'Please call me by my true names', 'Non-duality' and 'Peace is every step'.
Year 10		
<i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i>	Erich Maria Remarque	Erich Maria Remarque belonged to a family of French extraction who emigrated to Germany at the time of the French Revolution. In 1914, at the age of 18, he went straight from school into the army and to the Western Front. Remarque spontaneously wrote this book about his own and his friends' experiences in the war. The text describes three things: the war, the fate of a generation and true comradeship. Providing the German perspective, this would be an interesting contrast to the World War I poem by Wilfred Owen.
<i>Dear America—Letters Home from Vietnam</i>	Edited by Bernard Edelman	This is an interesting and, at times, extremely moving collection of letters, poems, journal entries and lists, written by and to American soldiers during the Vietnam War. Teachers might like to share a selection of letters with students to prepare them for the letter-writing Activity (1.2) in this Project.
<i>The Book Thief</i>	Markus Zusak	Set during World War II in Germany and narrated by Death, the book focuses on Liesel, an avid reader, who is horrified at the plight of the Jewish people being persecuted all around her. Beautifully drawn characters like Liesel, Rudy, Hans and Rosa remind us that despite the horrible things that people do to each other, manipulated by maniacal leaders, there are still those who show compassion and respect for their fellow humans.

Teaching plans

1 Introduction to the nature of war

Objectives

- Explore the nature of war.
- Create a poster examining some of the many aspects of war.
- Analyse the ways in which a photograph depicts war.

Explain to students that the focus piece of this project, *Weeping woman*, was inspired by the experience of the Spanish Civil War. Explore the idea that analysis and discussion of a range of visual and written texts can lead to a deeper understanding of the complex nature of war and the way it affects ordinary people.

Starter: aspects of war communicated through texts

Access Worksheet 1.1 on the website for this book and the accompanying texts and visual images for this activity. Explain that each of these texts communicates a different aspect of war. You may like to explore with students how both writers and artists use particular forms of written or visual language to create meaning.

Assign a particular image or piece of text to small groups or pairs of students and provide them with a copy of Worksheet 1.1. Ask students to discuss how their text communicates a perspective on war by responding to the following prompts. You could revise terms such as ‘propaganda’ at this point.

- a** [If an image] What is the salience or focal point of the image? (i.e. What part of the image is your eye drawn to and why?) [If a piece of written text] What is the key word in this text?

- b** What does this image or text communicate about war?

Suggested answers:

Image 1: A—commemoration

Image 2: B—refugees fleeing from war/displacement

Image 3: C—uniformity/modern weaponry

Image 4: D—war as normality/desecration of landscape in war

Image 5: E—patriotism in war

Image 6: F—heroism in war

Image 7: G—economics of war, can war ever be justified?

Text 8: H—dishonesty in war, politics of war

Text 9: I—senselessness of war

Text 10: J—war in the future/effects of nuclear war

- c** What techniques has the creator used to communicate their point of view? For example, [if a piece of written text] how have the words been selected and positioned or [if an image] how have form, colour, line and composition been used to create meaning?
- d** What questions might the image or text raise for an audience?

Ask individual groups to share their findings with the class. Record their answers and advise students to take notes to refer back to as a resource for writing later in the project.

Conduct a whole-class discussion about what these images and texts suggest about the nature of war. Ensure the discussion covers the following questions:

- What are the causes of war? (e.g. fear of difference, clash of cultural/religious/political/ideological beliefs, economic factors, imperialism)
- What are the effects of war? (e.g. loss of life, loss of homes, loss of identity, injury including mental illness, destruction of cultural icons and architecture, desecration of landscape, poverty, refugees, instability, hampering of economic development)
- Are there any instances in which war would be justified? Explain your answer.

ACTIVITY 1.1 Close reading

The purpose of this activity is for students to consider the physical reality of war through a close reading of a photograph taken in World War I. Students will use their descriptions and analysis of the photograph to complete a short writing activity in preparation for the extended writing tasks later in the project.

Provide students with some background information on Frank Hurley, who was an official photographer and cinematographer with the Australian War Records Section (AWRS) during World War I. He is known to have taken great personal risks in order to obtain his photographs.

Students should work individually or in pairs to complete the questions below, and in the Student Book (page 3), on 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?

b What strong contrasts do you see in the photograph?

Suggested answer: Dark/light, permanent/ephemeral, ethereal/earthly, stillness/movement.

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

Suggested answer: Transience/fragility of life in war.

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

Suggested answer: Bleakness, discomfort, numbing effects on soldiers, sense of resignation.

e How has he communicated these aspects visually?

Suggested answer: Hunched, lacklustre soldiers; dull, misty conditions; stark silhouettes.

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

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

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).

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

ACTIVITY 1.2 A letter home

Ask students to imagine that they are a soldier witnessing the scene in Frank Hurley's photograph and to consider what they might see, smell and hear. Students should write one paragraph of a letter or postcard to their family at home describing the mood and conditions shown in the photograph. They should use words and phrases to create a vivid, atmospheric picture that will help their family to visualise their 'war experiences'.

Select students to read extracts from their letters.

Propaganda

ACTIVITY 1.3 War propaganda

Revise the concept of 'propaganda' with students. Ask them to consider the ways in which Frank Hurley's photograph is different from a war propaganda poster and to list them in their Student Book.

Suggested answer: Answers must reflect on purpose and context. The purpose of Hurley's photograph is to capture and communicate the harsh realities of war, whereas a propaganda poster aims to persuade people to accept a specific message from the governing authorities. These distinctly different purposes are made clear by the careful tailoring of the propaganda poster's design, the unified nature of its visual and textual content and the visual details that are designed to capture attention. The real-life context of the Hurley photograph makes the composition less easy to control in comparison with the images used in the propaganda.

Homework task: aspects of war

Using a digital tool such as Prezi, students should create a poster that explores some of the many aspects of war. They should include:

- their own definition of war
- visual material that illustrates aspects of war.

Students could brainstorm the initial ideas for their posters by answering the inquiry questions: what, why, who, when and where.

Outcomes

The activities in this section have prepared students for the text analysis and extended writing tasks in subsequent sections. Students have explored some of the many perspectives on war and the nature of war through analysis of a range of text types, and have written a short descriptive piece inspired by a photograph depicting World War I.

2 Close reading and creative thinking

Objectives

- Understand how a work of art can be influenced by the historical and cultural context in which it was made and how it can communicate a political message.
- Analyse how Picasso used specific visual clues to communicate strong emotion.
- Capture an idea in a brief and concise written 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. Outrage at this atrocity inspired Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* and *Weeping woman*.

ACTIVITY 2.1 Looking for clues in *Weeping woman*

Display *Weeping woman* and encourage students to have it open in their Student Book (page viii). Ask students to look closely at the painting for several minutes and to examine the details.

- a** Ask each student to think of one emotive word that best describes the feelings expressed by the woman in the painting. List these words on the whiteboard and ask students to record them in their Student Book. This process will allow them to understand how powerful a visual image can be in generating interesting and varied vocabulary.

Words may include: anguish, torn, distressed, raw, trapped, broken, shattered, pain, isolated, despair.

- b** Ask students to consider the techniques that Picasso has used to communicate the emotion they identified in their chosen word. Explain to students that Picasso has constructed the meaning expressed in the painting through his choice of colour, line, shape and composition. You may like to draw a parallel between this process and the ways in which writers create meaning through their choice of language.

ACTIVITY 2.2 Picasso's world

Explore the information provided about the artist and the historical context of the painting with the students and encourage questions and discussion. You could express the contextual information in your own words or read directly from the book. In addition, you can find a link to a video which has authentic footage of the bombing of Guernica on the website for this book. It is also recommended that students use the internet to access Picasso's painting *Guernica*, from which *Weeping woman* was derived. Lead the class in a discussion and answer any of their questions about the artist and the historical context of the painting.

Lead a whole-class discussion around the following questions or put students into pairs to discuss the questions before reporting back to the class. Explain that viewers of works of art will form different interpretations, which are influenced by their particular personality, experience and culture. Encourage students to record their own ideas and some of those suggested by their peers or record the students' ideas and make copies available after the class. The bank of ideas generated and recorded can be used as inspiration for writing tasks later in the project.

The following answers are suggestions only. Students may offer different responses.

- a** Describe the green in the painting.

- b** What could this colour symbolise?

Suggested answer: 'Acidic green' is associated with disturbance, toxicity, illness, feelings like fear and turmoil. It is not a colour that inspires or reflects peace, and is not a colour associated with nature. The implication is that the natural order has been turned upside down by the inhumane bombing of innocent civilians and the killing of children in a war between adults.

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

Suggested answer: 'Like a squeezed lime disgorging rivers of acidic tears'.

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

Suggested answer: It is looking upwards—it could be surveying the bomber planes arriving or praying for godly intervention.

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

Suggested answers: The oversized, bulging eye to communicate a sense of horror; the vast scale of the handkerchief to suggest the deluge of tears; the sharpened nose to suggest the piercing nature of loss.

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

Suggested answer: Inner confusion, a broken nature.

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

Suggested answer: They resemble nails, suggesting pain; to some viewers they may allude to the crucifixion of Jesus and Mary's pain.

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

Suggested answer: 'A patchwork of fractured, ill-fitting shapes'.

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

Suggested answer: The acidic green may suggest the unreality of the woman's life since the bombing of Guernica; it creates a sharp contrast with the warm pink, which may suggest the familiar and normal life the woman led before the bombing. Pink is a colour associated with human vitality—skin colour, the glow of health, the colour of newborn babies. Pink also suggests a mood of calm. It is a relaxing colour used to create a soothing atmosphere in indoor spaces.

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

Suggested answer: It may signify despair, fear of the unknown or the evils of war.

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

Suggested answer: It may imply that she is trapped and stifled by her overwhelming grief.

- l** Which aspects of the painting may suggest Picasso's own troubled personal life at the time he created the image?

Suggested answer: The anguished face of the woman may symbolise the pain he and his three lovers were suffering as a result of their complex and turbulent relationship.

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

Suggested answer: The painting was inspired by a woman who lost her child when Guernica was bombed by the Fascists, whom Picasso was denouncing, during the Spanish Civil War.

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

Suggested answer: To draw public attention to the horrific effects of war on innocent people.