Hone your evaluation skills

In poetry there is often more than one interpretation of what the poem or an image means and why. Some people think this implies that whatever your opinion is it has to be right. This is not so: you may have misunderstood something and so be in error. But even if you could be right, some interpretations are more effective than others as they give us a greater understanding of the poem. Likewise, some ideas make more impact in an essay because they are expressed better. You need to be able to evaluate when an explanation is powerful and notice how to improve yours.

Here are some possible interpretations. Evaluate them carefully, tick the one you feel is most effective and then explain why:

1. ‘The Send-Off’ is more sombre than ‘Joining the Colours’ by Katherine Tynan Hinkson because ...

   … it is written by a man who knew what war was like, not by a woman with no experience of real fighting.

   … the soldiers are not excited new recruits going off for the first time; they are aware of what awaits them when they return to the front.

   Reason: ..................................................................................................

   ............................................................................................................

2. In stanza 6 the use of the word ‘mock’ suggests that ...

   … they are not the heroes the women thought they were when they gave them flowers. Stanza 2 says they were ‘wreath’ed with flowers and ‘mock’ perhaps reinforces the irony: the flowers given at their goodbye have become funeral wreaths, a permanent parting gift.

   … the men think the women are stupid to give them flowers when they are going to fight – the flowers will get ruined, so they mock the women.

   Reason: ..................................................................................................

   ............................................................................................................

3. The final stanza suggests the effect the war will have on men is that ...

   … they will ‘creep’ back to their homes ‘silently’, up roads they have forgotten because they have been away so long.

   … they will feel ashamed rather than heroic, returning stealthily. They will want to hide from the society that sent them to war.

   Reason: ..................................................................................................

   ............................................................................................................

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‘The Send-off’ by Wilfred Owen

Answer the questions

1. Who is the speaker of this poem (how do you know?) and what is he thinking as he watches the men at the station?

2. Explain the effect of the oxymoron ‘grimly gay’.

3. Why do you think the men have flowers pinned to their chests?

4. What does the poet emphasise when he links the short line ‘As men’s are, dead’ to a description of these flowers?

5. What impression do you get of the other people at the station? Are they cheering the soldiers as the women did in ‘Joining the Colours’?

6. The soldiers seem to go ‘secretly’ back to the front - why?

7. How can the signals be ‘unmoved’ if they nodded? Explain what the poet really means.

8. What are the two meanings of the word ‘winked’ in line 10? Explain the effect of this.

9. Why does the poet repeat the word ‘few’ after he has said ‘train-loads’ in the previous line?

10. What is the effect of the word ‘may’ on the penultimate line?

Copy or complete the table

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Point</th>
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<td>The soldiers are ... in the ‘darkening’ lanes to give themselves courage. Their faces are ...</td>
<td>The word ‘close’ has connotations of claustrophobia and restriction, perhaps even foreshadowing the grave. Their singing and supposed gaiety have a hollow ring as if it is also part of the army ritual, like lining up.</td>
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<td>2. There is something furtive (secretive) and clandestine about the way the soldiers leave, as if those involved are committing a crime.</td>
<td>‘a nod and a wink’ seem to pass between the guard and the station master, adding to the effect of ‘secretly’ and ‘wrongs hushed up’ that make their actions seem criminal.</td>
<td>Owen uses this sense of wrong-doing in order to ...</td>
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<td>3. Structure is used effectively to draw our attention to the complicity of all those who send the soldiers off to die and all those who allow it to happen by remaining silent.</td>
<td>The rhyme-scheme of aba ab cdc dc etc. shows us that the 3-line stanzas and their immediate 2 line stanzas belong together. This makes the gap between them significant - ‘why aren’t they all just one stanza?’ is the obvious question. There is a silence between the two parts of the ‘thought’ or split stanza.</td>
<td>In the first 3 lines of each ‘thought’ Owen ... Then in the second part, in two lines, he ... The effect of having a much shorter last line in that stanza is ...</td>
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‘The Send-off’ by Wilfred Owen

Answers for questions (page 2)

(These answers are not the only possibilities but do model what is being looked for.)

1. The speaker is a soldier from another regiment as he says ‘They were not ours’. He thinks about how few of them will survive and feels that those involved in sending them off are committing a crime.

2. The alliteration of the hard ‘g’ sound makes the phrase stick in your head and emphasises the effort it takes to appear happy. It is as if the men are gritting their teeth in their determination to ‘put on a show’ and seem cheery.

3. The flowers are parting tokens to remind the men of home and their loved ones, perhaps flowers from their gardens, picked as a little gift to show they’ll be missed or to reward them for being heroes. The flowers may even have been handed out/pinned on by civilians to show their appreciation.

4. Owen has already said the flowers look like wreaths - which could have given the image of a celebratory garland or laurel wreath. The short line hits us with the truth that these men are bound to die.

5. They are ‘dull’, ‘casual’ and seem inconsequential - a porter and a tramp. Both of these men seem oblivious to the fact that they’re sending the men to their doom (either that or they don’t care). It is almost as if they have shut their minds to the truth so that they can remain ‘unmoved’.

6. These soldiers have been there before and know what awaits them: a slaughter. Owen’s point is that it is so wrong it has to be done secretly. It is as if the soldiers are smuggled back to the front under the cover of darkness.

7. Here ‘unmoved’ really refers to not being moved emotionally, not caring that the men are doomed.

8. The word ‘winked’ refers to the way the light is waved up and down - causing the light to flicker - the station master is showing that the train can go. But so near ‘nodded’, it takes on the aspect of being in league, or in cahoots, implied by the phrase ‘a nod and a wink’. This emphasises Owen’s suggestion that those who send the soldiers off are involved in something criminal.

9. The contrast between the reality, ‘few’, and the propaganda that Owen mocks with his question is hammered home by the repetition.

10. It introduces uncertainty, as if there is no guarantee even a few will be left alive.
## ‘The Send-off’ by Wilfred Owen

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<td>In the first 3 lines of each ‘thought’ Owen draws our attention to some aspect of what he sees, at first literally, then what he notices and finally what he ‘sees’ as their future. Then in the two line sections, he makes a darker aside, almost creating a shadow to what he has said, emphasising the doom awaiting the soldiers and the callousness of those sending them off.</td>
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