

## A Veteran Teacher's Lessons: World War 1 in the Classroom

I recently saw a powerful documentary on World War 1. *They Shall Not Grow Old* made me want to come out of retirement from my history classroom, so I could share this stunning film with students.

This film will give teachers lots of chances to teach about World War 1, and also to get their students talking about the meaning of war more universally. Teachers would do well to add this powerful new documentary into the mix of posters, poems and photographs, literature and web resources they already use to bring this century old conflict alive.

Filmmaker Peter Jackson, of *Lord of the Rings* fame, tells the story of English soldiers who fought the Germans on the Western Front. Two techniques of the documentary stand out compared with previous efforts in depicting The Great War.

First, Jackson has colorized segments of original World War 1 film footage. The documentary opens and ends in black and white, the old, jerky clips we've seen before. However, as young British recruits move closer to the trenches they appear in color and moving naturally, through the magic of the latest computer film restoration techniques. This humanizes the soldiers, and makes the horror of the trenches all the more real, more contemporary. The rain and the rats, the barbed wire and bombardments, the gas attacks, the fear of going "over the top" into a desolate and dangerous "no-man's-land, all in living color.

Secondly, the entire documentary is told through the oral testimonies of the men who fought in the trenches. The film has no historians, no narrators, save the voices of the actual British soldiers who suffered the crucible of trench warfare. In their lively way, they tell stories of camaraderie of daily life in the trenches, both its boredom and terror.

The documentary, [\*They Shall Not Grow Old\*](#), is still in theaters on the big screen, but is already sold in [DVD](#) format, as well. Whether on the big screen or small screen the documentary is rated R because of its graphic violence. Preview it first. Be sure that it is appropriate for your students, and if necessary gain parental permission to show it. You may have time to show the entire documentary, about an hour and forty minutes. Even if you can't give up that much class time for the whole film, the DVD format will make it easy to show smaller portions from the documentary. Use these segments in conjunction with other WW 1 teaching materials.

For example, the film footage of Britain mobilizing for the war would be very effective with a lesson on the British propaganda posters used to recruit soldiers to the cause. [The Imperial War Museum has an excellent online collection](#). Your students could analyze these posters, as they listen to soldiers from the film telling us why they signed up.

The events recounted in the documentary could be paired with the [BBC's excellent World War 1 Timeline and Resources](#). Students can gain more in depth knowledge of trench warfare by

exploring the website's page devoted to answering the question: [How did so many soldiers survive the trenches?](#)

Along with the film, have your students read a chapter from Erich Maria Remarque's [All Quiet on the Western Front](#), which depicts the same horrors of trench warfare, but from a young German soldier's point of view. In addition, in the documentary students will have a chance to meet German prisoners of war and hear British soldiers' reactions to their captives.

No doubt, parts of *They Shall Not Grow Old* will amplify the questions raised by the famous [WW1 Poets](#), Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon. Have your students read them, or perhaps read and discuss the meaning of Wilfred Owen's poem, [Dulce et Decorum Est](#). Did Owen believe it was sweet and fitting to die for one's country? Do your students agree?

In the conclusion of *They Shall Not Grow Old*, the combatants talk of the end of the war. They share their experiences of going home, of trying to integrate back into a society that wanted to move on. Their voices are echoes of more modern veterans, those from the more recent US wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

A lot of experiences of World War 1 are left out of the documentary, as Jackson notes in his discussion of how he made the film. Teachers need lessons on these varied people and events, as well. That said, 100 years after the Armistice ending World War 1, *They Shall Not Grow Old* is an excellent resource for teachers. It is a film that will bring The Great War into our 21<sup>st</sup> century classrooms like no other.