Trench Poets

I knew a man, he was my chum,
but he grew blacker every day,
and would not brush the flies away,
nor blanch however fierce the hum
of passing shells; I used to read,
to rouse him, random things from Donne--
like “Get with child a mandrake-root.”
But you can tell he was far gone,
for he lay gaping, mackerel-eyed,
and stiff, and senseless as a post
even when that old poet cried
“I long to talk with some old lover’s ghost.”
I tried the Elegies one day,
but he, because he heard me say:
“What needst thou have more covering than a man?”
grinned nastily, and so I knew
the worms had got his brains at last.
There was one thing that I might do
to starve the worms; I racked my head
for healthy things and quoted Maud.
His grin got worse and I could see
he sneered at passion’s purity.
He stank so badly, though we were great chums
I had to leave him; then rats ate his thumbs.

John Edgell Rickword (1898-1982) served on the Western Front and wrote a number of war poems. His war poetry was published in 1921 in a volume entitled Behind the Eyes.

Analyse how the poet creates a sense of pointlessness and disgust.

In your answer you should:

• identify and give examples of techniques used in the text, and explain their effects (techniques used might include, but are not limited to, metaphor, alliteration, and structure)

• show understanding of the situation and its outcome

• show understanding of the poet’s overall purpose.
In the poem Trench Poets written by John Edgell Rockford, there is a sense of pointlessness, death and disgust. Though this poem may stand out to be a dark sided poem, it is slightly softened by language features and romanticised language. In the first line of the poem, Rickward wrote, “he was my chum,” this is not a language feature, however it does show that the narrator of the poem is talking about a friend that they may have lost to the war. The use of euphemism is used in lines 4 - 5, “however fierce the hum of passing shells,” this line is an euphemism because it is softening the true meaning of what it is trying to say; it describes the shooting noise of the gun to be a ‘hum’ and describes the shooting bullets as ‘passing shells.’ From reading this poem, we have mentally been given an image in our heads of what the shooting bullets would have looked and sounded like. This effect of putting images through the readers head is a good thing because it may allow them to go back to the point and maybe see how the narrator’s ‘chum’ (friend) died. Line 21 of the poem also features an euphemism, “his grin got worse.” This is an euphemism because it is better than saying that the ‘chum’s’ body and face looked almost dead. By using euphemisms, it helps the darkness of the poem to keep at a minimum and continue at a slightly lighter note.

By using language features to capture the audiences attention and guide them to the real meaning of the poem, this helps the author to get an important message across. The situation that John Rickword was in was horrible and he believes that no one should have to ever go through with it; losing your friend to a stupid war, even if it is considered heroism if you were to sign up and join. This poem gives the audience a sense of feeling that the author can not accept the fact that his friend was killed in the war, this is due to the fact that it would be extremely scary and upsetting if you were to serve the western front without your chum by your side.

The poets purpose of this poem was to describe to its audience that war had a much larger impact on humans that losing life at any given moment. Losing friends, lovers, family, soul mates, etc, will haunt you for the rest of your life. The poet was trying to get a message across that war was a pointless and completely stupid idea as many men, women and children were killed and nobody got anything in return for their lives except the destruction of the environment, embarrassment and a huger loss of money. This poem was published in 1921 in a volume entitled, “Behind the Eyes”, which explains that the poetry is that of the perspective of a soldier from the firing line. This poem clearly shows feelings of pointlessness and disgust through the use of language features; Rockford did a great job in justifying these feelings and backing them up with the use of language features and romanticised language.