

MODULE B – CLOSE STUDY OF TEXT

POETRY



WILFRID

OWEN

INTRODUCTION

Few would challenge the claim that Wilfred Owen is the greatest writer of war poetry in the English language. He wrote out of his intense personal experience as a soldier and wrote with unrivalled power of the physical, moral and psychological trauma of the First World War. All of his great war poems on which his reputation rests were written in a mere fifteen months.

From the age of nineteen Wilfred Owen wanted to become a poet and immersed himself in poetry, being especially impressed by Keats and Shelley.

He was working in France, close to the Pyrenees, as a private tutor when the First World War broke out. At this time he was remote from the war and felt completely disconnected from it too. Even when he visited the local hospital with a doctor friend and examined, at close quarters, the nature of the wounds of soldiers who were arriving from the Western Front, the war still appeared to him as someone else's story.

Eventually he began to feel guilty of his inactivity as he read copies of *The Daily Mail* which his mother sent him from England. He returned to England, and volunteered to fight on 21 October 1915. He trained in England for over a year and enjoyed the impression he made on people as he walked about in public wearing his soldier's uniform.

He was sent to France on the last day of 1916, and within days was enduring the horrors of the front line.

Wilfred Owen, the son of a railway worker, was born in Oswestry, on 18th March, 1893. Educated at the Birkenhead Institute and at Shrewsbury Technical School, he worked as a pupil-teacher at Wyle Cop School while preparing for his matriculation exam for the University of London. After failing to win a scholarship he found work as a teacher of English in the Berlitz School in Bordeaux.

From the age of nineteen Owen wanted to be a poet and immersed himself in poetry, being especially impressed by Keats and Shelley. He wrote almost no poetry of importance until he saw action in France in 1917.

He was deeply attached to his mother to whom most of his 664 letters are addressed. (She saved every one.) He was a committed Christian and became lay assistant to the vicar of Dunsden near Reading 1911-1913 - teaching Bible classes and leading prayer meetings - as well as visiting parishioners and helping in other ways.

Although he had previously thought of himself as a pacifist, in October 1915 he enlisted in the Artists' Rifles. Commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant, he joined the Manchester Regiment in France in January, 1917. While in France Wilfred Owen began writing poems about his war experiences.

Within a week he had been transported to the front line in a cattle wagon and was "sleeping" 70 or 80 yards from a heavy gun which fired every minute or so. He was soon wading miles along trenches two feet deep in water. Within a few days he was experiencing gas attacks and was horrified by the stench of the rotting dead; his sentry was blinded, his company then slept out in deep snow and intense frost till the end of January. That month was a profound shock for him: he now understood the meaning of war. "The people of England needn't hope. They must agitate," he wrote home.

In the summer of 1917 Owen was badly concussed at the Somme after a shell landed just two yards away. After several days in a bomb crater with the mangled corpse of a fellow officer, Owen was diagnosed as suffering from shell-shock.

While recovering at Craiglockhart War Hospital he met the poet Siegfried Sassoon. Owen showed Sassoon his poetry who advised and encouraged him. Sassoon suggested that



Owen should write in a more direct, colloquial style. Over the next few months Owen wrote a series of poems, including Anthem for Doomed Youth, Disabled, Dulce et Decorum Est and Strange Meeting. Sassoon introduced Owen to H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett and helped him get some of his poems published in The Nation. Owen also had talks with William Heinemann about the publication of a collection of his poems.

In August 1918 Owen was declared fit to return to the Western Front. He fought at Beaurevoir-Fonsomme, where he was awarded the Military Cross. Wilfred Owen was killed by machine-gun fire while leading his men across the Sambre Canal on 4th November 1918. A week later the Armistice was signed. Only five of Owen's poems were published while he was alive. After Owen's death his friend, Siegfried Sassoon, arranged for the publication of his Collected Poems (1920).

OWEN'S FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH THE REALITY OF WAR

On 30th of December 1916 Wilfred Owen, having completed his military training, sailed for France. No knowledge, imagination or training fully prepared Owen for the shock and suffering of front line experience. Within twelve days of arriving in France the easy-going chatter of his letters turned to a cry of anguish. By the 9th of January, 1917 he had joined the 2nd Manchesters on the Somme - at Bertrancourt near Amien. Here he took command of number 3 platoon, "A" Company.

He wrote home to his mother, "I can see no excuse for deceiving you about these last four days. I have suffered seventh hell. - I have not been at the front. - I have been in front of it. - I held an advanced post, that is, a "dug-out" in the middle of No Man's Land. We had a march of three miles over shelled road, then nearly three along a flooded trench. After that we came to where the trenches had been blown flat out and had to go over the top. It was of course dark, too dark, and the ground was not mud, not sloppy mud, but an octopus of sucking clay, three, four, and five feet deep, relieved only by craters full of water . . ."

OWEN'S PSYCHOLOGICAL JOURNEY

This short account may give some insight into the development of Owen's ideas and feelings and into the psychological change that probably takes place in most soldiers. To fight in a war and kill fellow human beings it is necessary to abandon the basic morality of civilised life and this requires painful mental adjustments. This account may be of particular interest to anyone who reads Owen's poems *Insensibility* and *Apologia Pro Poemate Meo*. This is most of the account in *Minds at War*. Only extracts from letters have been reduced. The full relevant extracts from letters appear in both *Out in the Dark* and *Minds at War*.

Three statements by Owen

"All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true poet must be truthful."

"The people of England needn't hope. They must agitate."

Letter 19 January, 1917, shortly after arriving at the front line in France.

"I am more and more a Christian. . . Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed: but do not kill."

Letter to his mother, May 1917.

For most of the time he was in the army Wilfred Owen lived and fought as an outsider. By his upbringing, character, religion and philosophy he was totally unsuited to the role of a soldier. He was shy, unoffensive, bookish, introverted, unworldly, sensitive, caring and deeply Christian.

He tried conscientiously to do his duty and play his part. The action he saw and the experiences he had were about as extreme and traumatic as any experienced by other soldiers on the Western Front. Shortly after Owen had been declared unfit for service because of his shell-shock he reflected in great anguish on the teachings of Christ which he and others were so blatantly ignoring. He wrote to his mother, describing himself as "a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience."

In August in Craiglockhart War Hospital he came under the influence of Sassoon who had just made his famous protest. Owen, too, wanted to make his protest, yet he couldn't identify with pacifists. His principles were locked into conflict. His role as a soldier and patriot demanded one thing: as a Christian, another. Knowing and believing Christ's teaching, with absolute clarity he felt compelled to act in complete contradiction to his convictions. The psychological conflict within him could hardly have been greater.

In a letter in October 1917 he asserted, "I hate washy pacifists." And then, echoing Sassoon's example. "Therefore I feel that I must first get some reputation for gallantry before I could successfully and usefully declare my principles."

In his poetry - even if he had not consciously acknowledged this in his time at the front line - he was now expressing the soldier's loss of moral feeling.

*Merry it was to laugh there -
Where death becomes absurd and life absurder.
For power was on us as we slashed bones bare
Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder.*

These lines are from *Apologia Pro Poemate Meo* which Owen wrote in October and November of 1917. In this same period he also wrote a more extended account of the soldier's loss of feelings in *Insensibility* which he worked on between October 1917 and January 1918:

*"Their senses in some scorching cauterizing of battle now long since ironed, can laugh
among the dying unconcerned."*

By April 1918 he had taken another crucial decision. He had decided to turn his back on life. Talking to his brother whilst home on leave he said that he wanted to return to the front line.

"I know I shall be killed. But it's the only place I can make my protest from."

In July, encouraged by Robert Ross (best known as a friend and supporter of Oscar Wilde) and the poet, Osbert Sitwell, Owen began to plan a volume of his poems. For it he wrote his first quick, half-thought-out draft of a preface. Some idea of his thoughts about his role may be gleaned from this.

*Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.
My subject is War, and the pity of War.
The Poetry is in the pity.*

Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.

On 26th August he was declared fit for front line action and instructed to embark for France. He wrote to Sassoon,

"Everything is clear now; and I am in hasty retreat towards the Front."

Retreat from life, perhaps, or from himself.

Owen rejoined his old unit, the 2nd Manchesters, at La Neuville near Amiens on 15th September. As his company waited day after day to go into the front line his fear was beginning to show. On 22nd September he wrote to Sassoon, pathetically blaming him for his predicament.

*'You said it would be a good thing for my poetry if I went back. That is my
consolation for feeling a fool. This is what the shells scream at me every time:
"Haven't you got the wits to keep out of this?"'*

Late afternoon on 1st October, and on through the night, the 96th Brigade of the Manchesters went into action near the villages of Joncourt and Sequehart, six miles north of St Quentin. There was "savage hand-to-hand fighting." At first the Germans were driven back, but they made repeated counter-attacks. Owen threw himself into his task. He wrote to his mother,

*I lost all my earthly faculties, and I fought like an angel . . . I captured a German
Machine Gun and scores of prisoners . . . I only shot one man with my revolver . . .
My nerves are in perfect order.*

The psychological change in Owen's personality was now definitely confirmed in action. Before this time we do not know what attempts, if any, he made to kill the enemy. His identification with soldiers and the soldiers' role, and his abandonment of his Christian principles, was now complete. Showing his habitual concern for his mother's feelings he implied that he had killed only one man, but the citation accompanying the Military Cross which he was awarded for his actions that night make it clear that he used the machine gun to kill a large number of men. "He personally manipulated a captured machine gun in an isolated position and inflicted considerable losses on the enemy. Throughout he behaved most gallantly."

He now rationalised his motives. In part, he was thinking as a soldier. Forgetting that he had been ordered there, he wrote,

"I came out in order to help these boys - directly by leading them as well as an officer can ..."

and then he added an idea which had long been with him, seeing himself once again as an outsider to the soldier's role,

"indirectly, by watching their sufferings that I may speak as well as a pleader can."

By killing men he crossed a moral divide between the good and the damned, and in so doing, surrendered his personality to the moral-numbness of front-line soldiers. The real Wilfred Owen no longer existed. The Wilfred Owen who entered the war was dead. His behaviour was no longer the expression of his own will: he was part of a fighting brotherhood, a killing machine. He was impervious to fear, had no sensitivity. He had no self-regard, no self-respect - no self to lose.

From now on his behaviour could be totally reckless being sufficiently rewarded by surges of adrenalin and a sense of heart-warming camaraderie. He wrote to his mother again on 8th October telling her this story of the aftermath of the battle when his company was still surrounded by the enemy.

The letter concluded,

"I scrambled out myself and felt an exhilaration in baffling the Machine Guns by quick bounds from cover to cover. After the shells we had been through, and the gas, bullets were like the gentle rain from heaven ... Must write now to hosts of parents of Missing, etc . . ."

Writing of the battle to Sassoon on 10th October he said,

"I cannot say I suffered anything; having let my brain grow dull . . . My senses are charred."

Owen knew that the war was nearing its end. The Germans were in full retreat. The British soldiers were welcomed with joyful gratitude by the French, and he was really enjoying himself being part of a band of soldiers. In his last letter to his mother, written on 31st October, he describes the matey atmosphere in his billets, "The Smoky Cellar of Forester's House." Conditions were so cramped that he could hardly write for pokes, nudges and jolts. The room was dense with smoke. His cook was chopping wood and an old soldier peeled potatoes and dropped them in a pot splashing Owen's hand as he did so. It was a scene of perfect soldierly brotherhood, and Owen remarks on his lack of sensitivity to danger.

"It is a great life. I am more oblivious than alas! yourself, dear Mother, of the ghastly glimmering of the guns outside, and the hollow crashing of the shells. . . Of this I am certain: you could not be visited by a band of friends half so fine as surround me here."

Ever Wilfred x"

His mind was now perfectly prepared for his final action. There were now no crucial military objectives, yet the crossing of the seventy feet wide Sambre and Oise Canal, just south of the tiny village of Ors was treated as such. The Germans held the east bank, and were well defended with machine guns. At 5.45 on

the morning of 4th November, under a hail of machine gun fire, the Royal Engineers attempted to construct an instant bridge out of wire-linked floats so that Owen's brigade and 15th and 16th Lancashire Fusiliers could cross and destroy or capture the enemy. Group after group of soldiers went forward and were killed or wounded. Wilfred Owen, standing at the water's edge, was encouraging his men when he was hit and killed.

Seven days later the war was over. Church bells rang throughout the country. As they were ringing in Shrewsbury, Susan and Tom Owen received the telegram announcing their son's death

WHEN THE FIRST WORLD WAR BROKE OUT, IT WAS WIDELY ASSUMED IT WOULD BE "OVER BY CHRISTMAS" WHY WASN'T IT?

- 1) Developments in technology and modern warfare
- 2) One million grenades coming out of munitions factories every week
- 3) British soldiers were outnumbered, badly equipped and unprepared
- 4) Trench warfare created deadlock where very little ground was made.
- 5) Awful conditions

HOW MANY MEN DIED?

- 13,000 men in 2 days, Flanders, March 1915
- 60,000 men in 14 days. Battle of Loos, 1915
- 60,000 men in 1 day, Battle of the Somme, 1916: more than the Crimean War, Boer War and Korean War combined.



Chronology

Events in Owen's Life

1893	Born at Plas Wilmot on 18 th March, Oswestry, son of Tom and Susan Owen
1897	Family moves to Birkenhead
1900	Starts school at Birkenhead Institute
1906	Family moves to Shrewsbury. Owen starts at Shrewsbury Technical School
1911	Works as a pupil-teacher at the Wyle Cop School, Shrewsbury.
	Takes matriculation exam at the University of London
	Goes to Bordeaux to teach English at Berlitz school.
1915	Returns to England and Shrewsbury.
	Enlists in Artists' Rifles on 21 st October
1916	Commissioned into Manchester Regiment
	Embarks for France
1917	Joins 2nd Manchesters on the Somme, near Beaumont Hamel
	Moves to front on the 6 th Jan
	Holds dug-out in no-man's land
	In front-line again, platoon exposed to severe frost-bite
	Suffers concussion from a fall at Le Quesnoy-en-Santerre, evacuated to military hospital
	Rejoins battalion at Selency
	Evacuated suffering from shell-shock, 2 nd may
	Arrives at Craglockhart War Hospital, Edinburgh
	Introduces himself to Siegfried Sassoon (fellow patient)
	Sassoon introduces him to Robert Graves, meets H.G. Wells
1918	'Miners' published in The Nation
	Graded fit for service
	'Hospital Barge' and 'Futility' published
	Returns to France, 31 st August
	Killed during attack across the canal, 4 th November

Historical Events

1914	Francis Ferdinand assassinated at Sarajevo
	Kaiser William II promised German support for Austria against Serbia
	Austria declared war on Serbia
	Germany declared war on Russia
	Germany declared war on France and invaded Belgium
	Britain declared war on Germany
Oct 18th	First Battle of Ypres, Trench warfare started to dominate the Western Front
1916	Conscription introduced in Britain
July 1st	Start of the Battle of the Somme
Dec 1st	Lloyd George becomes British Prime Minister
1917	USA declare war on Germany
	Britain launched a major offensive on the Western Front
1918	
Oct 4th	Germany asked the Allies for an armistice
Nov 11th	Germany signed an armistice with the Allies – the official date of the end of World War One.
1919	Peace conference met at Paris
	The Treaty of Versailles was signed by the Germans.

ANTHEM¹ FOR DOOMED YOUTH

What passing-bells² for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out³ their hasty orisons.⁴
No mockeries⁵ now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, –
The shrill, demented⁶ choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles⁷ calling for them from sad shires.⁸
What candles⁹ may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor¹⁰ of girls' brows shall be their pall¹¹;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk¹² a drawing-down of blinds.¹³

Wilfred Owen - September - October, 1917



- 1 Anthem - perhaps best known in the expression "The National Anthem;" also, an important religious song (often expressing joy); here, perhaps, a solemn song of celebration
- 2 passing-bells - a bell tolled after someone's death to announce the death to the world
- 3 patter out - rapidly speak
- 4 orisons - prayers, here funeral prayers
- 5 mockeries - ceremonies which are insults. Here Owen seems to be suggesting that the Christian religion, with its loving God, can have nothing to do with the deaths of so many thousands of men
- 6 demented - raving mad
- 7 bugles - a bugle is played at military funerals (sounding the last post)
- 8 shires - English counties and countryside from which so many of the soldiers came
- 9 candles - church candles, or the candles lit in the room where a body lies in a coffin
- 10 pallor - paleness
- 11 pall - a shroud, the cloth that a body is wrapped in
- 12 dusk has a symbolic significance here
- 13 drawing-down of blinds - normally a preparation for night, but also, here, the tradition of drawing the blinds in a room where a dead person lies, as a sign to the world and as a mark of respect. The coming of night is like the drawing down of blinds.

The poem is a sonnet in fourteen lines divided into two stanzas, the first of eight and the second of six lines. In the eight-line stanza, one aspect of an idea is expressed in the first four lines and this is further developed in the second four lines. In the six-line stanza the first four lines explore a different aspect of the general topic. The final two lines give a new twist to the ideas explored.

The redrafting of this poem with the help and encouragement of Siegfried Sassoon, whom Owen met while convalescing in Edinburgh's Craiglockhart Hospital in August 1917, marked a turning point in Owen's life as a poet. A remarkable writing period was just beginning. In sonnet form, ANTHEM FOR DOOMED YOUTH is an elegy, a lament for the dead, a judgement on Owen's experience of war rather than an account of the experience itself. Doomed youth is right. These were young men, some very young.

Lines 1-8 (the octet) contain a catalogue of the sounds of war, the weapons of destruction – guns, rifles, shells – linked, ironically, to religious imagery, until in line 8 we switch from the fighting front to Britain's "sad shires" where loved ones mourn. The tone now drops from bitter passion to rueful contemplation, the mood sombre, the pace slower, until by line 14 the poem quietly closes with "the drawing down of blinds".

In this octet the devilish clamour of trench warfare is carefully set against the subdued atmosphere of church. These religious images: passing bells, orisons (prayers), voice of mourning, choirs, candles, holy glimmers, symbolise the sanctity of life – and death – while suggesting also the inadequacy, the futility, even meaninglessness, of organised religion measured against such a cataclysm as war. To "patter out" is to intone mindlessly, an irrelevance. "Hasty" orisons are an irreverence. Prayers, bells, mockeries only. Despite Owen's orthodox Christian upbringing, how his faith actually developed during the last years is far from clear, and it is hard not to think that he was not remembering in this poem those members of the clergy, and they were many, who were preaching not the gospel of peace but of war.

Right at the start the simile "die as cattle" jolts us with its image of the slaughterhouse and the idea of men being treated as less than human. "Anger of the guns" (line 2): were the men behind the guns angry? Probably not. Hatred of the enemy was more common among civilians than the troops. Onomatopoeia, alliteration and personification come together in line 3 in a brilliant sound image.

The juxtaposition of "choirs" and "wailing shells" is a startling metaphor, God's world and the Devil's both as one; after which line 8 leads into the sestet with the contrasted, muted sound of the Last Post.

Religious images and allusions dominate lines 9-14. Forget about altar boys and candle bearers, says Owen. These have nothing to do with the real rites. Look in their eyes and in the ashen faces of their womenfolk to learn the truth about war.

In line 12, "pallor" – "pall" (paleness-coffin cloth) is almost an example of Owen's use of pararhyme (half rhyme), a poetic device which may give a downbeat, lowering effect or creates an impression of solemnity. "Flowers" (line 13) suggest beauty but also sadness, again a word that runs counter to the pandemonium of the first eight lines.

Aptly, dusk is falling in the last line and speaks of finality. The dusk is slow, for that is how time passes for those who mourn, and with the drawing down of blinds and the attendant sadness we may think of a house in Shrewsbury's Monkmoor Road where at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month a telegram was delivered that informed Wilfred Owen's parents of his death just a week earlier.

Main idea: The Waste of War

Key feelings: anger, frustration, grief, despair, hope, hopelessness, nostalgia, regret, sentimentality, disgust, love

QUESTIONS:

1. What is an anthem? Why did Owen give the poem this title? Explain the irony of the title.
2. What is the main image that runs through this poem? What are 'passing-bells', 'orisons', a 'pall'? Why the reference to 'drawing down of blinds'?
3. How is the image developed?
4. Underline or highlight words that express sounds. How do these sounds reinforce the meaning of the poem?
5. Use a different colour to identify words that have something to do with light.
6. Two very different scenes are contrasted in the first eight lines. What are they?
7. What are the main differences in these two scenes?
8. Write down examples of onomatopoeia. What kinds of sounds are described?
9. Explain the meaning of the simile "die as cattle."
10. Identify and comment on the use of alliteration and consonance in stanza one.
11. Identify two examples of personification in stanza one and explain their effectiveness.
12. 'Patter' and 'mockeries' suggest what about the funeral services at home?
13. In the second stanza sincere responses are described. From whom do they come? Which words or phrases suggest sincerity?
14. Identify two examples of metaphor in stanza two. Explain their meaning and effect.
15. How do the sound techniques differ in stanza two, compared to stanza one? What is their effect?
16. Owen's aim was to tell the truth untold. What are these truths?
17. What effect does the use of a rhetorical question have at the beginning of each stanza?
18. How does Owen make the reader understand the battlefield? Support your answer with specific quotes from the poem.
19. How does the use of sonnet form enhance the subject?
20. In summary, list six different features/techniques in the poem which help to express the ideas.

DULCE ET DECORUM EST¹

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares² we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest³ began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots⁴
Of tired, outstripped⁵ Five-Nines⁶ that dropped behind.

Gas!⁷ Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets⁸ just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime⁹ . . .
Dim, through the misty panes¹⁰ and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering,¹¹ choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud¹²
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest¹³
To children ardent¹⁴ for some desperate glory,
The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est
Pro patria mori.¹⁵

Wilfred Owen - 8 October 1917 - March, 1918



- 4 The noise made by the shells rushing through the air
5 outpaced, the soldiers have struggled beyond the reach of these shells which are now falling behind them as they struggle away from the scene of battle
6 Five-Nines - 5.9 calibre explosive shells
7 Poison gas. From the symptoms it would appear to be chlorine or phosgene gas. The filling of the lungs with fluid had the same effects as when a person drowned
8 The early name for gas masks
9 A white chalky substance which can burn live tissue
10 The glass in the eyepieces of the gas masks
11 Owen probably meant flickering out like a candle or gurgling like water draining down a gutter, referring to the sounds in the throat of the choking man, or it might be a sound partly like stuttering and partly like gurgling
12 Normally the regurgitated grass that cows chew; here a similar looking material was issuing from the soldier's mouth
13 high zest - idealistic enthusiasm, keenly believing in the rightness of the idea
14 keen
15 see note 1

1 DULCE ET DECORUM EST - the first words of a Latin saying (taken from an ode by Horace). The words were widely understood and often quoted at the start of the First World War. They mean "It is sweet and right." The full saying ends the poem: Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori - it is sweet and right to die for your country. In other words, it is a wonderful and great honour to fight and die for your country

2 Rockets which were sent up to burn with a brilliant glare to light up men and other targets in the area between the front lines (See illustration, page 118 of *Out in the Dark*)

3 A camp away from the front line where exhausted soldiers might rest for a few days, or longer



The Latin phrase "Dulce et Decorum est pro patria mori" was widely quoted at the beginning of the war and poems like Jessie Pope's 'Who's for the Game' reflected this idea – it is important to look at it.

'Who's for the Game'

*Who's for the game, the biggest that's played,
The red crashing game of a fight?
Who'll grip and tackle the job unafraid?
And who thinks he'd rather sit tight?
Who'll toe the line for the signal to 'Go!'
Who'll give his country a hand?
Who wants a turn to himself in the show?
And who wants a seat in the stand?*

*Who knows it won't be a picnic – not much-
Yet eagerly shoulders a gun?
Who would much rather come back with a crutch
Than lie low and be out of the fun?
Come along, lads –
but you'll come on all right –
For there's only one course to pursue,
Your country is up to her neck in a fight,
And she's looking and calling for you*

We should not forget that at the time the country was in grave danger and there is normally a wave of patriotism. But compare the language of Pope's poem to that of Wilfred Owen.

Dulce et Decorum Est 'It is sweet and right (to die for your country)' Is this sweet? Is this right? Is this fitting?

The poem describes a gas attack – mustard gas. With mustard gas the effects did not become apparent for up to twelve hours. But then it began to rot the body, within and without.

- The skin blistered, the eyes became extremely painful and nausea and vomiting began.
- Worse, the gas attacked the bronchial tubes, stripping off the mucus membrane.
- The pain was almost beyond endurance and most victims had to be strapped to their bed.
- Death took up to 5 weeks.

Stanza 1 sets the scene. The soldiers are limping back from the Front, an appalling picture expressed through simile and metaphor. Such is the men's wretched condition that they can be compared to old beggars, hags (ugly old women). Yet they were young! Barely awake from lack of sleep, their once smart uniforms resembling sacks, they cannot walk straight as their blood-caked feet try to negotiate the mud. "Blood-shod" seems a dehumanising image- we think of horses shod not men. Physically and mentally they are crushed. Owen uses words that set up ripples of meaning beyond the literal and exploit ambiguity. "Distant rest" – what kind of rest? For some the permanent kind? "Coughing" finds an echo later in the poem, while gas shells dropping softly suggests a menace stealthy and devilish. Note how in line 8 the rhythm slackens as a particularly dramatic moment approaches.

In Stanza 2, the action focuses on one man who couldn't get his gas helmet on in time. Following the officer's command in line 9 "ecstasy" (of fumbling) seems a strange word until we realise that medically it means a morbid state of nerves in which the mind is occupied solely with one idea. Lines 12-14 consist of a powerful underwater metaphor, with succumbing to poison gas being compared to drowning. "Floundering" is what they're already doing (in the mud) but here it takes on more gruesome implications as Owen introduces himself into the action through witnessing his comrade dying in agony.

Stanza 3. The aftermath. From straight description Owen looks back from a new perspective in the light of a recurring nightmare. Those haunting flares in stanza 1 foreshadowed a more terrible haunting in which a friend, dying, "plunges at me" before "my helpless sight", an image Owen will not forget.

Another aspect again marks Stanza 4. Owen attacks those people at home who uphold the war's continuance unaware of its realities. If only they might experience Owen's own "smothering dreams" which replicate in small measure the victim's sufferings. Those sufferings Owen goes on to describe in sickening detail. The "you" whom he addresses in line 17 can imply people in general but also perhaps, one person in particular, the "my friend" identified as Jessie Pope, children's fiction writer and versifier whose patriotic poems epitomised the glorification of war that Owen so despised. Imagine, he says, the urgency, the panic that causes a dying man to be "flung" into a wagon, the "writhing" that denotes an especially virulent kind of pain. Hell seems close at hand with the curious simile "like a devil's sick of sin". Sick in what sense? Physically? Satiated? Then that "jolt". No gentle stretcher-bearing here but agony intensified. Owen's imagery is enough to sear the heart and mind.

There are echoes everywhere in Owen and with "bitter as the cud", we are back with "those who die as cattle". (ANTHEM FOR DOOMED YOUTH). "Innocent" tongues? Indeed, though some tongues were anything but innocent in Owen's opinion. Jessie Pope for one perhaps, his appeal to whom as "my friend" is doubtless ironic, and whose adopted creed, the sweetness and meetness of dying for one's country he denounces as a lie which children should never be exposed to. A poem seemingly written at white heat. Harsh, effective in the extreme, yet maybe too negative to rank among Owen's finest achievements: those poems in which he transcends the scorn and the protest and finds the pity.

Main idea: Tradition and technology

Key feelings: confusion, revulsion, horror, anger, despair, fear

QUESTIONS:

1. In your own words, paraphrase each stanza – what is he writing about?
2. In Stanza 1 Owen uses lots of powerful imagery and similes to describe the soldiers. Find three examples of this and explain the effect these might have on the reader.
3. Choose the four details that best help you to understand how exhausted the retiring soldiers were.
4. What is the impact of 'Gas! Gas! Quick boys!'
5. Owen describes the soldiers putting their gas masks on as 'an ecstasy of fumbling'. Why does he use the word 'ecstasy'?
6. What is the effect of words like 'guttering, choking, drowning'?
7. Why does Owen describe his dreams as 'smothering'?
8. What is the impact of using the word 'flung'?
9. This is a description of a man after a gas attack, as his lungs are slowly eaten away. Which ugly words and comparisons describe this? Which details helped you most to understand what it would be like to be gassed?
10. Who do you think Owen is addressing here when he says 'If you could hear'?
11. What is the pace of the second stanza? Which words help to achieve this change? Explain their effect.
12. The final stanza is particularly long, composed of only one sentence. Examine its structure with the main clause at the end. What effect has been created with this structure?
13. Similes are a feature of this poem. Identify 2 in each of the three stanzas and explain the images conveyed.
14. Note the increasing intensity of these comparisons. What do you think Owen wanted to achieve?
15. Write down six examples of emotive language. Don't use the same examples as in previous questions
16. Find examples of repetition in the poem and explain their purpose.
17. The Latin quotation in the poem translates as "It is sweet (satisfying, glorious) and meet (right) to die for your country". Why has Owen presented this viewpoint in Latin rather than the English? Comment on the tone of the title in particular and the poem as a whole.
18. What was Owen's purpose or intent in writing this graphic piece?
19. In summary, list six different features/techniques which are used to express the poet's ideas.

FUTILITY¹

Move him into the sun --
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown².
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse³ him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds --
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs so dear-achieved⁴, are sides
Full-nerved, -- still warm, -- too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
-- O what made fatuous⁵ sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

Wilfred Owen - May 1918

1. Futile: Pointless or ineffectual
2. unsown: As yet unused - unrealized potential
3. rouse - wake
4. dear achieved - precious life
5. fatuous - foolish/silly

Owen wants the reader to understand the pointlessness of life if it is to end on the battlefield.

The dead man is symbolic of the entire situation – the poem starts quite specifically (futilely trying to wake a dead man) and then talks about the general situation (the whole war is futile). There is futility in trying to bring a dead man back to life and futility in life itself – what is the point of life if only to meet such a meaningless end? As well as futility in the actual argument - the speaker knows that the arguments are futile. It represents the thought process of shock and disbelief – that you may be willing to accept anything when the truth is this awful. The argument breaks down as:

- a. The dead man is really only asleep
- b. The sun has always been able to wake him in the past
- c. The sun has the power to bring life to seeds
- d. The sun had the power to create life billions of years ago
- e. The man's body has everything it needs for life.

It begins with a mood of hope, softness and gentleness and ends with a feeling of hopelessness and despair. Which is emphasised through the contrast of description. In the beginning it is more positive local imagery, fields and snow, later it is on a universal scale – clay and cold star.



The front line on a bright winter morning. A soldier has recently died though we don't know precisely how or when. Owen appears to have known him and something of his background and he ponders nature's power to create life, setting it against the futility of extinction. Only five of his poems were published in Wilfred Owen's lifetime. FUTILITY was one of them. It appeared, together with HOSPITAL BARGE, in "The Nation" on 15th June 1918, shortly after being written - at Ripon probably - although Scarborough is a possibility. At about this time Owen categorised his poems, FUTILITY coming under the heading "Grief". It takes the form of a short elegiac lyric the length of a sonnet though not structured as one, being divided into seven-line stanzas. Owen uses the sun as a metaphorical framework on which to hang his thoughts. The sun wakes us (lines 2 & 4), stimulates us to activity (3), holds the key of knowledge (7), gives life to the soil (8), gave life from the beginning, yet (13) in the end the "fatuous" sunbeams are powerless.

"Move him into the sun". "Move" is an inexact word yet we feel the movement has to be gentle, just as the command has been quietly spoken. (What a contrast with the body "flung" into the wagon in DULCE ET DECORUM EST.) Of course, we may have been influenced by "gently" in line 2 which reinforces the previous impression, while "touch" again not quite an exact word, is surely light, reverent even. A similar tone

characterises line 3 with "whispering", so soft a sound. "Fields half-sown" ("unknown" in an earlier version) has its literal sense of work on the farm that this man will never now complete, and a metaphorical one as well, suggesting the wider tragedy of life left unfulfilled.

"Even in France" (line 4). No fields here to speak of, no seeds to grow on ground devastated by war. Does the mention of snow startle? Sun, sowing, may have put a different picture in our minds. Line 7 "kind old sun" again suggests the softer emotions, "old" being literally true of the sun but again, as used here, a term of affection. Stanza 1, then, seems tender, almost unchallenging. Stanza 2 is very different. "Awoke", "woke", "rouse". This poem is about their opposite. In stanza 2 Owen invites us to share his thoughts, and soon a note of bewilderment is struck that becomes near despair. The questions he asks, prompted by the sight of his dead comrade, seem direct and rhetorical at the same time. So much has gone into the making of a man ("so dear achieved"), how can the sun that has done all this in the end do so little? Line 12's "Was it for this the clay grew tall?" has life, in man, reaching its peak merely to come to nothing, and the poem ends, fittingly, in ambiguity:

-O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's peace at all?

Why ever did the sun do anything so fatuous is one question, while another is - what was the cause of the sun behaving in this way? Depending whether the stress falls on "what" or "made" in line 13. A clever end to Owen's set of imponderables. Notice the simplicity of the diction which together with the use of so many words of one syllable accords with the elegiac, deeply felt mood. Owen is careful, however, to avoid smoothness. The first and last lines of each stanza are shorter than the rest. Some lines begin with the stress on the first syllable (trochee), some on the second (iamb). He makes much use of his favourite pararhyme (half rhyme): sun-sown, once-France, seeds-sides, star-stir, tall-toil, snow-now; which also helps to disturb the natural rhythm.

The problem Owen faces in *FUTILITY* is how to reconcile the miracle of creation with the evil of that creation laid waste, which intimates futility in two senses, first the futility behind the paradox of life made death, and second the futility of trying to find an answer. Where Owen stood at that time in relation to his practice as a Christian is impossible for us to know. At least the bitterness of *ANTHEM FOR DOOMED YOUTH* and *DULCE ET DECORUM EST*, in *FUTILITY* gives place to the pity that characterises his finest work, and manages, I think, to transcend the pessimism and the bleakness.

Main idea: The pointlessness of war

Key feelings: love, hope, disgust, fear, anger, confusion, joy, despair, hopelessness, grief.

QUESTIONS:

1. Explain the situation on which the poem is based.
2. Why do you think the speaker in the poem is so upset about this death in particular?
3. What ideas are being presented in the first stanza?
4. How does the use of sound techniques support these ideas? (Identify the sound patterns and discuss their effect)
5. Explain how the structure and tone of the poem follows stages of the grieving process, at first incredulity, then frustration and anger.
6. What image of the sun is conveyed in its personification in stanza one? Include a quote in your response.
7. Describe how the speaker's attitude towards the sun/creator changes in the second half of the poem. Include 'fatuous sunbeams' in your response.
8. Discuss the use and effect of alliteration and assonance in 'the clays of a cold star'.
9. Why are limbs described as 'so dear-achieved'?
10. Symbolism is a technique used in the poem. Explain its use in 'fields unsown', 'snow' and 'sun'.
11. What is the main theme of the poem? Does the question at the end serve this purpose?

"Move him into the sun --
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown."
12. By considering the *CONNOTATION* of the sun within the poem as whole, explain carefully why the poet wants his dead comrade to be moved into the sunlight.
13. Identify the *TONE* of these lines and explain what you have based your choice on.
14. Why was the sun "whispering" to the man?
15. What *IMAGE* does Owen create by referring to the "fields unsown"?

"Until this morning and this snow."
16. Explain why the poet has made specific reference to "snow".
17. Comment on the poet's use of repetition of the word "this".

"The kind old sun will know."
18. This is another example of personification. In your own words, explain the qualities he attributes to the sun and explain why he has chosen these qualities.

"Think how it wakes the seeds."
19. Comment fully on the reference to "seeds".

"Woke once the clays of a cold star."
20. Explain the meaning and implication of this line.

"Was it for this the clay grew tall?"
21. The poet uses the word "this". Identify and comment on the *TONE* conveyed by the word.
22. Identify the poet's *TONE* in this line and account for his use of this tone.
23. The poem begins with a mood of hope, softness and gentleness. Find three key words that help build this mood. How does this mood change with the word until?
24. In summary, list six techniques/features of the poem which help to convey the ideas.

MENTAL CASES

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?¹
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial² shadows,
Drooping tongues from jaws that slob³ their relish⁴,
Baring teeth that leer⁵ like skulls' tongues wicked?
Stroke on stroke of pain, -- but what slow panic,
Gouged these chasms⁶ round their fretted⁷ sockets?
Ever from their hair and through their hand palms
Misery swelters. Surely we have perished
Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?

-- These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished⁸.
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
Multitudinous⁹ murders they once witnessed.
Wading sloughs¹⁰ of flesh these helpless wander,
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.
Always they must see these things and hear them,
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
Carnage¹¹ incomparable and human squander¹²
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication¹³.

Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented¹⁴
Back into their brains, because on their sense
Sunlight seems a bloodsmear; night comes blood-black;
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh
-- Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,
Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.
-- Thus their hands are plucking at each other;
Picking at the rope-knouts¹⁵ of their scourging¹⁶;
Snatching after us who smote¹⁷ them, brother,
Pawing¹⁸ us who dealt them war and madness.

Wilfred Owen - May 1917 - July 1918

1. twilight - the time between sunset and nightfall, but also a state of uncertainty and vagueness
2. purgatorial - the state of being in purgatory which is the place Roman Catholics believe that people suffer for their sins forever. It is a place of punishment
3. slob - an ooze, in this case the saliva that drools from their mouths.
4. relish - a pleasing taste or flavour.
5. leer - a look with sexual interest or with a sly or malicious intention.
6. chasm - a deep opening, also here refers to the gap in their understanding or continuity of thought.
7. fretted - to be worn away with worry or annoyance or through torment. Shows an agitated or irritated state of mind. Here it means their eyes are eroded away.
8. ravished - to grab and carry away by force - sometimes a sexual connotation, but not here.
9. multitudinous - a great number. Numerous
10. sloughs - a dual meaning in this poem. a) a stagnant pool of mud like bog b) a condition of moral despair and sadness.
11. carnage - the slaughter of a large number of people. A massacre during a battle.
12. squander - great waste on a large scale.
13. extrication - to free or liberate something. In this case, to get out of a dangerous situation.



14. tormented - great mental anguish or physical pain.
15. rope-knouts - a kind of whip used to punish criminals or prisoners, also used by religious zealots to purge themselves of sin.
16. scourge - to use as whip or lash to inflict punishment or torture.
17. smote - to hit or strike quite hard, physically, psychologically or emotionally.
18. pawing - to strike or scrape in a beating motion



This is a very strong poem full of disturbing images of men who have returned from the war suffering from shellshock. Shellshock is also known as battle fatigue, and post-traumatic stress disorder. It results in a soldier's inability to fight, slow reaction times and an inability to connect with their surroundings. It reduced the sufferer's ability to make decisions – and they would often simply stare into space with a vacant expression. Other symptoms could include either paralysis or constant shaking. Even the mention of the words relating to war could send sufferers into fits or said them scurrying to hide. Many of those who suffered shell shock in the British army were shot as deserters – something that should be kept in mind when reading this poem.

This poem was written whilst Owen was a patient at Craiglockhart and explores different aspects of the men's conditions. The first stanza describes the men's appearance, the second focuses on the experiences of the men during the war that made them that way. The third stanza shows the effects on their lives. They don't want to remember but the memories haunt them.

Owen's creates incredibly realistic images in order for the reader to understand and empathise with these men.

STANZA ONE

In this stanza Owen gives us, in terrible detail, the physical appearance of the men who are suffering from shell shock. He begins with questions that draw the reader in and ask us to consider where we stand in regard to the men. It is confronting and that is his intention. Two questions begin the stanza and more questions occur in lines 4, 6, and 9. He is asking us to consider what made these men look like they do.

The connection he makes with the reader here is exploited in the final two stanzas when he gets us to empathise with these young men made mad by war. He asks us who are these men who have been caught in 'twilight' and 'purgatorial shadows'. These early images create the idea of young men caught in a world from which there is no escape. The images are very realistic and descriptions such as 'drooping tongues', 'slob', 'skull's teeth', 'gouged these chasms' and 'fretted sockets' leave little to the imagination.

The horror of the visages of the men is emphasized with the image of 'stroke on stroke of pain' as 'misery swelters' in these 'hellish' men. These images, based around the techniques of simile and metaphor, show the men as animal like. This is Owen's way of showing how the war has stripped them of their humanity. Perhaps these men are not as fortunate as those who have died as they suffer more. The oxymoron, 'slow panic' shows their fear is inescapable and highlights how they are trapped.

STANZA TWO

This stanza discusses the horrors of war and what these men have seen and experienced to make them look as they do,

'- These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished'

Here we see the living hell of war that these men now have with them day after day. The men that they fought with and died now haunt them in 'Memory fingers'. Here the alliteration of 'Multitudinous murders' reminds us of how death surrounded them. They had 'witnessed' much murder and the lines,

'Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter'

emphasises the horror but it also gives humanity to the dead men as they 'loved laughter'. This not only adds alliterative focus but shows how much has been lost. What makes the experience worse is that these men must 'always' see and hear these things. They live in a world where noisy guns shatter muscle and cause 'Carnage incomparable'. These men can never be extricated from these images and will never return to sanity. These memories are so powerful and graphic the men have been permanently scarred.

STANZA THREE

The images of the second stanza are powerful and it is in this final stanza we see their effect. The images Owen has given us in words the men have lived and this has caused their eyeballs to 'shrink tormented'. Both day and night are blood to them and what is the natural cycle of the day becomes painful to them. Owen gives us the impression that everything reminds them of blood. The coming of the new day horrifies,

'Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh'

For these men each new day is a fresh reminder of their condition, each day sheds light on a wound that will never heal. These men are the smiling dead, a reminder of the skull image in the first stanza~ These men sit and try to reach out for someone or something, 'plucking' and 'picking'.

Our 'Mental Cases' are being forever scourged by memories of what they have seen and heard. The final two lines suggest that they are reaching out for us, 'Snatching' even though it is us who 'smote them'. Owen blames us for their condition,

'who dealt them war and madness'

They reach out for us, perhaps for some kind of salvation but we cannot help them, in fact we push them away because of what they are.

Main ideas: The results of war – the psychological damage

Key Feelings: Anger, torment, pity

Questions:

1. Discuss the effect of the questions in the first stanza.
2. Why do the men 'rock'?
3. What do you think the term 'purgatorial shadows' means?
4. Write one paragraph that describes how you think the men look. You may use some of Owen's words if you wish.
5. What experiences does Owen describe the men as having in stanza two?
6. Why does he suggest they can never forget what they have seen and heard?
7. What is the effect of the 'm' alliteration in this stanza?
8. Stanza three describes what has happened to these men. How do they now see night and day?
9. Why does he remind us here of the death image from stanza one?
10. Examine the final two lines,
'Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
Paving us who dealt them war and madness'
Who does Owen blame for the men's problems? Explain your response fully.
11. In summary, list six techniques/features of the poem which help to convey the ideas.

DISABLED

He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,
And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,
Legless, sewn short at elbow. Through the park
Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn¹,
Voices of play and pleasure after day,
Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him.

About this time Town used to swing so gay²
When glow-lamps budded in the light-blue trees
And girls glanced lovelier as the air grew dim,
-- In the old times, before he threw away his knees.
Now he will never feel again how slim
Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle³ hands,
All of them touch him like some queer disease.

There was an artist silly for his face,
For it was younger than his youth, last year.
Now he is old; his back will never brace;
He's lost his colour very far from here,
Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,
And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race,
And leap of purple spurted from his thigh.

One time he liked a bloodsmear down his leg,
After the matches carried shoulder-high.
It was after football, when he'd drunk a peg⁴,
He thought he'd better join. He wonders why . . .
Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts.

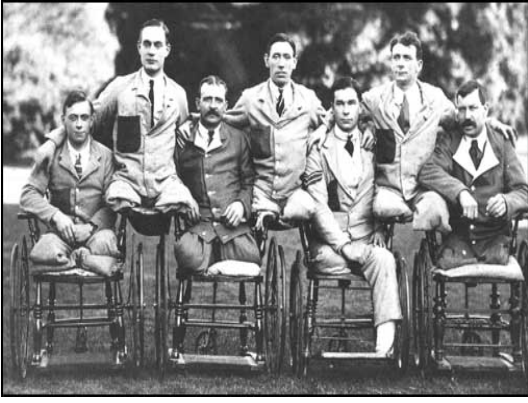
That's why; and maybe, too, to please his Meg,
Aye, that was it, to please the giddy jilts⁵,
He asked to join. He didn't have to beg;
Smiling they wrote his lie; aged nineteen years.
Germans he scarcely thought of; and no fears
Of Fear came yet. He thought of jewelled hilts⁶
For daggers in plaid socks; of smart salutes;
And care of arms; and leave; and pay arrears⁷;
Esprit de corps⁸; and hints for young recruits.
And soon, he was drafted out with drums and cheers.

Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal.
Only a solemn⁹ man who brought him fruits
Thanked him; and then inquired about his soul.
Now, he will spend a few sick years in Institutes,
And do what things the rules consider wise,
And take whatever pity they may dole.
To-night he noticed how the women's eyes
Passed from him to the strong men that were whole.
How cold and late it is! Why don't they come
And put him into bed? Why don't they come?

Wilfred Owen - October 1917 - July 1918

1. hymn - a song in praise of God
2. gay - a merry or lively mood or spirit. Happy in a social sense
3. subtle - delicate, faint and/or mysterious
4. peg - an alcoholic drink made from brandy or whiskey mixed with soda
5. jilts - silly girls who deceived him about the war when he had enlisted
6. hilt - the handle of a knife/sword
7. arrears - an overdue payment or debt
8. esprits de corps - team spirit, morale.
9. solemn - serious or grave, formal





A particularly disturbing poem. Its success lies in Owen's ability to take an unusual scenario to create a point.

A third person narrative about a return soldier, about regret, about the loss of youth, about his transformation from what he was to the thing of revulsion he has become. It explores the motivation to enlist for the war, the naivety, and the lure of what a uniform means and how he lost his sense of 'doing it for the uniform'. The poem emphasises the persona's uncertainty of the future. It has an overwhelming sense of pathos (sadness) as the reason for going to war were not realised (the women, the glory, the euphoria, the 'sport'). He is now completely helpless. He has been physically and mentally damaged – and has become someone waiting for someone to come and put him to bed (waiting to end it all?). It attacks the myth of the returning war hero. The persona leaves with cheers but returns to very little and certainly has no fanfare from the 'solemn man' who meets him on return. It is also about the loss individuals had to bare - the loss of mobility, the loss of freedom, the loss of respect, the loss of a future. This is especially emphasised in the final two lines.

STANZA ONE

Owen begins with an anonymous 'He' so it can be any young man who goes to war. This makes the sentiment behind the poem even more universal and can be related to any war. We also know the man is injured because of the words 'wheeled chair'. He waits for nothing but 'dark'. We soon learn he is badly injured,

'Legless, sewn short at elbow'

In this stanza we also see 'dark' and 'grey' setting up a sense of loneliness and isolation reinforced by the word 'shivered'. He hears from the 'park' the voices of boys playing but to him they are 'like a hymn' to him because it reminds him of his past and how bleak his future is. The stanza ends with dusk coming on as the children are 'mothered' in.

In this stanza Owen sets the mood of the poem with its bleak appraisal of the soldier and his shattered body. For him there is no brightness and we get the impression he is depressed.

STANZA TWO

The soldier thinks back to the past when he could look forward to this part of the day when the 'Town' was filled with fun and he could enjoy life. Here Owen uses alliteration with 'girls glanced'. Note also how the hyphen at the end of the line is used to signal a change in tone. This happy memory cannot last he has to think about now because of his injuries. He thinks back 'before he threw away his knees' but now he cannot even hold a woman as he has lost his arm. He also knows that they will shun him because of his injuries as he is 'like some queer disease'. Again Owen shows us the waste of war with the words, 'threw away' and the long-term effect on the soldier. Owen shows us that he has psychological as well as physical injuries.

STANZA THREE

This stanza begins by telling us how much the war and its effects have changed the young man and his once youthful face is now 'old' and it has taken about a year. Not only has he lost his youth and innocent view of the world but,

'He's lost his colour very far from here,'

and this creates an image of him giving blood for us in war. These images give us an idea of how his wounds occurred as the shells exploded his blood 'spurted from his thigh'. This could be seen as a sexual image but instead of a life giving spurt he has given his blood so ironically he can never have a woman. Another irony is that we learn later that he joined to please his girlfriend.

Owen always uses graphic imagery to convey the reality of war and this stanza is clearly designed to do this.

STANZA FOUR

This stanza takes us back to when he joined up and is linked by the idea of blood. On the sporting field a 'bloodsmear' could make you a hero. We get an image of him here being carried off the field a hero - ironically now he cannot walk and has to be carried everywhere. In the euphoria of his sporting heroics and a few drinks he decides to join up because of vanity, 'a god in kilts'; because it would 'please his Meg' and the 'giddy jilts' which is a Scottish term for young woman. These Scottish images lead us to believe he was in one of the regiments from Scotland. The poor young man was even under-age,

'Smiling they wrote his lie: aged nineteen years'

This gives us a good indication that he is indeed still very young and joined for silly, childish reasons. Now he has returned a cripple they all seem so puerile. This idea is reinforced in the next stanza.

STANZA FIVE

This stanza tells us that when he joined he hadn't even thought of the enemy or why they may be fighting them. He hadn't even considered the consequences of his actions so he had no 'Fear'. Note how Owen capitalizes the word to make it a real, living thing. The young man had only thought about the nice things he knew about war like, the uniform, pay, leave and the 'Esprit de corps'. He was even sent away with 'drums and cheers'.

STANZA SIX

This final stanza gives a lovely contrast with the reality of what he had to face. With a reminder of the football hero scene in stanza four this is a nice juxtaposition. Here no one cheers his even greater sacrifice but one 'solemn man'. What is left for him but 'institutes' and becoming passive and institutionalised. He has no choice as war has taken away his mobility and arm. He sees the looks of pity and can do nothing. He has lost his allure to women - now they take him to bed as less than a man when once he would have taken them. They want 'strong men that were whole'.

The final two lines remind us of how helpless he is. The shiver in line 2 of the opening stanza is linked to 'cold' here and all he can do is question, 'Why don't they come?' He can do nothing for himself and is reduced to waiting on the whim of others. Owen reminds us that his future is bleak, each day will be like this and it is the high cost of war; Again he reinforces the idea of senseless waste.

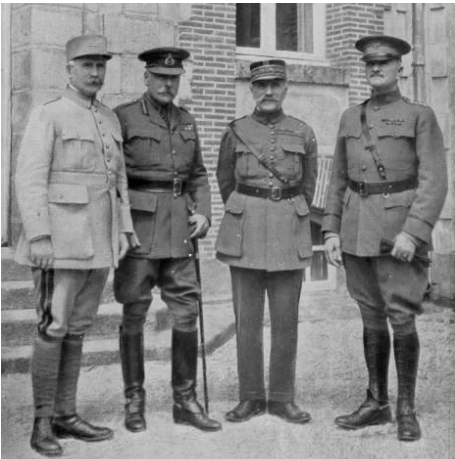
Questions:

1. How does Owen quickly establish the soldier is wounded?
2. Why would the voices of the 'boys' be like 'hymns'?
3. What does he remember in stanza two about his life in the past?
4. Comment on the words 'queer disease' at the end of stanza two.
5. In stanza three Owen comments on how the boy has aged. Explain how he achieves this.
6. Discuss the erotic image of the word 'spurted'. How is it used here?
7. In 5-10 lines give the reasons why the boy joined up. Refer to stanza four.
8. How did he perceive the Germans?
9. How did he perceive his own army?
10. How were these illusions shattered?
11. Describe how women now feel about him.
12. Discuss the impact of the final two lines.
13. In summary, list six techniques/features of the poem which help to convey the ideas.

THE PARABLE¹ OF THE OLD MAN AND THE YOUNG

So Abram rose, and clave² the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned³ both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold⁴ the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
And builded parapets⁵ and trenches there,
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy⁶ hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket⁷ by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.

But the old man would not so, but slew⁸ his son,
And half the seed⁹ of Europe, one by one.



Wilfred Owen – July 1918

1. parable - a story (usually religious) with a moral message or lesson used to teach
2. clave - the past tense of cleave - to cut. It also means to remain faithful.
3. sojourned - to dwell temporarily, to delay
4. parapet - a defensive wall or fortification
5. behold - to look at
6. thy - your
7. thicket - a dense growth of bush or shrub
8. slew - past tense of slay
9. seed - children, offspring

Genesis 22 : 1-19 (Authorised or King James Version which the poet would have been very familiar with. Owen based his poem on this passage).

And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you. And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together. And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together. And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me. And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son. And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovahjireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen. And the angel of the LORD called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time, And said, By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice. So Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up

'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young' is an unusual poem that doesn't use a traditional rhyme scheme. It is one of his early poems, it not one of his well known one and therefore is not as popular with students.

Its subject matter is the biblical story of the ascent of Abraham up Mount Moriah and his near sacrifice of his son, Isaac. Owen compares this sacrifice to the beginning of World War One in the final lines. He blames the various countries leaders 'Pride' for the sacrifice of innocent young men.

A parable can be defined as a short tale or story that is intended to be allegorical in nature. This means that it is a story that teaches a moral or religious lesson. Jesus often used parables in teaching Christianity and the idea of the parable has been used in Western literature and can be in prose or verse as our text is. Here Owen uses a biblical story adapts it to suit his purpose - to teach us about the pointlessness of war. He is being didactic (to teach). He uses a well-known old testament story and then fractures/disrupts the usual narrative. He uses language with an archaic, biblical air. He is parodying the bible.

Clearly this poem has a lot of biblical allusions. The next piece of information to help you understand the poem is the story of Abraham. This is a Bible story from the book of Genesis (reprinted on the next page). In the story God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on Mount Moriah. Abraham sets out to do this without hesitation and binds his son to the altar. Suddenly an angel of God stops him and Abraham sacrifices a nearby ram instead. In this poem Owen wants to horrify and confront his readers.

This is a story of sacrifice and this is how Owen saw the death of so many young and innocent men. He says the old men should not have bowed to pride and this would have saved all the young men who were sacrificed.

'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young' is another poem by Owen to show the waste and futility of war. He uses the biblical story of 'Abram' to develop the images of sacrifice in the poem and these sacrifices for him were the hallmark of the war. Before you study this poem it is important to look at the glossary, as there are words that are archaic used and some of the meanings have changed in modern usage.

The poem begins with the irony of 'Abram' the father of all nations, going to sacrifice his son. How can anyone be the father of all nations if all the young men are dead? Remember too that this is not an exact retelling of the parable and that Owen certainly integrates the old Biblical story and the war. This is obvious by the middle of the poem with the lines,

'Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps, and builded parapets and trenches there,'

By including words that refer to modern warfare, he moves the from the bible story and places it into WWI.

Here he 'sojourned' with Isaac who asks him where the lamb is for the 'burnt offering'. Before he can get any reply he is 'bound' and 'stretched forth the knife'. Just before he can be killed an angel calls out, 'Lay not thy hand upon the lad' Neither do anything to him, thy son.'

And then tells them about the 'Ram'. We hear the directive to kill the RAM OF PRIDE – this is a direct comment of the powers of WWI, that they would rather kill off their citizens than lose pride. Note: not making a comment on sides. Old men cannot see the error of their ways and are fighting for nothing more than pride.

The old man ignores this and 'slew the son' and Owen extends this to 'half; the seed of Europe'. Note that it is only the final two lines of the poem that rhyme and this is where Owen's warning about war is given. This is a true condemnation of any leader who sacrifices young men for their own ego. We know that Owen is focused on the waste and futility of war and here he reinforces this. Owen blames Europe's ruling elite for the war and the poem gives us this message clearly. Some critics have also suggested that the blind faith and loyalty that Abraham had in God cannot be translated into the real world. Others have suggested that Owen is saying that blind faith in anything is bad. You need to think about these ideas and decide which you think Owen means.

Questions:

1. In your own words give the definition of the word parable.
2. In 5,10 lines retell the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac in your own words.
3. Research Genesis 22. It is the first book in the Bible (reprinted above). This is where you will find the story of Abraham and Isaac. What words and ideas does Owen take to use in his poem? Think also about the changes that he makes to the story.
4. What does 'first-born' mean?
5. Discuss Owen's use of more modern language and images such as 'parapet' and 'lad' with this ancient tale. What impact do these have on the reader?
6. Why is 'Ram of Pride' capitalized?
7. How does Owen bind the first section of the poem together without the common rhyme scheme?
8. What is the effect of the rhyme in the last two lines? Why do you think he chose to rhyme these lines alone?
9. In your own words suggest what is the intended purpose of the poem?
10. Discuss the tone of the poem. Does it change or remain constant?
11. Who were the leaders who sent their young men to die? What were their motives? Is Owen right to condemn them?
12. In summary, list six techniques/features of the poem which help to convey the ideas.

WRITING THE ESSAY

- What do you do now? How do you maximize your performance?
- Owen was writing at a time when the poetic form was adhered to.
- Owen's poetry was trying to convey an idea and the techniques is HOW he does it.
- You REALLY need to know the poems well – ALL of them. Don't ignore any of the poems. They might specify a poem. Prepare something for EACH of the poems.
- You have to focus on the texts distinctive qualities and how he communicates his message.
- You need to develop the themes – and look beyond nationalism – it was not just bad for England
 - He looks at the way war is NOT glamorous/heroic.
 - Man's inhumanity to man
 - The dehumanizing of war
 - Challenging the romantic notions of war.
- How do the techniques work together to tell us something?
- What do the poems mean to YOU – someone almost 100 years later.
- DON'T FORGET TONE. The writer's attitude to the subject and himself. Find a tone and refine the word.
 - Eg: The cat sat on the mat
 - OR: The mangy stray sprawled across the moth eaten cloth
- For each of the poems, identify the key techniques, the key ideas, themes
- Make connections between poems.

and....**MAKE SURE YOU ANSWER THE QUESTION!**

NOTES FROM THE MARKING CENTRE

In stronger responses, candidates demonstrated an ability to select evidence both with discernment and economy. Stronger responses had a clear thesis which gave coherence and unity to their answers and these candidates often integrated references to the extract in their discussion of the other poems. Many responses demonstrated a genuine understanding of the techniques used by Owen to shape the readers' responses and the purpose of these techniques. Stronger responses demonstrated that they could select evidence well and use quotes effectively. They frequently blended all aspects of the question holistically. They addressed the question of Owen's perspective explicitly or implicitly.

Weaker responses tended to list techniques without addressing the question. While most responses showed an understanding of war, in weaker responses candidates did not address 'perspective'. Many weak responses were often clearly pre-prepared answers that were not well connected to the question.

PAST QUESTIONS

- 2011: Discuss how Owen's perspective on human conflict is conveyed in his poetry.
In your response, make detailed reference to at least TWO poems set for study.
- 2009: Wilfred Owen's poetry is shaped by an intense focus on extraordinary human experiences.
Select TWO poems set for study and explore Owen's portrayal of suffering and pity.
- 2008: In what ways do the final four lines from *Dulce Et Decorum Est* draw together the central concerns of Owen's poetry?
You must refer to at least TWO poems.
- 2007: *Distinctive ideas are at the heart of all poetry.*
In your view, what is a distinctive idea explored in Wilfred Owen's poetry? Explain how this idea is developed in at least TWO poems you have studied.