

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Power and Conflict

Exposure - *Wilfred Owen*

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EXPOSURE

Wilfred Owen

Brief Summary

The speaker describes the terrifying experience of a night in the trenches in the first world war. The poem shows the trauma experienced by soldiers in the trenches.

Synopsis

- The soldiers are waiting in a trench
- They are scared to rest because they could be attacked at any time
- Nothing eventually happens
- They watch the nature and the trenches which all seem to show signs of suffering
- They can hear fighting in the background
- Dawn only seems to bring more misery and suffering
- The cold is another aggressor and appears to be more of a threat than the enemy soldiers
- The passing of time is marked by snow transitioning into signs of spring

Summary

Context – Owen was disillusioned by his role as a soldier // he was known to suffer from shellshock

Structure - The structure is cyclical and anaphora is also used to show the repetitive nature of conflict.

Language – Natural imagery // rhetorical questions // repetition

Key Points – Nature is personified as the enemy rather than the actual opposition // Boredom is a key theme // the psychological effect of war is explored

Context

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

Originally, Owen pursued a career in the church however, he felt that it was hypocritical as it failed in its duty to care for its dependants. He became a soldier and was killed in battle one week before the armistice in 1918. War poetry was a new form at the time as there hadn't been a major war in more than 100 years.

Owen's inspiration in his writing was drawn greatly from the work of John Keats and Siegfried Sassoon. Sassoon later acted as a mentor to Owen whilst he suffered from shellshock in hospital. At this time, a therapist advised Owen to write about his experiences in his poetry, so his work expresses the true horror of war rather than him internalising it.

Exposure

The poem was written in 1917 whilst Owen was fighting in the trenches which creates an authentic first person narrative as the poem was written by an actual soldier in the midst of conflict. In contemporary Britain, war was romanticised to the point that it had gained mythical status. This was reflected in most other war poetry at the time which focused on the honour of fighting. Owen dispelled “*the old lie*” by exposing the horrific reality of war.



Exposure

Nature is personified in a sinister way to create fear in the listener.

This use of asyndetic listing creates a rushed, panicked pace and contrasts with the content of the poem.

This rhetorical question implies that the speaker is questioning his motivation to fight.

Nature is further personified to be evil here

This religious reference implies that there is a lack of religiously imposed morality remaining in the situation- highlighting the cruelty of it.

Our brains ache, in **the merciless iced east winds that knife us** ...
Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent ...
 Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient ...
Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,
 But nothing happens.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,
 Like **twitching agonies** of men among its brambles.
 Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,
 Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.
What are we doing here?

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow ...
 We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.
 Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army
 Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey,
 But nothing happens.

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.
 Less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow,
 With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew,
 We watch them wandering up and down the wind's
 Nonchalance,
 But nothing happens.

Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces-
 We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare,
 snow-dazed,
 Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,
 Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses.
 – Is it that we are dying?

Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed
 With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;
 For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;
 Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed, **-We turn**
back to our dying.

Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn;
 Now ever suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit.
 For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;
 Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were born,
For love of God seems dying.

Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and us,
 Shrivelling many hands. puckering foreheads crisp.
 The burying-party, picks and shovels in their shaking grasp,
 Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,
 But nothing happens.

The use of alliteration here makes the phrase difficult to say, alluding to the difficulty of the soldier's lives.

This is an uncomfortable image to hear.

The use of sibilance and fricatives here create a horrific image.

This blunt, passive statement shows the soldiers' disillusionment with their cause.



The Opening

The opening **“our brains ache in the merciless iced winds”** closely resembles the opening of Keates’ poem “Ode to a Nightingale” which shows his influence on Owen.

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us . . .
 Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent . . .
 Low drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient . . .
 Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,
 But nothing happens.

By opening the poem with a reference to **“brains”**, Owen establishes the poem’s focus on the **psychological impact of war**. This reference could also be interpreted in multiple ways. He could be referring to the physical brain and the literal ache from the cold causing the soldier’s physical suffering from their exposure to the elements. Owen could also however, be referring to the mind and the psychological pain inflicted by being forced to bear witness to seeing **“half-known faces”** die.

Form

Rhyme scheme

The consistency of the rhyme scheme allows the fifth line to stand out, emphasising its message. The consistency of the rhyme scheme shows the **monotony of war**, as does the regular stanzas.

Owen builds **rich imagery** throughout the stanza and then the simple fifth line creates an **anti-climax**. This mirrors the way in which the soldiers must stay constantly alert, yet nothing ever happens. This highlights the futility of war.



Pararhymes

Owen creates an underlying **atmosphere of unease** through the **pararhyme** between **“winds that knife us”** and **“curious, nervous”**.

By only rhyming the consonants, Owen leaves the reader unsatisfied to mirror the soldiers’ feelings of unease. The reader is left anticipating a rhyme in the same way the soldiers are on edge anticipating a battle. This unconventional use of rhyming creates the impression that the poem is only just being kept together just like the soldiers are only just coping.



Structure

Owen employs a **chaotic structure** in his poem to **mirror the chaos and panic of war**.

Cyclical structure

The last line of the first and last stanza is ***“but nothing happens”*** which connects the end and beginning of the poem to emphasise the fact that nothing has happened in that time.

Anaphora

The speaker repeats ***“but nothing happens”*** to emphasise the futility of war. The situation remains the same despite their suffering so they aren't achieving anything. This leads the speaker to question ***“what are we doing here”***. It is often interpreted that Owens wasn't objecting to war itself but against unnecessary wars and poor leadership.

Caesura

Owen uses punctuation to separate home from the trenches. The **colon** used in ***“slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires”*** depicts the soldiers to be imagining the warmth of their homes. Yet there is a barrier between the two places as they cannot return and must instead stay and fight in the cold.

Ellipses

The first three lines end with **ellipses** (***“east winds that knife us...”***, ***“the night is silent...”***, ***“our memory of the salient...”***) to emphasise the waiting and boredom of the soldiers. Owen's use of ellipsis slows the pace of the poem to force the reader to experience the same frustration as the soldiers due to their suffering being stretched out with time.



Language

Religious references

Owen presents the soldiers to be carrying out their **moral duty** to protect the innocent people at home; the speaker says ***“for love of God seems dying”***. Owen uses a contemporary listener's association of Christianity with morality to show the soldiers' selflessness. This can be tied to the idea of **Jesus suffering and dying to save humanity**. A similar sense of acceptance of death is shown in ***“we turn back to our dying”***.



The poem could also be interpreted to show the soldiers losing their love for God. Their faith is **“dying”** as it is difficult to reconcile the theory of a benevolent God with the reality of conflict. This links to Owen’s short career in the church resulting in his view of it being hypocritical.

Sibilance

Sibilance is used in **“sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence”** to position **nature as the enemy**. The **sibilant consonants** mirror the sound of gunfire which shows the reader that the snow is the real threat as snowflakes slice through the air in the same way as bullets. This breaks the silence previously described. It appears the battle the soldiers were waiting for is not with the opposition but with nature instead. The snowfall is not the **“dull rumour of some other war”**, it is an immediate threat. The **sinister atmosphere** is perpetuated by the **serpent like connotations of the sibilance used**.

Personification of nature

Nature symbolises the antagonist throughout the poem to imply that nature is an even bigger threat than the actual enemy. In **“dawn massing in the east her melancholy army”**, Owen **juxtaposes** the nurturing role traditionally associated with a female nature figure with the aggressive connotations of an army.

Simultaneously, Owen minimises the significance of the actual fighting occurring. He makes a direct comparison by describing the actual battle as **“less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow”** which, through the **deathlike connotations** of the colour black, ironically suggests that the soldiers have gone away to fight with nature instead of the opposition. The ongoing battle is further presented to be insignificant through Owen’s use of **auditory imagery** in **“gunnery rumbles”** and **“like a dull rumour of some other war”**.

Reality of war

Boredom

The **passage of time** is represented by the description of the **season** changing from **“snow-dazed”** to **“sun-dosed”** with **“blossoms”** and **“blackbird fusses”**. This shows how long they are in the trenches for just waiting.

Soldiers are forgotten

Owen conveys the despondency felt by the soldiers who believe that they are being forgotten. The **metaphor** **“On us the doors are closed”** implies that as those at home in safety carry on with life as normal, they forget about the soldiers dying for them. Owen laments the military leaders’ view of soldiers as **dispensable** by depicting the soldiers as indistinguishable from mud in **“this frost will fasten on this mud and us”**.

Suffering

Owen’s description of the environment is indicative of an individual in a great deal of pain. He **negatively personifies the wind** as **“mad gusts tugging on the wire like twitching agonies”** and the wire is referred to as **“brambles”**.



Fear

The soldiers are unable to sleep due to their fear driven constant state of alertness. The speaker states that ***“wearied, we stay awake because the night is silent”*** as if they are scared to sleep even though ***“nothing happens”***. The second there is a lapse in their concentration, the ***“dull rumour of some other war”*** poses a threat.

Comparisons

The Prelude (William Wordsworth)

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nature is presented to be an inescapable force in both poems. The natural imagery in <i>“rocky cove”</i>, <i>“mountain echoes”</i> and <i>“craggy ridge”</i> permeates the poem. There is similar recurring imagery in exposure in <i>“mad gusts”</i>, <i>“rain soaks”</i> and <i>“flowing flakes”</i>. This serves to highlight the overwhelming influence of nature which changes the perspective of the listener, causing them to realise the speaker, and their own insignificance.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wordsworth gives nature power due to its great expanse which is shown in the visual imagery of the <i>“horizon’s utmost boundary”</i> and <i>“a huge peak”</i>. In exposure however, nature’s power comes from it’s sheer aggression which is created by the violent connotations of <i>“iced east winds that knife us”</i> and <i>“Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army”</i>.

Charge of the Light Brigade (Alfred Lord Tennyson)

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tennyson is critical of military leader’s decisions by bluntly declaring <i>“Someone had blundered”</i> and stating <i>“Honour the Light Brigade”</i> at the end rather than their leaders. Owen is similarly negative and creates this effect by depicting the soldiers as isolated in <i>“Worried by silence”</i> which implies that they have been abandoned by the authority that put them there. Both poets repeat phrases to criticise how violence and military mistakes continue to repeat themselves. Tennyson repeats <i>“six hundred”</i> to emphasise the vast number of lives lost as well as <i>“Cannon”</i> to remind the listener that the Light Brigade is surrounded by weaponry. Similarly, Owen repeats <i>“nothing happens”</i> to show that they are being forced to wait in the freezing trenches for no reason.
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Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As Tennyson was poet laureate at the time he would not have been able to be outwardly critical of the government hence why the poem contains lexis from the semantic field of propaganda in “glory”, “Honour” and “Noble”. Owen did not have these restrictions as he was a soldier on the front line at the time of writing it. Tennyson is critical of rash action in his poem which is shown by the brash verb “plunged” whereas Owen detests the waiting in the trenches.
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Bayonet Charge (Ted Hughes)

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poets depict soldiers who have reached the battlefield and realised that it is largely different to what they have been ‘sold’. Owen shows this through his use of the rhetorical question “What are we doing here?” and Hughes does so through the despondent simile “a rifle numb as a smashed arm”. The psychological element of fighting is also addressed in both poems. In Bayonet Charge, this is evident in the soldier’s questioning on “Was he the hand pointing that second?” which could imply that he is questioning his motivations here. In Exposure, Owen is more explicit as the speaker complains of an “ache” in his brain as well as showing that he has given up in “We turn back to our dying”.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In exposure, the soldier seems relatively prepared to fight which is shown by the repetition of “nothing happens”. Contrastingly, the soldier in Bayonet Charge “almost stopped”, showing his extreme reluctance.

