

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Power and Conflict

Bayonet Charge - *Ted Hughes*

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BAYONET CHARGE

Ted Hughes

Brief Summary

Hughes depicts a soldier for a few seconds, desperately charging into battle.

Synopsis

- A soldier is thrown into a battle completely unprepared
- He is clumsy and confused
- He pauses on the battlefield to consider his role in war
- A hare gets thrown in front of him from the fighting
- The hare is dying and suffering in front of him which jolts him back to consciousness
- He realises the danger he is in
- Reverts to his instincts and runs towards the battle in fear

Context

Ted Hughes (1930-1998)

Ted Hughes was a famous war poet. However, as he wasn't alive during WW1 and was a child during WW2, he never fought or saw war firsthand. Instead, Hughes grew up in the post-war era and saw its influence in his home in Yorkshire. This rural upbringing is evident in his poetry which usually focuses on animals. Hughes studied mythology which is shown in the image of the yellow hare as well as anthropology which is shown through the poem's fixation on instinctual behaviour.

The poem is from the collection "The Hawk in the Rain" which was dedicated to his wife, Sylvia Plath. The poems in the collection were focused on the real and symbolic lives of animals.

Bayonet Charge

Hughes was writing in a post-war era that was greatly influenced by WW1 and WW2. The poem was published in 1957 but was set in WW1. His poems are a way for him to make sense of the events he never saw but whose impacts were seen daily

Hughes' father fought in WW1 and was one of only seventeen Lancaster Fusiliers to survive the Gallipoli campaign, leaving him emotionally traumatised for life. It is thought that in Bayonet Charge Hughes wanted to highlight the brutality of trench warfare as a tribute to his father's suffering as well as a way to memorialize war as a warning for future generations.

This poem was greatly inspired by Wilfred Owen who similarly tries to depict the reality of war in his poetry. Owen also wrote about events that he had never experienced, showing his insight.

Summary

Context – never fought in war // Father fought in Gallipoli // inspired by Wilfred Owen

Form – free verse // third person singular – isolate soldier + not his experience

Structure - enjambment (quickened pace, overwhelming) // Caesura force reader to pause + consider war // Start in medias res – surprise and unprepared

Language – allusion to Owens // Mix of body and weapons // metaphor for government // Personification of nature and nature as victim // Similes- collective (6 in total)

Key Points – Hughes is questioning the point of war // presents the reality of war, but has to borrow from those who were actually there as war can never be understood by those who haven't experienced it // realisation of a soldier's insignificance // personal perspective of the impact on individual soldiers



Bayonet Charge

This thrusts the listener into the action and relates to the idea of waking up.

This metaphor shows the physical impact of the soldier's fear.

The sparks created by rifle fire are beautified in this image.

Fear appears to have taken over the soldier's patriotism.

Mechanical imagery is emphasised by the harsh alliteration and implies that the soldier has been dehumanised in his role.

Rural imagery is subverted to create a juxtaposition between the nourishing connotations of farming and the life being taken away in the same place.

It appears that the hare is screaming.

Suddenly he awoke and was running – raw
In raw-seamed hot khaki, his sweat heavy,
Stumbling across a field of clods towards a
green hedge
That dazzled with rifle fire, hearing
Bullets smacking the belly out of the air –
He lugged a rifle numb as a smashed arm;
The patriotic tear that had brimmed in his eye
Sweating like molten iron from the centre of his
chest, –

In bewilderment then he almost stopped –
In what cold clockwork of the stars and the
nations
Was he the hand pointing that second? He
was running
Like a man who has jumped up in the dark and
runs
Listening between his footfalls for the reason
Of his still running, and his foot hung like
Statuary in mid-stride. Then the shot-slashed
furrows

Threw up a yellow hare that rolled like a flame
And crawled in a threshing circle, its mouth
wide
Open silent, its eyes standing out.
He plunged past with his bayonet toward the
green hedge,
King, honour, human dignity, etcetera
Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm
To get out of that blue crackling air
His terror's touchy dynamite.

The use of repetition creates a sense of desperation. The connotations of "raw" are animalistic which denotes a lack of humanity in the situation.

A clod is a mound of earth.

This metaphor creates a tense, violent atmosphere and also alludes to someone being winded and unable to breathe.

The use of the hyphen creates a pause which coincides with the idea of the soldier being about to stop.

The soldier begins to further question the reason for him fighting.

The violent connotations of "Threw up" contrast with the innocence connotated by a hare.

The soldier appears to have completely abandoned his previously upheld values and motivation to fight.



Perspective

The poem is written in the **third person singular** which gives a **limited narrative perspective**. This allows the reader to **focus on the individual impact of war** by showing the way war impacts a single individual. As it's written from a soldier's perspective, the reality of the war experience is horrific to the reader who finds it impossible to view war favourably. Even though the war may be beneficial nationally, and serving in a war is seen as honourable, the poem shows that this **does not excuse the suffering it inflicts on individual soldiers**.

This **third person singular perspective** also emphasises the **isolation** felt by soldiers in war. As the protagonist is the only human in the poem, he is **isolated from any source of help or comfort**. The isolation helps to **intensify the suffering** of the speaker and focuses the audience on the impact that war has on them. This shows that despite fighting in an army a battle is about self-preservation and that they are ultimately on their own. Moreover, soldiers are still neglected by the nation they fought for and are left to go back to society.

The poem is highly focused on one soldier's emotions which is ironic as soldiers were expected to show no emotion and also shows how the soldier referenced cannot share his feelings with his peers.

Hughes depicts a soldier desensitised to the harshness of war, he appears immune to the death of other soldiers and it takes the suffering of nature to break his trance-like state.

Despite the poem being written from the perspective of a soldier, Hughes couldn't write it in the first person as he had never experienced war before. His view of conflict is therefore from the perspective of an outsider.

Structure

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

Enjambment

Enjambment stops the reader from taking a break or pause which **quickens the pace** of the poem. The whole of the **first stanza is a single sentence**. This matches the tense action of the poem and maintains the momentum of a bayonet charge and helps the readers to empathise with the **panic** and **fear** felt by the soldier.

The enjambment helps to emphasise the importance of the **rhetorical question** it ends on – **“was he the hand pointing that second?”**. Here, the reader is forced to question whether the soldier is at war by his own choice or is a mechanical cog in a constantly ticking clock.

Caesura

The fast pace created by the enjambment in **the first stanza starkly contrasts with the second stanza**. The pace of the second stanza is much slower as it's broken up with lots of **caesura**. Here the soldier stops to consider the philosophical meaning of war. The pace of the poem is paused, implying that time has stopped or the soldier is so overwhelmed that they are forced to pause and consider. This has the alternative effect of causing the listener to pause and consider the reality of war.



Hughes' frequent use of enjambment and caesura makes the poem feel disjointed and confusing. The structure is consistent with his message that war cannot be understood fully (it is confusing to the reader – also to the soldier).

Repetition

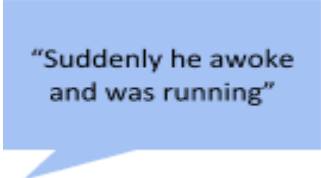
Hughes repeats “**raw**” which stands out against the strength of his other vocabulary conveying the soldier's intense suffering. Repetition is also reminiscent of stuttering as if the soldier is experiencing a breakdown in rationality as a result of their anxiety and stress.

Struggle through poem

The combined effect of free verse, enjambment, caesura and the rich but complex imagery Hughes uses is that it makes the poem difficult to read. The meaning and narrative is hidden under a plethora of literary techniques and structural devices that fragment the poem and confuse the listener. The listener's struggle to understand is representative of the struggle experienced by the soldier.

The opening

The poem opens with “suddenly he awoke” which instantly lunges the reader into the action without any introduction. By opening in **Medias Res** (the midst of the plot) there is no warning of the fighting to come and the reader has no chance to prepare for it, this mirrors the shock soldiers would have felt going into battle.



“Suddenly he awoke
and was running”

Suddenly he awoke and was running – raw
In raw-seamed hot khaki, his sweat heavy,
Stumbling across a field of clods towards a green hedge
That dazzled with rifle fire, hearing
Bullets smacking the belly out of the air –
He lugged a rifle numb as a smashed arm;
The patriotic tear that had brimmed in his eye
Sweating like molten iron from the centre of his chest, –

By starting at an **unconventional place in the narrative**, the reader is left feeling confused and a **tense atmosphere** is established. This reflects the **confusion and panic** soldiers would have felt in war which allows the reader to relate to their experiences, and therefore empathise with them. This empathy is essential if Hughes is to be able to portray the reality of war, as only someone who has experienced it can possibly understand it. Thus he needs the readers to have essentially experienced war through his poetry, and the first step towards this is by inciting the emotions created by war.

Language

Use of metaphors

Hughes infuses the physical actions of the soldier with **metaphorical meaning**. During war, sleep is a time of safety and protection. The act of waking up involves waking up to danger and realising one's own mortality. The soldier may have literally “**awoke[n]**” in response to a threat but there's



also a figurative side to him waking up in. Here, the soldier could have gained awareness of the reality of war.

It is possible that the events before this moment were comparable to sleeping and disconnected from actual fighting. Hughes suggests that this might be due to the **“patriotic tear[s]”** that place soldiers under an illusion of the honour and pride in fighting, it is only when they arrive on the frontline that the effects of propaganda wear off and the true horror of war is realised. **“was running”** shows that he is no longer protected by the safety associated with sleep and the safety of denying war’s reality for the favourable view presented in propaganda.

Lexis

Hughes’ combines lexis from the **semantic field of body parts and violence** with **metaphors** which **dehumanise the soldier** to blur the lines between what is human and what is weapon. This allows Hughes to suggest that humans are used as weapons in war.

- **“lugged”** – implies he is not physically adept enough to carry – physically unprepared for the hardship and strain of war
- **“Smacking”** – aggression and violence – targeted at nature
- **“Statuary”** – like a statue – frozen in fear
- **“blending of body and weapon”**

“He lugged a rifle numb as a smashed arm”

The soldier’s rifle is **“numb as a smashed arm”**, referencing the horror of war and how soldiers can become desensitised. Meanwhile, the air has a **“belly”**, personifying it to suggest the confusion of the situation of war, and the soldier is a second hand in the **“cold clockwork of the stars and the nations”**. This suggests the war turns individuals into tools to be used. Humans, nature and weapons all merge through Hughes’ metaphors and similes, this reflects how humans become weapons and nature becomes a human-like victim in the face of war.

The government, represented by **“the nations”**, uses the soldiers like tools, their lives made meaningless and their bodies useful only as cannon fodder. The **mixing of roles** within the poem demonstrates this meaningless waste of human life.

Similes

Hughes portrays the soldier as unprepared for war and unsuitable for his role by using **a simile to liken his rifle to a smashed arm**: **“he lugged a rifle numb as a smashed arm”**. This implies that the soldier seems disconnected from his weapon and uncomfortable holding it, showing his physical unsuitability for his role. The rifle is presented to be numb and cold showing how unnatural the soldier deems committing acts of violence. There are six similes used in the poem, implying that there is no way for Hughes to accurately describe what war is like. As Hughes has no first hand experience of war, the only way he can describe it is to compare it to his own personal experiences.

Reality of war

The speaker had a **“patriotic tear”** which shows that he came to war out of a sense of duty to protect his country. Now this patriotism is leaving him as he sees what war is really like. Hughes shows that the soldier has realised the propaganda was false in the **simile “sweating like molten iron from the centre of his chest”** this shows how the patriotism he previously held in his heart leaves from the centre of his chest. The idea of sweating molten iron has painful connotations showing how the soldier is physically pained by the realisation

“The patriotic tear... sweating like molten iron from the centre of his chest”



that his ideals have been disproven. The description of **“his sweat heavy”** shows how it is increasingly harder to fight once disillusioned and without patriotic motivation.

“King, honour, human dignity etcetera... dropped like human luxuries”

Hughes uses **asyndetic listing** when describing values of **“king, honour, human dignity”** to show how the soldier gains honour from fighting for his king and country. When faced with death and war, these values are **“dropped like human luxuries”** so are abandoned when the reality of war is revealed. **“etcetera”** creates a sense of being sick of it and mocking his past views.

The harsh **alliterative consonants** in **“cold clockwork”** reinforce the cold, calculated mechanical nature of war. The poem implies that the soldiers are treated as pawns in a game rather than individual lives. **“Clockwork”** conjures a sense of war being calculated and mechanical, as if the soldiers are being used as physical tools rather than sentient beings.

Nature

Hughes frequently used **natural imagery** within his poetry.

The hare

In Bayonet Charge the Hare is used as a **symbol of soldiers' collective suffering**. Hughes **projects the violence of war** onto an innocent creature accidentally caught up in the war.

“Threw up a yellow hare that rolled like a flame”

The **explicit violence** and **graphic descriptions** of war missing in the rest of the poem are provided through the hare's **“threshing circle”** and its **“mouth wide, open silent”**. Hughes is trying to show that the soldier is so immune to the death of humans, that it takes a new kind of suffering – that of an innocent animal – for him to be shocked out of his trance and into instinctive action as **“he plunged past”** away from danger.

The **personification** of the hare through Hughes' description of its eyes and screaming mouth, helps the reader to **associate the hare's suffering with that of the human soldiers**. This reminds them of the danger the speaker is in.

Just as the hare is personified, the soldier reverts to primitive, animalistic instincts. This shows that within war all human values of **“king, honour, human dignity... dropped like luxuries”**. This fluid relationship between animal and human reminds the reader of the soldiers' innocence and vulnerability. It also helps to project the hare's pain onto the larger scale of all soldiers involved in war.

In the same way, the **“yellow hare”** is made a **victim** with its **“mouth wide open silent”** like a human scream. The hare's suffering is the only explicit sign of violence, and the infliction of pain on an innocent animal **highlights the injustice of war**, as organisms completely unconnected to the conflict are being harmed.

“Mouth wide //open silent”

The surroundings

Hughes poses the argument that **nature is a victim of war** through his use of personification. He described the **“bullets smacking the belly out of the air”**. Here, the **active verb “smacking”** serves to **demonstrate the violence inflicted on the air**. This is emphasised through the use of harsh **plosive sounds** in **“bullets”** and **“belly”**. The **personification** of the air as having a



“**belly**” allows the reader to have sympathy for the effect of war on nature. Through describing it in human terms they are more able to relate to the abuse.

Peaceful images are juxtaposed with the violence of fighting showing the contrast between life and death. The simple, childish description of a “**green hedge**” provides a peaceful, innocent symbol of (plant) life. This is transformed into the focus of the bayonet charge, a symbol of death as it “**dazzled with rifle fire**”.

The poem is set in the countryside, Hughes shows how farmland has become a battleground. The soldiers charge across “**a field of clods**” and instead of sustaining life, the earth provides dangerous obstacles for the soldiers to trip over.

Allusion to Owen

It's well known that Hughes was inspired by Owen's poetry, and many parallels can be drawn between Bayonet Charge and Owen's 'Spring Offensive'.

- Where Owens used “**crawling**”, Hughes uses “**crawled**”; where Owens wrote “**plunged and fell away**”, Hughes writes “**he plunged past**”.
- Owens poem is entitled Spring Offensive likewise, Bayonet Charge has many **features of spring** – “**clods**”, “**green hedge**” and “**hare**”.
- Equally, Hughes uses **similar structural techniques** through his simple **repetition** in “**raw in raw seamed hot khaki**” which is reminiscent of Owens' “**lying easy, were at ease**”.

Style

On one hand, Hughes was still new to poetry when he wrote Bayonet Charge (it was one of the poems his wife sent to a competition that resulted in his first book being published) and, as he had been inspired by Wilfred Owen's poetry, it seems likely he may have imitated his work as he tried to develop his own style.

Can't describe war himself

The obvious correlation does however, seem to suggest that it was intentional, in which case the references to another war poem can be seen as another demonstration that in his difficulty to understand and describe war, he has had to borrow ideas from someone who was actually there.

Bayonet Charge	Spring Offensive
Crawled	Crawling
He plunged past	Plunged and fell away past
Running raw in raw seamed hot khaki	Lying easy were at ease
Both in third person	
Both about a bayonet charge	
Both include signs of spring	



Comparisons

Charge of the Light Brigade

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems criticise the leaders of war, this is explicit in Bayonet charge but more subtle in Charge of the light brigade. There is the implication in both poems that propaganda is a powerful tool in the public attitude to war.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Charge of the light brigade praises the blind obedience of soldiers in the rhetorical question “When can their glory fade?” whilst in Bayonet charge, the perception of honour is challenged in “In bewilderment then he almost stopped”. Tennyson presents the soldier’s bravery in the repetition in “Honour the charge they made!” “Honour the light brigade”. Opposingly, Hughes encourages the questioning of war in “King, honour, human dignity, etcetera // Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm”. The more critical tone of Bayonet charge is reflective of Hughes being relatively unknown when this was published whilst Tennyson was poet laureate, allowing Hughes more freedom. Tennyson uses dactylic dimeter to create a quick pace to glorify the action whereas Hughes presents war as a source of fear and panic.

Exposure

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The sense of duty imposed by patriotism disguises the true nature of war in both poems to give the soldiers motivation for fighting. Both poems present unprepared soldiers In Bayonet charge, Hughes implies that the soldier is motivated for fighting by his sense of patriotism through the metaphor “The patriotic tear that had brimmed in his eye”. Similarly, in Owen’s poem, the narrator questions their beliefs in “What are we doing here?”.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Owen actually experienced war whereas Hughes did not giving Owen a more valid perspective

Remains

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poets present the psychological impact of war upon a soldier. In Bayonet charge, this is done through the anthropomorphism of a hare as screaming in “its mouth wide // Open silent”. Armitage creates the same effect in Remains by depicting the long term impact of war in “His blood-shadow stays on the street”. The soldiers are presented to be scared in both poems which acts as a criticism of war and the killing it inflicts. Hughes’ narrator’s fear is shown through the description of “his sweat heavy” and Armitage creates the same effect through his use of alliteration in “I blink // and he bursts again through the doors”. They are both written by poets with no first hand experience of conflict
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Differences

- Remains shows the impact after war once the soldier is ***“home on leave”*** whilst Bayonet charge is the effect whilst the soldier is still ***“stumbling across a field”***.

