Beach Burial

📝 SUMMARY

The bodies of dead sailors gently float in groups to the shore of the Gulf of Arabs. In the night, their bodies are moved by the tides in the depths of the water; by morning, they wash up with the foam onto the beach.

It appears that somebody has time, between tears and avoiding live gunfire, to bury these men. Whoever it is pulls the men from the waves and buries them on the beach, gently patting the sand down over their naked bodies.

The graves are marked with crosses made of driftwood. There is writing on these crosses—written in mournful confusion—and the words themselves seem too sad to go on.

Each cross says "unknown seaman." The pencil markings grow fainter and then disappear, and purple drips down the wood. The damp atmosphere has turned the writing as blue as the lips of a drowned man.

These dead seamen, who all were in search of the same land, could have been enemies or allies—perhaps not even soldiers at all. Their place in the sand unites them, as does being dead.

⊙ THEMES

🪦 WAR AND DEATH

"Beach Burial" is a powerfully bleak poem that takes an unflinching look at war, portraying it as wasteful, senseless, and tragic. Inspired by a World War Two battle that took place in Egypt, the poem focuses on beach burials—soldiers killed at sea who wash to shore and are laid to rest in the sand. The poem highlights the anonymity of these burials (the graves are marked only as "unknown seaman"), presenting death as the great leveler that makes all people equal—whichever side of the war they fought on, whether they were even soldiers in the first place. Through contemplating these makeshift burial sites, the poem undermines the idea of war as a noble or heroic activity.

The poem opens with a paradox, describing the "dead sailors" who arrive on the shore as a convoy. This description is ironic, in that it paints these dead soldiers as if they were still living, as if they were coming into shore in military formation. The description places the heroic image of soldiers coming to fight in a kind of overlay with the eerie devastation of soldiers who have been killed, forcing these two understandings of war into an uneasy coexistence. Then in lines 3 and 4 the poem tips the scales, throwing off any idea of the heroic as it offers a grim depiction of the lifelessness of these bodies—the way that they

are at the mercy of the ocean and its tides. From the beginning, then, the poem establishes an atmosphere of death and hopelessness, of war not as a means to glory but a path to anonymous death.

The poem then turns its attention to the burial sites that line the beach. Generally speaking, the act of burial is about mourning and honoring the person who has died. But these burials are utterly different. They are improvised, done in a hurry, and, most importantly, they are *anonymous*. The brutality of war means that these men have become untethered—like ships cut loose from their moorings—from *who they actually are*. The anonymous "someone" (line 6) who buries the men wishes to commemorate them, but can only go so far. Both the person doing the burying and the dead themselves are unknown, and will be forever.

The speaker examines these burial sites closely, which intensifies the sense of tragic anonymity. The crosses are not well-made, but just "tidewood"—wood that has drifted into shore just as the dead bodies have. The inscriptions on the crosses—which just say "Unknown seaman"—are fading away ("the purple drips"). In other words, nothing can truly pay tribute to these men—like the inscriptions, the memory of them and their sacrifice is destined to fade over time.

But the poem does more than just highlight the tragic loss of life in war. The poem describes the washed-up men as being strangely united in death: "Whether as enemies they fought / Or fought with us, or neither; the sand joins them together." In death, the things that made these soldiers comrades or enemies wash away, and they all are once more part of the wider human family. Their anonymity has eroded their identity, but it has also eroded their wartime allegiances to one side or the other. Indeed, in the little phrase "or neither" the poem acknowledges that some of these men may not even have been soldiers at all! Nonetheless, *all* of these young men have "enlisted on the other front": they have joined whatever it is (if anything) that comes after death. The poem thus also highlights the absurdity of war, by showing that in death, when it is already too late, the allegiances and arguments that drive war cease to matter.

All in all, then, "Beach Burial" is a bleak poem that has nothing good to say about war. It doesn't portray anyone as heroic, nor does it seek to show how the men's sacrifices were somehow worth it. Though Slessor was inspired to write the poem after the actual Word War Two Battle of El Alamein, the poem leaves out any context about why or for what the soldiers fought, indicating that it's likely intended to highlight the foolish destructiveness of *all* war, not just World War Two.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

🔍 LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

> *Softly and humbly ...*
> *... dead sailors come;*

The poem spares no punches with its opening image. The funereal tone is established immediately, focusing on "convoys of dead sailors" who are destined for the Gulf of Arabs (a bay on the coast of Egypt). This is an unsettling [paradox](#) because it sounds as if the sailors head to this destination on purpose—when, in fact, they're already dead. "Convoys" is a word chosen specifically for its military connotations; a convoy is a group of ships traveling together, usually under military protection (or formed of military vessels itself). Even in the first two lines, then, the poem has already gestured towards the tragic waste of young life in war.

It's important, too, that the sailors arrive "softly and humbly." The notion of humility contrasts with the bombastic patriotism to which the organizers of war often appeal (indeed, war poetry can usually be categorized into works that either support or undermine this effort). Soldiers are usually thought to be proud, not humble, but it's already clear that these soldiers are very different from that ideal. However, the men's humility is not their choice—rather, they're forced to be humble simply because they're dead. Furthermore, they're anonymous, disfigured first by war and then by the water. They have no agency over what happens to them, drifting at the whim of the tides. The [enjambment](#) between the first two lines creates a long, meandering sentence that evokes this drifting and highlights the contrast between the aimlessness of *this* "convoy" and the more purposeful action of most conveys.

LINES 3-4

> *At night they ...*
> *... in the foam.*

Lines 3 and 4 further develop the poem's opening image of "dead sailors" adrift on the tides of the Gulf of Arabs. These dead men are ghostly figures traveling not just in the literal night, but in the darkness of the depths.

Line 3 captures the men's lack of agency over their dead bodies:

> At night they sway and wander in the waters far under,

This line is almost entirely governed by [alliteration](#), [assonance](#),

and [consonance](#), as highlighted above—indeed, the words "wander" and "waters in this line are alliterative, assonant, *and* consonant. The way that these sounds exert themselves on the line represents the way that the rhythms of the water have complete control of where these dead bodies end up. The verb choices in this line are also significant. "Sway[ing]" can be passive (like trees in the breeze—the wind *makes* them sway), while to "wander" suggests an aimlessness that is also self-directed. Both verbs sound peaceful and leisurely, giving the line a sense of stark contrast with the urgent activities of warfare.

As line 4 states, many bodies end up on the beach eventually:

> But morning rolls them in the foam.

Notice the /o/ sounds in this line—"rolls" and "foam" are assonant but "morning" is slightly different. These round /o/ vowels one after another seem to conjure the rolling motion that the line describes. And again, the grammar of the line emphasizes the soldiers' passivity. *They* do not roll in the foam; rather, their environment controls them, as "morning rolls *them*."

LINES 5-8

> *Between the sob ...*
> *... upon their nakedness;*

The second [stanza](#) shifts the poem's focus onto the burials mentioned in the title. "Someone," suggests the speaker, finds "time" to give the dead men some semblance of dignity. This someone, of course, can't give the men a full funeral service, but they can at least provide them with some kind of grave and grave-marker.

The opening line of this stanza—line 5—reasons that this "someone" conducts these burials "**b**etween the so**b** and clu**bb**ing of the gunfire." The /b/ [consonance](#) gives the line a kind of dull, dead sound that perhaps mirrors the numbness of the survivors' emotions as well as the dead men themselves. The speaker implicitly admires the person who finds time amid the tragedy and immediate danger of war to bury the men. Indeed, the use of [caesura](#) in line 6 gives the poem a slow pace, drawing attention to the way that this "someone" manages to find time for the burials against the odds:

> Someone, it seems, has time for this,

The /s/ consonance and [alliteration](#) in this line (also known as [sibilance](#)) evoke the watery coastal environment, mimicking the sound of lapping waves and sea breezes.

Lines 7 and 8 describe the initial act of burial, with the unknown "someone" pulling the bodies out of the shallow water and covering them in sand. As with the third lines of the other stanzas, line 7 is longer, contributing to the poem's elegiac tone

and recalling the meandering sound of line 3 (which described the aimless drift of the dead bodies in the water).

Alliteration, [assonance](#), and consonance in "bury" and "burrows" emphasize the effort it must take to bury these men, but there's also something hurried about the sounds—as if the person or people performing the burial are short on time (and, of course, resources). Line 8 then uses a gentle /d/ and /n/ consonance:

> And tread the sand upon their nakedness;

These sounds are themselves buried into the line and they're intentionally subtle, conveying the care with which the burials are performed.

LINES 9-12

> And each cross, ...
> ... they begin –

The third [stanza](#) takes a closer look at the burial sites on the beach. Each man is buried with a cross, marking these as Christian burials. However, these crosses are makeshift (like the graves), made out of whatever wood is at hand on the beach. Interestingly, then, the crosses arrive on the beach on the same tides that draw in the men. Everything about these burials, the speaker suggests, has come about as a result of distant, large-scale forces that the men being buried never had a hope of controlling—the tides may even be a symbolic stand-in for the powerful governments that sent the men to war. The [caesurae](#) in this stanza reinforce the poem's elegiac tone, helping the poem sound almost like a reading at a funeral.

In line 10, the speaker informs the reader that something is written on these crosses—"the last signature of men." Of course, these scrawlings aren't literally made by the dead men, but they do, in a sense, belong to them. The written markings are like the final sentences in the men's lives, stories that weren't and never will be finished. The notion of a "last signature" is perhaps also meant to remind the reader of a will, in which a person states what should become of their possessions and assets after they die. These men, of course, have no such power; these words written on driftwood are the best they're going to get.

Line 11 essentially expresses the main thematic thrust of the poem: "perplexity" and "bewildered pity" at the wasteful tragedy of war. It seems to indicate that it wasn't just the person who wrote on the crosses who was miserable and confused; it seems that the speaker feels that way, too. The dense [alliteration](#) in the line—"Written with such perplexity, with such bewildered pity"—draws the reader's attention to the material construction of the line, the fact that it is something *written*. This in turn supports the starkness of the image of the makeshift crosses and the writing upon them.

Line 12 then uses [paradox](#) for emotional effect, describing the

words as "chok[ing] as they begin," as though the words themselves are overcome by emotion. The line thus makes a logical leap from characteristics of speech to those of writing, setting up a surprising contrast to further the sense of a funeral-like occasion. Perhaps the words also "choke" in the mind of the speaker as they read them on the beach, since they're upsetting to read and difficult to accept.

LINES 13-16

> 'Unknown seaman' – ...
> ... drowned men's lips,

The fourth [stanza](#) is part of the same long phrase begun in line 9, the first line of the third stanza. The stanza break creates a dramatic moment between line 12 and line 13, with the latter line stating what the writing on the "stake[s] of tide wood" actually says: "Unknown seaman." This is a key moment in the poem, spelling out clearly the way that war divests the men not only of their lives but of their identities too. That is, in dying at sea, and washing up on this foreign shore, the chances of their deaths being properly recorded or honored are slim. The "someone" that buries them doesn't know anything about them—not even, as the final stanza suggests, which side they fought on, or if they fought at all! They are a long way, then, from their homes and their loved ones, their identities literally eroded by the sea (but stolen by war). The [caesura](#) in line 13 ensures that "unknown seaman" is given its own little space in the poem, almost as if this line, too, is a burial site.

The speaker sees the "ghostly pencil / waver[] and fade[]." In a literal sense, this means that the markings of the pencil are shadowy and hard to read, but it also suggests that the ghosts of the men themselves are writing the words, as if they're trying desperately for one last chance at recognition. But the fact that the writing is in pencil makes it clear that they won't succeed; the writing is essentially impermanent and prone to fading over time. If burial is supposed to provide a kind of final tribute to someone who is gone, the use of pencil shows that this particular tribute is hurried and temporary—soon the water may even wash the men away again.

Indeed, this process of fading has already begun. The moist sea air has "washed their inscriptions," and made them "as blue as drowned men's lips." This comparison highlights the lifelessness of the men and the macabre processes of change that their bodies are undergoing. The description of the sea air as a kind of "breath" is also notable, as it implicitly asks the reader to consider who this breath belongs to. That is, who is responsible for the way these men will inevitably be forgotten? If, for example, it is the breath of God, then the *silence* of the breath [paradoxically](#) speaks volumes—that is, no help from a higher power appears to be in sight.

LINES 17-20

> Dead seamen, gone ...

... the other front.

The final stanza shifts the poem's focus to consideration of the afterlife. But first, it highlights an unintended irony of the way that the "dead seamen" died. It's not clear, as the poem points out, on which side of the war (World War II) the dead men fought. Indeed, there may be corpses from either side—and even those of some men who weren't part of the war at all! In their grim deaths, the men are returned to the human family, all their differences allegiances washed away and all their fighting ceased. Ironically, there is a kind of unity to the way that the men have come to find themselves on the shore.

The poem takes this idea and transforms it using metaphor. After the caesura following "dead seamen," the phrase "gone in search of the same landfall" is key. It could relate to a literal destination—wherever the war was being fought, a site that men on either side would have been trying to reach. Or it could be the shore on which the men are now buried, with the "search" relating to the journey of their bodies on the tide. But a third meaning emerges, too, which is drawn out in the poem's closing lines. The search for "the same landfall" can also refer figuratively to the afterlife, since the men are now essentially on the same voyage together—despite the fact that they might once have been sworn enemies. They are united in death, whether their destination is oblivion or some kind of afterlife.

Line 19 perhaps hints at an element of autobiography in the poem. Sesslor was a war journalist, and given his Australian nationality, the "us" pronoun of "fought with us" probably refers to the Allies. The point, though, is that the speaker doesn't really know or care what side the dead soldiers were on—instead, the poem seeks to highlight the tragic waste of their young lives, no matter who they were. Now, united by the sand, they are all "enlisted on the other front"—a metaphor that again describes the transition to the afterlife and the way that earthly division cease to matter after death.

⊗ SYMBOLS

✏ THE GHOSTLY PENCIL

In the third and fourth stanzas of "Beach Burial," the speaker focuses on a detailed description of the driftwood crosses that mark the dead soldiers' graves, and in particular on the faded pencil marks that read "Unknown seaman." In a literal sense, the speaker is describing how the writing appears ghostly because it has faded in the wind and water, but the pencil marks also symbolize the way that these anonymous men will inevitably be forgotten.

The speaker describes how the marking "Wavers and fades," emphasizing how despite the efforts of whoever made the graves, this memorial is already falling away. So in the same way, the memory of these men will also fade; they're already

anonymous, and the speaker indicates through the symbol of the pencil that soon they won't be remembered at all. Just as their memorial has become "ghostly," so too will the men themselves become nothing more than ghosts.

Additionally, the pencil marks may also symbolize the speaker's fear that even writing this poem won't do much to mark the tragedy of the men's deaths. This poem is a kind of parallel to the inscriptions on the grave markers: it is the speaker's own attempt to memorialize the dead through writing. But though the speaker seems to hope that the poem will argue against the tragic wastefulness of war, the image of the fading pencil markings suggests a fear that this argument, too, will be forgotten as time (and readers' attention) moves on.

> **Where this symbol appears in the poem:**
>
> • **Line 13:** *"the ghostly pencil"*

✖ POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used frequently in "Beach Burial." For instance, it's prominent in lines 2 and 3:

> The **c**onvoys of dead **s**ailors **c**ome;
> At night they **sw**ay and **w**ander in the **w**aters far
> under,

The alliteration here, coupled with consonance, gives lines a sense of ebb and flow that conveys the way that the dead men's bodies drift helplessly on the tides.

Then, in line 6, the alliteration of "**S**omeone" and "**s**eems" has a whispery, watery sound—like a sea breeze (other /s/ consonance in this stanza adds to the effect).

The next example is in line 7, with "**b**ury" and "**b**urrows." These two /b/s sound insistent, emphasizing the determination of "someone" to see that the men get some kind of makeshift burial—even if it is in shifting sands and with crosses made of driftwood.

Next up is line 11:

> **W**ritten **w**ith **s**uch **p**erplexity, **w**ith **s**uch bewildered
> **p**ity,

The alliteration here draws the reader's attention to the material construction of the line, the fact that is something *written*. This in turn supports the starkness of the image of the makeshift crosses and the writing upon them. The repeating sounds also give the line a dense feeling, reinforcing the idea that whoever wrote the words had to push through confusion

and pain in order to do so.

In line 17, three /s/ words alliterate ("seaman," "search, and "same"). This sibilant sound is associated with the sea, and so its repeated use evokes the endless—eternal—search of the men for the peace of the afterlife.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "convoys," "sailors," "come"
- **Line 3:** "sway," "wander," "waters"
- **Line 6:** "Someone," "seems"
- **Line 7:** "bury," "burrows"
- **Line 11:** "Written with," " such ," "perplexity," "with," " such," "pity"
- **Line 15:** "wet," "washed"
- **Line 17:** "seamen," "search," "same"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used throughout "Beach Burial," usually to underscore the meanings of the poem's lines and enhance its sense of atmosphere.

It starts with gentle /ee/ sounds in line 1: "softly and humbly." These set up a sense of drifting and swaying, which mirrors the movement of the dead men's bodies in the water (before they wash up on shore).

The third line intensifies this effect, packing a lot of assonance into one line. Indeed, the assonance exerts control on the line in the same way that the tides of the water dictate where the bodies go:

> At night they sway and wander in the waters far
> under,

Line 4 uses similar /o/ sounds to suggest the way that the bodies are moved about by the water: "But morning rolls them in the foam."

Perhaps the most prominent example of assonance comes in the repeated short /i/ sounds of line 11:

> Written with such perplexity, with such bewildered
> pity,

The /i/ shows up in nearly every word of the line, giving it a breathy, pressured sound that foreshadows how "the words choke" in the next line.

The assonance in the penultimate stanza is subtle, almost unnoticeable. This ties in nicely with the description of how the writing on the graves has faded: "Unknown" and "ghostly," "Wavers and fades," "The breath of the wet season." The light, airy assonance helps represent this faded quality.

Then, assonance becomes more prominent again in the final

stanza. It links together particular words to underscore two of the poem's main ideas. First, the repeated /e/ sound in "whether" and "enemies" emphasizes that it doesn't matter "whether" the dead soldiers were "enemies," since now they're all buried on the beach together. Then, the matching /uh/ sounds in "other front" highlight the finality of the men's deaths; whatever comes after death (what the poem metaphorically calls the "other front") is now their only destination.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Softly," "humbly"
- **Line 2:** "convoys," "come"
- **Line 3:** "they sway," "wander," "waters far under"
- **Line 4:** "rolls," "foam"
- **Line 5:** "clubbing of," "gunfire"
- **Line 7:** "bury," "burrows"
- **Line 11:** "Written with," "perplexity," "with," "bewildered pity"
- **Line 13:** "Unknown," "ghostly"
- **Line 14:** "Wavers," "fades"
- **Line 15:** "The," "breath," "the wet"
- **Line 18:** "Whether," "enemies"
- **Line 20:** "other front"

CAESURA

Caesura is used in seven of the poem's twenty lines. Most of the time, it functions to vary the pace of the lines in keeping with the events they describe.

The first example is line 6 (quoted with line 5 for context):

> Between the sob and clubbing of the gunfire
> Someone, it seems, has time for this,

This part of the poem implicitly admires the "someone" who buries the men on the beach—the speaker is surprised that they can find the time to do so. The caesura here slows the line down, the poem's own way of making time for something. The caesura therefore comes to represent the moments of quiet memorial, like the dead men's burial, that manage to exist amid the chaos of war.

The caesura in line 9 adds extra weight to the word "cross." This extra weight conveys how the crosses require some physical effort to be "driven" into the ground.

Perhaps the most significant caesura in the poem, the dash after "Unknown seaman" in line 13, carves out a little space on the page for those two somber words. The caesura, then, makes the phrase stand out among the other words—just as the graves stand out on the shoreline.

The other caesurae in the poem give it a kind of lilt, perhaps suggesting the rhythms of the tides that carry the men's bodies

to shore. They also contribute to the poem's generally slow-paced, elegiac tone.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Someone, it," "seems, has"
- **Line 9:** "cross, the"
- **Line 11:** "perplexity, with"
- **Line 13:** "seaman' – the"
- **Line 14:** "fades, the"
- **Line 17:** "seamen, gone"
- **Line 19:** "us, or," "neither; the"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used throughout "Beach Burial." Some of this consonance is also alliteration, which is covered in that section of this guide.

There are a number of soft consonant sounds at play in the first stanza. They create a dull, gentle sound that hints at the lifelessness of the "dead sailors." The /s/ consonance (also known as sibilance) also helps conjure the atmosphere of a watery, coastal environment:

> Softly and humbly to the Gulf of Arabs
> The convoys of dead sailors come;
> At night they sway and wander in the waters far under,
> But morning rolls them in the foam.

In line 5, the /b/ consonance continues this dull, dead sound:

> between the sobs and clubbing of the gunfire,

The /s/ consonance continues throughout the second stanza too (e.g., "Someone," "seems," "sand," "nakedness"), further enhancing the reader's sense of a breezy, watery setting.

Line 8 also uses a gentle /d/ and /n/ consonance:

> And tread the sand upon their nakedness;

These sounds themselves are subtly trodden into the line, conveying either the gentleness with which the burials are performed or the temporariness of the burial sites (a harder sound might suggest they are more structurally permanent).

Line 15 uses /th/, /s/, and /sh/ sounds to convey breathiness—this matches with the line's image:

> The breath of the wet season has washed their inscriptions.

These sounds are also suggestive of the wildness of the coastal environment, as if a wind is blowing through the line, and the

alliterative /w/ sound highlights the importance of water in this place.

The /th/ returns in the poem's final three lines:

> Whether as enemies they fought,
> Or fought with us, or neither; the sand joins them together,
> Enlisted on the other front.

This repeated sound runs through the poem's conclusion and emphasizes the words that state its main point: it doesn't matter which side the dead men once fought on, because now they are all together, moving toward "the other front"—that is, whatever comes after death.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Line 17
- Line 18
- Line 19
- Line 20

DIACOPE

Diacope is used just once in "Beach Burial." It occurs in the last stanza, with the repetition of the word "fought.

This final section discusses the way that the men's identities have been eroded by death—and literally, perhaps, by the sea. In a strange way, then, they are united in death and in their shared burial, whichever side of the war they were once fighting on. The repetition of "fought" seems to emphasize the futility of war; it highlights how their lives were all about fighting, even though all that effort led them to the same helpless place.

Additionally, the repeated word creates a clear parallel between the men who fought "as enemies" and the men who fought "with us"—that is, on whatever side of the war the speaker supports. Their fighting once put them at odds with each other, but now they're the same; they're all anonymous

and buried on the beach, and the diacope underscores that unavoidable parallel. Finally, the past tense of the word "fought" emphasizes that these men's sense of agency and action is now long gone; they're dead, and they'll never fight again.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Lines 18-19:** "fought, / Or fought"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used several times in "Beach Burial." Primarily, it helps give the poem an ebb and flow that evokes the movement of the tides—the same tides that bring the men's dead bodies to shore. Enjambment allows the poem to vary the lengths of its phrases, giving the poem's rhythm a sense of pull and push.

The first use of enjambment is in the very first line:

> Softly and humbly to the Gulf of **Arabs**
> **The** convoys of dead sailors come;

These opening lines stretch and wander, coming to rest finally on the word "come"—exactly the word in which the "dead sailors" come to rest too (by arriving on the shore).

The enjambment between lines 5 and 6 works a little bit differently:

> Between the sob and clubbing of the **gunfire**
> **Someone**, it seems, has time for this,

This enjambment, coupled with line 6's caesurae, creates an emphasis on the word "Someone." This makes that person—the one who conducts the burials—seem more mysterious, but it also underlines their importance. Without this anonymous person, the men's bodies would just decompose on the shore or get washed back out to sea.

The enjambment in the fourth stanza (at the ends of lines 13 and 15) also has an interesting effect. Here, the speaker describes the faded quality of the writing on the dead men's makeshift grave markers. The white space at the ends of these two lines (between "pencil" and "Wavers," and "inscriptions" and "As") gently evokes the way that the sea (and moist air) will eventually wash these inscriptions away completely.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Arabs / The"
- **Lines 5-6:** "gunfire / Someone"
- **Lines 7-8:** "burrows / And"
- **Lines 13-14:** "pencil / Wavers"
- **Lines 15-16:** "inscriptions / As"

METAPHOR

"Beach Burial" uses one metaphor, which comes in its last stanza:

> Dead seamen, gone in search of **the same landfall**,
> Whether as enemies they fought,
> Or fought with us, or neither; the sand joins them together,
> Enlisted on **the other front**.

The first line here could be literal or metaphorical. That is, it could describe the actual search of the men for their destination, if they were headed somewhere specific while they were still alive. A second literal meaning is at play too, relating to the way that the men's bodies seem destined for the shore (because of the movement of the tides). But metaphorically speaking, the words "the same landfall" could also be talking about the afterlife—whether that's merely oblivion or some kind of religious fate. The men are united now, whichever side they fought on, by their transition to this afterlife.

The poem develops this metaphor further in the last line and, indeed, makes this the closing idea—death (and whatever comes next) as "the other front." A "front" is an arena of warfare, where the opposing sides meet. This conclusion underscores that the cause of these men's deaths is unambiguous: they died because of war, with all the waste and tragedy that it brings.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 20:** "the other front"

PARADOX

"Beach Burial" arguably has two examples of paradox. The first of these is in line 2 (quoted with line 1 for context):

> Softly and humbly to the Gulf of Arabs
> The convoys of dead sailors come;

A convoy is a type of organized military transport in which ships travel together under military protection, or it can also be a group of military ships themselves. "Dead sailors," of course, can't literally organize themselves into a convoy. But describing them as such highlights the way that the men are distinctly *unorganized*—they are totally at the mercy of the tides, and have no agency at all over what happens to them. By opening with this paradox, the poem immediately establishes the idea that the men described are completely controlled by forces beyond their control.

The other paradox comes in line 12, which describes the words on the makeshift crosses that mark the dead men's graves:

The words choke as they begin –

This line describes *written* words, not spoken ones. The verb "choke," then, doesn't make literal sense, since written words can't choke. But the paradox heightens the sense of intense emotion that colors this stanza, and it foregrounds the tragedy of war. Indeed, the "choke" might belong to the speaker—the one who actually reads these words. That is, the words might make the speaker themselves choke with emotion, or they might have done the same to the anonymous person who initially wrote them.

> **Where Paradox appears in the poem:**
> - **Line 2:** "The convoys of dead sailors come;"
> - **Line 12:** "The words choke as they begin –"

🗎 VOCABULARY

Gulf of Arabs (Line 1) - This is a bay near the Egyptian city of Alexandria.

Convoys (Line 2) - A traveling group of ships under military guard, or comprised of military ships itself.

Sob (Line 5) - A cry.

Clubbing (Line 5) - To club something, in this context, is to beat it violently.

Burrows (Line 7) - Holes dug in the sand.

Tidewood (Line 9) - Bits of wood that have washed up on shore.

Perplexity (Line 11) - Confusion.

Bewildered (Line 11) - Confusion combined with disbelief.

Inscriptions (Line 15) - Writing that is cut into a surface. These actually appear to be in pencil, but the writing on an ordinary grave marker would usually be inscribed into stone.

Landfall (Line 17) - The moment in a ship's voyage when it reaches land.

Enlisted (Line 20) - To enlist is to join the military and put yourself forward for combat.

Front (Line 20) - In this context, "front" refers to a site of battle, where the two sides in a war meet to fight.

⏱ FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Beach Burial" is made up of five quatrains (four-line stanzas). The poem could be considered an elegy because of the way it laments the dead, though elegies are usually more specific in terms of who they are talking about (one of the speaker's main

points is that the dead men's identities are unknown).

The poem doesn't follow any particular set form, and instead is itself is a kind of voyage (in keeping with the discussion of sailors). It starts with the dead bodies washing up on the shore, before thinking about who buries them. The speaker investigates the makeshift graves, noticing their tragic anonymity, before imagining the men embarking on a new journey—death and whatever comes after.

The poem makes use of long, meandering sentences that seem to ebb and flow like tides. The third line of each stanza is longer than the other three lines, highlighting this sense of wandering motion. And other than the one at the end of the poem, there is just one full stop in the whole poem (after "foam" at the end of the first stanza). This gives the poem a sense of pull and push, a certain restlessness that evokes both the movement of the bodies in the water *and* the speaker's difficulty in understanding why so much young life had to be wasted.

METER

"Beach Burial" isn't regular enough to say that it's governed by one specific meter, but the poet definitely pays attention to the metrical sound of the lines throughout.

Roughly speaking, the first, second, and fourth lines of each stanza have four stresses, while the third lines of each stanza have six stresses. This variation in line length is important. Though the precise number of syllables in each line varies, the relative predictability of the number of stresses gives the poem a sense of push and pull reminiscent of a tide—and tides, of course, are what bring the dead men to the shore.

As an example, here is the first stanza:

> **Soft**ly and **hum**bly to the **Gulf** of **Ar**abs
> The **con**voys of **dead sail**ors **come;**
> At **night** they **sway** and **wand**er in the **wat**ers **far**
> **und**er,
> But **morn**ing **rolls** them **in** the **foam.**

Only the final line has a consistent meter (iambic tetrameter, which uses four poetic feet per line with a da-DUM rhythm), but all the lines feature a gentle, rolling alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables. The other stanzas repeat this general pattern, emulating the regularity of tides while also containing enough variation to suggest the ever-changing coastal environment.

RHYME SCHEME

"Beach Burial" doesn't have a precise rhyme scheme, but it nonetheless uses rhyme throughout. In each stanza, every second and fourth line rhyme, with some rhymes more full than others. In stanza four, for example, "lips" and "drips" rhyme loud and clear. Conversely, "this" and "nakedness" in stanza two rhyme in a more subtle way. The rhyme is gentle but purposeful

throughout, perhaps evoking the lifeless but inevitable movement of the men's bodies on the tide as they wash ashore.

There is another aspect to the rhyme too, hidden away within the third line of each stanza. These lines use subtle internal rhyme, usually in the form of slant rhyme: "wander"/"under," "shallows"/"burrows," "perplexity"/"pity," season"/"inscriptions," "neither"/"together." These rhymes support the poem's sense of momentum, giving these lines a kind of lurching motion like water receding from a shore.

💬 SPEAKER

The speaker in "Beach Burial" is unspecified. They don't refer to themselves as an "I," but the poem feels like it is written in the first-person, since seems to be a series of observations based on a specific personal experience. Furthermore, Slessor had first-hand experience of World War Two and this specific geographical location, so the poem is generally taken to be partly autobiographical. But it's noticeable that Slessor *doesn't* include too much by way of specifics (the poem doesn't mention Slessor's native Australia, for example), emphasizing that the experience related here is somewhat universal—everyone, the lack of detail suggests, should feel this sad about the needless destruction of war.

The speaker feels an instinctive sympathy for the dead men, sensing the tragic loss of young life. This sense of loss is brought to life by the speaker's close attention to detail, for example in the observations of the makeshift grave markers. In a sense, the speaker performs the same function as the "someone" who buried the men—giving the dead whatever memorial is possible under these tragic circumstances.

In the last stanza, the speaker makes an interesting revelation, acknowledging with the word "us" (in "fought with us") that they were on one particular side of the war (which makes sense given the autobiographical context). But what's notable is that there isn't a hint of patriotism or nationalistic pride—the side that the speaker supports seems totally irrelevant. By mentioning—but not emphasizing—their own allegiance, the speaker suggests that the tragedy of the war, in its immense loss of human life, extends to humanity as a whole.

🖼 SETTING

As the title suggests, the poem is set on a beach. Specifically, it takes place in a coastal area in the Gulf of Arabs, near the port city of Alexandria (a city in Egypt). In fact, Slessor is thought to have written the poem after the Battle of El Alamein in World War Two.

The poem also has a ghostly and surreal atmosphere. There is the sense that, while WWII is its literal setting, the poem also takes place outside of time in a more abstract sense. Perhaps

that's because it opens with an image of death, which informs the poem's generally somber tone throughout. The focus on "ghostl[iness]" and the afterlife makes the particulars of the battle feel almost irrelevant now—the battle has already taken its tragic toll, and the losses of war matter more than the war itself.

ⓘ CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Kenneth Slessor was an Australian poet, correspondent, and journalist who went to numerous battle sites during World War Two. Slessor was one of Australia's earliest widely-renowned poets, and "Beach Burial" is probably his second-most famous poem after "Five Bells."

Slessor's poem avoids being patriotic or glamorizing war, as tends to be the case with war poets who, like Slessor, experienced war's horrors themselves. With this in mind, then, the poem has little in common with a poem like Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" (a WWI poem) and much more similarity to the works of poets like Keith Douglas, who wrote brilliantly about the realities of World War Two (in "Simplify Me When I'm Dead," for example). Slessor's work also has themes in common with two other prominent Australian war poets, Douglas Stewart and John Manifold.

Though "Beach Burial" is one of Slessor's most famous works, war poetry is a relatively small part of his overall body of work. In fact, he wrote only two poems during World War II—this one and "An Inscription for Dog River." Within the wider context of war poetry, "Beach Burial" is quite experimental. The rhymes are intentionally inexact, and the form is innovative (with its long third lines in each stanza).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As a war correspondent during World War Two, Slessor traveled far afield. At various points during the conflict he was stationed in places as geographically diverse as North Africa, Crete, Syria and Papua New Guinea. This poem is thought to have been inspired by the fallout after fighting in Egypt.

World War Two was the second horrendous conflict that humankind inflicted on itself during the 20th century. Around four times as many people died in WWII compared to WWI—approximately 70 million. The lead-up to WWII was long and complex, but put simplistically, it was based on the desire of Adolf Hitler to reinstate Germany's might and power following the harsh sanctions and limitations imposed on the country after WWI. Hitler and Neville Chamberlain, the British prime minister, signed an agreement which allocated certain land to the Germans—and seemed to prevent the outbreak of major war (this is known as the Munich Agreement). Thinking that Chamberlain and his allies would be reluctant to actually go to

war, Hitler soon made a grab for more territory, invading Poland in late 1939. Soon after, Britain declared war on Germany and other countries followed suit.

The conflict drew in many countries around the world, with Italy and Japan joining Germany (to form the Axis powers), and with the other side eventually including the Americans, the Russians, and most of Europe. The war officially ended on September 2nd, 1945, with the surrender of Japan.

📚 MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "Beach Burial" Read Aloud — A reading of the poem, with additional analysis. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kiumzbqIfto)

- World War II Poetry — A valuable sampler of WWII poetry curated by the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/91440/world-war-ii-poets)

- More Poems by Slessor — A selection of other works by the poet. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/kenneth-slessor#tab-poems)

- Further Slessor Biography — An in-depth account of Slessor's life, provided by the Australian Dictionary of Biography. (http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/slessor-kenneth-adolf-11712)

- Slessor Radio Documentary — A program provided by ABC about Slessor's life and work. (https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/poetica/kenneth-slessor-part-one/4579892)

💬 HOW TO CITE

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