Exposure

POEM TEXT

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knive 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, and puckering foreheads crisp.
The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp,
Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,
    But nothing happens.

SUMMARY

Our heads are pounding, and the never-ending wind is so cold that it feels like knives stabbing us. We're exhausted, but we have to stay vigilant because even though we don't hear any enemy fire right now, it's always possible. The flares sent out to illuminate the battlefield just make our job even more confusing. It's so quiet that it's freaking out the soldiers keeping watch, who nervously discuss the possibility of something finally happening. But nothing does.

While on the lookout, we hear the wind frantically rattling through the barbed wire set up as defense around the trenches. It sounds just like the twitching of men dying painful deaths after getting caught in the wire. We can hear constant gun fire coming from the north, but it seems like the sounds belong to some different war than the one we're fighting. I wonder why we're even here?

The sun is coming up, and with it the drudgery of another day in the trenches. We're not sure of anything anymore except for the fact that the fighting goes on and on, rain makes us soaking wet, and there are some very threatening storm clouds in the sky. Dawn is like a general organizing her miserable troops in the east, and her soldiers—wind, rain, and snow—attack us again as we sit in the freezing trenches. But, once again, nothing happens.

Suddenly round after round of bullet whoosh through the air

and break up the silence, but they're not as dangerous as the heaving snow storm surrounding us. The wind is so fierce that the snow falls sideways, swirling and building up all around us. We watch the snowflakes as they're carried by the wind, which doesn't seem to care where it goes. But, once again, nothing happens.

The snow flies in our faces, its flakes like fingers slyly reaching out to touch us. We huddle in the trenches and become mesmerized by the cold and snow, to the point that we start to imagine that our trenches are warm, grassy ditches. We imagine that we're drifting off in the warmth of the sun, lying in a field filled with flowers and birds. Does this mean that we're dying?

After a while we begin to imagine that our spirits have gone home. There, they spot fires that have burned out, covered with a layer of glowing coals that look like precious gems. The house is filled with the sound of crickets and happy, scurrying mice, who believe the empty house now belongs to them. The doors and windows are all closed—well, they're all closed to us. So instead we come back to the war, where we're probably going to die.

We don't believe that there are any warm fires left for us, even though the sun still shines brightly down on children and plants. We've lost faith in God's promise of happy, warmer times to come. As such, we're not resentful of our situation; we were born to be on the battlefield and possibly die, because God seems to have abandoned us.

Tonight will be so cold that it will freeze both the ground and our bodies, causing many soldiers' hands to shrivel up and their foreheads to harden and wrinkle. Other soldiers will come to bury those who freeze to death, their hands shaking from fear and cold as they hold their grave-digging tools, stopping occasionally to look at faces that they partially recognize. The dead men's eyes have frozen solid, but, once again, nothing happens.

THEMES

THE MONOTONY AND MEANINGLESSNESS OF WAR

Owen's "Exposure" is a poem about war, yet it focuses very little on actual fighting. Instead, its speaker zooms in on the physical and psychological suffering of soldiers huddled in freezing, muddy trenches (like those used during WWI, in which Owen himself served). In this way, the poem exposes both the trauma and sheer monotony of warfare. What's more, the poem presents these struggles as ultimately meaningless; as days and night merge into each other, the speaker repeatedly insists that "nothing happens"—implicitly criticizing war for its futility and unnecessary suffering.

The speaker presents the day-to-day reality of war as at once boring, stressful, and deeply draining; there is no glory or heroism to be found in these trenches. The soldiers must remain vigilant throughout the night, so much so that their "brains ache" from watching for any potential dangers. They are "wearied" and "confuse[d]" but have no way to alleviate their struggles.

In addition to this mental turmoil, the soldiers undergo physical strain as they "cringe in holes"—that is, trenches—to protect themselves as best they can from the freezing air that is more "deadly" than bullets. The speaker's description of the sentries being "worried by silence" seems to imply that silence indicates another night of inaction, sitting around and dying from the cold instead of making charges against the enemy. The speaker also calls them both "nervous" and "curious," with the second word implying that the sentries are almost eager for real combat. "But nothing happens"—they are denied that chance.

Four of the stanzas end with that same line: "But nothing happens." The repetition of this refrain emphasizes that war often involves just sitting around and waiting for days on end. War requires constant vigilance, yet it is a vigilance with no outcome, no payoff. This fact, the poem suggests, is part of what makes war so traumatic; as the soldiers wait around, they "only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy." Their minds are filled with a constant sense of dread and sorrow, interrupted occasionally by "Sudden successive streaks of bullets"—a reminder that should they actually be thrust into action, death is always on the horizon. The speaker depicts a dull and dreadful landscape of war that constantly weighs on the soldiers' minds. The terrible conditions, exacerbated by the monotony of the war, create a horrifying image of what it was like for soldiers on the front line.

The speaker's constant assertion that "nothing happens" refers to the frustrating monotony of the war, but it also gestures more broadly to the overall meaninglessness of the war. At one point in the poem, the soldiers ask, "What are we doing here?" The question refers to their immediate conditions: stuck in a trench, dying from exposure in the bitter cold, with no enemy to fight. But the question might also refer to the situation of World War I more generally, in which the actual reasons for the entire war were opaque and hard to understand. In both the specific scene described in the poem and in the entire war itself, there seems to be no reason for the soldiers' suffering. That this rhetorical question is never answered in the poem suggests that there *is* no answer—there isn't a true purpose for the soldiers to be there.

The poem ends with one final repetition of the line, "But nothing happens," which implies that the deaths of the soldiers described in the final stanza—deaths from the cold, not from battle—are in fact meaningless. The fighting and suffering aren't changing or accomplishing anything. By portraying war as pointless, in which men can and do die just as easily from

exposure as from battle, the poem condemns war as futile and refutes any attempt to ascribe to war any kind of glory or heroism.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 6-9
- Line 10
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-14
- Line 15
- Lines 16-17
- Lines 18-20
- Line 20
- Lines 21-22
- Lines 22-23
- Lines 23-25
- Lines 26-35
- Lines 36-40

MAN VS. NATURE

The primary enemy the soldiers face is not an opposing army but rather the forces of nature. Huddled in icy trenches, the men face extreme cold and suffer from frostbite and hallucinations, with many eventually dying from their exposure. The conditions are harsh, with "merciless iced winds" constantly battering the soldiers as snowflakes "come feeling for our faces." The poem personifies the forces of nature as an actively hostile force that attacks the soldiers, and presents nature as a more pressing threat than any human enemy.

The winter landscape of war is presented as dangerous and hostile. The winds on the battlefield "knive" the soldiers, and the sounds the blowing winds make remind the speaker of the "twitching agonies" of men dying on the barbed wire. Wind also brings the snow, which is so plentiful that the air "shudders black" with it. The snow falls on the soldiers and fills their ditches, freezing them and creating even more slush that they must sit in or else risk being hit by the bullets that occasionally fly past. The bullets themselves are described as being "less deadly" than the freezing air.

The speaker illustrates the effects of these dangerous conditions in describing the eventual deaths of the soldiers, as the ice is "Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp," and turning eyes to ice. The image of human features shriveling and puckering is so specific and brutal that it forces the reader, at least to an extent, into an impossible-to-romanticize understanding of the soldiers' experiences of exposure.

Not only is nature hostile, it's actively personified as the soldiers' more immediate enemy. Nature takes on an actively combative role in the poem as winds "knive" the soldiers and snowflakes stealthily "come feeling for our faces." Such actions are notably human and convey the idea that the soldiers are indeed under attack from nature. In fact, dawn itself is described as the leader of an army "massing in the east." Though dawn might typically indicate the hope of a new day, for the soldiers it only means another hard day they must attempt to survive under the assault of the wind, snow, and ice. Additionally, the forces of nature are even given emotions; for example, the wind has "nonchalance." Nature is thus both cruel and uncaring in its assault, utterly unconcerned with the suffering it causes.

The power and hostility of nature seem to make the actual human war seem smaller and less important. But it is also possible to read the power of nature as a natural *result* of the human war, thus making the war in general all the more terrible. Though nature was not the enemy these soldiers enlisted to fight, it takes precedence as the primary enemy once battle begins. The active battles, described by the "flickering gunnery" in the north, only reminds the soldiers of a "dull rumour of some other war." The ware they are forced to primarily concern themselves with is that with nature.

And this is a war the soldiers are undoubtedly losing, as made clear both by their eventual deaths at the end of the poem and by their sense, in the second to last stanza, that the “love of God seems dying.” The soldiers, beset by the elements, imagine the love of God itself flickering out. Nature not only kills the men, it also destroys their faith.

Yet while the soldiers depicted in the poem are more threatened by the freezing wind that by bullets, it's worth noting that it is only because of the war that the soldiers are exposed to bitter nature without the normal protections of civilization: shelter, heat, food, warm clothing, and so on. The way that the war exposes the soldiers to the fury of winter emphasizes the futility, meaninglessness, and dehumanizing brutality of the war. The men are given no chance of glory and instead are reduced to an animal-like state, forced to endure the wrath of nature that civilization was supposed to have tamed, and which they cannot survive.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Lines 6-9
- Lines 11-14
- Lines 17-19
- Line 21
- Lines 22-25
- Lines 36-40

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knive 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.

The speaker begins the poem with a description of the soldiers' mental state and physical environment. Sitting in frigid trenches during World War I, the soldiers are mentally and physically exhausted. Their "brains ache" from the constant vigilance required of them in case of attack, and they must stay awake in the cold, even though "the night is silent." In fact, it is that silence itself that is so worrying, because the soldiers have no way of knowing where the next attack will come from, or when it will happen. Attempts to light up the battleground with "Low drooping flares" only serve to make the landscape more confusing.

What's more, nature itself seems to be working against the soldiers. The wind is personified as being without mercy, metaphorically stabbing the soldiers with its chill. This is the first indication that nature might be just as dangerous to the soldiers as any enemy army. Indeed, the "exposure" of the poem's title refers, at least in part, to the risk the soldiers face by being literally stuck out in the cold.

These lines also capture the strange duality of emotions the soldiers feel in this situation. They are both "curious" and "nervous"—likely curious because they've been doing nothing but wait in the freezing night air for hours, and nervous because, if something *does* eventually happen, it's probably going to involve immediate danger. The alliteration of the /w/ sound across the stanza further reflects the exhausting tension that the soldiers feel: they are at once "**W**earied," "a**w**ake," "**W**orried," and "**w**hisper[ing]."

Also note the hissing sibilance in lines 1 and 4: "merci**l**e**ss** iced east wind**s** that knive us" and "**s**ilence, **s**entrie**s** **s**whisper, curious, nervous." The proliferation of /s/ sounds lends these lines a hushed and menacing quality that adds to the stanza's sense of weary anticipation.

Despite all this tension and vigilance however, "nothing happens." The speaker closes the stanza with the first instance of a refrain that he will repeat throughout the poem. The implication of this refrain extends beyond this specific wartime scene: by the end of the poem, it'll be clear that this phrase—"But nothing happens"—could just as well refer to the entirety of war itself. In other words, war is futile and meaningless; all this suffering changes nothing.

Also present in these lines is Owen's characteristic use of slant rhyme, seen between the word pairs "knive us"/"nervous" and "silent"/"salient." It's also as if the speaker is simply too weary to make his rhymes full and perfect. The poem *almost* rhymes but doesn't quite get there, adding to its sense of disorientation and unease.

LINES 6-7

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,
Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.

The second stanza begins by once again personifying the wind. The gusts of wind are "mad" not in the sense of being angry, but rather in that they're insane, frantic, chaotic—much like war itself, the poem implies. The wind is akin to an enemy force, and calling the wind crazy thus suggests that war, too, is meaningless and illogical.

The "wire" the wind tugs at is a reference to the barbed wire placed to defend trenches in World War I. The wind, then, is essentially trying to destroy the soldiers' protection. This is again a way for the poem to present nature itself as a deeply dangerous and destructive force—just as dangerous as any enemy army.

The sound of wind "tugging on the wire" is also compared in a simile to the sounds of dying men twitching among the barbed wire. This simile uses a shocking and graphic image of the reality of war (soldiers did indeed die in agony after getting caught in the wires). For civilians at home reading Owen's poetry, descriptions like this were often the first time they heard such graphic details of the war. This adds yet another level of meaning to the poem's title: it is also "exposing" the horrors of war to the public.

LINES 8-10

Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,
Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.
What are we doing here?

These lines contain the first explicit reference to the fighting happening beyond the trenches, as the soldiers hear the rumbling of guns. The sound is incessant, meaning it seems to go on and on without end or interruption, further adding to the sense of maddening monotony pervading life in the trenches. The multiple caesurae in line 8 slow the line down, adding weight to the word that appears between them as the reader is forced to hover over the word "incessantly."

> Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery
> rumbles,

Also notice the meter here, which makes use of multiple dactyls (relatively rare metrical feet consisting of a **stressed** syllable followed by two unstressed syllables) to create a noticeably repetitive rhythm—DUM da da DUM da da. The metrical rhythm of "**North**ward, in | **ces**santly" is echoed by "**flick**ering |

gunnery." Read aloud, the rhythm of line *itself* feels incessant

Gunfire is usually considered terrifying, but the soldiers have grown so used to its constant "rumbles" that it instead comes across "like a dull rumour of some other war." It *isn't* "some other war," however: it is the same war in which the soldiers are fighting, and this phrase thus also illustrates the soldiers' sense of being disconnected from their mission. In fact, they don't even know what that mission is, or whether they can actually do anything about it. The speaker sees no real point to all the violence and suffering that surrounds him, asking, "What are we doing here?"

The use of the word "other" also implies that these soldiers are still fighting *a* war, just not the one they *enlisted* to fight in. Instead, the poem will make clear, these soldiers are fighting for their lives against the forces of nature.

LINES 11-15

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.

The third stanza begins with the dawning of a new day. Dawn usually has positive connotations in literature, but here it's full of "poignant misery." It represents not new opportunity or a chance to start afresh, but rather more of the same old horror of war; the soldiers have survived the night, but now they must begin the process over again.

The soldiers still don't know what they're doing there; instead, the facts of life have boiled down to three statements—"war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy." In other words, their experience has been reduced to their immediate surroundings—the endless gun fire, incessant rain, and storm clouds that hang threateningly close in the sky. The parataxis of this line—the way each element is presented as being equally important—emphasizes once again that the soldiers' are up against both an actual enemy army and the hostile forces of nature. This is further supported by this line's heavy use of consonance, as /s/, /r/, and /t/ sounds repeat in each element listed: "war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy."

These forces of nature are metaphorically compared to an enemy army to emphasize just how dangerous they are. "Dawn" is personified as the leader of this "melancholy army," which "Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey." In other words, the speaker is imagining "Dawn" as a sort of general, the wind and rain as her soldiers. The diacope of the word "ranks" further supports the comparison of the forces of nature to enemy combatants, ready to attack the "ranks" of soldiers lined up in the trenches. (Note that "ranks" is actually being used in two slightly different ways here, an example of antanaclasis. In its first usage, the speaker is saying that Dawn's army is attacking in lines, in an orderly fashion; in its second usage, "ranks" is being used metonymically to refer to the human soldiers in the trenches.)

Despite what seems to be an impending attack, however, the speaker returns to his refrain, closing a stanza with the phrase "But nothing happens" for a second time. The poem continues its pattern of building up monotonous tension without offering any form of relief. Once again, all this anxiety and suffering seems to be for no meaningful purpose.

LINES 16-17

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.
Less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow,

The previous stanza ended with the refrain of "But nothing happens"—making the opening line of this stanza all the more jarring: "Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence." This is why the soldiers must be ever-vigilant; they never know when an attack from the opposing side may come, and if they ever let their guard down, even for a moment, it could spell death.

The intense sibilance of the line reflects the hissing, whooshing sound of bullets through the air, adding tension to the moment: "Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence." And unlike the opening lines of previous stanzas, all of which trail off with ellipses or commas, this line is presented as a simple declarative sentence ending with a period. It's clear that the atmosphere in the trenches has changed, the monotonous tension of waiting around suddenly broken.

However, the next line undercuts the danger of these bullets. To soldiers in these conditions, a sudden smattering of gunfire is certainly capable of inflicting great damage, but is still "Less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow." Again, the true enemy here is nature, which doesn't come through in sudden bursts, but rather incessantly attacks these "shivering ranks of grey."

While many of Owen's poems address the horrors of war, "Exposure" is notable for its focus on the natural dangers of warfare rather than on gunshot wounds and explosions. Yet although human beings can't do anything to change the weather, it's important to remember that it's the *war* that puts the soldiers into these conditions in the first place—without proper shelter, food, or other protection from the elements. That fact is made even more painful by the poem's assertion that the war doesn't seem to be accomplishing much.

LINES 18-20

With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew,
We watch them wandering up and down the wind's nonchalance,
But nothing happens.

These lines continue to characterize the nature of the winter weather conditions that make life so difficult for the soldiers.

They are made especially lyrical in their frequent use of alliteration and consonance. Note the repeated /f/, /l/, and /k/ sounds in line 18:

> With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew

This intense repetition of sound conveys a sense of being overwhelmed by the amount of snow building up around the soldiers. (This feeling is echoed later by the /f/ and /l/ consonance of line 21, as "Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces.")

The next line is also brimming with consonance, this time of /w/, /d/, and /n/ sounds:

> We watch them wandering up and down the wind's nonchalance,

It's interesting here that the flakes are "wandering," a word that implies movement without urgency or any specific destination in mind. The wind, too, is personified as being nonchalant—that is, casual, calm, uncaring. Whereas earlier in the poem the speaker characterized nature as an actively malevolent force—with "Dawn" building up her army, which mercilessly "attacked" the soldiers—here nature seems rather indifferent. Instead of being an active combatant against the soldiers, the wind is a mere bystander, carelessly contributing to their suffering. This emotional characteristic seems to call out the political leaders who no longer care about the soldiers they've sent to die in the war.

Once again, the stanza ends with the refrain of "But nothing happens." The "streak" of bullets is over, and nothing has changed. The soldiers must still wait in the wind and cold, without a goal in sight.

LINES 21-25

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?

The opening line of the fifth stanza echoes the sounds of the previous stanza—with the /f/ and /l/ sounds again repeating:

> Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces—

This time, though, nature is once again personified as actively seeking out the soldiers—the flakes are "feeling for [their] faces." These "fingers" are stealthy, which adds to the sensation that the soldiers cannot escape nature's onslaught.

This stanza also begins the section of the poem in which the soldiers dream of warmer times and of home. In an effort to temporarily forget the pain and struggles of their current conditions, the soldiers huddle in their trenches and stare at the snow so long that they become mesmerized by it, "snow-dazed." These lines suggest that the soldiers are even beginning to hallucinate, imagining dozing in the warmth of the sun in "grassier ditches" (that is, ditches not filled with cold mud and snow). In their hallucinations, the snow becomes a field full of blossoms and blackbirds, so lovely that the soldiers wonder if they're dying. These lines are both poetic and, to an extent, scientific: hypothermia often results in a dreamlike state, with victims calmly drifting in and out of consciousness as their bodies shut down.

On a more symbolic level, the abundance of life in the hallucination provides a striking contrast with the lifeless, barren battlefield. This comparison is particularly illuminating as the war not only affected individual soldiers but also left large swaths of the French countryside torn up by trenches and artillery. The kind of field imagined here wouldn't flourish there for quite some time. Just as nature seems to be attacking the soldiers, then, the poem subtly suggests the ways in which human beings have also been attacking nature all along.

LINES 26-30

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.

The soldiers' dreams or hallucinations continue as they imagine their "ghosts" returning home (perhaps suggesting they are already half-dead). The fires they see, which should be burning brightly in anticipation of the soldiers' return, are "sunk" and the coals are "crusted." This description perhaps suggests that the war has gone on for a very long time, to the point that even the optimistic wartime spirit at home has begun to falter. Essentially, those at home seem to have lost hope, and to have stopped waiting up for the soldiers' safe return. Even so, the image of burning coals is compared to precious "dark-red jewels," indicating how precious the idea of a warm fire is to these soldiers.

The speaker adds that "crickets jingle" back at home, while "the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs." In the soldiers' absence, it seems, nature has encroached upon civilization. There's also no sense of any mourning family members being in the houses; instead, the mice "rejoice" that no one's there to force them out. This further illustrates the isolation of these soldiers, whose homes seem to have grown cold and empty in their absence. Also note how the enjambment present between lines 26 and 27 ("glozed / With crusted dark-red jewels") places

emphasis on the last word in the line—"glozed," meaning to glaze over. It's as if the line itself is glazing over the next, subtly suggesting that this vision of home is just an illusion, and that the reality of war is inescapable.

Indeed, the shutters and doors are "all closed." The speaker immediately repeats and clarifies this phrase—"on us the doors are closed," he says, clarifying that it's the soldiers specifically who have been shut out. Going home is not an option, either because it's literally, logistically impossible, and/or because the soldiers have been so changed, too numbed by the horror of the war that surrounds them, to ever return to normal life. And they believe the rest of the world has abandoned them. The only option left for the soldiers is to "turn back to our dying." This echoes the closing line of the previous stanza—"Is it that we are dying?"—but makes it more declarative. The soldiers *are* slowly dying out in the freezing trenches, the speaker insists here, and even the vision of home offers no warmth or comfort.

LINES 31-35

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.

The poem's seventh stanza is its most explicitly religious, and also perhaps its most challenging. The main takeaway here is that God seems to have abandoned the soldiers. Not only are they shut out from their homes, but also from the "love of God." They no longer believe that "kind fires burn," only the cruel gun "firing" of the enemy army.

Line 32 suggests that spring is on its way, and personifies the sun as a benevolent figure that "smiles" on children and allows fields and fruit to flourish once again. Yet this light and warmth won't shine on the soldiers. They doubt God's promise of "invincible spring," such light and warmth being unimaginable in the freezing landscape of war in the winter. They even seem to fear hope itself, perceiving that they will just as likely die before the sun decides to breathe life into the world around them once again.

Indeed, they seem to have accepted their dismal fate. The speaker declares that they "were born" to "lie out here," and as such are "not loath" to do this supposed duty. Forgotten by the rest of the world and abandoned by God, the soldiers appear resigned to suffering and death.

LINES 36-40

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

The final stanza of the poem returns to the detailed descriptions of the conditions in the trenches, but this time, the speaker predicts the death of the soldiers from the "exposure" mentioned in the poem's title. This night will prove to be the last for many, as the "the frost fastens"—that is, freezes—both the mud and the men themselves. The speaker envisions the cold "Shrivelling many hands, and puckering foreheads crisp," the popping /p/ and /k/ consonance of this phrase sonically bringing that "puckering" to life and creating a disturbingly vivid image of the dead soldiers' bodies.

The same sounds are repeated throughout the next line as well—"The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp"—creating little pops of air that make the line feel almost as though it's shivering, reflecting the fact that the hands of the "burying-party" are "shaking" in the cold. They aren't burying total strangers, either, but rather people they "half-know"—a reminder that they could be next, that death lurks around the corner for all of these men. They stop to consider the faces of the dead men, the full-stop caesura in the middle of line 39 reflecting that "pause"—that moment of fearful recognition—on a formal level:

> Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,

The disturbing imagery continues with the description of the dead soldiers' "eyes" being "ice," a line that is at once metaphorical and horrifyingly literal. The soldiers' eyes have literally frozen in the cold, and are also figuratively like ice in that they are unmoving, unfeeling, inhuman.

The last line of the poem is the final repetition of the refrain, as the speaker says, once again, "But nothing happens." The final line suggests that nothing happens as a result of all these deaths, which are thus effectively rendered futile. The poem concludes on a deeply hopeless and bitter note, with the speaker asserting that soldiers' suffering and sacrifice has no real impact on the war, and that that war itself is utterly meaningless.

SYMBOLS

DAWN

Dawn is traditionally a symbol of hope in literature. It usually suggests that life will start again and flourish with the beginning of every new day. However, in "Exposure," dawn works quite differently: it marks the start of yet another day of suffering that the soldiers must endure. Indeed, the speaker first describes dawn as being accompanied by "poignant misery." Dawn thus evokes the relentless agony of war, and it also suggests how the natural world keeps moving along despite human conflicts. The soldiers' fighting has no effect on the dawn, which will come each morning regardless of what people do or how they suffer. The speaker later

personifies dawn as the leader of a dangerous army of wind and rain, transforming it from a coldly indifferent element of nature to an actively malevolent force. Ultimately, then, dawn represents both the power and cruelty of nature, which becomes the soldiers' true enemy throughout the poem.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow . . . "
- **Line 13:** "Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army "

POETIC DEVICES

SIBILANCE

The poem's frequent sibilance adds to its tense and disturbing atmosphere. It is often linked to descriptions of the cold and wind. For instance, take the first line: "merciless iced east winds that knive us." The intensity of /s/ sounds evokes the sound of the winds hissing by the soldiers.

In line 4, the poem uses sibilance to create a sense of hushed tension: "silence, sentries whisper, curious nervous." Here, sibilance reflects the sound of whispering voices and heightens the feeling of anticipation that the soldiers feel.

Another striking moment of sibilance comes in line 16: "Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence." As with the poem's first line, the intensity of /s/ sounds here mirrors the whooshing sound of the bullets "streaking" through the night air.

Throughout the poem relies not only on /s/ sounds, but also /sh/ and /z/ sounds—which, in many definitions, are also considered sibilant. Take lines 23-34, where the combination of /s/ and /z/ sounds reflect the lolling, dreamy quality of the line as the soldiers drift in and out of consciousness:

> and stare, snow-dazed,
> Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,

Overall, the poem's intense sibilance makes it feel as if the snow and wind are swirling around the lines themselves. For the reader these sounds are inescapable, just as the weather they often describe is inescapable for the soldiers.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "c," "ss," "c," "s," "s"
- **Line 4:** "s," "c," "s," "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 12:** "s," "s," "s," "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 14:** "s," "c," "s," "sh," "s"
- **Line 16:** "S," "s," "ss," "s," "s," "s," "s," "c"
- **Line 22:** "s," "s," "s," "z"
- **Line 23:** "ss," "S," "s," "s," "z"
- **Line 26:** "S," "s," "s," "s," "s," "s," "z"
- **Line 28:** "s," "c," "c," "c," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 29:** "Sh," "s," "s," "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 32:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 33:** "s," "c," "s"
- **Line 36:** "s," "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 38:** "sh," "sh," "s"
- **Line 39:** "s," "c," "s," "s," "c"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used many times throughout "Exposure," often in combination with other devices like sibilance, consonance, and assonance. One of the most frequent alliterative sounds is /w/, which, not coincidentally, also begins the word "war." In a subtle way, the intensity of the /w/ sound throughout the poem makes war seem ever-present. Takes lines 9-10:

> Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.
> What are we doing here?

War, here, is connected to the soldiers' sense of confusion and doubt via alliteration. Of course, /w/ also begins the word "wind"—which is presented as a kind of enemy force in its own right throughout the poem. Note how the "wind" of line 1 is then picked up immediately by "Wearied we keep awake" in line 2, connecting the soldiers' fatigue to the weather via sound.

Another striking moment of alliteration comes via the /f/ and /l/ sounds of lines 18 and 21: "flowing flakes that flock" and "flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces." The line is thick and heavy with these sounds, which are linked directly to the snow. Essentially, the alliteration here underscores how inescapable and overwhelming the snow is for the soldiers. The fact that /f/ and /l/ sounds keep popping up in the line echoes the fact that as soon as the soldiers brush away the snowflakes from their faces, new flakes fall and take their place.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "W," "w," "w"
- **Line 4:** "W," "s," "s," "wh"
- **Line 6:** "W," "w"
- **Line 7:** "m," "m"
- **Line 9:** "o," "o," "w"
- **Line 10:** "Wh," "w"
- **Line 12:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 13:** "m," "m," "a"
- **Line 14:** "A," "m," "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 16:** "S," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 18:** "fl," "fl," "fl"
- **Line 19:** "W," "w," "w," "w"

- **Line 21:** “f,” “f,” “f,” “f,” “f”
- **Line 22:** “s,” “s,” “d”
- **Line 23:** “D,” “d,” “S,” “d,” “s,” “d”
- **Line 24:** “L,” “b,” “l,” “bl”
- **Line 26:** “g,” “g,” “g”
- **Line 27:** “c,” “j,” “j”
- **Line 29:** “a,” “a”
- **Line 31:** “c,” “k”
- **Line 32:** “s,” “s,” “f,” “f”
- **Line 34:** “l,” “l”
- **Line 36:** “f,” “f”
- **Line 38:** “p,” “p,” “sh,” “sh”

ASSONANCE

In addition to sibilance, consonance, and alliteration, the poem also frequently turns to assonance to draw the reader's attention to certain phrases. For example, take the phrase "brains ache" in line 1, with its shared long /a/ sounds emphasizing the intensity of the soldiers' mental strain. Also in line 1 note the repeated short and long /i/ sounds, which sonically connect the "merciless" "wind" to "ice[]" and "knives."

Later, note how short /uh/ sounds repeat throughout lines 8 and 9:

> ... the flickering gunnery rumbles,
> Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.

These sounds also play off the phrase "gusts tugging" in line 6. By repeating this /uh/ sound in line 9, it's as if both those "gusts," the soldiers' natural enemy, and the "rumbles" of the "gunnery," the soldiers' man-made enemy, are echoing through the next line—a sonic representation of that "dull rumour." This /uh/ sound interestingly appears again in the final stanza, creating a link between the "mud" and "us"—that is, between the earth and the soldiers themselves. The assonance underscores that the soldiers are as subject to the whims of nature as is anything else; they are no safer than the mud is from freezing. Assonance does a similar thing in the second-to-last line of the poem, linking "eyes" and "ice."

The frequency of similar sounds throughout the poem also conveys the monotony of life in the trenches and of nature's incessant onslaught. This is clear in lines 11 and 12, with their assonant long /o/ vowels:

> The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow . . .
> We only know war lasts, rain soaks,

The /o/ sound is connected to "all" the soldiers can focus on in their dismal situation. The /o/ vowel also evokes a yawn when read aloud, instilling these lines with a sense of weariness. The same could be said of line 26, where the long /o/ vowel repeats yet again:

> Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk
> fires, glozed

Even in their dreams/hallucinations, the soldiers return to what they "know," represented here via assonance. The horror of war, this assonance suggests, is inescapable.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “rai,” “a,” “i,” “i,” “i,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 2:** “ea,” “ie,” “e,” “ee,” “a,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 4:** “y,” “i,” “e,” “e,” “ou,” “ou”
- **Line 6:** “u,” “u”
- **Line 8:** “u,” “u”
- **Line 9:** “u,” “o,” “o”
- **Line 11:** “o”
- **Line 12:** “o,” “o,” “oa”
- **Line 16:** “u,” “e,” “u,” “e,” “i,” “e,” “i,” “e”
- **Line 17:** “e,” “ea,” “a,” “a,” “a,” “a,” “o”
- **Line 18:** “o,” “o,” “o,” “au”
- **Line 19:** “a,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 21:** “a,” “a,” “i,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 22:** “o,” “o,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 23:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 26:** “o,” “o,” “o,” “o”
- **Line 28:** “ou,” “ou”
- **Line 31:** “e,” “ie,” “i,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 32:** “i,” “ue,” “i,” “ui”
- **Line 33:** “i,” “i,” “i,” “i,” “i,” “a,” “ai”
- **Line 34:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 36:** “u,” “u”
- **Line 37:** “a,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 38:** “a”
- **Line 39:** “a,” “eye,” “i”

SIMILE

There are two similes in "Exposure," appearing in lines 7 and 9. Similes are usually used to further explain a concept or image by comparing it to a more familiar image. This poem does indeed use similes to clarify/deepen certain images, but with a bit of a twist: instead of using images that would likely be familiar to a civilian audience reading his poems, Owen turns to yet more images of war to add detail and clarity to his descriptions. In a way, this technique subtly indicates how completely war consumes the thought process of the soldiers; it's all the speaker can think about.

The first simile in the poem compares the sound of the wind moving through the barbed wire protecting the trenches to the sounds of the men caught in that same wire twitching as they die. The speaker is actually giving two separate but connected examples of the aural experience of being a soldier on the front

lines. Most readers are familiar with the sounds of wind whooshing through wires or fences, but with this simile, they must now connect that familiar sound to the unfamiliar, disturbing sound of wires jangling due to the dying throes of men. This simile also adds to the poem's presentation of nature as a hostile enemy force.

The second simile compares the rumbling of guns to "a dull rumour of some other war." This succinctly communicates the disconnect the soldiers feel from the actual war they're fighting in. That war feels more like a distant "rumour," something that they don't really have anything to do with. This simile thus emphasizes the meaninglessness of war, in that the sounds of war don't seem to matter all that much to the soldiers. Instead, the speaker suggests that the real war is the daily struggle to endure the harsh weather conditions.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "mad gusts tugging on the wire, / Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles."
- **Lines 8-9:** "the flickering gunnery rumbles, / Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war."

END-STOPPED LINE

The vast majority of the lines in "Exposure" are end-stopped lines. The frequency of end-stopped lines seems to indicate the short, intermittent thoughts that might come to a soldier on the front lines, who is distracted by other concerns such as the winter weather and the ever-present possibility of an enemy attack.

Indeed, what's particularly interesting is that many of these lines end with an ellipsis, as if the speaker is trailing off in thought or his attention is split. Take the first stanza, which consists of three end-stopped lines that end in ellipses. Each of these lines presents a distinct, separate thought, and the ellipses suggest the weariness that the soldiers feel in watching for enemy action all night long.

The end-stopped lines are particularly emphatic in the fifth and final line of every stanza, each of which concludes with a period or a question mark. The speaker's tone is definitive in his repeated refrain of "But nothing happens," the full stop precluding any argument to the contrary. The same can be said for lines 30 and 35, the end-stops of which suggest a sense of hopeless resignation—to the fact that these men are dying, and to the fact that God has abandoned them. Overall, the sheer number of end-stopped lines makes this sense of resignation apparent throughout the entire poem: the speaker has no illusions or hope that the soldiers' dismal situation is going to change.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "us . . . "
- **Line 2:** "silent . . . "
- **Line 3:** "salient . . . "
- **Line 4:** "nervous, "
- **Line 5:** "happens. "
- **Line 6:** "wire, "
- **Line 7:** "brambles. "
- **Line 8:** "rumbles, "
- **Line 9:** "war. "
- **Line 10:** "here? "
- **Line 11:** "grow . . . "
- **Line 12:** "stormy."
- **Line 14:** "grey, "
- **Line 15:** "happens."
- **Line 16:** "silence. "
- **Line 17:** "snow, "
- **Line 18:** "renew, "
- **Line 19:** "nonchalance, "
- **Line 20:** "happens. "
- **Line 21:** "faces— "
- **Line 22:** "snow-dazed, "
- **Line 23:** "sun-dozed, "
- **Line 24:** "fusses. "
- **Line 25:** "dying? "
- **Line 27:** "there; "
- **Line 28:** "theirs; "
- **Line 29:** "closed,— "
- **Line 30:** "dying. "
- **Line 31:** "burn; "
- **Line 32:** "fruit. "
- **Line 33:** "afraid; "
- **Line 34:** "born, "
- **Line 35:** "dying. "
- **Line 36:** "us, "
- **Line 37:** "crisp. "
- **Line 38:** "grasp,"
- **Line 39:** "ice, "
- **Line 40:** "happens."

ENJAMBMENT

Though the majority of lines in this poem are end-stopped lines, there are two clear instances of enjambment. These moments are perhaps all the more striking for their contrast with the rest of the poem. The first enjambment comes between lines 13 and 14, as the speaker describes the way that a personified "Dawn" gets ready to attack the soldiers:

> Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army
> Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey

This enjambment here seems to suggest the strength and numbers of these massing forces, as well as the ferocity of their

attack. This "melancholy army" cannot be contained by the poem's form and its attack spills over from one line to the next. The enjambment here thus momentarily increases the poem's momentum.

The second use of enjambment in the poem comes between lines 26 and 27, when the soldiers imagine returning to home:

> ... glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed
> With crusted dark-red jewels

"Glozed" basically means "glossed over," and it has generally negative connotations; to "gloze over" something also can mean to make excuses for it, to conceal or make light of it. Here, the coals of the fire are compared to "crusted dark-red jewels" that have "glozed" over the flames. In other words, they may glow red with heat, but they actually don't provide much warmth, and they also signal that the house's inhabitants have *not* kept the fire burning in anticipation of the soldiers' return home. The enjambment of line 26 allows this line to essentially "gloze" over the next.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "army / Attacks"
- **Lines 26-27:** "glozed / With"

CAESURA

The poem uses caesura in every stanza. Quite often these caesuras are used to break up lists or add detail to various images. The many midline pauses throughout the poem add to its overall sense of trudging monotony; the lines don't flow all that smoothly, but keep stopping and starting, never really seeming to get anywhere.

Some moments of caesura are quite evocative. For example, note the two commas that surround the word "incessantly" in line 8:

> Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery
> rumbles,

The caesuras here make the reader stop and hover over the word "incessantly," the speaker implicitly emphasizing just *how* incessant—that is, continuous, without end—that distant gunfire seems to the soldiers in the trenches. A similar thing happens in line 18, where two commas set off the word "pause"—forcing the reader to literally pause while reading the line, reflecting the way the snowflakes "pause" by sticking to the soldiers' faces. The speaker again cleverly pairs a caesura with "pausing" in the poem's second-to-last line:

> Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,

The speaker is describing the way in which the burying-party momentarily stops their dismal work when they come across dead soldiers they recognize. The caesura here forces the reader to stop as well, to take a moment to understand the implication here: that in a world like this, death can come for anyone.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ",
- **Line 4:** " " " ",
- **Line 6:** ",
- **Line 8:** " ",
- **Line 9:** ",
- **Line 12:** " ",
- **Line 18:** " ",
- **Line 22:** " " " ",
- **Line 23:** " ",
- **Line 26:** ":"
- **Line 27:** ";"
- **Line 28:** ":"
- **Line 29:** " " ":"
- **Line 32:** ",
- **Line 34:** " " " ";"
- **Line 37:** ",
- **Line 38:** ",
- **Line 39:** "

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker uses personification many times throughout "Exposure," most frequently to emphasize the idea that the forces of nature are the soldiers' most dangerous enemy. The wind and the snow in particular are given many human actions and emotions. For example, the winds "knive" the soldiers and "tug" on the wire surrounding the trenches. Of course, winds don't have hands to thrust knives or pull barbed wire; this is just the speaker's way of underscoring how harsh the conditions surrounding the soldiers are. The "gusts" of line 6 are further described as being "mad." This doesn't mean that they're angry, but rather crazy or frantic—which, of course, gusts can't really be. Instead, this personification subtly hints at the madness of war itself.

Perhaps the most striking moment of personification comes in the third stanza, as the speaker describes a personified "Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army." Here "Dawn," often used as a symbol of hope in literature, is presented as the general of a dangerous army of snow and wind that relentlessly attacks the "shivering ranks of grey" (that is, the soldiers in the trenches). Once again, the figurative language here serves to emphasize that nature is the soldiers' most immediate enemy, as death from exposure is more likely than death from actual battle.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “the merciless iced east ,” “winds that knive us”
- **Line 6:** “mad gusts tugging,” “ on the wire”
- **Lines 13-14:** “Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army / Attacks”
- **Line 14:** “ once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey”
- **Line 21:** “Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces— ”
- **Line 28:** “For hours the innocent mice rejoice”
- **Line 32:** “suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit”

REFRAIN

The speaker repeats the line "But nothing happens" four times throughout the poem, turning it into a kind of refrain. On one level, the line refers to the fact that the soldiers often literally have nothing to do but wait to be attacked. They must always be vigilant for the moment when something *does* happen (such in the streaking bullets in the fourth stanza), but the vast majority of their time is spent tensely waiting around. They certainly aren't achieving any glorious or heroic victories; they're not even gaining an inch of ground. The speaker repeats the refrain to emphasize the mind-numbing monotony of warfare.

On a broader level, the refrain refers to the futility of war itself. The soldiers must endure terrible suffering and risk death, yet none of it changes anything. That makes the horror the poem describes all the more, well, horrifying. The final repetition of "But nothing happens" is particularly evocative, coming as it does after a graphic description of soldiers who have frozen to death. This phrase closes the poem and leaves the reader with the sense that nothing they've just read matters in the grand scheme of things. Soldiers will keep dying, and it won't change anything. The refrain thus suggests that the soldiers' deaths are meaningless and that the war itself is meaningless as well.

There are other moments of repetitive lines in the poem that might not really be refrains, given that they vary a bit each time they appear, but are nevertheless extremely similar in that they each end with the word "dying." These are:

1. "Is it that we are dying?"
2. "We turn back to our dying.
3. "For love of God seems dying."

These phrases appear at the end of three stanzas in a row, and seem to lay out a sort of natural train of thought or even stages of grief. First, the soldiers, having entered a dreamy, hallucinatory state in the cold, start to wonder if they're dying—literally, as in freezing to death: "Is it that we are dying?"

The next time a similar phrase appears, it's after the soldiers have imagined returning home only to find it cold and abandoned in their absence. On a figurative level this implies that the soldiers believe that the rest of the world has abandoned them, so they instead "turn back to our dying"—that is, focus again on the reality of the present. The following stanza deepens the soldiers' loss of hope, as they believe that they will never feel "kind fires" again. This time, they accept their sad fates because not only has the rest of the world left them behind, but so has God: "For love of God seems dying."

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “But nothing happens. ”
- **Line 15:** “ But nothing happens.”
- **Line 20:** “But nothing happens.”
- **Line 25:** “—Is it that we are dying? ”
- **Line 30:** “We turn back to our dying. ”
- **Line 35:** “For love of God seems dying. ”
- **Line 40:** “But nothing happens.”

CONSONANCE

As noted in our discussion of alliteration, sibilance, and assonance, the poem is filled with repetitive sounds—especially consonance. Altogether, these devices add emphasis to certain phrases, make connections between seemingly disparate words, or sonically echo the actual content of a line.

Take the popping /p/ and /k/ consonance of lines 37 and 38: "puckering foreheads crisp" and "burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp." These short, staccato sounds intensify the gruesome imagery of the soldiers' "crisp" dead bodies, frozen by the extreme cold. The little pops of air also make the lines feel like they're shivering, reflecting the fact that the hands of the "burying-party" are indeed "shaking" in the cold.

Consonance also adds to the poem's broader sense of monotony, as the speaker keeps returning to the same sounds again and again. Take line 12:

> We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.

Here the speaker is talking about the few things the soldiers "know"—that is, are aware of or can focus on their situation. The density of repetition in this line underscores the limits of the soldiers' knowledge, as the speaker keeps returning to the same /w/, /r/, /s/ and /k/ sounds over and over. In other words, the sound here reinforces the line's point that these things are all the soldiers can think about: war and weather.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “c,” “ss,” “c,” “s,” “w”
- **Line 2:** “W,” “w,” “k,” “w,” “k,” “c”
- **Line 3:** “f,” “s,” “f,” “s”

- **Line 4:** “W,” “s,” “c,” “s,” “wh,” “s,” “r,” “r,” “s,” “r,” “s”
- **Line 6:** “W,” “w,” “g,” “gg,” “w”
- **Line 7:** “w,” “g,” “m,” “m,” “b,” “mb”
- **Line 9:** “F,” “ff,” “l,” “ll,” “r,” “r,” “r,” “r”
- **Line 11:** “w”
- **Line 12:** “W,” “n,” “n,” “w,” “w,” “r,” “l,” “sts,” “r,” “s,” “k,” “s,” “cl,” “s,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 13:** “m,” “ss,” “s,” “m,” “m”
- **Line 14:** “m,” “r,” “r,” “r,” “r”
- **Line 16:** “S,” “s,” “cc,” “ss,” “l,” “t,” “s,” “ll,” “ts,” “st,” “k,” “s,” “l,” “c”
- **Line 17:** “L,” “ss,” “d,” “dl,” “th,” “th,” “th,” “dd,” “w,” “w”
- **Line 18:** “W,” “l,” “fl,” “w,” “fl,” “k,” “fl,” “ck,” “w”
- **Line 19:** “W,” “w,” “w,” “nd,” “nd,” “d,” “w,” “n,” “w,” “nd,” “n,” “n,” “n”
- **Line 21:** “l,” “fl,” “f,” “l,” “f,” “l,” “f,” “f”
- **Line 22:** “d,” “s,” “d,” “s,” “s,” “d,” “z,” “d”
- **Line 23:** “D,” “ss,” “d,” “s,” “S,” “w,” “d,” “w,” “s,” “s,” “d,” “z,” “d”
- **Line 24:** “L,” “bl,” “l,” “bl,” “b”
- **Line 26:** “Sl,” “l,” “g,” “s,” “d,” “g,” “gl,” “s,” “s,” “s,” “gl”
- **Line 27:** “c,” “r,” “d,” “d,” “r,” “r,” “d,” “j,” “cr,” “ck,” “j”
- **Line 28:** “r,” “r,” “c,” “c,” “c,” “s”
- **Line 29:** “d,” “ll,” “l,” “s,” “d,” “d,” “d”
- **Line 31:** “c,” “k”
- **Line 32:** “s,” “ns,” “s,” “tr,” “ld,” “f,” “ld,” “f”
- **Line 33:** “F,” “c,” “s,” “d,” “d”
- **Line 34:** “Th,” “l,” “th,” “l,” “r,” “r,” “r,” “r,” “r”
- **Line 36:** “s,” “f,” “s,” “f,” “s,” “n,” “n,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 37:** “n,” “n,” “d,” “nd,” “p,” “ck,” “r,” “r,” “cr,” “p”
- **Line 38:** “r,” “p,” “r,” “p,” “ck,” “sh,” “sh,” “k,” “p”
- **Line 39:** “P,” “f,” “f”

VOCABULARY

Flares (Line 3) - Devices used to send distress signals through a bright burst of light.

Salient (Line 3) - A section of a military line of defense that bulges outward.

Sentries (Line 4) - Soldiers stationed to keep watch or guard over an area.

Wire (Line 6) - The speaker is referring to the barbed wire that was set up during World War I to add an extra line defense against enemy soldiers who would attempt to attack the trenches.

Brambles (Line 7) - A bush with thorns, here used to describe the tangled barbed wire.

Gunnery (Line 8) - The firing of guns, especially large guns.

Poignant (Line 11) - Deeply affecting and moving, especially evoking feelings of sadness.

Ranks of grey (Line 14) - The speaker is referring to the soldiers in the trenches.

Nonchalance (Line 19) - The act of feeling, or appearing, completely calm and relaxed, not at all bothered by or particularly interested in anything.

Fingering (Line 21) - Using one's fingers, especially in a slow or cautious manner.

Holes (Line 22) - The soldiers hid in trenches, long lines of holes dug into the ground, to take cover and obscure their position from opposing armies.

Sun-dozed (Line 23) - Made sleepy and calm by the sun. This is an imagined state, as the soldiers hallucinate or dream of the sun after staring at the bright snow.

Glozed (Line 26) - Concealed or glossed over.

Invincible (Line 33) - So powerful that it cannot be defeated.

Loath (Line 34) - Reluctant, unwilling. With "not loath," the speaker indicates the soldiers were not reluctant to make the sacrifice of dying in war.

Puckering (Line 37) - Gathering into wrinkles. The speaker uses "puckering" to describe the shrinking folds the ice freezes into the soldiers' faces.

Burying-party (Line 38) - A group of soldiers sent to retrieve and bury dead bodies.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem doesn't fit into any traditional form. It has eight stanzas, each with five lines. This would technically make these stanzas quintains, but the poem actually reads more like eight *quatrains* with final lines tacked on. The first four lines of each stanza share similar rhyme sounds and describe the horrors of war; the fifth line in each stanza then either repeats the poem's refrain or makes some reference to "dying." This fifth line attempts to put everything that has come before in perspective and implies that none of this suffering or death changes anything.

Because each stanza is structured in the same way, the poem feels quite ordered and cohesive. The speaker follows a clear structure throughout, which seems fitting given the military setting of the poem and Owen's own military background.

METER

There is no consistent meter in "Exposure." Generally, all of the lines have between 12 and 15 syllables, except for the last line of each stanza, which has between 5 and 7 syllables. The lack of consistent meter gives the poem a feeling of uncertainty and instability. This uncertainty mirrors the feelings experienced by the soldiers on the front lines: the soldiers are constantly on edge as they wait for any action. And this constant, vigilant

waiting takes both a physical and mental toll, making their "brains ache."

This tension is momentarily broken by the last line of each stanza, which is notably shorter than the other lines in the poem. The shorter lines stand out, even more so through their repetition, and evoke the stagnant, depressing reality of the war for these soldiers.

Though there is no consistent meter in the poem, there are some interesting rhythmical moments. In the very first line, for example, "brains ache" creates two stresses in a row, subtly evoking the sense of a pounding headache. Also metrically evocative is line 8, with its multiple dactyls (metrical feet consisting of a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables). The DUM da da rhythm of "Northward, in | cessantly" is echoed exactly by "flickering | gunnery." This emphatic repetition makes the line itself feel incessant.

Meanwhile, the final line and a half of the poem consists entirely of trochees (stressed-unstressed) if read without the line break:

> All their eyes are ice, But nothing happens.

This final, metrical regularity is notable after so much inconsistency. It's as if the final half of line 39 melds into line 40—the soldiers' grisly deaths merging with the poem's hopeless refrain. This underscores the poem's broader thematic message: that all this suffering and death is ultimately meaningless.

RHYME SCHEME

In contrast to its inconsistent meter, "Exposure" has a relatively consistent rhyme scheme. Within each stanza, the first four lines are end-rhymed in an ABBAC pattern.

With the exception of the sixth stanza, all of Owen's rhymes in this poem are either slant rhymes, which is typical of Owen's poetry. He uses words with the same beginning and ending consonant sounds but different vowel sounds in between. For example: knive us/nervous, silent/salient, wire/war, etc. This technique adds to the poem's jarring, uncomfortable feel; lines *almost* rhyme, but not quite. Furthermore, it parallels the disconnect that soldiers felt from the declared motivations for the war. The soldiers in this poem experience a very different war from what was described to the general public in England at the time.

When Owen does use perfect rhyme once though, in the sixth stanza when he rhymes "glozed" and "closed" (and something called rich rhyme with "there" and "theirs"). Importantly, this is the stanza in which the soldiers dream of home. The perfect rhyme sounds create a subtle sense of security after so much slant rhyme, much like imagining a warm fire and being home might momentarily comfort the soldiers. At the same time, this comfort proves illusory as the soldiers realize the world has abandoned them and turn back to the horrors of the present. In a way, then, the perfect rhyme almost *mocks* the soldiers—it evokes the comfort of home in the same line in which it says the soldiers are locked out of that comfort, that its "doors are closed" to them.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is a soldier stationed with a group of men in the trenches during the winter. He is clearly disillusioned with war, finding it tedious and meaningless. The speaker wants to "expose" the harsh conditions of warfare, and to challenge the view that such suffering is necessary in the name of victory.

Though the speaker is just one soldier, he often speaks in the first person plural, using pronouns like "we" and "our" to indicate that he represents a larger group of people. In essence, he is speaking for all soldiers as he describes their situation on the front lines of World War I.

Wilfred Owen was an English soldier who fought and died in World War I. Owen was also very critical of the war and its impact on soldiers, which he experienced first-hand. Based on these facts, it is possible to read the speaker and Owen as being very similar, if not the same person.

SETTING

Though the exact setting of this poem isn't explicitly stated, it likely takes place during World War I—perhaps even more specifically during the winter of 1917 in France. This assumption can be made based on the fact that Owen himself was deployed to the front lines of France in January 1917 and often drew from his own experiences when writing his poetry. The poem also mentions "flares" and barbed "wire." These were military tools commonly used in World War I, as were trenches—described by the speaker as "holes."

In any case, it's clear that this wartime world is dreary, muddy, and freezing cold. It's snowy and windy, and the soldiers do not have adequate protection from the "merciless" natural elements. Though soldiers can hear gunfire in the distance, death from "exposure" appears more likely than death in battle.

Though the physical location of the soldiers does not change over the duration of the poem, there is a slight change of setting when the soldiers imagine the warm fires at home. There, the speaker describes a field of flowers and birds warmed by the sun and a house illuminated and full of life.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Wilfred Owen wrote "Exposure" in 1918. He wrote the majority of his poems (including two of most famous works—"Dulce et Decorum Est" and "Anthem for Doomed Youth") between August 1917 and September 1918, while he was hospitalized in a military hospital in Edinburgh. There, he befriended fellow war poet Siegfried Sassoon, who greatly influenced the developing style of Owen's poetry.

Most of Owen's poems share similar thematic and stylistic characteristics. Owen wrote primarily about war, especially about the gruesome, brutal parts of it that earlier war poets like Rupert Brooke tended to overlook. In this way, Owen broke from the tradition of war poetry that presented war as a form of patriotic glory and heroism.

"Exposure" also shares many stylistic traits with Owen's other poems, especially in its use of slant rhyme. He broke with many traditional forms of poetry in his work, as evidenced, for instance, by his frequently inconsistent use of meter. This break from tradition is consistent with the larger developments of the Modernist literary movement, which expressed disillusionment with the literary and social establishment by experimenting with new artistic forms.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

By 1917 most of mainland Europe was involved in World War I, the largest and deadliest war the world had ever seen at the time. Trench warfare was a major part of WWI military tactics, which Owen references here by referring to soldiers cringing in "holes." The space between opposing armies' trenches—so-called "No Man's Land"—was filled with barbed wire. Poor sanitary conditions in the trenches contributed to the spread of disease, and exposure during winter months was a common killer.

WWI is known not only for its immense number of casualties, also for its psychological effects on those who survived. The term "shell-shock" emerged from the war, in reference to soldiers suffering with what would now be termed PTSD. Owen himself was hospitalized in Edinburgh to treat his "shell-shock." Owen and many others also strongly criticized the war for what they saw as unnecessary loss of life. Owen wrote many of his poems to convey the horrors of war to civilians who had no way of visualizing what war really looked like.

After his hospitalization in Edinburgh, Owen returned to the front lines of the war in the fall of 1918 and died on November 4, 1918, one week before the armistice declaring the end of the war was signed.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Siegfried Sassoon's Influence — Read a history of Owen's relationship with Siegfried Sassoon, who influenced the development of Owen's poetry while they were both patients at Craiglockhart, a military hospital in Edinburgh. (https://www.theatrecloud.com/news/sassoon-and-owen-a-meeting-that-changed-the-course-of-literature)
- Listen to "Exposure" Out Loud — A reading of the entire poem by actor Rupert Mason. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qswRYfZYUs4)
- How World War I Changed Literature — A timeline of how literature changed during and as a result of World War I. (https://www.history.com/news/how-world-war-i-changed-literature)
- Biography of Wilfred Owen — Read a full biography of Wilfred Owen's life from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wilfred-owen)
- A Soldier's Experience — Read what life was like on the front lines for a soldier in World War I. (https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/combat-and-soldiers-experiences)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILFRED OWEN POEMS

- Anthem for Doomed Youth
- Dulce et Decorum Est
- Futility
- Strange Meeting

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