Mametz Wood

SUMMARY

For years following the battle at Mametz Wood, farmers would find them—the remains of soldiers, killed far too young, churned up by the farmers' ploughs as they worked the soil.

They'd find a piece of bone sticking out of the ground like a note written on a small piece of paper; a shoulder blade that looked like a delicate porcelain plate; all that's left of a finger; a skull blown into pieces like a crushed bird's egg.

All these bits of bone blend in with the shards of bluish white stones strewn across the field, the same field where the soldiers had been ordered to walk—rather than to run—towards the woods where the Germans lay in wait with their machine guns, settled seamlessly into the surrounding forest like nesting birds.

To this day the earth guards the soldiers' remains, only letting some of their bones be churned up to the surface of the field as a way of reminding people what happened—as though the earth was a wounded human body trying rid itself of something that shouldn't be there.

Just this morning, twenty men were discovered buried in a single mass grave. The picture created by all the pieces of their broken bones made it look like they were arm in arm, as though they had been stopped in the middle of a grotesque dance of death,

still wearing combat boots that were in much better condition than the soldiers' themselves. Their skulls, with empty holes at the base for their spinal cords, were drawn back, and their jaws had fallen open (though some of them didn't have jaws anymore at all).

It seemed as though only now, with their long-silenced bodies having been discovered, could they finally communicate their message to the world.

THEMES

THE HORROR AND WASTEFULNESS OF WAR

"Mametz Wood" is a poem based on a particular episode of World War I, in which around 4,000 Allied soldiers of Welsh nationality were killed. Essentially, the poem is a bleak and unflinching reflection on the horrors of war, focusing on the way that, almost a century on from the original conflict, farmers are *still* chancing upon body parts of the fallen soldiers.

The poem aims to unsettle readers with its gruesome imagery, which acts as a reminder of the immense suffering caused by WWI and, in the eyes of the speaker, is perhaps a more realistic memorial to those who died than the sculpture that stands in Mametz Wood now (which features a Welsh Red Dragon tearing up a barbed wire fence). To that end, the poem also rejects any sense of glory or heroism regarding warfare, instead arguing that war represents a tragic "waste" of young life.

In the poem, each soldier's body represents a life that was in a way unfulfilled, or at least cut short. Accordingly, the fragmented form in which the soldiers' bodies are found metaphorically represents the way that war destroyed these lives—and, indeed, how war fragmented society more broadly by claiming the lives of so many of its young men. That's why the speaker describes the bones as parts of a "broken mosaic"—because they represent part of a whole that can never be completed. The comparison of a skull to a shattered bird's egg also evokes the fragility of life—and the inability to restore it once it's metaphorically broken.

This waste of life is further emphasized by the way that the soldiers are described as having been "paused" in a "dance-macabre" (a death dance). This is a long-running genre of art in which humans are depicted dancing with figures of death (usually skeletons). These works are intended to remind the living of their own mortality, a meaning that is definitely relevant here. But also it's worth noting that the soldiers don't even have time to finish their death dance—that's how abruptly and violently their lives are ended.

Indeed, the poem's closing image is one of incompleteness. The freed skeletons—those with jaws—are now able to sing their song, no longer suffocated by the earth. But, of course, they have no tongues with which to do so. The mention of the tongue is a deliberately gruesome image that starkly reminds the reader of the way that the body deteriorates over time—and how these bodies haven't had their proper burials.

But the poem doesn't use these graphic moments just to shock or entertain. The poem suggests that it's important to talk in these terms because doing so gives a truer depiction of what war is actually like. Grand memorials and services are important, but the poem argues that a reminder of the realities of conflict is important too. That's why the personified earth—though only mentioned briefly—is a kind of key character in the poem. It is described as "reaching back into itself for reminders of what happened / like a wound working with a foreign body to the surface of the skin." As if by instinct, the earth senses the importance of remembering these men not just in the abstract, but in their bodily reality too—however grim.

"Mametz Wood," then, is not an easy read. But its discussion of the body parts of dead soldiers helps to make the soldiers seem real again—not just statistics or names inscribed on a stone memorial. Accordingly, a small part of the horror of war is played out on the page for the reader to experience—in order to emphasize the immense sacrifice that was made at the time, as well as the sheer waste of life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

NATURE VS. TECHNOLOGY

In addition to broadly reflecting on the horrors of war, "Mametz Wood" also explores the relationship between nature and humankind's capacity for technological destruction. The First World War was an especially bloody conflict—and much of this was due to the new technology that both sides had at their fingertips. The damage done to humanity by these weapons (that is, injuries and casualties) was and remains obvious, but the poem is also keen to stress the way that the earth itself has been damaged by advances in warfare. Furthermore, by drawing similarities between the land and the human body, the poem implicitly argues that human technology has alienated humanity from its place in nature.

The setting of the poem—and of the conflict that inspired it—is important. Woods are supposed to be natural environments, full of life in all its variety. Indeed, they are meant to be places were people can take a walk and commune with nature (this idea is toyed with grotesquely in the "walk, not run" of line 8). But the natural landscape here is inhabited just as much by bits of fingers and skulls as it is by birds, flowers, and squirrels. Indeed, this is part of the poem's power: the way that the brutal realities of war are placed within a natural context. And at the time of the battle itself, the wood was full of more immediate death and suffering. For instance, instead of being nested by birds, "machine guns" lay in wait (line 9). Nature, then, was subverted by human technology—which, in turn, resulted in a terrible loss of human life.

Throughout the poem, technology is presented as a subtly malevolent force. The sheer power of war weaponry has made human beings themselves as fragile as "bird's egg[s]." The durable boots used in warfare have "outlasted" those who wore them—and even the more innocent tools used by farmers (such as the "plough blades" mentioned in line 2) bring body parts up to the surface. Those body parts, in turn, are distanced from the people they once belonged to—compared instead to china plates and useless relics. In a way, then, the weapons of war have erased the dead soldiers' humanity.

But the poem is also keen to draw similarities between human beings and nature, to remind the reader that human beings are, ultimately, *part* of nature. Indeed, the earth metaphorically guards the fallen soldiers, implying the deep connection between humanity and the natural world. Yet while burial might typically be considered something natural—the dead's return to the earth, dust to dust—the soldiers' bones are compared to a "foreign body" inside the ground in part because their deaths were decidedly *unnatural*; they died young, mowed down by machine gun fire. In other words, they don't belong in the dirt, and their presence is akin to a "wound." The poem subtly suggests how technology has disrupted the natural cycle of life and death, leading the earth to expel the soldiers' remains as "reminders of what happened."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 7-9
- Lines 10-12
- Line 16
- Lines 19-21
- Line 20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

For years afterwards ...
... back into itself.

"Mametz Wood" is a poem with a specific historical context that is important to note before this discussion. Mametz is a village in Northern France, and the nearby wood was the scene of a brutal battle during the First World War. In this battle, a section of the British Army—known as the 38th (Welsh) Infantry Division—was tasked with attacking the German stronghold in the wood, or forest. Around 4,000 men on the British side were killed during the conflict.

As referred to in the poem's opening, farmers have been finding body parts of the fallen ever since. The alliterating and consonant /f/ sounds in the first line come across almost like discoveries themselves, as though they were poking out of the line above the other letters:

> For years afterwards the farmers found them –

The speaker then emphasizes the youthfulness of those killed. Over half of all WWI soldiers were between 18 and 23 when they enlisted; an incredible amount of young life was "wasted." Additionally, the caesura just after "young" gives the line a short pause, allowing the reader to reflect on this fact.

There is something deeply unsettling about this stanza's mention of the bodies "turning up under [the farmers'] plough

blades," but this is nothing compared to the graphic details that are to come. It's also worth noting that there is something vaguely threatening about the "plough *blades*"—even though they are an agricultural tool, they seem to hint at man's capacity for destructive technology, the kind that made WW1 so devastating.

In line 3, "tended" works as a kind of pun. It relates on a literal level to the farmers' actions of tending the land, but also sets up one of the poem's metaphors regarding the land as somehow injured—"tending" its wounds. This also gently develops the tension between nature (which humans are a part of) and the fearsome power of man-made technology, which ravaged the earth and has left scars on the Mametz landscape that can still be seen today.

LINES 4-6

A chit of ...
... of a skull,

The second stanza starts to deal in specifics about the WWI soldiers' discovered body parts. Essentially, the stanza is a kind of itemized catalogue of these discoveries, listing "bone," "shoulder blade," "finger," and "skull."

This approach is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it speaks to the sheer brutality of wartime violence: bodies are torn limb from limb, reduced to strewn parts. Secondly, it highlights the fragility of the human body (especially when compared to the machinery of war). Thirdly, as these are all fragments, it speaks to an overall sense of incompleteness—which in turn highlights the wastefulness of war, the way it cuts lives short before they can be lived fully.

But there's also a key metaphorical layer to this stanza. Indeed, every body part mentioned is accompanied by a kind of metaphorical partner—and all of these relate to fragility and fragmentation too. That is, each bone is compared to some other object. For instance, a "chit" is a short, abrupt note, almost a fragment. And "china plate," or a plate made of delicate porcelain, makes the bone seem delicate (though bone is actually a very hard material, this hardness is no match for machine gun fire).

Indeed, the alliteration between "**ch**it" and "**ch**ina" gently echoes the repetitive sound of such gun fire, as do the alliterating /b/ sounds in "**b**lown / and **b**roken **b**ird's egg." The use of caesura and enjambment in this section also suggests violence and fragmentation, mixing up the way that the phrases fall and undermining their sense of completeness.

LINES 7-12

all mimicked now ...
... of the skin.

The third stanza continues the sentence begun in the second, comparing the images of body parts to the flint rock that also appears in the earth. Flint can be a bluish color, but the "blue in white" here, in combination with the earlier mention of a "china plate," might also evoke the color pattern often found on fancy dishware. The hard /ck/ sound of "mimi**ck**ed" is consonant with the "bro**k**en bird's egg of a s**k**ull," the hardness of the sound conjuring an image of sharp fragments.

The mention of flint allows the poem to zoom out from the specific pieces of human bone and take a wider look at the field. At this point, the speaker relays how the men were given orders to "walk, not run" towards the German position in the woods. This order was based on a false presumption that it would be relatively easy to take control of the woods—and here serves to highlight the vulnerability of the men as they walked towards the enemy guns.

The description of the German machine guns as "nesting" is intentionally grotesque, taking a natural image and applying it through metaphor to something distinctly *un*natural. Whereas the woods should be full of nesting birds, instead they are full of guns. There is a kind of mismatch, then, between nature and technology—the latter doing a kind of violence to the former.

Stanza four further develops this idea, heavily personifying the earth. The earth is likened metaphorically to a soldier standing guard—leaving the reader to wonder what exactly the earth is now guarding. Perhaps it is the bodies, or perhaps it is the memory of the tragedy. That is, the earth is still deeply in the grips of the trauma of the original battle, even if most of the rest of the world has moved on.

This personification is developed further in the fourth stanza, which picks up on line 3's suggestion of the land being somehow wounded. Now, the link between the earth, trauma, and memory is made explicit. The earth is

> **r**eaching back into itself for **r**eminders of what happened
> like a **w**ound **w**orking a foreign body to the **s**urface of the **s**kin.

In other words, the earth is behaving like a wounded soldier, bringing these body parts to the surface as a way of healing itself, a process that is taking a long time. This mimics the way that the body would try to reject a "foreign body," like a bullet for example.

The alliteration of /r/, /w/, and /s/ sounds is an important part of these lines, as though the poem is bringing particular sounds to the surface too. The enjambment between these two lines—and their sheer length—also creates a reaching quality, mirroring the image of the earth "reaching back into itself."

LINES 13-16

This morning, twenty ...
... that outlasted them,

The fifth stanza offers an important shift in the poem, moving it from a past-tense discussion into the poem's present day. It tells the reader about a new discovery made in the fields around Mametz Wood: a mass grave in which twenty men are buried. The sheer number of men buried in one place highlights the wastefulness of war and the hurriedness with which men were buried.

Lines 14-15 pick up on the images of fragmentation listed in the second stanza by referring to the newly discovered dead bodies as a "broken mosaic of bone linked arm in arm, / their skeletons." The /k/ consonance recalls the use of the same sound earlier in the poem to give the words a sharp, broken quality. The reference to the men being "linked arm in arm" is an image of togetherness, but an unsettled and eerie one.

Indeed, line 15 picks up on this eerie togetherness by likening the "skeletons" to a "paused [...] dance-macabre." A *danse macabre* (how it is usually spelled), or dance of death, is a subgenre of art that depicts human figures dancing with skeletons (who represent death). These artworks serve as reminders to the living of the inevitability of death. The poem plays with this image, suggesting that the soldiers' lives were ended so violently and so abruptly that they didn't even have time to complete this Dance of Death.

The first line of stanza six uses the stanza break to great effect, enjambing from the previous line. The speaker relates how the soldiers' boots have "outlasted" their bodies. The way that this moment comes on its own line in a new stanza represents a kind of physical durability. It's as if only the soldiers' boots have persisted into the next stanza.

LINES 17-21

their socketed heads ...
... their absent tongues.

From line 17 ("their socketed heads tilted back at an angle"), the poem builds towards its final—and deeply unsettling—image. The discovered skeletons of the soldiers are depicted with "heads tilted back at an angle" and open jaws—"those that have them," at least. The picture of open jaws relates partly to the sudden and violent shock of death in warfare, the soldiers perhaps caught mid-scream. The description of "heads" and then "jaws" is also reminiscent of the itemization found in the second stanza.

Here, the poem deploys its second simile, picking up on this image of the jaws:

> As if the notes they had sung
> have only now, with this unearthing,
> slipped from their absent tongues.

The "notes they had sung" is a metaphorical way of describing the final sounds of the soldiers (again, probably screams or moans of pain). The idea here is that these sounds were, in their way, trapped under the earth all this time—the soldiers killed too abruptly to even allow them the sound of their final utterances. It's also worth remembering that soldiers frequently sang songs to try and boost morale.

This "unearthing" relates to the poem's earlier discussion of the earth as a kind of body, rejecting the horrors of war over a lengthy period of time and trying to heal itself (like an actual body trying to reject a bullet). The way that the poem ends on the mention of "tongues"—specifically "absent tongues"—intensifies the poem's focus on the human body. Most importantly, it highlights the way that these soldiers—their lives cut tragically short—cannot tell their own story. It's left to the reader to "unearth" these stories, even if they can never be fully recovered.

At the same time, these final moments suggest that, in death, the soldiers are indeed sending *some* sort of message to the world—in that the world is finally seeing the true, horrific face of war.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Mametz Wood" uses alliteration to great effect throughout. The first example is in line 1:

> For years afterwards the farmers found them —

These /f/ sounds ring together as if the reader is discovering them as the line progresses, each one an obvious and sudden presence. This mimics the way the farmers accidentally find body parts in the soil. Indeed, the visual height of the /f/ also makes them look as though they stick out of the line, poking above the average height of the other letters.

In the following stanza, alliteration is again obvious:

> A chit of bone, the china plate of a shoulder blade,
> the relic of a finger, the blown
> and broken bird's egg of a skull,

The two /ch/ sounds have a sharp feel, conveying the sharp fragments of bone found in the earth. This sound also gently echoes the noise of machine gun fire. Indeed, the /b/ sounds that follow in the next two lines also feel somewhat violent and noisy, helping the stanza to subtly hint at the sensory terror that comes with warfare.

The next key examples of alliteration are in the fourth stanza, which describes the earth as:

> reaching back into itself for reminders of what
> happened
> like a wound working a foreign body to the surface of

the skin.

These sounds are part of a key metaphor in the poem, in which the earth is compared to a human body. And, like a human body, the earth is trying to get rid of its "foreign" objects. The progression from alliterative /r/ to /w/ to /s/ sounds, then, represents the movement of "a foreign body to the surface of the skin" (or the ground). The sounds themselves even move from the throat (the /r/ sound) to the tip of the tongue (the /s/ sound), as if the trying to work their way out of the mouth. Additionally, the shared sounds are suggestive of small and somewhat difficult movements. Throughout the poem, then, alliteration helps capture the powerful aftermath of war and its effects on the natural landscape.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "F," "f," "f"
- **Line 2:** "u," "u"
- **Line 3:** "i," "i"
- **Line 4:** "ch," "ch," "l," "b," "l"
- **Line 5:** "b," "l"
- **Line 6:** "b," "b"
- **Line 7:** "b," "b"
- **Line 8:** "w," "w," "w"
- **Line 9:** "w"
- **Line 10:** "s," "s"
- **Line 11:** "r," "r," "w," "h"
- **Line 12:** "w," "w," "s," "s"
- **Line 13:** "m," "m"
- **Line 14:** "b," "b," "a," "a"
- **Line 15:** "m," "m"
- **Line 18:** "th," "th," "th," "th"

ASSONANCE

One of the first uses of assonance is in the second stanza of "Mametz Wood":

> A chit of bone, the china plate of a shoulder blade,
> ... the blown
> and broken bird's egg of a skull,

This section is a kind of itemized list of some of the gruesome findings in the ground near Mametz Wood. Though they are human remains, the poem distances them from human beings through metaphor in order to capture the dehumanizing violence of war. Accordingly, the bits of bone are likened to different objects associated with fragmentation (again suggesting brutal violence). The assonant sounds begin to appear like these fragments, each set of assonant vowels buried in the stanza, left to be discovered by the reader.

In the following stanza, /i/ sounds bring the first clause to life: "all mimicked now in flint." The /i/ sound copies itself throughout the line in a way that ties in with the word "mimicked." In turn, this draws attention to language's ability to mimic the images it describes.

Another significant example of assonance is in line 11, which describes the earth as:

> reaching back into itself for reminders of what happened

Though spaced quite far apart, these two long /ee/ sounds have a reaching, stretching kind of quality that evokes the image of the earth trying to retrieve "reminders" from itself.

In line 14, the poem describes a very recent discovery of "twenty men" who were buried together. They are described metaphorically as having been interrupted "mid dance-macabre" (this is a kind of dance of death). The assonance in the line before anticipates this mention of a dance—and the way that the men are linked together—by joining up sounds across the line:

> a broken mosaic of bone linked arm in arm

Again, as throughout the poem, assonance captures the sense of fragmented bodies that have been linked through their burial in Mametz Wood.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "a," "ou," "u," "u," "a"
- **Line 3:** "e," "a," "a," "i," "i"
- **Line 4:** "o," "a," "ou," "a"
- **Line 5:** "o"
- **Line 6:** "o"
- **Line 7:** "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 8:** "u"
- **Line 9:** "u"
- **Line 11:** "e," "i," "i," "e"
- **Line 12:** "o," "o"
- **Line 14:** "o," "o," "o," "a," "a"
- **Line 15:** "au," "a," "a"
- **Line 16:** "a," "a"
- **Line 17:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 18:** "a," "o"
- **Line 19:** "u"
- **Line 20:** "u"
- **Line 21:** "o"

CAESURA

Caesura is used throughout "Mametz Wood." It often lends the poem a fragmented or slowed-down feel, capturing the gruesome deaths whose aftermath the poem describes.

In line 2, for instance, the caesura creates a moment's pause

after "wasted young." That phrase could almost belong in a much more traditional-sounding memorial poem—but the caesura allows for the graphic shock of what follows, the rest of the stanza describing the way body parts keep "turning up under" farmers' plough blades.

In the second stanza, caesura is used in the first two lines to give the stanza a fragmented, bitty sound. This works well with the description of the different body parts that turn up in the soil. Similarly, line 18's two caesurae ("and their jaws, those that have them, dropped open") have a swinging kind of sound, mirroring the way that the dead soldiers' jaws are "dropped open." Line 20's caesura ("have only now, with this unearthing") has a similar effect as well, capturing how the open jaws seem to sing.

Line 8's caesura ("across this field where they were told to walk, not run") captures the feeling of the battle at the time that it happened. Here, the poem is telling the reader that the men who died in the Mametz woods were instructed to "walk, not run." The caesura after walk slows the line down, mirroring the way that the Welsh Regiment soldiers themselves were instructed to do the same (perhaps against their better instinct).

Throughout the poem, then, caesurae convey the experiences both of battle and of finding the soldier's remains years later.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "young, turning"
- **Line 4:** "bone, the"
- **Line 5:** "finger, the"
- **Line 7:** "flint, breaking"
- **Line 8:** "walk, not"
- **Line 13:** "morning, twenty"
- **Line 18:** "jaws, those," "them, dropped"
- **Line 20:** "now, with"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used throughout "Mametz Woods." In the first line, /f/ sounds are used (mostly through alliteration specifically) to bring the opening image to life:

> For years afterwards the farmers found them –

The letter "f" visually pokes out of the top of the line, and its sound seems to pierce through the line as well, evoking the way that body parts would appear in the soil.

The second stanza is again full of consonance: :

> A chit of bone, the china plate of a shoulder blade,
> the relic of a finger, the blown
> and broken bird's egg of a skull,

Most of these are sharp-sounding, conveying the fragmented pieces of bone found in the soil. Taken as a whole, the intensity of the repeated sounds captures the violence of the battle, as well as the shock of finding these remains years later.

Later, lines 14 and 15 use a harsh /k/ sound to once again call to mind the sharp and fragmented pieces of bone of the soldiers' remains:

> a broken mosaic of bone linked arm in arm,
> their skeletons paused mid dance-macabre

The /k/ sounds form their own kind of "broken mosaic" as they scatter through these two lines.

The final stanza uses /n/ and /ng/ consonance in a way that mimics a kind of tunefulness, with the stanza imagining the dead soldiers' un-singable song. These sounds play the stanza like a gentle melody:

> As if the notes they had sung
> have only now, with this unearthing,
> slipped from their absent tongues.

In fact, the first and last lines of this stanza rhyme. This brings the otherwise unnoticeable consonance of /ng/ sounds to the reader's attention, and adds a final songlike quality to the stanza, as if capturing the silent song of the dead.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "F," "f," "f," "f"
- **Line 2:** "n," "n," "l," "l"
- **Line 3:** "nd," "nd," "n"
- **Line 4:** "ch," "n," "ch," "n," "l," "l," "d," "l," "d"
- **Line 5:** "l," "c," "l," "n"
- **Line 6:** "b," "r," "k," "n," "b," "r," "k," "ll"
- **Line 7:** "ll," "m," "m," "ck," "n," "n," "l," "n," "b," "k," "b," "l"
- **Line 8:** "ss," "s," "ld," "w," "w," "ld," " w"
- **Line 9:** "d," "d," "s," "s," "n," "n"
- **Line 10:** "n," "n," "n," "s," "n," "s," "n," "n"
- **Line 11:** "r," "r," "r," "r," "w," "n," "ed"
- **Line 12:** "w," "nd," "w," "r," "r," "s," "r," "c," "s"
- **Line 13:** "n," "n," "n," "r," "n," "r"
- **Line 14:** "b," "r," "k," "c," "b," "k," "rm," "rm"
- **Line 15:** "r," "k," "d," "d," "d," "c," "b"
- **Line 16:** "b," "th"
- **Line 17:** "th," "ck," "d," "d," "d," "ck"
- **Line 18:** "th," "th," "th," "th," "pp," "p"
- **Line 19:** "n"
- **Line 20:** "n," "n," "th," "n," "th"
- **Line 21:** "n"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used throughout "Mametz Wood." Combined

with the poem's lack of rhyme scheme or defined meter, the poem's use of enjambment adds to its broader sense of unpredictability; the reader can't predict its form any more than than the farmers can predict where and when they will stumble upon human remains.

The enjambment in line 2 between "blades / as" captures a sense of physicality, as, visually, this mimics the ploughing that the sentence describes. It's as if the poem is "turning up" language in the same way that the plough blades turn up soil.

In line 5, the enjambment suspends the phrase's sense, requiring the following line to complete it:

> the relic of a finger, the blown
> and broken bird's egg of a skull,

This fragments the line, hinting at the violence of war. The phrase itself is "blown" apart and "broken."

Line 11's enjambment is integral to one of the poem's key ideas—that the earth is somehow "reaching back into itself" in order to heal its wounds and remember "what happened" during the First World War:

> reaching back into itself for reminders of what
> happened
> like a wound working a foreign body to the surface of
> the skin.

This creates a long, drawn-out sentence, stretching the reader's eyes across the two lines and extending the reader's breath. In this way, the enjambment draws the reader into the earth's attempt to come to terms with this battle.

The enjambment in line 15 is also important. Indeed, this moment enjambs not just between two lines but between two *stanzas* as well:

> their skeletons paused mid dance-macabre
> in boots that outlasted them

The idea here is that the newly discovered skeletons have been "paused" in a grotesque dance of death. The enjambment performs this pause, the line seeming to hang in suspension. Yet only the boots make it into the next stanza. The flesh of the soldiers has decayed; the boots have "outlasted" those who wore them.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "blades"
- **Line 3:** "as"
- **Line 5:** "blown"
- **Line 6:** "and"
- **Line 7:** "white"
- **Line 8:** "across"
- **Line 11:** "happened"
- **Line 12:** "like"
- **Line 15:** "dance-macabre"
- **Line 16:** "in"
- **Line 17:** "angle"
- **Line 18:** "and"
- **Line 19:** "sung"
- **Line 20:** "have"

METAPHOR

"Mametz Wood" is a highly metaphorical poem. Metaphor is used effectively though, making the grim and graphic images in the poem seem more real.

Essentially, there are two main metaphorical ideas going on throughout the poem. The first—which is quite varied—is of the dead soldiers' bones. The poem metaphorically compares these remains to other objects. This is particularly prominent in the second stanza, in which each piece of bone is metaphorically compared to something else: "chit of bone" (a chit is a short, written note), "china plate of a shoulder blade, "relic of a finger," and "blown and broken bird's egg of a skull."

Each of these metaphors relates to fragmentation and fragility, building up the stanza's overall metaphorical sense and managing to both humanize and dehumanize the remains at the same time. That is, images are both graphic and, somehow, beautiful. This same metaphorical idea is restated later in the "broken mosaic of bone" in line 14. Again, metaphor both dehumanizes the soldier's remains while at the same time paying homage to them.

The other main use of metaphor characterizes the earth as a kind of conscious being, one which is trying to process the trauma that it has been through. This is made explicit in lines 10 and 11 (and also through the use of simile in line 12):

> And even now the earth stands sentinel,
> reaching back into itself for reminders of what
> happened

First, the speaker compares the earth to a "sentinel," or guard, relating the earth to military imagery. Yet the earth isn't fighting a war, but rather guarding its own wounded body. Like a surgeon, the earth reaches into its wounds to remove the things that have wounded it—the bones of the dead. As line 11 states, part of that healing relates to remembering what happened. The earth reaches into itself for "reminders." This moment is also discussed in the personification entry of this guide.

There are also some smaller metaphors at work in the poem too. The description of machine guns as "nesting" at the end of stanza three is a deeply unsettling metaphor that likens the

guns to the birds of the woods—the more natural inhabitants of Mametz's countryside. The "dance-macabre" at the end of stanza five is a metaphor too, which presents the newly discovered bodies of twenty men as having been "paused" in some kind of grotesque death dance.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-6:** "A chit of bone, the china plate of a shoulder blade, / the relic of a finger, the blown / and broken bird's egg of a skull,"
- **Line 9:** "nesting machine guns"
- **Line 10:** "the earth stands sentinel"
- **Line 11:** "reaching back into itself for reminders of what happened"
- **Line 14:** "a broken mosaic of bone"
- **Line 15:** "their skeletons paused mid dance-macabre"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification is used in the poem's descriptions of the earth in and around Mametz Wood. Essentially, this helps the poem to map the violence suffered by the soldiers in the First World War onto the earth itself.

Indeed, the first personification of the earth explicitly likens the earth to a soldier. In the fourth stanza, the earth is described as standing "sentinel"—acting as a kind of guard. The earth is then metaphorically granted the power of memory, "reaching back into itself for reminders of what happened." This act of remembering, in turn, is implicitly compared to the act of battlefield surgery. The earth is trying to remove the things that have harmed it—namely, the bones of the dead. The earth wishes to keep the memory of the dead soldiers alive, but also to heal itself from the literal and metaphorical violence it too suffered in the war (the Mametz Wood landscape still shows many signs of the conflict).

One of the effects of this personification is thus to liken nature to humans—while at the same time showing how technology has divided nature and humans. In other words, *nature* is human-like, but humans themselves have become dehumanized because of the fearsome technology of warfare they have invented. This technology has outgrown the ability to maintain peace, causing violence to humanity and the natural environment.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-12:** "And even now the earth stands sentinel, / reaching back into itself for reminders of what happened / like a wound working a foreign body to the surface of the skin."

PUN

There are two puns in "Mametz Wood." Both of them capture a sense of how human conflicts come to be reflected in nature.

The first is in line 3:

> as they **tended** the land back into itself.

Here, "tended" works in two ways. First of all, it relates literally to the actions of the farmers, who tend their plots of land in order to grow produce. But the word also anticipates one of the poem's main metaphorical ideas: that the land itself is injured and trying to heal its trauma. So in that sense, the farmers are also *tending* to the earth's wounds. In caring for the land, they also become involved in its history.

The other pun in the poem is part of the same idea, and is found in line 12:

> like a wound working a **foreign body** to the surface of the skin.

In the context of a wound, "foreign body" means something that the body is trying to reject—the way that a human body might try to push out a bullet, for example. But "foreign body" also relates to the way that warfare depends on the division of nations, and the ability to view the enemy as a kind of other—a foreigner. Indeed, an emphasis on negative stereotypes of different nationalities was a big part of the propaganda on both sides of World War I. So, in both cases the double meanings of words capture how earth mirrors the effects of human conflict.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "tended"
- **Line 12:** "foreign body"

SIMILE

There are two similes in "Mametz Wood." They're closely related to the poem's use of metaphors and help to amplify the images of the soldier's remains. The first example is in line 12, which describes the way the earth is:

> reaching back into itself for reminders of what happened
> like a wound working a foreign body to the surface of the skin.

The simile here compares the earth to a wounded human body, arguing that it isn't only humans who suffer violence in war, but the land too. Indeed, the earth is *still* trying to process the trauma of the First World War. It's as if the bones of the killed soldiers have wounded the Earth like bullets. The earth tries to both free the remains of the dead soldiers in order to heal itself *and* to pay tribute to them by never forgetting what has happened. In this way, the poem implicitly compares memory

with healing.

The other simile comes in the final stanza:

> As if the notes they had sung
> have only now, with this unearthing,
> slipped from their absent tongues.

This is part of the way that the speaker makes sense of the horrific image of the newly discovered "twenty" dead soldiers—who look like they are "linked arm in arm." The speaker likens them to a kind of choir, perhaps, or even to songbirds (playing on the poem's earlier mention of "nesting"). It's as uncovering these skulls enables them to sing whatever notes they have been holding in all this time. Yet the emphasis is as much on the fact that the bodies *can't* sing as it is on imagining that they can.

These similes, then, emphasize both the painfulness of past horrors and the importance of remembering them—of "unearthing" them.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "like a wound working a foreign body to the surface of the skin."
- **Line 19:** "As if"
- **Lines 19-21:** " the notes they had sung / have only now, with this unearthing, / slipped from their absent tongues."

VOCABULARY

Wasted Young (Line 2) - This refers to those who died fighting in the First World War, specifically in the battle at Mametz Wood. These soldiers were for the most part young men.

Plough Blades (Line 2) - A *plough* is a farming tool used to churn up soil so that new seeds/crops can be planted. The way that the blades move the soil results in things coming up from below the surface.

Tended (Line 3) - To *tend* something is to care or look after it.

Chit (Line 4) - This is a small note or piece of paper, emphasizing the way that the discovered bone is just a fragment.

Flint (Line 7) - *Flint* is a hard type of rock. Notably, it was an important material for prehistoric man because it could be used as a tool. The flint, then, represents one of humankind's first technological advancements—which ultimately resulted in the type of devastating war machinery involved in the First World War.

Sentinel (Line 10) - To *stand sentinel* is to guard something—indeed, this is the kind of thing a soldier might be tasked with.

Foreign Body (Line 12) - This has a double meaning. Specific to the "wound" image, it relates to the way that the human body tries to reject things that it identifies as not belonging inside it (e.g. a bullet). But this is also a pun, playing on how war pits foreign soldiers against each other.

Mosaic (Line 14) - A mosaic is an artwork or decorative wall made out of small pieces of tiles, stone, glass, or other materials.

Dance-Macabre (Line 15) - A danse macabre (the usual spelling) is a subgenre of artwork, in which humans are depicted as dancing with figures of death, which are usually skeletons. The form is intended as a reminder of mortality, and often depicts death as a kind of leveler—everyone dies, from kings to peasants.

Socketed (Line 17) - This means simply that the skulls look like they have sockets in them, or holes.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Mametz Wood" is a twenty-one line poem consisting of seven tercets, used regularly from start to finish. That said, the poem doesn't feel formally strict because it is neither regularly rhymed nor written in regular meter.

In addition, the poem's line lengths fluctuate a lot. Long lines capture a sense of "reaching" and breathlessness, as in lines 11 to 12:

> reaching back into itself for reminders of what happened
> like a wound working a foreign body to the surface of the skin.

Meanwhile, short lines capture a poignant, quiet feeling, as in line 16: "in boots that outlasted them." Here, the sadness of the fact that the soldiers' boots lasted longer than they did is packed into the simplicity of a short line.

Structurally, the first stanza is a kind of general introduction to the poem's main subject, while the second reads like an itemized list of gruesome Mametz Wood discoveries. Stanzas three and four deal more with nature's relationship to the conflict, likening nature to a wounded soldier.

The final three stanzas discuss yet another discovery, this time of twenty men buried in a mass grave. The poem ends by imagining that unearthing these skeletons has allowed "the notes they had sung" to finally be released, and perhaps some peace has returned to the land.

The poem is written in the past tense throughout, which gives it

a sense of linking back across the years to the original conflict. As the same time, the poem still reads as if written from a contemporary vantage point (as indicated by the phrases like "now" and "This morning"). This also helps emphasize the sheer *amount* of body parts in the soil: they are still being discovered almost a century later.

METER

"Mametz Wood" is written in free verse, meaning it does not follow a regular meter. Instead, the lines are unpredictable in terms of meter—perhaps mimicking the unpredictable manner in which farmers stumble upon the remains of fallen soldiers.

There is one interesting moment of metrical regularity, though, which can be found in line 8:

> across | this field | where they | were told | to walk, | not run,

This line is made up entirely of iambs—poetic feet that follow an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern. This sudden regularity notably occurs just as the poem is talking about how the soldiers were ordered to "walk, not run" into the woods—where many of them would meet their brutal deaths. The regularity of the iambs in this moment—da DUM, da DUM, da DUM—evokes the sensation of walking steadily, of one foot following the other as the soldiers move towards their inevitable doom.

RHYME SCHEME

There is no rhyme scheme in "Mametz Wood," which is instead written in free verse. Perhaps this is because tidy, predictable rhymes would feel at odds with the poem's rather grim and gruesome imagery. Indeed, the lack of overall pattern can also be seen as relating to the way that the dead soldiers' body parts turn up randomly too—there's no pattern to when the farmers will find a piece of bone in the soil.

There are *some* rhymes in the poem though. For example, take the rhyme between "run" in line 8 and "guns" in line 9. The rhyme here feels bitterly ironic, a touch of lyricism in the moment the poem implies the soldiers' gruesome deaths. Another important rhyme comes in the final stanza, between "sung" and "tongues" in lines 19 and 21. The rhyme here feels more appropriate, given that it adds a touch of musicality to the speaker's description of the soldiers' "notes" finally being set free.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Mametz Wood" is relatively detached from the poem, never mentioned in the first-person or given any personal details. In a way, the speaker is not that important to the poem; instead, the poem focuses on the *soldiers'* experiences and the way that their body parts *still* turn up in the Mametz soil.

That said, Sheers has explained how the poem was inspired by his own visit to WWI battle sites and his understanding of the Mametz Wood story. Furthermore, the men who fought at Mametz Wood were from a Welsh Regiment—and accordingly were the same nationality as Sheers. In any case, the speaker is someone who either lives nearby or is visiting Mametz Wood and considering the land's macabre legacy.

SETTING

The setting of the poem is, of course, Mametz Wood—a real place in northern France that, in 1916, was the site of a particularly bloody episode of the First World War. The area contains both woods and treeless fields, where farmers now work the land, and, in doing so, occasionally unearth the bones of long-dead soldiers. Though the poem takes place in the present day, it thus remains deeply rooted in the past. Though the rest of the world has in its way moved on, the poem suggests that the earth cannot forget its trauma; even just "this morning" in the poem's present, 20 men were found buried in a long grave.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Owen Sheers, born in 1974, is a British poet who also works as a TV presenter, playwright, and anthologist. Sheers's poems often engage with the natural world, focusing on human beings' relationship to their environments (see: "Winter Swans"). Indeed, he anthologized a collection of poems by various poets under the title *A Poet's Guide to Britain*, the chapter headings of which show his belief in the importance of poetry grounded in a sense of place: "London and Cities," "Villages and Towns," "Mountains and Moorland," "Islands," "Woods and Forest," and "Coast and Sea." This poem, of course, takes a more twisted and unsettling approach in its look at nature. Instead of praising nature, the poem seeks to give an honest and unflinching account of the way that conflicts like the First World War can affect the land.

Ultimately, "Mametz Wood" is a kind of contemporary take on the WWI poem, which is very much a genre in its own right (one which sits within war poetry more generally). Accordingly, it's worth comparing this poem to those famous poems written closer to the conflict, namely works by writers like Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, and Wilfred Owen—the latter of whom is considered the leading figure in WWI poetry ("Exposure," "Anthem for Doomed Youth," "Dulce et Decorum Est," "Futility," "Strange Meeting").

Special mention must also be made to the Welsh war poet David Jones, who wrote an epic poem called *In Parenthesis*; Sheers was in part inspired through his work on a documentary about Jones and the war. A more contemporary comparison would be Jane Weir's poem "Poppies"—flowers which came to symbolize the First World War.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The historical context for "Mametz Wood" is two-fold. First of all, it's clear that the poem is written from a contemporary vantage point—the first line makes it obvious that many years have passed since the original battle in which these soldiers died. So, by and large, the poem is set around the time it was written. Indeed, part of its inspiration was Sheers's visits to WWI battle sites as part of a documentary about David Jones, a Welsh soldier (and poet) who served in that conflict. This aspect of the historical context serves to highlight the utter horror and wastefulness of war, the fact that body parts are *still* turning up a century later underscoring the sheer number of those who died.

Of course, the original conflict is an integral part of the historical context too. The First World War swamped the globe from 1914 to 1918 and remains one of the deadliest conflicts in history. Millions died in the fighting itself, and many more died from the fallout (through the 1918 flu pandemic and further political upheaval).

"Mametz Wood" relates to a very specific episode in the war. This was a 1916 conflict in the area of Mametz (in northern France) between the British Army and the Germans. This, in turn, was part of a wider offensive known as the Battle of the Somme (named after the wider French area) which killed around a million men. Those fighting in the Mametz Wood were from the Welsh Division of the British Army, and around 4,000 of those young Welshmen were killed.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Sheers's Inspiration — A short clip about a documentary that Sheers was involved in which focused on Welsh World War 1 poet David Jones. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p040qtps)
- The Welsh and WWI — A documentary about the Welsh role in the British Army, as well as the Mametz Wood conflict itself. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HfGpX4W5Vm0)
- David Jones's "In Parenthesis" — An excerpt from an epic poem by David Jones, a Welsh war poet who fought in the Mametz Wood conflict and whose poetry inspired Sheers. (http://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/poems/in-parenthesis-leave-it-under-the-oak/)
- Poems of the First World War — A valuable resource of WWI poetry selected by the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70139/the-poetry-of-world-war-i)
- An Interview with Sheers — The poet talks about his life and work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeB9zK1DtOo)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER OWEN SHEERS POEMS

- Winter Swans

HOW TO CITE

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