Strange Meeting

POEM TEXT

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
"Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn."
"None," said that other, "save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery;
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.

"I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now. . . ."

SUMMARY

It seemed like I escaped from battle down into a very deep, dark tunnel—a tunnel that had been carved out of the granite bedrock by some enormous wars in the past.

Even in the tunnel, I found people moaning and suffering. They were either too deeply asleep to be stirred, or they were already dead. Then, as I poked and prodded them, one of the sleepers jumped up and stared at me. He seemed to recognize me—and he pitied me. He lifted his hands sadly, as if he were going to bless me. And I could tell from his lifeless smile that the dark hall in which we stood was Hell itself.

You could see all the fear etched into his face—even though none of the blood or violence from the battle up above reached the hall where we stood. You couldn't hear the artillery firing down there; the guns didn't make the chimneys in the hall groan. I said to him, "Unfamiliar friend, there's no reason to be sad down here." He replied: "No reason except for all the years I'm missing out on, and the loss of hope. You and I had the same hopes. I threw myself into seeking the most beautiful thing in the world, and
I'm not talking about physical beauty. This beauty makes fun of time as it steadily passes by. If this beauty is sad, its sadness is so much richer than the sadness you find down here. If I hadn't died, my happiness might have made a lot of other people happy too; and even in my sadness, I would have left something important behind, something that can't survive down here. I'm talking about truth itself, the truth that no one talks about: the horror of war, war boiled down to its horrifying essence. Since I didn't get to tell people how horrible war is, people will be happy with the destructive things our armies have done. Or they'll be unhappy, and they'll get so angry that they'll keep fighting and killing each other. They will be as fast as tigers. No one will speak out or disagree with their governments, even though those governments are moving society away from progress rather than towards it. I was full of courage and mystery. I was full of wisdom and expertise. I won't have to

watch the world as it moves backwards, marching into cities that, foolishly, don't have fortifications. If the wheels of their armored vehicles were to get clogged with blood, I would go wash them with water from pure wells. I would wash them with truths too profoundly true to be corrupted. I would do everything I possibly could to help—except for fighting, except for taking part in more horrible war. In war, even those who aren't physically hurt suffer from mental trauma.

"I am the enemy soldier you killed, my friend. I recognized you in the dark: you frowned when you saw me in just the same way as you frowned yesterday, when you killed with me with your bayonet. I tried to fend you off, but my hands were slow and clumsy. Let's rest now…"

THEMES

THE HORRORS OF WAR

"Strange Meeting" is a poem about war, but it doesn't focus on heroic deeds or grand victories. Instead, the poem treats war as horrifying, wasteful, and dehumanizing: in the words of the enemy soldier, it presents the "pity of war distilled." According to the poem, war destroys the landscape in which its fought; it erodes the natural solidarity between human beings, turning people who might be friends into mortal enemies; and it robs the soldiers who fight of their capacity to speak truth to power—to resist the wars in which they give their lives. What's more, the trauma of war lingers even after the battle is over.

As he sets the scene of the poem—describing the deep, dark tunnel in which he finds himself—the speaker describes war as a fundamentally destructive force. Indeed, "titanic wars" have cut the tunnel in which the speaker finds himself. In other words, war created "Hell" itself. And though the tunnel is protected from the battle above, it leaves its mark on the soldiers stuck below: the enemy's soldier's face is "grained" with "a thousand fears" even in Hell (that is, you can see the fear and anxiety forever etched on this soldier's face). The violence of the battle has even deprived the enemy soldier of his humanity. Instead of being a full human being, he is a "vision": he has been reduced to being a specter or a ghost. The speaker thus portrays war as a force that permanently damages and diminishes both the landscape and the people who fight it.

In his long speech, the enemy soldier picks up on this theme. Instead of granting him dignity and immortality through heroic deeds, war has robbed him of hope and life. The enemy soldier's key hope is that he would be able to tell people about the horrors of war, and thus prevent future wars. However, because he has been killed in battle, he won't be able to convey this message to the world—and, as a result, the world will continue to go to war without questioning why their governments resort to violence: "none will break ranks." Just as the war has diminished the enemy soldier's own humanity, making him into a "vision" instead of a full human being, so too it will continue to deprive other people of their humanity: they will become, he notes, like violent animals: "swift" as the "tigress."

Though the enemy soldier hopes that people might be convinced—if only they knew the truth of war—to turn away from violence, he doesn't see any way that this hope will come true: he's been killed in battle and his death will serve to justify more killing. And, in a cruel irony revealed only at the end of the poem, he was killed by the poem's speaker—the very person to whom he addresses his long meditation on the futility of war. Nevertheless, the enemy soldier address the speaker as "my friend," suggesting that they could've been, should've been friends: war has obscured the natural solidarity and friendship that they should share.

Though the enemy soldier has been killed in battle, the poem takes up his message, offering it to the reader. And in this way, the poem critiques war on the enemy soldier's behalf, asking the reader to turn away from violence and toward reconciliation and solidarity.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-44

RECONCILIATION AND SOLIDARITY

"Strange Meeting" presents a pretty bleak view of human society, which seems unwilling to stop fighting. Yet the poem also presents that violence as a *choice*—something that people *decide* to engage in—rather than something innate to human beings. The two soldiers at the heart of the poem might very well have been friends in different circumstances. They even share the same hopes and dreams: "Whatever hope is yours, / Was my life also," the enemy soldier proclaims.

By illustrating their shared humanity, the poem suggests that war creates division where none need exist. What's more, the fact that the enemy soldier forgives the speaker in death and says they both can rest now—finally achieving some sort of peace—suggests that reconciliation and solidarity might be a sort of antidote to the horrors of war.

In his long speech at the center of the poem, the enemy soldier argues that war and violence are not necessary or even natural for human societies. Instead, he imagines that people are presented with a decision: they can move toward a peaceful world or they can "trek from progress." In other words, they can either advance or they can slide backwards, downwards, into violence. For this reason, it's not foolish to imagine a better

world—and the enemy soldier lays out some of the dynamics of that world: people will know the "truth untold" about war—that it's horrifying and not glorious—and they will work to avoid it. Indeed, he imagines himself repairing the damage caused by war, washing away the "blood" that "clogged ... chariot-wheels."

But despite this hopeful, even beautiful vision, the enemy soldier doesn't show a lot of optimism that it will actually come to pass. Instead, he argues that people take violence as a cause for further violence, a cycle with no obvious exit. He presents this as a betrayal of the underlying possibility for solidarity and reconciliation between the people who fight each other.

The poem stages this betrayal in its final lines, where the enemy soldier reveals who killed him: the speaker himself. The enemy soldier announces, "I am the enemy you killed, my friend." The line is paradoxical: one might wonder how the soldiers can be both enemies and friends. But the enemy soldier's implication is clear: they are only enemies because their countries have decided to fight each other. Once all that is stripped away, they are friends again, as they were at first, before the war. Friendship, not violence and enmity, is the natural relationship between human beings.

This is a bitter irony: all the devastation, horror, and dehumanization that the poem describes is unnecessary. In fantasizing about a better world, a world in which the two soldiers are friends instead of enemies, the soldier demonstrates just how unnecessarily brutal and horrifying *this* world actually is.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-44

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

The poem begins with the speaker escaping from battle by heading down into a deep, dark tunnel—a tunnel that "titanic wars" had "groined," or cut, into the granite bedrock beneath the battlefield. It's clear right from the start that this poem isn't going to treat war as something glorious or heroic. Note, for instance how the soldier is *running away* from the fighting. The reference to "titanic" wars also suggests that humanity has had a long, devastating history of violence. This might, in part, be an allusion to that actual ship the Titanic, which had sunk just six years before Owens wrote this poem; as such, the word evokes a sense of destruction and waste on a massive scale.

Note also that the speaker doesn't say *what* war he's fighting in, nor who he's fighting against. This suggests that the war's sheer brutality and horror overshadow whatever politics started it the first place.

These lines are written in iambic pentameter, as will be the case for much of the poem: each line has, more or less, five poetic feet, each consisting of a da DUM syllable pattern. It's easy to hear this rhythm in the poem's third line:

Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

These lines also introduce the poem's pseudo rhyme scheme, which will be a combination of slant rhyme and something called pararhyme. This is when words contain the same consonant sounds in the same order (but different vowels) and can be seen with "escaped" and "scooped." The same thing will happen with "groined" and "groaned" in line 4 . Owens was known for his use of pararhyme, especially in this poem, and there will be more and more of these pairs.

The poem's rhymes, such as they are, fall into heroic couplets (rhyming couplets of iambic pentamer)—or, maybe it's more accurate to say *failed* heroic couplets, where the rhymes fail to fully line up. As their name suggests, heroic couplets are often used to describe heroism and bravery in idealized ways. The poem's failed rhymes suggest that it is intentionally messing with the form, as if to show the reader what heroic couplets look like after they've actually been to a real battle.

The opening two lines of the poem are also enjambed—which gives a sense of the speed of the speaker's escape from battle. Line 3 is then end-stopped, and from there forward the poem uses a lot of end-stops—which tend to cut off one line from another. There is a sense of separation, of failed reunion, in the structure of the lines (which will eventually be important to the poem thematically).

These lines also exhibit another poetic device that will be important to the poem: alliteration. For example, take the /gr/ sound that appears in "granites" and "groined." The heavy alliteration in the poem gives it a very literary feeling—this poem is not trying to imitate every day, conversational speech. Even as the poem resists literary tradition, roughing up its heroic couplets, it also wants to feel sophisticated.

LINES 4-8

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.

In lines 4-8, the speaker describes the "tunnel" into which he escaped. The tunnel is full of dead people, whom the speaker describes, metaphorically, as "sleepers." They cannot be roused from their sleep, though the speaker pokes and prods them—except for "one" who springs to life in response to the

speaker.

This "one" seems to recognize the speaker and stares at him, full of pity, before raising his hands over the speaker. Using a simile, the speaker compares this gesture to a blessing. The simile suggests that this other person wants to absolve the speaker of his sins, to forgive him. It is a striking and tender moment—and it becomes more so as the poem progresses.

The speaker is deliberately vague here about who this "one" is. In fact, it takes all the way until line 40 for the poem to reveal its key secret: that—spoiler alert!—this is in fact an enemy soldier whom the speaker killed the day before. As such, it's surprising and touching that this enemy would be willing to bless the very person who killed him—and it suggests how different things are in this tunnel: the conflicts that structure life above simply don't matter here.

These lines fall into a pattern that the rest of the poem follows (a pattern which the first three lines hint at, but don't fully realize). The poem is in a rough form of heroic couplets: lines of iambic pentameter that—sort of—rhyme with each other. Indeed, none of the rhymes in this stanza are perfect rhymes; instead, the poem favors slant rhymes and the previously mentioned pararhymes, as is seen with "bestirred" and "stared" in lines 5-6 (ignore that first "be"; what's important here is that the same consonant sounds are shared in end each word's stressed syllable). The poem's form is intentionally rough, almost rhyming but not quite, perhaps reflecting the trauma and damage of war.

Only one line in this stanza is enjambed, line 6. The poem generally uses end-stops. As such, when it does use enjambments, they feel like disruptions, disturbances. And, aptly enough, the poem reserves its enjambments for disturbing moments. In this stanza, the only enjambment falls in the line where the dead man wakes up and stares at the speaker. It's a strange and surprising moment; the enjambment registers that surprise.

LINES 9-10

And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

In the final two lines of the poem's second stanza, the speaker makes a very important revelation: he's in "Hell." Among other things, this means that the speaker is dead—as is the man he's talking to. The speaker uses a parallel construction in lines 9-10 to delay this revelation as long as possible. Note also the intense consonance that fills the second half of each of these lines: both "sullen hall" and "stood in Hell" are characterized by /s/, /n/, /h/, and /l/ sounds, in that exact order.

And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

The speaker's description of Hell is not very Christian—there's no God or Satan down here inflicting punishment on sinners. Instead, the depiction of "Hell" alludes to that in *The Odyssey*, an ancient Greek epic poem. In Book 11, the poem's hero, Odysseus, descends into Hell, where he meets and talks with his dead friends—many of them soldiers who died fighting in the Trojan War, in which Odysseus also served. In *The Odyssey*, Hell is less a place of punishment and more a place to reflect on the cruelty and injustice of war. "Strange Meeting" follows this tradition, using Hell as a place to critique war.

Like the previous lines, these form a rhyming iambic pentameter couplet—a.k.a. a heroic couplet. Its rhyme, however, is rough: "hall" and "hell" is again a pararhyme. The poem's form remains damaged, incomplete. Here it seems that this might reflect the speaker's position: perhaps he is so shocked to find himself in Hell that he can't quite get his rhyme right. But as the poem proceeds, it becomes clear that the damaged rhymes reflect instead the trauma and injury he's suffered on the battlefield—and that Hell itself is a surprisingly peaceful, calm place.

LINES 11-13

With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.

In lines 11-13, the speaker describes his newfound companion in more detail. To put it bluntly, he doesn't look good! His face as "grained"—that is, wrinkled, careworn—by a "thousand fears." In other words, the soldier's fears metaphorically seem etched into his face, reflecting the persistence of wartime trauma; even in Hell, this other soldier looks scared and anxious.

At first this doesn't make much sense to the speaker, who points out that, in Hell, they're actually far from the war. No "blood" from the battlefield trickles down into the tunnel from the battlefield above. They can't hear the artillery pounding. The speaker is basically saying that this place is free from violence. It's more than a little ironic that Hell is a safer, more peaceful place than the battlefield—and, in turn, a pretty severe condemnation of the horror of war.

These lines follow the pattern established in the previous stanza: each line is written in iambic pentameter. They again fall—sort of—into rhyming couplets: for instance, "grained" and "ground" are yet another pair of pararhymes. As the poem describes war, it refuses to smooth out its form. One might've suspected, up to this point, that the poem's rhymes were off simply because the speaker is dead and in Hell. But here, as the poem turns to describe the war, it continues to be unpolished, inexact—suggesting that the violence of the war itself is responsible for the poem's strained sound.

LINES 14-17

"Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn."

"None," said that other, "save the undone years,
The hopelessness.
Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also;

The speaker addresses the enemy soldier as "strange friend"—suggesting that he has not yet realized that the person he's talking to is, according to the war happening up above, an enemy. "Strange" here can also mean "unfamiliar" rather than "weird," in the sense that this other soldier is a stranger.

The speaker tries to comfort his strange new friend, telling him that there's no reason to be sad down here in Hell (again reflecting the poem's ironic stance that Hell is actually safer and calmer than the war-torn world above). After this point, the enemy soldier more or less takes over the poem and the reader doesn't hear from the speaker again. In this sense, it seems like the opening lines of the poem, lines 1-14, serve simply to set the scene for the enemy soldier's speech—which is the true heart of the poem.

The enemy soldier doesn't quite agree with the speaker, and he does think there's a reason to be sad, even in "Hell." He lists two reasons why in lines 15-16: "the undone years" and "the hopelessness." In other words, the enemy soldier is sad that he has lost so much life and opportunity. (It's worth pointing out here that the average soldier in World War I, which Owen wrote this poem, was only in his early 20s.) The enemy soldier spends much of the rest of the poem meditating on what he'd wanted to achieve with his life.

But, before he does so, he makes an interesting an important note: it's not just *his* hope. It's something that he and the speaker *shared*: "Whatever hope is yours, / Was my life also." This humanizes the speaker's enemy—he's a person with dreams and aspirations like anyone else, but they were taken from him by the horror of war.

Although these lines largely follow the formal pattern established earlier in the poem—heroic couplets with intentionally bad rhymes, like the pararhyme between "years" and "yours" in lines 15-16.

LINES 17-21

I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.

Here, the enemy soldier is describing the "hope" he lost with his death—that is, how he'd wanted to spend his life. While alive, he went "hunting" in search of beauty, the use of "wild" implying that he pursued this passionately and recklessly. The enjambment at the end of line 17 emphasizes the "wild[ness]" of this hunt: in a poem so heavily end-stopped, the enjambment feels a little wild.

The beauty the soldier sought, in turn is deemed "the wildest beauty in the world." Lest the reader get the wrong idea, he quickly explains that he was *not* hunting "calm in eyes, or braided hair"—basically, he's not chasing pretty girls. He was seeking something that seems—to him, anyway—much grander. What, exactly, this beauty refers to isn't all that clear (though the fact that this enemy soldier never found it is).

The dead soldier notes that this "beauty" "mocks"—or pokes fun at—"the steady running of the hour." Here, "hour" stands in for time itself (in fact, this is an example of metonymy). And time is described metaphorically as "running." Of course, time doesn't literally run, but it does often feel like it speeds along.

The beauty that the enemy soldier seeks is thus being personified as something that looks at the passage of time and laughs; maybe this beauty isn't beholden to life and death in the way that human beings are; maybe it's laughing at the fact that this enemy soldier ran out of time before he could find it. And if there's sadness mixed with that beauty, the enemy soldier continues, that sadness is much richer than the sadness one finds "here," in the tunnel. Beauty can't exist in Hell, it seems, and the dead soldier has lost any hope of finding the beauty he so "wildly" sought.

The enemy's soldier's speech follows the formal pattern established in the opening 14 lines of the poem. Like the speaker, the enemy soldier uses heroic couplets with slant rhyme and pararhyme. The uses three such rhymes in a row with "hair," "hour," and "here"—breaking the poem's usual pattern; it generally organizes its rhymes in couplets, two rhymes in a row.

As the enemy soldier's speech gets underway, one also notes that the poem's use of alliteration—already considerable—intensifies. Note for instance the strong /w/ sound in lines 17-18, "went," "wild," "wildest," "world." These alliterations suggests that the reader should take the enemy soldier seriously, as an eloquent speaker: someone who deserves the reader's respect.

LINES 22-25

For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

In lines 22-25, the speaker continues to describe what he's lost—and what the world has lost—because he died in battle. First, he notes, that his "glee"—or joy—might have also made other people happy. And his sorrow, "his weeping," might have left "something" good and useful behind, "something" that has died with him. At first, the enemy soldier doesn't fully explain what this "something" might be, but in lines 24-25 he specifies what it is: "the truth untold / The pity of war, the pity war distilled."

These lines are really important to the poem. Here the enemy soldier tells the reader what he learned as a soldier, and what he wants to communicate to the world about war. The "untold truth" is that war isn't heroic or glorious: it's a "pity." In fact, war "distill[s]" this pity, reduces it to its essence, so that it is as powerful and intense as possible. The parallel construction of this line on either side of its caesura, plus the repetition of the word "pity" (an instance of diacope), reinforces the intensity of that pity by forcing the reader to read it twice.

This truth about war is all the more important since it is "untold": it's something that people don't know and need to learn—yet which they won't be able to learn because the soldier has taken that truth with him to his grave.

Although these lines are strongly end-stopped, a strong assonant /ee/ sound, beginning in line 21, binds them together:

> And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
> For by my glee might many men have laughed,
> And of my weeping something had been left,
> Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
> The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

The poem remains intensely musical and literary. This reflects the gravity of the subject matter, and also subtly suggests that the reader should respect the enemy soldier.

LINES 26-29

> *Now men will go content with what we spoiled.*
> *Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.*
> *They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.*
> *None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.*

In lines 22-5, the enemy soldier grieves his own death: because he died in battle, he will be unable to tell the world how horrible war really is. In lines 26-29, he outlines the disastrous consequences of this fact. Because he died in battle, "men will go content with what we spoiled." In other words, other people will be happy with the war: they'll think it was right or justified. Or—perhaps worse—they'll be angry about his death and use it as a justification for further violence and further death: they will be "discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled."

The enemy soldier focuses on this second option, imagining it in detail. In line 28, he notes that the "men" who use his death (likely meant to represent the defeat of his army in general) as a justification for violence will be "swift with the swiftness of tigress." In other words, they will be as ferocious and fast as a female tiger. The men will lose some of their humanity; they will become like violent animals instinctually protecting one of their own. This subtly underscores the tribal, animalistic mentality that undergirds war—the "us" vs. "them" dynamic that ignores the fact that soldiers on both sides of the battle are human beings. The repetition of the word "swift"—another instance of diacope, in a poem full of it—emphasizes this dehumanization. It's as though they have been reduced to a single characteristic: speed.

In line 29, the enemy soldier outlines another negative consequence that follows from taking his death as a justification for further violence: "None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress." Even though the violence of war is unjust and drags countries backward, away from progress, the need for revenge will prevent anyone from objecting. No one will dare speak up, suggesting that violence enforces conformity; it diminishes people's capacity to protest their nations' actions.

The speaker's argument in line 29 is reinforced by the consonant /n/, /r/, /s/, and /k/ sounds that bind the line together:

> None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.

The /n/ sound in "none" and the /r/ and /k/ sounds in "break" both appear in "ranks." The sounds wrap around each other, knotting together. The sounds model the unbreakable conformity that violence creates: even the sounds in the poem are unable to break ranks. The poem thus continues to use sound to mark its own literary sophistication.

LINES 30-33

> *Courage was mine, and I had mystery;*
> *Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:*
> *To miss the march of this retreating world*
> *Into vain citadels that are not walled.*

In lines 30-33, the enemy soldier once again mourns what he has lost—really, what was taken from him—when he was killed in battle. However, the things that he mourns have changed. In lines 16-21, he mourned the loss of hope and his failed attempt to hunt "the wildest beauty in the world." These were, in a sense, universal aspirations: as the enemy soldier notes in lines 16-17, "Whatever hope is yours, / Was my life also." He sought what everyone seeks, whatever side of the war they find themselves on.

In lines 30-31, however, he focuses on more personal things: special characteristics that he possessed, namely "courage" and "wisdom," "mystery," and "mastery." These lines might seem strange and difficult to understand at first—and, indeed, they are a little bit ambiguous and mysterious. Paying attention to the grammar of the lines can help unfold them.

They both have the same grammatical structure (which makes them an instance of parallelism): in the first part of the line the speaker says that something "was mine." Then there's a caesura, after which the enemy soldier adds another thing that he had, "mystery" or "mastery." Because of the way the lines are put together, there seems to be a cause and effect relationship between the first part of the line and the second. In other words, it's as though the speaker is saying "*Because* courage

was mine, I had mystery," and "*Because* wisdom was mine, I had mastery." In other words, the speaker's wisdom makes him masterful; and his courage is somehow mysterious, inexplicable.

The next two lines are also a little confusing—at least first. Because the enemy soldier was wise and courageous he was able to "miss the march of this retreating world." In other words, he was smart enough to object when the world started heading backward. (The enjambment across lines 32-33 emphasizes this backsliding—one feels the bottom dropping when one gets to the end of line 32 and doesn't find an end-stop, like usual). Unlike the men in line 29, he did "break ranks," he did object to the war. Alternatively, maybe he is saying he was smart to die, because in death he doesn't have to witness the world going backward.

Then, in line 33, the enemy soldier adds a key caveat. The world isn't simply "retreating." It's marching back to a specific place, "vain citadels that are not walled." Citadels are fortified towns or castles. A citadel without walls is thus pointless—or, as the speaker says, "vain." Without walls, a fortress doesn't fortify much of anything. The enemy's soldier's argument is that the world's retreat, its slide into war and violence, is itself indefensible—as vain as a citadel without walls. Or perhaps the soldiers are attempting to siege a useless fortress—suggesting that they're fighting for nothing.

Once the reader puts together all four of these lines, things begin to be a bit clearer. The enemy soldier is courageous and wise, he has mystery and mastery. But he doesn't use that courage and wisdom in the way that one might expect a soldier would, outwitting the enemy on the battlefield. Instead, he uses his courage and wisdom to object to the backsliding of the world around him, to protest violence and war itself. He thus implies that it's hard to resist: that objecting to the course of an entire nation requires not only intelligence but also bravery.

These lines follow the poem's general formal pattern: they are in rhyming iambic pentameter couplets. As in the rest of the poem, the rhymes here are slant rhymes/pararhymes. The form continues on, in all its skewed glory.

LINES 34-36

Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.

In lines 34-39, the enemy soldier fantasizes about how he would've repaired the damage that violence and war have done—if he had lived long enough to do so. As he launches into this fantasy, his speech becomes highly symbolic, even dream-like, full of strange, ambiguous images. But the overall message remains clear: the enemy soldier believes that he can repair the wounds of war, that he has the resources within him to do so. This makes his premature death all the more shocking and sad.

His fantasy begins, in line 34, with the damage of war itself. He imagines "chariot-wheels" "clogged" with "much blood." A chariot is a piece of ancient military equipment: a platform pulled by horses on which an archer or spearman would stand. Since the rest of the poem describes a modern war, with "guns" pounding the battlefield, it's safe to assume that the "chariot-wheels" are symbolic of the tools people use in war. Similarly, the "blood" that clogs their wheels symbolizes the destruction those instruments cause.

When, in the next line, the speaker fantasizes about washing the blood from the wheels with water from "sweet wells," he is imagining that he can repair the damage that the chariots have caused. And the water he imagines using isn't literal water: instead, as he notes in 36, it is really made up of pure "truths," truths that cannot be diluted or "taint[ed]." Here, the enemy soldier's speech comes full circle. In lines 24-25, he complained that he couldn't tell people the "truth untold" about the "pity of war." Here he imagines what such truths might do: they would heal the damage that war has done, and possibly prevent future violence.

Despite the beauty and tenderness of the enemy soldier's fantasy, the poem continues to work in a damaged form. These lines are written rhyming iambic pentameter couplets with pararhyme. Elsewhere in the poem, these failed rhymes suggest that the poem itself has been damaged by the trauma of battle. That trauma pursues the enemy soldier; even as he imagines a beautiful and tender alternative to that violence, his lines continue to bear the scars of the violence he's seen.

LINES 37-39

I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.

In lines 37-39, the enemy soldier continues to fantasize about healing the wounds that war creates. In lines 34-6, he has imagined washing the blood away from the wheels of a chariot with "deep" "truths." This is already a touching and beautiful image. But in lines 37-39, he goes even further. He offers to use his own "spirit," letting it pour out "without stint." In other words, he offers his very essence, his soul; he would willingly give all of it to help repair the damage that war has done. But, he specifies in line 38, he could does so without "wounds"—that is, without hurting anyone. He draws a line at ever again engaging in the "cess of war." Cess sounds like cesspool, a.k.a. a sewer, and thus presents war as a disgusting place—the one place into which the dead soldier won't pour his spirit. Cess might also refer to a tax, which would suggest the metaphorical cost of war.

The final line in this stanza shouldn't be taken literally. These men's foreheads aren't actually bleeding; instead, this blood represents trauma and pain. Perhaps the soldier is referring to the mental trauma of war, something with which Owen himself

was intimately familiar. Basically, the dead soldier is saying that if he were still alive, he would do everything in his power to stop all this violence, except for fighting in war—which "wounds" people both physically and mentally.

LINES 40-44

> *"I am the enemy you killed, my friend.*
> *I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned*
> *Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.*
> *I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.*
> *Let us sleep now. . . ."*

In the final five lines of "Strange Meeting," the enemy soldier offers a shocking revelation. For the past 30 odd lines he has been addressing the poem's speaker, talking about the brutality of war as well as his own squandered dreams. Here, he reveals that he *knows* the poem's speaker already: they met "yesterday" on the battlefield, when the speaker killed him. He recognizes the speaker because the speaker "frowned" when he first saw the dead soldier in the tunnel in the same way he had frowned when he stabbed the dead soldier on the battlefield. Though the enemy soldier tried to repel the blow, he was unable to do so because his hands were too slow.

These lines mark the climax of the poem, and they come as a major surprise. After all, the speaker and the enemy soldier have been getting along just fine until this moment. There's no sign that they might be at odds—indeed, the enemy soldier seems to bless his killer in line 8!

The tension of their relationship comes out most clearly in line 40, where the enemy soldier says: "I am the enemy you killed, my friend." One might wonder how they can be both enemies and friends at the same time. The enemy soldier implies that he and the speaker *could* be friends—*should* be friends—but war has divided them. The caesura in line 40 emphasizes this division, splitting "friend" and "enemy." The poem thus suggests that people are not naturally or fundamentally at odds with each other: wars break up the natural fellowship and solidarity that should exist between people.

These lines continue the formal pattern of the rest of the poem: they are in heroic couplets, rhyming lines iambic pentameter. The rhymes remain rough here: "friend" and "frowned" is a pararhyme, for instance.

The poem's final line, however, breaks from the rest of the poem in terms of form. Instead of a line of iambic pentameter, it's a line of iambic dimeter. It does not have a rhyme pair. It ends with an ellipsis, suggesting that the enemy soldier simply trails off, returns to the deep sleep that the speaker found him in. This is a sad moment: the enemy soldier has been so full of anger, energy, and hope: all that energy simply diffuses, falls away, in this moment. In response to the violence, trauma, and injustice he has suffered he is unable to do anything but "sleep."

Alternatively, it's possible to read this sleep as symbolic of peace—that the dead soldier has forgiven the speaker, his killer, and is inviting him to finally rest, to leave the mortal world of violence and suffering behind for good.

SYMBOLS

THE TUNNEL

"Strange Meeting" is set in a deep, dark tunnel where dead soldiers gather after their souls have left the battlefield. As the speaker eventually realizes, this tunnel is not a literal place: instead, it's "Hell." In the Christian tradition, Hell is a place that God creates to punish and torment sinners; the punishment is carried out by a crew of fallen angels. However, the "Hell" that the speaker describes in "Strange Meeting" doesn't share much with the usual Christian images.

In the speaker's account, God didn't create the "tunnel": instead, "titanic wars" cut it through the bedrock. And there are no demons administering punishment. Instead of being tortured, the speaker simply has a conversation with another soldier—an enemy soldier that he, himself, killed the previous day in battle. If there is punishment in the poem, this is it: the speaker has to confront the consequences of his actions, has to recognize the humanity he shares with the enemy soldier.

In this sense, the tunnel is best understood as a complex, ambiguous symbol. On the one hand, it is a symbol for the consequences of human violence: it shows how war damages the landscape and the people who fight it, cutting them off from their fellow human beings. On the other hand, it is also a place of reconciliation: where the soldiers have a chance to confront each other, to share their frustrations over the war, and to recognize their shared humanity. In this sense, it is also a symbol of reconciliation—albeit a very weak one. Only in "Hell" itself, after cataclysmic violence, does the reconciliation the poem describes become possible. This, in turn, reflects just how horrific war must be—if the only space for any semblance of peace is in Hell.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "tunnel"

BLOOD

In lines 12-13, the speaker describes the "profound dull tunnel" into which he has escaped as a protected, sheltered space. He notes, for instance, that down in the tunnel he can't hear the pounding artillery of the war going on above: "no guns thumped." And he also notes that "no blood reached there from the upper ground." In this line, the blood serves as a symbol for the violence of the war above.

This is a traditional symbol. For instance, people often refer to

violence as "shedding blood." Because the "blood" in the line is symbolic, it changes the meaning of the line. The speaker is not saying—or not only saying—that none of the blood from the battlefield seeps through the earth and into the tunnel. He is also saying that the tunnel itself is a space free from the violence that defines the battle going on above. Although the tunnel is "Hell," it is also a place of peace: it serves as a respite and relief from the violence that brought the speaker and his enemy there.

The symbol returns in line 34, where the enemy soldier imagines repairing the damage done by war. He begins by portraying that violence, describing "chariot-wheels" "clogged" with "much blood." The chariot wheels here symbolize the machines and equipment with which wars are fought; the "blood" that clogs them up symbolizes the violence and killing that they're used for. In both cases, then, blood symbolizes the violence of war.

The symbol appears one last time in the poem, in line 39, where the enemy soldier claims, "Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were." This doesn't mean that these men's heads are literally bleeding. Instead, the blood here is a symbol of their mental anguish—of the psychological trauma that war inflicts on those who fight.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "blood"
- **Line 34:** "blood"
- **Line 39:** "bled"

CITADELS

The enemy soldier notes that the "world" is "retreating" in line 32, and in line 33, he specifies where they are heading: "into vain citadels that are not walled." Citadels are fortified towns or large castles. The line contains a paradox, since a citadel without walls isn't much of a citadel. Indeed, the enemy soldier admits as much, calling the citadels "vain"—that is, useless. War is pushing the world backwards into these useless citadels—in other words, people are fighting for nothing.

More broadly—since the citadels are fortress, since they symbolize defensive architecture—the enemy's soldier's point may be the world's retreat, its slide into war and violence, is itself indefensible. In that case, the "citadels" symbolize the arguments that people make to support the war—the patriotic poems and songs that drum up support for it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 33:** "citadels"

CHARIOT-WHEELS

In the final lines of the enemy soldier's long speech, he drifts into a kind of visionary fantasy. He imagines that he will intervene and repair the damage that war has caused. He begins this fantasy in lines 34-5 by imagining that he will "wash" the "blood" from the "chariot-wheels." A chariot is an ancient military technology: a carriage pulled by horses, which allowed its driver to use a bow and arrow or a spear to attack other soldiers. It is thus somewhat out of place in the poem. Though the poem never specifies what war the speaker and his enemy fought in, it seems significantly more modern, with artillery pounding the battlefields. The "chariot-wheels" thus aren't literal instruments of war; instead, they symbolize the machines and tools that people use to make war. (And the "blood" that clogs their wheels symbolizes the violence and destruction that such instruments cause.) To wash the chariot's wheels, as the enemy soldier wants to do, is thus to release these instruments of war, to free them from their association with violence.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 34:** "chariot-wheels"

SWEET WELLS/WATER

As the enemy soldier describes his desire to wash the "blood" from "chariot-wheels," he tells the reader *how* he will wash them: he will use "truths that lie to deep for taint," truths that he draws up from "sweet wells." In other words, the enemy soldier is not going to literally wash the wheels (and they're not literal wheels, anyway). Instead, he is going to use truth itself to clear away the legacy of violence.

Those truths come from "sweet wells." Like almost everything in the enemy soldier's fantasy, these wells are not literal: rather they symbolize the objectivity and power of truth. The enemy soldier imagines that truth comes from some place deep in the earth; that it is life-giving (like the water that wells usually hold); that it is without "taint"—that it hasn't been poisoned or compromised. In other words, the "sweet wells" tell the reader a lot about how the enemy soldier imagines or understands truth itself. For the enemy soldier, truth is not relative; it does not change or decay. Rather, it is something that endures—and that is so powerful it can erase the effects of violence.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 35:** "sweet wells"

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

"Strange Meeting" is a strongly end-stopped poem. For one thing, this means that enjambment feels like a disturbance when it pops up, a break in the poem's order. It also creates a sense of deliberate pacing. Most of its lines are self-contained. This isn't a poem that rushes along with lines falling all over each other; instead, it seems controlled, slow, and methodical—which notably contrasts with the violence of its subject matter.

Perhaps this reflects the (rather ironic) peace and quiet that the speaker finds in Hell, where none of the above violence and chaos can reach. There is no need to rush headlong into battle here, and the poem's many end-stops thus support the dead soldier's calm, collected authority. The "truth" he has to tell the world isn't something derived from a fit of passion or rage, but rather an objective realization he has come to after leaving the violence of the battlefield behind.

More subtly, the poem's heavy use on end-stop as part of its resistance to its own form. To understand why, it's important to note that "Strange Meeting" is written in heroic couplets—a form that uses rhyming lines of iambic pentameter. Poems written in heroic couplets often fall into a regular pattern of enjambment and end-stop: the first line of each couplet is enjambed, the second end-stopped. The first rhyme is incomplete, unfinished; the second rhyme closes off a sentence or grammatical unit.

But in "Strange Meeting" this isn't what happens. Instead, each line is often its own sentence, as in lines 11-12:

> With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;
> Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground.

Although the lines sort of rhyme with each other (in fact, they are pararhymes), they are each discrete, separate units: complete sentences that end with an end-stop. Where a rhyme would usually connect two things or ideas, here it emphasizes the separation between the two lines: though he has escaped from the battle, the enemy soldier's face remains "grained": he has not recovered. The strong feeling of separation that the end-stopped lines create underlines the poem's argument: that violence isolates and divides people who might otherwise be friends.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "groined."
- **Line 4:** "groaned,"
- **Line 5:** "bestirred."
- **Line 7:** "eyes,"
- **Line 8:** "bless."
- **Line 9:** "hall,—"
- **Line 10:** "Hell."
- **Line 11:** "grained;"
- **Line 12:** "ground,"
- **Line 13:** "moan."
- **Line 14:** "mourn.""
- **Line 15:** "years,"
- **Line 18:** "world,"
- **Line 19:** "hair,"
- **Line 20:** "hour,"
- **Line 21:** "here."
- **Line 22:** "laughed,"
- **Line 23:** "left,"
- **Line 24:** "untold,"
- **Line 25:** "distilled."
- **Line 26:** "spoiled."
- **Line 27:** "spilled."
- **Line 28:** "tigress."
- **Line 29:** "progress."
- **Line 30:** "mystery;"
- **Line 31:** "mastery:"
- **Line 33:** "walled."
- **Line 35:** "wells,"
- **Line 36:** "taint."
- **Line 38:** "war."
- **Line 39:** "were."
- **Line 40:** "friend."
- **Line 42:** "killed."
- **Line 43:** "cold."
- **Line 44:** "now. . . ""

ENJAMBMENT

"Strange Meeting" does not use enjambment often. As a result, the enjambments that do appear in the poem feel disruptive. Once the poem gets going, they interrupt its flow.

However, it takes a little bit for the poem to establish this pattern. It opens with two enjambed lines, in fact, which give the reader a sense of motion: one feels the velocity of the speaker's escape from battle, his descent into the "profound dull tunnel."

Once the speaker is in the tunnel, however, the lines slow; they become grammatically and conceptually separate from each other. Now, when enjambments occur, they often serve to register surprising ideas or unexpected circumstances. For instance, the enjambment at the end of line 6, "Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared / With piteous recognition…" registers the speaker's astonishment: he's been poking all these dead people and one of them suddenly woke up!

Similarly, the enjambment in line 16-17 indexes the surprising

similarity between the two soldiers: "Whatever hope is yours, / Was my life also." In other words, the poem is very careful in the way that it uses enjambment. Since enjambment feels disruptive in this poem, the poem reserves it for disruptive moments—when the speaker's (and the reader's) expectations and prejudices are challenged or disturbed.

However, the enjambment at the end of line 34 works a little bit differently. The speaker is describing how the machines and tools that people use to make war—"chariot-wheels"—are so destructive that they end-up "clogged" with "much blood." And the speaker is also outlining a fantasy that he might be able to heal the wounds that such machines cause, by washing them with "deep" "truths." The enjambment at the end of line 34 is important to this fantasy: it does not allow the violence of the "chariot-wheels" to be the end of the story, to be complete in itself. Running the sentence into the next line, the enemy soldier suggests that violence is part of a larger story that might include healing and repair.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "escaped / Down"
- **Lines 2-3:** "scooped / Through"
- **Lines 6-7:** "stared / With"
- **Lines 16-17:** "yours, / Was"
- **Lines 17-18:** "wild / After"
- **Lines 32-33:** "world / Into"
- **Lines 34-35:** "wheels, / I"
- **Lines 37-38:** "stint / But"
- **Lines 41-42:** "frowned / Yesterday"

CAESURA

"Strange Meeting" contains a large number of caesuras. Not all of them are particularly noteworthy or interesting, but the poem does often use caesura in striking ways, emphasizing moments of opposition between ideas and people.

For example, line 40—arguably the key line of the poem—contains a caesura, which separates the final two words of the line from the rest of it: "I am the enemy you killed, my friend." The line is surprising, even disorienting. One might wonder how the speaker and the enemy soldier can be both friends and enemies, and why a friend would kill a friend in battle. These paradoxes are at the core of the poem: the enemy soldier is suggesting here that he and the speaker *could* be friends—indeed, that they *should* be friends, but war has unnecessarily divided them. The caesura emphasizes this division: it cuts off "friend" and "enemy," shoving them into different parts of the line.

Elsewhere, caesura works in concert with the poem's other poetic devices, devices like parallelism. The enemy soldier often uses parallel phrases, as in lines 30-31:

> Courage was mine, and I had mystery:
> Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:

The lines are almost identical, both in the words they use, their diction, and their structure. The caesura at the center of each line helps emphasize this parallel structure, separating each part of each sentence into its own space on the line.

Similarly, in line 21 the speaker uses epizeuxis, repeating the word "grieves" in close succession: "And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here." The two instances of the word are separated by a caesura. The caesura emphasizes the distinction between the two halves of the sentence, the difference between the way "the wildest beauty in the world" grieves "here" and how it might grieve elsewhere. In this sense, the poem's many caesuras often act to underline the distinctions and oppositions that the poem draws. And in doing so, they encourage the reader to imagine how—and whether—things might be different: if, for instance, the difference between "enemy" and "friend" might be overcome.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** ", "
- **Line 6:** ", ", ", ", "
- **Line 8:** ", "
- **Line 9:** ", "
- **Line 13:** ", "
- **Line 14:** "", ", ", "
- **Line 15:** "", ", ", "
- **Line 16:** ". "
- **Line 17:** "; "
- **Line 19:** ", "
- **Line 21:** ", "
- **Line 24:** ". "
- **Line 25:** ", "
- **Line 27:** ", ", ", "
- **Line 29:** ", "
- **Line 30:** ", "
- **Line 31:** ", "
- **Line 34:** ", "
- **Line 38:** "; "
- **Line 40:** ", "
- **Line 41:** ": "
- **Line 43:** "; "

SIMILE

"Strange Meeting" contains a single simile. It appears in the poem's second stanza, just after the speaker wakes up the enemy soldier (by poking him). The enemy soldier lifts up his hands, "as if to bless." The gesture is tender and sweet: at this point in the poem, the reader might imagine that the speaker and the person he wakes up know each other, are friends. This tender sweetness sets up the surprising revelation in the

poem's final lines: not only are they *not* friends, the speaker actually killed the enemy soldier in battle.

The simile underlines this tenderness, and in doing so, it amplifies the irony—and the surprise—of the poem's ending. The speaker compares the enemy soldier's gesture to a blessing. In Christian religious rituals, a priest blesses an individual or a group by raising his hands and making the sign of the cross. This blessing restores that individual or group to the good grace of the Church; it has the effect of reversing the damage they've done to their souls by sinning.

It is surprising, of course, to see such a gesture in "Hell"—the last place one would expect to find a Christian ritual. And it is even more surprising for an enemy soldier to offer such a blessing to the man who killed him in battle: it is a gesture of *absolution*, or forgiveness, that washes away the sin of killing. The simile suggests that the enemy soldier is ready, from the first, to forgive the speaker—and to establish a new, less violent relationship between himself and the speaker.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "as if to bless"

PARALLELISM

Both the speaker of "Strange Meeting" and the enemy soldier he meets in "Hell" use parallelism in striking ways. This device helps give the poem its highly literary feel. Parallelism is the kind of poetic device that doesn't usually appear in everyday speech; instead it reflects a good deal of effort and control on the part of the poet, sculpting and shaping the poem's language. For instance, lines 9 and 10 have the same grammatical structure and offer, more or less, the same information:

> And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—
> By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

Here, the parallel construction seems designed to simply delay revealing a key piece of information—that the "profound dull tunnel" where the poem is set is in fact "Hell." The parallel construction slows things down, it builds suspense and anticipation. In this instance, the speaker uses parallelism for rhetorical reasons: to shape the reader's experience of the poem.

Elsewhere, it does more complicated and significant work, underlining the poem's argument. For instance lines 30 and 31 have identical grammatical structures; only a few words change between each line:

> Courage was mine, and I had mystery;
> Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:

The parallel structure has a paradoxical effect: instead of highlighting the parts of the poem that are the same, it emphasizes the differences between the two sentences. The parallelism leads the reader to think carefully about the relationship between "courage" and "mystery," "wisdom" and mastery," asking why courage leads to mystery and wisdom to mastery. The lines themselves are mysterious and opaque: the parallelism heightens the mystery.

Although not technically parallelism, the construction of line 25 (which also employs diacope) works in a similar way. It emphasizes the differences between the two parts of the line: "The pity of war, the pity war distilled." On a first read, one might not even notice the key difference between the two halves of the line: the word "of" disappears. The two parts of the line are *that* similar, that parallel. But it makes a difference. In the second half of the line ("the pity war distilled") "war" is the subject of the verb "distilled." In other words, war itself does the distilling here: it has a kind of power and agency in the line. War shows, on its own accord, how awful war is.

Parallelism thus helps to set the poem's literary tone. It guides the reader through the poem, emphasizing key moments and ideas, building the poem's mystery and underlining its critique of war.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,— / By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell."
- **Line 25:** "The pity of war, the pity war distilled."
- **Lines 30-31:** "Courage was mine, and I had mystery; / Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:"

DIACOPE

"Strange Meeting" uses diacope a lot, especially in the enemy soldier's speech. From the start of the enemy's speech, he repeats key words and phrases, calling the reader's attention to the differences between these various uses.

Sometimes these differences are obvious, as in lines 15-16:

> "None," said that other, "save the undone years,
> The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
> Was my life also."

Here there's a clear opposition between "hope" and "hopelessness" (which also makes use of polyptoton). This opposition helps to underline the cost of war: both soldiers started out full of hope, but fighting in the war drained them, cutting off their reservoirs of energy and optimism.

The enemy soldier uses diacope in a similar way in lines 26-7, playing on the words "content" and "discontent":

> Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
> Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.

Either people will be happy with the sacrifices the two soldiers made, or they will use their deaths as an excuse to indulge in more violence. The use of diacope here (as well as polyptoton) suggests that it doesn't make much of a difference to the enemy soldier which option people choose. Even though they mean opposite things, "content" and "discontent" share the same root. That similarity encourages the reader to reflect on the underlying continuities between the two scenarios the enemy soldier lays out. Indeed, for the enemy soldier, both content and discontent are bad. Both options betray the soldiers since they fail to reckon with the true horror of war.

Other instances, such as the repetition of "smile" in lines 9 and 10, or "mine" in lines 30 and 31, play into the poem's use of parallelism. These moments encourage the reader to consider the similarities and differences between parallel phrases by watching how the repeated word transforms. For instance, "his smile" in line 9 becomes "his dead smile" in line 10, mirroring the speaker's discovery that this "hall" is actually "Hell"—that the speaker is surrounded by the dead.

In each of these instances of diacope, the poem plays on the repetition of words in order to highlight important oppositions and transformations.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "smile"
- **Line 10:** "smile"
- **Line 16:** "hopelessness," "hope"
- **Line 17:** "wild"
- **Line 18:** "wildest"
- **Line 25:** "pity," "war," "pity," "war"
- **Line 26:** "content"
- **Line 27:** "discontent"
- **Line 28:** "swift," "swiftness"
- **Line 30:** "mine"
- **Line 31:** "mine,"

APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe is at the very heart of "Strange Meeting." After all, the device involves addressing someone or something absent, inanimate, or dead, and both the speaker and the enemy soldier that he meets in "Hell" are dead. As a result, the entire center section of the poem where the speaker and the enemy soldier address each other can be described as apostrophe.

Such a classification is slightly unconventional, however. In most poems that use apostrophe, the dynamics are a little different: someone living addresses someone dead. The dead don't speak to or among themselves. However, the poem does follow the basic impulse behind apostrophe: it addresses someone who would not normally be able to respond. Of course, here that person (the dead soldier) does respond, so that this case of apostrophe can also be thought of as a dialogue. In this sense, the poem stretches the boundaries of the device.

"Strange Meeting" may not look particularly innovative—it is, after all, a poem in iambic pentameter, one of the oldest and most prestigious meters in the English language. But in using apostrophe in the way that it does, it pushes the limits of poetry (and the language scholars have to describe poems)—subtly calling into question the usefulness of those traditions for describing the horrors of war.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 14-44

PERSONIFICATION

In lines 17-21, the poem personifies "beauty" as something that "mocks"—or makes fun of, laughs at—the passage of time. Of course, "beauty" cannot really mock anything; here, the dead soldier is essentially saying that the wild beauty he sought wasn't beholden to the passage of time. In a sense, then, the personification actually makes beauty seem somewhat *less* human: human beings *are* subject to the "running of the hour," but this beauty is not. Maybe this is the soldier's way of saying that people will never be able to access this wild beauty (whatever it really refers to); human beings will always run out of time. It's worth noting that time is arguably personified here too, since it cannot actually "run"; the figurative language emphasizes how fast time is moving.

Later, in lines 27-29, the poem compares humans and tigers, flattening the difference between the two. This comparison personifies tigers and dehumanizes people. First, the enemy soldier announces his greatest fear—that his death in battle will lead to further violence. Instead of reconsidering the wisdom of warfare, "men" will become more committed to violence, unwilling to "break ranks" even if what their countries do is wrong. Further, the enemy soldier suggests, this commitment to violence will dehumanize the people who perpetuate it. In line 28, he worries that they will "be swift with swiftness of the tigress." In other words, they will become as ferocious and as fast as a female tiger hunting her prey. This is an example of personification in reverse: the "men" lose their human characteristics and become like animals.

At the same time, however, this line also personifies the tigress. The enemy soldier speaks as though there's no difference between a soldier's violence and a tiger's violence, even though there seems to be. After all, soldiers go to war to defend their countries and accomplish political objectives; tigers hunt in order to eat. Comparing men to tigers, the enemy soldier flattens these differences and imposes the characteristics of human violence onto the tigress. In this way, the enemy soldier both personifies the tigress and strips the men of their humanity. He seems to say that all violence is the same.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-21:** "I went hunting wild / After the wildest beauty in the world, / Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair, / But mocks the steady running of the hour, / And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here."
- **Line 28:** "tigress"

SYNECDOCHE

"Strange Meeting" uses synecdoche in small moments throughout the poem. In the first line, the speaker claims that he "escaped" from "battle." On one level, this might be a literal claim. However, as the poem progresses, it becomes clear that "battle" is merely *part* of what the speaker has escaped. He has also escaped from war and violence more generally, entering into a space where it is possible to be friends with an enemy soldier—a soldier he killed just the day before. As such, it's possible to consider this first line to contain synecdoche, with "battle" standing in for war or violence in general.

There's a parallel to this synecdoche in line 12, where the speaker notes that "no blood" "from the upper ground" reaches the tunnel. He's not talking (or not *just* talking) about real blood; he also uses the blood to represent violence more generally. The "guns" in the next line work in a similar way: they refer to real guns, but also to the noise and chaos of battle at large.

The enemy soldier also regularly uses synecdoche. In line 19, for instance, he uses the phrase "calm in eyes, or braided hair" to represent feminine beauty. In the next line, he announces that wild beauty "mocks the steady running of the hour." Here, "hour" represents time itself. In other words, the "wildest beauty in the world" is unaffected by the passage of time. The enemy soldier also makes reference to violence in line 34: the "chariot-wheels" refer to chariots, and more generally to instruments of war.

All these synecdoches reflect the literary elegance of the people who speak in the poem. These synecdoches are also somewhat expected: using "hours" to represent time itself is an old trope, almost a cliché. So is representing women through their hair—that trope goes all the way back to the Italian Renaissance. So, even though the poem subtly criticizes literary tradition for the way it fails to represent the realities of war (we talk more about this in Rhyme Scheme), it also draws on that tradition to emphasize its own grandeur and seriousness.

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "battle"
- **Line 12:** "blood"
- **Line 13:** "guns"
- **Line 19:** "calm in eyes, or braided hair"
- **Line 20:** "hour"
- **Line 34:** "chariot-wheels"

ALLITERATION

"Strange Meeting" is a strongly alliterative poem, particularly in its third stanza, the stanza that contains most of the enemy soldier's speech. Indeed, as the poem progresses, the amount of alliteration increases. There are some notable alliterations in the first stanza—like "granites" and "groined" in line 3. But those alliterations are relatively isolated, sparing, and judicious.

Once the enemy soldier starts speaking in line 14, the poem's use of alliteration becomes less restrained. Note, for instance, the strong /w/ sound in lines 17-18, "went," "wild," "wildest," "world," or the /m/ sound in line 22, "my," "might," "many," "men." Why does alliteration pick up in the third stanza? One reason is that, although the whole poem is literary and ornate, the enemy soldier's speech is its centerpiece, a passionate declaration that draws on all the techniques in the poetic bag of tricks.

This eloquence underlines the poem's broader argument: the enemy soldier isn't savage, barbaric, or inhuman. Instead, he's capable of eloquence; his language is beautiful and refined. All the alliteration in these lines serves to underline a simple point: that the enemy soldier is not only human, but worthy of respect.

In the fourth stanza, alliteration dies down again. Whereas the third stanza depicts the soldier's eloquence, the fourth stanza contains a more plainspoken tone. The soldier drops his literary pretensions and talks intimately with the poem's speaker. Here, *lack of* alliteration draws attention to the soldier's voice, now making him seem more human through the poem's unaffected sounds.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "D," "s," "d," "s," "s"
- **Line 3:** "gr," "gr"
- **Line 5:** "T," "t," "b," "b"
- **Line 6:** "s," "s"
- **Line 9:** "h," "s," "s," "h"
- **Line 10:** "h," "s," "st," "H"
- **Line 11:** "th," "f," "th," "f"
- **Line 12:** "th," "th"
- **Line 13:** "m," "m"
- **Line 15:** "s," "s"
- **Line 16:** "h," "W," "h"
- **Line 17:** "W," "w," "w"
- **Line 18:** "w," "w"
- **Line 21:** "gr," "gr"
- **Line 22:** "m," "m," "m," "m"
- **Line 24:** "m," "m"
- **Line 25:** "p," "w," "p," "w"
- **Line 26:** "w," "w," "w"
- **Line 27:** "b," "b," "b"
- **Line 28:** "w," "sw," "w," "sw"
- **Line 29:** "N," "n"

- **Line 30:** "m," "m"
- **Line 31:** "m," "m"
- **Line 32:** "m," "m"
- **Line 34:** "wh," "wh"
- **Line 35:** "w," "w," "w"
- **Line 36:** "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 37:** "w," "s," "w," "s"
- **Line 38:** "n," "w," "n," "w"
- **Line 39:** "wh," "w," "w"
- **Line 41:** "f," "y," "f"
- **Line 42:** "Y"

ASSONANCE

"Strange Meeting" is a very musical poem. Its vision of "Hell" and war is full of alliteration, assonance, and consonance. This is perhaps surprising, given its subject matter: one might expect that a poem about the horrors of war would be less fluid and musical. But the use of these devices suggests the poem wants to feel literary even as it critiques literary traditions. Furthermore, such devices insist that both the speaker and the enemy soldier are eloquent and dignified, worthy of respect.

The enemy soldier's speech, which occupies most of stanza 3 and all of stanza 4, is particularly rich with assonance. For instance, beginning in line 21, the enemy soldier uses an assonant long /e/ sound that runs through several lines:

> And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
> For by my glee might many men have laughed,
> And of my weeping something had been left,
> Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
> The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

This sound binds the lines together. This is particularly important, since all of these lines are end-stopped. The end-stops cause the lines to feel separate from each other. But the assonant sounds help to connect the lines, keeping the poem moving across the end-stops.

The assonance also binds together surprising ideas: "glee" and "grief," for example. Because these words share the same sounds, the reader is encouraged to think about the possible connections between them—even though they seem like opposites. And they do share a connection: they are both rich emotions, emotions that the enemy soldier might have explored in depth if his life hadn't been cut short by war.

The connection between the words suggests that the enemy soldier is less concerned with whether he would've been happy or sad, and more concerned with the fact that he has lost the opportunity to feel the full range of human emotions. In this way, assonance emphasizes both the poem's and the enemy soldier's aspirations: to engage with the full range of human possibility—to be literary.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "a," "a"
- **Line 2:** "o," "ou," "u," "u," "oo"
- **Line 3:** "ou," "a," "i," "i," "a," "i," "a"
- **Line 5:** "e," "e"
- **Line 6:** "e," "e," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 7:** "i," "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 8:** "i," "i"
- **Line 9:** "y," "i," "I"
- **Line 10:** "y," "i," "I"
- **Line 11:** "a," "ai"
- **Line 13:** "u," "u," "a"
- **Line 14:** "a," "ie," "ai"
- **Line 15:** "o," "o," "u," "o"
- **Line 16:** "o," "e," "e," "o"
- **Line 17:** "y," "i," "I," "i"
- **Line 18:** "i"
- **Line 19:** "ie," "eye"
- **Line 21:** "ie," "ie," "i," "e"
- **Line 22:** "y," "y," "ee," "i," "y"
- **Line 23:** "ee," "i"
- **Line 24:** "ie," "I"
- **Line 25:** "i," "y," "a," "i," "y," "a," "i," "i"
- **Line 26:** "e," "i," "e," "i"
- **Line 28:** "i," "i," "i," "e," "e"
- **Line 29:** "ea," "a," "a"
- **Line 30:** "i," "I"
- **Line 31:** "i," "I"
- **Line 32:** "i," "i," "e," "ea"
- **Line 34:** "e," "e," "u," "oo"
- **Line 35:** "ee"
- **Line 36:** "E," "u," "oo," "ee"
- **Line 37:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 38:** "ou," "ou," "e"
- **Line 39:** "ea," "e," "e"
- **Line 41:** "ew," "ou," "ou"
- **Line 43:** "oa," "o"

CONSONANCE

Just as "Strange Meeting" makes extensive use of alliteration and assonance, it does so with consonance as well. This gives the poem a strong literary feel: at times the poem sounds sing-songy or jingly. It doesn't imitate ordinary, everyday speech. This is perhaps even more true of its use of consonance, which runs through the poem in thick bands.

For example, line 29 contains /n/, /r/, and /k/ sounds that link the line together (alongside a weaker /s/ sound):

> None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.

The sounds bind the line, and the various ideas it advances,

together. The solidity of the sounds, the way they wrap around each other forming a tight knot, emphasizes the point the enemy soldier is making. No one will disobey orders, no one will be able to break out of the knots that violence binds them with.

Given the profusion of consonance throughout the poem, it is perhaps most interesting to note the places where it relaxes slightly: most notably, in the poem's final stanza. After the dense, literary play of the rest of the poem, these lines are relatively straight-forward and unadorned. Though they contain some alliteration, assonance, consonance, these are not nearly as loud as it is elsewhere in the poem.

Paradoxically, these quieter lines are all the more notable for their lack of alliteration, assonance, and consonance. It feels like the enemy soldier speaks directly, in his own voice—rather than the heightened one of stanza 3—perhaps for the first time in the poem. Unsurprisingly, these are the most famous lines in the poem, the ones that readers tend to remember.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "t," "d," "t," "t," "tt," "d"
- **Line 2:** "D," "n," "s," "n," "d," "d," "nn," "s," "s," "d"
- **Line 3:** "r," "gr," "n," "t," "t," "t," "n," "d," "gr," "n," "d"
- **Line 4:** "l," "s," "r," "n," "r," "d," "s," "l," "r," "s," "r," "n," "d"
- **Line 5:** "T," "st," "t," "d," "t," "b," "b," "st," "d"
- **Line 6:** "s," "p," "s," "p," "p," "s"
- **Line 7:** "p," "s," "n," "n"
- **Line 8:** "L," "f," "t," "s," "t," "ss," "f," "l," "s," "f," "b," "l," "ss"
- **Line 9:** "b," "h," "s," "l," "s," "ll," "h," "ll"
- **Line 10:** "h," "d," "s," "l," "s," "d," "H," "ll"
- **Line 11:** "th," "n," "f," "s," "th," "n," "s," "f," "s," "n"
- **Line 12:** "r," "th," "r," "r," "th," "r," "r," "n," "d"
- **Line 13:** "n," "d," "n," "s," "m," "d," "n," "s," "m," "m," "n"
- **Line 14:** "r," "r," "d," "d," "r," "n," "r," "n"
- **Line 15:** "N," "n," "s," "th," "th," "r," "s," "th," "n," "n," "r"
- **Line 16:** "h," "p," "ss," "ss," "W," "r," "h," "p," "s"
- **Line 17:** "W," "s," "l," "w," "w," "ld"
- **Line 18:** "r," "w," "ld," "w," "r," "ld"
- **Line 19:** "l," "s," "l," "s," "r," "d," "d," "r"
- **Line 20:** "s," "s," "r," "r"
- **Line 21:** "gr," "gr," "r," "l," "r," "r"
- **Line 22:** "m," "l," "m," "m," "n," "m," "n," "l"
- **Line 23:** "m," "ng," "m," "ng"
- **Line 24:** "m," "n," "m," "n," "t," "n," "t"
- **Line 25:** "p," "t," "w," "r," "p," "t," "w," "r," "t"
- **Line 26:** "n," "w," "ll," "n," "t," "n," "t," "w," "t," "w," "l," "d"
- **Line 27:** "d," "n," "t," "n," "t," "b," "l," "b," "l," "d," "n," "b," "ll," "d"
- **Line 28:** "w," "b," "sw," "w," "sw," "ss," "ss"
- **Line 29:** "N," "n," "r," "k," "r," "k," "s," "n," "n," "s," "r," "k," "r," "r," "ss"
- **Line 30:** "r," "m," "n," "n," "d," "d," "m," "r"
- **Line 31:** "W," "s," "m," "s," "m," "n," "n," "d," "d," "m"
- **Line 32:** "m," "ss," "th," "m," "r," "th," "s," "r," "t," "r," "t," "r"
- **Line 33:** "n," "t," "n," "t," "l," "th," "t," "n," "t," "ll"
- **Line 34:** "Th," "wh," "l," "d," "d," "l," "d," "th," "wh," "l"
- **Line 35:** "w," "w," "m," "w," "w"
- **Line 36:** "th," "t," "th," "th," "t," "t," "p," "t," "t"
- **Line 37:** "w," "p," "r," "s," "p," "r," "t," "w," "s," "t"
- **Line 38:** "t," "n," "t," "w," "n," "t," "n," "w"
- **Line 39:** "r," "d," "s," "n," "d," "wh," "r," "n," "w," "ds," "w," "r"
- **Line 40:** "m," "n," "m," "d," "m," "n," "d"
- **Line 41:** "n," "n," "s," "d," "r," "f," "r," "s," "f," "r," "n," "d"
- **Line 42:** "s," "r," "r," "s," "d," "d"
- **Line 43:** "rr," "nd," "r," "l," "nd," "l"
- **Line 44:** "L," "s," "s," "l"

ALLUSION

In the opening lines of "Strange Meeting," the speaker describes Hell as a deep tunnel, filled with numberless sleeping people who cannot be roused from "thought or death." This description of Hell alludes to an earlier literary depiction of Hell, in Homer's *Odyssey*. In Book 11 of the *Odyssey*, the poem's hero, Odysseus, travels to the Underworld, the Greek version of Hell. He's there to free himself and his men from Circe, a sorceress who's captured them, but while he's there he talks to a series of fallen warriors that he fought alongside in the Trojan War.

The speaker's description of Hell closely parallels Homer's. Like Homer's, it's packed with dead people the speaker interacts with. Like Homer's, the speaker's version of Hell is a place where fallen soldiers reflect on the wars they've fought in. This allusion is important because it clarifies that Owen is writing in the literary tradition of the *Odyssey*. The *Odyessy* is famous for its criticisms of war and violence. It rejects the tradition of patriotic war poetry that praises heroism and bravery in battle. Alluding to this ancient Greek epic poem, Owen signals to the reader that he wants his poem to be understood as part of this tradition of war poetry that critiques violence instead of celebrating bravery.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-10:** "It seemed that out of battle I escaped / Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped / Through granites which titanic wars had groined. / Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned, / Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred. / Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared / With piteous recognition in fixed eyes, / Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless. / And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,— / By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell."

METAPHOR

"Strange Meeting" contains a number of metaphors. These metaphors tend to concentrate on small moments. They're rarely the focus of the poem—instead they crop up here and

there, as the speaker and the enemy soldier use them to describe the horrors of war. For example, the speaker describes the people in "Hell" as sleepers, using sleep as a metaphor for death. Similarly, the "thousand fears" that "grain" the enemy soldier's face in line 11 stand metaphorically for the lines and wrinkles that the stress of war has etched into his face.

The enemy soldier also uses metaphor. For example, in line 20, he uses a metaphor to describe time's progress: the "running of the hour." Time doesn't literally "run," but it does often feel like it moves fast. The enemy soldier's metaphor captures that rapid movement. Similarly, as the enemy soldier critiques "nations" for their commitment to violence, he turns to metaphor, describing them "trek[king]," "march[ing]" and "retreating." Nations don't literally do any of these things, but the speaker's metaphors convey the idea that the nations are moving backward.

The poem's most significant metaphor comes at the end of stanza 3. The enemy soldier compares the state of the world to "vain citadels," in which countries descend into an indefensible warlike state. He fantasizes about repairing the damage of war, washing the "blood" from the instruments of war, "chariot-wheels." Here, the soldier compares "truths" and the human spirit to water, describing their power to cleanse the results of violence. He says that he would have "poured [his] spirit without stint" to do so.

But though the enemy soldier would sacrifice his essence in the process, he would not have been wounded as in a battle. He summarizes this fantasy with a deeply enigmatic statement: "Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were." It's best to understand this as a metaphor: his forehead isn't going to actually bleed. Instead, he means that people have made great sacrifices for the betterment of the world without fighting in wars. The blood here represents the enemy soldier's essence, his spirit. He would have devoted himself entirely to making the world a better place, giving his spirit freely—no wounding necessary.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "sleepers"
- **Lines 11-11:** "thousand fears / that vision's face was grained"
- **Line 20:** "running of the hour"
- **Line 29:** "though nations trek from progress"
- **Line 32:** "the march of this retreating world"
- **Lines 33-38:** "Into vain citadels that are not walled / . / Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels, / I would go up and wash them from sweet wells, / Even with truths that lie too deep for taint. / I would have poured my spirit without stint / But not through wounds; not on the cess of war."
- **Line 39:** "Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were"

VOCABULARY

Profound (Line 2) - Deep.

Dull (Line 2) - Dark, gloomy.

Granites (Line 3) - A coarse rock, often bedrock. It is known for being hard and tough, difficult to cut.

Groined (Line 3) - Cut the wars have opened a hollow or hole in the bedrock.

Encumbered (Line 4) - Burdened or hampered. It is not entirely clear *how* the sleepers are encumbered here: whether they are in pain from injuries they suffered above, in the war, or if they are literally restrained somehow.

Fast (Line 5) - Caught, fastened, restrained.

Bestirred (Line 5) - Woken up.

Probed (Line 6) - Poked or prodded.

Piteous (Line 7) - Pitiful or sad. The enemy soldier may pity the speaker, or he may seem pitiful to the speaker—or both.

Distressful (Line 8) - Troubled or pained. Perhaps the enemy soldier's hands have been injured.

Sullen (Line 9) - Dark and gloomy.

Vision (Line 11) - A specter or ghost.

Grained (Line 11) - Lined or marked. The enemy soldier's face is careworn.

Upper ground (Line 12) - The world above, where the war is still going on.

Flues (Line 13) - Chimneys. A flue is a device in a chimney which channels the smoke from a fire up and away from a house.

Running (Line 20) - Moving fast; time is rushing past quickly.

Richlier (Line 21) - More fully and completely.

Distilled (Line 25) - Reduced to its essence, purified.

Spoiled (Line 26) - Destroyed or damaged.

Tigress (Line 28) - A female tiger; thus, something violent, threatening, and fast.

Progress (Line 29) - Advancing socially and politically.

Citadels (Line 33) - Fortified cities.

Cess (Line 38) - "Cess" sounds like "cesspool," or a sewer. It might also be short for "cessation," which means simply the end, or be a reference to the Irish word for " bad luck." Finally, "cess" might refer to a tax, suggesting the cost of war.

Parried (Line 43) - Blocked. The enemy soldier tried to ward off the speaker's blow, but failed.

Loath (Line 43) - Slow or unresponsive.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Strange Meeting" is broken up into four stanzas of wildly varying lengths. The longest of these is the third, which, not coincidentally, contains the dead soldier's monologue. This speech is the thematic heart of the poem—it's where the poem makes its strongest condemnations of war—and it's fitting that this is the longest stanza of the bunch.

This is also interesting on a visual level, since the final stanza, which reveals the poem's major twist, *looks* so short in comparison to what comes directly above it. It's as though the revelation that the speaker killed this soldier is simply tacked on to the soldier's speech as an afterthought. This "truth" about the dead soldier's identity isn't nearly as important to the dead soldier as is the "truth" about how horrible war is. Indeed, the brevity of the final stanza suggests how little it matters what side someone is on in war. The reality is, *everybody* loses.

METER

"Strange Meeting" is written in iambic pentameter, meaning there are five poetic feet per line, each of which has an unstressed-stressed syllable rhythm. For example, take the poem's first line:

> It seemed | that out | of batt- | le I | escaped

The poem is relatively steady in its use of iambic pentameter, reflecting the relative calm of Hell in comparison to the battlefield. That said, there are some lines that break this meter. For example, line 29 opens with a trochee, a metrical foot that follows a stressed-unstressed rhythm—just the opposite of an iambic rhythm:

> None will | break ranks,

This trochee is then followed by a spondee (stressed-stressed). Altogether, this underscores the authority of the line—the soldier is certain that no one will speak up to end the meaningless violence.

Trochees also open lines 30 and 31, where they again add a sense of emphasis and authority to the soldier's self-assessment:

> Courage
> Wisdom

Another trochee appears in line 42:

> Yester-

The line breaks from the expected meter of the poem, but in doing so, it registers the force of this moment—not coincidentally, the moment when the dead soldier tells the speaker that the speaker is the one who killed him. These are just a few examples, reflecting how the poem uses slight variations in sound to support its thematic arguments.

RHYME SCHEME

"Strange Meeting" is written in heroic couplets—a form in which two lines of iambic pentameter rhyme with each other. This form could be extended indefinitely:

> AABBCCDDEE

...and so on.

Very often, the rhymes in heroic couplets ring out clearly, but "Strange Meeting" almost never uses perfect rhyme. Instead, the poem is a kind of murderer's row of unusual, awkward, and failed rhymes. Most prominent among these is slant rhyme, which more often than not falls into the specific category of pararhyme—meaning words share the same consonant sounds in the same order: for example, "hall" and "Hell" in lines 9-10, and "years" and "yours" in lines 15-16. Sometimes these rhymes even extends across stanzas, as with "groined" and "grown" in lines 3 and 4. At one point, the poem offers three pararhymes in a row, instead of the two one expects in a poem written in couplets: in lines 19-21, which rhyme "hair," "hour," and "here."

This is surprising and perhaps disorienting, since usually poems in heroic couplets have very good rhymes. The 18th-century poet, Alexander Pope, for instance, loved heroic couplet—and prided himself on the strong, full rhymes he managed produce in each couplet. For many readers, such rhymes create a sense of certainty and confidence.

As such, the awkward, broken, failed rhymes of "Strange Meeting" defy the expectations of this form. Instead of certainty, one finds doubt; instead of confidence, anguish and pain; instead of polish and control, damage and devastation.

In other words, the poem's bad rhymes echo its general disillusionment with war—and with the poetry that celebrates war. And they register the damage and violence of war: the poem itself seems as wounded and devastated as the soldiers it describes.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Strange Meeting" is a dead soldier. In "Hell" he meets an enemy whom he killed the previous day. Since the poet, Wilfred Owen, fought in World War I—and wrote the poem while he was serving on the Western Front—most readers assume that the speaker is also a soldier in World War

I.

Some of the poem's details support this assumption. For instance, World War I was very destructive of the physical terrain in which it was fought; the speaker begins by describing how the war has cut a deep tunnel into the bedrock of the battlefield, a tunnel that leads straight to Hell. And the speaker's description of "guns thump[ing]" recalls the artillery fire that marked the battlefields during World War I—and accounted for much of the damage the war did to the terrain where it was fought.

However, the poem is careful not to give a lot of specific information about the speaker. By the end of the poem, the reader doesn't know what country the speaker fights for, or even whether he really fights in World War I. (Since all soldiers were men at the time the poem was written, it is reasonable to assume that the speaker is male.) The poem resists being tied too closely to a specific historical context. As a result, the poem feels broad. It is not simply a meditation on the horrors of World War I, but a reflection on the horrors of war in general.

SETTING

"Strange Meeting" is set in a deep, dark tunnel, which the speaker describes in line 2 as "profound" and "dull." The tunnel cuts into the bedrock of the earth—or, rather, it *was* cut by "titanic wars." In other words, the tunnel is not a natural phenomenon; instead, human beings created it through seemingly endless wars.

Later, the speaker announces that this tunnel is in fact "Hell" itself. In this sense, the poem can also be thought of as taking place in the after-life; after all, both the speaker and the enemy soldier who he talks to are dead. And they aren't the only ones: the tunnel is occupied by other "encumbered sleepers"—that is, other dead people. The poem never tells the reader how many, exactly, but it feels like the tunnel is full of them, the dead from all the wars in history gathered together under the earth.

In the Christian tradition, Hell is usually understood to be a place of punishment and torment—a place that God Himself created. But in "Strange Meeting," God doesn't seem to have much to do with Hell. The poem doesn't make any other references to Christian theology, and God never appears in the poem to judge the dead soldiers. (Instead, they judge each other). In "Strange Meeting," Hell is a creation and consequence of human violence. The setting thus supports the poem's broader argument: that war creates nothing but horror and pain.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Strange Meeting" was written in 1918, when Wilfred Owen was a soldier fighting on the Western Front during World War I. Owen is now recognized as a leading voice among a group of young English poets who fought in the war and wrote about their experiences. Among the most famous of these poets, beside Owen himself, are Siegfreid Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, and Isaac Ginsburg. These poets revolutionized the way that people wrote about war. Instead of writing patriotic verse, glorifying heroism, they criticized the war itself—and violence more generally.

More broadly, the 1910s were an exciting time for poets as writers such as Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot rejected literary traditions like meter and rhyme and started to experiment with radical new forms. This was called "modernism," a literary movement that emerged in response to the rapid urbanization and industrialization of European society in the second half of the 19th century. Poets wanted to find a way to express those societal transformations in their work—and the tried and true traditions of poetry just weren't up to the task.

As society transformed, so did warfare—becoming more brutal, violent, and total. And though "Strange Meeting" might not be as radical in terms of form as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" or "In a Station of the Metro," Owen's poem *does* break with poetic tradition in trying to find new ways to represent these new forms of warfare. For instance, the poem flirts with the traditional form of heroic couplets: it's written in iambic pentameter and it rhymes. But its rhymes are consistently *off*: Owen uses slant rhyme and pararhyme in place of the perfect rhyme expected from a formal poem. In this sense, the poem both uses a poetic tradition and (very subtly) calls it into question, suggesting that such old-fashioned forms aren't sufficient when writing about the horrifying reality of war.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wilfred Owen wrote "Strange Meeting" in 1918, while he was serving in the British army during World War I. Owen did not survive the war: he was killed in battle in 1918.

World War I began in 1914, following the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand by Serbian nationalists in Sarajevo. Because the great European powers had signed treaties pledging to defend each other, this local event in a far corner of Europe quickly plunged the continent into total war.

WWI followed an extended period of peace, stretching back to the 1870s. Indeed, the peace had lasted so long that many people felt that war was a thing of the past, that human society had progressed beyond needing to fight wars in order to settle

its differences. Despite this faith in human progress, when the war broke out, it was greeted with celebration in many quarters of European society. People were eager to prove themselves in battle; they treated it as an occasion for heroic displays. Many patriotic poems were composed to celebrate the troops riding into battle.

However, the war quickly ground to a bloody, horrifying stalemate. Neither side was able to gain the upper hand. In eastern France the Germans on one side and the English and French on the other settled into trenches separated by several hundred yards of no-man's land. Hundreds of thousands of lives were sacrificed in bloody battles—battles which resulted in one side or the other advancing only a few inches. The brutality of the war—accelerated by new chemical and conventional weapons—was unprecedented in human history, as were the number of casualties.

For many of the soldiers, the war quickly began to feel pointless. Its barbarism caused many to question the values that they had believed in at the start of the war—namely, patriotism and progress. Owen's poem reflects these tensions: it does not treat war as heroic, but rather horrifying. And the enemy soldier is well aware that his society is moving away from, not toward, progress.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poetry of World War I — A list of poems written about and during World War I, broken down by year, from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70139/the-poetry-of-world-war-i)
- World War I — A detailed timeline for the First World War, put together by the BBC. (https://www.bbc.com/timelines/zqbhn39)
- "Strange Meeting" Read Aloud — Alex Jennings reads Owen's poem in its entirety. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slcsx5NVvww)
- Benjamin Britten's "Strange Meeting" — A performance of the British composer Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem," which includes a musical adaptation of Owen's "Strange Meeting." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uw3uax3-6so)
- The Life of Wilfred Owen — A detailed biography of Owen from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wilfred-owen)
- The Rear Guard — Siegfreid Sasoon's poem, "The Rear Guard," which influenced Owen's "Strange Meeting." (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57268/the-rear-guard)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILFRED OWEN POEMS

- Anthem for Doomed Youth
- Dulce et Decorum Est
- Exposure
- Futility

HOW TO CITE

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