I Hear an Army

POEM TEXT

I hear an army charging upon the land,
And the thunder of horses plunging, foam about their knees:
Arrogant, in black armour, behind them stand,
Disdaining the reins, with fluttering whips, the charioteers.

They cry unto the night their battle-name:
I moan in sleep when I hear afar their whirling laughter.
They cleave the gloom of dreams, a blinding flame,
Clanging, clanging upon the heart as upon an anvil.

They come shaking in triumph their long, green hair:
They come out of the sea and run shouting by the shore.
My heart, have you no wisdom thus to despair?
My love, my love, my love, why have you left me alone?

SUMMARY

The speaker says that they can hear the sounds of an army as it charges forward onto the land. The pounding of the horses' hooves is like thunder as the animals emerge from the water, froth swirling up and around their legs. Proud, haughty soldiers, who are wearing black armor, stand behind the horses on their chariots. These chariot riders let go of the reins and crack their whips through the air.

The soldiers scream their battle cries into the darkness of the night. The distant sound of the soldiers' echoing laughter disturbs the speaker's sleep. The soldiers slice open the speaker's melancholy dreams with a flame that burns that's so bright it hurts the speaker's eyes. The soldiers pound again and again on the speaker's heart like metal upon metal.

The victorious soldiers wave their long, green hair back and forth. They emerge from the sea and scream as they run along the shoreline. The speaker addresses their own heart directly, asking, "Don't you know better than to get so sad?" The speaker then calls out to their love again and again, asking, "Why have you abandoned me?"

THEMES

THE PAIN OF HEARTBREAK

"I Hear an Army" conjures a frightening nightmare: while sleeping, the poem's speaker is besieged by a great, ghostly army that emerges from the ocean on horse-drawn chariots. Soon enough, it becomes clear that these fearsome riders bearing down on the speaker are the product of a troubled mind: they represent the overwhelming loneliness and despair that the speaker feels after being left by their "love." In this way, the poem vividly illustrates the toll of romantic loss and how heartbreak can cause restlessness, anxiety, and even outright terror.

The poem begins with a frightening scene: soldiers "charging" forward (and thus closer to the speaker), filling the air with the sound of "thunder" as their horses' hooves pound the land. The riders themselves are "arrogant" (implying they know full well that they can defeat the speaker), cracking their threatening "whips" and wearing ominous "black armour."

The speaker uses language and imagery that makes the soldiers seem inhuman, even supernatural (and thus all the more disconcerting). They rise out of the sea, "foam" swirling about their horses' knees, their green—yes, green!—hair flowing in the wind. They scream "their battle-name" (or battle cry), conveying their bloodlust. In short, they're terrifyingly bizarre, like creatures sent from some mythological world sent to attack the speaker.

The poem links this horror with the speaker's mental state as it becomes clear that what the reader is really witnessing is a picture of psychological distress. The reader learns that that this army is, in fact, the product of a terrible nightmare; the sleeping speaker "moan[s]" as the army invades their dreams, clearly tormented by their presence.

In the end, the poem reveals that the speaker's despair, and thus this nightmare, stems from heartbreak: the speaker's love has abandoned them, and the army is the haunting manifestation of the speaker's loneliness, anxiety, and fear in the wake of this loss. The soldiers are "clanging upon" the speaker's heart as though pounding a hammer on an "anvil," an image that evokes the speaker's deep emotional pain. The soldiers' "whirling laughter," meanwhile, suggests that the speaker feels humiliated and ashamed, as though their feelings of love are worthy of mockery.

Neither their own "heart" nor their ex-lover responds when the speaker cries out to them, leaving the speaker utterly alone in the face of this ghoulish invasion. The army's overwhelming power and ability to conquer the speaker's dreams thus implies

that the speaker has been totally vanquished by their own romantic pain.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I hear an army charging upon the land,
And the thunder of horses plunging, foam about their knees:

The speaker hears an army, somewhere in the distance, making its thunderous way across "the land," presumably as part of an invasion. Notice how the lack of detail here builds tension in the poem: the reader has no idea whose army this is, nor for what purpose they fight. All the reader knows is that something dramatic, and likely threatening, is taking place.

The intense auditory imagery in these lines creates a vivid sonic landscape for the reader. The speaker doesn't *see* the army (at least, not just yet) but *hears* them. This makes the army seem all the more frightening because the speaker (and the reader) doesn't yet know what they look like, and thus might imagine all sorts of foes.

The meter here is mostly iambic, meaning it follows a da DUM pattern (albeit with an anapest, da da DUM, tossed in):

> I hear | an ar- | my char- | ging upon | the land,

Both iambs and anapests are "rising" feet, meaning they move from unstressed to stressed beats. This creates a sense of propulsion, evoking the galloping of those horses and the army's "charging" motion. The consonance and assonance in "army charging" add energy and emphasis to this opening line as well.

Line 2 then reveals a bit more about this army: these aren't modern soldiers with tanks and artillery. Instead, this army uses horses for transport. The pounding of those horses' hooves creates a sound like "thunder" as their legs go "plunging" through the water (this detail suggests the army has just landed on a coastline). The horses' powerful movements whip "foam about their knees," violently disturbing the surface of the water (just as they disturb the speaker's sleep).

The poem uses various techniques to create its own poetic "thunder," bringing this auditory imagery to life:

> And the thunder of horses plunging, foam about their knees:

The meter here once again relies on march-like iambs and galloping anapests to evoke the horses' movements:

> And the thun- | der of hor- | ses plun- | ging, foam | about | their knees:

Finally, in its use of horses, the poem perhaps recalls the apocalyptic scenes of the Bible's final book, Revelation, in which the appearance of four horsemen heralds the end of the world.

LINES 3-4

Arrogant, in black armour, behind them stand,
Disdaining the reins, with fluttering whips, the charioteers.

Lines 3 and 4 describe the soldiers themselves—and they make for an extremely ominous-looking group!

For one thing, these soldiers are "charioteers" (that is, they ride in carts pulled by horses). Chariots feature in many ancient, epic battle legends. Their mention here makes this army seem like something pulled from Greek or Roman myth.

The soldiers themselves are also "arrogant," or overly proud and cocky, implying that they're not worried about defeat. They wear scary "black armour" that perhaps makes them seem like a force of evil and darkness, and they crack their "fluttering whips" through the air." So confident are these soldiers in the knowledge that they have full authority over their animals they don't even feel the need to hold their horses' reins. They "disdain" their reins, in fact, looking down on these tools with disgust.

Note how convoluted the phrasing of these lines is. The main subject of the sentence doesn't arrive until the very last word:

> Arrogant, in black armour, behind them stand,
> Disdaining the reins, with fluttering whips, the charioteers.

The reader thus gets to know *about* the charioteers before knowing that they are, well, charioteers. The numerous caesurae throughout these lines create this grammatical delay, imbuing the poem with a sense of rising tension. The poem heightens the soldiers' aura of frightening mystery, placing them as the sentence's main event (like the headline act at a concert).

Once again, assonance, alliteration, and consonance ("Arrogant in black armor, behind," "disdaining the reins,) add intensity to the poem.

LINES 5-8

They cry unto the night their battle-name:
I moan in sleep when I hear afar their whirling laughter.
They cleave the gloom of dreams, a blinding flame,
Clanging, clanging upon the heart as upon an anvil.

The next stanza reveals that these nightmarish soldiers are just

that: the product of the speaker's nightmares.

These soldiers shout their battle cry "unto the night." That they make these cries "unto" (at), and not *into*, the night, suggests that their mission is in some sense actively *against* the night. This makes sense, given that these soldiers seem to be a manifestation of the speaker's pain and anxiety, which refuse to let the speaker rest. This army (which readers might start to suspect is really a representation of the speaker's troubled thoughts) is effectively warring against the peaceful restfulness of sleep itself.

The speaker "moan[s]" upon hearing the far-off "whirling laughter" of the soldiers. This auditory imagery has an almost psychedelic quality; it's as though the soldiers' derisive laughter has swirled and echoed across impossible distances to unsettle the sleeping speaker. That this laughter is "whirling," or spinning, further suggests that it surrounds the speaker.

In lines 7 and 8, the army appears to outright attack the speaker. They "cleave," or slice into/split "the gloom," or murky darkness, "of dreams." It's as though the army has torn apart the comforting darkness of sleep, replacing it with a "blinding flame" that burns away the speaker's peace.

Next, the strikes down upon the speaker's heart, "clanging" against it as though hammering down on an anvil. This simile evokes the sound of metal upon metal and conveys the pounding pain the speaker feels. It's no wonder the speaker can't rest it also again implies how difficult this nightmare-army has made it for the speaker to rest; it'd be impossible to sleep with a "blinding flame" in your eyes and the sound of metal "clanging" in your eyes.

The sounds of these lines mimick the chaotic, even cacophonous approach of this army. For one thing, note the anaphora of lines 5 and 6, both of which begin with "They" followed by a verb (both those verbs also begin with a sharp /c/ sound, "cry"/"cleave," emphasizing their parallelism). This repetition creates the sensation of a continual, relentless attack.

The epizeuxis of "Clanging, clanging" likewise implies that this pounding on the speaker's heart, their emotional center, is non-stop and painfully loud (the only thing louder than one "clang" is two!).

Note that the word "clanging" itself is also a poetic foot known as a trochee (the opposite of an iamb, with a DUM da pattern). Placing two trochees at the start of line 8 evokes the sheer power of that "clanging" itself:

> Clanging, | clanging [...]

These trochees interrupt the poem's flow (which, again, is generally iambic; the line before is perfect iambic pentameter, in fact). This metrical disruption evokes the speaker's disturbed state of mind.

This whole stanza is filled with clashing consonance, assonance, and direct repetition that combines into one great, horrible cacophony:

> They cleave the gloom of dreams, a blinding flame,
> Clanging, clanging upon the heart as upon an anvil.

The mixture of sharp, guttural, and plosive sounds creates a chaotic, intimidating mess that reflects the din of this imaginary army.

LINES 9-10

> *They come shaking in triumph their long, green hair:*
> *They come out of the sea and run shouting by the shore.*

The army's onslaught doesn't let up in the poem's final stanza. Instead, the speaker continues the "They" anaphora to convey how the army continues to bear down on the desperate speaker.

Line 9 is quite surreal, intensifying the poem's strange atmosphere. These fighters "come out of the sea" and shake their "long, green hair" "in triumph." It's almost as though these soldiers are a bizarre mash-up of different fighters: part Roman charioteers, part grotesque demons/mermen/wizards. They're drawn up from the depths of the speaker's unconscious mind to disturb the surface of the speaker's thoughts, seemingly represented here by the "shore" along which the soldiers "run," "shouting" in celebration of their victory.

Given that this invading army consists of thoughts and feelings rather than actual soldiers, the battle was effectively won before it began. That is, if these fighters intend to disturb and upset the speaker, then mission accomplished!

The alliteration of "shouting" and "shore" here creates yet more raucous poetic noise—perhaps even with a touch of irony, as the /sh/ sound is so often associated with sleep.

LINES 11-12

> *My heart, have you no wisdom thus to despair?*
> *My love, my love, my love, why have you left me alone?*

The poem's final two lines are notably different from the rest. Suddenly, as though jolted awake, the speaker asks two searching, painful questions:

> My heart, have you no wisdom thus to despair?
> My love, my love, my love, why have you left me alone?

It's an important moment, revealing the source of the speaker's distress: heartbreak. Their love has left them (perhaps they broke up, or perhaps this "love" died), making the speaker's heart sink into "despair."

This reframes everything that has come before, making sense

of the link between the ghoulish army and the speaker's troubled sleep. The soldiers apparently represent the speaker's untameable worries, fears, and regrets related to lost love.

Both questions are also an example of the device apostrophe, addressing something or someone that is clearly not able to respond. The speaker addresses their own heart—the center of their emotional self—and basically asks, *"Don't you know any better than to fall into this sadness-trap again!?"* The /h/ alliteration of "heart" and "have" suggests breathlessness and anxiety.

The last line again begins with "My," creating another example of emphatic anaphora. The opening of this line is also an example of epizeuxis:

> My love, my love, my love [...]

This repetition adds intensity to the poem's final line and it also helps to convey the depths of the speaker's pain as they call out to their beloved again and again and again with no response. The speaker is utterly "alone" with their agony. Ending on this hopeless note, then, the poem thus shows the tragic power of heartbreak to overwhelm and "defeat" someone.

SYMBOLS

THE ARMY

The army that the speaker hears represents the relentless barrage of negative emotions (pain, anxiety, regret, loneliness, etc.) stemming from the speaker's heartbreak.

This frightening army emerges from the sea, an image suggesting that these fighters are born from the depths of the speaker's subconscious. That they shout "by the shore" as their horses kick up "foam" also suggests the way they rise to and disrupt the surface of the speaker's thoughts.

The soldiers' sheer, terrifying strangeness, meanwhile, implies the overwhelming, unbeatable nature of the speaker's pain; the speaker's agony feels as frightening as an army of green-haired warriors screaming their battle cries into the night, "charging" ever closer.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

In the last two lines, the poem makes a surprising shift. Here, the speaker addresses "My heart" and "My love" directly:

> My heart, have you no wisdom thus to despair?
> My love, my love, my love, why have you left me alone?

This important moment implies that this nightmarish invasion is really a product of the speaker's emotional distress. These apostrophes emphasize the speaker's solitude: their heart cannot answer because it's part of the speaker, and the lover won't respond because they've already "left" (they've either broken things off with the speaker or died), leaving the speaker in turmoil.

Note that the speaker is also personifying their own heart here, treating it as an entity that can act independently of the speaker's will. This emphasizes how out of control the speaker's emotions feel; they can't stop their "heart" from despairing. That the speaker calls out to their own heart reflects their sense of fragmentation and perhaps some self-loathing. The speaker feels like they should know better than to fall into the trap of heartbreak.

The call-out to the speaker's love, meanwhile, happens not once, but three times in a row. This conveys the speaker's desperation.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "My heart, have you no wisdom thus to despair? / My love, my love, my love, why have you left me alone?"

ASSONANCE

Assonance plays an important role in creating the raucous sounds of the army that the speaker "hear[s]." It often appears alongside consonance and alliteration; together, all these sonic devices make the poem sound more menacingly intense.

Take, for example, "army charging" in line 1, which starts the poem off on an energetic note that subtly conveys the force with which this army plows across the land. In the very next line, the assonance of "thunder" and "plunging" rings out like a peal of thunder traveling across the sky. Similarly, the flurry of short /ih/ sounds in "Disdaining the reins" and "with fluttering whips" in line 4 suggests the army's might, these vowels imposing themselves on the line as the soldiers invade the land.

There's another interesting moment of assonance in line 7. Here, the long /ee/ sounds of "cleave" and "dreams" add rhythmic intensity to the line, again conveying the power of this army to disturb the speaker's sleep.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "army charging"

- **Line 2:** “thunder,” “plunging”
- **Line 4:** “Disdaining,” “reins,” “with fluttering whips”
- **Line 7:** “cleave,” “dreams”
- **Line 10:** “out,” “shouting”

CAESURA

Caesurae grant the poem a dramatic, rollicking rhythm that fits right in with its image of a ghoulish army of green-haired charioteers.

Caesurae are most important in the poem's opening stanza, where they add to the ominous tone:

> And the thunder of horses plunging, foam about their knees:
> Arrogant, in black armour, behind them stand,
> Disdaining the reins, with fluttering whips, the charioteers.

That first comma after "plunging" halts the reader and subtly creates a kind of heady downward motion, evoking the legs of the horse as they pound the surf.

The next lines are then jammed with pauses; readers move forward haltingly, and, in this way, caesurae help to ramp up the poem's dramatic tension. All those commas delay the arrival of the "charioteers" in the sentence and in the poem, leaving time for dread to build as readers wonder who, exactly, will appear at the stanza's end.

The commas also suggest physical might, pulling the poem's generally iambic meter this way and perhaps evoking the speaker's tossing and turning as this army invades their dreams.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “plunging, foam”
- **Line 3:** “Arrogant, in,” “armour, behind”
- **Line 4:** “reins, with,” “whips, the”
- **Line 7:** “dreams, a”
- **Line 8:** “Clanging, clanging”
- **Line 9:** “long, green”
- **Line 11:** “heart, have”
- **Line 12:** “love, my love, my love, why”

CACOPHONY

Joyce packs the poem with noisy sonic devices to recreate the thunderous, frightening atmosphere of the speaker's nightmare. Percussive, explosive, and growling consonants weave throughout nearly every line, evoking the pounding of the horses' hooves, the soldiers' shrieking battle cries, and the general chaos of war. This cacophony makes sense, given that this army is essentially waging war against the speaker's sleep.

Take lines 3-4, where the consonance of guttural /r/, sharp /k/ and /t/, and heavy /d/, /b/, and /g/ sounds swirl together to create the sensation of building doom:

> Arrogant, in black armour, behind them stand,
> Disdaining the reins, with fluttering whips, the charioteers.

The sounds of the poem get even harsher as this army attacks the speaker. Readers can hear the screech of metal upon metal here:

> They cleave the gloom of dreams, a blinding flame,
> Clanging, clanging upon the heart as upon an anvil.

The swirl of biting, thudding, and, indeed, "clanging" sounds makes the imagery of these lines, in which this nightmare army is battering away at the speaker's heart, all the more vivid.

Where Cacophony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-10

IMAGERY

"I Hear an Army" uses surreal, frightening imagery that appeals to readers' eyes and ears. This vivid imagery immerses the reader in the speaker's terrifying nightmare.

Auditory imagery, in particular, dominates the poem, bringing the sounds the speaker can "hear" to life. For example, there's the sound of the army "charging upon the land" on galloping horses, whose hooves smack the ground like "thunder." The soldiers scream out their "battle-name," making the speaker "moan in sleep," surrounded by their "whirling laughter."

Some of the most striking auditory imagery comes in line 8, in which the speaker describes the army "Clanging, clanging upon the heart as upon an anvil." This simile turns the speaker's heart into an anvil, against which the army pounds again and again. Readers can hear that ear-splitting clang of metal on metal, like the sound of clashing swords. Having defeated the speaker, the soldiers shout their "triumph." It's no wonder the speaker can't sleep!

The poem's visual imagery is just as unsettling. These soldiers emerge from the sea like monsters or gods from myth, "shaking in triumph their long, green hair." They stand tall and proud, clad "in black armor," on chariots behind their horses, as though they're ancient Roman warriors. And they pierce the "gloom" of the speaker's sleep with "blinding flame," suggesting that the speaker's pain is fire-hot and inescapable.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10

REPETITION

Repetition in "I Hear an Army" helps to present the army's onslaught as unrelenting and unforgiving. Of course, this is an army formed in the speaker's head, the soldiers representing the speaker's emotional pain. Using repetition thus informs the reader about the speaker's state of mind: cyclical, restless, and fraught.

This repetition comes in various forms. Lines 5 and 7, for example, use anaphora:

> **They** cry unto the night their battle-name:
> I moan in sleep when I hear afar their whirling laughter.
> **They** cleave the gloom of dreams, a blinding flame,

The army won't let the speaker sleep, making constant noise and attacking from the inside of the speaker's mind. The repetition mirrors this unrelenting warfare.

(Note, too, the subtle juxtaposition here: while "They" cry and cleave, the speaker can only "moan." The parallelism of these phrases emphasizes the fact that these soldiers are a product of the speaker's mind and are causing the speaker great emotional distress.)

The poem continues this effect in lines 9 and 10:

> **They come** shaking in triumph their long, green hair:
> **They come** out of the sea and run shouting by the shore.

Those soldiers just keep coming and coming, and there's nothing the speaker can do to stop them!

Repetition also comes in the form of epizeuxis:

> **Clanging, clanging** upon the heart as upon an anvil.

This repetition again emphasizes the soldiers' relentlessness, and it also makes that "clanging" seem even louder (after all, two "clang[s]" are noisier than one).

Anaphora, parallelism, and epizeuxis combine in the poem's final two lines:

> **My heart, have you** no wisdom thus to despair?
> **My love, my love, my love,** why **have you** left me alone?

The speaker suddenly cries out, but there is no one there to answer. The repetitive phrasing of these questions portrays the speaker as painfully alone, as though these questions are asked into an echoing void. The epizeuxis of "My love" comes across as desperate and frantic, demonstrating heartbreak's hold over the speaker's world.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "They cry"
- **Line 7:** "They cleave"
- **Line 8:** "Clanging, clanging," "upon," "upon"
- **Line 9:** "They come"
- **Line 10:** "They come"
- **Line 11:** "My heart," "have you"
- **Line 12:** "My love, my love, my love," "have you"

VOCABULARY

Charging (Line 1) - Rushing forward in combat.

Plunging (Line 2) - Dropping quickly.

Disdaining (Line 4) - Rejecting; finding no need for.

Reins (Line 4) - Long straps used to control the movement of a horse.

Fluttering (Line 4) - A trembling motion.

Charioteers (Line 4) - Soldiers riding in horse-drawn carts.

Unto (Line 5) - Towards, at.

Battle-name (Line 5) - The name of the battle, or perhaps the individual monikers used by the soldiers when in combat.

Afar (Line 6) - From far away.

Whirling (Line 6) - Swirling or moving in circles.

Cleave (Line 7) - Split.

Gloom (Line 7) - Dark, murky atmosphere.

Clanging (Line 8) - Striking with a loud metallic noise.

Anvil (Line 8) - A metalworking tool against which another metal object—the one being shaped—is struck.

Triumph (Line 9) - Victory.

Have you no wisdom thus to despair? (Lines 11-11, Line 11) - The speaker is basically saying, "Don't you know better than to be sad like this?"

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"I Hear an Army" consists of three quatrains (four-line stanzas), each of which uses a mostly iambic (da DUM) rhythm and follows an ABAC rhyme scheme. This steady stanza structure perhaps evokes the rigid organization of an army into separate units (though this particular army seems frighteningly chaotic

too!). The form is relatively predictable, reflecting the army's seemingly inevitable victory. That is, the poem marches forward just as surely as the army itself.

METER

"I Hear an Army" generally follows an iambic rhythm. An iamb is a poetic foot consisting of two syllables that follow an unstressed-stressed pattern (da DUM).

Iambs tend to convey forward motion, and, in this poem, they subtly evoke the advance of the army "charging upon the land." However, from the first line, readers can hear that this iambic rhythm isn't perfect:

> I hear | an ar- | my char- | ging upon | the land,

The third foot here is an anapest (da da DUM), a variation that the speaker turns to often in the poem. Anapests, like iambs, feature a rising rhythm (meaning they move from unstressed to stressed syllables). Their frequent inclusion thus doesn't break with the poem's powerful momentum, and these anapests also evoke the galloping of horses. Take line 2, which begins with two galloping anapests before falling back into iambs:

> And the thun- | der of hor- | ses plun- | ging, foam | about | their knees:

The poem also uses trochees, which are the opposite of iambs (DUM da). These create more impactful breaks in the poem's rhythm, as in line 8:

> Clanging, | clanging [...]

The line opens with two trochees in a row. These front-loaded poetic feet land heavily and violently, evoking the harsh sound of metal striking metal. These feet are downright *noisy*, just like the poem's imagery at this moment.

Line 9 then almost loses the metrical scheme completely:

> They come | shaking | in tri- | umph their long, | green hair:

The line's unpredictable rhythm conveys the army's chaotic energy in victory.

RHYME SCHEME

"I Hear an Army" has a simple rhyme scheme running throughout. In each stanza, the first and third lines rhyme, while the second and fourth do not:

> ABAC

On the one hand, this steady pattern adds to the poem's feeling of relentless momentum. That is, regular rhyme gives the poem forward movement as the reader begins to anticipate when the next rhyme will fall.

At the same time, however, it's more common in poetry for the second and third lines of a stanza to rhyme (ABCB). "I Hear an Army" resists this expected pattern, denying readers a sense of sonic resolution at the end of the stanza. This, in turn, evokes the speaker's lingering anguish.

SPEAKER

"I Hear an Army" uses a first-person speaker, though the poem gives very little away about their specific identity. This speaker is the individual who "hear[s] an army charging upon the land," and they describe this ghoulish invasion in vivid, frightening terms.

As the poem goes on, it reveals more about the speaker: the speaker's mention of troubled sleep in line 6 imply that this whole scenario is really a nightmare. Lines 11 and 12 then reveal that the speaker is heartbroken and lonely. This person is someone who has been abandoned by a lover (whether this lover left the speaker or died remains unclear), and the strange, green-haired charioteers that torment the speaker are a manifestation of their anguish.

SETTING

"I Hear an Army" conjures a surreal, terrifying setting of a nightmare. The speaker dreams of an army filled with black-clad, green-hair soldiers emerging from the sea like strange mythical creatures. The army is also strangely ahistorical, driving horse-drawn chariots that bring to mind the warriors of ancient Rome. Their fierce horses' legs are "plunging" into the water, which froths about their knees. The air is filled with the sound of the thundering of those horses' hooves, the "fluttering" of the soldiers' "whips," swirls of cackling laughter, and screams of victory.

These images don't entirely make sense (for example, are the soldiers still on their chariots, or have they leapt off to run along the shore?). That's the point, though: the setting has the twisted logic of a dream-world rather than reality. This bizarre, chaotic setting captures the speaker's frazzled, obsessive, despairing state of mind.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

James Joyce was one of the most influential writers of the 20th century. Though best known for his novels *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* and for his short story collection *Dubliners*, Joyce also published three poetry collections.

"I Hear an Army" is the closing poem in the first of these collections, *Chamber Music*, which was published in England in 1907 (before any of Joyce's major works). The poems in *Chamber Music* generally feature strict stanza forms and focus on romantic love and the beauty of nature. "I Hear an Army" was a late addition to the collection (along with "All Day I Hear the Noise of Waters"), and it sticks out: while many of the other poems conjure pleasant, pastoral worlds, "I Hear an Army" creates an apocalyptic vision drawn from a nightmare.

James would go on to become a major figure in modernism, a movement that encouraged breaking with old-fashioned forms and experimentation with artistic techniques. Yet there's little in this poem (or, indeed, in the collection in which it appears) to suggest Joyce's later role as a literary innovator. Indeed, the poem seems more indebted to W.B. Yeats, who called "I Hear an Army" a "technical and emotional masterpiece." By 1932, Joyce had stopped writing poetry completely.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

James Joyce was born in Dublin in 1882. He composed most of the poems in *Chamber Music* between 1901 and 1906, while still in his 20s, and he later called the work a "young man's book."

The early 1900s was an era of considerable uncertainty. In addition to being a time of rapid technological change and industrialization, the movement for Irish independence from Britain was already gaining speed. Internally, Ireland was ideologically divided between primarily Catholic nationalists and pro-Britain, primarily Protestant unionists.

In the nightmarish atmosphere of this poem, some critics perceive a premonition of armed conflict between the two sides. That said, Joyce viewed the book as a representation of himself as a "strange lonely boy, walking about by myself at night and thinking that some day a girl would love me." It seems unlikely, then, that the poem has much of its specific historical context in mind.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Chamber Music — Check out the 1907 poetry collection in which "I Hear an Army" appears. (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2817/2817-h/2817-h.htm)
- Joyce's Words on Joyce's Work — Read excerpts from Joyce's correspondence that relay his feelings about the poems in Chamber Music. (https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/james-joyce-s-chamber-music-1918-american-edition)
- The Poem Set to Music — Listen to a musical setting of the poem by American composer Samuel Barber. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTonj_r0KIY)
- More Poems by Joyce — A selection of Joyce's other poetry, hosted by the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/james-joyce)
- Joyce's Place in Irish Poetry — A brief survey of where Joyce stands in Irish literature, specifically as a poet rather than a novelist. (https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/01/09/specials/joyce-collected.html?source=post_page----------)

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