# Spring Offensive

## POEM TEXT

1 Halted against the shade of a last hill,
2 They fed, and, lying easy, were at ease
3 And, finding comfortable chests and knees
4 Carelessly slept.
5 But many there stood still
6 To face the stark, blank sky beyond the ridge,
7 Knowing their feet had come to the end of the world.
8 Marvelling they stood, and watched the long grass swirled
9 By the May breeze, murmurous with wasp and midge,
10 For though the summer oozed into their veins
11 Like the injected drug for their bones' pains,
12 Sharp on their souls hung the imminent line of grass,
13 Fearfully flashed the sky's mysterious glass.

14 Hour after hour they ponder the warm field—
15 And the far valley behind, where the buttercups
16 Had blessed with gold their slow boots coming up,
17 Where even the little brambles would not yield,
18 But clutched and clung to them like sorrowing hands;
19 They breathe like trees unstirred.
20 Till like a cold gust thrilled the little word
21 At which each body and its soul begird
22 And tighten them for battle. No alarms
23 Of bugles, no high flags, no clamorous haste—
24 Only a lift and flare of eyes that faced
25 The sun, like a friend with whom their love is done.
26 O larger shone that smile against the sun,—
27 Mightier than his whose bounty these have spurned.

28 So, soon they topped the hill, and raced together
29 Over an open stretch of herb and heather
30 Exposed. And instantly the whole sky burned
31 With fury against them; and soft sudden cups
32 Opened in thousands for their blood; and the green slopes
33 Chasmed and steepened sheer to infinite space.

34 Of them who running on that last high place
35 Leapt to swift unseen bullets, or went up
36 On the hot blast and fury of hell's upsurge,
37 Or plunged and fell away past this world's verge,
38 Some say God caught them even before they fell.
39 But what say such as from existence' brink
40 Ventured but drave too swift to sink.
41 The few who rushed in the body to enter hell,
42 And there out-fiending all its fiends and flames
43 With superhuman inhumanities,
44 Long-famous glories, immemorial shames—
45 And crawling slowly back, have by degrees
46 Regained cool peaceful air in wonder—
47 Why speak they not of comrades that went under?

## SUMMARY

Resting in the shade of a final hillside, the soldiers ate, lay down comfortably, and using each others' chests and legs as pillows, fell asleep without fear.

But some of their comrades kept standing, staring at the empty sky over the hilltop and sensing that they had arrived at the brink of death. They stood there in wonder, watching the May wind stir the tall grass, which hummed with flies and wasps. Even though the approaching summer felt as good as the painkillers they took for their injuries, the battle line before them disturbed them to their core, and the clear, dazzling, unknowable sky frightened them.

For hours, they contemplated the sunny battlefield, as well as the distant valley behind them, where yellow flowers had cheered them on their heavy march. Prickly plants had clung to their clothes, as if distressed and unwilling to let them go forward. The soldiers breathed as quietly as trees on a windless day. Then the order to prepare for battle came like a cold wind, and the soldiers steeled themselves in body and spirit. There were no bugle calls, raised banners, or noisy preparations—just the soldiers' eyes rising and flashing in sunlight, as confrontationally as if they were ending their friendship with the sun. Oh, their grimace seemed even more powerful than the sun, whose gift of life they were refusing!

Then the battle began: they rushed over the hilltop and ran as a team over lush, open, unsheltered ground. Immediately, the sky rained fire on them; the ground grew pitted with thousands of small craters to soak in their blood; and the grassy hillsides exploded into steep chasms where soldiers fell to their deaths.

Many soldiers, rushing forward on those final heights, were cut down mid-stride by bullets they never saw, or blasted into the air by hellish explosives, or fatally thrown into bomb craters.

Some people say God received them in heaven before their bodies even hit the ground. But what do the survivors say—those who rushed over the brink of death, but ran too fast to actually die? Those few soldiers who physically charged into hell, outwitting its fire and fury—by committing unnatural evils and earning permanent glory and age-old guilt—then gradually crept back, astonished, into the calm breeze: why don't they talk about their comrades who died?

## THEMES

### WAR, DEATH, AND TRAUMA

"Spring Offensive" portrays the experience of ordinary soldiers in World War I (in which the German Spring Offensive, or Kaiserschlacht, was a series of major attacks). The poem describes combat troops resting on the slope of a "last hill," then charging into a hellish battle, where many die and others crawl back after improbably surviving. The speaker suggests that all these men feel a profound awareness of death before rushing in, as though they'd reached "the end of the world." Whether they live or die, the battle does spell the end of something for them: even the "few" survivors may return in "shame[]," and they will refuse to talk about "comrades" who died. In modern warfare, the poem implies, even soldiers who escape death cannot escape lasting trauma.

The poem describes soldiers at the edge of a battlefield where many will soon die and indicates that the brink of death brings a uniquely powerful and sober state of mind. The speaker calls the soldiers' waiting-place "a last hill," which implies that they've surmounted other hardships and survived other battles—but now they sense they've reached "the end" of life. Prior to combat, they "ponder" the battlefield "Hour after hour," as if contemplating their own potential death. They even "face[] / The sun" as though it were "a friend with whom their love is done": as though they were ready to exit nature and die. In a strange way, they seem "Mightier" than the sun, since they're prepared to abandon all the gifts that nature and life have to offer. They confront the horror of battle with quiet intensity—but their quiet also reflects the unspeakable trauma they've already endured.

The poem then shows how, whether the soldiers live or die, battle changes them profoundly and permanently. Those who die seem to drop off into "Opened" ground or "infinite space," as shell craters open below them. In other words, they pass immediately from life into death, or from nature into eternity. Those who return from the fray feel a mix of "glories," "shames," and "wonder"—perhaps a combination of pride, guilt, and awe at their own survival. It's the survivor's guilt, in the end, that seems most intense. Rhetorically, the speaker asks: "Why speak they not of comrades that went under?" The soldiers' trauma is so intense that they can't even talk about friends and companions who died.

Ultimately, the poem shows that the soldiers' pre-battle instincts are correct: they have indeed reached a terrible, decisive moment. War is so brutal that even when it's not the end of a soldier's life, it's "the end of the world" they knew; they will live with the psychological repercussions forever after.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-47

### THE MYTH VS. THE REALITY OF WAR

Like many of Wilfred Owen's poems, "Spring Offensive" contrasts sentimental myths about war with the harsh realities soldiers face. For example, it contrasts trite, obsolete descriptions of battle preparations with the modern (early-20th-century) reality. The speaker also undermines the pious idea that God catches dying soldiers "before they [fall]," noting that soldiers who actually witness their comrades die can't even speak about the horror afterward. Through its unvarnished details, the poem shows that actual war is far more "hell[ish]" than the picturesque clichés that lure soldiers into battle.

In the midst of describing a real war, the speaker invokes war clichés and myths—only to knock them down. For example, the speaker observes that in the moments before battle, there are "No alarms / Of bugles, no high flags, no clamorous haste." These dramatic preparations may have occurred in some pre-20th-century wars, but they're obsolete now—romantic clichés of a bygone era. In modern warfare, they've been replaced by an eerie, watchful hush.

Of those who die in battle, the speaker notes, "Some say God caught them even before they f[a]ll." Without contradicting this claim outright, the speaker then asks why soldiers who witness *real* battlefield deaths can't even mention the experience later. This implies that the picturesque wartime death—complete with God or gods ministering to the fallen—is a complete myth.

The gap between myth and reality, in turn, suggests that pious or glamorous accounts of war are lies. The final question reads as a challenge to readers, as if the poet is insisting that they learn or admit the truth of war to themselves. And the poet's own descriptions of battle are much grittier—full of "blood," "bullets," and the like. The poem repeatedly compares war to "hell" and stresses that the soldiers are exhausted even *before* this battle; they've had to take an "injected drug for their bones' pains." In short, the poem deflates comforting or inspiring myths about war by depicting the true horror of combat. This theme runs throughout the poetry of Wilfred Owen, himself a combat soldier who died in World War I.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 20-25
- Lines 34-47

### NATURE'S SERENITY VS. HUMAN VIOLENCE

"Spring Offensive" contrasts the fury of a World War I battle with the calm of the countryside in which it occurs. The poem opens in the restful shade of springtime, mentions the beautiful landscape the soldiers have crossed, and concludes in the "cool peaceful air" of the battle's aftermath. In between, it recounts a terrifying scene of death and carnage, prompted by a war whose purpose is never mentioned. The poem's imagery suggests that, on its own, nature is almost heavenly in its "bounty"; it's human violence that occasionally creates hell on earth.

The poem draws a jarring, painful contrast between the serene springtime setting and the horrific battle. The speaker describes the "grass swirled / By the May breeze," the golden "buttercups" behind the soldiers, and other spring imagery in lush, sensuous detail. These details provide a painfully ironic setup for the bloody events that are about to unfold.

The personified landscape even seems to implore the soldiers not to fight. As they advance toward battle, the "brambles" on the ground seem to "clutch[]" at them in "sorrow[]." It's as if nature itself wants them to live—and enjoy life. Later, those who return from battle drink in the "cool peaceful air" with a sense of "wonder." This "wonder" might include a sense that the battle was surreal: why did such violence have to happen at all in this "peaceful air"?

Meanwhile, the battle itself is portrayed as grotesque, violent, and cataclysmic; the human "Offensive" has temporarily ruined the placid "Spring." Before the battle, the soldiers who face the sun "like a friend with whom their love is done" seem to reject nature itself. Brave and "Might[y]" as they may be, it's as though they deliberately "spurn[]" or snub the gifts life has to offer. As the battle begins, the "whole sky" seems to "burn[] / With fury against" them. The beautiful "green slopes" become a nightmare landscape, pitted by shells and soaked with blood. Temporarily, nature seems to turn on these soldiers—but, of course, they and their fellow humans are really the ones causing such "inhumanities." The speaker repeatedly describes the battle as "hell," or as a catastrophe beyond the ordinary "world."

In other words, the poem depicts war as fundamentally *unnatural*—a grotesque, gratuitous intrusion on the beauty of "Spring." This framing becomes part of its anti-war message: the poet seems to plead for the natural "wonder" of life over the horror of needless death.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-47

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-4

*Halted against the shade of a last hill,*
*They fed, and, lying easy, were at ease*
*And, finding comfortable chests and knees*
*Carelessly slept.*

Lines 1-4, along with the title, begin to establish the poem's setting and characters. Wilfred Owen was a leading poet of World War I, and the titular "Spring Offensive" refers to a 1918 series of attacks along the Western Front of that war. Based on the approximate date given later (the month of "May"), the setting is probably northern France.

The poem describes an unnamed collective "They"—an army unit—resting up before a battle. By withholding the names and nationality of the troops, Owen makes the poem more universally relatable—and takes ordinary politics, including the cause of the conflict, out of the equation. Instead of the political disputes that sparked WWI, the poem focuses on the human drama of battle. (And, in doing so, perhaps implies that politics become irrelevant in the heat of battle.)

As the poem begins, the soldiers have "Halted" in the "shade of a last hill." They are resting up and eating on a shady hillside, which *might* be the "last" in terms of their mission or tour of duty (the poem takes place in the last year of WWI)—but is also the "last" hill most of them will ever see. WWI battles were exceptionally bloody, and as the poem goes on, the soldiers seem to be preparing for death. In fact, even the "shade" that falls on them might symbolize the darkness of death (or "the shadow of death," in the biblical phrase).

For now, however, the soldiers are "at ease" (a military term meaning *in a resting position*, with weapons lowered). In fact, most of them are "lying easy" on the slope, using each other's "chests and knees" as "comfortable" pillows. (Of course, comfort in this situation is relative!) They sleep "Carelessly," meaning, in this context, "without care or anxiety." The battle is still hours away; they are not yet tense.

These opening lines start to establish the poem's form. It's written in iambic pentameter (10-syllable lines that generally follow a da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm), which is the most common meter in English poetry. This choice lends the poem an air of traditional gravitas. However, Owen's handling of the meter is somewhat rough and unconventional, reflecting the rough conditions of war and the poetic experimentation of his "modernist" era. (More on this in the Meter section of this guide.)

The pairing of "ease"/"knees" (lines 2-3) signals that the poem rhymes, but it will not follow a consistent rhyme scheme. In that way, it's as unpredictable as the battle awaiting the soldiers.

## LINES 5-9

*But many there stood still*
*To face the stark, blank sky beyond the ridge,*
*Knowing their feet had come to the end of the world.*
*Marvelling they stood, and watched the long grass swirled*
*By the May breeze, murmurous with wasp and midge,*

In lines 5-9, the poem juxtaposes the sleeping soldiers (lines 1-4) with their comrades who do not sleep. A group of "many" soldiers remains standing, either because they're obeying orders or because they prefer not to sleep. (Or else because they feel *unable* to sleep.) They "face the [...] sky beyond the ridge," whose "stark, blank" appearance seems to symbolize the blankness of death. They "Know[] their feet had come to the end of the world"—at least, the end of the world for *them*. In other words, they sense that death or life-changing trauma awaits them beyond that ridge.

There may be an implied distinction here between seasoned veterans and newer recruits, or between more and less informed soldiers. That is, those who "Know[]" how deadly the battle will be may have served longer, or may have access to information their comrades don't. Then again, they may just handle fear differently.

The standing soldiers "Marvel[]" at the scene before them, as though terror has stunned them into a kind of awe. But they may also be stunned by the *beauty* of the scene. The speaker describes the balmy "May" weather in sensuous detail, complete with pleasing /m/, /s/, /w/, and /b/ alliteration:

> Marvelling they stood, and watched the long grass swirled
> By the May breeze, murmurous with wasp and midge,

The /m/ sounds are especially prominent, and are clearly meant to evoke the drone or "murmur[]" of the wasps and flies. ("Murmurous" is even an onomatopoeia word.) Notice how, within the ironic peacefulness of this scene—a beautiful landscape that's about to turn bloody—the "midge[s]" or small flies are a straightforwardly creepy presence. Flies swarm around corpses, so they're both literally and symbolically associated with death. To the soldiers, their "murmur[]" probably sounds more haunting than soothing.

## LINES 10-13

*For though the summer oozed into their veins*
*Like the injected drug for their bones' pains,*
*Sharp on their souls hung the imminent line of grass,*
*Fearfully flashed the sky's mysterious glass.*

Lines 10-13 confirm that the soldiers are frightened by the scene ahead of them. On the one hand, the "summer[y]" May climate seems to "ooze[] into their veins" like a narcotic—"Like the injected drug for their bones' pains." (This simile refers to morphine, which WWI soldiers commonly used as a painkiller; the speaker means that the sunny weather soothed the soldiers, as if giving them a little high.)

On the other hand, pleasant weather can't erase their fear of the battle ahead. The "imminent line of grass"—the grassy ridge they'll soon have to charge over—seems to "h[a]ng" on their "souls" like a "Sharp" object. In other words, it's both burdensome and painful to contemplate. They know that once they cross that "line," the battle will start and they will most likely die. Accordingly, the "line of grass" comes to symbolize the border between life and death.

Above the ridge, the "mysterious glass" of the sky "Fearfully flashe[s]." In other words, the sun dazzles the soldiers as if it's glinting off glass. Perhaps the sunlight flashes off their guns, helmets, etc. as well. In this context, "Fearfully" means "frighteningly" or "tremendously"; the vast intensity of the sky fills the soldiers with dread. But notice that "fearful" can mean also *afraid*, so it's as if, at the same time, the soldiers are projecting their fear onto the surrounding scene. And the sky is often symbolically linked with heaven or the divine, so this sky may fill the soldiers with the fear of God, fate, etc. Notice how the emphatic alliteration and assonance here ("Fearfully flashed [...] glass") mimics the intensity and repetitiveness of the "flash[ing]."

## LINES 14-19

*Hour after hour they ponder the warm field—*
*And the far valley behind, where the buttercups*
*Had blessed with gold their slow boots coming up,*
*Where even the little brambles would not yield,*
*But clutched and clung to them like sorrowing hands;*
*They breathe like trees unstirred.*

Lines 14-19 continue to describe the soldiers' response to the landscape. Ahead of them lies the "warm field" that will soon become a battlefield, its pleasant warmth ironically turning into a scene of cold-blooded slaughter. The troops "ponder" the field "Hour after hour," contemplating the agony and/or death they're about to experience.

But they also ponder "the far valley behind" them, which they've just crossed on foot. The speaker's wistful description suggests that they already miss this terrain, as if they'd like to turn back and enjoy it. "Buttercups"—small yellow flowers—surrounded them on their heavy march, as if "bless[ing]" their "slow boots" with a sprinkling of "gold." Meanwhile, "little brambles"—prickly vines or shrubs—caught at their clothing like distressed, "sorrowing hands."

The brambles "clutched and clung" and "would not yield," as if desperate to hold the speakers back from destruction. In their

"sorrow[]," they seemed to grieve the soldiers in advance. This personification of the buttercups and brambles—which can't literally feel anything—is a way of projecting the soldiers' own feelings onto their surrounding environment. (Poetic projection of human feelings onto nature is sometimes known as the pathetic fallacy.) The *soldiers* are the ones who felt distraught and reluctant to keep going; as they marched toward their suicide mission, they grieved for themselves. They longed to stay behind, enjoying the "bless[ings]" of nature and life itself.

Now, on the verge of battle, the soldiers "breathe like trees unstirred." This simile not only conveys their tense, guarded silence but also ties them closely to the natural environment. Like "trees" gone motionless on a windless day, they seem *part* of this landscape. Soon, of course, many of them will die, go motionless forever, and return to nature—so this image might be read as a bit of ominous foreshadowing.

This whole passage is dense with alliteration (e.g., "behind"/"buttercups"/"blessed"/"boots"/"brambles," "clutched"/"clung") and assonance (e.g., "clutched"/"clung"). These effects slow the language down, mirroring the heavy tread of the soldiers and the way the brambly terrain hinders their progress.

## LINES 20-23

*Till like a cold gust thrilled the little word*
*At which each body and its soul begird*
*And tighten them for battle. No alarms*
*Of bugles, no high flags, no clamorous haste—*

As the poem reaches its midpoint, its narrative takes a turn. The soldiers' watchful silence is broken by a "little word": the order to prepare "for battle." This order arrives like a "cold gust" of wind, stirring up the soldiers (whom the previous line compared to motionless "trees"). In other words, the news seems to bring an ominous little chill in the midst of a warm day. For many if not most of the troops, it's the signal that they're about to die.

Having received the order, the troops quickly get ready: they "begird / and tighten" not only their "bod[ies]" but their "soul[s]" in preparation for "battle." The archaic word "begird" literally means to fasten a belt or similar item around oneself; metaphorically, it suggests steeling oneself for combat or some other major challenge. So these soldiers are "tighten[ing]" their uniforms, putting on their gear, and taking up weapons; at the same time, they're psychologically preparing (steeling their "soul[s]") for the fight ahead.

The speaker then points out that this process doesn't look the way readers might expect it to look—or the way it would have looked in previous wars. These battle preparations don't include "bugle[]" calls, the raising of "high flags," or any kind of "clamorous haste" (noisy hubbub). These elements would have been present in many Western wars of previous centuries, and still featured, to some degree, in the public imagination of the World War I period. But WWI was a mechanized war fought with brutal modern weapons, including machine guns, high-explosive shells, and mustard gas. The resulting casualty rate—nearly 15 percent of all combat soldiers died—necessitated greater tactical stealth and rendered the pageantry of previous wars obsolete. By 1918, the year of the German "Spring Offensive," bugle "alarms" and battle standards (flags carried into combat) were pretty much relegated to the history books. Poets like Owen, who fought in the trenches, hoped to convey the truth to civilian readers: war in the 20th century was more hellish than ever.

## LINES 24-27

*Only a lift and flare of eyes that faced*
*The sun, like a friend with whom their love is done.*
*O larger shone that smile against the sun,—*
*Mightier than his whose bounty these have spurned.*

If the soldiers aren't blowing "bugles" or raising "high flags" in the moments before battle, what are they doing? Lines 24-27 provide the answer: they simply "lift" their eyes toward the terrain they're about to storm. Their ranks "face[] / the sun," so their eyes "flare" in the light.

This flare, according to the speaker, resembles a great "smile" shining "against the sun." In fact, it looks "larger" and "Mightier" than the sun's own metaphorical smile—and defiantly *opposed* to the sun itself. In a complex simile, the speaker claims that the soldiers regard the sun as they would "a friend with whom their love is done." They seem to "spurn[]," or reject, all the "bounty" or abundance the sun offers. It's as though these men have had a falling out with nature—or with life. They no longer care for the bountiful earth around them; in fact, they are prepared to abandon it forever. They are willing to die, and this willingness gives them a strange, unearthly kind of power.

Notice the old-fashioned, exclamatory "O" in the phrase "O larger shone that smile against the sun." This is one of the only moments in the poem when the third-person speaker shows a flash of direct emotion. (Of course, the poem's intense descriptions convey emotion in an indirect way.) The exclamation seems to express admiration, wonderment, and/or sympathy for the soldiers—after all, the poet was a WWI soldier himself.

## LINES 28-33

*So, soon they topped the hill, and raced together*
*Over an open stretch of herb and heather*
*Exposed. And instantly the whole sky burned*
*With fury against them; and soft sudden cups*
*Opened in thousands for their blood; and the green slopes*
*Chasmed and steepened sheer to infinite space.*

In lines 28-33, the battle finally begins. The soldiers "top[] the hill"—dash over the ridge—and "race[] together" over "open" ground. This ground consists of grass, shrubs, and other

vegetation ("herb and heather"), which, unlike the grass on the shady hillside, lies "Exposed" in the sunlight. But notice that the grammar here is a little ambiguous; the adjective "Exposed" could also apply to the soldiers. They have dashed out into the open, leaving themselves vulnerable to enemy fire.

And they don't have to wait long. "Instantly," bombs and bullets rain down on their ranks, so that the whole "sky" seems to "burn[] / With fury against them." The personification of the sky here seems to tie back to the personification of the sun in the previous stanza. It's as though, having "spurned" the "bounty" of nature, they have now incurred the *wrath* of nature (or God). But of course, it's not actually nature shooting at these soldiers—it's their fellow human beings. If these soldiers have rejected nature, they have done so in order to wage an unnatural-seeming war.

The terrain beneath their feet turns treacherous, too. What had been a "warm" and pleasant-looking "field" (line 14) now looks like the stuff of nightmares. As the bombs fall, "thousands" of "soft sudden cups," or craters, "Open[]" in the ground as if to swallow the soldiers' "blood." The explosions create steep—or even "sheer" (perpendicular)—"Chasms[]" that drop off into what seems like "infinite space." A fall into these craters, it seems, can be as deadly as the bombs themselves—can be a one-way ticket to the infinity, or eternity, of death. (Owen may also be invoking some traditional imagery associated with hell, such as the description in Book II of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "The dark, unbottomed, infinite Abyss." The hell comparison will become much more explicit in the following lines!)

## LINES 34-38

*Of them who running on that last high place*
*Leapt to swift unseen bullets, or went up*
*On the hot blast and fury of hell's upsurge,*
*Or plunged and fell away past this world's verge,*
*Some say God caught them even before they fell.*

The long, twisting sentence in lines 34-38 presents more nightmarish battle imagery before ending on a note of apparent optimism. The speaker notes that many of the soldiers who went "running on that last high place"—the battlefield over the ridge line—promptly died. Some were cut down mid-stride, or mid-"Leap[]," by "swift unseen bullets" (i.e., bullets they never saw). Some were "blast[ed]" into the air by explosives that resembled the "fury of hell[]" itself. Some "plunged" into craters as if falling "past this world's verge" (i.e., off the edge of the world).

Yet, according to the speaker, "Some say" of these soldiers that "God caught them even before they fell." In other words, even before their bodies hit the ground, their souls were received into heaven. Their tragic deaths—and the hell-on-earth they suffered beforehand—were instantly redeemed by the blessing of eternal life. The "Some" who would make such a claim are presumably pious, patriotic individuals. As the poem's ending suggests, they are probably also people who have never been near a battlefield.

Throughout this final stretch of the poem, sonic devices such as alliteration (e.g., "hot"/"hell's," "Some say"), consonance ("upsurge"/"plunged"/"verge"), assonance ("unseen"/"up," "upsurge"/"plunged"), and internal rhyme ("say"/"away," "hell's"/"fell") become especially pervasive. They give the poem's language a percussive intensity that mimics the thunder of the battlefield scene.

## LINES 39-44

*But what say such as from existence' brink*
*Ventured but drave too swift to sink.*
*The few who rushed in the body to enter hell,*
*And there out-fiending all its fiends and flames*
*With superhuman inhumanities,*
*Long-famous glories, immemorial shames—*

Lines 39-44 begin to qualify the dubious claim in line 38. The speaker wonders: if "Some say God caught [the dying soldiers] even before they fell," what do actual survivors of the battle say? What is the firsthand testimony of those who "Ventured" forth "from existence' brink" (crossed over the line between life and death), yet "drave too swift to sink" (ran too fast to actually die)?

Notice, first, that the language here picks up on previous images in the poem. The striking phrase "existence' brink" refers back to the "imminent line of grass" that seemed to represent "the end of the world" (lines 12, 7). The phrase "this world's verge" in line 37 conveys the same idea. In each case, the hilltop or ridge-line over which the soldiers charge marks the symbolic crossover point between life and death or earth and hell. Both "brink" and "verge" mean *edge*, and both can specifically refer to the edge of a body of water, such as a lake or ocean. Metaphorically, then, some soldiers "drave" (drove forward) too swiftly to "sink" in the ocean of death (or the pit of hell). As they dodged the bullets and bombs, they were like swift ships gliding through dangerous waters.

Lines 41-44 expand on this idea. According to the speaker, the "few" survivors of the battle "rushed" physically into "hell," and rather than finding themselves outmatched, managed to "out-fiend[]" all of hell's "fiends and flames." In other words, they showed a kind of demonic energy or violence that surpassed the worst hell had to offer. They committed "superhuman inhumanities"—atrocities beyond the capacity of normal people—and, in the process, earned lasting "glories" and permanent "shames." (Indeed, these shames were age-old, or "immemorial": ancient warriors knew them just as well as modern soldiers.)

To survive hell, then, these soldiers had to become almost diabolical themselves. In the speaker's view, *they* are the people worth asking about what death in combat looks like—and

whether "God" plays any role in it or not.

### LINES 45-47

*And crawling slowly back, have by degrees*
*Regained cool peaceful air in wonder—*
*Why speak they not of comrades that went under?*

Lines 45-47 complete the long sentence begun in line 41 ("The few who rushed"). This sentence adds up to a pointed rhetorical question:

> [The few who,] crawling slowly back, have by degrees
> Regained cool peaceful air in wonder—
> Why speak they not of comrades that went under?

Again, these lines refer to the "few" soldiers who "crawl[ed]" back alive from the battle, gradually making their way back to the "cool peaceful air" of safe territory. Why, the speaker wonders, don't they talk about the "comrades" they lost? If death on the battlefield is picturesque and redemptive—a matter of falling into the arms of "God" (line 38)—then why can't the people who have actually *witnessed* battlefield deaths even bring themselves to mention the dead?

The question implies that death in war isn't so picturesque, after all. In fact, it's so horrifying that, for many witnesses, it's literally unspeakable. The people who envision war in pious, patriotic terms have no concept of the trauma it entails. Combat survivors may feel a sense of "wonder" at the life they've "Regained," the "air" they're fortunate enough to breathe again. But they're forever scarred by the things they've seen, including the deaths of friends.

Notice that, by ending on a question, the poem itself leaves certain things unsaid. Owen was a soldier himself—one who experienced severe combat trauma and ultimately died in the war he wrote about. By asking, in effect, "Why do *you* think veterans have such a hard time talking about their experiences?" he challenges readers to learn the truth about war rather than trusting sentimental, patriotic clichés.

## SYMBOLS

### THE RIDGE/HILLTOP/LINE OF GRASS

The "ridge" (line 6) or "line of grass" (line 12) refers to the top of the "hill" where the soldiers initially rest and over which they charge into battle. Symbolically, the poem depicts this ridge as the line between life and death, or earth and "hell" (lines 36 and 41). That's because the battle is both hellishly violent and fatal to most of the soldiers who participate.

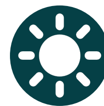
Notice that the "sky beyond the ridge" is "stark" and "blank," symbolizing the emptiness of death. The "line of grass" seems to cut into the very "souls" of the men facing it, because they know what terrors lie beyond it. Lines 39-42 make the symbolism even clearer:

> But what say such as from existence' brink
> Ventured but drave too swift to sink.
> The few who rushed in the body to enter hell,
> And there out-fiending all its fiends and flames [...]

The top of the hill, then, is like the "brink" of "existence[]" itself; once the soldiers cross it, they "enter hell." Even if they somehow manage to crawl back alive, life will never be the same as before.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 6:** "To face the stark, blank sky beyond the ridge,"
- **Line 12:** "Sharp on their souls hung the imminent line of grass,"
- **Line 28:** "So, soon they topped the hill, and raced together"



### SUN AND SHADE

The sun in "Spring Offensive" is a symbol of nature and life itself. The soldiers in the poem face the sun "like a friend" they no longer love, and seem to "spurn[]" or reject the "bounty" the sun offers. These descriptions indicate that the soldiers are preparing to die, or at least reconciling themselves to the likelihood of death. They're turning their backs on the natural abundance of the spring/early summer, including the beautiful "valley" whose slope they've just climbed.

More broadly, they're spurning life itself as they brace themselves for what is essentially a suicide mission. Indeed, they rest in the "shade" of the hill, staying out of direct sunlight, as if rejecting light and life in favor of the darkness of death. (The references to "shade" and the "valley" might even subtly allude to the biblical phrase "valley of the shadow of death.")

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Halted against the shade of a last hill,"
- **Lines 24-27:** "Only a lift and flare of eyes that faced / The sun, like a friend with whom their love is done. / O larger shone that smile against the sun,— / Mightier than his whose bounty these have spurned."

## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLITERATION

The poem is jam-packed with alliteration. First and foremost,

this effect makes the poem highly musical (especially in combination with the poem's use of assonance). This is a solemn, lyrical, tightly woven elegy for fallen soldiers.

Second, alliteration helps evoke some of the poem's sights and sounds. Listen to the prominent /m/, /w/, and /b/ sounds in line 9, for example:

> By the May breeze, murmurous with wasp and
> midge,

The /m/ sounds, especially, evoke just what the line's describing: the buzz and drone of wasps and flies. In this way, alliteration works hand in hand with the onomatopoeia of "murmurous."

Dense alliteration can also slow the poem's pace, making its language sound heavy and deliberate. This is an especially important effect in lines 15-18:

> And the far valley behind, where the buttercups
> Had blessed with gold their slow boots coming up,
> Where even the little brambles would not yield,
> But clutched and clung to them like sorrowing hands;

These lines literally describe slow movement: the heavy marching of troops up the slope of a valley, where sharp "brambles" catch at their clothing as if to hold them back. Fittingly enough, then, the cluster of /b/, /w/, and /cl/ sounds (along with the assonance in "clutched" and "clung") slow the language to a crawl.

Other alliteration makes the language sound punchy and percussive—an appropriate effect in a poem full of bombs and bullets. You can hear an example of this in line 42, which describes soldiers managing to survive on a hellish battlefield:

> And there out-fiending all its fiends and flames

The barrage of fricative /f/ sounds is as rapid and harsh as the bombardment they're facing!

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Halted," "hill"
- **Line 3:** "comfortable"
- **Line 4:** "Carelessly"
- **Line 5:** "stood still"
- **Line 6:** "stark," "blank," "sky," "beyond"
- **Line 8:** "stood," "swirled"
- **Line 9:** "By," "May," "breeze," "murmurous," "with wasp," "midge"
- **Line 13:** "Fearfully flashed"
- **Line 14:** "field"
- **Line 15:** "far," "behind," "buttercups"
- **Line 16:** "blessed," "boots"
- **Line 17:** "Where," "brambles," "would"
- **Line 18:** "But," "clutched," "clung"
- **Line 21:** "body," "begird"
- **Line 22:** "battle"
- **Line 23:** "bugles," "high," "haste"
- **Line 24:** "faced"
- **Line 25:** "friend"
- **Line 26:** "smile," "sun"
- **Line 27:** "his whose," "spurned"
- **Line 28:** "So, soon," "topped," "together"
- **Line 29:** "herb," "heather"
- **Line 31:** "soft sudden"
- **Line 32:** "slopes"
- **Line 33:** "steepened," "space"
- **Line 34:** "last"
- **Line 35:** "Leapt"
- **Line 36:** "hot," "hell's"
- **Line 37:** "plunged," "past"
- **Line 38:** "Some say"
- **Line 39:** "say such"
- **Line 40:** "swift," "sink"
- **Line 42:** "fiending," "fiends," "flames"
- **Line 46:** "wonder"
- **Line 47:** "Why," "went"

## ASSONANCE

"Spring Offensive" is peppered throughout with assonance and internal rhyme. These effects heighten the musicality of this very lyrical poem, and also add emphasis at key moments. Listen to the emphatic short /a/ sounds in line 13, for example:

> Fearfully flashed the sky's mysterious glass.

Along with the alliteration of "Fearfully flashed," these repeated vowels help evoke the repeated "flash[ing]" of the sky. Similarly, in "clutched and clung" (line 18), a combination of /cl/ alliteration and short /uh/ assonance mimics the way the brambles repeatedly catch at the soldiers' clothing. (These sound effects also slow the line down, just as the brambles slow the soldiers down.)

Assonance becomes particularly strong in the second half of the poem, intensifying the language just as the battle scene intensifies. Consider the repeated vowel sounds in lines 28-31:

> So, soon they topped the hill, and raced together
> Over an open stretch of herb and heather
> Exposed. And instantly the whole sky burned
> With fury against them; and soft sudden cups [...]

Like the alliteration of "herb and heather, "soft sudden," etc., assonance adds percussive force to the language at a key

dramatic moment. It even seems to echo the fire and "fury" raining down on the soldiers.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "easy," "ease"
- **Line 3:** "chests"
- **Line 4:** "Carelessly," "slept"
- **Line 5:** "there"
- **Line 13:** "flashed," "glass"
- **Line 18:** "clutched," "clung"
- **Line 20:** "Till," "thrilled," "little"
- **Line 25:** "sun," "love," "done"
- **Line 29:** "Over," "open," "stretch," "heather"
- **Line 30:** "Exposed," "burned"
- **Line 31:** "fury," "sudden cups"
- **Line 32:** "green"
- **Line 33:** "steepened sheer"
- **Line 35:** "unseen," "up"
- **Line 36:** "fury," "upsurge"
- **Line 37:** "world's verge"
- **Line 39:** "existence' brink"
- **Line 40:** "swift," "sink"
- **Line 41:** "few who," "enter hell"
- **Line 43:** "superhuman inhumanities"
- **Line 44:** "famous," "glories," "immemorial," "shames"
- **Line 45:** "degrees"
- **Line 46:** "peaceful"
- **Line 47:** "not," "comrades"

## METAPHOR

The poems' metaphors and similes vividly render the horror of the soldiers' experience. For example, the simile and metaphors in lines 10-13 convey their strange mix of pleasure and dread before the battle:

> For though the summer oozed into their veins
> Like the injected drug for their bones' pains,
> Sharp on their souls hung the imminent line of grass,
> Fearfully flashed the sky's mysterious glass.

First, the speaker compares the "summer" air to the "injected drug" (i.e., morphine, used heavily in WWI) that relieves the soldiers' aches and pains. In other words, the warm May breeze soothes them like a painkiller. At the same time, the "line of grass" ahead—the hilltop they'll charge over once the battle begins—seems to "h[a]ng" on their "souls" like a "Sharp" object. Pre-combat anxiety burdens and wounds their psyches. Meanwhile, the sky resembles "mysterious glass" that "Fearfully flashe[s]"—in other words, its dazzling sunlight strikes them as a confusing and frightening omen. They don't know exactly what this battle will bring, and the sky (symbolically linked with heaven, the will of the gods, etc.) won't tell them. However, they know the sky will soon "burn[] / With fury against them" (lines 30-31); the same sunny atmosphere that now warms them will soon rain bombs on them.

The similes in lines 24-27 develop this idea, depicting the soldiers and the sun as former friends who are now at odds. According to the speaker, the soldiers' weird "smile"—a metaphor for their pre-battle grimace—seems to outshine the sun they've "spurned." It's as if, by choosing unnatural war over the natural instinct to live (and enjoy the sunny day!), these troops have gained a strange kind of superhuman power.

Other similes and metaphors bring the poem's landscape to vivid life. Behind the battle line, the personified terrain seems very much on the soldiers' side: even the prickly "brambles" cling to them "like sorrowing hands," lamenting their march into danger. The soldiers themselves seem like an organic part of this landscape. In their silence, they're compared to "trees unstirred" by wind—at least, until orders to prepare for battle shake them "like a cold gust." But on the other side of the battle line, the landscape is metaphorically linked to death and "hell." Its bomb craters resemble "cups" that open to receive the soldiers' "blood"; its explosions look like hellish "fiends and flames." The battlefield is so deadly—and so churned up by shelling—that the ground itself resembles a dark sea or molten pit in which bodies "sink" or "[go] under."

**Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 10-11:** "For though the summer oozed into their veins / Like the injected drug for their bones' pains,"
- **Line 12:** "Sharp on their souls hung the imminent line of grass,"
- **Line 13:** "Fearfully flashed the sky's mysterious glass."
- **Lines 17-18:** "Where even the little brambles would not yield, / But clutched and clung to them like sorrowing hands;"
- **Line 19:** "They breathe like trees unstirred."
- **Line 20:** "Till like a cold gust thrilled the little word"
- **Lines 24-25:** "Only a lift and flare of eyes that faced / The sun, like a friend with whom their love is done."
- **Line 26:** "O larger shone that smile against the sun,—"
- **Line 27:** "Mightier than his whose bounty these have spurned."
- **Lines 31-32:** "and soft sudden cups / Opened in thousands for their blood;"
- **Lines 39-40:** "But what say such as from existence' brink / Ventured but drave too swift to sink."
- **Lines 41-42:** "The few who rushed in the body to enter hell, / And there out-fiending all its fiends and flames"
- **Line 47:** "Why speak they not of comrades that went under?"

## PERSONIFICATION

Personification helps illustrate the soldiers' complex

relationship to the landscape—and, ultimately, to nature and life itself. At first, the May landscape seems warm and friendly toward these troops. As they march up the "valley," for example, little flowers and prickly vines seem to reach out to them:

> [...] where the buttercups
> Had blessed with gold their slow boots coming up,
> Where even the little brambles would not yield,
> But clutched and clung to them like sorrowing hands;

The beautiful buttercups appear to extend a blessing to the troops marching past, while the sharp "brambles" that cling to their clothing seem to do so with "sorrowing hands." The implication is that they "would not yield" because the troops are marching toward their doom; it's as if the brambles are trying to physically hold them back from disaster. Of course, this personification (which involves the pathetic fallacy) is really a reflection of the *troops'* feelings. *They* understand that they're headed toward likely death, so part of them wants to stop and turn around. But they (and the poet) project that desire onto the surrounding landscape, as if they need to distance themselves from it in order to go on.

Later, the poem personifies the "sun," comparing it to a "friend" the soldiers have fallen out with. Indeed, the soldiers seem to reject, or "spurn[]," the "bounty" the friendly sun is offering. In other words, the soldiers are effectively turning their backs on life, nature, and all the gifts they bring. Again, these are men preparing to die.

Once they rush into battle, nature seems to turn against them. The personified "sky / burn[s] with fury against them." Ironically, this is really a description of *humans* bombarding other humans. But by projecting their warlike "fury" onto the sky, the poem extends the earlier personification, suggesting that nature is now angry at the troops who have spurned life's gifts. Like some vengeful sky-god, it seems to attack them without mercy.

**Where Personification appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 15-18:** "And the far valley behind, where the buttercups / Had blessed with gold their slow boots coming up, / Where even the little brambles would not yield, / But clutched and clung to them like sorrowing hands;"
- **Lines 24-27:** "Only a lift and flare of eyes that faced / The sun, like a friend with whom their love is done. / O larger shone that smile against the sun,— / Mightier than his whose bounty these have spurned."
- **Lines 30-31:** "And instantly the whole sky burned / With fury against them;"

## RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem ends with two related rhetorical questions, though only one is punctuated with a question mark. These span lines 39-47:

> But what say such as from existence' brink
> Ventured but drave too swift to sink.
> The few who rushed in the body to enter hell,
> And there out-fiending all its fiends and flames
> With superhuman inhumanities,
> Long-famous glories, immemorial shames—
> And crawling slowly back, have by degrees
> Regained cool peaceful air in wonder—
> Why speak they not of comrades that went under?

Depending on how the poem is punctuated (different editions use slightly different texts), the first question ends at either "sink" or "wonder." (In this version, it's "sink.") Regardless, the overall meaning is the same. Having noted that "Some [people] say God" catches dying soldiers, the speaker now asks, in effect: what about veterans who have *seen* their fellow soldiers die? What do *they* have to say on the subject? And, more to the point: why don't those who survive the "hell" of battle seem able to say *anything* about the "comrades" they lost?

The wording of these questions suggests part of the answer. The speaker declares that those who survive fierce combat do so by committing atrocities ("superhuman inhumanities"), earning "shames" as well as "glories" in the process. Part of their silence, then, involves guilt over what they had to *do* to survive. They might also feel a more general survivors' guilt—the sense that they didn't especially deserve to live compared to their comrades, pangs of remorse at having left friends behind, etc. Finally, the poem implies that the *way* their comrades died was horrific, not picturesque. These traumatized veterans saw their friends bloodied and suffering, not "caught" by "God."

**Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 39-47:** "But what say such as from existence' brink / Ventured but drave too swift to sink. / The few who rushed in the body to enter hell, / And there out-fiending all its fiends and flames / With superhuman inhumanities, / Long-famous glories, immemorial shames— / And crawling slowly back, have by degrees / Regained cool peaceful air in wonder— / Why speak they not of comrades that went under?"

## VOCABULARY

**Last hill** (Line 1) - That is, a hill over which these soldiers will have to rush into battle. For most of them, it's the "last" because they will die on the battlefield.

**Carelessly** (Line 4) - That is, without cares or worries.

**Stark** (Line 6) - Plain and severe-looking.

**Murmurous** (Line 9) - Making a buzzing or murmuring sound.

**Midge** (Line 9) - A type of small fly.

**The injected drug** (Line 11) - Refers to a painkiller such as morphine.

**Imminent** (Line 12) - Just ahead or about to happen; ominously close. Here, literally indicates that the "line of grass" is just ahead of the soldiers, but also metaphorically suggests that the battle (when they will have to cross this line) is about to start.

**Brambles** (Line 17) - Prickly vines or shrubs.

**Sorrowing** (Line 18) - Feeling or expressing grief or distress. (Part of the personification of the "brambles.")

**Thrilled** (Line 20) - Moved or passed through in a stirring or exciting way (like a "cold" wind or important news, as here).

**Begird** (Line 21) - Fasten one's clothing or armor (as with a belt); prepare oneself for battle, action, etc.

**Clamorous** (Line 23) - Noisy.

**Bounty** (Line 27) - Abundance; plentiful gifts. Can refer more specifically to a crop yield or an abundance of natural growth.

**Spurned** (Line 27) - Rejected.

**Heather** (Line 29) - A type of *heath* or short flowering shrub.

**Chasmed and steepened** (Line 33) - Indicates that the ground, blasted with shells, opens up into deep craters or chasms.

**Sheer** (Line 33) - So steep as to be perpendicular (here referring to the sides of shell craters).

**Upsurge** (Line 36) - An upward blast or explosion.

**Verge** (Line 37) - Edge; brink.

**Brink** (Line 39) - The edge, border, or margin of something. Here, "existence' brink" refers to the border between life and death.

**Drave** (Line 40) - An old-fashioned variant of "drove," here meaning "rushed forward."

**Out-fiending** (Line 42) - Surpassing in evil, violence, etc.

**Superhuman inhumanities** (Line 43) - In other words, cruelties exceeding the ordinary capacities of human beings.

**Immemorial** (Line 44) - Ancient; existing since before recorded history or human memory.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

The form of "Spring Offensive" varies depending on which version of the poem one is reading. The poem survives in two draft copies, and Owen died before he could resolve all the discrepancies between them—apparently even before he finished the poem to his satisfaction. As a result, different editors have presented the poem differently in terms of its stanza structure and word choices.

The version in this guide contains four stanzas of varying lengths. (The first stanza features a stepped line whose caesura resembles, but isn't, a stanza break.)

The poem also uses iambic pentameter—lines with five metrical feet and a da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm—as well as irregular rhyme. At first, it seems to have a regular rhyme scheme (ABBA CDDC, etc.), but this pattern soon shifts around. For example, lines 19-21 all rhyme with one another, while lines 18 and 22 don't rhyme with anything. The increasing irregularity might mirror the growing turmoil of the soldiers as they transition from resting to preparing for battle to fighting.

There are many variations in the poem's meter as well, and some lines (19, 40, and 46) are slightly shorter than others. It has been suggested that these lines are simply unfinished and that if Owen had lived, he would have filled them out to the standard pentameter length. But it's also possible that Owen—in the experimental spirit of his modernist age—purposely roughened the meter rather than following its rules to the letter. This element of roughness and unpredictability certainly matches the poem's subject matter.

### METER

The poem mostly uses iambic pentameter, with occasional variations. This means that its lines usually contain five stressed syllables and follow a "da-DUM, da-DUM" rhythm. Readers can hear this rhythm clearly in line 2, for example:

> They **fed**, | and, **ly-** | ing **ea-** | sy, **were** | at **ease** [...]

This is only a general pattern, however; Owen departs from it often for the purposes of rhythmic variety and dramatic emphasis. For example, line 12 contains extra unstressed syllables and an irregular rhythm:

> **Sharp** on their | **souls** hung | the **imm-** | inent **line** | of **grass**,

Here, the rhythmic disruption and emphasis on "Sharp" helps convey how fearful and unsettled the men are—so much so that the fear seems to cut to their "souls."

Iambic pentameter is the most common meter in English poetry; it dates back hundreds of years and was a favorite of famous poets like Chaucer and Shakespeare. Overall, it lends the poem a kind of classical grandeur. But Owen's unexpected variations—including the shorter lines 19, 40, and 46—give the poem an occasional jaggedness that fits the gritty subject of modern warfare.

### RHYME SCHEME

The poem uses rhyme throughout but doesn't follow a consistent rhyme scheme. Its opening lines seem to set up an ABBACDDC (etc.) pattern: "hill"/"ease"/"knees"/"still"/"ridge"/"world"/"swirled"/"midge." But it quickly departs from this scheme and never regains it. Meanwhile, two lines in the middle of the poem (lines 18 and 22) don't rhyme with any others. Fittingly, the orderly pattern breaks down as the chaos of battle approaches.

Owen was known for his creative use of rhyme, particularly slant rhyme. For example, his poem "Strange Meeting" uses slant rhymes only—an innovative technique at the time he was writing. There are only a few imperfect or slant rhymes in "Spring Offensive": "buttercups"/"up" (lines 15-16) and "cups"/"slopes" (lines 31-32), plus "up" in line 35 (which imperfectly echoes "cups"). Still, the effect adds some extra tension and unpredictability to Owen's war poem, as lines pair off but do not quite align.

## SPEAKER

The poem has an impersonal, third-person speaker, or what in fiction might be called a third-person omniscient narrator. The speaker has almost no explicit personality of their own but can see into the minds and hearts of the characters in the poem. For example, the speaker knows that the resting soldiers in line 2 feel "at ease," whereas the vigilant soldiers in lines 7-8 "Marvel[]" at the battlefield, "Knowing" that they've reached "the end of the world" (i.e., death or the end of life as they've known it). The speaker even claims to see into their souls: "Sharp on their souls hung the imminent line of grass" (line 12).

The speaker does show a few small traces of emotion and personality, as when exclaiming "O" in line 26 ("O larger shone that smile against the sun,—"). This exclamation seems to convey a kind of sober admiration for the soldiers. Similarly, the speaker's closing rhetorical question ("Why speak they not of comrades that went under?") undermines the "Some" who "say God caught [the dead soldiers] even before they fell." In other words, the speaker appears skeptical of those who describe war in picturesque or pious terms.

In these subtle ways, the speaker reflects the perspective of the poet, Wilfred Owen, a WWI veteran who experienced serious trauma on the battlefield (and tragically died in combat himself). Other Owen poems—most famously, "Dulce Et Decorum Est"—are openly contemptuous of myths and lies about war.

## SETTING

The poem is rich with setting description, though it never names a precise location. It takes somewhere on the Western Front (in France or Belgium) during the spring of 1918, the last year of World War I.

The Western Front was one of the main theaters (combat areas) of the war. Based on the reference to "May" (line 9), the poem most likely describes the Blücher-Yorck offensive, or Third Battle of the Aisne, within the series of battles known as the German "Spring Offensive." In that case, it would take place along the Aisne River near Paris, France. The "ridge" in line 6 might refer to the Chemin des Dames Ridge, which was contested during the battle. However, the poem's vagueness about location makes it slightly less tied to a specific event. Notice that it doesn't name the army it's describing, either! These choices would have made the poem relatable to more than one side of the conflict, and to more than a narrow audience of firsthand witnesses.

The speaker's setting description is full of stark contrasts—and symbolism. The shady "hill" on which the soldiers rest, and the "far valley behind" them, at first sound positively beautiful. The "long grass" of the hillside is pleasantly "swirled" by the "breeze," while the valley is full of "buttercups" that "blessed" the soldiers' "boots" with "gold." In part, then, the hill is a place of rest and "ease." But it's also a place of fear, because the battle is about to take place just over the ridge. The sky above the ridge is ominously "stark" and "blank," perhaps representing the emptiness of death. Once the soldiers cross over the hilltop, they enter a "hell" on earth, full of bombs, bullets, and shell craters ("Chasm[s]") opening underfoot. Many of them die, as if crossing over the symbolic "brink" of "existence[]"; a few others return, traumatized and stunned, to the "cool peaceful air" of the hillside. Again, it's as if they're returning to earth from hell, or to life from the afterlife.

Ultimately, then, the setting descriptions contribute both to the poem's frightening realism and to its broader, symbolic overtones.

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Wilfred Owen wrote "Spring Offensive" in 1918, during his service as a soldier in World War I. The poem responds to the German Spring Offensive or "Kaiser's Battle" of 1918.

Owen is recognized as a leading voice among a group of young English poets who fought in the war and wrote about their experiences. Famous members of this group, besides Owen himself, include Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, and Isaac Rosenberg. These writers revolutionized the way poets wrote about war. Instead of glorifying patriotism and battlefield heroism, they lamented the violence of combat—and violence more generally. As Owen wrote in the preface to his poems: "My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity." This perspective—embodied in poems like "Spring

Offensive," "Futility," and "Dulce Et Decorum Est"—contrasts with the kind of propaganda governments use to recruit troops and marshal support for war.

More broadly, the 1910s were an exciting time for poets, as writers such as Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot experimented with free verse and other innovative poetic techniques. Their literary movement, which became known as "modernism," emerged in response to the rapid urbanization and industrialization of Europe in the late 1800s and accelerated with the onset of World War I. Poets wanted to find a way to express these transformations in their work—and judged that the tried and true conventions of poetry weren't up to the task. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Owen never abandoned the use of meter and rhyme, but his use of slant rhyme and near rhyme were innovative in their own right. (Examples here include "buttercups"/"up" in lines 15-16 and "cups"/"slopes" in lines 31-32.)

Owen was also heavily influenced by the Romantic poets and in particular by John Keats. In "Spring Offensive," the reader can perhaps see the influence of Keats's famous phrase about a poet's responsibility to their poems: Keats said that they must "load every rift of [their] subject with ore." This poem is packed with powerful sonic effects and the kind of unrelenting intensity Keats described.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Owen wrote this poem during, and in response to, World War I (1914-1918), then known simply as The Great War. Observers at the time described this conflict as "the war to end all wars"—a phrase that proved tragically inaccurate when the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and World War II (1939-45) erupted. Around 16 million people died directly in WWI, and many more perished in the great flu outbreaks and genocides (for example, the Armenian Genocide) that followed.

The war began with the assassination of Archduke Franz-Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire (which ruled a large section of central and Eastern Europe at the time). The assassin, Gavrilo Princip, wished to see an end to Austro-Hungarian rule in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Previously arranged allegiances soon brought Germany and Russia into opposition, and before long the conflict pulled the other countries of Europe into the war as well. In 1915, the Germans sank a British passenger ship called the *Lusitania*, killing many civilians. This event, among others, drew the United States into the conflict as well.

As described in the poem, WWI was a hellishly destructive war. New weaponry—such as tanks, machine guns, and bomber planes—made combat far deadlier than in past conflicts. Life in the trenches was terrifying and deadly, and unsanitary conditions caused frequent disease. The "Spring Offensive" described in the poem—really a series of four offensives or attacks in the spring and early summer of 1918—resulted in over 800,000 casualties.

Wilfred Owen fought in France, part of what was called the Western Front, which was the war's main theater (i.e., the main site of its armed battles). In a turn of fate that underscores the tragedy of war, Owen was killed in action one week before the Armistice (truce) was signed on November 11, 1918. News of his death reached his parents on the same day church bells rang out to mark the end of the war.

# MORE RESOURCES

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life and Work — Read the Poetry Foundation's short biography of Wilfred Owen. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wilfred-owen)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of "Spring Offensive." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEC5-3qcJ1c)
- Owen and WWI — A short video feature about the poet and the war. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWIbPtbISBI)
- Remembering Owen — A BBC film on Wilfred Owen's legacy. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsPdEgC0wdk)
- Voices of WWI — Soldiers' firsthand accounts of the German Spring Offensive. (https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-the-german-spring-offensive)
- More about the "Spring Offensive" — Read about the German Spring Offensive of 1918. (https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/learning/first-world-war/german-spring-offensive-1918)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILFRED OWEN POEMS

- 1914
- Anthem for Doomed Youth
- Disabled
- Dulce et Decorum Est
- Exposure
- Futility
- Mental Cases
- Strange Meeting
- The Next War

## HOW TO CITE

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### CHICAGO MANUAL

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