The Destruction of Sennacherib

POEM TEXT

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:
Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and for ever grew still!

And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide,
But through it there rolled not the breath of his pride;
And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf,
And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.

And there lay the rider distorted and pale,
With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail:
And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,
The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown.

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

SUMMARY

The Assyrian king Sennacherib marched towards Jerusalem like a wolf preparing to attack a flock of sheep. The soldiers in Sennacherib's army wore shining purple and gold armor. Their spears were as bright as the reflection of stars on the sea, such as on a wave of the biblical sea of Galilee.

The Assyrians appeared like green summer leaves in the distance, and their banners were visible at sunset. Yet the next day, they looked like autumn leaves scattered by the wind.

This is because the Angel of Death flew down on the wind to the sleeping army. The Angel breathed in the faces of the Assyrians. They died as they slept, and the next morning their eyes looked cold and dead. Their hearts beat once in resistance to the Angel of Death, then stopped forever.

One horse lay on the ground with wide nostrils—wide not because he was breathing fiercely and proudly like he normally did, but because he was dead. Foam from his dying breaths had gathered on the ground. It was as cold as the foam on ocean waves.

The horse's rider lay nearby, in a contorted pose and with deathly pale skin. Morning dew had gathered on his forehead, and his armor had already started to rust. No noise came from the armies' tents. There was no one to hold their banners or lift their spears or blow their trumpets.

In the Assyrian capital of Ashur, the wives of the dead Assyrian soldiers wept loudly for their husbands. The statues of their gods in the temple of their ruling god, Baal, had all been destroyed. The power of these non-Jewish people, untouched by any Earthly weapons, had completely disappeared. It was gone like snow that God melts in an instant.

THEMES

GOD'S MIGHT

"The Destruction of Sennacherib" retells a biblical story in which God sends an Angel to destroy the Assyrian army that is about to lay siege to the holy city of Jerusalem. The mightiness of God could be considered the poem's central, overarching theme. That power becomes all the more amplified because the poem never explicitly mentions God until the end of the poem, even though Byron borrowed the narrative from an Old Testament story. Instead, the poem catalogues the *results* of God's power to terrifying effect, implicitly arguing that God's might goes without saying; that is, its results speak for themselves.

Just as the Assyrian army, led by Sennacherib, seems like it is about to achieve victory, God intervenes. Stanzas 3 to 5 function as a catalogue of the effects of this intervention, in order to emphasize God's omnipotence, or unlimited power. Rather than representing power as loud and theatrical, the poem depicts it as silent and invisible, thus contrasting with the flashy Assyrian military. For instance, the "Angel of Death" doesn't strike the Assyrian forces with lightning or fire, but simply "breathed in the face of the foe." The Assyrians have a chance to put up a fight or even scream in terror, but rather, "their hearts but once heaved, and for ever grew still!" In other words, they die on the spot. God's might thus undermines

military prowess. There is no battling against him or begging for mercy. The Assyrians, with their "lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown," aren't even given a chance.

The poem's most forthright statement concerning God occurs only in the last stanza, yet it functions as a kind of moral for the poem as a whole. The narrator says, "the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the swords, / Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!" In other words, God's power is so much greater than military might (represented here by "the swords") that armies metaphorically "melt"—are handily destroyed—in the face of it. In addition to triumphing over powerful armies, the Hebrew God also triumphs over the "false" gods of other peoples. When the "idols"—images of these false gods—are destroyed "in the temple of Baal," this means that God has also defeated the Assyrians' gods. (Baal is a generic name used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to gods other than the God of the Hebrews). Similarly, "Ashur" refers both to the Assyrian capital and to their nation's ruling deity. The words "the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail" thus represents the double nature of God's victory: God has vanquished the earthly power of the Assyrians (their army and king), and he has also defeated their divine power (their gods Ashur and Baal).

The omnipotence of God thus throws the limits of human ability into stark relief. God effortlessly rewards the faithful and punishes their enemies, no matter that enemy's earthly power, and there's nothing anyone can do to stop God.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-24

DEATH

While the poem's descriptions of the destruction of Sennacherib's army exemplify God's might, they also detail the terror of mortality. More broadly, there's a way to read this poem that secularizes it—in other words, it's possible to read it not as a necessarily religious poem, but as a work that details the sad inevitability of death.

Stanzas 2 through 5 supply the reader with images of death on a visceral level. They act as a kind of montage that essentially shows the ravages of time sped up to happen over the course of one night. That is, everything that happens to the Assyrian army here will eventually happen to all humans, whether through sudden deaths like the soldiers' or just the gradual process of aging. Stanza 2 invokes a seasonal metaphor to describe the destruction of Sennacherib's army. While they start like the promising "leaves of the forest when Summer is green," they end up "withered and strown" like Autumn leaves. Half a year passes in an instant, suggesting that all life is fleeting.

A similar effect occurs as the poem details the power of the "Angel of Death." In line 18, for instance, there is "rust on the mail" (i.e. armor) of the soldiers, as if many years have passed, rather than just one night. Additionally, when the speaker says the dried foam near the horse's mouth is as "cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf," the poem once again employs a natural simile to describe death. These images emphasizing death as a natural force (even if the circumstances of death here are based on God). So, it makes sense to read this "Angel of Death" not just as an emissary sent by God to ravage this particular army, but also as a symbol for the force of death and time in the world in general.

The poem's images also provoke sympathy and sadness. Although readers might be happy that the "villains" have been defeated, they can also recognize the immense suffering that death causes. Moreover, readers may also recognize their own future deaths in these images. Stanzas 3 to 5 offer ghastly close-ups of death, as when the "eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill, / And their hearts but once heaved, and forever grew still!" Stanza 5 presents an even more vivid death: "And there lay the rider distorted and pale, / With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail." Here, the poem is so close to the rider it can even see the droplets of dew that have formed on his head overnight.

Images like these have a complex tone. On one hand, it's easy to feel triumphant over the rider whose "distorted" pose makes readers feel distant from him—readers stand above his crumpled, defeated body. On the other hand, "the dew on his brow" is such a gentle image that it might provoke sympathy, a desire to mop his brow and nurse him back to health, as if he were only sick. A similar moment occurs when "the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail" in line 22. Although this line represents total victory over the Assyrians, it showcases the saddest effects of such a victory. Women have lost their husbands and are grief-stricken. It becomes difficult to feel completely joyful over a victory that causes such suffering.

Through such relentlessly devastating imagery, the poem indirectly encourages readers to confront the chilling specter of death and accept that it comes for everyone sooner or later. It also suggests that death is always somewhat tragic, even when it's "foes" who are dying.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-21

MILITARY HUBRIS

The biblical "lesson" that might be taken from the poem goes something like this: military strength and impressiveness do not guarantee success. Ultimately, God decides who wins and who loses. The glorious description of Sennacherib's gleaming army thus becomes ironic,

demonstrating hubris (excessive pride) rather than actual might.

The first stanza offers a description of Sennacherib's impressive army that is undercut by the blunt final line of stanza 2: "That host on the morrow lay withered and strown." The poem begins *in medias res*, in the middle of a war with the Assyrian army, just as they are about to invade Jerusalem: "The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold." Beginning in such a way increases the level of excitement, and so heightens the seeming glory of the Assyrian army. This gets amplified even further by the anapestic meter (da da DUM | da da DUM), the galloping rhythm of which mimics the charging of the Assyrian horses.

The poem then offers a visual description of the army designed to evoke its might. The soldiers are "gleaming in purple and gold," two colors associated with wealth and royalty. Their spears "gleam like stars on the sea, / When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee." Here, the poem describes the Assyrians on their weapons in a classical manner—it could have been plucked from an epic poem like *The Iliad*.

Yet rather than continuing on like *The Iliad* to describe a heroic and glorious battle scene, the poem suddenly veers into different territory. By the next morning all the Assyrians are dead, without a single fight having taken place. None of their military might gets put to use. Instead, it comes off as bluster, a lot of flashiness and pride, all of which proves useless in the end.

The final two lines of the poem evoke how easily such military might turns to hubris: "And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword, / Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!" The poem suggests that faith in military power, rather than faith in God, is ultimately hubris. The might of the Assyrians simply melts away in the face of God's power; "swords" have no effect at all. This moment can also be read as more generally admonishing humans against believing they are indestructible. The poem's conclusion suggests that even the most powerful army can be struck down unexpectedly; they might fall ill, encounter insurmountable weather conditions, or be destroyed by other forces beyond their control.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Lines 13-20
- Lines 23-24

TRIUMPH OF THE DOWNTRODDEN

Just as the poem condemns pride, it celebrates the humble and downtrodden. The poem implies the presence of the Hebrew people, rather than explicitly stating it. In this way, the precariousness of their position gets amplified, as if it's too uncertain to even mention aloud. Here, the Hebrew people represent downtrodden people more generally, as their lives are totally dependent on what happens outside their city walls among the powerful. The poem argues, however, that this powerlessness can and should end, using God's deliverance of the Hebrews as evidence.

The only somewhat direct mention of the Hebrews comes in the first line, "The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold." Here, "the fold" represents the Hebrews, depicted through a simile as helpless sheep being attacked by a wolf. After this moment, the poem goes on to describe the mightiness of the Assyrian forces, without mentioning the Hebrews again. It's as if we can only understand the Hebrews in terms of the danger they face. The Assyrians are a resplendent army "gleaming in purple and gold," while Hebrews humbly wait for the Lord to deliver them from this danger.

The poem's perspective immediately makes the Hebrews sympathetic. They're the underdogs, while the Assyrians are a frightening menace. Historically speaking, this was a bold move for Byron to make: depicting Jewish people in a positive light elicited much criticism from Byron's anti-semitic countrymen. Yet the poem does its best to win over anti-semitic readers. Since it emphasizes the dangers faced by the Hebrews, rather than describing the people themselves, it forces readers to put themselves in the Hebrews' place. Readers become "the fold," watching from behind the walls of Jerusalem as this terrifying army approaches.

In last stanza's admonishment of military hubris and false idols, it implicitly praises the Hebrews, again without discussing them directly. They have been rewarded for their humility and faith. That is, their helplessness is an implied contrast to "the might of the Gentile" which "hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!" Again, the poem emphasizes that Hebrews don't have the kind of might that militaristic forces like the Assyrians do. Instead, the humility and faith of the Hebrews mean that they will eventually triumph *despite* the meagerness of their earthly power. On a religious level, the poem thus advocates for faith over military or political power. More generally, though, the poem demonstrates a belief that the weak and oppressed will eventually be saved from their oppressors. Essentially, "The Destruction of Sennacherib" puts readers in the shoes of the downtrodden and argues that one day their unjust oppression will end.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 3-8
- Lines 23-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,

The poem begins *in medias res* (literally, "in the middle of things"). The Assyrian king Sennacherib has been leading his army on a campaign through the Kingdom of Judah and is about to lay siege to Jerusalem. The poem starts off with Sennacherib visible in the distance. Cutting through the lead-up to this event, the omniscient narrator instead chooses to place the reader at the start of what promises to be a climactic battle.

Starting a poem *in medias res* heightens its sense of tension and excitement. It sweeps the reader up in the military fervor of the impending battle. In contemporary terms, this is a very cinematic move: it's as if the poem opens with a shot of the charging Assyrian army. In more classical terms, this technique is borrowed from the epic tradition inherited from Greek and Latin poets. For instance, *The Iliad* begins in the middle of the Trojan war, rather than at the start of it. By beginning this way, the poem establishes certain expectations for what's going to happen. A reader in 1815, when this poem was published, would have been accustomed to poems invoking the epic tradition, and would have thus expected a series of scenes detailing military valor. The poem's meter further emphasizes the military feel of this first line. The anapestic tetrameter (da da DUM | da da DUM) has a galloping feel to it that mimics the charging of horses and lends the poem an irresistible momentum.

At the same time, a contemporary reader, familiar with the Christian tradition, would also have known what's about to happen: God destroys the Assyrian army; there are no scenes of military glory. Furthermore, by comparing Sennacherib to a wolf and the Hebrews to a "fold," or a group of sheep, the poem treats this less as an encounter between two armies and more as a potential slaughter. The comparison to sheep also calls to mind the Christian use of the word "flock" to describe a congregation. This simile, then, does a lot of work. It establishes the good guys (the Hebrews) and the bad guys (the Assyrians). It makes the reader root for the underdog (the Hebrews) and frames those underdogs in Christian terms. This latter move is a radical choice because these are not Christians but Jews, and Jews had experienced (and continued to experience) a long history of persecution and discrimination in England.

So, from the very first line, the poem messes with a Christian reader's expectations. One might expect epic battle scenes to come, except the astute reader knows that God is going to intervene before the battle gets underway. One might also expect a racist portrayal of Jews, given the culture in which this poem was written, but instead the Jews are talked about as if they were Christians.

LINE 2

And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;

In its second line, the poem describes the Assyrian forces as "gleaming in purple and gold," two colors associated with royalty. This is an immediate reminder that Sennacherib is an absolute ruler: his subjects have to do what he says, and the resplendence of his army is ultimately a reflection of his own pride. The poem sets these forces of earthly royalty in implicit contrast to God, who doesn't exhibit the same flashy splendor as the Assyrians. Furthermore, the poem doesn't describe the Hebrews at all. Instead, the reader is left to imagine them as embodying the opposite qualities of the Assyrians—of not being clad in purple and gold, but rather possessing deeper faith and humility.

Additionally, by now the poem has established itself as taking place in the past tense. Yet this isn't a distant past; it's not spoken from 1815 as Byron looks back 2500 years to this biblical siege. Instead, it's as if the speaker describes the siege directly after it's happened, after having witnessed it in person. This in-person quality stems in part from the narrator's ability to evoke the physical imagery of the siege, such as the colors of the Assyrian army. The poem brings these events to life by focusing on their physicality, and particularly on the bodies of the Assyrian army, while at the same time never letting the reader lose sight of the fact that this is a biblical narrative.

In other words, the poem encourages the reader to simultaneously view it as both real and constructed (or *re*-constructed from past events). Poems in general are often good at maintaining this kind of paradox. Look, for instance, at how this line introduces rhyme ("fold"/"gold"), immediately heightening the reader's awareness of the poem *as a poem*, as something that is constructed and artificial, even as its imagery begins to suck the reader into the "reality" of the Assyrian army. Introducing the rhyme right away also heightens the poem's intensity. Rather than delaying the rhyme, it seems that the poem can't wait, as if it's tightly wound and ready to spring into action.

LINES 3-4

And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

The final two lines of the first stanza merge vivid imagery with Biblical allusion. The poem uses a simile to compare the spear tips to stars, again emphasizing the visual appearance of the army. Yet continuing to pursue this comparison, the poem says the spears are like the *reflections* of the stars on the sea. This allows the poem to incorporate motion into its imagery, so that the spears seem to move like the reflections of stars on a wave. At the same time, that idea that the spears are only reflections (rather than actual stars) hints that their strength may not be all it seems to be. Finally, the poem specifies that the sea is

Galilee, mostly known by Christian readers for its appearances in the New Testament, where it figures prominently in the life of Jesus.

By looping in this final specification, the poem again links its Old Testament material to New Testament references, thereby appealing to Christian readers. In Biblical commentary, this is a technique known as typology. According to typology, people and events in the New Testament mirror those from the Old Testament. Earlier events foreshadow later ones, and "types" of things happen. So, one way to think about what Byron is doing here on a broad, theological level is that he's typologically weaving Christian references into a Jewish story—not to appropriate this story, but to appeal to otherwise prejudiced Christian readers.

Beyond these broad concerns, lines 3 and 4 also have interesting things happening on a formal level. As the elaborate comparison between spears and "stars on the sea" indicates, these lines contain a complex array of connections and transformations. It's a signature mark of Byron's poetry that he's able to be wordy and complex without being dense. Byron always entertains. Here, he actually makes these multi-level comparisons seem rather simple. Part of the way he's able to do that is through the poem's meter. Because each foot contains three beats, the poem can contain a little extra information in its four-foot structure compared with an iambic meter (which would have only two beats per foot). Consider line 3, for example:

> "And the sheen | of their spears | was like stars | on the sea,

Furthermore, just as the anapests mimic the galloping horses in lines 1 and 2, they mimic the rolling waves in lines 3 and 4. How? Well, again it's partly because they create more space between stressed syllables, so it's possible to imagine those stresses as the periodic crash of waves. And it's partly because that extra space heightens the build-up to the stressed syllables, so when they come, the reader feels the stress more emphatically. At any rate, this mimetic relationship between wave and meter makes the introduction of the wave comparison seem like a natural extension of what's come before.

LINES 5-8

Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:
Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

At the beginning of the second stanza, the Assyrians have approached the city of Jerusalem and made camp outside the city, in preparation for invading the city the next day. The Hebrews see the Assyrians' green banners in the distance looking like "leaves of the forest" against the sunset. As in the previous stanza, the poem employs a simile from the natural world to describe the Assyrian army. This simile has several effects.

First, the simile links the poem, published in 1815, to the classical epics of ancient Greek and Roman literature. For instance, in *The Iliad*—which describes a portion of the ten-year war between Greek and Trojan forces—Homer often uses natural metaphors to describe battle scenes. The events of *The Iliad* occurred 1000 years before those of "The Destruction of Sennacherib." (Though, interestingly, *The Iliad* was probably written around the same time that these biblical events were happening.) At any rate, the gesture here can be linked to the typological impulse identified in Stanza 1. Here, however, rather than linking the poem's events to a Christian understanding, Byron suggests a connection to classical literature. Again, this choice can be read as making an appeal to prejudiced readers by playing up forms traditional forms that contemporary readers already valued.

Second, this stanza's pair of parallel similes establishes the connection between human events and the natural world, allowing the reader to see military events as dependent on natural rhythms and forces. While lines 5 and 6 present a pleasing natural image, the next two lines play up the destructiveness of nature. While the Assyrians approach Jerusalem looking like green summer leaves, by the next day they have been strewn on the ground like autumn leaves. The following stanzas elaborate on how this death was caused by the "Angel of Death," but for now the reader is left to imagine the Assyrian massacre as an event as natural as the turning of the seasons.

The second stanza also introduces a metrical variation that will appear in the poem at various points. Namely, the poem drops a syllable in the opening foot (here, lines 6 and 8). So, while line 5 begins with a standard anapest,

> Like the leaves

line 6 begins with an iamb:

> That host

This happens again in line 8, again with the same phrase, "That host." Because the poem then falls back into its regular anapestic tetrameter, and because readers are so used to seeing iambs in poetry in general, this variation might almost go unnoticed. However, one subtle effect it does have is to establish the parallel structure of these lines, emphasizing the similar structures between lines 5 and 7, and between lines 6 and 8. It also slightly increases the emphasis on "host," perhaps foreshadowing the attack on the army that's about to come.

LINES 9-12

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and for ever grew still!

Stanza 3 explains the mysterious destruction of the Assyrian forces: God sent his Angel of Death to wipe them out. For the next few stanzas, the poem zooms in on these events and provides vivid, concrete detail about the killing of these soldiers. The reader is given a window into these events that would normally be impossible for a mortal. The reader watches the Angel of Death fly with spread wings on the wind, down to the sleeping soldiers. As he passes over them, he breathes in their faces, instantly killing them.

In line 11, the poem really zooms in: "And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill, / And their hearts but once heaved, and for ever grew still!" The poem (and the reader) watches the soldiers die. First, their eyes grow cold and distant. Then, it's as if the poem is inside their bodies, watching as the soldiers' hearts beat once more in resistance to death, then cease moving forever.

In depicting the Assyrian deaths so vividly, the poem gets to have its battle scene after all (sort of). That is, even though the clash between Assyrian and Hebrew forces never takes place, the poem still provides a dynamic and violent sequence. It's just that now that all violence is perpetrated by a messenger of God. And while a "normal" battle scene would depict a conflict between humans and other humans, here the reader's given a glimpse of purely natural forces instead.

That is, in a way, these soldiers die a natural (even super-natural) death. There are no sword wounds, arrow piercings, burn marks, or traces of poison. Historically speaking, it's possible that the Old Testament based this story on a plague that ravaged the Assyrian troops. After all, natural forces like disease and weather have just as much an effect on wars as military strength. Through the key symbol of the Angel of Death, this stanza makes it clear that death is an unstoppable force in all human lives, whether or not it comes through God's direct intervention.

LINES 13-16

And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide,
But through it there rolled not the breath of his pride;
And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf,
And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.

The fourth stanza builds on the third stanza's unflinching examination of the Assyrians' deaths. If there's something a little (or a lot) disturbing about the descriptions of death that the poem continues to elaborate, that's part of the point. Though readers are probably rooting for the defenseless inhabitants of Jerusalem, that doesn't mean they necessarily want to have the effects of a massacre shoved in their faces. This is a quality common to classical epics: they undermine the reader's ability to "root" for certain sides, or at least root for one side for long. Instead, such poems' descriptions of death leave readers with a feeling of the fundamental tragedy of human conflict, no matter which side seems more sympathetic. That feeling is further amplified by this stanza's description of a dead horse.

Notice how the poem chooses to describe the horse before his rider. The horse becomes the first specifically described casualty of this massacre. One effect of this is that it neutralizes the sense of there being "sides" in this scene. That is, this horse had no idea what this war was being fought over, so it's hard to see him as a villain. So, in effect, the poem's first specific image of death is an innocent one.

This is move capitalizes on the fact that it's often the animal deaths in stories that upset audiences the most. (It's worth noting too that Byron himself loved animals, including horses, and that he kept many pets wherever he lived.) Here, the poem uses personification in referring to the war horse's "pride," assigning him emotion and thus acknowledging his "personhood." In other words, the poem treats the horse with as much respect and sympathy as it would treat a person—or perhaps even *more* sympathy, since the horse never understood this fight or chose to participate in it.

In depicting the sympathetic figure of the horse, the poem also continues its project of linking human affairs to the natural world, and thereby breaking down the division between the two. That is, horses get killed just like people, and people get killed just like horses.

Furthermore, the horse's "foam" gets compared to the "spray of the rock-beating surf," which—besides adding to the sad grotesquery of this sight—adds another connection to natural phenomena. These deaths thus get caught up in a web of natural occurrences: the soldier's deaths are first described in terms fallen autumn leaves, and then in terms of a horse's death, which gets connected to the sea. The "rock-beating surf," in turn, refers back to the comparison in the first stanza between soldiers and waves, and between spears and the reflections of stars on those waves. This stanza makes these natural cycles feel truly inescapable, reinforcing the poem's thematic focus on the frightening inevitability of death.

LINES 17-20

And there lay the rider distorted and pale,
With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail:
And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,
The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown.

After detailing the horse's death, the poem moves on to describe an individual human death. The horse's rider lies nearby; dew has formed on his forehead over night and his armor has begun to rust, as if years have passed.

Like the last stanza, this one begins on an iambic foot ("And there"). One effect this has is to emphasize the deictic nature of this description. Deictic phrases are those that depend on additional context information in order to make sense; they "point" to something outside themselves. The poem says "there," gesturing at a specific rider in a specific place on the battlefield. Though of course the reader can't be physically present at this imagined scene, using a deictic phrase helps emphasize the fact that this *was* a real event, that individual people really did die here. It's *as if* the reader is right there seeing it happen.

This specificity helps elicit a complex reaction to these images of the soldier's body. On the one hand, this soldier would have pillaged Jerusalem and killed countless inhabitants, if he had lived. On the other hand, the image of him presents a certain delicacy that makes it hard to view the soldier without sympathy. The reader knows that he died defenseless, without even a chance to beg for mercy. The dew could be sweat, as if the soldier were only sick with fever. And the rust suggests the ravages of time, to which we all are susceptible.

There's also a third layer of meaning to this stanza, hidden beneath the sympathetic/non-sympathetic interpretations of the soldier's death, which is the aestheticization or softening of death. There's a beauty to the line, "With dew on his brow, and rust on his mail." That beauty creates a gentle glow of pleasure in the reader, a pleasure related to the fact that even the most violent images can also contain exquisite beauty. Such aesthetic effects cause the reader to become distanced from the content of what's described. From this distance, the reader can regard the scene with an eye almost like that of a god, or an "Angel of Death." Thus, the poem leads to the reader to sympathize with everyone involved: the Hebrews, the Assyrians, and even the Angel of Death, for whom all of this is a night's work in the sad and beautiful task of maintaining the balance of the world according to God's will.

Next, the poem evokes the silence of the whole camp. The poem evokes the emptiness that death leaves in its wake, as the camp becomes a kind of tableau or an empty stage. There's an eeriness to this empty camp. It acts as a final image of military hubris, showing all these instruments of war abandoned and useless. The banners, lances, and trumpet become metonyms for the soldiers themselves, showing how death instantly undoes the potential of even powerful entities.

LINE 21

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,

At the start of the final stanza, the scene suddenly changes. The poem flashes forward to the Assyrian capital of Ashur when the inhabitants have learned of Sennacherib's defeat. There, the widowed wives of the soldiers are inconsolable in their public mourning.

In this first line of the final stanza, the poem does a lot of new work. For one, it introduces what might be the most sympathetic portrayal of the Assyrians in the whole poem. Rather than continuing to portray the events of the poem as a strictly military defeat, this line broadens the scope of the inflicted suffering. The deaths of these soldiers continue to have ramifications in civilians' lives, so that the reader gets a glimpse of the brutal and ongoing toll that war takes on entire societies. Throughout the widows' wailing, the poem depicts the inherent tragedy in any military victory.

The line is also noteworthy for the way it jumps forward in time, particularly because it does so as if it's *not* jumping forward. The continued anaphora of "And" here seems to suggest that this scene is just another detail in the scene the poem has been describing for three stanzas. However, for news of the army's defeat to have reached the Assyrian capital, several days must have passed. By glossing over this time difference, the poem heightens the dramatic effect of the defeat and gives the reader what amounts to a God's-eye view. God, the speaker subtly suggests here, doesn't experience time the way humans do (since, after all, he was the one who invented it). Instead, he can jump forward instantly, seeing connections between events that humans might miss.

Just as the beauty of death in the previous stanza lets the reader relate to the Angel of Death, here the insignificance of time lets the reader relate to God and experience some of his power in a way that feels immediate. Yet the cool detachment of a vengeful God contrasts with the sympathetic portrayal of the affected widows, so that the reader experiences both contradictory feelings at once: God's confidence and the widows' misery. This half-human, half-god point of view represents one of the most powerful aspects of an omniscient narrative: such narratives can expose readers to an amount of suffering that is almost unbearable to a mortal mind.

LINES 22-24

And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

Just as the first line of the final stanza seemed to speed up time, the following line suggests a kind of augmented relationship between cause and effect. That is, Sennacherib's defeat isn't just a military defeat; rather, it shakes the foundations of Assyrian society to the point where even their temples seem to crumble.

"[T]he idols are broke in the temple of Baal," says the poem. Baal is a generic name used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to the "false" gods worshipped by other religions. The idols that have been broken in his temple are the statues of Assyrian gods. The specific use of the word "idol" is important here because the Old Testament specifically commands against making idols of other gods. Thus, their destruction here represents an enforcement of specifically Jewish values.

That's the symbolic resonance of the "broke" idols. Metaphorically, they have to do with how this defeat shakes the foundation of Assyrian society. Like a kind of earthquake, the events of the poem shatter the Assyrian statues. Yet how exactly do the statues break, literally? The poem doesn't answer that question. Instead of trying to find an answer, it might be better to think of this line as a swerve into poetic logic, where the metaphorical becomes real. That is, in the poem, the metaphorical shaking of a society's foundations results in real statues breaking.

After setting the scene for the full ramifications of God's actions, the poem ends with a kind of summary and moral: God is more powerful than any earthly mortal. Specifically, the poem uses the term "Gentile" to refer to non-Jewish people (here, the Assyrians). The Assyrians, as non-believers, are defeated not by "the sword" (that is, by the weapons of other humans) but by the "glance of the Lord." This glance represents all the power of God, which he wields effortlessly, in contrast the weapons of humans, which cost great effort both to make and to use.

Additionally, the poem ends on one more natural simile. Whereas stanza 2 invoked summer and fall, here the poem references winter and spring. The power of the Assyrians has melted like snow at the start of spring. Again, the poem links God's power to the natural world, so that the two could almost be interchangeable. So, this ending simile can also be seen as an admonishment against thinking that any earthly power is permanent. All mortal works, however grand, eventually melt like snow at the turning of the seasons.

One final note: the poem's use of "Gentile" (a term for non-Jewish people) in a negative context represents a political gesture on the part of Byron. After all, most of Byron's readers would have been non-Jewish people! By casting gentiles (and thus his readers) in a negative light, Byron makes a bold statement about identifying with the oppressed and downtrodden. Another way to think about this move is that—after luring his readers in through Christian tropes—at the last minute Byron asks them to no longer identify as Christians at all. That is, for Byron, caring for the oppressed is more important than maintaining religious hierarchies. With this final gesture, the poem suggests again that the domination of other people is full of hubris, and will eventually be punished.

SYMBOLS

THE ANGEL OF DEATH

To put it bluntly, the Angel of Death symbolizes death. But within that symbolism, he also represents a variety of attitudes and experiences surrounding death.

Theologically, The Angel of Death represents God's unlimited power, and the ease with which God wields that power. That is, if God wants to wipe out an entire army, all he has to do is send an angel who will breathe in their faces, killing them instantly. This means that death is a built-in aspect of God's power and of God's essential identity.

Relatedly, the Angel of Death also represents nature. The poem spends a lot of energy using similes to link its events to images from the natural world (for instance, describing the fallen soldiers as fallen autumn leaves in line 7). The Angel of Death, whose means of killing is basically the same as what might be called "natural causes," thus represents how death is an integral element of nature—and by extension, human existence.

As a whole, the poem is a reckoning with death, and the Angel of Death acts as a symbol for the ways humans use religion and the natural world to come to terms with it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast, / And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;"

POETIC DEVICES

SIMILE

"The Destruction of Sennacherib" makes extensive use of simile. As a whole, this gestures towards how classical epics like *The Iliad* use simile, thus linking the poem to a larger culture of war poetry and also appealing to readers who would have been familiar with classical literature.

Byron's poem focuses in particular on comparisons with the natural world. One reason for doing so is that this links human events with nature, thus suggesting that there's not that much difference between what happens to people and what happens to things in the natural world. For instance, the poem's final simile, in its closing two lines, states that "the might of the Gentile ... / Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!" Here, human decline gets compared to a late winter thaw, as if both are aspects of the same unavoidable process.

As in the above example, the poem's comparisons with the natural world also establish an equivalence between God and nature. Here, the poem implicitly compares the "glance" of God to the sun's warmth as it melts snow. In this way, although the events of the poem are extraordinary (God sends the Angel of Death to wipe out a whole army overnight), these natural similes serve to fit them into the ordinary course of the natural world. So, while the *way* the Assyrian soldiers died is remarkable, the simile emphasizes that the *fact* they died is unremarkable; after all, everyone will die sooner or later.

Relatedly, the first stanza's similes employ natural imagery that comes from the Bible. "[T]he fold" in line 1 follows the Christian

tradition of referring to believers as sheep. And "Galilee" in line 4 refers to the Sea of Galilee, which figures prominently in the Bible (especially the New Testament). Both of these instances further link religion, nature, and human beings.

The similes in stanza two, which compare the destruction of the Assyrians to the transition in foliage between summer and fall, provide the poem's clearest statement of the parallel between human decline and natural rhythms. This theme is also expressed in the fourth stanza when the poem compares the foam at a dead horse's mouth to the spray of surf. Additionally, the sea imagery here picks up on the earlier reference to the Sea of Galilee, showing how all of these various natural processes are linked in an unbroken cycle.

All in all, these comparisons depict the interconnection between entities as varied as humans, animals, leaves, seas, snow, seasons, angels, and God. The human, the natural, and the divine all bleed into each other.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "like the wolf on the fold"
- **Line 3:** "like stars on the sea"
- **Line 5:** "Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green"
- **Line 7:** "Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown"
- **Line 16:** "as the spray of the rock-beating surf"
- **Line 24:** "like snow in the glance of the Lord!"

ANAPHORA

Throughout the poem, the anaphora of "And" (also an example of polysyndeton) emphasizes the logical connections between one event and the next. For instance, in the third stanza, the poem describes the actions of the Angel of Death by linking them with "And," rather than describing each action as its own sentence. It goes something like this: "The Angel of Death did A / *And* B / *And* C / *And* D." Constructing sentences in this manner helps unify the effects of the Angel's intervention and highlight the extent of his power.

The anaphora also heightens the dramatic nature of these events. Because the sentences get extended, there's a breathless quality to the poem's enumeration of all these images. The anaphora amps up the poem's excitement, much as its anapests bring to mind the rhythm of a galloping horse.

The final stanza provides a good example of how the repeated "And" raises the emotional pitch. After each "And" in the stanza, the poem describes an aspect of the Assyrian defeat: the wail of the widows, the broken idols, the lost power. In this way, the anaphora it functions like a lament, listing all the sad things that have happened to the Assyrians.

Anaphora is also a common feature of ancient Hebrew verse. So, by employing it here, the poem gestures to its source material. It subtly references and incorporates the tradition it's drawing from, thereby making that tradition more accessible to an audience that likely prejudiced against that tradition.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "And"
- **Line 3:** "And"
- **Line 10:** "And"
- **Line 11:** "And"
- **Line 12:** "And"
- **Line 13:** " And"
- **Line 15:** "And"
- **Line 16:** "And"
- **Line 17:** " And"
- **Line 19:** "And"
- **Line 21:** " And"
- **Line 22:** "And"
- **Line 23:** "And"

CAESURA

Caesuras begin to appear in the second half of the poem, mostly in the last two stanzas. In general, they signal a slowing down of the poem's rhythms. This slowing down represents the death and defeat of the Assyrian forces.

Whereas at the start of the poem the anapestic meter served to represent the galloping of horses, all the horses are dead by the time the caesuras begin. Instead, in the fifth stanza, the poem describes an eerie quiet: "And the tents were all silent, the banners alone, / The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown." These caesuras also create an instance of asyndeton, which contrasts sharply with the excited "Ands" present throughout much of the poem.

A similar effect occurs in stanza 3. Here, the pause in line 12 mimics the stopping of the soldiers' hearts: "And their hearts but once heaved, and for ever grew still!" By mimicking the stopping of the soldiers' hearts with an unexpected caesura, the poem puts the reader in the place of the soldiers. Taken together, these pauses all contribute to the reader's sympathy for the Assyrians, because they keep the reader from rushing past images of suffering and death.

A final caesura comes in line 23. Here the pause has a rhetorical effect, allowing the poem an aside ("unsmote by the sword"). This final slowing down prolongs the dramatic conclusion of these last two lines. And by breaking up the second-to-last line of the poem, it allows the final line to dramatically swoop in as a unified conclusion.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** ","
- **Line 18:** ","

- **Line 19:** “,”
- **Line 20:** “,”
- **Line 23:** “,”

ALLUSION

"The Destruction of Sennacherib" is one giant allusion: it's based on a biblical story found in the Books of Kings and Isaiah. The story relates the Assyrian invasion of the kingdom of Judah and the subsequent siege of the capital, Jerusalem. Although it seemed like the the Assyrian forces were going to capture the city, the Bible says that God sent an angel to kill the Assyrians in the middle of the night.

Stanza 2 also borrows a famous image from the third canto of Dante's *Inferno*. In this section of the *Inferno*, Dante compares the descent of souls into hell to the falling of autumn leaves. Similarly, lines 7 and 8 compare the killing of the Assyrian soldiers (who, according to the Christian religion, would then go to hell) to the falling of autumn leaves.

The use of this allusion to Dante (the great poet of medieval Christianity) within a poem referring to events from the Hebrew bible helps to wed Christian and Jewish imagery. The poem also incorporates Christianity in the use of the word "fold" (which literally means a fenced enclosure of sheep), and which in Christian traditions is commonly used to refer practicing Christians.

All in all, these mixed allusions suggest that Christian readers can and should be sympathetic to stories from other religions. This multicultural poem provides many ways in for readers of various faiths, and ultimately it's interested in providing a resonant depiction of oppression, death, and the forces of nature, rather than promoting any one view of religion.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,”
- **Lines 7-8:** “Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown, / That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.”

CLIMAX (FIGURE OF SPEECH)

The final stanza employs the poetic device of climax as it lists the effects of the Angel of Death's actions, each one more devastating than the last: first the mourning widows, then the destroyed temples, and finally the weakening of a whole society.

This use of climax in this stanza builds on a structure that has been used throughout the poem. Because each stanza functions as a single sentence, the stanzas in general tend to have a quality of enumeration. That is, each stanza focuses on a particular scene and lists different elements of that scene. For the most part, these stanzas don't escalate in the way the final stanza does. Rather, they tend to list effects that are roughly equal in intensity.

The final stanza, however, lists effects that have greater and greater ramifications for Assyrian society, starting with individual mourning, moving on to the undermining of a religion, and finally to the ruin of a whole military and political system!

This use of climax also suggests interconnection. That is, military defeat, grief, and the breakdown of religion are all connected, and what connects them is the origin of nature and death—which Judaism and Christianity (and Islam) call God.

Where Climax (Figure of Speech) appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-24:** “ And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail, / And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal; / And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword, / Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!”

END-STOPPED LINE

The poem relies entirely on end-stopped lines. One reason for this is the poem's meter. In comparison to iambs (da DUM), anapests (da da DUM) are more energetic and harder to control. So, when they do get put to use, writers have to work hard to keep them under control, often by employing end-stopped lines. The flip-side of this is that anapests make end-stopped lines interesting; they fill a relatively static structure with energy.

The end-stopped lines also emphasize the catalogue-like nature of the poem and make room for its related use of anaphora. When you make something like a shopping list, you're using end-stopped lines. So, when the poem lists the effects of the Angel of Death, it's employing a similar structure. The anaphora of "And" contributes to this list- or catalogue-like structure. That's one of the strengths of anaphoric poetry in general, that it allows for the creation of emotionally resonant lists. It replaces the tension and energy of enjambment with repetition, which creates a kind of piling-on effect.

For instance, while something like a Shakespearian soliloquy uses enjambment to convey the twists and turns of thought, a poem like this uses end-stopped lines to convey how the effects a single event (a massacre) accumulate to the point of undermining a whole society. Thus, the poem uses end-stopped lines to its benefit, creating a clear vision of a powerful event in biblical history.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “,”
- **Line 2:** “;”

- **Line 3:** “,”
- **Line 4:** “.”
- **Line 5:** “,”
- **Line 6:** “:”
- **Line 7:** “,”
- **Line 8:** “.”
- **Line 9:** “,”
- **Line 10:** “;”
- **Line 11:** “,”
- **Line 12:** “!”
- **Line 13:** “,”
- **Line 14:** “;”
- **Line 15:** “,”
- **Line 16:** “.”
- **Line 17:** “,”
- **Line 18:** “:”
- **Line 19:** “,”
- **Line 20:** “.”
- **Line 21:** “,”
- **Line 22:** “;”
- **Line 23:** “,”
- **Line 24:** “!”

PARALLELISM

The poem's use of parallelism helps it provide a sense of order to the events it describes. In general, it suggests how effects can ripple out from a single cause, and how different events in nature mirror each other. That is, the Angel of Death's massacre of the Assyrian forces creates many effects that all have a kind of parallel structure, because they proceed from the same event.

The poem's first big use of parallelism happens in the second stanza, which employs a kind of interlocking parallelism. The structure of line 5 parallels that of line 7:

> Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green,

And:

> Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,

Line 6 then parallels line 8:

> That host with their banners at sunset were seen:

And:

> That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

These lines compare the destruction of the Assyrians to the withering of falling of leaves in Autumn. Their parallelism creates a mirroring effect, in which natural processes and human events seem intertwined.

In stanzas 5 and 6, parallelism, combined with asyndeton, helps create a catalogue of the effects of the Angel of Death, such as in line 20, "the lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown." Each phrase is:

- "the" + battle-related noun + adjective beginning with "un"

By phrasing these events in such a way as to emphasize their parallel nature, the poem reminds the reader that they come from the same central event, the destruction of the Assyrians.

Additionally, because the poem employs extensive anaphora of the word "And," many phrases follow a roughly parallel structure because they all hinge on the word "And." Although not as precise as the highlighted examples, this creates a general sense in the poem that many sentences are following similar forms, resulting in a pile-up list-like effect that mimics how many effects can flow from a single event.

The use of parallelism also relates to the fact that the poem was originally set to music. Parallelism can be thought of as a musical effect because it employs repeating structures, just as a song employs repeated rhythms and melodies. Parallelism is an important structure in oral epic poetry as well because it makes it easier to remember lines.

All in all, the use of parallelism helps the poem tell its story in an effective manner.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** “ Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green, / That host with their banners at sunset were seen: / Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown, / That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.”
- **Line 18:** “With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail:”
- **Line 20:** “The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown.”
- **Lines 21-22:** “ And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail, / And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;”

SYNECDOCHE

In the fourth and fifth stanzas, the poem zooms in on two specific deaths, that of a "steed" and that of his "rider." Here, the horse and rider act as synecdoches: they are parts referring to the state of the whole army. Their deaths are representative of what has happened to all the Assyrians overnight.

One way that the poem signals that the horse and his rider are representative is by using the word "the." "The" is a uniquely versatile article because it can be used to point to a *specific*

thing ("the red paint on your house") as well as to *general* entities ("the color red"). That is, "the" can signal either a particular instance of a category, or the *whole category itself*, depending on its context.

Here, that context is unclear. The poem introduces "the steed" as if the reader were already familiar with it. Had the horse been mentioned before, "the" would here refer to that specific horse. However, since no mention of a horse has been made as yet, "the" could just as well refer to the whole category of "steed," or more specifically to all the Assyrian steeds. The same goes for the rider.

This use of "the" gives a clue to why synecdoche is so useful. Essentially, it lets the poem have it both ways. It allows the poem to get really specific about particular physical beings—describing the horse's and rider's deaths in detail—while also using those physical particulars to say something about the general state of affairs of the whole army. The reader experiences a clear and sympathetic description of death, while at the same time knowing that this death has happened a scale vaster than comprehension (the Bible says 185,000 Assyrians were killed). Thus, synecdoche helps the poem create empathy for dead, while also suggesting the incomprehensibility of what has happened.

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-16:** " And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide, / But through it there rolled not the breath of his pride; / And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf, / And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf."
- **Lines 17-18:** " And there lay the rider distorted and pale, / With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail:"

METONYMY

The use of metonymy in the poem allows physical objects to stand in for human events. In doing so, the poem is able to incorporate more physical imagery that helps place the poem historically and ground these events in concrete reality.

In the fifth stanza, the last two lines list elements of the army whose disuse signals the Assyrian defeat. There is no noise from the tents, no movement of flags, no lifted spears, and no trumpet sounds. All these items represent the army on a metonymic level. The fact that none of them are being used relates to how the poem uses absence. The implied absence of any living Assyrians mirrors the absence of any Hebrew characters in the poem. It's part of what might be thought of as a kind of general evacuation of the poem. Eventually all humans are undone: killed, unmentioned, or forgotten. That's why the unused objects play such an important role at the end; think of how post-apocalyptic landscapes are often depicted as empty buildings, abandoned cars, etc. Human absence and death is shown by what gets left behind.

Similarly, in the final stanza the "idols," or statues of gods, are broken in the Assyrian capital. As metonymies for the religious establishment, their breaking represents a disintegration of the Assyrian faith and society. The word "idol" is used very deliberately here, because the bible makes clear that idols of foreign gods are strictly prohibited. Thus, the undermining of the Assyrian religion comes as retribution against the Assyrians for worshipping other gods beside God. There's a general sense of societal breakdown in this stanza. Again, objects function as evidence of this because they remain as evidence of what has happened to the people who once owned them.

Where Metonymy appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-20:** "And the tents were all silent, the banners alone, / The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown."
- **Line 22:** "And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;"

ASSONANCE

Assonance helps to unify lines and create a sense of musicality. For instance, look at the repetition of long /e/ sounds in the first stanza:

> The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,
> And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
> And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
> When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

The repeated long /e/ sounds are like repeated notes in a melody. The poem doesn't go crazy with repeating these sounds, but it does develop them enough to give the stanza a sense of sonic cohesion.

Although not intrinsic to a reading of the poem, it's also interesting to think about a composer and singer would interpret these sounds, especially given the fact that Byron wrote the poem specifically for the purpose of being set to music. That is, a composer can choose to emphasize certain syllables by assigning them longer notes or dramatic pitch changes. Setting this song to music might entail, for instance, drawing attention to these long /e/ sounds. Or, it might entail downplaying these repeated vowels in favor of more subdued sounds.

Another effect the poem employs emphasizes the parallel structure between lines. This tends to happen at the end of stanzas. For instance, notice how lines 11 and 12 repeat the long /e/ sound in "sleepers" and "heaved." Lines 15 and 16 perform a similar move, repeating the long /o/ sound in "foam " and "cold" and the long /a/ sound in "lay" and "spray." And lines 22, 23, and 24 repeat the long /i/ sound in "idols," "might," "Gentile" and "like," as well as the long /o/ sound in "broke,"

"unsmote," and "snow."

All in all, this particular structure of repeating sounds in roughly the same place in each line creates a feeling of parallelism and resonance, a sense of almost-rhyme. Again, imagine how a musical structure could play up these repeated sounds with, for instance, a melody that also repeats.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "y," "i," "o," "o"
- **Line 2:** "o," "ea," "o"
- **Line 3:** "ee," "ea," "ea"
- **Line 4:** "y," "ee," "ee"
- **Line 5:** "ea," "ee"
- **Line 6:** "ee"
- **Line 7:** "ea," "o"
- **Line 8:** "o," "ow," "ow"
- **Line 9:** "e," "ea," "ea," "i," "i"
- **Line 11:** "ee"
- **Line 12:** "ea"
- **Line 13:** "i," "i"
- **Line 15:** "oa," "ay"
- **Line 16:** "ol," "ay"
- **Line 17:** "a," "a"
- **Line 19:** "a"
- **Line 20:** "u," "u"
- **Line 22:** "i," "o"
- **Line 23:** "i," "i," "o"
- **Line 24:** "i," "o"

CONSONANCE

The poem uses consonance to help create unity within stanzas and emphasize certain phrases. This use is closely related to the poem's use of alliteration, which, on its own, is pretty toned down.

The first stanza offers a good example of how consonance both creates aesthetic unity and emphasizes specific phrases. In line 4, the liquid /l/ sound mimics the rolling of the sea's waves: "When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee." This use of the /l/ sound builds on the stanza's previous use of the sound in the words "like," "wolf," "fold," "gleaming," and "gold." In this way, the poem seems to build on itself, creating a stable structure of sound.

In general, most of the poem's instances of consonance aren't very dramatic. They don't always happen right next to each other, but are more often like what happens with the /m/ sound in lines 23 and 24. Here, "might," "unsmote," and "melted," use this repeated sound to maintain a sense of progression. However, there are enough words in between them that the effect could almost go unnoticed. This use of consonance could be thought of more as architectural than ornamental. In other words, it contributes to the basic structure and stability of lines, rather than drawing explicit attention to the beauty of these sounds.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "c," "l," "l," "f," "f," "l"
- **Line 2:** "c," "g," "l," "p," "p," "l," "g," "l"
- **Line 3:** "s," "s," "s," "l," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 4:** "l," "ll," "l," "G," "l," "l"
- **Line 5:** "L," "l," "s," "S"
- **Line 6:** "s," "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 7:** "L," "l," "s"
- **Line 8:** "s," "t," "s," "t"
- **Line 9:** "b"
- **Line 10:** "b," "f," "p"
- **Line 11:** "s," "p," "s," "x," "l," "ll"
- **Line 12:** "h," "h"
- **Line 14:** "r," "r," "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 15:** "f," "f"
- **Line 16:** "s," "r," "r," "s," "f"
- **Line 17:** "d," "d," "d," "d"
- **Line 18:** "d"
- **Line 19:** "t," "n," "t," "l," "nt," "nn," "l," "n"
- **Line 20:** "l," "n," "n," "l," "l," "n"
- **Line 21:** "w," "l," "w," "l"
- **Line 22:** "l," "b," "l," "B," "l"
- **Line 23:** "m," "l," "s," "m," "s"
- **Line 24:** "m," "l," "l," "s," "l," "c," "L"

ALLITERATION

The poem does not make extensive use of alliteration. However, there are a few instances where it's used to emphasize certain phrases. For instance, line 3 uses the repeated /s/ sound (technically an example of sibilance): "And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea." The /s/ sound repeats like repeated reflection of stars on the sea, drawing attention to the striking imagery of this line.

Many other instances involve a sound repeated just once, as in the phrase "face of the foe" in line 10. Here, this repeated /f/ sound does a couple of things. One, in order to make this sound, you have to breathe out forcefully between your lips and teeth. That means that the /f/ sound itself mimics the breath of the Angel of Death that this line describe. Additionally, the sound draws attention to two nouns that embody the poem's central emotional paradox: sympathy for one's enemy. On one hand, there's the word "foe," which represents the villains of the poem that must be defeated. On the other, there's the word "face," which creates empathy between people (think, for instance, how the horse's "nostril" and the rider's "brow" are used to create sympathy in stanzas 4 and 5).

In this same stanza, the poem uses another aspirated consonant—that is, a consonant that involves a strong outburst of air. In line 12, the phrase "their hearts but once heaved" uses

the breath of the /h/ sound to mimic the final beat of the soldiers' hearts. Again, sound is used to put the reader inside the action, involving the mouth with the literal action of the poem.

In general the poem uses this doubling of sounds, often with a fair bit of distance between them, as in the phrases "the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail" and "the idols are broke in the temple of Baal." These doublings serve to link nouns and verbs; the widows wail, the statues of Baal are broken. Overall, it creates a feeling of subtle, musical cohesion in the poem.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "c"
- **Line 2:** "c," "g," "g"
- **Line 3:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 4:** "G"
- **Line 5:** "g"
- **Line 6:** "b," "s," "s"
- **Line 7:** "L," "l," "b"
- **Line 9:** "b"
- **Line 10:** "b," "f," "f"
- **Line 12:** "h," "h"
- **Line 17:** "d"
- **Line 18:** "d"
- **Line 20:** "u," "u"
- **Line 21:** "w," "w"
- **Line 22:** "b," "B"
- **Line 23:** "m"
- **Line 24:** "m"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem uses subtle personification in the fourth stanza, when it describes the death of a horse. Though a tool of the Assyrian army, the horse cannot possibly understand what is being fought over, and as such no "breath of his pride" escapes as the animal lays dying. In other words, the horse has the *potential* to show pride—a human emotion—but has no cause to do so here.

Note how the poem takes care to talk about the *horses's* death before turning its attention to that of the horse's *human rider*. This underscores the fact that the horse is not really on any side here—it is introduced without any reference to the Assyrian army, which helps separate the animal from the cause it is being forced to fight for. The personification of the horse then makes the tragedy of this conflict all the more immediate and visceral. By granting this animal the potential to feel human emotion, the poem grants the horse a sort of "personhood"—and, it follows, implicitly calls for the horse to be treated with sympathy and respect. The horse is essentially an innocent victim of human beings' thirst for violence.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide, / But through it there rolled not the breath of his pride;"

VOCABULARY

Assyrian (Line 1) - The Assyrian directly refers to Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, an ancient kingdom located in Mesopotamia.

Fold (Line 1) - A fold literally refers to an enclosure of livestock. Here, it's meant to evoke the Christian concept of the fold, which refers to practicing Christians, and generally suggests the Christian metaphor of practitioners as sheep. Its use here is bold because it refers not to Christians, but to Jews.

Cohorts (Line 2) - Sennacherib's cohorts are the entire army he is leading. Etymologically, the word originally refers to a Roman military unit of 600 soldiers.

Galilee (Line 4) - The sea of Galilee (which is actually a freshwater lake) is in Israel. It figures prominently in the life of Jesus in the New Testament (it is, for instance, where he walked on water).

Host (Line 6) - A slightly archaic term referring to an army. Here, it means the Assyrian army.

Morrow (Line 8) - A literary version of the word "tomorrow." Here, it means the next morning.

Strown (Line 8) - Alternate version of the word "strewn." It means that the bodies of the Assyrians are scattered about.

Blast (Line 9) - The wind that the Angel of Death flies upon. Its appearance is foreshadowed by the autumn wind in the previous stanza.

Waxed (Line 11) - Intensified, became, grew. As in, "the eyes of the sleepers grew deadly and chill."

Chill (Line 11) - Cold. The soldiers' eyes have the cold look of the dead.

Steed (Line 13) - A riding horse. Here, it refers to a war horse that would have been ridden by an Assyrian cavalry member.

Mail (Line 18) - Mail is a kind of armor formed by a mesh of interlinking chains.

Ashur (Line 21) - Ashur was both the capital of the Old Assyrian kingdom and also the name of the Assyrians' ruling god.

Baal (Line 22) - Baal was a general name used to refer to Mesopotamian gods. It means "Lord." In the Hebrew Bible, it's used to refer to other gods that are not the Hebrew God.

Gentile (Line 23) - A term used in Judaism to refer to non-Jews.

Unsmote (Line 23) - A past-tense negation of the word "smite," which means to strike. In other words, the Assyrian's have not been struck by "the sword."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is made up of six rhymed quatrains consisting of two rhymed couplets each. Quatrains are good for telling stories in clear and discrete sections because they allow events to appear in a carefully contained manner and to proceed logically. This form is consistent throughout the poem and easy to follow, allowing it almost to melt into the background so that the reader/listener can focus on the story being told.

The poem's quatrains subtly nod to ballad stanzas, which are a traditional narrative form in English poetry. Quatrains can also be contrasted with tercets (three-line stanzas, such as those Dante used in his own religious narrative poem, the *Inferno*.) Tercets tend to interlink, making it harder to separate events, and emphasizing the thought-process of the narrator. As such, they wouldn't really help the speaker tell the story here.

The poem's quatrains could also be compared with Byron's extensive of Spenserian stanzas in other narrative poems. Spenserian stanzas do create self-enclosed units, but because of their size—they're a whopping nine lines long—they tend to allow more events of an intricate nature to occur within them. Since this poem was written to be set to music, the quatrain structure helps maintain a degree of simplicity that is more suitable to be set to music.

METER

The poem employs an anapestic tetrameter, which goes:

da da DUM | da da DUM | da da DUM | da da DUM

Anapests are often thought of as mimicking galloping horses, which they do well at the beginning of the poem, as Sennacherib's forces charge towards Jerusalem. They also create a sense of excitement. One reason for this is that, in general, readers of English language poetry are used to iambic meters, which have two beats per foot in an unstressed-stressed rhythm. Anapests, however, have three, which can make them seem faster and more energetic, as if the reader has to fit three syllables into the space of two.

The poem only varies the meter in one way, which is sometimes by switching out an anapest for an iamb in its opening foot. The first time this occurs is in line 6:

That host- | with their ban | ners at sun | set were seen.

Using an iamb at the beginning of an anapestic line is a very subtle way to vary the meter. This is because:

1. As mentioned above, readers are used to seeing iambs.
2. Putting this tweak at the beginning allows the anapest to gallop uninterrupted afterwards, whereas putting the iamb in the middle of the line would have caused a stumbling effect and slowed down the poem.

Varying the poem in this manner helps prevent the poem from growing monotonous. In thinking about setting the poem to music, such moments create the opportunity for extending a note to account for the extra beat that would otherwise be lost.

RHYME SCHEME

Each of the poem's stanzas is made up of two rhyming couplets. As such, it uses the following rhyme scheme:

AABBCCDDEEFFGGHHIIJJKKLL

One effect of this rhyme scheme is that the rhymes are close together, so they occupy a particularly vivid place in the reader's attention. The rhyme gives an immediate pay-off, rather than being delayed. This contributes to the sonic intensity of the poem, which is important because the poem was written to be accompanied by music. In fact, the nearness of the rhymes acts as a reminder that the reader should think of the poem, at least in part, as a song.

The immediacy of the AABB rhyme scheme also pairs well with the poem's use of anaphora and its end-stopped lines. It lends the poem what might almost be called a kind of bluntness. The poem isn't intricate and doesn't want to be. Rather, it relates this story in as simple and memorable a manner as possible, much as an oral story teller would.

An attentive reader might be reminded of heroic couplets (a rhymed pair of lines in iambic pentameter), which were the form of choice for translating epics into English. Just as the poem contains *thematic* gestures towards epic poetry, without ever becoming an epic itself, so too do its rhyme scheme and meter suggest epic poetry without fully verging into that territory.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is best described as an omniscient narrator—that is, a narrator who knows everything about what's going on. This omniscience is on par (or almost on par) with that of God, so that the narrator gets to witness the Angel of Death descending to destroy the Assyrian forces. In this respect, the narrator is like that of a biblical story, capable of witnessing acts of God.

Also in keeping with this biblical feel, the narrator seems to sympathize with the Hebrews. One way to interpret the fact that the Hebrews are never mentioned explicitly is that the narrator is one of them, or at least is speaking from their point of view. In this reading, that Hebrews are never mentioned because the poem is looking out from their point of view towards the oncoming Assyrians.

That said, that narrator shouldn't be taken as an actual person present at the siege. Rather, the poem constructs a point of view capable of taking in all these events *as if* it were there. This point of view is capable of depicting death with sympathy, but also with distance. Furthermore, while basically representing a Jewish point of view, it does contain subtle references to Christianity.

SETTING

The setting of the poem is Jerusalem in the 8th century BCE. Sennacherib, king of the Assyrians, is invading the Jewish kingdom of Judah, and approaches the capital city of Jerusalem. The main event of the poem, the massacre of Sennacherib's troops by the Angel of Death, takes place outside the city in the surrounding land. Then, at the end of the poem, the setting switches over to the Assyrian capital city, Ashur. Here, the poem depicts the ramifications of Sennacherib's defeat for the Assyrian people.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Lord Byron was the most internationally famous of the English Romantic poets. His poetry exemplifies many of the qualities associated with English Romanticism, such as an interest in extreme states of emotion and personal liberty. The Romantics were also generally interested in the relationship between human beings and nature, a relationship that is explored in this poem as well.

"The Destruction of Sennacherib," as well as the book it comes from, *Hebrew Melodies*, might be thought of a successor to William Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*. In that earlier work, Wordsworth sought to use language and forms related to folk songs and ordinary people. Although Byron's poem isn't necessarily written in the language of a rural folk song, it does borrow some of the simplicity and formal charm of Wordsworth's poems.

All of the Romantic poets had an interest in narrative poems, and Byron was no exception. He became famous for his semi-autobiographical long poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and later his satiric poem *Don Juan*. "The Destruction of Sennacherib" comes before this latter poem, and is definitely closer in tone to the earlier work. It was written at the request of Isaac Nathan, a musicologist who claimed to have music that dated back to the Temple of Jerusalem (though this claim has proven to be totally false).

At any rate, Byron supplied a book's worth of lyrics that, along with Nathan's music, became the collection *Hebrew Melodies*. The book's Jewish subject caused a degree of controversy, but many of the poems from it have gone on to have enduring popularity.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It's important to note that writing from a Jewish perspective was a controversial move in England at this time. Antisemitism has a long history in England, and Byron's poem earned him a great deal of criticism for his sympathetic portrayal of Jews. This decision, however, was in line with Byron's character and politics. In general, he supported social reform and anti-imperialism. In fact, he held these beliefs so strongly that he served in the Greek War of Independence, during which he died of a fever. This interest in helping the oppressed is at work in "The Destruction of Sennacherib" as well.

The historical context for the story that the poem narrates is a real event that happened around 701 BCE, when the Assyrian king Sennacherib lay siege to the city of Jerusalem. During the siege, the inhabits of the city cut off the water supply to the surrounding areas. Other than this, nothing is known about what destroyed the Assyrian forces that were poised to take the city. The Bible says God sent an Angel to destroy the army, while Assyrian sources don't mention the destruction at all. Given the mysterious context surrounding this story, Byron's poem can be read as a powerful attempt to visualize an event that is otherwise shrouded in mystery.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Hebrew Melodies — More background information on "Hebrew Melodies," the collection in which the poem originally appeared, as well as selected photos of the music to which the poems were set. (https://www.klinebooks.com/pages/books/43826/isaac-nathan-ron/a-selection-of-ancient-modern-hebrew-melodies-the-poetry-written-expressly-for-the-work-by-lord)
- The Poem Out Loud — A reading of the poem on YouTube. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKjBSC_F1NA)
- Historical Background — Useful historical information on the siege of Jerusalem that inspired the biblical story this poem is based on. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assyrian_siege_of_Jerusalem)

- The Poem Set to Music — A choral adaptation of Byron's poem by the Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLI_7_-X98U)
- A Biography of Byron — An extensive biography of Byron from Britannica. (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lord-Byron-poet)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LORD BYRON POEMS

- Prometheus
- She Walks in Beauty
- When We Two Parted

HOW TO CITE

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