Vergissmeinnicht

SUMMARY

It's been three weeks since the battle and the fighters have all left. The speaker and his fellow soldiers have returned to the nightmarish battlefield, where they discover, in a spot they'd been before, the body of a dead German soldier splayed out in the sun.

The barrel of the German's gun seems to scowl as it casts a shadow over the man's body. During the earlier battle, the German had fired at the speaker's tank and made a direct hit that felt like a beast from hell tearing through.

The speaker directs his gaze to the ruined gun pit (an excavated area to protect soldiers from enemy fire), where he sees a tarnished photograph of the dead man's girlfriend. On the photo, she has written her name, Steffi, and "Vergissmeinnicht" (German for "forget me not") in perfectly neat calligraphy.

The speaker and his comrades are almost happy to see him so degraded, apparently having gotten what he deserved. His own equipment seems to mock him; it's still firm, sturdy, and perfectly useable, while he's a decomposing corpse.

Steffi would cry if she could see him now—his skin swarmed by black flies, his eyes dried up and covered with dust, and his stomach with a gaping, cavernous hole torn into it.

Lying here, the figure of the lover and of the killer are joined together, sharing a single body and heart. Death singled the German soldier out, and in doing so mortally wounded Steffi, too.

THEMES

THE HORROR AND DEHUMANIZATION OF WAR

In "Vergissmeinnicht" (German for "forget me not"), a group of British soldiers in WWII come across the dead body of one of their German counterparts. Near the man's rotting corpse lies a signed photograph of his girlfriend, Steffi—a reminder that he was once a human being with loved ones back home. And yet, the British soldiers are "almost content" to see their enemy in his wretched state, something the speaker describes without any clear sense of pity or empathy. The horror of war isn't just its physical brutality, the poem suggests, but also the way it numbs people to death, pain, and destruction. "Vergissmeinnicht" presents war as an utterly dehumanizing force that fundamentally changes those who experience it first-hand.

The poem conveys the brutal violence of war through graphic depictions of the German's body. The speaker and his fellow soldiers are walking across the "nightmare ground" of a previous battlefield when they discover the dead German. His body has been rotting in the sun; his stomach is burst open "like a cave," his eyes are dried up like “paper,” and his skin is covered in flies. The speaker's dispassionate yet stomach-churning descriptions of the body suggest that he has become desensitized to gore and death.

The British also apparently recognize this soldier (perhaps by his location on the battlefield next to an anti-tank gun). In fact, it was only recently that the speaker and the German soldier had been trying to kill each other: the speaker recalls how, when the German fired at his tank, the impact was "like the entry of a demon." This phrase places the German firmly on side of evil and suggests how war, perhaps out of necessity, can make the enemy seem like something other than a human being.

The photograph of Steffi, by contrast, gestures to the very human life and love that the war cut short. Like so many young men on both sides of the conflict, the German soldier had people waiting for him back home. The war, though, ended the soldier's life and ruined his girlfriend's; "she would weep to see" him as he is now, the speaker says—not just because he's dead, perhaps, but also because he had become a "killer."

Now, the speaker continues, "the lover and the killer are mingled." The "lover" here might refer to Steffi, who's symbolically "mingled" with the soldier in the sense that her photograph is next to his body. But "lover" might also refer to the soldier *himself*; after all, he loved Steffi enough to carry her photo with him into battle. War, in this reading, utterly transformed the German, so that a "lover and killer" resided in his "one body and one heart."

The poem implies that the speaker and his fellow soldiers have become killers, too. Indeed, they view the dead man "almost with content," relieved, perhaps, to find that it wasn't one of their own. The speaker also says that the German seems to have "paid"—that is, gotten what he deserved. The German might be the dead one, but it's clear that the speaker has also lost a part of himself: the very human ability to empathize with his fellow man.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

HUMANITY VS. TECHNOLOGY

The speaker of "Vergissmeinnicht" describes a dead German soldier lying next to his "equipment," which remains "hard and good" even as the man's body rots in the sun.

This equipment even seems to mock the German, whose body appears all the more fragile next to his study weaponry. "Vergissmeinnicht" thus illustrates how WWII unleashed great, and perhaps untameable, tools of destruction upon the world.

The poem repeatedly calls attention to the devasting effects of technology during WWII, when new weapons of war made it easier to kill more efficiently and in greater numbers than ever before. The speaker mentions various pieces of equipment, including tanks and gun barrels. The battlefield is filled not just with people, the poem makes clear, but with devastating weapons.

What's more, the speaker grants this technology an agency of its own. The barrel of the dead German's gun is "frowning," for example. A gun can't literally frown, of course, but the image imbues the weapon with agency and perhaps even suggests that it's frustrated at its own inactivity. And when the gun *was* in use, the impact of its shells was like "the entry of a demon." In other words, the weaponry takes on an almost supernatural capacity for evil and destruction.

The fact that the German's equipment outlasts the man himself, meanwhile, emphasizes human weakness in comparison to technology. People are soft and mortal, while the weapons of war are firm and everlasting. The fact that the dead man's equipment is still "hard and good" while "he's decayed" is a kind of insult, the speaker says; the sturdy equipment "mock[s]" the dead man, as if boasting that it has transcended the limits of its human user. The phrase "hard and good" has distinctly sexual undertones to it as well, implying that the dead German has been emasculated, made less of a man by his weapons. Technology may be a human creation, the poem suggests, but that doesn't mean it's entirely within humanity's control.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-8
- Lines 13-16

WAR, LOVE, AND SUFFERING

The poem's speaker and his fellow soldiers don't appear to feel much, if any, sympathy for the dead German they come across. The only real pity in the poem seems to be for the German's girlfriend Steffi, whose life (and love) the fighting has effectively ruined. The poem thus demonstrates how war affects not just those on the battlefield, but also those left behind. The poem also shows how women in particular (especially in Douglass's day) are often forced to bear the lasting pain of such conflicts.

Like so many other women of the era, Steffi clearly wanted her lover to return home to her alive. Her picture lies near the dead man's body, signed with "Vergissmeinnicht," meaning "forget me not." This simple plea hints at a loving relationship with a dreamed-of future ahead of it. The fact that the German carried this photo with him into battle, meanwhile, reflects his own love for Steffi and his desire to see her again.

But war doesn't care about love, the poem implies. The speaker says that the photo has been "dishonoured," perhaps because it was shot through with bullets, exposed to the eyes of strangers, or simply because war disrespected Steffi's wishes. Steffi "would weep" to see her lover now, concludes the speaker (even if he himself feels no clear sadness over the German). "Death [...] has done the lover mortal hurt," the speaker concludes. Death might have "singled" out the German, but, in killing him, it mortally wounded Steffi, too. The poem thus gestures not just towards the brutal violence of the actual conflict, but the wider, enduring reach of its destruction.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-12
- Lines 17-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Three weeks gone ...
... in the sun.

"Vergissmeinnicht" is based on poet Keith Douglas's own experiences during the 1942 Battle of El Alamein in Egypt. The poem begins after the battle has ended. The speaker and his fellow British soldiers travel back over the "nightmare ground" where, "three weeks" ago, they were engaged in fierce combat with the German enemy. It's here that they find a dead soldier from the enemy side.

This first quatrain establishes an eerie atmosphere. The diacope of "gone" emphasizes the utter emptiness of this battlefield, reflecting how surreal it must seem to walk across ground that, just weeks earlier, was a "nightmare" of chaos and bloodshed. The sibilant alliteration of "soldier is sprawling in the sun," meanwhile, evokes the sinister silence and hissing heat of the deserted, desert battlefield.

One of the major themes of the poem is how war affects people psychologically, and it's intriguing that the soldiers *want* to find this body. The article "the" implies that soldiers are searching for a *specific* spot: they find "the place" and "the soldier" (rather than a more random "place" and "a soldier"). Perhaps they simply need to retrieve some supplies or weaponry, or perhaps they felt compelled to see what happened to this particular enemy. This excursion *might* suggest that the speaker and his comrades want to pay witness to what happened—in a way, to make a pilgrimage back into their recent memory, after having been utterly changed by their experiences.

This stanza also sets up the poem's meter. By and large, the poem uses iambic tetrameter: each line contains four iambs, poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed (da-DUM) syllable pattern. There's plenty of variation throughout the poem, however; in this stanza, only lines 3-4 feature perfect iambic tetrameter:

> Three weeks | gone and | the com**bat**- | ants gone
> re**turn** -| ing **ov**- | er the **night**- | mare ground
> we **found** | the **place** | a**gain**,| and **found**
> the **sold**- | ier **sprawl**- | ing **in** | the **sun**.

The first two lines both have nine syllables instead of the expected eight of iambic tetrameter, and both feature multiple substitutions. For example, line 1 begins with three stressed beats in a row, creating a spondee ("Three weeks") followed by a trochee ("gone and"). The meter of lines 1 and 2 might be scanned in a number of ways, but it's definitely not iambic tetrameter!

Right away, then, the poem isn't on sure footing. The metrical looseness might reflect the speaker's own nerves, frazzled from combat. Steady iambs can sound a bit like a march, but these soldiers are exhausted, and the meter reflects that.

LINES 5-8

> *The frowning barrel ...*
> *... of a demon.*

The speaker points out the dead Germain soldier's gun. (Given that the dead soldier is German, the speaker might be describing a specific anti-tank weapon called a Panzerfaust.)

The speaker personifies this gun, imbuing it with a will of its own and saying that it's "frowning" as it looms over the dead man. This frown implies dissatisfaction: perhaps the gun because it would rather be wreaking havoc than just standing dormant. The fact that it casts an ominous shadow over the dead soldier might further hint at the way that technology has come to dominate humankind. The full-stop caesura after "overshadowing" then creates a brief, ominous pause.

Next, the speaker flashes back to the battle that took place three weeks earlier. The sudden time shift might feel a bit disorienting to readers, in turn evoking the general chaos of war. On the day of the battle, the speaker says, the then-still-living German landed a hit on the speaker's tank. The speaker and his fellow soldiers, then, have a twisted personal connection with this man, who almost killed them.

The impact of the German's hit was akin to "the entry of a demon," a simile that conveys the wicked force of the ammunition tearing through the tank. And again, the speaker is ascribing some sort of agency to the German man's weaponry, treating it now like a creature from hell. More broadly, the mention of a "demon" gestures toward the wretched, inhumane nature of modern warfare.

LINES 9-12

> *Look. Here in ...*
> *... copybook gothic script.*

With each stanza, the poem zooms in closer on the dead man, describing the scene in increasing detail. "Look," the speaker now says, using an imperative to capture the reader's attention. Yet note how ambiguous the speaker's tone is here. This "Look" might be solemn and serious, as in, *"Bear witness to this tragic scene."* Or it could be more casual, as if the speaker says to his comrades, *"Hey guys, come check this out."* It's hard to say, at this stage, how the speaker feels toward the dead man.

In any case, the speaker points out a "dishonoured photograph" of the dead German's girlfriend, which lies near his body in the "gunpit spoil":

- The gun pit refers to the excavated area from which the German soldier would have fired his weapon.
- "Spoil," meanwhile, suggests ruin and waste. This gun pit has been "spoiled" in the sense that it's now useless and home to a rotting (or "spoiling") body.
- At the same time, "spoil can refer to a kind of bounty obtained by the victors of a battle. The speaker might be sifting through the stuff the dead man's left behind, looking for useful supplies, when he stumbles across the photograph.

The photograph has been "dishonoured" in multiple ways:

- By the war itself, in that it has cut short the girlfriend's dreams of a life with the German soldier;
- By blood or dirt that's marred its image;
- And by the fact that the photograph, with its intimate message, has fallen into the possession of the dead man's enemies—probably the last people on earth he would want to find it.

The German "girl" has written "Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht." on the photograph. "Steffi" is presumably short for "Stefanie," and this nickname conveys the familiarity between the two lovers. "Vergissmeinnicht," meanwhile, is German for "forget me not." Steffi wanted her love to think of her while off fighting in a faraway land. The fact that the dead man kept the photograph with him in battle implies that it was an important object to him, too.

The speaker also takes note of Steffi's handwriting, calling it "copybook gothic script." This a distinctly German style, and "copybook" suggests that she wrote carefully and neatly. Again, it's clear that this was an important object to both Steffi and the dead man.

LINES 13-16

> *We see him ...*

... when he's decayed.

Despite the emotional pull of Steffi's photograph, the speaker and his fellow soldiers struggle to look at the dead man with much sympathy. On the contrary, they "see him almost with content. That is, they're almost *happy* to see the German soldier in this wretched state. Death has degraded him (he's been "abased"), and it looks like the guy got what he deserved: he's "paid" for trying to kill the speaker and his comrades in that earlier battle.

Yet these lines have a doubtful, uncertain undertone to them as well. Again, the speaker doesn't say that he and his men *are* content, only that they "almost" are; likewise, the speaker doesn't say the dead man has "paid," but rather that he's "seeming to have paid." The speaker is hedging; his feelings are too complicated to simply rejoice in the death of an enemy. Perhaps he knows on an intellectual level that what he sees is terrible, tragic, and inhumane but can't bring himself to really *feel* the effects of that tragedy. It's like there are two contradictory feelings at work: contentment/relief at having survived and won the battle, and a deeper, harder-to-access suspicion that they are *all* victims of humankind's brutality and, of course, the advanced weaponry of war.

The speaker then juxtaposes the dead man with his gun:

> and mocked at by his own equipment
> that's hard and good when he's decayed.

The gun, in its erect readiness, seems to deride the decaying, lifeless body of its previous user. This moment echoes the "frowning barrel" of line 5, personifying the gun in a way that suggests it has taken on a life of its own—perhaps *it* controls the man and not the other way around.

The sexual innuendo of "hard and good" is no accident. As with the "dishonour[ing]" of Steffi's picture, the dead German is emasculated by the presence of his gun. Notice how consonant /d/ sounds in these lines create a dull, deadened tone—"paid," "hard and good," "decayed"—emphasizing the lifelessness (and lack of sexual vitality) of the corpse.

LINES 17-20

But she would ...
... like a cave.

The speaker imagines how upset Steffi would be if she could see her sweetheart now, before then relaying an unflinching look at the dead man's corpse. The juxtaposition between Steffi's grief and the gruesome, unsentimental imagery with which the speaker describes the dead man suggests that war doesn't care one whit for Steffi's pain. (And, perhaps, neither does the speaker.)

Dark black flies swarm over the body, the man's eyes are dried up and covered with dust, and his stomach has "burst" open "like a cave." His eyes are no longer like eyes, and there is a huge hole where his stomach should be. The man is less recognizably *human*, his *physical* deterioration evoking the broader dehumanizing effects of war.

It's also interesting that the speaker compares the man's "burst stomach" to a cave. Early humans lived in caves, and their mention here subtly undermines the idea of fighting in the name of progress or that technology has made humanity more civilized. Perhaps all that has progressed over thousands of years is humanity's efficiency when it comes to destroying each other.

Finally, note how the rhymes sound in this stanza are both slant: "today"/"eye", "move"/"cave." There is no satisfying, reassuring click here, and it's more like the rhyme words themselves are in a state of decomposition.

LINES 21-24

For here the ...
... lover mortal hurt.

The sixth stanza sounds different from the rest. Instead of describing the scene in excruciating detail, the speaker zooms out. Looking at the German soldier's corpse, the speaker makes a more intellectual/conceptual observation:

> For here the lover and killer are mingled
> who had one body and one heart.

The speaker acknowledges that the German wasn't *just* his enemy. He was both a "lover and killer" (perhaps like the speaker himself). These aspects of the German's identity co-exist in "one body and one heart," the diacope of "one" emphasizing the tension and strangeness of *one* man containing *two* drastically different selves.

Notice, too, the subtle shift into the past tense here: "who had one body and one heart." This re-affirms the fact that the German soldier is dead. And, indeed, the "heart" here doesn't solely refer to his metaphorical heart (which would have contained his love for Steffi). The bodily descriptions of the previous stanza make this "heart" also feel like an *actual* heart—the same one that's currently rotting away in the speaker's chest.

In the last two lines, the speaker personifies death:

> And death who had the soldier singled
> has done the lover mortal hurt.

Death here chose—"singled" out—the German soldier. Of course, one could argue that's not really the case: he was just one among many casualties in the chaos of warfare. Death's choice, though, not only harms the soldier—it does the "lover [Steffi] mortal hurt" too. Her life will never be the same because

she's lost her sweetheart: war affects far more people than just those who fight it.

It's interesting that the poem ends by focusing on Steffi. It's as though the speaker, so numbed and frayed from the horrors of battle, substitutes Steffi's impending sorrow for his own lack of empathy. *She* can still feel something, while he can't. Imagining her perspective thus reintroduces a touch of basic humanity into the poem—something that was in rare supply during the cruel, maddening atmosphere of WWII.

SYMBOLS

THE DEAD MAN'S GUN

The German artillery gun, which not long ago struck the speaker's tank, looms over the dead body, casting an ominous shadow. This gun symbolizes the tension between human beings and technology (or, perhaps more precisely, between human ingenuity and humanity's capacity to find ever more efficient ways to destroy itself).

The speaker personifies the gun, saying that it's "frowning" over the corpse, still metaphorically alive even after its wielder has died. The gun remains "hard and good while he's decayed," emphasizing the comparative fragility of the human body and suggesting that humanity has lost control over its own creations.

Lines 15-16 have distinctly sexual undertones as well. The soldier's "equipment" remains erect while his body goes limp. The gun thus seems to mock and emasculate its former user, who, being dead, is impotent; he can't be a "lover" to Steffi ever again. The gun, then, becomes a phallic symbol that links the brutal violence of war to masculinity. It suggests that man's lust for death destroys tenderness and romance.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "The frowning barrel of his gun / overshadowing."
- **Lines 15-16:** "mocked at by his own equipment / that's hard and good when he's decayed."

STEFFI'S PICTURE

To the German soldier, the signed photograph of his girlfriend Steffi represented the life he'd left behind and hoped to return to. The fact that he carried the picture into battle suggests that it was precious to him and that the memory of life and love at home probably helped him get through tough times abroad. It was a reminder of a better world, far away from the "nightmare ground" of the battlefield.

To the British soldiers, the photograph is a sign that the dead German was more than just a "killer": he was also a "lover." The image reflects his humanity.

Now that it lies next to the dead man—for whom it meant so much—it also speaks to the cruelty of war. There might be thousands of objects just like this one testifying to the way war destroys not just the lives of those who fight it, but also the lives of their loved ones back home.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-12:** "Here in the gunpit spoil / the dishonoured picture of his girl / who has put: Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht. / in a copybook gothic script."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration makes the language of "Vergissmeinnicht" evocative and visceral, bringing its grim imagery to life on the page.

Check out the /s/ sibilance in line 4, for example, when the speaker and his fellow soldiers find the dead German:

> the soldier sprawling in the sun.

Sibilance evokes the eerie silence of the scene at hand. At the same time, these /s/ sounds seem to sizzle with heat, evoking the desert environment (the poem was based on Douglas's experiences at the Second Battle of El Alamein in Egypt). Later, the sibilance of "skin" and "swart" makes the graphic descriptions of the body all the more unsettling.

In lines 7 and 8, the plosive /d/ sound evokes the power of the impact of anti-tank artillery:

> overshadowing. As we came on
> that day, he hit my tank with one
> like the entry of a demon.

That /d/ packs a strong punch, working with the monosyllabic words in line 7 to give the reader a sense of what it's like to come under enemy fire.

Note, too, that the poem also features consonance that overlaps with and enhances the poem's alliteration. Take the third stanza, which is brimming with hissing sibilance alongside spiky, popping /k/, /t/, /p/, and hard /g/sounds:

> Look. Here in the gunpit spoil
> the dishonoured picture of his girl
> who has put: Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht.
> in a copybook gothic script.

The lines feel sharp and perhaps even bitter. The crisp language

makes the image itself seem clearer.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "soldier sprawling," "sun"
- **Line 7:** "day"
- **Line 8:** "demon"
- **Line 9:** "spoil"
- **Line 10:** "picture"
- **Line 11:** "put," "Steffi"
- **Line 12:** "script"
- **Line 17:** "would weep," "see"
- **Line 18:** "skin," "swart"
- **Line 23:** "soldier singled"

IMAGERY

The poem's grim imagery conveys the gruesome horror of war. In the first stanza, the speaker describes coming across the "soldier sprawling in the sun," for example. The hissing sibilance of the line adds to the unsettling image of a body "sprawling," or being spread awkwardly, on the ground as the sun beats down overhead. The "barrel" of the dead man's tank gun looms over his body, "overshadowing it." Beyond being merely descriptive, this image feels loaded with symbolism: the man's gun casts the man himself in shadow, reflecting the poem's broader unease with the destructive technology unleashed during the war.

The poem's starkest image appears in its penultimate stanza, where the speaker uses vivid, visceral language to describe the soldier's rotting body. It's a grim, hellish depiction: the body is covered by "swart," or dark black, flies, creatures inextricably linked with death and decay. Their dark color also might reflect the moral darkness of the war itself. The man's eyes, meanwhile, are dried up, turned "papery" and covered by a layer of "dust." This evokes the harshness of the desert landscape where the battle took place. Finally, his "stomach" has "burst" open "like a cave, a horrifyingly gruesome simile intended to shock and unsettle the reader and hammer home the fragility of the human body.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-6:** "found / the soldier sprawling in the sun. / The frowning barrel of his gun / overshadowing."
- **Lines 7-8:** "he hit my tank with one / like the entry of a demon."
- **Line 12:** "in a copybook gothic script."
- **Lines 18-20:** "how on his skin the swart flies move; / the dust upon the paper eye / and the burst stomach like a cave."

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem features several juxtapositions that highlight the cruelty and brutality of war. Most obviously, the speaker contrasts the dead German soldier's rotting body with his sturdy weaponry—which is still very much intact and ready for use while "he's decayed."

The speaker finds the dead man sprawled out in the sun, the "frowning barrel of his gun" casting a dark shadow across his body. The gun, though technically inanimate, seems alive and frustrated at its lack of inactivity. It's like the weaponry of war has developed its own agency and is eager to wreak more havoc. The contrast between the man and his weapon highlights the fragility of the mortal human body and the devastating potential of technology; humanity's creations can outlast humanity itself.

Stanza 4 develops this juxtaposition further, describing the soldier as "abased," or humiliated/degraded, while "his own equipment" remains "hard and good," no worse for wear. In standing tall, the man's equipment even seems to "mock[]" its former owner. This illustrates the terrible strength of military equipment, highlighting the weapon's efficiency and reliability as a killing machine. The gun is a phallic symbol here as well, the language "hard and good" having distinctly sexual undertones. Man's lust for death, the image suggests, has triumphed over his better nature.

To that end, there's also a juxtaposition between the sweet, delicate photograph of the German's girlfriend, Steffi, and the horror of the "gunpit" in which his body lies. The photograph is an emblem of the soldier's life back home, the part of himself that existed beyond the realm of war. This romance, of course, is over: the picture is "dishonoured," and the man's body is limp, lifeless, and rotting away. There's also a contrast between the soldier as he was before the war and the "killer" he became, which conveys the way that war fundamentally changes those who fight.

Finally, the poem juxtaposes the speaker's (lack of) reaction to the dead body with how he knows Steffi would react. She "would weep to see" what became of her beloved, whereas the speaker looks at the body "almost with content." This contrast suggests just how much war has desensitized the speaker to death.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-6
- Lines 9-24

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker of "Vergissmeinnicht" personifies the dead soldier's weapons as well as death itself. In doing so, the poem conveys the fragility of the human body as well as the overwhelming horror of modern warfare.

Though the battlefield has fallen silent, and the German soldier lies dead, the technology of war seems full of life. The dead

man's gun looks down on him, casting an ominous shadow, and "frowning" as if to say, *"Is this it? When do we get back killing?"* Technology, the poem implies, can easily overcome human control.

Building on this idea, the speaker later says that the dead man is "mocked at by his own equipment," as if it's laughing at the wretched weakness of his body. It's "hard and good," up for war, while he's rotting away. War has rendered the dead man impotent.

In the last two lines, the poem also personifies death itself:

> And death who had the soldier singled
> has done the lover mortal hurt.

Death, here, seems to actively hunt for its victims. Again, human beings seem weak and helpless, easily overcome by forces beyond their control.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "The frowning barrel of his gun / overshadowing."
- **Lines 15-16:** "mocked at by his own equipment / that's hard and good when he's decayed."
- **Lines 23-24:** "And death who had the soldier singled / has done the lover mortal hurt."

VOCABULARY

Combatants (Line 1) - Fighters.

Came on (Lines 6-7) - Advanced.

Gunpit spoil (Line 9) - "Gunpit" refers to a hole dug to keep the German soldier's gun in place and protect him from enemy fire. It's now "spoil[ed]" in the sense that it's wrecked. "Spoils" can also refer to bounty or loot; the "gunpit spoil" might thus refer to dead German's supplies left behind in the pit.

Vergissmeinnicht (Line 11) - German for "forget me not."

Copybook gothic script (Line 12) - Neat handwriting in gothic style (which looks something like this).

Abased (Lines 13-14) - Humiliated.

Content (Line 13) - Happiness and satisfaction (because the enemy soldier is dead).

Swart (Line 18) - Dark black.

Mingled (Line 21) - Joined/mixed together.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Vergissmeinnicht" consists of six quatrains (four-line stanzas). Each concludes with an end-stop, making the poem feel quite episodic—like a series of short scenes as the speaker zooms in on the dead soldier's body. The poem also uses a pretty regular meter, lending it some formal consistency and predictability. This, in turn, adds to its matter-of-fact, detached tone—a tone that strikingly contrasts with the horror of the scene at hand. The poem's shape on the page perhaps echoes the rigid regularity of military life, as well as the way that war desensitizes combatants to death.

METER

"Vergissmeinnicht" uses iambic tetrameter—lines of four iambs, or metrical feet that follow an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern (da-DUM). Here's that pattern at work in lines 3 and 4:

> we found | the place | again, | and found
> the sold- | ier sprawl- | ing in | the sun.

The iambs create a trudging, marching rhythm that pushes the poem along, mirroring the movement of the speaker and his fellow weary soldiers as they "return[] over the nightmare ground."

That said, there's a fair amount of variation in the poem. Take the opening line, which begins with three stressed beats in a row:

> Three weeks gone and the combatants gone

The first line might be scanned in a few ways, but it's certainly not a line of strict iambic tetrameter! The poem thus undermines its meter right from the off, unsettling the reader and, perhaps, reflecting the sheer exhaustion of those marching soldiers.

RHYME SCHEME

"Vergissmeinnicht" uses plenty of rhyme, but these rhymes don't always fall in predictable spots.

The first stanza rhymes ABBA, the next BCBB, the next DDEE, and the rest settle back into the alternating pattern (with new rhyme sounds introduced, i.e., FGFG HIHI etc.). The poem thus has *some* steady music, but it still keeps readers on their toes. In this way, the poem's sounds evoke both the steadiness of military life and the chaos and confusion of war.

Adding to this effect is the fact that *all* of the ending words in the first two stanzas sound very similar, thanks to consonance: gone/ground/found/sun/gun/on/one/demon. These are all slant rhymes (especially the rhymes in stanza 2, which some

might argue has a rhyme scheme of BBBB rather than BCBB). It's not quite clear at first glance which words pair up together, creating an unsettling effect for the reader. The sounds of the poem are monotonous, subtly reflecting the idea that the horrors of war are also monotonous after a while. Coming across a rotting body is nothing new for these soldiers.

The rhyme between "heart" and "hurt" in the final stanza reflects the influence of WWI poet Wilfred Owen. This is an example of pararhyme, in which only the vowels (not the consonants) change between the two rhyming words. Owen famously used pararhyme throughout his war poetry.

SPEAKER

The speaker is a British soldier in World War II. He and some fellow soldiers have returned to a battlefield on which they fought three weeks prior. It's unclear why they've returned, though the poem implies that they're curious to see the fate of an enemy soldier who had hit the speaker's tank with artillery from his gun; the speaker says they find "the place" again and "the soldier," suggesting that they've been looking for this *particular* man.

The speaker describes the man's rotting body in gruesome detail. The straightforward manner with which the speaker talks about the dead man, without any clear sense of revulsion or pity, suggests that he's become desensitized to the horrors of war. In fact, he and his comrades view the body "almost with content," reflecting that the war has made them weary and battle-hardened. Perhaps they're relieved that the dead man isn't one of their own; less charitably, perhaps they take pleasure in seeing their enemy so "abased."

At the same time, the speaker hedges a little, saying that they "see him almost with content." His feelings are more complicated than simple joy or despair. He doesn't take outright pleasure in the man's death, maybe, because he can't take pleasure in anything at all anymore. War has numbed him.

If there's any pity in the poem, it's reserved for Steffi, the dead man's "girl." The speaker takes care to point out her photograph, telling the reader or his comrades to "Look." The speaker knows that she "would weep to see" what had become of her beloved, even if the speaker has no such inclination. He seems to recognize the humanity of the dead man, or at least the fact that his death will hurt his loved ones, even if the speaker himself can't *feel* that tragedy.

Douglas served in the British Army during WWII, and the poem is thought to be loosely based on his experiences as a tank commander during and after the Second Battle of El Alamein in Egypt.

SETTING

The poem takes place on a WWII battlefield three weeks after the fighting has ended. The "combatants" have departed, leaving only the dead and some equipment behind. The "sun" shines overhead and the landscape is "dust[y]." This supports the idea that the poem is based on Douglas's experiences at the Second Battle of El Alamein in Egypt; much of this battle was fought in the desert.

The speaker and his comrades are "returning over the nightmare ground" when they find a dead German soldier, the same man who, only recently, had hit the speaker's tank with his artillery gun. An eerie hush has fallen over the land, the quiet all the more sinister and surreal, perhaps, in contrast to the chaos and violence that filled the setting during the battle.

Now, everything seems still and lifeless. The dead soldier is "sprawling in the sun," his "burst stomach like a cave" and his papery eyes covered with dust. His keepsake—a picture of his girlfriend, Steffi—seems like a relic from another time and another world. Only the flies currently tucking into his body are moving. In the aftermath of war, death is the only survivor.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Keith Douglas (1920-1944) was a British poet and soldier who served—and died—in WWII. Douglas wrote nearly 40 poems while in active service, including "Simplify Me When I'm Dead," which provided the title for a later collection of Douglas poems selected by Ted Hughes. Douglas's poetry became some of the most impactful and inventive work to come out of the conflict. He described his own style as "extrospective"—that is, detached and clear-eyed rather than sentimental and introspective. In this poem, that approach challenges the reader, giving them no easy instructions as to how to feel in response to what they're reading.

Douglas was also influenced by the great war poets of WWI, particularly Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg. In particular, Douglas picks up on Owen's experimentations with pararhymes (e.g.,"heart" and "hurt"). The poetry of World War II, however, is a bit different from that of the previous conflict. In World War I, poets like the aforementioned Owen and Siegfried Sassoon wrote extensively about trench warfare, outlining the visceral, in-your-face violence of the front lines. Poems like Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" and Sassoon's "Attack" center around the gruesome intensity of fighting on the ground.

But the nature of war itself changed significantly between World War I and World War II, as new forms of technology made it possible to fight on a much larger scale. For this reason,

many of the poems written about World War II focus on its fearsome machinery. Poems like Henry Reed's "Naming of Parts" and Oscar Williams's "On the Summer Sky the Airship Hangs" focus very specifically on the tools and vessels used for killing.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

World War II began in 1939 when Britain and France declared war on Germany following Hitler's invasion of Poland. By the time the war ended in 1945, 40 to 60 million people had died.

Keith Douglas joined the war effort as soon as he could, completing his training in July 1940. He was posted to Cairo, Egypt, and Palestine. "Vergissmeinnicht" was inspired by Douglas's experience as a tank commander in the Second Battle of El Alamein in Egypt, during which Allied forces scored a major victory over German general Erwin Rommel and his Panzer Army. Douglas chronicled his war experiences in the memoir *Alamein to Zem Zem*. Douglas was later stationed in Normandy, France, where he was struck and killed by enemy fire on D-Day, not long before the end of the war.

WWII was, of course, the *second* incredibly deadly conflict of the 20th century. Though humankind had made huge technological advancements in the previous decades, for many these two brutal wars undermined the sense that this constituted actual progress. Many felt that perhaps technology had merely made humankind more efficient and creative in its own self-destruction, a point echoed by the way the dead man seems to be "mocked at by his own equipment" in this poem.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listening to a reading of "Vergissmeinnicht" by John Gielgud, one of England's acting greats. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ie7v-cmMoFE)
- Keith Douglas's Biography — Read more about Douglas's short life over at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/keith-douglas)
- A Radio Documentary About the Poet — Listen to this BBC programme examining Douglas's poetry and wartime experiences. (https://archive.org/details/keith-douglas)
- The Battle of El Alamein — Learn more about the major battle in Egypt, during which Douglas served as a tank operator. (https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/a-5-minute-history-of-the-battle-of-el-alamein)
- A Poet's Perspective — Listen to thoughts on Douglas from one of the foremost figures in contemporary poetry, Seamus Heaney. (https://poetshouse.org/audio/1991-passwords-seamus-heaney-on-keith-douglas-full-audio/)

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