

ASM TUITION ACADEMY

BAYONET CHARGE

Suddenly he awoke and was running – raw
In raw-seamed hot khaki, his sweat heavy,
Stumbling across a field of clods towards a green hedge
That dazzled with rifle fire, hearing
Bullets smacking the belly out of the air –
He lugged a rifle numb as a smashed arm;
The patriotic tear that had brimmed in his eye
Sweating like molten iron from the centre of his chest,

In bewilderment then he almost stopped –
In what cold clockwork of the stars and the nations
Was he the hand pointing that second? He was running
Like a man who has jumped up in the dark and runs
Listening between his footfalls for the reason
Of his still running, and his foot hung like
Statuary in mid-stride. Then the shot-slashed furrows
Threw up a yellow hare that rolled like a flame
And crawled in a threshing circle, its mouth wide
Open silent, its eyes standing out.

He plunged past with his bayonet toward the green hedge,
King, honour, human dignity, etcetera
Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm
To get out of that blue

Summary of "Bayonet Charge"

"Bayonet Charge" by Ted Hughes (often attributed to Wilfred Owen in error, but the poem is indeed by Hughes) captures a soldier's terrifying experience as he rushes towards enemy lines during a bayonet charge in World War I. The poem begins in medias res, thrusting the reader into the chaotic and disorienting experience of war. The soldier is described as moving through a landscape filled with confusion, fear, and the deadly reality of battle. The poem focuses on the intense physical and psychological effects of warfare on the individual soldier, exploring themes of fear, patriotism, and the dehumanizing nature of war. The soldier's initial instinct to survive conflicts with his deeper realization of the futility and horror of his actions, ultimately questioning the meaning and justification of war.

Analysis of Themes

1. **The Futility of War:** The poem emphasizes the futility and meaninglessness of war. The soldier's charge, driven by patriotism or instinct, is juxtaposed with the grim reality of warfare, where survival becomes the only goal.
2. **Fear and Confusion:** The soldier experiences overwhelming fear and confusion, highlighted by the chaotic and disorienting imagery. The suddenness and violence of the situation leave little room for rational thought, underscoring the raw terror of battle.
3. **Dehumanization:** War strips the soldier of his humanity, reducing him to a mere "cog in the machine" of warfare. The poem explores how the brutal realities of battle erode the soldier's sense of identity and moral purpose.
4. **Nature and War:** The natural world in the poem is depicted as indifferent to human conflict, with images of the natural environment contrasting with the violence of the bayonet charge.

Poetic Devices and Literary Techniques

1. **Imagery:** Hughes uses powerful and often disturbing imagery to convey the chaos and horror of war. Phrases like "bullets smacking the belly out of the air" vividly capture the violence and immediacy of the battlefield.
2. **Simile:** The soldier is described as "sweating like molten iron," comparing the intense heat and stress he feels to a forge, emphasizing the physical and emotional strain of the charge.
3. **Enjambment:** The poem's lines frequently run over into the next, creating a sense of urgency and momentum that mirrors the soldier's frantic rush.
4. **Alliteration and Assonance:** The use of alliteration (e.g., "cold clockwork") and assonance adds a rhythmic intensity to the poem, enhancing the emotional impact of the language.
5. **Juxtaposition:** Hughes juxtaposes the soldier's idealistic motivations (patriotism, duty) with the grim reality of war, creating a powerful contrast that underscores the poem's themes of disillusionment and futility.
6. **Metaphor:** The "yellow hair" mentioned in the poem is often interpreted as a metaphor for the soldier's fear or innocence caught in the crossfire, adding a layer of symbolic meaning to the narrative.

Comparison with "Exposure" by Wilfred Owen and "War Photographer" by Carol Ann Duffy

1. **Theme:**
 - **"Bayonet Charge"** explores the immediate, visceral terror of combat, focusing on the soldier's internal conflict between survival and the futility of war.
 - **"Exposure"** by Wilfred Owen presents a different aspect of war, focusing on the psychological torment of soldiers who are not engaged in active combat but are instead enduring the agonizing wait in freezing conditions. The theme here is the slow, insidious death caused by exposure to the elements, rather than the immediate violence of battle.
 - **"War Photographer"** by Carol Ann Duffy addresses the aftermath of war and the emotional toll it takes on those who document it. The photographer is depicted as a mediator between the horrors of war and the detached, often

indifferent public. The poem explores themes of guilt, the ethics of voyeurism, and the desensitization to violence.

2. Structure:

- **"Bayonet Charge"** is composed of three stanzas with irregular line lengths and no consistent rhyme scheme, reflecting the chaotic and unpredictable nature of the battlefield.
- **"Exposure"** is structured in regular stanzas with a consistent ABBAC rhyme scheme, which ironically mirrors the monotonous, relentless suffering of the soldiers.
- **"War Photographer"** uses a tight, controlled structure with four six-line stanzas and a regular rhyme scheme, symbolizing the photographer's attempt to impose order on the chaos he captures through his lens.

3. Tone:

- The tone of **"Bayonet Charge"** is one of panic and desperation, capturing the soldier's fear and the intensity of the moment.
- **"Exposure"** has a tone of bleak resignation and despair, as the soldiers face death not with the adrenaline of battle but with the slow, creeping dread of freezing to death.
- **"War Photographer"** employs a detached, reflective tone, as the photographer processes his experiences and contemplates the disconnect between his work and the audience's reaction.

4. Use of Nature:

- In **"Bayonet Charge,"** nature is portrayed as an indifferent backdrop to human conflict, with the "green hedge" and the "yellow hare" existing in stark contrast to the violence of the charge.
- **"Exposure"** uses nature as an antagonist; the cold, wind, and snow are as deadly as any enemy, contributing to the soldiers' suffering.
- In **"War Photographer,"** nature is largely absent, reflecting the focus on human suffering and the artificial environment of the darkroom where the photographer works. However, the poem's imagery does connect the physical process of developing photographs to the psychological process of grappling with traumatic memories.

Conclusion

"Bayonet Charge," "Exposure," and "War Photographer" each offer distinct perspectives on the experience of war. While "Bayonet Charge" plunges the reader into the chaos and terror of combat, "Exposure" dwells on the slow psychological and physical deterioration of soldiers exposed to the elements, and "War Photographer" reflects on the emotional burden borne by those who document the horrors of war. Despite their differences, all three poems engage with themes of fear, futility, and the profound impact of war on the human psyche. They employ a range of poetic devices and structures to convey these themes, creating powerful, evocative portrayals of the varied experiences of war.