

ASM TUITION ACADEMY

EXPOSURE

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knives us...
Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent...
Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient...
Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,
But nothing happens.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,
Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.
Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,
Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.
What are we doing here?

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow...
We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag storm.
Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army
Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey,
But nothing happens.

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.
Less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow,
With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew,
We watch them wandering up and down the wind's nonchalance,
But nothing happens.

Pale flakes with lingering stealth come feeling for our faces—
We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed,
Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,
Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses.
—Is it that we are dying?

Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed
With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;
For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;
Shutters and doors, all closed: on us, the doors are closed,—
We turn back to our dying.

Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn;
Now ever sun smile true on child, or field, or fruit.
For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;
Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were born,
For the love of God seems dying.

Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and us,
Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp.

The burying party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp,
Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,
But nothing happens.

Summary of "Exposure" by Wilfred Owen

"Exposure," written by Wilfred Owen, vividly captures the harrowing experiences of soldiers in the trenches during World War I. The poem describes the relentless, bitter cold and the ever-present threat of death as the soldiers endure the brutality of war. They face not only the enemy but also the merciless elements, particularly the freezing winter. The soldiers are in a state of hopelessness and despair, feeling abandoned by God and society. The poem concludes with a sense of futility, as the soldiers realise that they may die in the trenches, forgotten and unrecognised for their sacrifice.

Poetic Analysis

Wilfred Owen's "Exposure" is a stark and poignant portrayal of the futility and suffering inherent in war. The poem's structure, imagery, and language work together to convey the relentless agony faced by soldiers. The title itself, "Exposure," is multifaceted, suggesting both the physical exposure to the elements and the emotional exposure to fear and despair.

1. **Structure and Form:**
 - The poem consists of eight stanzas, each containing five lines, reflecting a consistent, repetitive structure that mirrors the monotonous and unending suffering of the soldiers. The regularity of the structure symbolizes the cyclical nature of their despair, where each day is a repeat of the last, filled with cold, fear, and waiting.
 - The rhyme scheme is ABBA, known as an enclosed rhyme. This choice enhances the sense of entrapment and suffocation as if the soldiers are trapped within their own misery.
2. **Imagery:**
 - Owen employs stark and vivid imagery to convey the harshness of the soldiers' environment. The use of words like "merciless iced east winds," "mad gusts," and "dawn massing in the east her melancholy army" paints a picture of a hostile, unforgiving nature that is as much an enemy as the human foes.
 - The imagery of cold and ice dominates the poem, symbolizing not only the physical conditions but also the emotional numbness of the soldiers.
3. **Tone:**
 - The tone of the poem is one of despair and resignation. Owen's use of language creates a bleak, oppressive atmosphere, reflecting the hopelessness felt by the soldiers. The repetition of phrases like "But nothing happens" underscores the futility and stagnation of their situation.
4. **Themes:**
 - **The Horrors of War:** Owen vividly portrays the suffering and futility of war. The soldiers are not depicted as heroic figures but as victims of a brutal, senseless conflict.

- **Nature as an Enemy:** The poem presents nature as a powerful and malevolent force, with the cold and wind acting as additional foes to the soldiers.
 - **Isolation and Abandonment:** The soldiers feel abandoned by both God and society, leading to a deep sense of isolation. The poem touches on the spiritual desolation that accompanies the physical suffering.
5. **Comparison of Themes:**
- When comparing the themes of "Exposure" with other war poems, especially those written by Owen, such as "Dulce et Decorum Est" or "Anthem for Doomed Youth," the focus remains on the brutal reality of war. However, "Exposure" uniquely emphasizes the cruelty of nature and the relentless, passive suffering of waiting, as opposed to the active horrors of battle.
 - Unlike other poems that focus on the immediate violence of war, "Exposure" delves into the slow, torturous experience of waiting in the trenches, where death can come from nature as readily as from the enemy.
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GRAMMATICAL TECHNIQUES:

Wilfred Owen uses a range of literary devices to enhance the impact of "Exposure":

1. **Personification:**

- Nature is personified throughout the poem, with the "winds that knife us" and "Dawn massing in the east her melancholy

army." This personification emphasizes nature's role as a hostile force, almost as if the natural world is an active participant in the war, attacking the soldiers just as fiercely as the enemy troops.

2. **Alliteration:**

- Owen uses alliteration to create a harsh, biting sound that reflects the brutal conditions. For example, in the phrase "Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence," the repetition of the "s" sound mimics the whistling of bullets and the cold wind.

3. **Repetition:**

- The phrase "But nothing happens" is repeated throughout the poem, creating a sense of stasis and hopelessness. This repetition reinforces the theme of futility, as the soldiers endure endless suffering with no resolution in sight.

4. **Juxtaposition:**

- Owen juxtaposes images of warmth and cold, life and death, to highlight the unnatural conditions the soldiers face. For instance, the "poignant misery of dawn" contrasts the usual association of dawn with hope and renewal, instead presenting it as a harbinger of continued suffering.

5. **Simile and Metaphor:**

- Similes such as "Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles" convey the physical and mental torment of the soldiers. Metaphors, like "the frost will fasten on this mud and us," suggest the inevitability of death, as if the cold itself will claim the soldiers' lives.

6. **Caesura and Enjambment:**

- Owen frequently uses caesura (a pause within a line) to create a sense of interruption or dislocation, mirroring the soldiers' fragmented thoughts and the unpredictability of their environment. Enjambment (running one line into the next without a pause) is also used to reflect the ongoing, unbroken nature of their suffering.

Grammatical Techniques

Wilfred Owen's mastery of language extends to his use of grammatical techniques to enhance the poem's emotional impact:

1. **Ellipsis:**
 - The ellipsis in lines such as "Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous, / But nothing happens." creates a pause, reflecting the soldiers' anxious waiting and the eerie calm before potential violence.
2. **Tense and Aspect:**
 - The poem primarily uses the present tense, which immerses the reader in the immediate experience of the soldiers. The use of continuous aspect (e.g., "We keep awake because the night is silent") emphasizes the ongoing, never-ending nature of their vigil.
3. **Short, Simple Sentences:**
 - Owen often uses short, simple sentences to convey the blunt, stark reality of the soldiers' situation. This simplicity reflects the stripped-down existence of the men, where survival is their only concern.
4. **Questions:**
 - Rhetorical questions like "What are we doing here?" convey the soldiers' existential despair and the lack of purpose they feel in their suffering. These questions are left unanswered, emphasizing the lack of meaning they perceive in their sacrifice.

Conclusion

"Exposure" is a powerful example of Wilfred Owen's skill in conveying the grim realities of war. Through its vivid imagery, use of literary devices, and exploration of themes such as the futility of war and the cruelty of nature, the poem provides a haunting portrayal of the soldiers' experience in the trenches. The structure, language, and grammatical techniques work in harmony to create a sense of relentless suffering and despair, making "Exposure" one of the most poignant and enduring anti-war poems in the English language.

COMPARISON WITH **THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE**

When comparing "Exposure" by Wilfred Owen and "The Charge of the Light Brigade" by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, we can observe key differences and similarities in their treatment of war, tone, structure, and message.

1. Themes:

- **"Exposure"**: Owen highlights the futility and suffering of war, particularly focusing on the harsh realities of soldiers exposed to the elements during World War I. The poem is concerned with both physical and emotional torment. Nature, especially the cold, is depicted as a deadly enemy.
- **"The Charge of the Light Brigade"**: Tennyson's poem is a more traditional, heroic depiction of war, recounting the bravery of soldiers in the Crimean War. It emphasizes duty, valor, and sacrifice, despite the tragic loss of life due to a military blunder.

2. Tone:

- **"Exposure"**: The tone is bleak, sombre, and bitter. Owen uses language that conveys despair and hopelessness, reflecting his anti-war stance. Phrases like "But nothing happens" create a sense of monotony and stagnation, emphasizing the futility of the soldiers' suffering.
- **"The Charge of the Light Brigade"**: Tennyson adopts a more celebratory and respectful tone, even though the poem describes a military disaster. The tone remains dignified and reverent, with lines like "Noble six hundred!" emphasizing the soldiers' courage in the face of death.

3. Structure and Form:

- **"Exposure"**: Owen uses a consistent ABBAC rhyme scheme and eight stanzas, each contributing to the poem's sense of stasis and endless suffering. The regular structure mirrors the soldiers' repetitive, never-ending experience of waiting and suffering.
- **"The Charge of the Light Brigade"**: Tennyson uses a dactylic rhythm to mimic the galloping of horses, creating a sense of movement and urgency. The poem's stanzas vary in length, mirroring the chaos and action of battle. The repetition of lines like "Forward, the Light Brigade!" adds to the sense of command and momentum.

4. Portrayal of Soldiers:

- **"Exposure"**: The soldiers are portrayed as vulnerable, powerless, and suffering from the environment. Owen presents them as victims of both the war and the natural conditions, with no sense of glory or triumph. They are dehumanized by the cold and fear.
- **"The Charge of the Light Brigade"**: The soldiers are portrayed as brave and honourable, even in the face of almost certain death. Despite the "blunder" made by military leadership, the soldiers' loyalty and courage are glorified. The poem immortalizes them as heroes, regardless of the outcome.

5. Attitudes to War:

- **"Exposure"**: Owen's poem is deeply critical of war, questioning its purpose and showing the psychological and physical toll on soldiers. War is depicted as a meaningless and relentless force, indifferent to human life.
- **"The Charge of the Light Brigade"**: While Tennyson acknowledges the disaster of the Light Brigade's charge, his focus is on the soldiers' honor and duty. War is still seen as tragic, but it is also presented as a setting for heroism and noble sacrifice.

6. Imagery and Language:

- **"Exposure"**: Owen uses stark, vivid imagery to convey the harshness of the cold and the desolation of the soldiers. Nature is personified as a cruel, indifferent force, with phrases like "merciless iced east winds that knife us." There is a heavy use of rhetorical questions, emphasizing the soldiers' confusion and despair.
- **"The Charge of the Light Brigade"**: Tennyson's imagery focuses on the chaos and violence of battle. The famous lines "Cannon to right of them, / Cannon to left of them, / Cannon in front of them" create a vivid picture of the soldiers surrounded by danger. The language is more formal and archaic, fitting the poem's tone of heroic commemoration.

7. Message:

- **"Exposure"**: Owen's message is anti-war. He emphasizes the pointlessness of conflict, not just in terms of physical battle, but in the way soldiers are left to suffer and die without purpose. The cold and inaction become metaphors for the futility of war.
- **"The Charge of the Light Brigade"**: Tennyson's message is one of respect and admiration for the soldiers who obeyed orders and faced death with courage. While there is an acknowledgement of the error that led to their deaths, the focus remains on their bravery and the honour in following duty.

Conclusion:

- **"Exposure"** presents a harsh, unflinching view of war's futility and suffering, focusing on the individual psychological and physical torment of soldiers.
- **"The Charge of the Light Brigade"** celebrates the bravery and heroism of soldiers in a tragic situation, despite the disastrous outcome, offering a more traditional and glorified view of war.

Both poems explore the themes of sacrifice and the consequences of war, but from very different perspectives: Owen is critical and bleak, while Tennyson is more traditional and heroic.