

Missing rhythm

Wilfred Owen Poems

Insensibility

Start with opening information:

- Owen wrote *Insensibility* in 1918 at Ripon where he was training to return to the **Western front**.
- *Insensibility* is Owen's reaction to romantic notions by other writers. *Insensibility* is Owen's reaction to **William Wordsworth's** poem, *Character of the Happy Warrior*, written in 1807 (two years after the naval **Battle of Trafalgar**) about military heroes who are to be commended not only by men but by God.
- I will be approaching the poem thematically
 - The themes of the poem that I will be exploring are
 1. **The plight & desensitising of the soldier**
 2. **The tragedy & horrors of war**
 3. **The rebuking of pro-war individuals**
- Provide contextualisation and overview of extract
 - This poem was written by Wilfred Owen, a war poet who focused on anti-war poetry after experiencing the horrors of World War 1 first hand.
 - This poem was written as Wilfred Owen was preparing to return to the battlefield after he had been sent back home to be treated for shell shock and this poem explores the psychological mechanisms soldiers employ to stomach the horrors of war, perhaps presenting itself as a reflection on Owen's attempt to overcome the trauma he experienced
 - This poem is divided into six different stanzas, each bearing a roman numeral. The irregular meter, broken rhythm and use of pararhyme throughout the poem might reflect the broken mental state of soldiers at war, facing its horrors having been sent to the frontline under the influence of pro war individuals
- **The plight & desensitization of the soldier**
 - Parallel to romantic poems
 - The start of *Insensibility* "Happy are men" parallels to romantic poems, yet it is an ironic reversal of the patriotic lines used in other romantic poems, as can be seen with the end of the line "who yet before they are killed". Owen has done this for two reasons.
 - Firstly, to introduce readers to the truth of war as he sees it and informing them that this poem is not to romanticise war, but in fact to talk about the harsh realities of war and the loss of senses that these men have to have in order to survive in the war.
 - Secondly, Owen is bringing out the feelings of the pity that people should have for the soldiers in the war instead of the glorification of war itself.
 - The parallel to romantic poems is carried out throughout the poem as can be seen at the start of almost every stanza, "happy are these", "happy the soldier, "happy the lad".
 - Feeling diction (emotive diction)

- Owen frequently brings up emotions only to negate them throughout the poem. He repeatedly uses the word “happy” ironically at the start of multiple stanzas, but also uses terms such as “no compassion”, “tearful fooling”, “cease feeling”, “terror’s first constriction over”...
- The use of these feeling words as can be seen is to negate the feelings/emotions that they are describing. In all the evidence stated above, the presence of emotion is seen to be a bad thing and hence the need to “cease feelings”. This is to bring across the message of the desensitizing of soldiers – plight of soldiers.
- The only true emotions that are reflected in this poem are anger and bitterness as is expressed explicitly in the last stanza of this poem. Owen “[curses] the dullards”. He is possibly referring to the generals and leaders of this war that have decided to send the men to the front lines to fight the war for them while they stay “immune” to the “cannon stuns” and insensible to the deaths of the many young soldiers in the front lines.
- Repeated sound devices
 - The use of the fricative “f” sounds used through stanza one in “flee”, “feet”, “front”, “fade”, “flowers”, “fooling”, “filling”, “fought” and ending in the first line of stanza 2 in “cease feeling” are used to express Owen’s forceful furious anger which he feels for the deaths of so many soldiers. The situations described so far are mostly of the **plight and desensitising of soldiers** in the front lines.
 - The sibilant ‘s’ sounds used in stanza 2 in “cease”, “themselves”, “dullness”, “solves”, “tease”, “shelling”... are create a strong hissing effect. This effect builds up and places a huge emphasis on the message in stanza 2 which is that the deaths of “armies” are not even accounted for. Portraying the **dehumanisation of the soldiers** fighting the front lines by the people paying their “shillings”.
 - The alliteration of sinister sibilant ‘s’ sounds used in stanza three in a row, “senses in some scorching cautery”, emphasises the harsh ‘c’, ‘k’, sound in ‘cautery’. This emphasises the **desensitizing of the soldiers in battle**. → expressing the numbing of feeling of the soldiers and their emotions.
- Metaphor
 - An **extended metaphor** based on the mathematical issue of calculating who dies and who lives is used in the last three lines of stanza 2.
 - The extended metaphor amplifies the lack of care that the soldiers feel for themselves. They had rather let the personified “Chance” decide through random means who lives and who dies. The soldier’s have decided it is far beyond them to calculate or tally how many of their fellow soldiers are dying.
 - “shillings” is a euphemism used for the enlistment into the army.
 - The use of “strange arithmetic” could also be used to describe the random dropping of the shells, killing many in their wake.
- Symbol
 - ‘laugh among the dying, unconcerned’

- symbolises the survival technique by which the living soldier's learn to survive amongst the many dead.
 - Use of punctuation
 - "How somewhere, every dawn, some men attack,"
 - Use use of many commas in this line creates the **onomatopoeic effect** of the 'sighing' sound that people make when they are tired. Which focuses on the **plight of soldiers**.
 - 'Alive, he is not vital overmuch; / Dying, not mortal overmuch'
 - use of the semi colon at the end of both lines creates syntactical parallel lines, this emphasises the juxtaposition and contrast between the two lines. Shows that although being alive and being dead are two contrasting ideas, there is not much difference in emotions.
 - "Nor sad, nor proud,
Nor curious at all.
He cannot tell
Old men's placidity from his." Saying that the soldiers themselves cannot tell separate the difference between cold and being calm. Hence, they choose to shut out their emotions in order to feel 'calm' on the battlefield.
- **The tragedy & horrors of war**
 - Military diction
 - Owen uses a lot of military diction in this poem. For example, he starts of the poem immediately with "killed" as is the assumed fate for all who fight in the war. He carries on using words such as "front line withers", "troops who fade", "shilling", "armies" are decimated...
 - The use of military diction here with negative associations gives a negative tone towards the notion of war.
 - Military terms also have an emotionless feel to them and hence accentuates the insensibility of the soldiers as described in the poem.
 - Metaphor
 - "cobbled" streets are used as a **metaphor** for the trenches being paved by the dead bodies of dead soldiers in the war. The brutal metaphor is used to depict the **horrors of war** that the men need to become insensible to.
 - We march taciturn, because of dusk, the long forlorn relentless trend from larger day to huger night'
 - day and night here are used to represent the life and death. By portraying the day as large and night as huger, it seems to me that Owen is pushing across the message that he does not know what lies after death, but he knows that there is much hardship to overcome in life. Hence, the use of "larger"
 - Diction
 - 'makes their feet sore on the alleys cobbled with their brothers'
 - A tragic and horrifying scene is painted as soldiers have to march on over their dead comrades and this would imply that not only are

there so many fallen soldiers that they are described as cobbling the path, but also that they are not honoured with anything resembling a proper burial, essentially that they die with no dignity, their bodies left to rot on the battlefield

- Additionally, the word 'cobbled' establishes a link between the soldiers and stone, suggesting that the soldiers were insignificant and meant nothing more than mere stone
- Use of color/symbolism
 - 'Having seen all things red, their eyes are rid of the hurt of the colour of blood for ever'
 - Simple brutal symbol of the bloodshed during the war
 - The use of "rid of the hurt" shows that the soldiers themselves have become immune to the bloodshed around them as they have desensitised themselves to the sights of their fellow soldiers dying amongst them.
 - 'We wise, who with a thought besmirch blood over all our soul'
 - As opposed to without a thought. They are aware of their actions and they have to carry the emotional baggage if they do not learn to desensitise themselves
 - Sibilant 's' sounds
 - "Before the last sea and the hapless stars;
Whatever mourns when many leave these shores;
 - Use of sibilant 's' sounds in the last stanza alludes to the river Styx in Greek mythology which is the river between life and death that the dead have to cross.
- **The rebuking of pro-war individuals**
 - Tone
 - "But cursed are dullards whom no cannon stuns"
 - oppositional conjunction is used. This is to show the large contrast between the emotions that readers should feel for the soldiers fighting in the war as described in the stanza's before, and the anger that they should feel towards those supporting the sending of youths to the war.
 - Tone in the last stanza is full of anger and directed at the leaders, generals, and all those who support the sending of young innocent troops to the war.
 - 'they are troops who fade, not flowers for poets' tearful fooling'
 - perhaps suggesting that it is hopeless for poets' to write about the war as no one is listening and it does not bring the troops back from the dead.
 - 'Happy the lad whose mind was never trained', 'he sings along the march which we march taciturn'
 - provides the contrast between a youth that is fighting in the war and one that is staying home in the home front, lucky to not have to desensitise himself due to the horrors of war.
 - 'they should be as stones', 'alleys cobbled with their brothers'

- perhaps the poet is suggesting that instead of the “brothers” that die around him in the war, it should be those that promote pro-war rhetoric that should fight the war.
- Or it could also mean that these people are emotionless as stone.