

Wilfred Owen Poems

The Sentry – 1918

- Start with opening information:
 - Owen began writing *The Sentry* when he was receiving hospital treatment at Craiglockhart hospital in 1917. The recount seems similar to a letter that Owen wrote to his mother on Jan 16th 1917, where Owen writes about sentry duty. *The Sentry* was finally completed in France in September 1918, a few weeks before his death.
- I will be approaching the poem thematically
 - The themes of the poem that I will be exploring are
 1. **The horrors & tragedy of war**
 2. **The chaos and hopelessness of war**
 3. **The plight of the soldier**
- 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. In this particular poem, and echoed in other similar anti-war poems like *Dulce et Decorum Est*, Owen writes about one particular soldier.
 - In fact, this poem was inspired and based on a particular experience he had where one soldier on sentry duty was blown down and blinded during an artillery attack. The fact that this happened 1.5 year before *The sentry* was published, yet it is written in such great detail suggests that the personal experience was so horrifying that that he could still remember it so vividly.
 - Presenting an account of this singular event to the reader, Owen splits up his poem into three uneven stanzas in a manner similar to a three act structure, with the first stanza setting the scene, the second conveying the action of the event and the third exploring the aftermath. Through this singular event, Owen achieves his goal, to explore the pity of war, both on a large scale as the greater battle and on a personal scale, with light shone upon the plight of the individual soldier
- **The horrors & tragedy of war**
 - Onomatopoeia
 - ‘Blast/ Of whizz-bangs’ (lines 11-12), ‘hammered’ (line 3), ‘shrieking’ (line 27).
 - Whizz bang is the onomatopoeic name the soldiers gave to most German shells, as they flew faster than the speed of sound, thus delaying the bang that should warn men to shield themselves.
 - The effect of its impact is transmuted into the crashing fall of the sentry’s body and noises of human suffering such as “whined” (line 18), “sobbed” (line 23), “spewed” (line 28), “moans” (line 32) and “wild chattering” (line 33).
 - The extensive use of onomatopoeia to describe the scene thus describes the aural assault that engulfs Owen and his men, which may be summed up in the alliterative phrase, ‘dense din’ (line 36)
 - ‘gave us hell, for shell on frantic shell’
 - Regular rhythm and rhyme in this line, mirrors the frequent and relentless bombs dropping on the men.

- **Assonance and Internal rhyme** which creates **emotional tension**
- **Personification** of the 'shell' that are bombardment shells typically used during WWI – reflecting the **heightened and tense atmosphere**
- Personification of the shell also acts to dehumanise the soldiers, devaluing them to mere weapons of war.
- **Transferred epithet** of "Frantic Shell" reflects the frantic nature of the soldiers and the **chaos** that ensues in the trenches.
- **Emphasising the horrors and tragedy of war**
- "Floundering about" line 25
 - It leaves him 'floundering about' (line 25) without dignity or even purpose, like the gassed, 'drowning' victim of *Dulce et Decorum Est*.
 - Reveals the cruelty of war in intense manner.
- 'Oh sir, my eyes – I'm blind – I'm blind, I'm blind'
 - Formality and respect evokes sympathy
 - Medial caesura accentuates the agony with prolonging the line
 - Repetition and exclamation point also accentuates the agony
- 'Eyeballs, hug-bulged like squids'
 - Grotesque imagery
 - Theriomorphic imagery dehumanises soldier
 - This is the only simile used in the poem, and stands out in the readers' minds, possibly similar to how the protagonist watches him in "his dreams still". Emphasises the horrors of war and the fact that these horrors will never leave the witnessing soldiers.
- 'Those other wretches, how they bled and spewed'
- **Chaos and hopelessness**
 - Titular significance
 - Ironical as sentries are supposed to keep on the lookout and report any signs of enemy activity. However, the sentry in *The Sentry* is blinded.
 - His loss of sight places emphasis on the futility of war, highlighting how the efforts of those who sacrificed their lives and believed in their country's cause eventually amounted to nothing
 - Rhyme scheme
 - Normally Owen likes to use pararhyme throughout his poems, for example "*Strange meeting*", however, for this poem he has written almost entirely in full rhyme, almost as if he did not wish to get in the way of the action of the story. First stanza: "knew"//"through", "hour"//"sour", "slime"//"climb".
 - There are instances of rhyming couplets throughout the poem. Personally, I think he used them to signal a change in events that are occurring. For example, last part of stanza 1, "men"//"den", or first lines of stanza 2, "blast"//"last". Owen even ends the poem with a rhyming couplet, "shout"//"out". - this last couplet is used to show the hopelessness of the blind man's false hope and the grim reality of the facts that "our lights had long died out"
 - 'uh' assonance is often repeated throughout the poem
 - assonating words such as 'guttering' (line 4), 'slush' (line 5), 'buffeting' and 'snuffing' (line 13), 'much' (line 15), 'mud' and 'ruck' (line 17)

- This sound is reiterated by the high proportion onomatopoeic words such as 'burst' (line 3), 'thud! Fump! Thud!' and 'thumping' (line 13), to convey the muffled sounds of explosion and falling in the confined space underground.
 - in "guttering", "slush", "murk" – heightens the impression of noisy confusion in the trenches, replicating chaos experienced by the soldiers.
 - Rhythm
 - 'Rain guttering down in waterfalls of slime, kept slush waist-high and rising hour by hour' – is a hypercatalectic line emphasising the "waterfalls of slime", just like how the line is overflowing by one syllable instead of the usual 10 syllables.
 - Line 9 is a hypercatalectic line and the additional syllable draws our attention to the extended length of time the dug-out has been occupied.
 - Inverted feet (use of trochaic meter) in lines 3, "Hammered", line 13, "Buffeting" and line 35, "Pummelled".
 - Use of Spondee in lines 4, "rain guttering". Line 14 has 7 heavy beats "And thud! flump! thud! down the steep steps came thumping" – used to convey the deadweight of a falling body.
 - 'choked the steps too thick with clay to climb'
 - Sense of entrapment
 - 'one found our door at last, - buffeting eyes and breath, snuffing candles'
 - Enjambment creates tension for this action scene
 - Sense of disorder
 - Snuffing candles = symbolism for the hopelessness/loss of hope
 - 'And splashing in the flood, deluging muck – //the sentry's body'
 - Enjambment
 - Caesura
 - 'floundering about to other posts under the **shrieking air**'
 - Sense of chaos
 - **Double entendre** of shrieking, where it could mean the noise created by whizz bangs as it travels through the air or it could refer to the miserable atmosphere of the men.
 - **Transferred epithet** as if the air itself is terrified and scared. Highlights the men's fears.
 - This highlights the feelings of fear by the men, to a point that the atmosphere around them radiates the same emotion.
 - 'crumps pummelled the roof and slogged the air beneath'
 - All encompassing
 - 'we heard him shout "I see your lights!" But ours had long died out'
- **The plight of the soldier**
 - Rhyme
 - There is one pararhyme in this poem and that is at the start of the last stanza, "spewed"//"good" – the dissonant connection between these

two create an eerie effect as if the dying is 'good' when faced with staying alive to continue fighting in the war. This highlights a soldier's plight.

- Tone
 - The poet's fearful tone can be heard in the phrases shell after frantic shell / Hammered' l.2-3 and the horror of the situation in later nightmares: 'Eyeballs, huge-bulged like squids / Watch my dreams still'
 - 'I try not to remember these things now' – poet trying to distance himself from the gory details of the situation he was in, instead allowing himself selective memories.
- Rhythm
 - "Half-listening to that sentry's moans and jumps"
"And the wild chattering of his broken teeth," – two lines in last stanza that are hypercatalectic.
 - "half listening..." the hypercatalectic line highlights the unease within the soldier being described and the sleeplessness that the soldier suffers amidst the war.
 - The use of the extra syllable in "and the..." seems to convey the jolty nerves of the terrified sentry.
- 'There we herded from the blast off whizz-bangs'
 - Like cattle
 - Enjambment emphasises ceaseless blasts
- 'We dredged him up, for killed, until he whined', 'coaxing'
 - Dredge like dirt
 - Expectant of death
 - Child-like whine and coax – emphasis of the youthfulness of the soldier being described.
- 'that sentry's moans and jumps', 'the wild chattering of his broken teeth'