

Wilfred Owen Poems

Exposure – 1918

- Start with opening information:
 - This poem seems to be inspired by Owen's experience in the winter of 1917, when he and his men lay in the snow of Redan Ridge for 2 days and 2 nights, unable to move.
 - the final draft of exposure was dated Sept 1918, just a few weeks before Owen was killed near Ors, in northern France.
- I will be approaching the poem thematically
 - The themes of the poem that I will be exploring are
 1. **Nature as the enemy**
 2. **The plight of the soldier and Loss of faith**
 3. **Camaraderie of soldiers/ Shared endurance**
- 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.
- Structure of poem
 - **Consists of 8 regular stanzas, each containing 5 lines (quintains).** The poem, in brief, depicts the fate of soldiers who are suffering and eventually perish from hypothermia.
 - Through this event, Owen provides a realistic view of war not only as the horrors and tragedies that occur in the midst of battle and bloodshed, but in the waiting periods of the war as well. (**War portrayed as a waiting game**). This contradicts propaganda and over glorified portrayals of war.
 - **Use of pararhymes** throughout the poem, following mostly ABBA structure. Used to create sense of discordance in the poem, possibly to represent the discordant thoughts of the soldier. Creates sense of unease in readers.
 - ABBA structure is unchanging, reflective how nothing happens.
 - **Meter: Hexameter is used** (excluding the last line of each stanza), but the meter is regularly broken, some lines even contain extra feet. This perhaps reflects the uncertainty of the men, or the brokenness of the men's minds even though they are trying to stay orderly.
 - **Half lines at the end of each stanza.** Each of Owen's stanzas end with a short half line. In the Stanzas 1, 3, 4, 8, it ends with "But nothing happens" which reflects the monotony and also the unchanging fact that nothing is happening. Portraying that **war is a waiting game**. The questions and other statements asked at the end of the other stanzas will be discussed.
- **Nature as the enemy**
 - Significance of the title: "Exposure"
 - The title itself is rather ambiguous, but hints at several ideas that are discussed in this poem.
 - Exposure can firstly be taken to mean the exposure to the elements of nature, which portrays **nature as the enemy**.
 - On a deeper level, exposure also hints at the soldier's exposed and vulnerable state of mind.

- Alternatively, Exposure could mean the exposure of the plight of a soldier and the harsh realities of war to readers. Especially to the audience in those times, it reveals the harsh realities of war that the propaganda of the government tries to cover up. Exposing the government's over glorification of war to the youths of that time.
- Keatsian Elements
 - The first line of the poem alludes to Keats' opening line in *Ode to a Nightingale*: "my heart aches..." More Keatsian elements are depicted in the poem, particularly stanza 5 where images of spring are introduced.
 -
- Sounds
 - **Sibilance** of the first line in "merciless iced east winds that knife us"
 - The use of sibilance provides a hissing sound which mimics the sound that a knife makes as it cuts through the air. This is further substantiated from the poet's choice of diction in "knife" us.
 - This brings to mind an image of the strong winds literally knifing the soldiers, attacking them, portraying nature as the enemy.
 - **Fricative sounds** in "frost will fasten"
 - The alliterative and fricative effect that this has is in emphasising the active effort of the frost fastening themselves on the soldiers and the mud.
 - **Almost onomatopoeic** effect in "flickering gunnery rumbles"
 - The atmosphere created here is tense where the smallest sounds seem to be amplified. It also conveys the deathly silence of the setting around the soldiers.
 -
- Personification
 - "Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army"
 - Dawn is personified and likened to enemy soldier ranks. The use of military diction here strengthens the idea of nature being the enemy.
 - What is ironic about this is that Dawn is typically a symbol of hope, but in this case, it was a common WW1 strategy for armies to attack at dawn when the soldiers on shift were most likely tired from a long night of sentry duty and in the cover of darkness.
 - The use of dawn, which is the portrayal of a new day, conveys the cyclical nature of the torment that the men have to endure from nature. This shows the unrelenting torture that the men have to endure from the elements of nature.
 - "pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces-"
 - The personification of flakes here connote that the soldiers are being attacked by nature.

- The fact that the flakes are personified and actively “feeling the [soldier’s] faces” also highlights the paranoia of the soldiers in thinking that they are under attack. This conveys the effects of the war on the mental state of the soldiers.
 - “air that shudders”, “wind’s nonchalance”
 - The personification has the intent of bringing nature to life and give it a very real, sinister presence around the soldiers.
- Description of Nature
 - “war lasts, rain soaks and clouds sag stormy”
 - **Use of triadic structure**, listing of three facts that the soldiers are certain of amongst all the uncertainties of the war. Emphasis here is all placed on nature. Which suggests the continuous torture the men endure from nature, again portraying nature as the enemy.
- **Plight of soldiers, loss of faith**
 - Repetition
 - Repetition of “but nothing happens” 4 times throughout the poem
 - Creates an anticlimactic effects and an air of indifference in to the soldiers’ sufferings.
 - Passage of time
 - “Dawn” to “Tonight”
 - When the reader reads “tonight”, the reader realises that the poem is actually following the passage of time from morning to night. This sense of circularity suggests a cyclic monotony to the soldiers’ lives in the trenches and heightens the theme of the plight of soldiers.
 - Symbol
 - several possible interpretations depending on the position of the soldier. inside, the closed door may be taken as a symbol of safety or comfort; outside, it is a symbol of abandonment or cold neglect. in the latter’s case, could also possibly allude to society’s frowning on young able men who bailed out, accusing them of cowardice. (young women would send white feathers, a symbol of cowardice, to such soldiers, ‘the men who would not fight’)
 - Use of the half lines (last lines of each stanza)
 - First stanza - half line “what are we doing here?”
 - The rhetoric question conveys the disoriented and confused state of mind of the soldier.
 - Soldiers are beginning to question the very purpose of their participation in the war. Loss of faith of the soldiers.
 - Fourth stanza – half line “is it that we are dying?”
 - The rhetorical question here suggests the soldier’s disbelief at the brief happiness of his experience. This presents death as a release and respite from war.
 - Fifth stanza – half line “We turn back to our dying”
 - Reveals that the soldiers are trapped both ways. If the soldiers decide to return home from the war, they face humiliation and shame from everyone for their cowardice. If the soldiers decide

to stay, they face almost certain death. Should they survive the war, the soldiers will also almost certainly have certain disabilities, whether suffering mental illnesses, or bodily harm. These effects of war are expressed in Owen's other works, mainly in Disabled and Mental cases.

- Sixth stanza – half line “for love of God seems dying”
 - Owen implies a spiritual death, he hints at the soldier's increasing doubt in God's love and protection.
 - This sentiment is echoed later on in the poem as well when he mentions “His frost” as if the soldiers are blaming God for the cold that causes them suffering and to some even death.
 - “His” is made a proper noun and is in direct reference to God. Owen associates God with the wrath of the elements and nature on the soldiers. By extension he is subtly blaming God for the sufferings and deaths of soldiers.
- Dying is now repeated 3 times in the last lines of the last three stanzas. This seems to drive in the point that these soldiers will face the inevitable end of death.

- **Camaraderie and shared endurance of soldiers**

- Sibilance
 - Sibilance in “Silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous”
 - Sibilant s sounds used to mimic the whisperings of the soldiers, this highlights the heightened anxiety of the soldiers because of the uncanny silence. This paranoia conveys the effects of the war on the mental state of the soldiers.
- Sensory descriptions
 - The use of kinesthetic and auditory imagery and the use of synesthesia (use of multiple senses), in “watching we hear”, reflects the soldiers' heightened senses. The rather contradictory assertion that the soldiers are “hear[ing]” by “watching” goes on to show the impoverished state of the soldiers' minds and the paranoia of the soldiers. (effects of war on the mental state of soldiers)
- Oxymoron
 - Oxymoronic use of “black with snow” creates a sinister unsettling effect. The monochromatic setting painted for the readers is used to represent the bleak mood created since the start of the poem.
- Metaphor
 - Homophones in “eyes” and “ice”. The deliberate ambiguity here of whether Owen is referring to the living or the dead's eyes implies that both the eyes are cold, lifeless and unfeeling. For the dead, this is obvious as they are empty of life. For the living, it suggests

the numbing of emotions of the hardened soldiers due to the war.
This theme is echoes in insensibility.

Conclusion

Insensibility has a place in Owen's larger body of work- it is the only poem that truly explores the inaction of war and the idea of war as more of a waiting game than an active, combat-filled affair (in the case of Dulce or Sentry, which has a fair deal of action). Also, though perhaps to a lesser extent, the idea of Nature as the real enemy (also in Spring Offensive). Introduces readers to a significant facet of life as a soldier and war, in general.