

Wilfred Owen Poems

Mental Cases

- Start with opening information:
 - Mental cases was finished by Wilfred Owen in 1918 whilst he was fighting the war in Ripon.
- I will be approaching the poem thematically
 - The themes of the poem that I will be exploring are
 1. **The horrors of war**
 2. **The dehumanisation soldiers**
 3. **The pity of war**
- 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 fact, his experiences on the frontline were so traumatic that he had to undergo treatment at Craiglockhart, a war hospital, which is the setting and experience which he based this particular poem on.
 - This poem is divided into three different stanzas, the first asking a series of questions, the second serving to answer these questions and the third forming a conclusion. The poem mostly follows a trochaic pentameter while moments of particular horror are recounted with an extended line length (an extra foot) to jolt the reader from the routine. Additionally, there is practically no rhyme scheme throughout this poem and perhaps the uplifting chime associated with a rhyme scheme was not appropriate for Owen's grim and tragic subject matter
- **The horrors of war and hell the soldiers have to face**
 - Biblical diction
 - "Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows"
 - use of "wherefore", archaic language which is used in the bible, elevates the question being asked to a philosophical level. This lends biblical weight to the moral implications of the mental cases' condition.
 - "purgatorial" is a religious place that people believe to be where people go when they are in-between heaven and hell. These mental cases are likened to being stuck between heaven and hell just as they are stuck between the torment of their minds and reality.
 - "Rock they" – kinaesthetic imagery which accurately describes the habitual rocking motions of the mental cases. In this case it is an accurate observation that draws pity in readers.
 - "Shadows"
 - By referring to these patients as shadows Owen could be suggesting that they are shadows of their former selves. Invoking pity for the soldiers/mental cases.
 - "why sit they here in twilight?"

- Not biblical, but archaic language is used. Through the use of the syntax, the following line seems to have added importance lending emphasis on the use of biblical diction.
 - This could also be referring to not just their physical selves but their mental selves. Twilight is the time of the day between day and night. This could be referring to the mental health of the mental cases, at a state between reality and the turmoil of their minds.
- Allusion to Macbeth
 - Lines 12 and 13 allude to Shakespeare's Macbeth.
 - "multitudinous murders"
 - This is an **allusion** to Macbeth when Macbeth speaks of "multitudinous seas incarnadine" in reference to the amount of blood on his hands which will turn green seas red. This expression is used to express the amount of bloodshed this war has caused and that the men have witnessed.
 - "multitudinous murders" is also an **alliteration** of the 'm' sound. The 'm' sound gives a very dull, dead tone. This could possibly be the tone, devoid of emotions, that the mental cases have when they speak. This could be due to the post traumatic stress of the all the deaths that they have witnessed, or even, with reference to *Insensibility*, the suppression of their emotions.
 - "wading sloughs"
 - This is another **allusion** to Macbeth, when Macbeth exclaims that "I am in blood" and that he has stepped so far he shall "wade no more".
 - In battle, the soldiers must have had to wade through mud in order to move about, and there was a lot of mud everywhere, which made it difficult to move. This expression is used to relate the mud that they are moving about in with the blood and the guilt the soldiers must feel for the people that they have killed.
 - The soldiers are also portrayed here as "helpless wanderer[s]". This could be emphasising the fact that the soldier's are helpless wanderers in their own mind.
- Allusion to Dante's 'Inferno'
 - The use of "purgatory" is also an allusion to Dante's Inferno, where Dante walks through the path from hell, all the way to heaven, passing through purgatory along the way.
 - Use of "wading" is also an allusion to Dante's Inferno, where a group of Wrathful are striking each other in the mud pile. The Wrathful were people who were consumed with anger during their lives. In the same way, the soldiers probably had to use anger to fuel them to kill the enemies. If not they probably would not have been able to kill their enemies and survive.
- Use of rhetoric
 - 'Why sit they here in twilight? Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows'

- Wilfred Owen opens the poem with a series of rhetorical questions regarding soldiers being treated at the institute and these questions essentially form the basis for Owen's argument for the pity of war because the answer to these questions is that the soldiers are here because of the war and what it has done to them. Triggers reflection in readers.
- Describing the soldiers as sitting in twilight paints a bleak and dim image, setting the atmosphere for the poem that echoes its subject matter. While twilight could refer to the setting of night, it might also refer to the concept of twilight years, of someone old living the last years of their life. Owen is suggesting that because of the war, the best years of the soldiers are behind them and they are left to live a shortened and unfulfilling life and this is emphasised by the term purgatorial, suggesting that their life on earth is over and they are in a limbo between life and death
- **'Stroke on stroke** of pain, -but what slow panic, gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?', 'their eyeballs shrink tormented back into their brains'
 - The **repetition** of the word stroke along with its inherent long 'o' sound gives a sense of the unceasing nature of this pain and torment experienced and this is emphasised by the use of medial caesura that draws out the length of this line in the poem
 - Additionally, the **oxymoronic** 'slow panic' evokes a sense that the pain and plight of the soldier is long and torturous
 - The image painted by Owen also evokes a sense of sympathy for the soldiers who have wide and bleary eyes because of their experiences, with chasms gouged round their fretted sockets
 - Fretted also might have a **double meaning**, in that the soldiers are anxious and **tense** because of their experiences but it might also mean that the area around their **eyes has been gradually worn** away at by torment, again highlighting the long and painful process of dealing with shell shock
- Rhythm
 - Owen mainly uses regular trochaic pentameters for this poem. However, for lines 16 and 17, he has added an extra foot to the poem. This causes readers to be jolted out of the routine of pentameter lines and places large emphasis on the **horrors of the wars** witnessed by these soldiers.
- 'Ever from their hair and through their hands' palms misery swelters'
 - The **soldiers are described as being in a cold sweat**, again suggesting at their constantly tense and nervous state brought about by their experiences with war
 - However, instead of telling us that they were sweating, the poet describes it being misery that exudes from their pores, emphasising the fact that their cold sweat is brought about by their pain and suffering
- 'Surely we have perished sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?'
 - Perhaps taking on the perspective of a fellow soldier instead of merely a witness, Owen now suggests that the life they are left to lead can be likened

- to a living hell, being certain that the only way the terrors he experiences are real is if he died in his sleep and was sent to hell
 - Additionally, Owen suggests that the other patients around him are hellish in appearance, perhaps due to their injuries and the twitches from shell shock, and beyond highlighting the plight of the soldier, this also shows how the soldiers have been dehumanised, likened to demons or inhabitants of hell
 - ‘Always they must see these things and hear them’
 - The speaker highlights the permanence of the soldiers’ torment, that they are forced to relive the painful and horrific experiences of war
 - The words ‘always’ and ‘must’ suggest a sense of compulsion to their actions and this further emphasises the torturous and tormenting experiences of the soldier
 - ‘on their sense sunlight seems a blood-smear; night comes blood-black; dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh’
 - The use of **juxtaposition** between day and night seems to create a never ending cycle. This creates a sense of unending torment.
 - The poet suggests that the post traumatic stress of the soldiers force them to see blood and horrific images in general all throughout the day, suggesting that the horrors of war haunts them forever.
 - Additionally, while dawn might present itself as a **symbol** for hope or a new beginning, the soldiers are not able to face a new day with a new hope because of the suffering they have.
 - “batter... shatter”
 - The use of the onomatopoeia for the firing guns helps to create the fast paced war setting that surrounds the men.
 - Furthermore, the internal rhymes of these two words add create the link between the two words and provide a visual image of the bullets of a gun battering away and shattering the bodies of soldiers.
- **The dehumanisation of the soldier**
 - ‘Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter’
 - Past participial used implies that these people are not able to laugh any longer because of the numerous murders that they have witness amongst the other horrors of war they had to face.
 - Furthermore, these people were forced to fight and did not want to fight. If they had not enlisted they may still be laughing with their loved ones back at the home front. This invokes a sense of guilt within the readers/ or people who glorify war as they are the ones that have convinced these soldiers to enlist, in turn causing them to end up the way they are being described.
 - ‘Who are these?’
 - In the opening line of the poem the speaker refers to the soldiers as ‘these’ as compared to ‘they’ and this objectification of the soldiers sheds light on how their condition has resulted in them being considered as less than human. This also reflects the lack of individuality that these soldiers have.
 - ‘Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish’

- The poet presents images of the soldiers in a beastly and monstrous way with the use of the verb 'drooping' and the **kinaesthetic imagery** of 'slob'. While this gives insight into the state of the soldiers and how traumatised they are, it also gives a sense that they are not functioning as humans and are seen as **less than humans**
 - 'Baring teeth that leer like skulls' teeth wicked?'
 - The soldiers are shown to be grimacing and this highlights their pain and suffering, however, they are again presented in an **animalistic manner**
 - The baring of teeth is something animalistic and would be a show of aggression, likening the soldiers to **feral and wild beasts**. The use of a **simile** helps to emphasise the **animalistic imagery** used.
 - '-thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous, awful falseness of set-smiling corpses', '-thus their hands are plucking at each other; picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging'
 - The first conclusion contains two **paradoxes** which highlight the insanity and ludicrous nature of the situation the soldiers are left in. The two paradoxes are paralleled with one another through the use of **anaphora**.
 - The second conclusion suggests that they are picking at their hands which are described as tools with which they caused suffering, suggesting that it is their actions that are responsible for their suffering and that there is a sense of remorse and guilt that they cannot let go of
 - A **cyclical nature** of suffering is highlighted and emphasised by the use of initial **caesura** in these two statements
 - Use of dashes in front of the two lines not only help to link the two lines, but helps the protagonist to distance himself from the horrors of war that he has most probably witnessed for himself.
- **The pity of war**
 - 'These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished'
 - 'Memory fingers in their hair of murders, multitudinous murders they once witnessed'
 - Nasal occlusive 'm' sound
 - 'Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles'
 - Internal rhyme
 - 'Carnage incomparable, and human squander rucked too thick for these men's extrication'
 - "carnage incomparable"
 - There is an **inversion of word choice** here. The syntax that has been used creates a stronger image of the picture of a battlefield.
 - The bodies are piled so densely that they cannot individually be removed from the carnage
 - 'Snatching after us who smote them, brother, pawing us who dealt them war and madness'
 - Brother – sermonic, collective

- switch from the detached 3rd person perspective to first person narration in the last two lines of the poem. The focus here is on “us” which he uses twice. He is including himself in the mental torture and pain that he as well as other soldiers feel.
 - He is also using first person in order to create an accusatory tone and blame for the government for the pain that they have caused him and his fellow soldiers. Uses the words “war” and “madness” as if they are one and the same, of how the war and madness has reduced them to little more than animals. Evoking sympathy for the soldiers and invoking the theme of the pity of war.