

BAYONET CHARGE by Ted Hughes

BACKGROUND TO THE POET

- ✓ Hughes was born in 1930 and grew up in Yorkshire. He was passionate about nature.
- ✓ He wrote poetry from a young age.
- ✓ His father served in WW1, when the poem is set.
- ✓ Hughes was a huge fan of Owens, who wrote Exposure. There are many similarities between Bayonet Charge and some of Owens work.

BACKGROUND TO THE POEM

- ✓ Hughes wrote about a war he did not personally experience. His father fought in the war and was one of only a few soldiers in his regiment to survive a battle at Gallipoli. This left him traumatised and emotionally paralysed, which impacted Hughes' childhood.
- ✓ Hughes grew up in West Yorkshire, where many suffered badly through the war. Many lost their lives or livelihood because of it, and for many years Hughes felt the region was stunned by the after-effects.
- ✓ Hughes was also a great admirer of Wilfred Owen. He appreciated the contemporary approach Owen took and this influenced some of his work, including this poem.

WHAT IS THE POEM ABOUT?

- ✓ Bayonet Charge is a very complex poem to understand, but this was Hughes intention. He wants the reader to be disoriented, confused and overwhelmed, as this is the reality of war.
- ✓ The first stanza begins in the middle of action, a soldier is thrown into battle, confused and unprepared. He charges onto the battlefield with his bayonet in hand.
- ✓ The second stanza sees the soldier stop for a moment, confused about what he is doing. He takes a moment to gather himself and consider his role and purpose.
- ✓ The final stanza sees the soldier focus on a yellow hare which is thrown in front of him injured and dying. The sight of the hare jolts the soldier back to his senses and makes him see the danger he is in.

THEMES

- ✓ Reality of War. Hughes paints, descriptive, confusing images to capture the true, horrific reality of war.
- ✓ Effects of War: Hughes shows how it is not just the soldiers who are attacked during a war. Nature suffers too.

COMPARISONS

Reality of War	Effects of War
Exposure, Charge of the Light Brigade, Remains, Kamikaze, Poppies, War Photographer	Exposure, Charge of the Light Brigade, Remains, Kamikaze, War Photographer

FORM and STRUCTURE

- ✓ The poem is written in the 'third person singular'. This means it is a poem written **about** someone, i.e., is uses 'he' rather than 'I' (Hughes could not write in the first person as he had not personally experienced war). The fact that it is singular means it focusses on just one person and not a group of people. This provides the reader with an insight into the individual impacts of war. The singular perspective emphasises this further by providing a sense of isolation.
- ✓ The structure of the poem is very chaotic, with no real pattern or predictability. This is intentional as Hughes wanted to mimic the chaos and panic soldiers feel in the midst of battle.
- ✓ The first stanza is all one sentence. This enjambment forces the reader on, with no breaks or pauses this quickens the pace, forcing them to understand the disorientation the soldier feels.
- ✓ In contrast, the second stanza is full of caesura (where sentences stop mid line). This mirrors the fact that the soldier has paused because he was so overwhelmed. The caesura means the reader is forced to pause too.
- ✓ This frequent use of enjambment and caesura gives the whole poem a very chaotic feel. The reader struggles to get through it as it seems fragmented. This emphasises the struggle the soldiers feel.
- ✓ Looking back at the first stanza, it begins in the midst of battle 'Suddenly'. This abrupt start gives the reader no chance to anticipate what is coming and makes them feel confused and panicked, just like the soldier.

LANGUAGE / QUOTES

- ✓ Repetition of the word 'raw' in the first two lines give a stuttering effect. As though the poet is struggling to find words to describe the situation. The word 'raw' also has animalistic connotations which shows the situation lacks humanity.
- ✓ Hughes uses many similes in the poem, 'numb as a smashed arm', 'sweating like molten iron', 'Like a man who has jumped up in the dark'. This is partly because Hughes never experienced war himself so has to liken it to something he has experienced. But also, gives a feeling that the reality of war is so horrific that it cannot be described in itself, it has to be likened to other things.
- ✓ Hughes uses personification in a de-humanising way. 'Bullets smacking the air' 'Statuary', 'Blending of body and weapon'. This makes humans and weapons feel like one and the same, i.e., humans become weapons. Also shows nature suffers as a result of war.
- ✓ 'Bullets smacking the air' creates a violent image of being unable to breathe.
- ✓ 'Listening...for the reason, of his still running' illustrates how the soldier pauses to question what he is doing.
- ✓ 'Threw up a yellow hare' again creates a violent image. The hare is used as a symbol for the soldiers suffering. It is personified and appears to be screaming 'mouth wide open, silent'.
- ✓ 'King, honour, human dignity etcetera, Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm'. This shows the soldier has abandoned his patriotic values and lost his motivation to fight.