

EXPOSURE by Wilfred Owen

BACKGROUND TO THE POET

- ✓ Born in 1893, Owen joined the British army in 1915 and fought in the first world war.
- ✓ He was killed in battle on November 4th 1918, just before the war ended.
- ✓ He originally planned to pursue a career with the church, but changed his mind as he felt that the Church failed to care for those in the community that needed it most.
- ✓ He was an avid fan of John Keats and this is reflected in his works.

BACKGROUND TO THE POEM

- ✓ War poems around this time typically focussed on patriotism; praising soldiers and glorifying battle.
- ✓ Owen's poetry revolutionised this; challenging the impressions people had of battle as unrealistic. He sought to present the reality of war; as pointless and futile.

WHAT IS THE POEM ABOUT?

- ✓ The poem focusses on the impact of extreme weather on the soldiers who are waiting in the trenches to be ordered into battle.
- ✓ The poem does not contain any fighting or battles, representing instead the emotions of the soldiers as they wait.
- ✓ It shows the soldiers are helpless, suffering against the brutal weather conditions.
- ✓ This challenges the view that other poems gave, glorifying battle, making it seem exciting.
- ✓ As the poem continues it becomes clear that the soldiers have accepted their fate.

THEMES

- ✓ Reality of War: rather than glorifying war Owen presents it as pointless and futile.
- ✓ Power of Nature: the poem presents the real enemy as nature. The relentless weather conditions take their toll on the soldiers and are portrayed as much more harsh than enemy soldiers.

COMPARISONS

Power of nature	Reality of War
Ozymandias, Prelude, Tissue, Kamikaze, Storm on the Island	Charge of the Light Brigade, War Photographer, Remains, Poppies, Bayonet Charge

FORM and STRUCTURE

- ✓ The poem is written as eight separate stanzas, each containing five lines.
- ✓ In each stanza the first two lines are blunt and powerful. Lines three and four then contain vivid imagery and emotive vocabulary. The fifth line is short, providing an anti-climax to the previous four. This mimics the way the soldiers feel, having to stay constantly alert but nothing happens. This portrays the futility of war.
- ✓ Owen uses 'pararhyme' (where the consonant sounds of the ending words are the same, but the vowel sounds are different). This gives a feeling of unease, again mimicking the way the soldiers feel as they wait for battle.
- ✓ The rhyme scheme itself adds further to this. It follows a ABBAC pattern throughout, with the first four lines building a pattern, only to be broken by the final line.
- ✓ The poem has a cyclical structure, where the speaker repeats 'but nothing happens' to connect the beginning and end of the poem. This emphasises the lack of action throughout.
- ✓ The repetition of 'but nothing happens' is also a form of anaphora (where words or phrases are repeated between lines). This repetition encourages the reader to question what the point of the war is? Why are the soldiers having to suffer like this?
- ✓ Punctuation including the use of caesura (where sentences stop mid-line) is used to further unsettle the reader. The frequency with which sentences are stopped mid-line makes the reader pause, creating a feeling of unease and restlessness.

LANGUAGE / QUOTES

- ✓ Owen uses biblical references 'rumour of some other war' (Matthew 24 where Jesus is talking about the end of the world). The point he is making is that the soldiers feel the end of the world has come for the soldiers suffering the harsh conditions.
- ✓ Owen continually personifies the weather in a rather deadly way 'winds that knife us', 'air that shudders with black ice', 'pale flakes with fingering stealth faces'. This shows the weather as being more deadly than the enemy. This is emphasised further by combining it with military terms 'knife us', 'deadly', 'stealth', 'ranks' etc.
- ✓ Sibilance (repeating 's', 'sh', and 'f' sounds are used to create hissing sounds 'sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence', 'Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling our faces'. This creates a sinister hissing sound, threatening the soldiers safety. Or perhaps mimicking their shivers?
- ✓ Lines three and four in each stanza are consistently graphic, often containing uncomfortable images for the reader 'twitching agonies' 'flickering gunnery rumbles', 'sidelong snow flakes'.
- ✓ The final line of some stanzas are posed as questions 'What are we doing here?', 'Is it that we are dying'. This challenges the reader to consider each, question. What are the soldiers doing there?