

Exposure

by Wilfred Owen

NOTES -for- STUDY

Summary

Exposure is about what life was like in the trenches during the First World War. By describing the terrible natural conditions under which the soldiers lived and died, Owen highlights some of the less considered issues of war: the boredom, the ongoing suffering and the sense of hopelessness.

Context

Wilfred Owen was born in Oswestry, Shropshire, 1893. He began to write poetry around the age of ten and was influenced by the Romantics, a 19th-century movement of poets and artists who extolled the natural world and the power of emotion, in part as a reaction to industrialisation and scientific rationalism. At university, Owen studied botany, the science of plants – he was a lover of nature but also wanted to understand its workings rather than see it as something miraculous and unfathomable.

Owen was only 21 when the First World War began. Its first impact was to curtail his sojourn to France, where he was working as a language tutor. He returned home immediately but didn't enlist in the army until October 1915, when he joined the Artists Rifles, training in Essex. A year later, in December 1916, he left for the Western Front. Like most of those he left behind, Owen didn't fully appreciate what he was letting himself in for, telling his mother in letters that he 'hate[d] washy pacifists' and 'now most intensely want[ed] to fight'.

His own exposure to conflict soon gave him other ideas. Over the course of a few months he suffered concussion after falling into a shell hole and was blown into the air by a trench mortar and spent several days lying on an embankment amongst the remains of his fellow soldiers. He was diagnosed with shell shock, now commonly referred to as

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and was sent to hospital to recuperate. There, he met Siegfried Sassoon, a prominent war poet, who encouraged Owen's own writing and inspired him to value realism over Romanticism.

In hospital, he was kept awake at night by the howls and cries of inmates suffering from PTSD. Corresponding with his mother about the discomfort of his hospital stay, Owen told her, 'I think that the terribly long time we stayed unrelieved was unavoidable; yet it makes us feel bitterly towards those in England who might relieve us, and will not.' He became increasingly bitter towards what he termed 'armchair patriots', by which he meant people who supported the war without comprehending what it entailed. It was these feelings that gave rise to poems such as *Exposure*. Owen made it his mission to expose the realities of war.

Though he is now famous as one of the war poets who documented the so-called Great War, Owen only found fame posthumously. He was killed in action on the 4th of November 1918, exactly one week before the end of the war. It is believed that his parents were informed on Armistice Day, at the same time church bells rang out to commemorate the war's end. A single volume of Owen's poetry was published in 1920. *Exposure* was written sometime in 1917 or '18, during one of the coldest winters in living memory on mainland Europe.

Title

The word 'exposure' has multiple meanings, all of which are relevant to the poem:

1. The state of being left open and vulnerable to something damaging or harmful – the

soldiers who are the subject of the poem are exposed both to conflict and the atrocious conditions in the trenches at wintertime.

2. The revelation of something potentially shocking – it was Owen's objective to expose the shocking reality of war to ignorant civilians back home.
3. In photography, the exposure determines how light or dark an image will appear – the poem contains dark, depressing themes and imagery but the photographic terminology also links to Owen's role in documenting the war; the First World War was the first fought in the age of camera technology, though the advanced artillery machinery had more bearing on the front-line, and it was left to the war poets to do the reporting.

Form and Structure

One of the ways in which Owen communicates the authentic experience of war is through the use of the first-person plural. The pronouns 'our', 'we' and 'us' show that the feelings are not unique to Owen, they are shared by all the soldiers. This strengthens the message to those 'armchair patriots' whose eyes the poet wanted to open to the horrors of war. Furthermore, the use of present tense makes the soldiers' suffering seem simultaneous with our reading. We can read about it but do nothing, and feel helpless in turn. As Owen explained in the preface to his posthumously published volume of poetry, it may be too late for these soldiers but humanity is being urged not to make the same mistakes with future generations.

With regards to the rhyme scheme, Owen uses pararhyme, a form of half rhyme in which the hard consonant sounds rhyme but not the vowel sounds. This reflects the soldiers' unease. Stanzas are an equal length and all follow an ABBAC pattern. This uniformity aptly reflects the monotony of life in the trenches. Conversely, the rhythmic structure is hexameter-based (six feet per metrical line), but Owen does not rigorously stick to it so there are added and missed beats, adding to the sense of discomfort. The biggest variation is in the final line of each stanza, which has a different meter and rhyme scheme. This is visually emphasised by the indentation. For all the changes in form and structure, the soldiers are still in stasis, emphasised by the refrain 'But nothing happens'.

Language

Stanza one: Those first words – 'Our brains ache' – set the tone. The subjective first-person plural pronoun places us right there beside the soldiers. And why do our brains ache?

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Multiple reasons, uppermost among them being the cold and the anxiety, which are making the troops almost as numb and unfeeling as the 'merciless iced east winds'. Not only are the winds personified as 'merciless', just as soldiers are trained to be, they will also 'knife us'. Owen is combining the semantic fields of armed warfare and treacherous weather conditions to show how exposed and vulnerable the men are – they are being attacked on two fronts. It's also worth remembering that words are Owen's weapon and, though the subjects of his poem are passive, he is using them to stick the knife into people who have been complicit in the soldiers' suffering. Punctuation is another weapon in Owen's armoury, and the use of the ellipsis as an end-stop for lines 1, 2 and 3 reinforces the soldiers' torment, waiting 'wearied' in the 'silent' night. The listing in line 4 – 'Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous' – has a similar tormenting effect as the sensations pile on. This combination of words also exemplifies the use of alliteration and assonance which are a feature of the pararhyme, creating a sense of discordance by establishing patterns and then thwarting them. The overall rhythmic effect of the listing gives the impression that it's leading somewhere but readers, like soldiers, are frustrated by the anti-climactic refrain of 'But nothing happens'.

Stanza two: Another prime

example of nature being personified is the 'mad gusts tugging on the wire, / Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles'. Despite personifying the gusts as an adversary, Owen subtly reminds us that there are no winners in war with the simile comparing them to 'twitching agonies' – everyone and everything suffers in this environment. The senses are assaulted throughout, as evidenced here in 'the flickering gunnery rumbles', the visceral adjective and verb creating a sense of motion that conflicts with the soldiers' stasis. The 'gunnery rumbles', however, 'Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war'. This simile reminds us that the war is being fought internally as much as externally, with the sounds of the actual conflict only 'dull' and far away. The rhetorical question 'What are we doing here?' sums up the stanza.

Stanza three: This stanza brings a new day as 'The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow...'. Where the sun rising on a new day often symbolises fresh hope and relief, here it is the enemy, bringing more misery. There is no relief, the war continues, as indicated by the ellipsis that follows, leading to the downbeat disclosure 'We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.' The sibilance and assonance continue the parhyme effect. The adversarial personification of dawn is extended in it 'massing... her melancholy army'. As in stanza two with the 'twitching agonies' of gusts arousing sympathy for all sides, dawn may be the enemy but she certainly doesn't glory in the conflict, she is equally miserable and melancholic. Nature's not really an enemy, it is only made that way by the conditions.

Stanza four: The sibilance in 'Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence' could be said to echo either the sound of bullets whooshing by or the sound of soldiers shivering. A couple of lines below, the fricative alliteration in 'flowing flakes that flock' could resemble the catching of breath, especially in conjunction with the verbs 'pause, and renew'. The stanza reiterates that cold air and wind, personified as 'shudder[ing] black with snow' and nonchalant respectively, are more lethal than the bullets flying overhead. A bullet could kill in an instant but the weather takes its time, hence the painful refrain of 'But nothing happens'.

Stanza five: More fricative alliteration and personification presents the snowflakes as soft but malign, creeping stealthily over the soldiers who fantasise of snow-free, 'grassier ditches'. Much of the conflict took place in the

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fields of France and Belgium which, in a different context, could be portrayed as a pastoral idyll. The compound adjective 'sun-dozed' could refer to hypothermia, extreme states of which can bring on hallucinations. This meaning is reinforced by the new refrain, breaking the reverie, 'Is it that we are dying?'

Stanza six: The adverb 'slowly' stresses the time taken for anything to happen. The verb 'drag' has a similar ponderous effect. It is again suggested here that the men are experiencing hallucinations or visions of home. Their only way of getting there, however, is via death, hence the ghost-form. The long assonant 'oh's in 'slowly', 'ghosts', 'home' and 'glozed' sound like groans and emphasise the long, painful journey. In literal terms, the 'sunk fires' could be burnt-out embers of flames from artillery shells. Linking the ideas of home and fire could also evoke a cosier image of home-fires burning. It could be taken as a light at the end of the tunnel, although the fact that it is only glimpsed suggests that the idea is fleeting and out of reach. The glazing of 'crusted dark-red jewels' also evokes dried blood; these bodies, dead or alive, are tarnished and debased, stripped of their precious idealism.

Stanza seven: The double negative 'not otherwise' could represent the soldiers' delirium as they dream of home comforts. The one-syllable

rhythm of 'Now ever suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit' resembles a childlike rhyme and perhaps represents the simplicity and purity of pre-war life. Life and death are juxtaposed, but God is no longer the arbiter of them, with the men no longer trusting that spring – a metaphor for being reborn and new life – will come again.

Stanza eight: As if things weren't dark and gloomy enough already, night time has crept up on us. 'Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and us, / Shrivelling many hands, and puckering foreheads crisp.' The physical effect of war is visible in the miens of soldiers. Not visible but implied by Owen in the frost as metaphor for coldness, which harks back to the very first image of brains aching, is the mental trauma. In the final lines, the poet switches from the 'we' and 'us' of the soldiers' point of view to an omniscient third-person narrator observing a burial party. Bodies are being buried, as are hopes, futures and dreams. 'All their eyes are ice' could refer to the dead soldiers, exposed for so long to withering conditions, or the burial party, numb to their task. Everyone is affected. The refrain 'But nothing happens' reiterates the futility of war – all this time, all this suffering, has achieved nothing.

Themes

War: This poem is concerned primarily with the reality of war, and Owen's point is that the waiting, the uncertainty, is as much of an agony as the actual conflict. Compare the stasis of his soldiers in the trench to the motion of the cavalry in *The Charge of the Light Brigade* or the 'running', 'stumbling' and 'sweating' of Hawks's bewildered infantryman in *Bayonet Charge* – the same verb in both titles gives an indication of their propulsion and narrative thrust, as opposed to Owen's stasis. With little action to speak of, *Exposure* is more concerned with what's happening in the mind of its speaker. In this respect it is similar to Carol Ann Duffy's *War Photographer*, told from the perspective of a non-combatant suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the images he's captured haunting his thoughts like ghosts.

Nature: If the bullets don't get the soldiers, then Mother Nature will. The personification of the weather suggests that there are enemies all around, raining down on the men, adding to the sense of despair and the evaporation of hope. Compare the power and danger of the climate to *Storm on the Island*, although in Seamus Heaney's poem the storm is code for Stormont and Northern Ireland's political troubles, whereas the soldiers in Owen's poem

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are literally battling against the weather conditions and the fear of frostbite or trench foot. Owen is now far removed from the Romantic notion of nature as something to be worshipped and exalted, though it remains powerful.

Religion: The poem contains several allusions to Christianity. Line 9 – 'Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war' – sounds like Matthew 24:6: 'You will hear of wars and rumours of wars'. The Gospel of Matthew tells of the end of days and the First World War must have seemed similarly apocalyptic. Stanza seven suggests that soldiers might be Christ-like, sacrificing themselves for the sake of others. Its last line is ambiguous though: is it saying that Christian men will die and sacrifice themselves for the love of God, or is it saying that God has forsaken them and it is His love that is dying?

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