Anthem for Doomed Youth

POEM TEXT

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
— Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

SUMMARY

What church bells will ring for the young men slaughtered like farm animals? Instead, these young men just hear the fearsome rage of firing guns. The only prayers they get are the quick and jarring rhythms of rifle fire. These men will have no inappropriate rituals in their names, whether prayers or bell-ringing. No voice will mourn them, except the choirs—the high-pitched and hellish noises of falling artillery. Bugles will call for the young men from sad hometowns and villages.

What candles can be lit to help the dying soldiers in their passage from life to death? Instead of young boys holding these faint lights, the soldiers' eyes will show the fading light of life as they say their goodbyes to the world. Instead of drapes over their coffins, the soldiers will be remembered by the grief-stricken faces of women and girls. Instead of flowers, perhaps the dead will be honored by peace and diplomacy—by more patience in the world. The end of every day will also be a kind of ritual, as those who live on after the war draw down their window blinds.

THEMES

NATIONALISM, WAR, AND WASTE

"Anthem for Doomed Youth" is a poem about World War I, which is estimated to have caused the deaths of around 17 million people worldwide. Written by WWI combatant Wilfred Owen while recovering from the trauma of battle, the poem makes a clear statement: war is a hellish and futile waste of human life. It is, then, a kind of protest poem—subverting the usual use of "anthem" as a symbol of nationalism (that is, taking undue pride in your home nation) into an anti-war message.

From start to finish, the poem foregrounds the wastefulness of war. The reader gets a sense of the way war hollows out society, particularly in its relentless destruction of young men. Men are disposable, the poem suggests, their deaths merely part of the price of war. Note how, in the poem's very first line, these men are compared to "cattle." These men are like farmed animals, brought into life only to grow big enough for their own slaughter. Furthermore, the poem makes no attempt to glorify war or paint these men as heroic or noble. It doesn't say that they're *not* these things, but instead makes the case that these traits—heroism and nobility—are rendered practically irrelevant by the sheer brutality of the conflict.

Accordingly, instead of populating the poem with examples of bravery, the poem is full of the daily realities of battle. There are guns, the relentless fire of rifles, and wailing shells falling overhead. All of these are portrayed as hellish and terrifying. The guns fire in "monstrous anger" and the shells scream like "shrill, demented choirs." In other words, they take on the emotions that represent the worst of humanity: fury and violent madness—the very things that cause war in the first place (along with politics, oppression, and so on).

The latter image of the choirs is especially important. War is often presented along nationalistic lines, with young men encouraged to fight for their countries out of a sense of patriotism. Indeed, in one of Owen's other famous poems, he ironically quotes the Roman poet Horace: "*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*" ("it is sweet and right to die for one's country"). But the members of *this* choir don't sing the soldiers' national anthem—they sing a bloodthirsty, banshee-like cry of war. The poem makes the point that these men, fed to the war like nameless cattle, will never return home anyway—their actual national anthem is no longer relevant. The bugles will call "for them from sad shires" ("shires" refers to the different parts of Britain), but this call will forever be unanswered.

Ultimately, then, "Anthem for Doomed Youth" asks the reader not to romanticize war. Though it's a lyrical and beautiful poem, its power comes from the way in which it brings the horrors of war to life. War is held up to the light, exposed as futile, horrific, and tragic.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

RITUAL AND REMEMBRANCE

"Anthem for Doomed Youth" argues that the horrors of a war like WWI render the usual tributes to the dead—e.g. the ringing of bells, collective prayer, choir singing, the draping of coffins with the national flag—practically meaningless. Furthermore, most of the men who die in such conflict will never be honored with such rituals anyway—there are too many fallen soldiers. The poem shows the usual ceremonies to be inadequate and argues in favor of different forms of remembrance that are more appropriate for such a terrible conflict.

In the first stanza, the poem looks at some of the ways that dead soldiers might be honored and transforms them into the sounds and sights of war itself. The rituals referenced—the ringing of bells, prayers in churches, singing choirs—are presented as "mockeries" that fail to do justice to the fallen. That is, these things are so removed from the horrible reality of war that they *mock* the people they are supposed to honor.

Furthermore, the church and the government are big parts of why these men went off to die in the first place: the soldiers were asked to defend their country and its (Christian) values. The hypocrisy also has to do with how these supposedly solemn rituals take place in relative safety, while the soldiers themselves experience the horrors of war.

Indeed, the only fitting "passing-bells," "orisons" (prayers), and "choirs" that *can* pay honest tribute to the war are the weapons of war themselves. Only *they* deal with the reality of war because they *are* the reality of war. Of course, the speaker doesn't really see gunfire as a form of prayer, but rather sees its sound as a truer and more authentic representation of what war is actually like for the soldiers.

In the second stanza, the poem moves to describes more fitting forms of tribute. Instead of the weak light of remembrance candles, for example, the speaker suggests honoring the "holy glimmers of goodbyes" in the soldier's eyes—that is, the dying light of life in their eyes as they realize that their time is up. Then, the speaker goes on to mention the "pallor of girls' brows," the "tenderness of patient minds," and the "drawing-down of blinds" each day. Each of these, the speaker suggests, is a more honest form of tribute.

The first example describes how, rather than having their coffins draped with flags, the young men will be remembered better by the grief-stricken faces of their loved ones—particularly the "girls" who may be their sisters, wives, or girlfriends. Then, the "tenderness of patient minds" suggests that the best tribute that could be made to the dead is the calmness, patience, and understanding that could prevent war from ever happening again. Finally, the "drawing-down of blinds" is in part an image of the darkness of death. But it's also a more literal sign of the continuation of everyday life: blinds are drawn, people go to sleep, and they wake up the next day to go on living. The image suggests that the simple *existence* of an everyday life would be the most authentic tribute to the dead soldiers, because it means that others are enjoying the peace for which the war was fought.

In summary, "Anthem for Doomed Youth" criticizes the usual forms of ritual and tribute used to commemorate people who have died in war. It's not saying that these rituals don't have their place, but rather that they're not enough in the face of war's horrors. In the second stanza, the poem presents memory, kindness, and gratitude as more fitting memorials.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 2-7
- Lines 5-6
- Line 8
- Lines 9-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

"Anthem for Doomed Youth" opens with an unflinching rhetorical question: what bells will ring to mark the deaths of those fighting in the trenches in World War I?

"Passing-bells" are meant to be part of a memorial service, the kind that usually takes place in a church. But the simile at the end of the question reveals why the speaker is asking this question in the first place. The young men fighting on the front line die like animals in a slaughterhouse. Accordingly, there are far too many of them dying for each to get a proper funeral service—and many of the dead bodies won't make it back home in the first place. Not only are "passing-bells" impractical, but they also seem inappropriate for deaths that are, in a sense, a business-like occurrence that's as commonplace as cows being killed for food. The speaker questions what good "passing-bells"—and other forms of ritual—really do in the face of such indiscriminate slaughter. In other words, this first line introduces the idea that there is too much of a disconnect between the pretentious symbolism of religious ceremony and the grim realities of warfare.

Though this is only the first line, the meter has an interesting variation here. The poem generally follows an iambic pentameter metrical scheme (line 6 is a solid example of this basic pattern), and accordingly each line *should* end with a stress (a strong syllable). But *this* line is talking about dying, and

senseless dying at that. And many of the deaths which the line refers to involve a kind of literal fall, with men going over the top of the trenches to—most likely—be mowed down by gunfire soon after. The final word of the line ("cattle") adds an additional weak (and thus, falling) syllable to what would otherwise be a straightforward line of iambic pentameter:

What pass- | ing bells | for these | who die | as cattle?

This extra syllable deliberately weakens the line, calling to mind the fallen soldiers. Even in the space of just one line, the poem has already set up both of its main themes: the horror and futility of war, and the inadequacy or irrelevance of the way that the war dead are remembered back home.

LINES 2-4

— Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.

Though the first line is a rhetorical question, the poem *does* have an answer to it. This answer is not literal, but rather metaphorical, and it compares the sombre but relatively pleasant tones of church bells with the horrific sounds of warfare. Instead of hearing church bells to mark their deaths, the young men on the front line hear only the "monstrous anger of the guns" and relentless rifle fire (the "guns" are probably more long-range weapons that need multiple people to operate them, and while the "rifles" would be the sorts of weapon that each soldier carries personally).

The "guns" in line 2 are personified as angry. Firstly, this foregrounds their sheer violence (WWI machine guns, for example, could fire 450-600 rounds per minute). But it also reminds the reader that, in a way, they *are* human. That is, they are the product of the human imagination, the result of time and effort spent on finding better, more efficient ways to kill. Accordingly, they behave with the spirit in which they were made.

Lines 2 and 3 are make similar points. They are both about the sounds of war, and both begin with anaphora of the repeated "Only" and a trochee in the first foot:

— Only | the mons- | trous ang- | er of | the guns.
Only | the stutt- | er-ing rif- | les' rap- | id rattle

The trochee in the first foot of each line creates a sudden sense of brute force, and the repeated "Only" makes the sounds of war feel inescapable—which, of course, they often were.

Line 3 contains one of poetry's most famous instances of alliteration (and consonance) in its repeated /r/ sounds: "stuttering rifles' rapid rattle." This phrase emulates the sound of rifle fire, with the quick and numerous repetition conveying relentlessness and the impossibly of escape. The extra syllable in the third foot also creates a stuttering sound, matching the rhythm of gunfire. What's more, the rhyme word "rattle" chimes with "cattle," which, as discussed in the previous line-by-line section, evokes a sense of weakness and falling (calling to mind soldiers hit by gunfire as they go over the top of the trenches). The force of the "rattle," these lines make clear, is closely linked to the falling of the "cattle."

The fourth line links the above with the "passing-bells" of line 1. "Orison" is an archaic word for prayer. In this hellish depiction of warfare, it's the *guns*—not the people—who utter prayers. As with the "passing-bells," the sort of prayers being made in churches back home do nothing to help the soldiers in battle. A gun is, of course, a weapon designed to kill, and it forces on its victims an abrupt transition from life to death. In that sense, then, it exerts a greater control of the spiritual life of those who come under its fire than anything truly religious like a more conventional prayer. The soft sound of "patter" is deliberately out of place here, helping to portray actual prayers (and traditional responses to soldiers' deaths more generally) as, essentially, meaningless utterances.

LINES 5-7

No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;

Line 5 makes the poem's stance on remembrance rituals explicitly clear: "passing-bells," "orisons," "choirs" and so on are all "mockeries." That is, rather than paying tribute to fallen soldiers, they're actually more of an insult—because they're so divorced from the reality of warfare. The line also highlights the stark and bleak fact that the war dead won't be around to hear *anything* anymore. The caesura partway through makes line 5 feel a little slower and more mournful as well, compared with the brutal depictions of first half of the stanza.

The alliteration in the line links "No," "Now," "no," and "nor" together. Three of these are negating words, and they all apply to the one word ("now") that isn't—that is, there will be *no* more *now* for the fallen soldiers; their lives are in the past tense, not the present.

Line 6 deliberately sets up a brief contradiction in the logic of the poem. Here, the speaker says there will be no "voice of mourning" for the dead except for the "choirs." As choirs are part of the often-religious rituals that the poem elsewhere critiques, this statement feels suddenly out of step. The em-dash end-stop also makes this contradiction seem more dramatic, as the reader wonders what the speaker means here. Before looking at the answer to this brief riddle, it's worth noting the /r/ consonance and the internal rhyme of "Nor," "mourning," and "choirs"—the effect is deliberately tuneful, in keeping with the mention of ceremonial music.

Of course, the speaker hasn't made some kind of mistake with the internal logic of the poem. The "choirs" of line 6 are, in fact,

the horrific sounds of the "shells" (explosive and deadly projectiles) as they rain over the soldiers' heads. These sounds are metaphorically described as "shrill, demented choirs," like a choir from hell singing in praise of death and destruction. This description isn't an exaggeration—the actual sound of one shell was potentially deafening, let alone thousands falling at once. The line uses prominent consonance here to create this sense of increased "volume":

> The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;

"Demented" also relates to the idea of insanity, pushing home the poem's message that war is absurd, futile, and devastating.

LINE 8

> *And bugles calling for them from sad shires.*

Line 8 is part of the octave (that is, the initial eight-line unit) of this sonnet. Normally, the turn—the shift in direction—comes in the ninth line of sonnets (which is the beginning of the sestet). But here, line 8 is a kind of turn itself, setting up the following stanza.

Line 8 is a shift because it moves the poem's setting from the "theater" of war (the area where the conflict actually takes place) to the country from which the soldiers in question originally came. Whereas lines 1 to 7 showcase the horrible and hellish of sounds weaponry, the sound (that of a bugle, which is a simple brass instrument) in line 8 instead relates specifically to *home*. The "And" at the start of the line marks these sounds out as almost irrelevant—the "and" doesn't really connect this line to any previous statement or idea in the poem, making it feel more like an afterthought. And indeed, the bugle-calls mentioned here *are* literal afterthoughts, calling for the dead young men who are already past the point of no return.

Bugles were commonly used on the front lines of war to convey instructions or information. But they also have a commemorative use (for example, a tune called "The Last Post" is still played in tribute to those who lost their lives in WWI). The speaker evokes this second use of bugles by characterizing their tune as the melodic sound of loss and longing, echoing in the silence of death. The simple phrasing of "sad shires"—a specific mention of Britain as "home," since "shires" is a word for different areas of Britain—is almost comical, like a tune that doesn't fit the occasion. With the octave closing on the word "shire" and thus shifting the setting away from mainland Europe and back to Britain, the poem sets up its sestet, which is a more specific discussion about how the war dead can (and should) be remembered by their loved ones back home.

LINES 9-12

> *What candles may be held to speed them all?*
> *Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes*
> *Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.*
> *The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;*

The sestet of this sonnet starts similarly to the octave—with a rhetorical question. Here, the speaker asks what candles can help the souls of the dead find their way ("speed") to the afterlife. Of course, it's not a literal question—the speaker is pointing out the way in which lighting a candle actually *doesn't* seem like an adequate tribute to those who have died. Not only would candles be inadequate, but most of the young men who have died are unlikely to get funerals anyway—their bodies are still on the mainland, and there are far too many of them.

As with the question in the first stanza, the speaker provides an answer to this one. Rather than the light from candles held by "boys" (which probably refers to altar boys or members of a church choir), there is the fading light in the soldiers' eyes as they die. Light is a metaphor here for life, and the "holy glimmers" are the looks in the young men's eyes as they confront their imminent deaths. This line—line 11—makes use of sibilance (both alliterative and consonantal) to create a whispering quality that's suggestive of weakness as life ebbs away:

> Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
> Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.

The poem also makes effective use of end-stop here, the full stop at the end of the line adding a sense of finality.

Line 12 continues with the idea of redefining the usual rituals that mark death. A pall is a cloth laid over a coffin—but again, many of these young men won't have funerals, which means that they won't have coffins over which a pall could be draped. The pall used on soldiers' coffins is often the flag of the nation for which they fought, so this again highlights the gulf between official versions of mourning, like government's rituals, and the realities of war. Instead of these palls, the speaker claims, the soldiers will be remembered by the grief-stricken faces of the loved ones they've left behind. These girls are likely intended to be the sisters, girlfriends, and wives of those who fought in the war. "Pallor" has a kind of double meaning—it relates to being pale, but can also mean "deathlike." In other words, the "girls' brows" have been touched by death in their own way. Through this image, the speaker suggests that the profound grief of those left behind is actually a more fitting way to honor the dead than any of the formal rituals discussed in previous lines.

LINES 13-14

> *Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,*
> *And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.*

Lines 13 and 14—the closing couplet of the sestet—continue offering more apt ways of remembering and honoring the war dead. They're not instructions as such, but more a reality check about the legacy of war, showing how its effects will live on. Everything listed in lines 12 to 14 is sad, of course, but these

things also represent life slowly moving on. They're also firmly rooted in the home land, not in the theater of war. The speaker suggests that it's these small gestures of peace and healing that can provide a fitting tribute to the dead soldiers.

Line 13 is perhaps the most tragically hopeful line in the entire poem. Here, the speaker hopes that part of the sorrowful legacy of the war will be "the tenderness of patient minds." That is, the speaker hopes that one of the effects of such a devastating war will eventually be to make such an event less likely in the future. Hopefully humanity will show more tenderness and kindness to itself, and resolve the differences between different peoples in a way that honors the catastrophe of WWI. This line is all the more bleak given that it was written roughly three decades before the onset of World War II. The speaker, then, hopes that instead of the temporary beauty of "flowers," the sacrifices of WWI will be honored by peace. The mention of "flowers" may also refer to the flowers that might someday grow on top of the soldiers' graves, and this interpretation turns the flowers into a metaphor for a more peaceful future that the soldiers' deaths helped create.

If line 13 represents hope for the future, the poem's final line is more about day-to-day reality. After the war, each evening will bring about a "drawing-down of blinds." This is a metaphor for the soldiers' deaths (with the image of the blinds mirroring the closing of their "eyes"), but it is also something more literal and grounded. Because the war is over, normal life can slowly and tentatively begin to go on again. So the "drawing-down of blinds" also refers to the activity that it describes: people settling in for the night, preparing for the next day of their normal lives in the post-war world. This image is mundane, but in the context of war, it's also miraculous in its peaceful simplicity. The speaker suggests that feeling grateful for such quiet, happy routines would be the best way to honor the dead.

Both lines in the couplet use sibilance, drawing the poem to its hushed close. And ultimately, that's what the poem is about. It argues that quiet and heartfelt tribute—through how people remember the war dead, how they interact with each other, and how they go about their daily lives—is more apt than the pomp and ceremony of religious and state rituals. Appropriately, then, the poem closes with a kind of whisper.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used to powerful effect in "Anthem for Doomed Youth."

The first example is in line 3, and this is perhaps one of the most famous examples of alliteration in English poetry. Indeed, it is often used to illustrate the definition of the poetic device:

> Only the stuttering **r**ifles' **r**apid **r**attle

This line uses the repeated /r/ sounds (including the consonantal /r/ in "stutter**r**ing") to emulate the sound of relentless gun fire. The alliteration is deliberately heavy and obvious, calling to mind the hail of bullets that WWI soldiers had to face when they went out of the trenches. As the stanza talks specifically about the horrible sounds of warfare—contrasted with the pleasant but meaningless "passing-bells" in churches back home—it makes sense for the poetic "volume" to be turned up so loud with this alliteration.

The next example is in line 5:

> **N**o mockeries **n**ow for them; **n**o prayers **n**or bells;

These /n/ sounds are linked with the concept of negation—that is, the closing-down or rejection of possibilities. Essentially, they link the words "no" (and "nor") with the word "now," subtly pointing out that for those who have died in the war there is no now—they are no longer part of the present, but rather part of the past.

Lines 7, 8, and 11 also have alliteration, but that specific type is covered in the sibilance section. Line 12 ties "**p**allor" and "**p**all" together through similarity of sound. This is part of the line's metaphor that, rather than a flag draped over their coffins, the dead young men will be honored in the grief-stricken faces of their loved ones (in particular "girls" like their sisters, wives, and girlfriends).

The last line also features alliteration, with the /d/ sounds of "**d**usk" and "**d**rawing-**d**own" combining with gentle consonants to bring the poem to a hushed close (in contrast to the bombastic music of national anthems, which the speaker has previously made clear is an inappropriate way to honor soldiers' deaths).

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 5:** "N," "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 7:** "sh," "sh"
- **Line 10:** "b," "b"
- **Line 11:** "Sh," "sh," "g," "g"
- **Line 12:** "p," "p"
- **Line 14:** "d," "d," "d"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is used once in "Anthem for Doomed Youth," in the repeated "Only the..." phrases that begin lines 2 and 3.

These two lines (with line 4 as well) are the speaker's answer to the rhetorical question posed in the first line. The men who "die as cattle" will not have their deaths marked by "passing-bells" (church bells), but rather by the horrendous sounds of warfare. Instead of bells, they will hear "only the" angry sound of guns and the relentless sound of rifle fire.

The first line's use of "cattle" gives a sense of how the soldiers' deaths are indiscriminate and numerous, just like those of cows who are raised only to be slaughtered. The anaphora of the following two lines builds on this sense of inevitability, making the sounds of warfare dominate the lines and making it clear that the soldiers have no hope of escaping this situation. Using the word "only" once would already be powerful, but repeating it reinforces the idea that there is truly *nothing* else for the soldiers in this moment. It also helps that both lines have trochaic first feet (the poem is mainly iambic). The extra stresses at the starts of both lines feel forceful and dramatic, making the guns seem all the more powerful and terrifying.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** " — Only the"
- **Line 3:** " Only th"

CAESURA

Caesura occurs in lines 5, 7, and 10.

In line 5, the caesura helps clarify the poem's central idea—that the usual sounds and rituals of remembrance are meaningless in the context of the hellish sounds and realities of war. Lines 1 to 4 have replaced "passing-bells" with "guns," and "orisons" (prayers) with rifle-fire. The first half of line 5 gives a new collective name to these conventional rituals: "mockeries." The official ways of mourning, in other words, mock the suffering of the soldiers. The caesura creates a brief pause, allowing for this point to linger. After the caesura, the speaker reiterates the same position, again linking "prayers" and "bells" to "mockeries." The significance the caesura adds also indicates that what follows will be part of this central idea, too—meaning the reader knows not to take the "choirs" of the next line entirely at face value.

Indeed, it is in this line—line 7—that the poem uses its next caesura. This one creates a dramatic space around the words "shrill" and "demented," emphasizing both the madness of war and the sheer terror of its sounds. These are choirs sound like they're from hell, and their songs are the high-pitched sounds of falling explosives. Again, the caesura lets this heavy meaning linger for a moment, mirroring the way an echo of a loud sound might literally ring in a person's ears.

The caesura in line 10 contributes to the sestet's shift in tone. Whereas the octave (the first stanza) aims to conjure up the horrors of war, the sestet is more focused on life after the war—and how the soldiers' deaths are honored. It's a much quieter stanza, and the caesura after "boys" is part of this more mournful tone. It also marks another shift from official ceremony—the practice of lighting candles—to a more metaphorical perspective. After this caesura, the official ways of mourning are transformed by metaphor into what the speaker thinks are more apt ways of paying tribute.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** ";"
- **Line 7:** ","
- **Line 10:** ","

CONSONANCE

"Anthem for Doomed Youth" is a poem of intense sounds, and much of this intensity is achieved by consonance. In the first stanza—the octave—this is generally intended to convey the terrifying and deafening noises of warfare, which are contrasted with the official but hollow remembrances of the church and the state. In the sestet, the consonance works more to create a sense of hushed and mournful quiet.

The first line uses a consonant /l/ sound to pair two words together: "passing-bells" and "cattle." This contrasts home (in this case Britain) with the front line. Churches in Britain might ring their bells for the war dead, but this means little to the men in a faraway war, who are slaughtered like farm animals.

Then in line 2, /n/ and /g/ sounds combine. There's something stressful about the way the sound builds, as though the line itself is rising in anger:

> Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

This almost seems to bring the guns to life, as though they have taken human characteristics and are in search of blood (indeed, the poem does use personification to suggest that these guns experience fury in a very human way).

The third line makes use of /t/ sounds in addition to the alliterative /r/. This means the line is dominated by these two sounds, and the combination evokes the relentless and repetitive noise of the rifles themselves. The line seems to stutter (and combine with "patter and "hasty" in the following line) in a way that brings to life the jarring rhythm of gunfire:

> Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
> Can patter out their hasty orisons.

Lines 7 and 8 make use of /l/ consonance again. This section compares the sound of the "shrill," "wailing shells" with the "bugles calling" the soldiers back home (a call which is, of course, unanswered). The /l/ sound has a deliberate ugliness here, almost catching in the throat as it is read. The constrained sounds of the /l/ amplifies the horror of line 7. Then, in light of that horror, the bugle calls in line 8 seem kind of pathetic and irrelevant, with the continued /l/ sounding out of place against the simple, homey image of the "sad shires."

Line 9 develops this /l/ sound further, but through the sorrowful rhetorical question, the sound starts to take on a more mournful tone. /L/ sounds are slow, lingering, and almost

sleepy—which makes sense with the more hushed quality of this stanza. The stanza itself is more about trying to get on with life after the war than the daily reality of the war itself:

> What candles may be held to speed them all?
> Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
> Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
> The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
> Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
> And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

The way the /l/ continues through the whole stanza and fades toward the poem's end suggests both that the war will have lingering consequences and, on a more hopeful note, that it will someday be replaced by deeper peace.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ss," "ll," "s," "s," "l"
- **Line 2:** "n," "n," "s," "s," "g," "g," "ns"
- **Line 3:** "st," "tt," "r," "r," "s," "r," "r," "tt"
- **Line 4:** "tt," "r," "t," "r," "st," "r," "s," "ns"
- **Line 5:** "N," "r," "s," "n," "n," "r," "rs," "n," "ll"
- **Line 6:** "N," "n," "v," "c," "n," "s," "v," "s"
- **Line 7:** "sh," "ill," "l," "sh," "ll"
- **Line 8:** "l," "ll," "m," "m," "s," "s"
- **Line 9:** "dl," "l," "d," "d," "ll"
- **Line 10:** "s," "b," "s," "b," "s"
- **Line 11:** "Sh," "ll," "sh," "l," "g," "l," "s," "g," "b," "s"
- **Line 12:** "p," "ll," "r," "l," "r," "ll," "r," "p," "ll"
- **Line 13:** "l," "r," "s," "n," "d," "r," "n," "ss," "n," "n," "d," "s"
- **Line 14:** "nd," "s," "l," "d," "s," "d," "d," "n," "nds"

END-STOPPED LINE

Most of the lines in "Anthem for Doomed Youth" are end-stopped. It's only lines 3 and 9 that *aren't*.

In part, the end-stops help the poem establish a sense of difficulty and relentless obstacles. They slow the poem down, perhaps with the intent of evoking the slow-moving conflict of WWI. Though the battlefield was obviously a chaotic and terrifyingly fast-paced environment, the actual territorial gains were often painfully slow. Indeed, this is why men were being slaughtered like "cattle"—to help the army push on in small, incremental distances.

Line 6 presents an especially powerful use of end-stop. Here, the speaker seems to be setting up a contradiction. The speaker has spent the stanza so far arguing that the "bells" and "prayers" make "mockeries" out of the war (which is to say, they're inappropriate). But then the speaker says that fallen soldiers *do* have "choirs" to mourn them, which seems at first to go against the idea that such typical remembrance rituals are "mockeries." The end-stop dash provides a brilliantly dramatic pause, which sets up the next line. And in this line, the speaker's real meaning becomes clear—these choirs *are* the sounds of warfare too. In this instance, the end-stop introduces a sense of hope, only to strip it away a moment later in a cruel twist that seems fitting for this devastating battlefield setting.

In contrast, the end-stops in the sestet take on a more funereal quality, almost like a hushed kind of prayer. That's mostly because the poem's content shifts from life in battle to life back home, after the war. The end-stop of the last line is heartbreakingly final, drawing the poem to a clear close to match the line's "drawing-down of blinds."

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "?"
- **Line 2:** "."
- **Line 4:** "."
- **Line 5:** ";"
- **Line 6:** ",—"
- **Line 7:** ";"
- **Line 8:** "."
- **Line 9:** "?"
- **Line 11:** "."
- **Line 12:** ";"
- **Line 13:** ","
- **Line 14:** "."

ENJAMBMENT

There are two instances of enjambment in "Anthem for Doomed Youth."

The first of these is between lines 3 and 4. It allows for the length of the phrase to be stretched out, meaning that line 3 can linger on the terrifying sound of rifle-fire and delay finishing the thought until the next line. The enjambment then allows the following line to emphasize one of the poem's main ideas: that the sounds and rituals that often pay tribute to fallen soldiers are in some way inadequate or inappropriate. The *real* prayers heard by soldiers are those "hasty orisons" said by the guns. This enjambment also has an accelerating effect, conjuring a sense of panic and threat that matches the guns' "rattle."

The enjambment between lines 10 and 11 functions differently. In line 9, the poem asks a rhetorical question that marks a shift in the poem from the horrifying sounds of war to a more hushed discussion of what will come after. As with the first instance of enjambment, this one momentarily suspends the sense of the phrase—in a grammatical sense, line 10 needs the completion of line 11. But this enjambment also marks the stanza's shift into metaphor, taking the idea of weak candlelight and seeing it not in candles but in the dying light in soldiers' eyes. The smooth slide into metaphor continues throughout the stanza, as the speaker goes on to describe a number of ways that mourners might transform hollow rituals into

something more meaningful.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** " rattle"
- **Line 4:** "Can"
- **Line 10:** "eyes"
- **Line 11:** "Shall"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification is used throughout the first stanza. In line 2, the "guns" are characterized as possessed by "monstrous anger." Guns in and of themselves, of course, do not feel human emotions. But it's a useful personification because guns only exist to do one thing: inflict injury and/or death. So the emotional trait that the guns mimics and emphasizes the spirit in which humans invented them, built them, and ultimately use them .

The next example is similar in that it matches weapons with human activity. However, this particular example—the noise made by rifles—becomes a prayer rather than an act of anger. The speaker notes how the rapid slew of bullets represents a series of "hasty orisons" (prayers). This personification in part highlights the irrelevance of rituals like "prayer" (or ringing church bells) when it comes to the grim reality of warfare. But it is also subtly suggestive of soldiers perhaps saying their final prayers—as in, they fire their guns and merely hope for the best, praying that they will survive.

In perhaps the most terrifying personification of all, the speaker describes the "wailing shells" of artillery as "shrill, demented choirs." Religious music is supposed to bring church-goers closer to God, but this is more like a choir from hell, singing praise songs for the death and destruction of war. This personification provides one of the most vivid images of how empty the speaker thinks remembrance rituals (like singing choirs) really are. This personification is also grounded in fact—falling shells really did make a horrible, high-pitched sound.

The final personification comes with the phrase "sad shires" at the end of line 8. The hometowns and villages of the dead young men are portrayed as "sad." In light of the personifications that have come before, there is something almost mundane and pathetic about describing these towns so simply. This contrast is likely a deliberate way of highlighting the difference between the way that war is thought about back home and the way it actually is on the front line.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "Only the monstrous anger of the guns. / Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle / Can patter out their hasty orisons."
- **Lines 6-7:** " Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,— / The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;"
- **Line 8:** " sad shires."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem asks two rhetorical questions, both found at the starts of their respective stanzas.

The first asks:

> What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

In other words, what official sounds of mourning can actually do justice to the slaughter of millions of young men? The whole point, of course, is that no sound can accomplish this task. Church bells, prayers, choirs—all of these are essentially irrelevant to the scale of the destruction brought on by WWI. Indeed, this isn't *quite* a rhetorical question, because the speaker does have an answer. The poem presents this answer through the *real* sounds of war, which take the place of prayers, choirs, etc. and make it clear that only these horrifying sounds will accompany the soldiers as they die.

The second question is quite similar:

> What candles may be held to speed them all?

Again, this asks what rituals can possibly be useful when it comes to the horrors of war. But this question is answered differently. Instead of bringing the sounds of warfare to poetic life, the speaker points out the *real* ways that people can and should pay tribute to the sacrifice of the young men. For example, instead of having flags draped over their coffins, the young men will be remembered through the grief of their loved ones. Their deaths will—hopefully—be honored by "patient minds" (peace), and the continuation of everyday life (the "drawing-down of blinds"). This second rhetorical question sets the sestet up to show what effective remembrance really looks like.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?"
- **Line 9:** "What candles may be held to speed them all?"

SIBILANCE

There isn't a single line in "Anthem for Doomed Youth" that doesn't contain some sibilance. And while sibilant /s/ sounds are, of course, a regular occurrence in all speech, sibilance is used to deliberate effect in this poem.

In the first stanza, sibilance is linked to the sound of warfare. Accordingly, it takes on a kind of devilish, inhuman sound, particularly when linked with the "shrill, demented choirs of

wailing shells." The subject matter here is partly about music, and so the stanza's sibilance *becomes* a kind of horrible music, with the /s/ sounds dominating the poem's sound in a way that mimics the deafening noises of "monstrous" "guns," "stuttering rifles" and especially "wailing shells." The sibilance of "sad shires" at the end of the stanza also feels deliberately pathetic, with the /s/ sounds still echoing the hellish sounds of war that have come before, even though they now relate to the soldiers' quiet hometowns. "Sad shires" hardly seems to do justice to the tragedy of war.

The sibilance in the sestet takes on a more hushed tone, more like the sound whispering. Here, the poem shifts the discussion from the sounds of war to life *after* war. The whispery quality of the stanza evokes a gentle kind of peace, as though society itself has become quieter after the horrors—and noise—of war. Indeed, this sense of gentle calm ("the tenderness of patient minds") is exactly what the speaker thinks would be a fitting tribute to the soldiers' tragic deaths.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ss," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 2:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 3:** "s," "s"
- **Line 4:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 5:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 6:** "c," "s," "s"
- **Line 7:** "sh," "s," "sh," "s"
- **Line 8:** "s," "s," "sh," "s"
- **Line 9:** "s," "s"
- **Line 10:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 11:** "Sh," "sh," "s," "s"
- **Line 12:** "s," "s," "sh"
- **Line 13:** "s," "ss," "ti," "s"
- **Line 14:** "s," "s," "s"

SIMILE

"Anthem for Doomed Youth" has only one simile, but it's a powerful one. In the poem's opening rhetorical question, the speaker asks:

> What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

Put more generally, this question asks: how can society adequately honor soldiers who die in wars? The speaker thinks there is a big disconnect between the official ceremonies of church and state and the realities of war.

And it's here that the simile comes in. These men die not like men, the poem says, but like cattle in a slaughterhouse. That is, they are so numerous as to become anonymous. Cows don't have names but are instead simply counted, and war is a numbers game as well. In fact, WWI was particularly bad in this respect. Mankind had found new ingenious ways to kill and maim, remote warfare (such as drones) wasn't yet possible. In order to make small territorial games, men had to go over the tops of the trenches and into the line of fire. Those that could make it to the enemy lines could take out a few of the opposing side's soldiers, but most died in a hail of gunfire. The simile makes this sense of nearly inevitable death come alive.

The simile also has a sense of indignity about it, as though those fallen soldiers are merely discarded pieces of meat rather than human beings. Like cows, the poem seems to say, these men get to live only long enough to sacrifice themselves for reasons that have little or nothing to do with them.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "as cattle?"

METAPHOR

Metaphor is a key device used throughout "Anthem for Doomed Youth." For the most part, the first stanza (the octave) takes the horrible sounds of warfare and uses metaphor to interpret them in the context of religious rituals of remembrance. The noises made by these rituals—church bells, prayer, choirs—don't acknowledge the realities of war, and so it is the sounds of guns, rifles, and shells that are more authentic. This stanza makes frequent use of a specific form of metaphor, personification, for which there is a specific section of this guide.

The second stanza (the sestet) is practically the opposite of the first in terms of its use of metaphor. Whereas the first stanza personified different elements of warfare, this stanza takes the behaviors of real people and casts *them* in the roles of typical objects related to remembrance. So the dying light of young soldiers' eyes are the real candles; the grief-stricken faces of young women are the real "pall" (which is a drape covering a coffin, often the flag of the deceased soldier's country); their flowers are actually the hard-won peace between people. The last line is both literal and metaphorical, in that it relates to the figurative "drawing-down" of darkness as a way of describing the passage from life to death, *and* to the continuation of everyday life represented by the closing of literal window blinds.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Line 7
- Lines 10-14

VOCABULARY

Passing-bells (Line 1) - These are church bells that mark

somebody's "passing"—their death.

Patter (Line 4) - Patter is a kind of repeated light tapping sound, but also a type of inane chatter. Both definitions are relevant here, because of the actual sound of the guns and the way that these sounds represent meaningless prayers.

Hasty (Line 4) - *Hasty* means "hurried."

Orisons (Line 4) - Orisons is an archaic word for prayers.

Mockeries (Line 5) - These are inappropriate misrepresentations, relating here to how church bells, prayers, and choirs don't do justice to the realities of war.

Demented (Line 7) - *Demented* means "mad" or "insane."

Wailing (Line 7) - Wailing is a high-pitched, unpleasant sound (like a baby's cry).

Bugles (Line 8) - A bugle is a basic brass instrument. It was used in warfare to convey instructions and information to the troops because its sound could travel quickly. Bugles were also a part of the memorial services for those who died in wars.

Shires (Line 8) - Shires relates to the different counties of Great Britain, e.g. Oxfordshire and Pembrokeshire. They're a bit like states, but generally smaller.

Speed (Line 9) - Speed in this context means to "aid with a journey." Specifically, the speaker is talking about the journey from life to death.

Pallor (Line 12) - A pallor is a pale, deathlike appearance that is often associated with sadness or shock.

Pall (Line 12) - A pall is a cloth spread over a coffin. For soldiers who die in combat, this is often the national flag of the home country.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Anthem for Doomed Youth" is a sonnet. This can be seen in the clear division between the two stanzas: an octave and a sestet, with the sestet ending in a couplet. This makes the poem, in part, a Petrarchan sonnet. But the rhyme scheme is more Shakespearean than Petrarchan. Cleverly, this makes the poem a hybrid of mainland Europe (Petrarch's Italy, and the site of the war) and the United Kingdom (Shakespeare's nation, and the home country of this poem's soldiers). In its form, then, the poem represents both home and the foreign lands in which the main part of the war was fought.

Both stanzas begin with rhetorical questions, which shows that this is a searching poem. This isn't a triumphant celebration of war, but rather an attempt to cast doubts on the myths and rituals that surround it. Though they start in a similar way, the two stanzas are quite different in content. The first is preoccupied with bringing the horrors of war to life for the reader, and with showing the irrelevance of church bells, prayers, choirs and so on when it comes to paying tribute to the fallen.

The second stanza deals more with life after the war, looking at the way the soldiers should actually be honored. Interestingly, though the sestet definitely does mark the sonnet's traditional turn, line 8 is sort of a turn too. Here, the poem looks homeward, rather than at the theater of war, setting up the discussion that the sestet will continue.

METER

"Anthem for Doomed Youth" is a metrically regular poem written in iambic pentameter (as many sonnets are); this means the poem has five iambs, or poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern, per line. Generally, the slow and steady iambs give the poem a mournful tone. Take line 9, for example:

> What cand- | les may | be held | to speed | them all?

But the poem does contain some interesting variations on that basic pattern. The first line, for example, has an extra weak syllable at the end of the first foot. This extra syllable undercuts the rhetorical power of the iambic pentameter as early as the first line. Furthermore, the weakness of that final syllable evokes the fall of soldiers under a hail of bullets, while the way it extends the line reflects the sheer number of young men dying:

> What pass- | ing bells | for these | who die | as cattle?

This extra syllable at the end of the line's final foot is technically known as *hypercatalexis*. In this context, it means that the powerful rhetorical question ends with a note of weakness, not strength. This makes sense, as the poem is about death and argues against the empty rituals and nationalistic posturing of traditional "anthems."

Lines 2 and 3, with their repeated anaphora of "Only the," are both metrical variations too. In both of them, the first foot is reversed from an iamb to a trochee (stressed-unstressed):

> — Only | the mons- | trous an- | ger of | the guns.

This change makes the speaker's answer to the opening line's rhetorical question more forceful and dramatic, emphasizing the word "Only" to convey that there is truly *nothing* else for the soldiers beyond the horrifying sounds of war.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem has a regular rhyme scheme that is closest to the Shakespearean sonnet scheme (rather than the Petrarchan sonnet scheme). Though the poem is divided into an octave and

a sestet, the rhyme scheme sounds more like four quatrains and a closing couplet:

ABAB / CDCD / EFFE / GG

The use of a closing couplet lends extra power to the poem's last lines. What they express is deliberately a kind of quiet ("patient minds" and drawn blinds), but the rhyme lends it that peacefulness a sense of authority as well.

It's also worth noting that the A, C, and E rhymes are all very close to rhyming with each other too. For example, consider the sounds of "cattle" (A rhyme) "bells" (C rhyme), and "all" (E rhyme). These similar sets of sound give the poem a subtly heightened sense of sound patterning, which is important as so much of the poem is specifically about sounds—whether church bells or falling artillery.

SPEAKER

The speaker is unspecified but, as with many WWI poems, the speaker here is generally assumed to be drawn from the poet's personal experiences. Indeed, it is the fact that Wilfred Owen served—and died—in the war that partly contributes to his poems' authority and power. It is a subtle kind of authority based more on authenticity than dominance; that is, the reader believes the message of the poem in part because the poet's backstory relates so directly to the poem's content.

The reader doesn't learn anything specific about the speaker; their age, gender, and other personal details remain hidden. The one thing that is clear, however, is that the speaker is keen to address what they see as an injustice—the way that the church and state seem to encourage war on the one hand, while offering hollow tributes and rituals to honor those killed on the other. The speaker, the reader learns in the second stanza, is interested in a more genuine day-to-day way of honoring the dead, rather than an elaborate symbolic one.

SETTING

The poem has two distinct atmospheres or settings. The first of these is the battlefield of WWI (described in lines 1 through 7), which is powerfully conveyed by the poem's focus on the terrifying and deafening sounds of weaponry. In this setting, guns and rifles seem to be firing from all directions, and "wailing shells" are falling overhead. It's a horrific scene that contrasts sharply with the mild images of church bells, prayers, and choirs.

The other setting is back home, in the country from which these soldiers came. This setting is described in lines 8 through 14, and specifically, it's the nation of England (as demonstrated by the phrase "sad shires," which refers to different areas of England). Indeed, it is line 8 rather than the more traditional line 9 that begins the sonnet's turn, shifting the focus from the war front to the "home front" (the home country in which civilian life goes on). The post-war future predicted in the second stanza is a mournful, tentative one. But while this is a grief-stricken society, the speaker does gesture towards life moving on as the second stanza draws to a close.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

After "Dulce Et Decorum Est," "Anthem for Doomed Youth" is probably Wilfred Owen's most famous poem—and one of the most celebrated war poems more generally. Its distinct power comes from its lack of sentimentality, its refusal to buy into nationalistic propaganda, and its insistence on more appropriate and personal forms of remembrance. It was written in 1917, while Owen was in the hospital recovering from the trauma of his own experience in the war.

In fact, it was in this Scottish hospital that Owen befriended one of the other most celebrated poets of WWI, Siegfried Sassoon. Sassoon was a little bit older than Owen and from a more privileged background, but the two men got along well. Their friendship also shaped Owen's work; for example, both the "doomed" of the title and the "patient minds" of line 13 were in part Sassoon's suggestions.

Owen and Sassoon share an unflinching and realistic way of looking at the horrors of war. This perspective contrasts with the kind of nationalistic propaganda that the government used to make young men sign up to fight *and* to keep the public in favor of the war. Owen's and Sassoon's poetry, which looks at the realities of trench warfare, differs from the more celebratory and patriotic verse of writers like Rupert Brooke.

Additionally, Owen was heavily influenced by the Romantic poets, and in particular by John Keats. In this poem, the reader can perhaps see the influence of Keats's famous phrase about a poet's responsibility to their poems: Keats said that they must "load every rift of [their] subject with ore." This poem is packed full of powerful sonic effects and exactly the kind of unrelenting intensity that Keats described.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The historical context of this poem is, of course, World War I. At the time, this war was described with the term "the war to end all wars"—a phrase that of course turned out to be tragically inaccurate with the onset of World War II. Around 16 million people died directly in WWI, with many more perishing in the great flu outbreaks and genocides (for example, the Armenian Genocide) that followed.

The war began with the assassination of Archduke Franz-Ferdinand, who was the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire (which ruled a large section of central and Eastern Europe at

the time). The assassin, Gavrilo Princip, wished to see an end to Austro-Hungarian rule in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Previously arranged allegiances soon brought Germany and Russia into opposition, and before too long this conflict pulled the other countries of Europe into the war as well. In 1915, the Germans sank a British passenger ship called the Lusitania, killing many civilians. Among other reasons, this event drew the United States into the conflict as well.

As described in the poem, WWI was a horrendously destructive war. Life in the trenches of Europe was terrifying and deadly, and the poor conditions caused frequent sickness and disease. Wilfred Owen fought in France, part of what was called the Western Front, which was the war's main theater of war (the term "theater of war" refers to the actual sites of a war's armed battles). And in a turn of fate that perhaps underscores the tragedy of war, Owen himself very nearly survived to see its end. He was killed one week before the Armistice (the truce) that was signed on the 11th of November 1918, with news of his death reaching his parents on the very same day that church bells were ringing out to signal the end of the war.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Learn More About War Poetry — A series of podcast documentaries from the University of Oxford about various aspects of World War I poetry, including some excellent material specifically about Wilfred Owen. (http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/british-world-war-one-poetry-introduction)
- Poems in Response to Owen — A BBC show in which three contemporary poets respond to Wilfred Owen's poetry. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000117l)
- More Poems and Biography — A valuable resource of Owen's other poetry, and a look at his life. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wilfred-owen)
- A Reading by Stephen Fry — Internationally famous actor, comedian,and writer Stephen Fry reads the poem (with a bugle call in the background). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6IzPoDxAq0)
- Bringing WWI to Life — In this clip, director Peter Jackson discusses his recent WWIfilm, They Shall Not Grow Old. Though technology, Jackson brings old war footage to vivid life, restoring a sense of the soldiers as actual people. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cSXfKSRKz4)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILFRED OWEN POEMS

- Dulce et Decorum Est
- Exposure
- Futility
- Strange Meeting

HOW TO CITE

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